

Memo



Date: March 7, 2024

To: Higher education, government, and workforce development leaders in California

From: California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy

Re: **Strengthening a Culture of Career Readiness: Key Issues and Promising Practices**

Key Takeaways:

- Leaders of the four community colleges in Los Angeles County’s second supervisorial district and the county government have articulated a variety of areas in which to improve career readiness among area residents, some of which are already being addressed by existing programs and policies.
- Toward this end, we highlight the following six promising practices:
 - **Communicating with students early and often about career readiness**
 - **Engaging faculty in career readiness efforts**
 - **Strengthening employer partnerships**
 - **Promoting paid work experiences for students**
 - **Improving connections between colleges and the county**
 - **Collaborating across colleges to better meet the needs of residents**
- We provide examples from the four colleges that demonstrate what can be done to improve career readiness in the region and offer a roadmap for colleges and county governments, to guide future efforts.

Working Together to Advance Career Readiness

California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy has been working alongside four community colleges in Los Angeles County’s second district (Compton College, El Camino College, Los Angeles Southwest College, and West Los Angeles College), along with partners from Los Angeles County (the countywide Department of Economic Opportunity and Second District Supervisor Holly Mitchell’s office), to strengthen a culture of career readiness as a campus-wide responsibility. By making career readiness a central part of the campuses’ missions, these colleges can provide students from underserved backgrounds with clearer pathways from education to employment, leading to successful transitions into meaningful careers that support their ability to engage in, contribute to, and thrive in their communities. To this end, we aim to build a foundation of promising practices that strategically weaves career readiness across students’ postsecondary experiences, builds institutional capacity, utilizes regional collaboration (see sidebar), and creates a productive workforce that strengthens the economy.

Why a Regional Approach to Workforce Development?

We adopted a regional approach to align with the local and regional structures of labor markets. Employers primarily seek to recruit their workforce from local labor markets and often prefer not to work with multiple colleges individually. Similarly, students base their training or career decisions on local availability rather than the governmental distinctions of college service boundaries or whether training is offered by a county or a college. Colleges working collaboratively can effectively engage employers, reduce redundancy in course offerings, share labor market information needed for decision-making, and collaborate on student recruitment and completion.

In the first phase of this work, researchers conducted 49 interviews with college administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as partners from the county and community-based organizations. This “discovery phase” helped to identify both promising practices and areas for improvement. While each college situation is unique, we identified several common actions critical to strengthening a culture of career readiness on campus and in the region. We will explore six key recommendations from our work to date:

- Communicate with students early and often about career readiness.
- Engage faculty in career readiness efforts.
- Strengthen employer partnerships.
- Promote paid work experiences for students.
- Improve connections between colleges and the county.
- Collaborate across colleges to better meet the needs of residents.

For each of these recommendations, we highlight insights gathered from interviewees, connect those to the latest research, and offer examples of promising practices to address these

important priorities. We aim to extend beyond the participating colleges and county partners, serving as inspiration and motivation for other community colleges across the state, as well as the nation. The examples provided are not intended to be an exhaustive inventory, but rather an illustrative sampling to spotlight what has been accomplished and to encourage and inspire future practices.

Communicate with Students Early and Often About Career Readiness

A recurrent theme in our interviews with college administrators, faculty, and staff was that conversations around career readiness need to begin early in a student's academic journey, even before they get to college. Interviewees stressed the importance of this early exploration, particularly given that students are required to select a major or program of study when they enroll in the college. Without some understanding of different careers and how various programs of study relate to those careers, students may struggle with making informed choices about majors.

