

Testimony of Casey K. Sacks, Ph. D.
President, BridgeValley Community and Technical College
Before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Economic Growth, Energy Policy, and Regulatory Affairs
Wednesday, October 25, 2023

Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Bush, and other members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join today's hearing to share my perspective on **Strengthening Workforce Development through Innovative Education Models and Financial Accessibility**.

My name is Casey K. Sacks. I serve as President of BridgeValley Community and Technical College in Charleston, West Virginia.

At BridgeValley, my team and I are focused on enrollment, retention, completion, and job placement for the students in the state's capital region. I previously served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Community Colleges at the United States Department of Education where I led work around workforce development, career and technical education, adult education, and prison education. I also previously served as the Vice Chancellor for the West Virginia Community and Technical College System; and in several roles with the Colorado Community College System where I have focused on community college excellence and workforce development.

In addition to my role as a college president, I serve as a trustee for Homebuilders International (HBI), a Board member for the SkillPointe Foundation, a Commissioner for the Postsecondary Commission, Board member for the Thomas Memorial Hospital Foundation, and am part of the AEI Conservative Education Reform Network. I have held a research appointment at Rutgers University, was an Aspen Institute Presidential Fellow in the inaugural class at Stanford University, and earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Connecting people to work is my passion.

Developing Models for Workforce-Ready Graduates

Community Colleges: Tailoring Education to Local Job Markets

Community colleges stand as ideal institutions to bridge the gap between higher education and workforce needs due to their unique positioning within communities. These institutions are deeply rooted in the regions they serve, allowing for a nuanced understanding of local job markets. By closely aligning educational programs with the demands of employers, community colleges become invaluable hubs for nurturing talent. Community college graduates possess skills tailored precisely to the needs of the local workforce, ensuring a seamless transition from education to employment. Community Colleges play this role with both traditional associate degree programming and through short-term credentialing; as single institutions that serve local workforce demands it's often perplexing that the two primary federal funding streams that serve our learners are not better aligned to help learners and our intuitions leverage support: The Higher Education Act (HEA), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

At the heart of community colleges' success in workforce development is their emphasis on practical skill development. These colleges offer hands-on training, cutting-edge coursework, and real-world experiences that go beyond theoretical knowledge. In West Virginia, our CTCs have focused on building the practical skills needed by hospital nurses, manufacturing technologists, and cyber security specialists.

By focusing on imparting tangible, industry-relevant skills, community colleges empower students to meet the evolving demands of the workforce. This approach not only prepares graduates for immediate employment but also equips them with the adaptability needed to thrive in an ever-changing job landscape. Some of this ability comes from a solid grounding in a strong academic background, particularly in language skills and mathematics.

Creating Tailored Educational Pathways

One of the key strengths of community colleges lies in their ability to create tailored educational pathways for students. These pathways are designed in close collaboration with local industries, ensuring that the curriculum remains current and relevant. By understanding the specific needs of various sectors within the community, community colleges craft specialized programs. In West Virginia, we have created tailored pathways including ones in advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and technology. These tailored pathways provide students with the expertise needed to excel in their chosen fields. This customization not only enhances the employability of graduates but also fosters a sense of community pride as these skilled individuals contribute meaningfully to the local workforce. Ongoing communication between the private sector and higher education is essential to make this all work; programs need to constantly adapt.

Learn and Earn Programs: A Pathway to Success

Learn-while-you-earn apprenticeship programs represent a paradigm shift in education, merging classroom learning with practical, on-the-job experience. Particularly in STEM fields, these initiatives offer a dynamic approach to education by providing students with the opportunity to simultaneously learn and work within their chosen fields. For example, Toyota hires BirdgeValley students every year to work in the Toyota Motor Manufacturing plant while they also go to school in the Advanced Manufacturing Technology program at BridgeValley. The real-world application students get while they work at Toyota prepares students for the complexities of the modern STEM workforce, including helping them get the mentorship they need in manufacturing and helping them negotiate the job market when they graduate. Learn and Earn programs not only instill technical proficiency, but also cultivate essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, making graduates well-rounded and highly employable. Employers often say that these “soft skills” are harder to find than those with specific technical aptitudes, but they remain essential.

