Community College Access and Affordability for Occupational and Nontraditional Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine what types of initiatives exist to increase access to and affordability of postsecondary education, especially in community college programs that lead to occupational advancement. We reviewed community college agency and state legislative Web sites to discover what initiatives or policies are currently being implemented or considered in the 50 states. We found few state-level initiatives designed specifically for occupational students, so we broadened our target population to include nontraditional students, whom we defined as financially independent working adults (over 25) who commute to a community college part time. We found that common ways of attempting to increase access for nontraditional students were (1) evening and weekend course schedules, (2) distance learning, and (3) awareness campaigns about college and the availability of financial aid. In terms of affordability, we found that states were expanding existing financial aid programs as well as creating new ones that target nontraditional students. States were also targeting specific occupational fields for aid in order to develop the workforce needed in that state. Future research in this area should study the effectiveness of these initiatives and policies in order to determine which initiatives have had the greatest impact on increasing access to and affordability of community colleges for occupational and nontraditional students.

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Foreword

This report was initially completed in June 2008. Reviews were not returned until March 2009. In the intervening months, the entire economic landscape changed fundamentally. When this report was first submitted, there was no recognized recession taking place, no housing sector crash, no surge in unemployment, no financial sector rescues, no auto industry bailouts, and no stimulus packages.

Since June 2008, states have experienced large budget shortfalls and cut higher education funding just as more people are enrolling in higher education as a buffer against the harsh labor market. The growth in the national unemployment rate has created a greater need for state expenditures for social programs that must be paid for out of coffers emptied due to a lack of stable income tax revenue. Lending has tightened beyond what is noted in this report, making college loans of any kind difficult to obtain. The effects of these changes on the topics of this report are not yet fully known.

The contribution that this report was designed to make was to discover what initiatives and efforts exist across the country to increase access to and affordability of community colleges for people seeking occupational advancement. The presumed next step was to pursue research on the most promising practices identified that could lead to improved participation and completion rates in occupational programs. This report was a snapshot in time, of its time. Given the cataclysmic changes in the economy since June 2008, another snapshot is in order. However, the original purpose of the report remains intact; it still serves as a launchpad for those next urgent steps: research on which initiatives survive and thrive in lean times. Now more than ever, the findings of this report should be used to find ways of increasing student access to and affordability of community college occupational programs that will provide opportunities for skilled employment.

Executive Summary

College access and affordability go to the heart of the mission of community colleges. But that mission is threatened by the ever-increasing costs of attending—not only tuition, but also institutional fees, books and materials, and transportation. The federal government, state governments, and postsecondary institutions have all developed initiatives or policies to address these increases. The purpose of this study was to examine what types of activities are being undertaken to increase the access and affordability of postsecondary education, especially community college programs that lead to occupational advancement.

First, we present a policy framework that reviews the literature on access and affordability with a focus on community colleges. We discuss access issues such as distance learning, which has greatly expanded the concept of access by providing educational opportunities using technology, allowing access to students who are geographically far from a postsecondary institution. Access to undocumented immigrants wishing to attend college is another topic reviewed.

A major component of access is affordability, as access is a moot point if education is not affordable. We report on several efforts to measure the affordability of postsecondary education in the 50 states and review some actions that states and institutions have taken to make college more affordable, such as freezing tuition rates. Such actions may be popular but can have negative implications, such as a lack of funds for institutional improvement or inevitable large tuition increases once a freeze is lifted. We review the recent history of financial aid, particularly its shift from a need-based to a merit-based system, the advent of market-based financial aid strategies such as tax credits and tax-free savings plans, and the implications of these developments for nontraditional students. Finally, we briefly discuss some international financial aid models as a means of putting the American situation in a broader context.

Our methodology was a grounded theory approach, which is a qualitative method of deriving theory or understanding from data that are systematically gathered and analyzed. We examined the Web sites of each of the 50 states' higher education and community college agencies or boards for information on current legislation and policy related to access and affordability at community colleges. These Web sites linked to others, which we also examined. In the grounded theory approach, data analysis takes place iteratively, at the same time as the data gathering. We coded or labeled similar instances, and this grouping allowed concepts or patterns to emerge that required returning to data collection to ensure that all such instances had been included. This process continued iteratively until the search was exhausted (i.e., until each new link or search direction yielded no new information).

Each author reviewed each state, providing a form of validity. We also compared our findings to those of recent reports on access and affordability, recognizing that with constantly changing data such as these, our findings might be more up-to-date than even the most recent published sources.

Given that the only source of our data was the Internet, it is possible that some states are doing more than they report on their Web sites. In such a case, that information would not appear in this report. It is also possible that since the time we completed data collection, new relevant

legislation has been introduced. This is a limitation in any study collecting contemporaneous data that include legislative actions across 50 state legislatures.

Our first major finding was that there are few state-level initiatives designed specifically for occupational students. For this reason, we broadened the scope of the search to include initiatives aimed at nontraditional students, whom we defined as financially independent working adults (over 25) who commute to a community college part time. Nontraditional students share many of these characteristics with occupational students.

With respect to community college access, we found states doing many similar things. States are reorganizing financial aid offices or entire state-level community college governance systems to improve their efficiency. Every state has a distance learning network. Many states have reciprocal tuition agreements with neighboring states, granting other states' students their in-state tuition rates (or some discount). Some states are creating extended campuses in regions of the state that had previously been without access to a postsecondary institution. Other common initiatives include statewide campaigns to increase the public's awareness of postsecondary education and the financial aid opportunities that can make it more affordable, and changing the work rules for their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs, allowing participants to attend college as a work activity.

But access is difficult to maintain in tough economic times. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's *Measuring Up* (NCPPHE, 2008a) initiative reports that the percentage of working-age adults enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher has declined 1.8% nationally since 1991. Despite this, states continue to develop noteworthy strategies to help people access postsecondary education, such as rural education initiatives (i.e., Alaska, Maine), and a means of granting college credit for knowledge gained from previous educational experiences or work (i.e., Vermont).

With respect to community college affordability, the *Measuring Up* initiative reports that overall, the affordability of postsecondary education continues to decrease. In fact, only Nevada, New York, and Tennessee increased their affordability rating based on the report's measures. Investment in financial aid varied across the states, but most states provide little need-based aid, according to *Measuring Up* (NCPPHE, 2008a).

We briefly mention some ubiquitous programs such as tuition discounts or waivers for members of the National Guard or the other armed services. Other common strategies addressing affordability include tuition freezes, tuition guarantees, and legislation addressing the high cost of textbooks.

But financial aid is the primary tool that states have to protect the affordability of postsecondary education. Historically, financial aid has been tied to continuous full-time attendance directly after high school, which is no longer the way many people approach postsecondary education. We found that many states have become aware that their financial aid systems are inadequate and outdated, especially for part-time students, working adults, and students who stop out. Many states are adopting new strategies, policies, and initiatives to improve affordability for these nontraditional students.

Nearly half of the 50 states have expanded access to state financial aid for more students. This aid is often targeted at low-income students, part-time students, and students who are the first in their families to attend college. States are also creating new financial aid programs, again aimed at similar populations. In addition to targeting populations, states are targeting occupational fields with their financial aid in order to accomplish other policy goals. For example, some states have directed their financial aid to encourage people to enter high-demand fields, STEM fields (i.e., fields in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and nursing.

Undocumented immigrants pose a dilemma for states, because although they are not legal U.S. citizens, many have gone through the American school system and are qualified to attend college. They might be promising scholars, but they are in the country illegally. On the one hand, some states believe that granting in-state tuition to these students helps the state economy by creating educated, tax-paying residents as opposed to adding to the population of adults who are underprepared for jobs in the global economy. On the other hand, these students receive in-state tuition rates whereas U.S. citizens of other states must pay out-of-state rates to attend the same schools. The issues are the same with respect to state financial aid for undocumented students. An exact count of the states that grant in-state tuition and/or financial aid to undocumented immigrants is difficult to establish because policy is in flux in many states, although fewer states grant access to financial aid than in-state tuition rates.

We found that newer, more market-based models for financial aid are popular across the nation. These include college savings plans, prepaid tuition plans, tax credits, and lifelong learning accounts. Some of these programs may not be useful for low-income families; for example, the tax credits option may not work because a family must owe taxes to be able to take the tax credit. But plans such as the LiLA (Lifelong Learning Account) are useful for working adults because they are employer-matched, portable educational accounts that workers can use to finance their education and training. Employers are encouraged to participate through tax credits. Some states have already created LiLA legislation, and others had such legislation pending or were in the planning stages at the time of the preparation of this report.

It is beyond the scope of this report to assess or review the impact that any of the efforts reported here have had. In fact, many of the initiatives are very recent, having been enacted only since 2006. The most promising trends to study appear to be the expansion of need-based financial aid and the targeting of aid to students in specific occupations. These policies appear to be the most useful to nontraditional students, including working adults. Future research in this area should study the effectiveness of these initiatives and policies in order to determine which initiatives have had the greatest impact on increasing access to and affordability of community colleges for occupational and nontraditional students.

Introduction

Access and affordability are not just current catch words in postsecondary education. Rather, they go to the heart of the mission of community colleges. Although two-year colleges already existed at the time, the Truman Commission report (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947) asserted that in order to further the ideals of American democracy, higher education should be made more broadly available to the entire population. It proposed community institutions (thus popularizing the name community college) that charged no tuition, thus being accessible and affordable to all. This basic mission has continued to this day, opening the door to higher education along the way for underserved populations.

This mission is currently threatened by the ever-increasing cost of attending community college—including tuition and other attendant costs (e.g., institution fees, books and materials, and transportation). The federal government, state governments, and postsecondary institutions have all developed initiatives or policies to address this increase. Some of these initiatives increase access to financial aid for a broader group of students, including nontraditional students who are over age 25 and attend part time—students who are often in programs leading to occupational advancement as opposed to transfer to a four-year college or university. This study reports on these initiatives to increase access and affordability for nontraditional students using data from higher education agency and state legislative Web sites from all 50 states.

