Building Pathways for Community College Students

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funds AACC Partnership

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The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is launching a major project focused on helping community colleges design and implement structured academic and career pathways for all students.

The Pathways Project (Pathways) is being funded by a $5.2 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AACC is coordinating a national partnership to build capacity for community colleges to implement a pathways approach to completion and student success. Partners include Achieving the Dream, Inc., the Aspen Institute, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the Community College Research Center, Jobs for the Future, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, and Public Agenda. Each of the partner organizations will contribute to the development of a model series of six two-day institutes, which will focus on key elements required to implement a fully-scaled pathway model at a community college.

“This project is a game-changer,” said AACC president Walter G. Bumphus. “Pathway programs will provide clearly delineated outlines for students to follow toward their completion goals. The Pathways Project will allow AACC and our partners to develop modeling, training, and materials based upon successful programs that will serve as an implementation guide for our colleges.”

Initially, 30 community colleges will be invited to participate in the institute series. Readiness for and commitment to the work will be gauged through a competitive application and interview process to be conducted in the early fall. Following design and initial execution of the institute series, opportunities for college participation will be significantly expanded through collaboration with Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design, and state-based student success centers.

Bumphus notes that Pathways furthers the recommendations from the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. “A decade of intensive focus on improving student success in community colleges has seen positive results. Increasingly institutions are putting knowledge into practice and demonstrating success,” said Bumphus. “However, we need to ensure that these models are replicable and scalable at the national level; that’s what the Pathways Project will help to do.”

Leading the work for AACC are Kay McClenny, who serves as senior advisor to the president/CEO, and Gretchen Schmidt, who is assuming the position of executive director of the AACC Pathways Project. McClenny previously was founding director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement and co-chair of the 21st-Century Commission. Schmidt has extensive institutional and state-level experience in community colleges and has most recently served as director of postsecondary state policy at Jobs for the Future.

Selection criteria and application information are being developed and will be available in the coming weeks.