To address this issue, interviewees emphasized the need for better integration of academic and career advising, enabling students to consider career goals as integral components of their academic planning process. Research aligns with this perspective, underscoring the necessity of early career exploration as early as middle school to equip students with the best possible information.¹ This is particularly important for young people in low-income communities.²

» **Offering career exploration courses to new students and encouraging frequent use of career services.** West Los Angeles College (WLAC) has made a concerted effort to provide career exploration and career readiness information to students at the beginning of their college careers. In the fall of 2023, WLAC organized a five-day career exploration program for students in the LA College Promise program.³ Over the course of the week, students had the opportunity to hear from Career Technical Education (CTE) faculty about different programs offered at WLAC, completed two career exploration assessments, met with career advisors, registered for the WLAC job portal, and met with counselors to select their courses. The college designed this orientation session to provide students with more information about careers they might be interested in and about the various programs offered, so they could make more informed choices about their courses and majors. In the first year, approximately 200 students went through this orientation. WLAC hopes to expand this program to all incoming students, regardless of whether they are enrolled full time.

Engage Faculty in Career Readiness Efforts

Another common theme in our interviews with college representatives was the importance of engaging instructional faculty in career readiness efforts. Of all college staff, faculty invest the most significant amount of time interacting with students. This observation is underscored by interviewees noting the pivotal role of instructional faculty as the primary points of contact for most students, making the classroom an important space for integrating career exploration and

skill development. Polling research validates this perspective, revealing that students identify faculty members as the most valuable source of career-related advice on campus.⁴ While faculty members often help students develop important career skills—such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving—a gap exists between this instruction and efforts to connect these skills to specific careers. To address this disconnect, researchers suggest that colleges facilitate collaboration between academic and career advisors and instructional faculty to establish common learning goals for skills that are relevant to both academic and career endeavors.⁵

While most interviewees agreed on the importance of the role instructional faculty need to play in career readiness efforts, they also acknowledged the difficulty in implementing this practice, particularly in non-CTE courses. Interviewees suggested that it would be helpful if there were specific training for faculty on how to incorporate career readiness in their curriculum or, even better, if there were short, prepackaged modules that could readily be added to a course, thereby lessening the burden on faculty. While interviewees did not provide specific examples of how their colleges are engaging faculty in career readiness efforts, there are some national promising practices that could be used as models (highlighted in the following sections).

» Employing a framework.

Researchers note a stark reality: although 70 percent of first-year college students nationwide intend to complete an internship, only 30 percent actually participate in work-based learning experiences such as internships, and less than half of students even engage with their career services offices. This research underscores the imperative for positioning the classroom as the focal point for skills development and career-related learning.⁶ The University of Wisconsin–Madison’s [Career Readiness Across the Curriculum](#) framework provides a roadmap for colleges to assess how best to utilize both faculty and career services to improve career readiness. This framework is designed to help colleges assess the extent to which current courses and other learning opportunities are developing skills needed for different fields or disciplines. The goal is to fill any identified gaps through faculty professional development (see sidebar) and/or adoption of new programs, and to create inventories of opportunities and user-friendly roadmaps for students to improve career readiness. at.

Teaching 21st Century Skills in College Courses

One example of the type of professional development that can help train faculty to incorporate career readiness into the curriculum is the online certificate developed by Michael Hora of the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Center for Research on College–Workforce Transitions. This program provides guidance on how to embed skills development and career information into the classroom and the student experience, and provides practical suggestions for incorporating activities into the curriculum.⁷ The “Teaching 21st Century Skills in College Courses” [professional certificate](#) is now available through edX.

Strengthen Employer Partnerships

Interviewees at all colleges cited the need to better understand and strengthen employer partnerships. Successful partnerships with employers are critical to career readiness efforts at the colleges, yet these arrangements are difficult to create and sustain, much less excel at.⁸

Research unveils four overarching structural factors for successful partnerships:⁹

- **Mutual understanding:** Colleges must actively seek to understand employers' needs through data analysis and frequent conversations with employers.¹⁰ One such venue for interaction, required by state law, is employers' participation in advisory boards for hands-on career and technical education programs. But these boards vary widely in their degree of effectiveness.
- **Sustained interaction:** Both parties need to establish and maintain relationships over many years. As one interviewee noted, "It takes a significant amount of time to build relationships and build trust." High rates of employee turnover makes sustaining relationships particularly difficult.
- **Involvement of third parties to fortify partnerships:** When necessary and appropriate, colleges can bring in other leaders from government and industry, as well as third parties with a stake in workforce development, such as labor unions, nonprofit community-based organizations, workforce development agencies, and economic development agencies. These intermediaries can assist college leaders with building and maintaining relationships with business and industry.
- **Appropriate staffing:** Each college should designate a liaison (an individual or a team) who can engage employer partners and develop a more strategic approach to establishing and maintaining partnerships.

