

Students in the Respiratory Therapy Program at Community College of Allegheny County run through emergency procedures after a simulated health crisis in a dummy patient known as "SimMan." CCAC is the largest provider of allied health professionals in southwestern Pennsylvania, and third-largest in the country. Some 400 students graduate annually with certificates or degrees in nursing, radiation technology and respiratory therapy.



COLLEGE COURSE

AFTER DECADES OF NEGLECT, COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE SUDDENLY THE DARLINGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION, EMBRACED AS DEMAND-DRIVEN SUPPLIERS OF WORKERS FOR THE NEW ECONOMY. A REPORT ON HOW FOUNDATIONS ARE HELPING THEM SHOULDER HEAVY EXPECTATIONS. BY MICHELLE PILECKI PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA FRANZOS

An abrupt screech focuses attention on the medical monitor above the hospital bed. The heart rate is fluctuating wildly, blood-pressure and oxygen-saturation levels falling, carbon-dioxide level rising. The patient is in obvious distress, but what is the respiratory therapist supposed to do next to keep the patient breathing?

The human brain can survive only about four minutes without oxygen before suffering irreversible damage. Hesitation, delay, a wrong choice can all be fatal. “You have to start bagging!” blurts respiratory therapy student Shannon Welch from rote memory, referring to the squeezing of an airbag to push oxygen into the lungs of the patient. She is learning in this crisis situation that, for the patient to survive, ‘bagging’ has to be done quickly, automatically.

Michelle Pilecki, former executive editor of Pittsburgh Magazine, has years of experience covering western Pennsylvania's economy and educational systems. Her last story for h followed a local composer's creation of a new symphony as part of an Endowments-sponsored, artist-support program.

Community College of Beaver County's live tower operation is a cross-country draw for students wanting certification for air-traffic controller jobs that open up by the hundreds each year. But since the program can only handle 25–30 students at a time, there is a two-year waiting list. In top photo, opposite page, second-year student Judd Wallace, far right, works the tower next to supervisor Ron Horak. Below right, instructor Jim Davoli leads students through simulated air-traffic movement between airports.

The prognosis for this particular “patient” is that there will be hundreds of similar medical crises in his future. His name is “SimMan,” a medical mannequin designed to simulate a variety of symptoms—from “abnormal” to “you’re-really-in-trouble.” Welch, like her fellow students in the Community College of Allegheny County’s Respiratory Therapy program, uses SimMan to learn how to identify symptoms, make a diagnosis and then plan a course of action—all in seconds.

Respiratory therapy is just one among scores of higher-education tracks that are offered through southwestern Pennsylvania’s community colleges and hundreds of similar schools across the country. And like so many of the newer offerings, the Respiratory Therapy program is highly technical and science-based, perfectly matched to a needy employment sector and filled with significant numbers of older-adult students holding down a pay-the-bills job.

It’s more than a few course catalogs removed from the traditional community college offerings of bargain-basement educations to students who can’t afford or qualify for more expensive choices.

In fits and starts through the past two decades, the community college mission has been expanding. But only in recent years has a breathtaking new agenda developed that has community colleges as nimble educators of a growing number of distinct student groups—from immigrants to adult wage-earners moving up the ladder to displaced workers. When all the new-student groups are added up, it’s clear that the community colleges are being counted on as the new stokers of economic development for the regions in which they operate.

In many instances, philanthropy is one of the few power centers that recognize the inherent value of these schools and the danger of heaping enormous new expectations on them without supplying additional funding and leadership training.

The forces pushing these new educational tasks range from some of the country’s most forward-thinking CEOs—who believe the best future job growth will be in fields that require two years of technical training, not four-year college degrees—to no less than President George Bush, who followed up a reference to community colleges in last year’s State of the Union

Address by visiting a school in Jacksonville, Fl., in January. He promised to assist the community colleges in becoming “... more flexible and demand-driven so they can train workers for industries that are creating the most new jobs.”

While community colleges might theoretically appreciate this latest rediscovery of their special place in the country’s educational system, most are consumed with the daily struggle to supply a quality education in the face of pinched budgets, which offer little funding for training staff to meet new responsibilities. In Pennsylvania during the past five years, enrollment in community colleges has increased 25 percent to 350,000, a larger jump than in any other higher-education sector. Yet, the state Legislature has cut the subsidy paid per student by 10 percent. That has forced community colleges to cut programs and sharply raise tuition in order to clear multi-million-dollar deficits.