Policy Framework and Literature Review

Community colleges are the first postsecondary step for many Americans, and for some, the only such step they will take. These institutions provide what most people need in order to transfer to a four-year university or earn a certificate or associate degree so they can improve their job opportunities. The niche of community colleges is to provide local access to a high-quality combination of general education and the technical skills necessary to work in the increasingly information-based world economy. Indeed, studies conducted on the economic returns to completing a community college occupational program have shown positive results on earnings (Grubb, 1995, 1999; Sanchez & Laanan, 1998). Grubb (1995) found that both certificates and associate degrees increased the earnings of those who received them. He found that getting a job related to one's field of study had substantial benefits compared to getting another kind of job. A subsequent analysis using more recent data also supported these findings (Grubb, 1999).

Community colleges are known to be the institutions of choice for occupational certificates and degrees that lead to employment. This is evident in the number of baccalaureate degree holders who "reverse transfer" to a community college, often in order to obtain training for skilled employment with a future. Quinley and Quinley (1998) reported that the percentage of baccalaureate reverse transfers to community colleges ranged between 5% and 13% of the for-credit community college population throughout the 1980s. More recent estimates are that approximately 10% to 20% of community college students in 1997 had a baccalaureate degree or higher, but exact numbers are difficult to obtain because some students do not self-report their prior degrees (Townsend, 2007).

In order to meet their mission of providing occupational education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), community colleges monitor the state and local outlook for employment in various occupations and plan their education and training programs accordingly. Current projections show shortages of qualified workers in many occupations due to slowing population growth rates and the aging of the current working-age population (Toossi, 2007). As these trends continue, many occupational sectors face a declining number of workers. In all regions of the country, shortages of skilled workers are being felt in the areas of allied health (Girion, 2005), construction (Rolph, 2008), and even manufacturing (Jasinowski, Eisen, & Kleinert, 2005). Although the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics considers manufacturing to be in decline (Figueroa & Woods, 2007), the National Association of Manufacturers surveyed its members and found that a serious gap exists between the skills manufacturers need in their workers and the skills of the available workforce (Jasinowski et al., 2005). This gap is partially attributed to the retirement of experienced workers and also to the relative disinterest of younger workers in manufacturing, perhaps because of its negative image. This decline in workers will need to be replenished with higher skilled, more productive workers. This includes skilled production workers such as machinists, craft workers, and technicians, but also includes engineers and scientists ("Engineers remain hot," 2008). All of these are areas which traditionally require skills learned or credentials earned in community colleges, and this helps explain why working adults and baccalaureate degree holders would choose to enroll in community college occupational programs.

Nontraditional Students

The age of majority in most states is 18. This is the age at which a person is considered to be an adult, with all of adulthood's attendant rights and responsibilities. Although many young people also achieve financial and residential independence from their parents at this age, other young people attend college, and many of them remain financially dependent on their parents until completing their education. Based on previous literature (Bean & Metzner, 1985), we defined traditional college students as being between the ages of 18 and 24 and attending a residential four-year college full time. This study, then, is focused on nontraditional students; that is, independent, working adults (over 25) who commute to a community college part time.

According to the U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 21% of all students enrolled in postsecondary education in 2007 attended a public two-year college part time (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2009). Of these nearly 4 million students, about 50% were age 25 or older.

Nontraditional students tend to drop out of college before completing a degree. For instance, student persistence among those who entered college in 2003 was measured in 2006 (Berkner, He, Mason, & Wheeless, 2007). Students with the lowest persistence rates came from two-year rather than four-year institutions, tended to be part time, not full time students, and were older, independent students (see Table 1).

Table 1

Persistence Among 2003-2004 Beginning Postsecondary Students

	No Degree, Not Enrolled in 2006 (%)
Type of Institution	
Public two-year colleges	44.6
Public four-year colleges	17.3
Type of Enrollment	
Part time only students	69.1
Full time only students	27.9
Age at Enrollment	
Students age 24 or more	53.2
Students age 23 or less	38.1
Dependency at Enrollment	
Independent	52.7
Dependent	25.6

The table shows that in each comparison, the nontraditional students are less likely to complete their degree program than those students with more traditional college student characteristics. Nontraditional students share several risk factors for not completing their postsecondary education. Therefore this is an important group to consider in national efforts to improve rates of postsecondary completion.

Much of the literature on access and affordability refers to traditional students, however. This report differs from previous work because it focuses on community colleges, on occupational programs within those colleges where possible, and on older students returning to education, sometimes only part time. Less literature exists on these topics. Thus, although the extant literature addresses access to postsecondary education, its findings are often not relevant to this study. For instance, Choy (2002) synthesized 10 years of research on access and persistence and found that there are four factors that determine access to college: the influence of parent income, rigorous high school studies, the plans of friends, and financial aid. The first three of these factors are relevant for traditional students going directly to college from high school; only the last factor, financial aid, usually comes into play for nontraditional students.

Issues of Access

Access to postsecondary education, according to Kipp, Price, and Wohlford (2002), is made up of two components: admissibility—whether a college admits typical college-bound students in that state, and affordability—whether such students can afford to attend. Kipp et al. noted that nearly every community college meets the first criterion of admissibility because they are less selective than public or private four-year universities. The term *access* connotes openness, and it is often used in discussions of underrepresented groups, such as access for low-income or minority students (Biswas, 2005; Davis & McSwain, 2007).

The concept of access to postsecondary education has expanded greatly with the advent of the use of technology in delivering instruction. Distance learning is especially useful in rural or other outlying areas of a state that might not have a community college campus or university extension center nearby. But distance learning is also popular among students who are geographically close to campus. Online education is one of the fastest growing arms of higher education in many states, especially at the community college level (Ohio Learning Network, 2006; Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2007).

Other ways to increase access for nontraditional students include offering classes at convenient times and places and providing distance learning opportunities, through which students can study at a time and place of their choosing. Yet another issue affecting access is whether previous learning can be counted toward a student's academic standing (Voorhees & Lingenfelter, 2003). Most adults will not devote the time to take courses that teach what they already know from previous educational experiences or work. Colleges can increase access by recognizing and awarding credit for knowledge and skills already acquired.

Access for undocumented immigrant students. Perhaps the most controversial issue related to college access is whether such access should be extended to undocumented immigrant students. Because undocumented immigrants are not in the country legally, many argue that they should therefore not receive benefits (i.e., in-state tuition) that are reserved for citizens. Students who are U.S. citizens and would like to go to another state to attend school end up paying more than students who are not legal U.S. citizens. The counterargument holds that many of these students have attended U.S. schools for most if not all of their lives, graduated from a U.S. high school, and could either add to the human capital of a state, pay taxes, and contribute to society, or they could remain in a precarious legal status, be unable to get a job that pays a living wage, and go underground or become a drain on society instead (Prosopsaltis, 2005).

Most of the states that have granted in-state tuition to undocumented students have several criteria that the students must meet. Usually the students must have attended a state high school for the past several years and graduated from one, and they must file an affidavit with the college or university stating the intention to file for legal permanent residency as soon as they are eligible (Biswas, 2005).

As states continue to debate this issue, the federal government is beginning to address it as well. As early as 2001, legislation was introduced to clarify that states could offer in-state tuition to undocumented students who met certain criteria: students who entered the country prior to their 16th birthday, have lived in the United States for at least five years, and have either graduated from high school or enrolled in college.[1] That bill did not pass. In 2006, the act was revived with a new name: The American Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors, or DREAM

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[1] See H.R. 1918 from the 107th Congress of 2001, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/C?c107:./temp/~c107R8hbS6.

Act (H.R. 5131). It passed in the Senate but was not taken up in the House. It was raised again in 2007 but remains a pending issue.

Some states have recently updated their state higher education or economic development strategic plans (i.e., Pennsylvania, West Virginia), and they have set ambitious goals of educating a certain number of people by a certain date or have proposed media campaigns as previously described. Ultimately, however, media campaigns are not enough to increase access for many nontraditional students because financial aid has not kept up with rising tuition.

Issues of Affordability

Affordability in higher education is comprised of three concepts: the ability of a student (and his/her family) to afford college expenses, the financial aid a student receives, and any loans a student takes out to attend college (NCPPHE, 2008b). The federal government calculates the affordability of postsecondary education for a family using a formula-based Expected Family Contribution, and then federal, state, and institutional sources provide at least some of the remaining needed funds. Several organizations have attempted to determine the affordability of postsecondary education across the states (Kelly et al., 2006; Kipp et al., 2002; NCPPHE, 2006, 2008a), concluding that there is no one threshold of affordability. What is affordable for one family income level in one state will not be affordable for a different family in a different state.

Kipp et al. (2002) reported on the disparities in college affordability across the 50 states. First, the authors separated public and private and two-year and four-year institutions because of the great cost differences across these institutions. Kipp et al. found public two-year colleges to be the most affordable of all postsecondary institutions for low- to middle-income dependent students, although in many states, this level of affordability still includes some borrowing. Although public two-year colleges are still the most affordable option for the working adults who are the subject of this report, going back to school often requires borrowing money, because independent adults have financial responsibilities they must meet. If they choose to attend college full time, they will be forgoing work and wages. It is often due to financial issues that many independent adults enroll only part time and continue to work part time. Kipp et al. identified states where two-year colleges are affordable to low-income independent students who want to attend full time (California, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Oregon, and Virginia).

Another effort to gauge the affordability of higher education in the United States is the *Measuring Up* initiative led by the NCPPHE (2006, 2008a). Every two years, the NCPPHE grades the states' progress on six performance categories: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits, and learning. Their purpose is to stimulate debate and policy related to improving higher education. We have incorporated several of the *Measuring Up* indicators into our findings on access and affordability in the body of this report. In the 2008 *Measuring Up* report, no state received an A or B in affordability. The best grade was a C- in California. This continues to be a deteriorating indicator, prompting the report's authors to write:

> [T]he college affordability problem does not exist in a vacuum. It is one of many symptoms of the underperformance of American higher education that signal the urgent need for a comprehensive and fundamental reexamination of higher education finance.