While there are many recommendations for successful partnerships, the research also suggests that such partnerships are few and far between. A recent national survey of community college and business leaders found that only 26 percent of employers strongly agreed that community colleges are producing the work-ready employees they need.¹¹ At the same time, just 7 percent of college leaders were very satisfied and another 38 percent were satisfied with their partnerships with employers.¹²

This lack of satisfaction may be a result of the mismatch between colleges and employers in culture and structure, and on their understandings of values that hinder or obstruct collaboration.¹³ Despite these challenges, however, we found several examples of the colleges successfully partnering with employers to improve career readiness for their students.

» **Securing work experiences with local employers.** El Camino College's Community Advancement office (CAO) operates several programs with local employers—particularly in the aerospace and defense industries—that benefit both the college and employer partners. Noteworthy among these initiatives is the CAO's collaboration with Northrop Grumman,

offering students an impactful eight-week cooperative education program in which students earn both academic credit and a paycheck. Approximately 20 students in the fields of machining, electronics, and engineering technology participate each year, depending on the employer's needs. Students gain valuable experience that often leads to an apprenticeship, while the employer has the opportunity to evaluate students closely as prospective employees. The CAO also provides education to incumbent employees at local firms, which has a two-for-one effect: the employees qualify for promotions, which opens up entry-level positions for the college's recent graduates. The CAO's programs are largely funded by grants, so there is little direct cost to the college. Some employers also give back by donating equipment and funding scholarships.

» **Streamlining a path to entertainment careers.** WLAC offers students a unique, streamlined pathway to well-paying careers in the entertainment industry through its Hollywood Cinema Production Resources (CPR) program. This partnership with the labor union, representing “below the line” employees in production, was formalized over 20 years ago. Traditionally, students seeking a job in film production would have to wait years to join the union or have a personal connection in the industry, but through the CPR program, even students with no professional contacts are able to enter these careers quickly. One interviewee described the program's orientation for students: “Our program is . . . geared from Day One to get them into the workplace.” The college works with nearly every film and television production studio, as well as all 18 trade unions representing production workers.

» **Teaming up to engage industry partners.** El Camino College and WLAC both have a history of successful partnerships (individually and jointly) with the South Bay Workforce Investment Board (WIB).¹⁴ According to interviewees, the key ingredient to these relationships is entrusting considerable decision-making authority with the dean at each college responsible for workforce education. This allows the college and the WIB to pursue workforce development opportunities with minimal bureaucracy and red tape. In contrast, some deans at other colleges must receive a committee's approval for each new initiative, adding considerable time and effort.

» **Creating a fast track to construction careers.** HireLAX—a partnership among Los Angeles Southwest College (LASC), Los Angeles World Airports, and the Los Angeles/Orange County Building and Construction Trades Council—combines work experience with wraparound services to guide students toward well-paying construction careers. Under the auspices of Los Angeles World Airports (the governing body of Los Angeles International Airport), LASC provides classes and materials, while a combination of nonprofits and city and county entities support students' basic needs with case management, job preparation, and other wraparound services.¹⁵ As of September 2023, the program had graduated 276 pre-apprentices, and according to interviewees, this eight-week pre-apprenticeship program's rate for placement into a corresponding construction apprenticeship is 80 to 85 percent.¹⁶ For the few students who

do not complete the pre-apprenticeship program, according to one interviewee, the main reason is that they are hired into an apprenticeship before the end of the program.