In West Virginia, the state Learn & Earn program places students in apprenticeships with a flexible schedule where they can earn an industry credential and a paycheck while receiving on the job training. Upon completion, employers gain a highly qualified employee and a future skilled labor pool. Businesses are also incentivized with 50/50 salary matching from the state during the training or apprenticeship.

Programs such as this bridge the gap between theory and practice. Students engage in hands-on experiences, gaining insights into industry-specific challenges and best practices. This practical exposure not only solidifies their understanding of academic concepts but also hones their skills, making them job-ready from day one.

These programs serve as pipelines, channeling skilled workers directly into the workforce. By partnering with local businesses and industries, learn while you earn initiatives ensure students receive training tailored to meet specific industry needs from healthcare to accounting. BridgeValley students and local

employers leverage this program every day, and graduates emerge with a deep understanding of their chosen field, making them highly sought after by employers seeking specialized talent.

K-12 Early College and CTC Partnerships

Another innovative method includes charter schools that integrate high school education with two-year college programs to offer a promising model for workforce readiness.

This Fall, BridgeValley Community and Technical College **welcomed its inaugural class of the WIN Academy (Workforce Initiative for Nurses)**. This innovative charter school model integrates classroom education with practical education for high school juniors and seniors. Graduates will earn both their high school diploma and an associate degree in nursing in just three years. The team at BridgeValley is working to add an Advanced Manufacturing Technology path to the initiative, which will move students into good-paying jobs. The WIN Academy is modeled after successful programs in Florida (Indian River State College's Clark Advanced Learning Center and St. Petersburg Collegiate High Schools); Ohio (Lorain Preparatory High School); and North Carolina (Wake Tech Early Colleges).

By providing a seamless transition from secondary to higher education, these schools bridge the gap between academic learning and practical skills training. Students in these institutions benefit from a focused curriculum that emphasizes both traditional academic subjects and vocational skills, preparing them for immediate entry into the workforce. This innovative approach not only ensures that graduates possess job-ready skills but also addresses the evolving demands of the job market. Charter schools that combine high school and two-year post-secondary education create a pathway for students to obtain valuable qualifications efficiently, promoting workforce readiness and enhancing opportunities for successful careers. Leveraging the public charter school provisions in West Virginia means that all students, particularly students from low-income families, can earn college credit and credentials while they are still in high school – where in many other communities, school districts ask families to pay for these educational experiences, effectively pricing low-income students out of the opportunity.

By fostering partnerships with local businesses, these programs ensure that students are exposed to real industry challenges, enabling them to develop solutions in a supportive environment. For example, **the Aspiring Nurse Program provided by WVU Medicine**. While in most cases tuition support already exists for these students in terms of grants, loans, and scholarships, the Aspiring Nurse Program provides nursing students at BridgeValley with up to \$25,000 to support their real needs: day-to-day life expenses.

Students selected for the Program receive \$5,000 for each of the four semesters they're in school plus a \$5,000 sign-on bonus upon hire in exchange for a three-year work commitment with their training hospital after graduation. WIN Academy students are eligible for this program too. The hospital system and the College not only support students financially throughout the program, but through human-centered approaches with academic success coaches and retention specialists.

By offering financial incentives, programs like this inspire student participation and success, demonstrating the tangible benefits of investing in education while working to eliminate traditional financial barriers.

Affordable Education and Smart Student Loan Practices

Affordability of Community College Education

Community colleges serve as beacons of affordability in the realm of higher education. When compared to proprietary institutions and traditional four-year colleges, community colleges consistently offer more cost-effective educational opportunities that are aligned with regional labor market needs. The economic accessibility of community colleges ensures that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can pursue higher education without the burden of overwhelming debt, or any debt at all. By keeping tuition fees reasonable, community colleges break down financial barriers, making education attainable for a broader spectrum of the population.