> This report card highlights these symptoms: flat college participation rates; lack of progress in extending college opportunity for low-income Americans; poor rates of completion of college programs; escalating costs and prices; and a financial aid system that is less focused on the nation's need to improve college access and attainment. (NCPPHE, 2006, p. 22)

Kelly et al. (2006) analyzed 25 years (1979-2004) of economic and enrollment data from each state to observe how financial aid and tuition policies tracked the economic cycles during those years, ending in 2003. The report provided a general overview of financial access, defining it as "the balance of state financial aid and tuition and fees for students attending public institutions" (p. 5). Kelly et al.'s historical view complements the more recent data in the Kipp et al. (2002) and NCPPHE (2006, 2008a) reports. Kelly and colleagues found that in all states, access to higher education did not keep pace with the growing economies of the states (as measured by the gross state product). After three of the four recessions during the period (1980, 1990-1991, and 2001), state appropriations for higher education decreased (by an average of 2.0%, 5.0%, and 8.6%, respectively), thus decreasing financial access. Only after the 1981-1982 recession did higher education appropriations increase—by 9.6%. Kelly et al. attributed this sharp increase to the typical robust recovery seen after a severe recession such as that of 1981-1982. Since the 2001 recession, states have decreased their spending on higher education and student aid while workforce development spending has increased. Institutions often offer tuition offsets to students in lieu of state financial aid, which dilutes state policy targeting specific populations to receive that aid. Finally, the report noted that higher education has come to be regarded as a personal benefit rather than a public good worth investing in. Kelly et al. suggested that this viewpoint does not recognize the role of higher education in economic growth, and as such bodes ill for the prospects of funding higher education adequately.

Citing concern over the rising costs of postsecondary education, the U.S. Congress commissioned a study on tuition rates and patterns of enrollment by various racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). The report pointed to a shift that occurred between 1995 and 2006 in which Latino enrollments in two-year colleges increased 4%, to 60% of all Latinos enrolled in higher education. Latino enrollments in four-year colleges and universities declined by 2% over the same period. Over 50% of the college enrollments from other minority groups (e.g., African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native) also attend two-year colleges, compared to only 43% of White college enrollments. During this same period, tuition continued to rise at all institutions, albeit less at two-year colleges than at four-year universities. Given these trends in enrollment and tuition, the report noted that "the majority of [all] students today attend institutions that have the lowest average tuition" (p. 3). However, this has not made college more affordable for many people.

In a retrospective look at what he called the "access agenda" in American postsecondary education, Longanecker (2008) discussed three contributing goals of higher education policy: (1) keep tuition low, (2) provide geographic access, and (3) grant financial aid. This overall philosophy led to an era of expanded access, but Longanecker argued that success has suffered in the process. When states with artificially low tuition rates began to see increases in demand in the 1990s, their tuition rates went up. In good economic times, people could pay the tuition. Longanecker called the decade of the 1990s "the era of tuition hikes and merit aid" (p. 4). In general, during that time and since, more financial aid dollars changed from grants to loans and tax credits, and aid did not keep up with inflation. Whenever and wherever the economy faltered, access eroded because tuition continued to increase but aid did not.

Tuition freezes and tuition guarantees. Some states have responded to the situation with tuition policies such as freezes or guarantees. A tuition freeze is simply that—tuition is not allowed to increase. Tuition freezes may be set either statewide or at the individual college level, depending on the community college governance system in the state. Other states have gone a step further and announced a "guaranteed tuition" or "tuition lock" for each cohort of students. Each year, the state (or an individual college) projects how much tuition might increase over four years, finds the average tuition rate, and sets that rate for the incoming class. Students are guaranteed that rate for four years as long as they stay in school.

Guaranteeing students a fixed tuition rate for four years is popular with families because they can plan better, knowing in advance what costs will be. For the colleges, however, it is slightly risky if state appropriations for higher education should drop, because colleges could not then raise tuition to make up the shortfall. The goal behind keeping tuition low is to maintain access, but some argue that that access comes at the cost of investing in quality (Redden, 2007). In contrast, states with higher tuition models tend to pursue access goals by collecting higher tuition rates from full-paying students, who in turn subsidize not only improvements, but also aid for low-income students. Other arguments against tuition freezes and guarantees include: (a) they do not address the causes of rising tuition costs and (b) such policies "simply set the stage for exceptionally large tuition increases as soon as the restrictions are lifted" (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2007, p. 35).

Notwithstanding such tuition policies, nontraditional students are hard-pressed to afford college. To make matters worse, over the last 20 years, states have shifted from a predominantly need-based aid system to more of a merit-based financial aid system (Dynarski, 2000; Longanecker, 2008; McDonough, Calderone, & Purdy, 2007). The merit aspect of these grant programs usually requires that students demonstrate that they have completed a rigorous high school curriculum. As McDonough et al. noted, strong academic preparation is a predictor of success in postsecondary education (Adelman, 1999). Linked to national K-12 reform efforts, these types of grants are aimed at students coming directly out of high school and therefore leave out the population of independent adults wishing to attend college but lacking funds to do so. Thus the financial aid policy of many states has in fact led to decreased access by nontraditional students.

Market-based affordability strategies. At the same time that state financial aid policy is shifting away from nontraditional students, the federal government has shifted much of its student financial assistance from Pell grants to tax credits (National Conference of State Legislatures Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education, 2006), which may not be useful for low-income families because a family must owe taxes to be able to take the tax credit. Dynarski (2000) showed that the HOPE scholarship in Georgia (upon which the federal program was based) increased enrollments among middle- and high-income students, but not among low-income students, thus reversing decades-old policies of directing college financial aid to the neediest families. In addition, the Georgia HOPE scholarship appeared to have widened the gap between African American and White college-going rates. Others have also questioned the unintended consequences of education tax credit policy and have recommending allowing a refund of education expenses beyond what the tax credit will cover for low-income people with a low tax liability (e.g., Cooper, 2004; Davis & McSwain, 2007).

All of this has contributed to a shortage in pure need-based aid and an increase in blended aid; that is, need- and merit-based aid in one grant (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002) and savings plans that put the onus on the family. However, Ifill and McPherson (2004) cautioned that in some cases, investing in an education savings plan may result in a "dollar-for-dollar decrease" (p. 8) in eligibility for need-based grant aid because any aid a student might have qualified for is offset by the amount of savings or assets in the family.

An international perspective on affordability. The trends noted here and elsewhere in this report are also evident in other nations. Citing a 2006 World Bank paper, Longanecker (2008) listed several types of financial aid models throughout the world, and most are not unfamiliar to Americans. The voucher model recently begun in Colorado is also practiced in France and Denmark. Longanecker considered this model to be transparent but expensive. An analysis of the Colorado legislation concluded that the law increased the likelihood of greater competition for undergraduates but also created more instability in the higher education budget because the stipends partially replaced the legislature's regular appropriations (Harbour, Davies, & Lewis, 2006). The authors concluded that because almost 60% of Colorado's public higher education funding is tied directly to enrollment under the stipend system, institutions are left without a sufficient funding base to ensure budget stability.

In some developing countries, higher education is free (e.g., Egypt, Uganda). Such a model is rare in the United States. In these countries, the elite essentially receive a subsidized education even though they can afford to pay for it. Targeting the subsidy at poorer students by instituting fees and providing financial aid would increase access and reduce the effect of social background on upward mobility (Redden, 2008).

The indirect transfer model is characterized by financial aid transferring through institutions to students. Many U.S. states and most countries follow this model; Longanecker (2008) noted that although efficient, it is not transparent. A third model is tax benefits in the form of tuition offsets for individuals or employers. The United States and several European countries use this model, which Longanecker described as efficient but not designed to increase participation. Finally, many countries use loans as their primary method of providing financial aid for postsecondary education. With loans, differences arise in the method of repayment, which ranges from being contingent on the income a graduate earns to human capital contracts—a condition Longanecker described as "modern indentured servitude" (p. 17) in some cases. For Longanecker, the ideal financial aid system would eliminate barriers for students and have the following traits: defensible, fundable, transparent, understandable, and efficient.

Improving Access By and Affordability For Nontraditional Students

An initiative that addresses community college access and affordability for low-skilled and/or low-income adults is the Breaking Through initiative from Jobs For the Future. Breaking Through seeks to help low-skilled adults enter and succeed in community college. Six policy recommendations gleaned from that work were gathered into a report (Duke & Strawn, 2008). The report's first recommendation was for states to develop a media campaign that showcases the benefits of enrolling in postsecondary education and the availability of financial aid for independent students. Next, states were advised to (a) harness the full array of federal and state funds targeted at economic development, customized training, student aid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Unemployment Insurance, job training for low-income adults, and child care, and (b) use those funds to help people attend college. Third, Duke and Strawn recommended tracking outcomes through a rigorous data system that spans education and labor force participation. The authors recognized the privacy issues that have been raised in terms of such data sharing, but they considered this step crucial to being able to gauge the effectiveness of the system. Fourth, states need to identify jobs with growth potential and partner with employers to help develop the capacity of the state's population to do those jobs. Fifth, states should overhaul their adult education system to streamline the various strands—basic education, English as a Second Language, and remedial education—and connect them with occupational programs so that adults can move in and out of the system more quickly. Finally, Duke and Strawn suggested improving financial aid and counseling support so that adults can be successful in college.

McDonough et al. (2007), in their report on the shift from need-based to a blended need- and merit-based aid system and its impact on students' choices of whether or not to seek out higher education, noted the dilemma that such a shift has created: State aid tends to be awarded to students who would have attended college anyway, and it grants relief from the growing costs of higher education to middle-class voters. Such policies do not increase access for low-income students, thus increasing the access gap. On the other hand, strictly need-based aid improves college access but has not improved the educational attainment of poor and minority students. McDonough et al. suggested that states examine their ratio of need and merit based aid as well as their policy goals and find the correct match for the state. In states in which the policy goal is to increase access for underrepresented and nontraditional students, McDonough et al. provided some general guidelines: (1) start small and build programs, (2) target the lowest-income students first, and (3) provide aid for the entire time that a student is in college to encourage degree completion.

