

MEETING THE MOMENT: COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND WORKFORCE PELL

It's time to shift the conversation from process to purpose — and outcomes.

By Jo Alice Blondin and Kate Kinder



WITH LESS THAN THREE MONTHS UNTIL implementation, it's time to shift the Workforce Pell conversation from process and compliance to purpose and outcomes. Instead of asking what programs will be eligible, community colleges and state leaders should be asking how learners benefit, how we can build more seamless pathways for learners to earn credentials of value that lead to careers with economic mobility, and how Workforce Pell can be a catalyst to transform our workforce and higher ed ecosystems, and to center the needs of our learners, our local employers, and our communities.

The U.S. Department of Education issued its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on Workforce Pell after its Accountability in Higher Education and Access through Demand-driven Workforce Pell (AHEAD) Committee reached consensus on the regulatory framework. Workforce Pell expands access to this important federal financial aid stream for students pursuing short-term, career-driven programs. It features a unique approval process coupled with eligibility requirements, connection to the workforce, employment outcomes, and a focus on credential and degree pathways.

Given the very narrow program eligibility parameters, states and colleges project that a relatively small number of programs and therefore students will qualify. Focusing on this reality, however, misses the mark. The passage of Workforce Pell is a catalyst for change, including removing barriers between traditional academic credit programs and professional or “noncredit” programs. It’s a call to action to take stock of how well our programs and systems are meeting the needs of all modern learners, industry partners, and today’s economy.

This cannot be achieved without the expertise of college leaders and students. A practitioner-focused approach to implementing Workforce Pell is needed to ensure that learners are at the center of the conversation, alongside employers and faculty.

Now is the time to do this work. While colleges wait for final federal guidance and advocate to inform state processes, they can be planning for successful campus implementation and systems change. Five recommendations for effective Workforce Pell implementation and impact include:

1. Do not let existing and traditional academic silos or systems drive the implementation process or stifle workforce innovation.
2. Rely on the expertise of workforce staff who work closely with learners and employers to braid funding and identify resources.
3. Center the student experience in program design, including outreach, enrollment, advising, holistic supports, and financial aid processes.
4. Adapt infrastructures, including student record systems, term schedules, data, registration, and financial aid.
5. Be clear about the policy challenges and the opportunities.

Fortunately, there are exceptional examples of colleges already doing this work across the country. The National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE) was able to hear tangible strategies and recommendations from Amanda Abens, assistant vice chancellor of workforce development and lifelong learning at Pima Community College, Randall Stamper, associate vice chancellor of career education and workforce programs at the Virginia Community College System, and Ne’Keisha Stepney, assistant provost of workforce development at Waubensee Community College.

Leaders highlighted how their institutions and states are centering learners and viewing Workforce Pell as a tool to improve college and career outcomes. They highlighted that this work requires cross-functional collaboration across the college and with partners to strengthen data, improve student supports, reshape program offerings, advance credit for prior learning, effectively serve adult learners, and ensure that “all learning counts, and every student counts.”

The passage of Workforce Pell is a recognition of the value of stackable credentials and seamless pathways that allow learners to enter and exit into college and careers over time. It’s overdue recognition of the programs and services that college workforce departments have been offering learners, employers, and the community for decades and the myriad ways they transform lives.

While Workforce Pell is not a panacea and must be harnessed wisely and judiciously with learner outcomes and intent in mind, it is a powerful tool and opportunity for reform. It’s a charge for leaders to ensure that workforce education learners, programs, faculty, and staff are no longer at the margins, but centered in the mission and culture of every community college and supported by public workforce and economic development partners.

Let’s listen to learners and college practitioners. Let’s meet this moment.



Dr. Jo Alice Blondin is president of Clark State College and NCWE Board President. Kate Kinder is NCWE executive director.