

Don't Underestimate the Power of a Community College

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Many people underestimate the role that community colleges play in higher education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, these institutions provide “access to education for many nontraditional students who are adults and working while enrolled” and welcome “more women students (first-generation women, women of color, older women)” than four-year institutions do. In *On Campus with Women*, Caryn Musil says that community colleges provide a practical education and enhance the potential of both traditional and nontraditional students “rather than stamping them ‘not qualified.’”

The Shriver Report—A Woman's Nation Changes Everything argues that our educational system will need to play a more active role as more American women become breadwinners. Postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, will need to ensure that “women pursue and complete degrees that allow them to bring home the same-size paychecks and benefits from the same array of professions as men.”

To address these needs, we must improve access to higher education and services and institutionalize support structures for women who are working toward their degrees while balancing work and family responsibilities. We must also encourage women to pursue careers in the higher-wage science, technology, engineering, and mathematics professions. AAUW's 2009–10 Campus Action Projects focus on **breaking through barriers for women and girls in these fields**.

Massasoit Community College was one of twelve **institutions selected to receive funding for a Campus Action Project**. Their exciting program, “Beyond Health Care: Moving Women into Nontraditional Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Careers,” aims to meet a specific need on their campus. Each spring, the college accepts only 160 students out of nearly 1,000 applicants for the nursing and allied health programs. Many female students who prepare for this career trajectory by taking science and math courses believe they have no career alternatives. The program aims to increase awareness among these students by providing them with information on alternative careers in nontraditional areas.

In the *New York Times*, David Brooks writes that community college enrollment is increasing “at more than three times the rate of four-year colleges.” Federal spending on four-year colleges has continued to increase while, year after year, community colleges get the short end of the stick. President

Obama's American Graduation Initiative, however, would invest \$12 billion in community colleges, with the goal of having 5 million new graduates by 2020. This innovative initiative could help increase access to higher education and extend opportunities for women.

As Caryn Musil says, "Community colleges have constructed spaces where women can succeed and thrive, whether as presidents, senior leaders, faculty, or students. They are reminding us ... that what is good for women is typically good for the overall population."

Community colleges deserve recognition for the wonderful opportunities they give aspiring students across the nation. Most important, they embrace diversity and provide students with a chance for a quality education, instead of none at all.

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