The issues surrounding community college access and affordability touch on many current economic and political events and debates, from illegal immigration, which has resulted in undocumented students who have gone through the compulsory education system of a state and who are now seeking postsecondary education, to the tightening credit market, which affects student loans. States do not set higher education policy in a vacuum, so these issues are included in the discussions that follow where relevant.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine what states are doing to increase access to and affordability of postsecondary education, especially in career and technical education (CTE) programs that lead to occupational advancement. We reviewed state community college agency and legislative Web sites and other publicly available sources to discover what strategies are currently being implemented or considered in the 50 states. The goal was to inform the federal government and other states about potential models or practices that could be implemented more broadly to maximize affordable and accessible education options for adult learners. This study addressed the following research questions:

- What types of initiatives or policies are being undertaken by states in order to increase access to community colleges?

- What types of initiatives or policies are being undertaken by states in order to increase the affordability of community colleges?

Method

We determined that a qualitative approach was called for given the nature of the research questions, which called for exploring a substantive area about which little is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We chose grounded theory due to its focus on knowledge generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory approach refers to theory or knowledge that is derived from data that are systematically gathered and analyzed. The methodological appendix provides more information on grounded theory. We adapted the approach in that we are not building theory so much as building an understanding of a policy area. But that understanding is grounded in the data. The advantage of deriving our understanding from data is that it provides a guide for action or next steps precisely because it is strongly grounded in reality.

One important feature of grounded theory is that the analytical process takes place iteratively, at the same time as the data gathering, despite the necessarily linear presentation of the process in this report. Researchers use codes or labels to group similar instances or cases in the data, and this grouping often allows concepts or patterns to emerge which require returning to data collection to ensure that all such instances have been included. This iterative process occurs until additional data collection yields no new information. This is called category saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Please refer to the appendix for more details on grounded theory and its use in studies of areas of emerging knowledge.

Data Collection

We examined the Web sites of each of the 50 states' higher education and community college agencies or boards for information on current legislation and policy regarding access and affordability at community colleges. This central state Web site linked to others, such as the state legislature Web site or certain foundation Web sites (i.e., Achieving the Dream if the state was a participant in that initiative). If a state did not have such an agency, we began at the legislative Web site. All ancillary Web sites were also examined and relevant information gathered. We culled the Web sites searching for reports, policies, initiatives, and legislative activity related to increasing access and affordability at state community colleges, most especially in occupational areas.

Many of the higher education agency Web sites provide detailed information about relevant bills pending in state legislatures as well as describing current policy. We found that by reading three to four years' worth of legislative updates on higher education agency Web sites, we exhausted the range of relevant legislation pending in a state. Legislation already "on the books" was also usually available on the same site or through a link to the act as recorded in the state statutes and available on the legislative Web site.

These higher education agency Web sites often included reports on access or affordability, sometimes in state strategic plans for community colleges and at other times in reports describing the status of access or affordability policy. The sites also included descriptions of state financial aid programs, which were examined for relevant programs to include in this report. When each new link or search direction yielded no new information, the available information had been exhausted.

Another part of our search method for each state was to search the Web site of the *Community College Times*, the biweekly newspaper of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). This search often provided dates and other information on state initiatives. Additional online sources emerged from Google searches that used terms such as the following (using Ohio as an example):

- Ohio community college and access
- Ohio community college and affordability
- Ohio postsecondary and access
- Ohio postsecondary and affordability
- Ohio community college and tuition freeze
- Ohio postsecondary and tuition freeze
- Ohio community college and tuition cap
- Ohio postsecondary and tuition cap

We collected the names of reports and Web page links along with some cut-and-pasted descriptive information into a document for each state. In doing so, the focus was on recent (i.e., since 2003) initiatives, although we noted all relevant aid programs.

The next step was to examine foundation and other Web sites and their reports on the issues of access and affordability. Some of these foundations fund state efforts (i.e., Ford Foundation's Bridges to Opportunity, Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream) and have produced state-specific reports on these issues (e.g., Dougherty & Reid, 2007). In other cases, organizations have produced relevant national reports which we examined, such as Jobs For the Future's report on state initiatives to improve public financial aid participation (Prince, 2006). Where possible, we added to the state summaries from the information in such reports.

We synthesized the state-by-state documents into state summaries, iteratively following the links, continuing to explore the Web site of "completed" states as explorations in other states warranted. One example of information gathered through such a process was in the state of Oklahoma, where a bill was passed in 2007 guaranteeing students and their families the same tuition rate as their freshman year. This same bill also addressed the high cost of college textbooks, but these ancillary sections had not been captured during the first pass of the data because we had not yet encountered controlling textbook costs as a means of maintaining affordability.

As a form of validity, we compared our findings with the contents of recent reports that attempt a 50-state overview, such as the State Policy Inventory Database Online (SPIDO)[2] from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), Illinois State University's Center for the Study of Education Policy,[3] the state policy briefs and reports from the Education Commission of the States (ECS),[4] the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's Report Card on Higher Education,[5] and the Web site of the National Governors Association.[6] Although some of these sources may be more than one year old, many bills take that long to wend their way through state legislatures, especially in states where the legislatures do not meet year round.

This is not a typical validation procedure for collecting data, but it is not unprecedented when searching for current but changing information because many of the prior sources are quickly outdated. In such cases, a final means of assuring validity can be used: assigning a random subset of states to more than one investigator and then comparing outcomes (cf. Castellano, Harrison, & Schneider, 2007; Mechur Karp, Bailey, Hughes, & Fermin, 2005). We felt that collecting the data iteratively as we did served the same purpose; all 50 states were included, not merely a sample of them, so that each state's Web sites and data were examined several times by both authors. These state summaries were then used to produce the report.

Data Analysis

We continued the grounded theory approach in which our framework was derived from the data that was systematically collected and analyzed until category saturation occurred. As the state materials were being collected, we began to group together similar types of approaches that were being adopted across states (e.g., distance learning, tuition freeze). A state strategy could be classified into more than one of the types we identified; for example, Michigan's No Worker Left Behind policy was classified as (1) an additional need-based financial aid program and (2) aid for students entering high demand fields.

We also noted innovative approaches or policies. New approaches appeared as we continued through the 50 states. All approaches were reduced to matrices in the form of Excel files with all of the states listed. Ubiquitous approaches and policies were separated out for general discussion, and unique or innovative approaches were also extracted to be described in the report.

Regarding nomenclature, we have used the words *strategy*, *policy*, *initiative*, and *effort* synonymously for this report. Similarly, the terms *two-year*, *community*, and *technical colleges* are used interchangeably.

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[2] See http://www.wiche.edu/policy/SPIDO.
[3] See http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/eafdept/centerforedpolicy/webs/CCActs05.pdf.
[4] See http://www.ecs.org/.
[5] See http://measuringup.highereducation.org/reports/.
[6] See http://www.nga.org/

Limitations

We only listed a state as having a certain policy or following a certain approach if they mentioned it somewhere on their Web site. It is possible that some states are doing more than what they report on their Web sites, in which case such additional practices do not appear in this report. It is also possible that since the time of our data collection in any given state, new relevant legislation has been introduced or new policies have been implemented. This is a limitation in any study collecting contemporaneous data that include legislative actions across 50 state legislatures.

We did not include access policies or financial aid programs by individual community colleges, focusing instead on statewide efforts. Also, we do not cite in the text or references every Web site we visited or every link to legislation. These links change often as bills move through the deliberative and committee processes. We expect that the description of our method—starting with each state's community college or higher education board Web site and iteratively following links through each state's financial aid agency and legislative statutes Web sites—suffices for future researchers approaching this topic.

Findings: Increasing Access to Community Colleges

The most important finding we reached was that there were very few state-level initiatives that focus on helping increase the access to or affordability of postsecondary education specifically for occupational students. This is quite similar to a finding in another study that sought to examine postsecondary CTE-specific interventions that improved student achievement and retention (Bremer et al., under review): Although occupational education is one of the most important missions of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), most initiatives and interventions to help students tend to be either generally directed at all students or focused specifically on transfer students. There are few state-level initiatives underway specifically for CTE students. It is possible that individual colleges are responding to their student body or business community with CTE-specific initiatives, but this is rare at the state level. For this reason, we broadened the scope of the search to include initiatives aimed at nontraditional students, whom we defined as financially independent working adults (over 25) who commute to a community college part time. Nontraditional students share many of these characteristics with occupational students.

It is important to know that the governance of community colleges varies greatly across the 50 states. In some states, community colleges are run by the state; in others, they are operated by localities. Some states have only a loose network of two-year colleges or operate them as adjuncts to individual four-year universities or even local K-12 education systems. Several states have recently changed or are considering changing their community college governance system (or instituting one) in order to improve efficiency and have a louder voice with the state legislature. For instance, at the turn of this century in Maine, there was a growing consensus that the lack of a comprehensive community college system was leading to low college participation and attainment levels. The state technical college system, with the support of business, industry, and government, changed its accrediting body to the one used by most higher education institutions and formed a community college system. The technical colleges already had many of the features and attributes of comprehensive community colleges. The new system has developed a strategic plan for higher education with a mission that calls for increasing access and affordability for Maine residents, among other things.

We found that every state has developed a distance education network. In some cases, the network spans the different levels of higher education (e.g., Massachusetts); in others, two-year colleges have their own network and the university system has a separate distance education network (e.g., Illinois), and in still other cases, each community college has its own network (e.g., Nebraska). Most networks offer all of the courses required to earn an associate degree. Distance education has many forms, converging on the commonality that most of the teaching and learning occur via telecommunication systems as opposed to face-to-face classroom interaction (Moore, 2003). Most states offer some subset of the following types of distance education: live interactive or taped video transmitted through the Internet or cable or closed-circuit television. These services can be delivered to personal computers or to designated remote sites. Some distance education courses are hybrids, in that they meet physically at least once, some meet over the Internet, and others never meet at all. As noted on the Web page for South Carolina's distance education network, these courses "can be synchronous (all students in the class online at specific times) or asynchronous (log on and study anytime) or a combination. Communication with the instructor and other students is normally through email and students can interact through discussion groups in online chat rooms."[7] Such myriad options expand access to education for all regions of the 50 states.

