Learning from a Critical Investment in Community Colleges

Executive Summary

Congress created the $2 billion Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant in 2010 at the height of the deepest recession in more than a generation. The program was the largest targeted investment in community colleges the federal government has made and was meant to increase the schools’ capacity for providing training for in-demand jobs. Now—as we face increasing automation and the threat of another recession—we can learn from TAACCCT how to build our education infrastructure and connect Americans to learning and skill-building throughout their lives.

The Research

Our team reviewed 220 final evaluations of individual TAACCCT grants to determine whether the projects’ design was sufficiently rigorous for inclusion in a meta-analysis of their impact on student outcomes. After extensive review, we found 36 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the meta-analysis.

The Findings

We analyzed the effect of participating in TAACCCT-funded programs in two critical outcomes areas—“education,” which included data on program completion and/or credential attainment and “employment,” which included employment and/or wage gains. We found that participating in these TAACCCT-funded programs had positive impacts on both. The positive result was statistically significant for both outcomes, with results showing stronger impact on education than employment outcomes.

Types of Interventions Used

The most common types of interventions implemented across these grants include:

- Career pathways with stacked and latticed credentials
- Prior learning assessment
- Student supports, navigating, coaching, and career advising
- Online and technology-enabled learning
- Employer and public and workforce engagement

Investment Recommendations

Given the promising, positive impact of the TAACCCT investment, we would recommend creating another investment in community colleges of a similar size. However, our review of the impact evaluations revealed some ways the investment could be better structured. We recommend:

- Limiting eligibility to in-state consortium and strategic single institutional grants
- Administering the program through an office made up of joint Department of Labor and Department of Education personnel
- Creating a set-aside for state higher education agencies to support sustainability, access to data, and scaling up of evidence-based innovations
- Requiring a third-party implementation and sustainability evaluation due a year after the close of each grant
- Mandating a rigorous impact analysis due two years after the close of the grant for a selective subset of grants (approximately 30 percent of grantees would provide stronger and more substantial evidence in the next round of federal funding)

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To read the full report, please visit newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/estimating-impact-taaccct