Promote Paid Work Experiences for Students

Many of our interviewees highlighted work-based learning as a key component of career readiness and stressed the particular importance of providing paid work experiences for their underserved student population. Work-based learning can provide many benefits to students, including engagement in real work, transferable skills, and connections that can lead to future employment. However, research has found that students from low-income and disadvantaged populations are often unable to take advantage of these opportunities because they are commonly unpaid.¹⁷ The majority of individuals enrolled at community colleges need to work at least part time and therefore need paid work-based learning experiences.¹⁸ And research shows that paid work experiences offer greater advantages to both students and employers than those that are unpaid.¹⁹

» **Providing support to employers and students to facilitate paid work experiences.** WLAC is a leader in working with students and employers to support paid work experiences. The college has developed an innovative model for apprenticeships that allows employers to design individualized programs to fit their most pressing needs. WLAC supports employers by taking care of paperwork and other administrative functions that might otherwise present a hurdle to employers in taking on an apprentice or pre-apprentice.²⁰ Through its CA Center for Climate Change Education, WLAC is also launching a summer internship program that will offer paid climate-related positions to students.²¹ The center will provide funding for the internships (including an above-minimum hourly wage plus extra support for participants who need child care, transportation, equipment funding, etc.). To prepare students for the internships, the center will offer training in critical and soft skills, as well as climate education courses. As with the apprenticeships, WLAC attempts to do much of the heavy lifting of hiring interns, making employer program participation more attractive.

Improve Connections Between Colleges and the County

County governments can play a crucial role in coordinating across entities—including colleges, employers, nonprofits, and other training providers—to improve opportunities for career success among area residents. A recent landscape analysis identified several actions counties can take to help maximize educational and employment opportunities for its residents. These strategies include directly allocating funds, leveraging partnerships with local chambers of commerce and industry leaders to identify skills needed in emerging job markets, and promoting ongoing coordination with educational partners.²² This research highlights the importance of cross-sector partnerships among counties, higher education institutions, and employers to ensure that residents have the opportunity to gain the skills needed to be competitive in local and regional job markets.

Several of our interviewees noted the importance of addressing basic needs as a key component to improve career readiness opportunities and as a critical area where partnership with the county is necessary. While the immediate connection between providing food and enhancing career readiness may not be apparent, interviewees stressed the fundamental principle that meeting basic needs is a necessary step to career readiness. As one interviewee stated, “If you are hungry, you can’t learn.” Addressing this issue is crucial, given the prevalence of food insecurity among community college students in California.²³ Additionally, research reveals disparate access to benefits for food, as less than a third of eligible California students living in poverty apply for and receive CalFresh benefits.²⁴

County agencies and community colleges share the goal of boosting the local economy by helping area residents have their basic needs met and prepare for and enter high-quality jobs, particularly in fields with critical shortages. Interviewees noted a desire for greater collaboration between county partners and community colleges, with aims of leveraging the combined expertise and connections of both entities to meet this common goal. While interviewees felt a need to strengthen these relationships, they also identified several promising practices that involve collaboration between the county and the colleges.

» **Meeting students’ basic needs.** Compton College has taken a proactive role in addressing the basic needs of its students to improve educational and career outcomes.²⁵ In the area of food insecurity, Compton College has implemented some particularly noteworthy initiatives, several of which are done in collaboration with and supported by Los Angeles County programs:

- **Data sharing:** There is an agreement with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services to share student data to increase students’ utilization of CalFresh benefits.²⁶
- **Free daily meal:** All students and staff can receive a free meal from the campus cafeteria.
- **Market match:** The college hosts a weekly farmers market where students can use their CalFresh dollars to purchase food at a two-to-one “market match” ratio.
- **Vouchers:** All currently enrolled students receive \$20 vouchers each week to use at the farmers market.
- **Extended benefits to dual-enrollment students:** The farmers market benefits (market match and vouchers) are also awarded to high school students in dual-enrollment programs.