We also found that most states have reciprocal tuition agreements with bordering states, such as the Western Undergraduate Exchange (15 states), the Midwest Student Exchange (12 states), the Academic Common Market (16 states), and the New England Higher Education Compact (6 states). Through these agreements, states grant other states' students their in-state tuition rates (or some discount) due to their proximity—sometimes the closest college to a student is in a neighboring state—or because a student's home state may not offer a program offered in a neighboring state. Usually the number of students covered by the agreement is at the discretion of each participating institution.

Many states have worked to expand access to various population groups. Creating extended campuses or regional centers of existing community colleges has increased access in many rural parts of states that previously had no higher education institutions in the area. Another strategy that many colleges in a number of states have used is to offer alternative scheduling for courses, such as in the evenings or on weekends. This increases access for busy adults who must continue to work while attending college.

Table 2 presents other common initiatives that states have undertaken to increase access to community colleges, according to our Internet scan. Nine states have developed statewide campaigns to increase the public's awareness of postsecondary education and the financial aid opportunities that can make it more affordable. These are state-funded efforts, usually an outgrowth of the state higher education strategic plan, publicizing the importance of postsecondary education on television, radio, and other media. California has developed a bilingual Web site.

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[7] See http://www.sctechsystem.com/distlrng.htm.

Table 2

Initiatives to Increase Access to Community College

Campaign to increase awareness of postsecondary education and financial aid	*Aid that covers support service expenses (e.g., tutoring, child care, transportation)*
Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, Ohio, Texas, West Virginia	*California, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, *Wyoming

Note. *College-specific policy.

Often people are aware of the importance of getting more education; they might even feel that they could qualify for financial aid, but other factors prevent them from enrolling. These barriers include the need for child care, transportation, or other support services that are traditionally not a part of financial aid packages. Six states have begun to include these services in financial aid for low-income or nontraditional students (see Table 2), and individual colleges at two additional states do so as well.

Many states have programs targeted at single parents receiving federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under federal law, states develop their own definitions of work requirements, and approximately 21 states allow full-time postsecondary education to count as an allowable work activity. There are often requirements that participants must meet in order to continue, such as steady academic progress (Greenberg, Strawn, & Plimpton, 2000).

Measuring Up Report Card Data on Access

Another measure of access to community college is reported every two years by the NCPPHE's *Measuring Up* initiative.[8] This organization "grades" the states in the progress they have made in performance categories such as participation in higher education. Within the participation category, we have selected the indicators most relevant to community colleges and nontraditional students (NCPPHE, 2008a), such as the percentage of 25- to 49-year-olds enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher (see Table 3).

[8] See http://measuringup.highereducation.org/default.cfm

Table 3

Measuring Up Report Card: Access Indicators for Community Colleges

States	*Percent of postsecondary students enrolled in public 2-year colleges*	*25- to 49-year-olds enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher (nat'l avg. = 5.6%)*	*Change in percentage since 1991 of working-age adults enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher (national = 1.8% decline)*
Alabama	35	5.2	1.0% decline
Alaska	4	5.9	3.7% decline
Arizona	42	15.1	3.8% increase
Arkansas	37	4.9	0.7% increase
California	65	7.2	1.7% decline
Colorado	30	7.3	4.9% decline
Connecticut	32	3.9	4.3% decline
Delaware	33	5.0	1.9% decline
Florida	33	5.2	1.6% decline
Georgia	36	4.4	0.1% decline
Hawaii	39	5.2	1.0% decline
Idaho	18	5.0	2.6% decline
Illinois	51	6.6	2.5% decline
Indiana	20	5.2	0.7% decline
Iowa	40	9.4	2.1% increase
Kansas	44	6.0	3.6% decline
Kentucky	39	5.6	0.6% decline
Louisiana	25	4.0	1.2% decline
Maine	22	4.4	1.0% decline
Maryland	45	5.8	2.9% decline
Massachusetts	26	4.8	3.4% decline
Michigan	41	5.7	0.5% increase
Minnesota	40	5.9	1.3% decline
Mississippi	50	4.6	0.8% decline
Missouri	28	5.6	2.3% decline
Montana	21	4.5	2.0% decline
Nebraska	39	6.3	4.2% decline
Nevada	16	5.0	2.5% decline
New Hampshire	22	3.4	3.7% decline
New Jersey	47	4.4	2.2% decline
New Mexico	56	8.6	1.9% decline
New York	29	4.4	1.2% decline
North Carolina	47	5.1	1.3% decline
North Dakota	21	6.7	0.2% increase
Ohio	33	4.9	1.8% decline

Oklahoma	36	5.5	1.9% decline
Oregon	45	5.7	2.9% decline
Pennsylvania	22	3.8	2.0% decline
Rhode Island	23	4.8	4.5% decline
South Carolina	43	3.9	1.1% decline
South Dakota	13	6.0	0.8% decline
Tennessee	31	4.1	1.7% decline
Texas	50	4.7	2.6% decline
Utah	21	8.9	1.7% decline
Vermont	16	4.3	2.8% decline
Virginia	41	5.6	2.1% decline
Washington	59	6.0	1.8% decline
West Virginia	22	5.8	0.3% increase
Wisconsin	38	5.4	2.5% decline
Wyoming	64	6.1	3.7% decline

Note. Information taken from *Measuring Up. The National Report Card on Higher Education. 2008 state reports*, http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/states/index.php.

In terms of the percentage of all postsecondary students who are enrolled in community colleges, California leads the nation at 65%, followed by Wyoming (64%) and Washington (59%). The states that have the fewest of their postsecondary enrollments in community colleges include Alaska at 4% and South Dakota at 13% (see Table 3). The *Measuring Up* data also show that the national average of 25- to 49-year-olds enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher is 5.6%. But the range varies greatly across the states, from a high of 15.1% in Arizona to a low of 3.4% in New Hampshire.

A final relevant *Measuring Up* access indicator notes the change in percentage of working-age adults enrolled in any type of postsecondary education with no bachelor's degree or higher. Nationally, there has been a 1.8% decline since 1991, the year of enrollment data used for a baseline (NCPPHE, 2008b). States that have increased this percentage include Arizona and Iowa. Most states have seen a decline in this percentage, including Colorado, Connecticut, Nebraska, and Rhode Island, all of whom saw declines in this indicator of over 4% of their 1991 participation percentages.

Noteworthy Access Initiatives

Our scan of the states' higher education and legislative Web sites revealed several unique or otherwise mentionable strategies being used by states. For instance, both Alaska and Maine have begun rural initiatives to bring higher education to their more remote regions. In Alaska, the RANA (Rural Alaska Native Adult) program provides access to associate degree programs for rural and nontraditional students. Although many states have distance learning programs and many states have initiatives for Native Americans, this program combines the two. However, one does not have to be an Alaska Native to participate.

The Maine Community College System (MCCS) launched the Rural Initiative in late 2007 to provide more services to the rural areas of the state. With a large private investment, the initiative plans to (1) increase the number of community college scholarships available to rural residents, including offering child care assistance, (2) expand distance learning opportunities, and (3) increase rural high school students' access to the community colleges. Another effort within the initiative is called "Bring College to ME." It will deliver targeted, two-year degree programs on an intermittent basis to rural areas, beginning with healthcare-related training.

Vermont has a program called Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) that can grant college credit for prior college-level learning, whether school- or work-based. Students enroll in a class in which they develop portfolios that identify, articulate, and document this learning. Committees assess the portfolios and if granted, the credits are considered Vermont State College transfer credits. Students only pay tuition and fees for the APL course and not for any additional credits awarded.

Findings: Increasing Affordability of Community Colleges

A major way in which states provide and expand access to postsecondary education is through financial aid, which of course also addresses the affordability barrier. This section explores what states are doing to increase the affordability of community colleges for nontraditional students. First, we note some ubiquitous and/or federally funded programs and strategies. Then we look at state-level reports on affordability published by the *Measuring Up* initiative (NCPPHE, 2008a). Finally, we provide information gleaned from state Web sites, including common strategies to keep student costs low, the creation or expansion of financial aid programs, certain targeted financial aid, market-based strategies, and emergent or unique strategies to increase college affordability.

Many states are working through various means to increase the affordability of higher education overall and to community colleges specifically. Some steps are small or might seem bureaucratic in nature, but these can bring about changes in practices that can lead to improved affordability for students. For instance, Connecticut and North Carolina improved the efficiency and delivery of financial aid to students, (e.g., coordinating various student financial aid data systems, integrating them with a new management information system, automating the application process, and hiring more financial aid officers to meet the demand). These actions left more money for more students. Ohio moved its office of adult occupational programs from the K-12 education agency to the postsecondary agency to better address student needs.

Ubiquitous or Federal Programs

We found that most if not all states shared certain financial aid programs in common, many of them funded by the federal government. The federally funded programs include grants such as the Robert C. Byrd Scholarship. Because these strategies are common and have usually been in existence for decades, they tend to be targeted more to high school seniors than to nontraditional students. An exception to this is the federal Pell grant, which is a need-based grant to low-income students who have not received a bachelor's degree. Part time students are eligible for Pell grants, which differentiates them from other federal financial aid programs. Pell grants are therefore an important means of providing access to part-time students, older students, and all other nontraditional students. Nonetheless, because Pell grants are well known and available in all states they are not discussed further in this report.

Other common strategies include College Goal Sunday, a statewide volunteer program providing free information to students and families who want to apply for financial aid. This program assists parents of high school students and independent adults to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Many states provide in-state status for tuition purposes or waive tuition altogether for certain targeted groups. All states have such a program for the National Guard, and Table 4 shows some of the other groups most often targeted by states for such tuition programs.

