



News

The Research at the Summit

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The [White House Summit on Community Colleges](#) led several scholars to release new analyses. And while the official gathering did not focus on the papers, some of the themes of the conference were consistent with the work. The emphasis of the papers: partnerships with businesses, not new federal cash, are the key to improving job training.

Louis Soares, director of the postsecondary education program at the Center for American Progress, wrote a [paper](#) for the summit about how relationships with local businesses can help integrate “vocation and employment-oriented goals in academic educational programs” at community colleges. Soares explains that the three missions of community colleges — “university transfer, vocational and developmental education” — are often at odds with one another. He suggests that these institutions look to local industry to help untangle this common internal conflict.

“Community colleges have the scale, pedagogical diversity and access to the student body to improve the postsecondary attainment of many Americans, but they must find ways to integrate their three missions to do so,” Soares writes. Community college-industry partnerships, “as a new [vocational] innovation, hold forth the promise of leveraging these assets with those of partners to promote institutional innovations [that] yield better results in terms of relevant knowledge and skills and degree attainment.”

When community colleges and local business work together to offer career-training programs, Soares says, it is essential that leaders on both sides understand the “what’s in it for me” in the partnership.

Soares cites the [Metropolitan College](#) program in Louisville, Ky. as one example of this mutual benefit. The program is a partnership among the United Parcel Service, Jefferson Community and Technical College and the University of Louisville. It began in the mid-1990s after UPS, the largest employer in Kentucky, threatened to move its hub from Louisville if it could not find new ways to recruit workers for its Next Day Air operation, which was experiencing major staffing troubles at the time.

UPS provides part-time jobs with full-time benefits to students in the program, who then take classes at the local community college and university. The company pays for half the cost of their tuition and reimburses them for textbook purchases; the state and local government pay for the rest of their tuition. The program also has unique “workforce preparation activities,” such as courses in financial literacy, resume preparation and mock interviewing.

The program’s success has benefited both UPS and the state of Kentucky, Soares says. “At the start, only eight percent of UPS workers had a postsecondary degree,” Soares writes. “By the spring of 2009, 2372 Metropolitan College students had earned some kind of postsecondary credential. The retention rate of Metropolitan College participants at Jefferson Community and Technical College was more than 50 percent in 2007. UPS enjoyed an increase in job retention as the annual turnover rate for new hires went from 100 percent in 1998 to 20 percent, and a 600 percent return on investment in its students.”

In an interview with *Inside Higher Ed* after the summit, Soares acknowledged that some faculty members and education scholars are [highly critical of corporate partnerships](#) like this. Still, he defended their value in providing college access to students who otherwise might not have it. “My point of view on alternative higher education is, look, unless we think tomorrow we’re going to invest in traditional higher education so that everyone who wants an education can get one, then we need to consider them,” Soares said. “I’m frank in my belief that we’re still learning about these methods, but that’s the nature of innovation at the front end. It’s messy.”

Soares added that critics of these nontraditional programs should embrace them in an effort to improve their rigor. “Instead of saying, ‘We’re matter and they’re anti-matter,’ traditionalists should say, ‘If there are types of learners who benefit from this, then how can we help deliver it in a way we consider higher education?’” Soares said.

Soares's paper also cites Northrop Grumman's [Apprentice School of Shipbuilding](#) in Newport News, Va., as a value-adding partnership between community colleges and local industry worth emulating.

Apprentices at the school receive “paid, on-the-job training” in one of 19 separate programs with full benefits that can last for up to five years. They take a “fundamental” shipbuilding curriculum with numerous courses related to the specific trades. Those students “who show particular aptitude and academic achievement” in their apprenticeship are picked to attend either nearby Thomas Nelson or Tidewater Community Colleges and earn an associate degree in either business administration, engineering, marine engineering or electrical engineering technology — all paid for by Northrop Grumman.

The company also offers tuition reimbursement to students who wish to continue on to earn a four-year degree. Finally, and perhaps most unusual, the company offers remedial education to all apprentices at its school who may not be college ready — which Soares argues “alleviates the burden on the community college system.”

Soares notes that more than 2,500 Apprenticeship School graduates still work at Northrop Grumman today and that more than 32 percent of the most recent graduating class of apprentices earned an associate degree with their training. Though Northrop Grumman estimates it spends about \$100,000 per student at its Apprenticeship School, Soares argues that the investment is paying off.

“Rather than simply training frontline employees and hiring mid-level workers who earned credentials elsewhere, [Northrop Grumman] makes investments in its apprentice ... students that go beyond what is necessary for an entry level position,” Soares writes.

In a set of policy recommendations, Soares points out a concern that many attendees at Tuesday summit brought up during the day's discussions. Federal and state funding policies and regulations, he argues, often “stifle good practice when partners are building an alternative education program.” If policymakers can ensure that these regulations are less confusing to those in education and industry, he says, a community college-industry partnership can “become an institution-transforming catalyst” in helping institutions integrate “the three missions of academic transfer, occupational and developmental education.”

Robert Lerman, senior fellow at the Urban Institute and an economics professor at American University, also contributed a paper to the summit's packet of distributed-but-not-discussed materials. Expanding upon Soares's overview of successful education-business partnerships, Lerman called for the expansion of apprenticeship training — a method that, he argues, “can and sometimes does serve as a foundation for completing further education.”

“A federal subsidy for expanding apprenticeship makes sense on several grounds,” Lerman wrote. “First, while apprenticeships significantly increase human capital at least as much as community college, they receive no government support, except for some indirect subsidies based on low community college tuition. Subsidies to the general education component of apprenticeships are justified as subsidies to college and university education. Second, the expected benefits from subsidies to stimulate added apprenticeships are likely to far exceed the costs.”

Other scholars who contributed to the packet of reports distributed at the summit included Michelle Cooper, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, who highlighted successful student support services at community colleges; Elisabeth Barnett and Katherine Hughes, staffers at the Community College Research Center, who wrote about how state and local policymakers can encourage better transitions between high school and community college; and Pat Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, who provided a comprehensive overview of transfer policies around the country.

— **David Moltz**