Key questions and answers concerning community colleges

What is distinctive about community colleges?
Community colleges are a distinctively American innovation, created in 1901 and now comprising the largest sector of higher education. Noted for their local orientation and responsiveness, these institutions are established by state and local communities to address ever-emerging educational, economic, and social needs. The colleges may be called “community, technical or (rarely) junior colleges,” and their fundamental mission is to make higher education available to anyone who aspires to it. In that regard, they are the most egalitarian of postsecondary institutions, and they are also the most diverse. Community colleges truly mirror the face of America, with an impact that reaches deep into the fabric of their local communities.

Is there a “national” system of community colleges?
Yes and no. To the extent that the nation’s 1,200 community colleges are found in every state, sharing a core mission and an emphasis on providing needed education and related services, the answer is yes. To the extent that there is no central entity that is responsible for their creation and administration, the answer is no. Each state’s system of community colleges is, in some sense, unique, and federal policy should reflect this diversity.

Should the federal government provide aid to community colleges?
On average, state and local expenditures comprise close to 60 percent of a community college’s budget. The federal government benefits enormously by the comparatively smaller investment it makes in the colleges (about 7 percent of revenues), since the bulk of their infrastructure is paid for by other partners. The government reaps increased tax revenues when individuals improve their job-related skills, leading to greater economic productivity. It costs far less to educate an individual for economic self-sufficiency than to provide that same individual with Medicaid, TANF, and other supporting benefits.

For students, what makes the difference in attending community colleges and is the federal government doing its part?
Community college students are typically the least affluent students in all of higher education—29 percent have annual incomes of less than $20,000. Students are drawn to community colleges, in part, by low tuition costs. In the fall of 2006, the average tuition for a full-time student was just $2,272. However, additional education-related costs such as books, housing, and transportation average more than $10,000 per year. Pell Grants are the primary federal student aid program benefiting community college students, reaching more than 2 million students annually. In recent years, Pell Grant funding has eroded, and it badly needs substantially increased resources. The federal government also should use the tax code more effectively to help community college students finance their educations. Loans are an unfortunate but growing recourse for many community college students: 31 percent of all community college graduates have educational debts, averaging $9,201.
Is current federal funding well-targeted and adequate for community colleges? The existing array of federal programs addresses many facets of community colleges, and their range is impressive, from the Departments of Education and Labor to the National Science Foundation and the Departments of Environmental Protection and Agriculture and many others. Some areas where institutions continue to seek greater support include high-tech infrastructure, nursing, teacher training, adult basic education, student support services, rural economic development, and others.

What role should community colleges play in the area of economic development and in helping address the skills gap? A number of prominent recent studies conclude that our nation’s workforce can’t afford to lose a single potential qualified worker. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63% of all new jobs to be created by 2014 will require at least some postsecondary education. Community colleges have an indispensable role to play in preparing workers for these jobs. However, the population that community colleges serve starts with high school students (primarily through dual enrollment programs) and continues through those of traditional retirement age. Across that continuum, millions of students will enroll in community college programs for a variety of job-related motivations—to get a new job or maintain the job they currently hold, to seek economic second chances from employment in obsolete career fields, and to gain basic literacy or language skills through English as a second language programs. Community colleges have the potential to address both individual student needs and the collective challenges of our increasingly diverse nation.

Are community colleges "accountable?" What, if anything, is the appropriate federal role in ensuring accountability? The federal government makes a substantial investment in community colleges through the federal student financial aid programs and has a vested interest in ensuring that all eligible institutions are of high quality. However, federal policies designed to impose new standards on community colleges can conflict with widely varying state, local, and private accountability efforts. These non-federal efforts continue to expand. Again, the federal government provides a relatively small, if critical, share in community college resources. Given this fact, Washington-based interventions should be undertaken judiciously to avoid diverting institutional resources for compliance away from other, more student learning-centered purposes.