

U. of I. education expert: Community colleges undervalued, underfunded

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Education professor Debra Bragg says that community colleges are an underfunded community asset and an invaluable resource for first-generation college students, low-skilled adult workers and immigrants aspiring to enter college, and downsized workers and mid-career changers transitioning to a recession-proof career. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Popular culture may have an uncharitable attitude toward community colleges, but a University of Illinois expert in education says they are an underfunded community asset and an invaluable resource for first-generation college students, low-skilled adult workers and immigrants aspiring to enter college, and downsized workers and mid-career changers transitioning to a recession-proof career.

According to Debra Bragg, a professor of [higher education](#) and the director of the Forum on the Future of Public Education at Illinois, community colleges are cost-efficient ports of entry to higher education when compared with just about any other type of college, especially private colleges or for-profit technical institutions.

"First-generation college students and adults who have a high school diploma often have very little information about college and what higher education is about," Bragg said. "There are more choices in education than ever before, but some of those choices are very costly. It's very difficult to

make good decisions about the cost and benefits of higher education, particularly for adults who have limited experience with college. Community colleges can be a gateway to an associate's or a bachelor's degree, at a fraction of the cost of entering a public four-year college and just about any private institution."

Besides community colleges, there aren't many alternatives for preparing students and adult learners that are affordable and have a successful track record, Bragg said.

"If community colleges didn't exist, many students wouldn't have options. They would probably go to private colleges, where they could incur a large debt and possibly not receive a quality education," she said. "That's why community colleges are such a valuable public resource."

A year's tuition and fees can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to more than \$40,000 for full-time study at private institutions.

"Those same classes would cost about \$3,000 at a community college in Illinois," she said. "The difference is huge. To my mind, it's an incredibly worthwhile value."

But because of what Bragg terms their "diverse missions" and the transitory nature of the student body, community colleges' reputations have suffered for trying to be too many things to too many people.

"Community colleges are caught in the middle because they have so many missions and they're trying to do so many things, it spreads their resources very thin," she said. "They're a vocational school, a terminal degree-granting institution, a port of entry for the bachelor's degree, a workforce training institute for business, and a place where the community convenes. So their function is a lot broader than most people would think."

The effect of having so many different functions is that it "raises legitimate questions about what community colleges can do to achieve some of these larger, more grandiose goals that they sometimes set for themselves," Bragg said.

"They're trying to accomplish what no other educational institution has proven that they can accomplish. They are doing the things that high schools have failed to do, like providing basic foundational preparation so people can go on to college."

With the impending exodus of the baby boomer generation from the workforce, Bragg said the brain drain will be felt because both the number and the qualifications of people who need to be trained and moved into the workforce will be insufficient.

"Even if we reform our K-12 curriculum to a point beyond our wildest hopes for primary education, and transition more youth into the workforce, it's a drop in the bucket compared to the number of people we'll need when the baby boomers eventually retire," she said. "It's imperative for our economy that we do a better job of preparing and re-training adults. And that's why community colleges are invaluable, because they're able to prepare diverse learners, including low skilled adults who have limited academic and employment skills, and to re-train downsized workers and transition them into jobs that are in demand."

In higher education, lack of funding from state and federal governments is a familiar refrain. But in the current economy, increasing financial aid to non-traditional, minority and low-income adults is imperative, Bragg said.

"There are unique difficulties that adult learners have in getting financial aid and other needed services to return to community college because they're part-time students," she said. "They're the lowest-income, most highly diverse and most marginalized population, and yet, because they're working part- or full-time, it's very difficult for them to secure the financial aid that they need."

Educational tax credits and loans, according to Bragg, are an inadequate solution to the problem.

"Many of these adults are in low-wage jobs, so we're talking about a minimal benefit for tax credits, and an inability to secure loans or an unwillingness to incur debt," she said.

To increase [financial aid](#) to students, Bragg believes the federal government is going to have to foot more of the bill. This imperative has never been so clear as it is now, during the nation's economic recession.

"Community colleges get very little federal funding anyway, because they're primarily funded by the states and local entities," she said.

"Outside of Pell grants and a few targeted programs from the Departments of Education and Labor, the lion's share of federal money goes to K-12 schooling and not to community colleges," Bragg said. "More of those funds should be flowing to community colleges, because that's where the greatest need is."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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