Compton College is making a concerted effort to make sure that students are aware of these benefits and that students apply for CalFresh if they might be eligible. Information is readily available on the college website and on flyers posted around the campus.²⁷ The use of these programs continues to grow. In the 2022–23 school year, 2,371 students enrolled at Compton College took advantage of some kind of food assistance, compared to about 550 students in the previous academic year.²⁸ Approximately 1,400 students (27% of the students enrolled) accessed one or more of these food supports for the first time.²⁹

» **Supporting students in pursuing social work careers.** Following voters' approval of the county's Measure H sales tax in 2017, Los Angeles County initiated Careers for a Cause to train area residents, particularly those with lived experiences, to be caseworkers in homeless services and to begin to fill the thousands of vacant positions in county government and with nonprofit service providers. The program started at LASC and later expanded to Compton College, with a few other local community colleges having recently joined or about to join.³⁰ The eight-week program promotes workforce readiness through career exploration and assessment, job shadowing, skills training, on-the-job coaching, and job retention support. Critically, participants receive a stipend and wraparound support services. The program takes in 35 students at LASC and 20 at Compton College every year, and it has almost 200 graduates to date.

Collaborate Across Colleges to Better Meet Needs of Residents

Throughout this project, it has been clear that representatives from the county government and the community colleges in Los Angeles County's second district have a collective desire to improve residents' career readiness and support workforce development across the region. Interviewees recognized the importance of working together to best meet the needs of residents, particularly since not every college can offer every program. As one college staffer noted, "There are some industries in my service area that I cannot do what they need. I just don't have the capacity at this college and would love to invite some of my colleagues who maybe do [have capacity] to do that."

However, several interviewees noted that this kind of collaboration likely requires reciprocity of some kind: "It is an interesting idea to say there are certain things in your service area that maybe just don't fit for you . . . but there needs to be that idea of reciprocity, that if someone else is coming in to offer that, what might [we offer to do] in return?"

» **A model for sharing funding.** A creative funding-sharing agreement entered into by the Compton Community College District (CCCD) and Long Beach Community College District (LBCCD) may serve as a model of a reciprocal arrangement across institutions and districts. Under this agreement, CCCD permits LBCCD to offer courses in culinary arts (a program that Compton College does not offer) at Lynwood High School, which is in Compton College's service area. In return, LBCCD agrees to reimburse CCCD at a rate of 15 percent of gross revenues per class, per semester, "provided and contingent upon LBCCD having received State funding for such courses as provided in accordance with [their] agreement."³¹ Revenue-sharing arrangements like this one would seem most promising for colleges in urban and suburban regions with out-of-district colleges located nearby and in programs and fields of study that require expensive capital investments, such as complex machinery or equipment.

Continue Growing Pathways to Prosperity Through Cross-Sector Initiatives

The current moment could be used strategically, especially given the economic downturn that the state is grappling with, the anticipation of diminished public funding in the years ahead, and postsecondary enrollment challenges. These times of crisis serve as a unique opportunity for leaders to tackle long-standing challenges and restructure organizations in ways that enable shared resources and collective action toward aligned goals.

As the previously discussed examples illustrate, each of the partners in this work has specific programs and projects that demonstrate what needs to happen more systemically to support the needs of Los Angeles County's second district. While there is an increasing commitment among community colleges to integrate workforce efforts across their campuses,³² achieving this integration requires an in-depth understanding of institutional functions and the strategic leveraging of assets to establish meaningful partnerships within the community. Colleges must not only connect efforts within and between their campuses but also forge connections with employers, local and regional governments, and other postsecondary institutions offering complementary or competing programs. A holistic approach will ensure a robust and integrated framework for workforce development that aligns with local and state priorities, expands economic opportunities, and paves the way for a brighter future for all. Now is the time to seize this momentum and drive region-focused approaches forward, not only benefiting this region and the various cross-sector entities involved but also serving as a blueprint for others and setting a precedent that will resonate throughout the state.

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