Table 4

Most Common Aid Programs Targeted at Population Groups

Military scholarships	*Dependents of fallen police/fire/EMT public servants*
Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming	Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Wyoming

Measuring Up Report Card Data on Affordability

The 2008 *Measuring Up* report included an affordability performance category for each state. This affordability category measured whether residents can afford higher education, given state income levels, financial aid programs, and the tuition and fees at the various types of colleges and universities in the state. The change since 1992 in this affordability index is reflected in the first column Table 5, which shows that most states did not make any progress in providing affordable higher education to its residents. In fact, only Nevada, New York, and Tennessee made any progress on this indicator. Similarly, low-priced college opportunities were difficult to find across the United States; only California was rated as having such opportunities (see Table 5).

Table 5

Measuring Up Report Card: Affordability Indicators for Community Colleges

States	*Progress in providing affordable higher education*	*Low-priced college opportunities*	*Investment in need-based financial aid*	*Percent of income low-income population spends to attend CC*
Alabama	lost ground	none	very low	36
Alaska	lost ground	none	very low	34
Arizona	lost ground	none	very low	31
Arkansas	lost ground	none	very low	19
California	lost ground	yes	low	38
Colorado	lost ground	none	very low	33
Connecticut	lost ground	none	high	37
Delaware	lost ground	none	very low	39
Florida	lost ground	none	very low	36
Georgia	lost ground	none	very low	29
Hawaii	lost ground	none	very low	30
Idaho	lost ground	none	very low	28
Illinois	lost ground	none	very high	37
Indiana	lost ground	none	very high	34
Iowa	lost ground	none	very low	40
Kansas	lost ground	none	very low	28
Kentucky	lost ground	none	very low	23
Louisiana	lost ground	none	very low	28
Maine	lost ground	none	very low	43
Maryland	lost ground	none	low	33
Massachusetts	lost ground	none	low	40
Michigan	lost ground	none	very low	33
Minnesota	lost ground	none	very high	36
Mississippi	lost ground	none	very low	24
Missouri	lost ground	none	very low	33
Montana	lost ground	none	very low	33
Nebraska	lost ground	none	very low	30
Nevada	improved	none	very low	38
New Hampshire	lost ground	none	very low	51
New Jersey	lost ground	none	very high	40
New Mexico	lost ground	none	very low	28
New York	improved	none	very high	43
North Carolina	lost ground	none	fair	32
North Dakota	lost ground	none	very low	42
Ohio	lost ground	none	very low	44
Oklahoma	lost ground	none	very low	30
Oregon	lost ground	none	very low	44

Pennsylvania	lost ground	none	very high	44
Rhode Island	lost ground	none	very low	49
South Carolina	lost ground	none	very low	29
South Dakota	lost ground	none	none	41
Tennessee	improved	none	very low	32
Texas	lost ground	none	very low	30
Utah	lost ground	none	very low	28
Vermont	lost ground	none	very high	50
Virginia	lost ground	none	very low	31
Washington	lost ground	none	very high	36
West Virginia	lost ground	none	very low	30
Wisconsin	lost ground	none	fairly low	33
Wyoming	lost ground	none	very low	26

Note. CC = community college. Information taken from *Measuring Up. The National Report Card on Higher Education. 2008 state reports*, http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/states/index.php.

The investment in need-based financial aid was somewhat more varied: Eight states provided large amounts of aid (Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Washington) in 2008, while South Dakota provided none, and most of the rest of the states provided little need-based aid.

The final column in Table 5 shows the percent of their income that a low-income student or family must spend to attend a community college in that state. The definition of low income is based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data (NCPPHE, 2008b). ACS respondents were asked what their income was over the previous 12 months, including gross earnings (wage/salary income before taxes), interest, dividends, Social Security, and public assistance. For each state, ACS divided the family incomes across the state into quintiles, and low income was defined as the lowest two quintiles (40%) for each state.

The *Measuring Up* report calculated the percentage of income that must be used for a member of a low-income family to attend community college (i.e., tuition less any financial aid). The lowest percentages of low-income family income needed to attend community college were found in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi, at less than one-fourth of family income. The states in which the highest percentage of family income was needed to attend college in 2008 were Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont, with Vermont reaching fully one-half of family income (see Table 5).

Common Strategies to Contain Student Costs

We found three strategies that states used to try to keep postsecondary students' costs low: tuition freezes, tuition guarantees, and policies that address the high cost of textbooks. Table 6 shows the states that have taken these actions. Eight states have frozen community college tuition during the 2007-2008 academic year. In some of those states, the state legislature only meets every two years, so the freeze will last longer than one year. In other states, the freeze has been ongoing, and in still others, there were tuition freezes in previous years but not in 2007-2008, so they do not appear in the table.

Table 6

Common Strategies to Keep Student Costs Low

Freezing community college tuition	*Guaranteeing community college tuition*	*Addressing high cost of textbooks*
Florida, *Kentucky, Montana, Ohio, *Oregon, *South Dakota, *Washington, Wisconsin	**Georgia, ***Illinois, ***Kansas, **Oklahoma	*Alabama, *Alaska, *California, *Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Virginia

Note. *Introduced in legislature. **Two- and four-year guarantee. ***Four-year guarantee only.

Table 6 shows that Georgia and Oklahoma placed a four-year guarantee on their four-year university tuition and a two-year guarantee on community college tuition, whereas Illinois and Kansas have only guaranteed their four-year university tuition rates. Although the guarantees in the latter two states do not apply to community colleges, they can impact community college enrollment: Students may choose to lock in a tuition rate at a four-year institution as freshmen rather than attending community college for their first two years.

Rarer than tuition freezes or guarantees are proposals to make community college free to all in-state residents. This has been proposed in several states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma.

Another common strategy used or under consideration is to address the high cost of college textbooks. Some states have instituted state sales tax waivers on college texts and other materials (e.g., New Mexico). Others have addressed the issue in other ways, such as Oregon, which passed a law in 2007 requiring the “unbundling” of textbook products from other ancillary materials such as interactive CDs and study guides. Publishers often require that the entire bundle be purchased, regardless of whether the entire set of materials is needed by an instructor for a particular course, so this law bans that practice. Publishers are also now required to inform faculty members about updates for the materials being purchased to prevent unnecessary expenditures on the part of students.

Financial Aid

Financial aid for postsecondary students has historically been tied to continuous full-time attendance directly after high school, which is no longer the way many people approach postsecondary education. As we scanned the financial aid Web sites of each state and cross-checked state statutes, we found existing aid programs that had been created 30 years ago or more. Flagship aid programs in many states still assume that students are coming directly from high school, so high school achievement is often a criterion for aid. Room and board costs are often factored in, despite the fact that many students need financial aid to attend community colleges, which rarely have student housing. Many states have targeted aid programs for economically disadvantaged students and students from ethnic/racial minority backgrounds, but they are often not available to part-time students. Additionally, some grants are cancelled if the student stops out for one semester.

From recent reports (cf. The Futures Project, 2005) and from the findings we present here, it is clear that many states have become aware that their financial aid is inadequate and outdated, especially for part-time students, working adults, and students who stop out. Many states are adopting strategies, policies, and initiatives to improve the affordability of postsecondary education, and these expansions of existing aid and new aid developments are reviewed here.

Table 7 shows that nearly half of the states have expanded access to state financial aid for more students. The notes reveal the categories of students who have become eligible for aid since approximately 2003: low-income students, part-time students, and students who are the first in their families to attend college. States without notes in the table might have expanded financial aid in unique ways, such as Maine's expansion of an existing scholarship program to include child care assistance, or Connecticut's expansion to include family or household expenses of low-income students.

Table 7

Recent Changes to State Financial Aid Programs to Address Affordability

Expanding access to state financial aid for more students	*Creating additional need-based financial aid programs*
[*]Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, [*/***/****]Florida, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, [*]Montana, [*]Nebraska, [***] New Jersey, [***]New Mexico, [***]New York, [***]North Carolina, North Dakota, [*/***/****]Ohio, [*]Oregon, [*/***]Tennessee, [*/***]Washington, [***]West Virginia	[**]Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Idaho, [***]Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oregon, South Carolina, [**]Texas, [**]Vermont, Washington, Wyoming

Note. [*]Low income. [**]Introduced in legislature. [***]Part time. [****]First in family.

In addition to states expanding access to existing programs, 17 states have created new financial aid programs to accommodate the growing and diverse need in their states. Several examples will show how the new programs are aimed at specific populations that are the subject of workforce and economic development efforts around the country. In some cases, the new financial aid programs are an outgrowth of recommendations from a state higher education strategic plan recommending an increase in the number of adults returning to school. Kentucky's Go Higher Grant gives adults aged 24 or older up to $1,000 for one academic year, even if they enroll less than half time (i.e., one or two courses). This need-based award covers tuition and includes a book allowance. Montana and Washington have similar programs, as does Minnesota, whose program offers $1,200 to low-income returning students. In Arkansas, the Second Effort Scholarship provides up to $1,000 to the individuals with the top ten GED scores during the previous calendar year. Oregon's program meets 90% of the recipient's unmet financial need as determined by the college of attendance.

A more comprehensive approach was taken by Michigan, perhaps because of the dire economic circumstances in that state. Launched in 2007, the No Worker Left Behind program provides displaced workers who want to acquire skills in high-demand occupations with a three-year window to receive up to two years worth of free community college tuition. Any resident who is currently unemployed, recently terminated or laid off, or employed with a family income of $40,000 or less is eligible for the program.

Targeted Aid Programs: Specific Occupational Fields

Financial aid policy, like any policy, can be developed to achieve certain goals. All states use financial aid policy for this purpose, some more than others. Table 8 shows the states that have directed their financial aid to encourage people to enter high-demand fields, to enter STEM fields (i.e., fields in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics), and to enter nursing. The aid could be in the form of grants or loans.

Table 8

Aid Programs Targeted at Specific Occupational Fields

For students entering high-demand fields	*For students entering STEM fields*	*For students entering the nursing field*
Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Washington, **Wyoming	Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, **Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Texas, West Virginia	Alabama, *Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, *Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, **Mississippi, *Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, *New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, *Oregon, *Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont, *Washington, *Wisconsin, *Wyoming

Note. *Loan forgiveness plan, not a scholarship. **College-specific policy.