For several foundations in southwestern Pennsylvania, including The Heinz Endowments, a concerted effort to help community colleges get out ahead of the new expectations comes at a pivotal time. Four of the region’s five community colleges are headed by new presidents—the fifth, Daniel C. Krenzski of Westmoreland County Community College, will retire June 30.

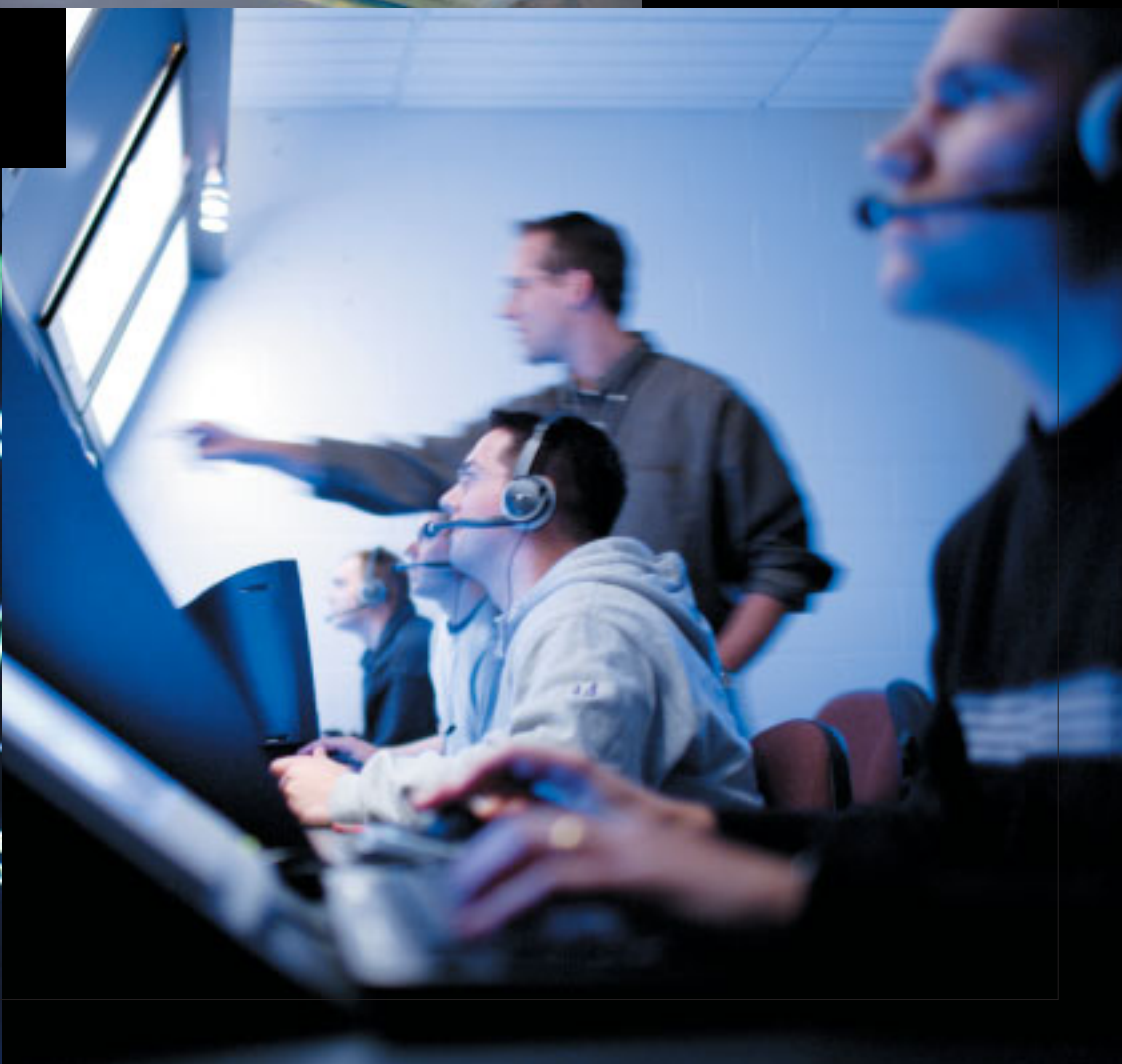
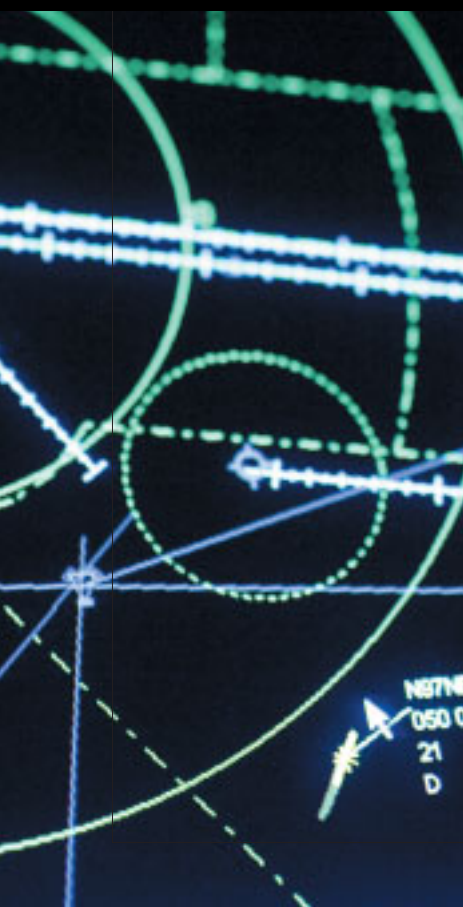
While the specifics at each school vary, the challenges are similar at all the nation’s 1,173 community colleges. They are facing cutbacks in traditional sources of funding while being expected to train new workers for today’s top-demand, tech-heavy jobs. The schools also are under pressure to sharpen their role as providers of affordable higher education. The new responsibilities include, for instance, responding to requests from business and industry managers to shape curricula so that the education process is more job-specific and can adapt quickly to changes in job descriptions.