Four-year colleges excel in research and development, fostering intellectual curiosity and creativity across diverse disciplines. They foster technological growth and help add to the overall knowledge in our country and the world. Community and technical colleges specialize in providing workforce-ready employees, emphasizing practical, hands-on skills tailored to specific industries - our country's future workforce.

Limiting Student Loans and Implementing State Based Program Incentives

To further enhance accessibility and promote responsible borrowing, it is crucial to explore innovative approaches to student loans. One promising strategy involves limiting the amount of student loans available based on the program of study. If given authority by Congress, institutions could create actuarial tables to assess loan feasibility based on specific programs. By placing restrictions on loan amounts for programs where we know students have little wage-earning potential, students might be encouraged to consider fields with higher employment prospects and earning potential, such as STEM disciplines. Actuarial tables could provide data-driven insights, ensuring that students are making informed decisions about their borrowing, thus mitigating the risk of excessive debt burdens. It is also worth emphasizing that only about 15% of all community college students take out federal loans, and that is because of our low tuition rates.

Research from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce¹ studied the significance of certificates and associate degrees in shaping economic opportunities, emphasizing that program of study and major often matter far more than the level of education. Middle-skills credentials provide viable routes to economic opportunity for those who want to advance in labor markets as soon as possible or who simply do not want to pursue a four-year degree. While more education is generally better concerning earnings, specific fields of study within certificates and associate degrees can yield higher returns than some bachelor's degrees. The text underscores the importance of understanding the labor-market value of these credentials.

"Middle-skills credentials" including certificates and associate degrees, are crucial for bridging the gap between high school and four-year programs. These credentials are closely tied to specific occupations and industries, providing students with job-ready skills. However, the earning potential is highly contingent on the relevance of the skills learned and the demand in the local job market. In my community and in many of your communities, it's not as simple as earning a degree. It's prioritizing degrees that we know are the most valuable. In Charleston, those degrees are in manufacturing,

¹ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees: What Students Need to Know Before They Go to College*, 2020.

healthcare, and IT. In other places, students must have the information that they need to make wise decisions about enrollment, and they must be encouraged to use it.

West Virginia Invests: Financial Aid Support to Foster Workforce Demands

The West Virginia Invests Grant serves as a shining example of a successful initiative that promotes education accessibility. By offering financial aid support for community college education in select program areas that align with the state's workforce needs, WV Invests not only reduces financial barriers for students and encourages them to make beneficial decisions about which course of study to pursue, it also strategically addresses skill gaps within the state. This targeted approach ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, supporting programs and courses that are vital for the economic growth of the region. In its first three years, the WV Invests Grant provided \$10 million dollars in financial aid to qualifying West Virginians.

By replicating such models and expanding their scope, communities can create a robust educational infrastructure that aligns with workforce demands, fostering a skilled workforce ready to tackle the challenges of the future.

In conclusion, innovative education models play a pivotal role in strengthening workforce development, promoting financial accessibility, and bridging the gap between education and employment. Community colleges, deeply embedded in local communities, tailor their programs to align with regional job markets, producing graduates with practical skills tailored to specific industries. These institutions offer tailored educational pathways, collaborating closely with local industries to ensure curriculum relevance.

Learn and Earn programs and other innovative education models represent a paradigm shift, integrating academic learning with real-world experience, instilling technical proficiency, and essential soft skills. These programs provide seamless transitions from high school to higher education, preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce.

Financial accessibility is crucial; community colleges offer affordable education, breaking down financial barriers and encouraging responsible borrowing. Limiting student loans and focusing funding on programs of value ensures students make informed decisions about borrowing, mitigating debt risks. Research underscores the enduring value of community college education, emphasizing tailored education, practical experience, and financial prudence. Initiatives like West Virginia Invests grant exemplify successful strategies, reducing financial barriers and strategically addressing skill gaps. By replicating these models, communities can establish a robust educational infrastructure, empowering a skilled workforce ready for future challenges.

Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Bush, and other members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.