One example of a state encouraging people to enter high-priority occupations is Pennsylvania's Job Ready PA program. Since 2005-2006, it has provided loans to adult workers who are enrolled in a community college occupational program less than half time. Such students would be ineligible for the state's traditional grant programs. Targeted occupations provide a living wage or offer advancement opportunities. Recent updates on this initiative showed that employees who received training during 2005 saw an average increase in their wages of 12.9%, and businesses reported improved productivity and employee retention rates.[9]

Sometimes there are strings attached to this aid. For example, Maryland's Workforce Shortage Student Assistance Grant (WSSAG) is for students who plan to work in child care, human services, teaching, nursing, physical and occupational therapy, or public service occupations. Students may be full or part time and can receive $2,000 per year if attending full time or $1,000 per year if attending part time. In order to receive the grant, the student must agree to a service obligation of one year for each year that they received the scholarship.

Table 8 also shows the states that have targeted students in STEM-based programs for aid. For instance, New York's Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP) is designed for historically underrepresented students in scientific, technical, health-related, or licensed professions; or who are economically disadvantaged; and who demonstrate an interest in and potential for a CSTEP-targeted profession (i.e., math, science, technology, or health-related fields). The Department of Transportation in the state of Texas offers its own STEM grant for students majoring in civil engineering, computer science, computer information systems, or management information systems. Students can receive up to $6,000 per academic year, but they must agree to work for the department for two years immediately following graduation. This is called a "conditional grant" because if the borrower does not fulfill the promise to work in that field in that state for the agreed-upon amount of time, the grant becomes a loan that must be repaid.

Given the nationwide nursing shortage, it not surprising to see targeted aid as an incentive to enter this field. Financial aid for students in nursing programs is structured differently in different states. Most states that provide aid to nursing students grant scholarships (14 of 24, see Table 8). But 9 of those 24 states have instituted loan forgiveness programs, in which the loans are forgiven if the student agrees to work for a certain number of years in the state. Otherwise, the scholarship reverts to a loan that must be repaid. The final state, Mississippi, only grants nursing scholarships to college juniors and seniors and so is not relevant to the populations or colleges that are the focus of this study.

Postsecondary Education Affordability for Undocumented Immigrant Students

The final category of students that many states have identified is undocumented immigrants. Texas was among the first states to grant in-state tuition to undocumented students. This practice began in Dallas but went statewide in 2001. It has since spread to 10 other states, with at least 11 others considering it (see Table 9). An exact count is difficult because this policy is in flux in many states. Some legislatures have introduced bills to repeal the policy every year since its passage (i.e., Utah), and other states have tried to pass laws barring undocumented students from being admitted to the state's public higher education institutions before other laws can pass (i.e., Missouri, South Carolina, Virginia).

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[9] See http://www.paworkforce.state.pa.us/about/cwp/view.asp?a=471&q=155669, entitled Governor Rendell's Strategy for Building a Skilled Workforce: Job Ready PA Update.

Table 9

Postsecondary Education Affordability for Undocumented Immigrant Students

Granting in-state tuition to undocumented students	*Granting access to state financial aid to undocumented students*
*Arkansas, California, *Connecticut, */**Florida, *Idaho, Illinois, **Indiana, *Iowa, Kansas, *Maryland, *Massachusetts, *Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, **Nebraska, Nevada, **New Hampshire, *New Jersey, **New Mexico, New York, **Ohio, Oklahoma, *Oregon, *Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, **Virginia, Washington	California, **Nevada, New Hampshire, **New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas

Note. **Introduced. **College-specific policy.

After offering in-state tuition for undocumented students, the next logical controversy is whether or not such students should be eligible for financial aid. The federal government has already decided that they are not eligible for federal aid, but some states have granted state aid (see Table 9). Nevada and New Mexico have left it up to individual colleges to decide, and in many states, colleges and universities have the discretion to award institutional financial aid to anyone they choose.

North Carolina offers an interesting case study of the undocumented immigrant in higher education. In 2004, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) allowed colleges to decide individually whether to admit undocumented immigrants. In 2007, the NCCCS studied the policy and concluded that community colleges must admit illegal immigrants who meet the basic requirements of being either a high school graduate or an adult in need of skills training. However, undocumented students had to pay out-of-state tuition. This decision created controversy, so the NCCCS asked the state attorney general for an opinion. The response was that the state would have to pass a law allowing such admissions, and until then, the NCCCS policy should be to drop the open admissions policy for illegal immigrants. In the meantime, legislation was introduced stating that illegal aliens are not eligible for the in-state tuition rate. These bills have not yet passed the state legislature ("Documents now needed," 2008).

Other states also have such legislation pending (Pinhel, 2008). Perhaps the most draconian of such measures was introduced in Virginia, which would require postsecondary institutions to collect a certified copy of each first-time entering freshman's birth certificate upon admission (or an affidavit in the absence of the birth certificate, noting the place and country of birth). Students who fail to submit this documentation would not be eligible for in-state tuition or state financial aid, regardless of their citizenship status.

About Loans

Another ubiquitous financial aid program across the country is the loan programs guaranteed by the states or by loan guarantors working with states. Several states have created new low- or no-interest loan programs as an incentive to adults to return to school. For instance, Massachusetts offers no-interest loans for needy students, who then have up to 10 years to repay it. Texas takes this a step further, retiring the entire loan if students maintain a certain grade point average and graduate on time (i.e., two or four years depending on the institution and program).

As this report was being prepared, credit was tight and getting tighter in many market sectors, including college loans. Community college students have begun to have trouble securing loans, as banks and lending institutions seem to prefer baccalaureate borrowers, prompting a congressional response to compel lenders to extend credit to any eligible student (Glater, 2008). Other responses include an increase in market-based solutions such as peer-to-peer lending (Schonfeld, 2008).

Market-Based Strategies Addressing Affordability

Although some financial aid programs have existed for over a generation, newer models are more market-based than traditional programs, including college savings plans, prepaid tuition plans, tax credits, and lifelong learning accounts. Much of the following discussion is based on information from three Web sites for student financial aid planning: the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) Web site,[10] The Next Student Web site,[11] and the Saving For College Web site.[12]

Hope Scholarship tax credit. Perhaps the best known education tax credit is the federal Hope Scholarship tax credit. The NASFAA has described it:

> The Hope Scholarship is a tax credit, not a scholarship. Tax credits are subtracted directly from the tax a family owes, instead of being subtracted from taxable income like a tax deduction. A family must file a federal tax return and owe taxes to get this tax credit.[13]

The student can be the taxpayer or the taxpayer's spouse or offspring. The student also must be enrolled at least half time in an eligible degree or certificate program and must be in the first two years of undergraduate study. In order to receive the credit, taxpayers must report to the IRS the amount of tuition and fees paid as well as the amount of any scholarships, grants, and untaxed income used to pay the tuition and fees.

Although currently limited to tuition and fees, there have been bills introduced in 2008 (e.g., H.R. 5269) to have the tax credit expanded to cover the costs of books and supplies, room and board, and child care expenses, which have risen greatly over the years.

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[10] See http://www.nasfaa.org/home.asp
[11] See http://www.nextstudent.com/
[12] See http://www.savingforcollege.com/
[13] http://www.nasfaa.org/AnnualPubs/TaxBenefitsGuide.html.

Lifetime Learning Tax Credit. According to the NASFAA, the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit works like the Hope Scholarship tax credit in that a family must owe taxes to get the tax credit. However, it differs from the Hope Scholarship in that this credit can be used for any postsecondary education, even nondegree programs. The credit will offset 20% of tuition and related expenses (up to a $2,000 yearly limit) paid by the taxpayer.

Education savings plans. Created in 1998, education savings plans are sometimes called 529 plans after the relevant section in the IRS code. Money invested in a plan is not taxed, and when used for college expenses (tuition, room and board, fees, books, supplies, or equipment), the distributions are nontaxable. There are often state tax benefits as well. 529 plans are usually categorized as either savings plans or prepaid tuition plans.

Savings plans. Education savings plans are operated by all 50 states as well as by individual educational institutions to help families set aside funds for future college costs. Each state determines the details of its plan, such as the types of investments that the plans will use and whether they will match the contributions of low-income participants (e.g., Arkansas). Educational institutions cannot offer savings plans, but can offer prepaid tuition plans.

Prepaid tuition plans. Another type of 529 plan is a prepaid tuition plan, which guarantees an increase in value at the same rate as college tuition. For example, if someone buys shares worth one semester of tuition at a community college, those shares will always be worth one semester of tuition there, even 10 years later when tuition rates have risen. Prepaid plans offer the same tax and distribution benefits as education saving plans.

Table 10 presents the states that offer state tax credit options and prepaid tuition plans. Because all states offer education savings plans, they are not listed in Table 10.

Table 10

Market-Based Strategies

State tax credit options	*Prepaid tuition plans*	*Lifelong Learning Accounts*
*Illinois, **Maine, Michigan, *Missouri, New York, **Oregon, South Carolina	Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia	*California, Illinois, ***Iowa, Kansas, Maine, *Massachusetts, *Michigan, ***Minnesota, Missouri, *New York, *Pennsylvania, Washington

Note. *Introduced in legislature. **Employer tax credit. ***In the planning stages, 2008.

Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLA). Unlike many of the initiatives reviewed here, LiLAs help working adults save for education expenses. This is helpful if an adult does not make enough to qualify for the tax credit options described above. LiLAs are employer-matched, portable educational accounts that workers can use to finance their education and training. Employers are encouraged to participate through tax credits. Although federal legislation on LiLAs is currently pending, some states have already created LiLA legislation either statewide (i.e., Illinois) or regionally (i.e., Kansas, Missouri). Other states have LiLA legislation pending or were in the planning stages at the time of the preparation of this report, as shown in Table 10. Although these are employer-based benefits, they are useful policy tools to improve workforce development, and so they are being supported by government through incentives such as additional match dollars for low- or moderate-income workers or tax credits for individual or employer contributions (Sherman & Klein-Collins, 2007).

Emergent or Unique Strategies

In this report, we have focused on strategies that appear in several states and therefore point to policy trends regarding maintaining or increasing the affordability of a community college education. In this section, we highlight some of the more emergent or unique strategies that states are using, specifically with respect to adults enrolled in occupational programs at community colleges where possible.