To help community colleges better position themselves in a 21st-century economy, the Endowments and other foundations are among the groups that have formed the Community College Affinity Partnership, an organization that will develop strategies to make the schools more flexible and responsive to educational needs.



FACILITY 1
COURSE AVIC239

ENROUTE RADAR LAB
SPECIAL COURSE SPET264



“Our larger goal is to transform institutional practice more broadly by helping to shape the policy environment within which community colleges operate,” says John Colborn, deputy director for economic development at the Ford Foundation. The foundations are among the leaders of the Affinity Partnership, a growing group that also includes state and national government agencies, nonprofits and academic offices that are investing in these schools to ensure their success.

A key strategy for the Partnership is to develop “leaders with all the skills they need in policy, management and academics,” explains Leah Meyer Austin, senior vice president, research and programs, at the Lumina Foundation for Education, a new national foundation based in Indianapolis, and another leader of the affinity group.

“There’s a new mold of president coming out. It’s a community college leader who is far more entrepreneurial,” says Suzanne Elise Walsh, the Endowments’ program officer in economic opportunity. The new presidents are learning to deal with issues of accountability and of developing leadership skills throughout their administrative teams. “They realize that, if they can improve their system, ultimately it is just far more beneficial to the community at large,” she says.

“It’s a great time to invest in community colleges.”

Explaining the growing interest of local and national funders, Walsh contends that the future health of communities is inextricably tied to the health of their community colleges, especially in offering residents a route out of poverty and in developing a highly skilled workforce.

The challenge, say Walsh and Colborn, is meeting the philanthropic directive of “going to scale.”

“It’s about people, and it’s about building a larger system that will ultimately affect more people,” says Walsh. “Foundations are thinking in a more businesslike way about return on investment.” Where can they look to help take their workforce strategies to scale? The answer, increasingly, is community colleges.

To make the job more doable, foundations are working with colleges on two key issues: leadership development and accountability. “Huge numbers of people are retiring,” explains

Barbara Viniar, executive director of the Cornell University-based Institute for Community College Development, which supports educational and professional development for community colleges. The key mission, she says, is to prepare people to be leaders—faculty, trustees, presidents—recognizing that they will need to take on a different job from those who started 25 years ago.

“Private fund raising is now a major part of the job,” says Viniar. “Regulatory issues are increasing exponentially. Student populations are increasingly diverse. Technology is consuming a larger percentage of scarce resources, and leaders have to make multi-million-dollar decisions in this arena. Workforce development needs shift more quickly,” she says. “And all of these challenges must be met openly, in the public eye.”

And it’s not just the top layer that is viewed as deserving of specialized training. “A department chair is your frontline academic administrator, who really can influence the faculty in the department and in the classroom,” says Walsh. But rarely discussed, until all the recent heightening of attention on community colleges, has been the notion of training. There’s also an effort to work on succession planning, to “push decision-making down” so that an organization isn’t top-heavy. “Given the rapid changes in the economy, you have to have an agile faculty and staff open to turn at a moment’s notice,” she says. With the help of local foundations and their own efforts, south-western Pennsylvania’s community colleges are embracing such training. Through the past several years, for example, the Endowments-supported, five-member Western Pennsylvania Community College Resource Consortium has shared strategies and resources.

