Opening doors: Students' perspectives on juggling work, family, and college [1]

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Excerpted from Overview: Community colleges offer low-wage workers opportunities to increase their earnings and improve their family's overall economic well-being by enhancing their marketable job skills with advanced education and training. Yet many people who could benefit from community college programs either do not enroll or drop out before completing their coursework. This study uses information gathered in focus groups at six community colleges from current, former, and potential students (most of them single parents) to explore institutional and personal access and retention issues they face as they seek a workable balance of college, work, and family responsibilities. The focus group findings have important implications for the community colleges, employers, and policymakers who work with these nontraditional students. Key findings: - Focus group participants identified stable child care; personal support from family members, peers, and college faculty and staff; and accommodating employers as leading factors influencing their ability to stay in college, complete their programs of study within expected time frames, or enroll in the first place. Expanding on-campus support services and introducing new course formats that offer modularized or short-term training options with more flexible schedules may lower these barriers and enable students to complete courses more quickly. - Although the direct costs of tuition and books are significant factors in the ability of low-wage students to attend community colleges, focus group participants emphasized that lost wages from having to reduce work hours strongly influenced their ability to afford college. College administrators and policymakers may want to consider offering new forms of financial aid that help low-wage working students meet direct education-related costs as well as replace lost income. - With regard to community college institutional supports, focus group participants who were able to take advantage of academic and personal counseling and flexible on-campus child care (that offered extended hours of coverage and could accommodate both infants and older children) described these services as enormously valuable. Other students, however, either were not able to avail themselves of these services, were unaware that the services existed, or were unsure whether they would be eligible for them. In addition to expanding the availability of these supports, colleges may want to increase their outreach and marketing efforts. - Students participating in the focus groups reported that they had difficulty accessing work-based safety net programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, Earned Income Credits, Section 8 housing vouchers, and child care subsidies. Because these programs can provide key supports for work and education, colleges could improve students' access to them by developing partnerships with public agencies and community-based organizations.

Region: United States [5]
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