STATEMENT

American Association of Community Colleges

Hearing on the Role of Education and Training in the TANF Program
April 22, 2010

Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support
Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives
The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is pleased to submit this statement addressing the critical need to better integrate education and training into the TANF program. AACC represents the nation’s nearly 1,200 community colleges, as well as 29 affiliated councils, including the American Student Association for Community Colleges. Community colleges enroll 44% of all undergraduates in the U.S., including 52% of Hispanic students and 43% of African American students. In addition, community colleges enroll the highest percentages of low-income students of any sector of higher education. They remain the “Ellis Island” of higher education.

The hearing of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support is timely not only because of the need to extend the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, but also because continuing changes in the nation’s workforce coupled with the recent economic crisis have again underscored the critical link between educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency. Although the economic downturn that began in the fall of 2007 caused unemployment to rise across all educational attainment levels, those with relatively little education have suffered the highest increases in unemployment.¹

During the past several years, the national economy has shifted, leaving behind those without at least some college, as the dream of financial self-sufficiency slips further and further out of their reach. While individuals holding at least a college degree have, on average, managed to secure a suitable standard of living during the past decade, they are the only segment of society about which this can be said.² Increasingly, the road to a middle-class lifestyle runs straight through a college education.

Consequently, federal policy should both enable and encourage TANF recipients—and all members of our society—to participate in higher education, so long as they demonstrate a commitment to becoming self-supporting within an appropriate and realistic timeframe.

Ensuring that all adults who aspire to college are able to enroll and succeed is a huge challenge for our society. It has become the de facto policy in America to assign to community colleges the role of educating those least likely to thrive in college. Many of these hardest to serve individuals are TANF beneficiaries, by the simple fact that those lacking a college degree face significant challenges in establishing themselves in our economy.

Often community college administrators do not even know when they are serving TANF recipients. Many of the programs targeted to the welfare population were gradually ended following the enactment of the 1996 welfare reform law. The dramatic reduction in TANF caseloads has exacerbated this lack of focus. Fortunately it is not universal, and there exist a number of robust state programs targeted to providing education to the TANF population.

In the area of postsecondary education, the TANF program reflects some of the inconsistencies in federal human resources and related programs. Despite repeated efforts to rationalize these programs, political and policy considerations continue to stand in the way of a more integrated system. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 marked an ambitious attempt to better coordinate federal
workforce, income security, and human resource programs, and has resulted in some success, but many “silos” remain. One of the inconsistencies in federal policy that is of great concern is that, in practice, TANF provides less opportunity for higher education than other major federal higher education and job training programs, including the Higher Education Act, the Workforce Investment Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. While TANF is not primarily an educational program, it must retain a strong education component. However, because of the structure of current recipient work requirements and state policies, it is far more difficult for a single parent receiving TANF benefits to attend college than for an upper-middle class dependent to do so\textsuperscript{iii}—truly a perverse outcome.

AACC has consistently maintained that the longstanding TANF policy of discouraging postsecondary education beyond one year should be altered. The current one year requirement is woefully inadequate in enabling most TANF recipients to make significant progress in higher education. Part of the problem stems from the fact that few recipients are ready to fully benefit from postsecondary education and need significant amounts of remedial coursework prior to enrolling in credit-bearing postsecondary education classes.

The TANF program should be structured so that recipients can attend postsecondary education until they attain an associate’s degree, so long as they maintain standards of satisfactory academic progress (SAP) as specified in Title IV of the Higher Education Act. For 40 years, the SAP standards have served to ensure that students complete their studies within an appropriate timeframe. Many community college students are required to go for some period without receiving federal student aid while they complete the coursework that enables them to comply with the SAP standards. It is punitive and contrary to the national interest to apply far more stringent policies than this to the TANF population. Use of the SAP standards will also allow the many TANF recipients who need basic skills development to enroll in a fixed amount of this academic programming.

Attainment of the associate’s degree enables most graduates to qualify for the “middle skills jobs”—laboratory technician, graphic designer, teacher’s assistant, allied health professional—that allow an individual to earn family-sustaining wages. On average, these individuals earn about $7,000 more each year than high school graduates.\textsuperscript{iv} The associate’s degree also opens up a pathway to four-year colleges. Research has shown that many individuals can substantially increase their earning power by earning just a one-year certificate—but they shouldn’t have to stop there.

The debate around the issue of providing postsecondary education opportunities to TANF recipients is often emotional, carrying with it the implication that TANF recipients use college as a means of “avoiding work.” Approximately 80% of all community college students work while juggling academic and family responsibilities.\textsuperscript{v} We believe that those who are raising our next generation while working deserve a full and fair opportunity to participate in our economy through postsecondary education. The policies we recommend will permit that and ultimately result in a stronger America.


3 See, for example, Anthony Carnevale, Jeff Strohl, and Nicole Smith, “Help Wanted: Postsecondary Education and Training Required” in Richard M. Romano and Hirschel Kasper, eds., *Occupational Outlook for Community College Students* [New Directions for Community Colleges, No. 146, 21-31] (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Summer 2009).