Funding for the consortium is included in the \$7.6 million that the Endowments has disbursed in 54 separate grants to community colleges since 1992. Others more recently added to the list: \$200,000 to the Community College of Allegheny County for African-American recruitment and retention; another \$100,000 to the school for leadership development; and \$300,000 to Butler County Community College for a career-development-and-recruitment initiative.

The issue of accountability is inherently trickier, yet just as important. “There are multiple measures of success,” says

VIEWPOINTS

Viniar. “We try to stay away from graduation rates, because so many students come for short-term goals—maybe just one semester, one year. We have to track individual performance. If a person is in a transfer program, did they transfer and how did they do in a four-year college? If getting a job is the goal, we need to track employer satisfaction.

“If we don’t get out in front to define ‘success,’ we’ll have some legislator say it all depends upon, say, graduation in three years.”

Lumina’s Austin likes the slogan around her foundation’s research program involving 27 colleges nationwide. “‘Community Colleges Count’ has a double meaning,” she says, referring not just to the inherent compliment but also the program’s directive to “disaggregate the data” down to the individual student. “We can’t know what the issues are if we can’t see where students are failing to achieve,” she explains.

“People don’t understand all the roles of community colleges,” says Walsh. “The untold story of community colleges is that so much is expected of them, but so little is given.”

How little? Pennsylvania’s self-mandated share has been \$1,500 per full-time student for some 40 years. Rather than adjust that payment upward for inflation, or to compensate for the increased demands, the General Assembly has cut funding so that the state’s share is down to \$1,355 this year. Also, for the fourth year in a row, no money has been allocated for capital improvements.

“It is not entirely coincidental,” CCAC trustee Paul Whitehead wrote in a December *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* opinion piece, that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ranks Pennsylvania “49th among the 50 states in job creation over the past 25 years.”

“We have been starved to the core,” says CCAC president Stewart Sutin. Now, the largest provider of health-care education in a region in which health care is, by far, the leading industry, has only one SimMan. Cost ranges from \$70,000 to \$150,000 each. Sutin contends that such short-changing restricts the growth of the program as it tries to fill chronic shortages of respiratory therapists in Pittsburgh and across the nation.



STEWART SUTIN
President,
Community College of Allegheny County

We work hard at reducing costs, pulling in the reins and shrinking expenses. It's like fighting a rising tide.



BARBARA VINIAR
Executive Director,
Cornell University-based Institute for
Community College Development

The legislators tell [community colleges], “See? We cut your budget and you still managed.” But they always “manage.” That is their biggest challenge.



JOHN COLBORN
Deputy Director for Economic Development,
Ford Foundation

Our larger goal is to transform institutional practice more broadly by helping to shape the policy environment within which community colleges operate.



SUZANNE WALSH
Economic Opportunity Program Officer,
The Heinz Endowments

People don’t understand all the roles of community colleges. The untold story is that so much is expected of them, but so little is given.



LEAH MEYER AUSTIN
Senior Vice President,
Research and Programs,
Lumina Foundation for Education

[President Bush] says he’s interested in supporting community colleges [referring to a proposed \$250 million worker training initiative], but what does that mean?



MICROBIOLOGY
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“We work hard at reducing costs, pulling in the reins and shrinking expenses,” Sutin says, ticking off \$2.5 million in savings last year from staff reductions, class-size increases and other actions. But utility bills rose and health insurance costs leaped 39 percent. “It’s like fighting a rising tide,” he says with a sigh.

Joe D. Forrester, president of the Community College of Beaver County, says his 30-year-old campus needs \$15 million to \$20 million just for deferred maintenance and basic upgrades—including \$350,000 to upgrade its airport control tower—and another \$750,000 to \$1 million for a controller simulator. The annual budget for the 2,400-student system is \$17 million. The area’s newest—founded in 1994—and smallest school, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, doesn’t even have its own home. President Anna Weitz says the 1,300-student system has to choose between spending \$25 million to \$30 million for its own modern campus in Cambria County, or more than \$30 million to retrofit its current leased space in a vo-tech high school building. Cynthia Azari, president of the 4,000-student Butler County Community College, says, “We use every inch of space we can find. Our tutoring center is in a hallway.”