Higher Education Stipends/Vouchers

One unique approach to addressing the high cost of postsecondary education was launched by Colorado in 2004, the College Opportunity Fund (COF). The COF provides a stipend or voucher to eligible undergraduate students that pays a portion of the total in-state tuition. The stipend has lower value at private institutions. Stipends are paid to the institution based on the number of credit hours a student takes, and the stipends replace general fund appropriations to public institutions for undergraduate education. The credit-hour amount of the stipend is set annually by the state General Assembly. The stipend does not affect the amount of financial aid for which a student qualifies. In 2005, the COF was amended to allow students to use their stipend for basic skills and dual enrollment courses without that use applying to the lifetime limit on the stipend.

Texas introduced legislation in the 2007-2008 session to study the feasibility of issuing debit cards to students who are awarded financial aid. Students would present their debit card to the college or university where they are enrolled. This initiative was part of the governor’s higher education reform proposals of 2007. The deadline for the commission to complete the feasibility study is September 2008.

Community Foundations

Some states (e.g., Hawaii, Maine, Nebraska, and Oregon) have community foundations that raise money for local students to attend college. Although these are not state funds and community foundations are not a state strategy, they are very helpful to students in these states. In Hawaii, there are many such scholarships, each targeted very specifically, often to specific occupational programs (e.g., automotive, culinary). Nebraska provides state-funded matching awards as an incentive to community scholarship foundations to raise more money.

Miscellaneous

Idaho counties are required to pay a portion of a resident student's community college tuition, up to $500 per semester for a full-time student, up to six semesters, totaling $3,000. This law was recently (2005) amended to recognize that students today do not always complete their education within six semesters, because they often have to work for a living at the same time. The new law kept the $3,000 maximum but removed the six-semester cap, allowing students a longer period of time to complete their community college programs.

Illinois has several noteworthy grants, including the College Savings Bond Bonus Incentive Grant Program, which awards a grant to some beneficiaries of an Illinois College Savings Bond. The amount of the grant depends on the amount of the bond: $40 to $440 per $5,000 bond. Illinois also has a Higher Education License Plate (HELP) program, which provides grants to students who attend Illinois colleges that have special collegiate license plates for sale. Part of the proceeds of the sales of these plates are used for grants to undergraduate students attending these colleges.

Summary

It is beyond the scope of this study to assess or review the impact that any of the efforts reported here have had. In fact, many of the initiatives are very recent, having been enacted since 2006. It will take time to assess their impact. These efforts have required some states to make radical departures from their established procedures and legislation regarding education and workforce development; such efforts have also required much self-reflection and cooperation among various interest groups. All of these efforts have at their core an interest in the economic and social development of the states. Many states have decided to make a substantial investment in their people and their future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Just as grounded theory builds theory from the existing data, the grounded understanding of access and affordability for community college occupational students was built from the data found for each state. These data necessarily drove this report in a direction that ended up being less focused on community college occupational students and more about nontraditional students, because there simply was not enough information on the narrower population of occupational students. Nonetheless, the initiatives reviewed here can help increase access and affordability for students who are in occupational programs. Some of the initiatives reviewed here were only introduced into state legislatures in the past several years, so it is premature to discuss their effectiveness. But it is not premature to select some of these initiatives for further study, particularly as they affect occupational education and training.

In this regard, access initiatives could be more consciously targeted at nontraditional students. Policies such as Vermont's Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), which grants college credit for prior college-level learning, whether school- or work-based, is one means of helping working adults receive some of the credits necessary to complete their educational programs quicker and less expensively. The APL program should be studied for participation and effectiveness, including how many credits are earned and whether those students complete their programs more often than nontraditional students who do not participate. If results are positive, this program could be replicated in many states.

The literature noted that affordability is a component of access; by increasing affordability, access is increased as well. Unfortunately, trends in the affordability of higher education are not promising for students, nontraditional or otherwise. Although community colleges were found to be the most affordable of postsecondary institutions (Kipp et al., 2002), even at these, students must often borrow money in order to attend. Two encouraging strategies were found for the occupational students that are the focus of this report. First, over half of the states (see Table 7) have created new need-based aid programs or expanded existing ones in order for nontraditional students to be eligible (i.e., those who attend less than full time, are GED recipients, or are in some way nontraditional according to the description offered in policy framework section). Second, nearly half of the states offer grant aid to students in targeted occupational programs, and several more offer this targeted aid in the form of loan forgiveness or “conditional grants” that are “paid back” through a service obligation (see Table 8). If the obligation is not met, the grant reverts to a loan that must be repaid.

The last section of the paper reviewed loans and tax credits because these are significant elements in financial aid packages today. But they appear to be less useful to lower-income students, because this group often does not have collateral to secure a loan, and tax credits are only useful insofar as there is taxable income to offset the credit. Given this, the most promising trends to study appear to be the expansion of need-based financial aid and the targeting of aid to students in specific occupations. These financial aid policies appear to be the most useful to nontraditional students including working adults. Research in this area should include outcome data that show that recipients of this targeted aid complete their programs and actually enter the fields that the state has identified as important to its economic development and well-being.

As clear as it is that higher education needs increased support, higher education funding is only one pressure among many on state budgets. Higher education has to compete with other interests, such as K-12 education and health care, for meager state dollars. By providing evidence of a return on investment in financial aid for higher education, researchers can help legislatures target funding in evidence-based ways that contribute to as opposed to reduce a state’s economic health.

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Methodological Appendix

We determined that a qualitative approach was warranted given the nature of the research questions, which called for exploring a substantive area about which little is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This meant that we would collect the relevant data and organize it into descriptive or conceptual schemes or matrices that provide an understanding of the phenomenon under study. In this case, the phenomenon was the range of access or affordability initiatives that were designed to help nontraditional students attend postsecondary education institutions in each of the 50 states.

Qualitative research has a different standard of rigor than quantitative research. Data are not quantified but rather analyzed for their internal organization and relationships that together build a fuller understanding. Much qualitative research uses people's behaviors or expressed thoughts as data. In such cases the researcher becomes an integral part of the analytical process because the analysis involves interpretation of those behaviors or thoughts. The rigor in the process comes when the analysis yields a comprehensive, credible result. However, this does not mean that others, using the same data sources, might not reach different conclusions. This should not be seen as a limitation of qualitative research, but as the reality of studying social phenomena, which can always lend themselves to alternate interpretations.

We chose an adapted grounded theory approach due to its focus on knowledge generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory refers to theory that is derived from data that are systematically gathered and analyzed. We call our approach adapted, however, because in this study we are not building theory so much as building an understanding of a policy area about which little is known. But that understanding is grounded in the data. The advantage of deriving our understanding from data is that this method provides a guide for action or next steps precisely because it is strongly grounded in reality. We see this study as a precursor to further research on the effectiveness of access and affordability initiatives for nontraditional students. The field needs to understand the landscape before researchers can craft appropriate research questions.

Because grounded theory is most often applied in studies that are based on people's experiences, behaviors, or feelings, researchers are expected to remain open to alternative interpretations of the data. In this study, our data were elements of state policy; rather than building theory, we were building an understanding of the state of access and affordability for nontraditional students. Although state legislation is a social phenomenon and open to differing interpretation (witness the work of appellate courts), it arguably does not lend itself to the same level of interpretation that people's behaviors or expressed thoughts do. Therefore there was somewhat less interpretation involved than is often the case with qualitative studies. Nonetheless, it is possible that other researchers might have used different categories and even extracted a different understanding.

The process we undertook involved gathering information on initiatives or policies that states have developed to improve access and affordability for nontraditional students. We used the Internet as our main source, examining Web sites from state community college boards/agencies and from state legislatures. We also examined state-level reports on higher education as well as university and foundation reports in an attempt to capture the entirety of the phenomenon.

The analytical process in a grounded theory approach takes place at the same time as the data gathering. Researchers use codes or labels to group similar instances, and this grouping often allows concepts or patterns to emerge. This conceptual ordering (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), or systematic organization of the data, can be used to build theory or simply to generate knowledge that furthers understanding of a field. Conceptual ordering creates analytic and conceptual categories from the data that often suggest additional directions in which to go for more data that will complete the understanding. This continuous sampling, or returning to the data based on the emerging concepts, is known as theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin), as new findings are accommodated into the emerging theory.

For internet research, which was the basis of this study, these procedures were followed by following links to new sites and continuing this iterative process until additional data collection yielded no new information, no initiatives that had not already appeared in the search. This is called category saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As we found new initiatives we often went back to states that we thought were complete to check and make sure that our inquiry into that state's initiatives was indeed saturated and that a new initiative found elsewhere was not present in that state.

According to Suddaby (2006), the first proponents of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) "described an organic process of theory emergence based on how well data fit conceptual categories identified by an observer, by how well the categories explain or predict ongoing interpretations, and by how relevant the categories are to the core issues being observed" (p. 634). In our case, the categories are the various types of access and affordability initiatives, which we have categorized and organized into the tables found in the report.

Grounded theory is flexible enough to encompass this study. It has been used in many fields including organization theory, where the change from hierarchical bureaucracies to flexible, technology-based learning organizations required an expansion of approaches in organizational research in order to try to understand the changing terrain (Daft & Lewin, 1993). The nursing field has also applied a grounded theory approach to areas of emerging knowledge that improve patient care, such as knowing the patient (Radwin, 1995) and understanding the transition between health and illness (Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Messias, & Schumacher, 2000).

In education, grounded theory has often been used to describe the social nature of teaching and learning, as well as of the decision making that affects the teaching and learning that students receive. For example, in a study of whether referral processes lead to the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education, Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (2005) found that a complex set of influences and their interactions lead to this overrepresentation, including student academic or behavioral skill deficits, teacher bias, and errors in bilingual assessment. Other methodologies can and have quantified the phenomenon of overrepresentation of minority students in special education, but such methods cannot explain the process. Grounded theory allows for interpretation of the phenomenon in ways that may not be fully generalizable but that lead to new understandings and new directions for future research that can apply more broadly.

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