The problem is statewide. Sutin reports that when state officials asked the 14 community college presidents to list

immediate needs, the total was \$527 million. CCAC plans a \$20 million bond issue to fund a \$25 million capital budget. That’s separate from the school’s \$97.1 million operating budget for some 90,000 students in more than 170 programs.

“But we always ‘manage,’” observes Cornell’s Viniar. “That’s our biggest challenge. The legislators tell us, ‘See? We cut your budget and you still managed.’”

Much of the difference between what the state pays and what the schools need comes out of students’ pockets. This year, CCAC increased tuition 8 percent, while community colleges in Beaver, Butler and Westmoreland counties rose 9 to 13 percent. “None of us has reached a point where the reductions have been detrimental to the quality of the educational programs we offer,” says Beaver’s Forrester, “but we do now find ourselves in conversations about having to limit access to high-demand programs.” The price, ultimately, say many economic development specialists, is a limit on the availability of skilled workers, and thus a ceiling on the ability of the region to support the growth of high-skills jobs.

That’s not a mere worry. Beaver County’s nationally respected Air-Traffic Controller Program already has a two-year waiting list. CCAC’s Respiratory Therapy program cannot expand into offering the continuing-education programs newly mandated by the state. And Butler County Community College, one of



Community College of Allegheny County nursing student Bennie Smith and general studies student Jeff Young prepare spore slides for microscopic viewing. “When you’re looking at education, you’re taking a student from novice—from someone who can’t even spell ‘respiratory therapy’—to someone who can take care of you,” says Kathleen Malloy, vice president of health professions. “You’re taking them not only through the disease process, but also the technology.”

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the first in the country to begin credentialing in computer forensics, could see its still-new program grow obsolete without funding for new equipment.

“When you’re looking at education, you’re taking a student from novice—from someone who can’t even spell ‘respiratory therapy’—to someone who can take care of you,” explains Kathleen Malloy, vice president of health professions at CCAC, which graduates about 400 allied health professionals annually with certificates or degrees in nursing, radiation technology and respiratory therapy. “You’re taking them not only through the disease process, but also the technology.”

The aim is twofold: the use of training simulators exposes students to a wider range of experiences than they could normally expect, and also helps them learn how to use the basic tools of the trade.

The price that is paid is that students don’t get to practice on the increasingly sophisticated equipment in their chosen fields, says Malloy. “You don’t want us to stick a tube down your throat for practice,” she says.

The new college presidents in southwestern Pennsylvania have a good idea of the depth of long-standing problems and the breadth of challenges ahead. CCAC’s Sutin admits that the colleges have not had “an exemplary track record in the meticulous execution, monitoring and follow-up” that foundations

demand. Says Beaver’s Forrester, “We were able to coax funding from other sources and didn’t have to develop the expertise in meeting foundations’ expectations.” But that relationship is changing. The new breed of leaders brings new perspectives and new strategies from diversified backgrounds: Presidents Weitz, Azari and Forrester are from outside Pennsylvania; Sutin has lived in Pittsburgh for years but comes from the world of high finance, not high academia.

The smaller schools are just beginning to decide what to ask for in foundation support, but the platform for a cooperative effort already is in place. The foundations’ Affinity Partnership is gearing up for policy forums in Washington. “[President Bush] says he’s interested in supporting community colleges,” notes Lumina’s Austin, referring to last year’s announcement of \$250 million for worker training through a new Community College Initiative, “but what does that mean?”

The local college Consortium is similarly working on state policy issues—not just funding, but the possibility of a formal, coordinated education plan involving both community colleges and the four-year state schools. The cooperative spirit involves town as well as gown. A proposed Regional Workforce Collaborative of the community colleges and five local workforce investment boards in the region, also funded by the Endowments, aims to develop a system for better coordination and a more effective response to the training needs of the region.

But the focus is always on benefits to students. “It’s important that, no matter what partnerships we get involved in, the end result will be to help students define their goals, then help them to attain those goals,” says Azari. Some students—13 percent at Beaver County Community College, for instance—already have a bachelor’s degree.

While getting a business degree from Western Carolina University, “I didn’t have to study that much,” admits respiratory student Welch. “At CCAC, I was overwhelmed at first. I feel that I’ve done more work here. It’s been very stressful, but I’ve enjoyed it. I never wanted to miss a class.” How are the job prospects? “Great,” she says, laughing. “Every hospital you go to, people ask you, ‘Do you want to come here?’” *h*