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AQ FEATURE

Bridge Institutions in Higher Education

BY Carol Stax Brown

Meeting the needs of a global labor market.

The United States and Latin America are both struggling to find ways to improve participation in quality education in the face of a labor-market skills gap. But all too often, policymakers, businesses and educators have looked to elite universities as a way of meeting those gaps. While important for high-end jobs, labor market and social demands also require us to look elsewhere.

Increasingly, the network of technical schools and community colleges in the Americas has become an attractive alternative.

In Latin America, traditional higher education has historically served the elite. Even after major investment and emphasis on human resource development over the past few decades, participation rates are still among the lowest in the world, averaging approximately 10 percent across the region. Only Sub-Saharan Africa has lower rates of tertiary school enrollment. In the U.S., while there is still a long way to go, participation rates are higher. Of 27-year-olds surveyed in 2012, 79 percent had enrolled in some form of higher education since graduating high school.

The higher number in the U.S. reflects a decentralized, diverse system of higher education that strives, in its structure and design, to be accessible to a large portion of the U.S. workforce. But even there, the challenge is defining what constitutes a meaningful educational credential in the twenty-first-century workplace—and by implication, how educational "success" can be defined and supported.

Vocational and Community Education Compared

Over the past decade, Latin American investment in education has reflected an interest in going beyond improving basic literacy and numeracy. But at the same time, many government programs have focused primarily on the quality of elite tertiary education, fostering initiatives such as exchange programs with internationally renowned universities overseas.

Many Latin American governments and businesses are recognizing the need to provide critical thinking, reasoning, technology, and communication skills that can help citizens be effective in their communities, across their countries, and globally. Educational strategies now encompass more than the traditional university-bound middle-class demographic, reflecting a recognition that global competitiveness requires meeting the demands of employers and potential investors, at all skill levels.

The region's system of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has emerged as a tool for unlocking the potential of millions of Latin Americans for whom higher education would once have been a distant dream.

These networks of post-secondary school programs are able to train students for real private sector jobs. Generally, the schools are controlled by the national labor ministries and are tightly tied to stated needs of industry and commerce. Support for TVETs comes in full or in part from the private sector, student tuition or through religious affiliations.

There is much to be said for this system. Some of the well-funded urban TVET institutions in cities such as São Paulo would be the envy of any U.S. technical college. They boast extremely high job placement rates, state-of-the-art labs, impressive corporate sponsorships, and strong representation at world skills competitions.

However, despite TVETs' responsiveness to industries' needs in Latin America, they suffer from shortcomings that derive in no small part from their centralization under labor ministries, which places limits on the numbers of students.

In the U.S., the equivalent of the TVETs are the two-year, associate degree–granting community and/or technical colleges. These institutions are fully recognized as part of U.S. higher education; data on them are reported to the U.S. Department of Education rather than the U.S. Department of Labor. In fact, half of the U.S. population currently enrolled in higher education is enrolled in two-year community colleges.

Approximately 60 percent of students in community colleges transfer to bachelor's degree–granting, four-year universities to complete their bachelor's degree.

In the U.S., two-year community or technical colleges are not part of a national "system." Highly decentralized by design, they are charged with responding to local workforce, community and higher education needs, which vary by region, state and local municipality. With a negligible amount of funding from the federal government, U.S. two-year colleges do not technically respond to national mandates by the government, although national policy can inform their consideration for funding. More often, community businesses drive what is taught and funded, as a way of meeting local job market demands.

In the U.S., the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is responsible for coordinating the accrediting bodies. CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations, which includes community and technical colleges. This is not government managed, but rather a self-regulated peer review process among higher education professionals.

Illustration by Alex Nabaum.

As with universities, accreditation plays the greatest role in establishing a two-year college's credibility and its eligibility for student federal financial aid, cooperation agreements with four-year schools, faculty credentials, and quality metrics. The process of accreditation has ensured that community colleges fulfill their mission of providing practical and quality education—in many cases serving as a stepping stone to four-year universities and colleges. Accreditation allows for the transfer of credits between two-year and four-year institutions.

The model is part of the reason why the U.S. is near the top of the list globally for enrollment rates in higher education. Community colleges are broadly accepted as a pillar of a democratic society. But being responsive to a multitude of stakeholders and to the changing needs of the workforce is a constant struggle for community college leaders and for policy makers.

There are, of course, similarities among these "bridge" higher education institutions in Latin America and the U.S.:

- They provide opportunities to communities that, for whatever reason, are not attending universities.
- They emphasize teaching rather than research.
- They offer hands-on training.
- They rely on direct links to industry and commerce and offer industry-relevant certifications.
- Programs are developed and adapted to economic development needs.
- They are charged with addressing a multitude of social issues that accompany the mission of wider access.

Problem and Response

Strengths and challenges for the TVETs and community colleges differ, a result of their different structures and roles in their communities and labor markets. But collaboration can help resolve many of those individual challenges in ways that will help update the models for the demands of both the global economies and the local populations.

Here's how.

Adapt Institutions to Meet Multiple Demands of Diverse (and Often Needy) Student Bodies

Open access institutions, by definition, serve students who may present a multitude of special needs.

In Latin America, it is generally students from low-income, rural or peri-urban backgrounds who enroll. While not as extreme, U.S. enrollees in community colleges also face similar challenges. Many have not received satisfactory academic or study preparation in their primary or secondary schools. Yet the job market requires life skills beyond mere vocational skills training.

In the U.S., because of the connecting role community colleges play, many suffer from trying to be all things to all people. From addressing major social issues to preparing students to transfer to the most prestigious universities, there never seems to be sufficient funding to address every student and community need.

The situation in Latin America is different. TVET institutions are not held to the same requirements as universities, nor are they intended to prepare students for universities. While this eliminates a major burden, TVETs are left to work with students who often do not have their basic needs met, such as food, shelter, electricity, or time to study. School infrastructure and access to basic services such as water, electricity, telecommunications and sewage systems are very poor in many Latin American schools. According to a 2011 report from the Inter-American Development Bank, only 50 percent of the schools that serve the poorest quintile have electricity and water, and only 4 percent have access to a telephone line. Students from these strata need more assistance than an institution of higher education can provide.

However, across the Americas there are many quality NGOs and social services that specialize in addressing students' social welfare needs. The International Youth Foundation (IYF), for example, has a global network of over 175 organizations working together for positive youth development around the world, 72 of them in Latin America alone. These organizations work to strengthen and expand the reach of effective programs serving young people.

In the U.S., community colleges are often the hosts of such organizations to meet the needs of underserved youth. As a bridge between high school—even middle school—and the workplace and universities, the

community college is a logical place. Additionally, due to the way in which community colleges are often linked to the local community, leaders of NGOs and community organizations are often involved in the college, perhaps as a board member or in some other role. Involving those groups in the college can help provide assistance—in areas such as transportation, child care and Internet access—to the students who need it, while allowing the college to focus on education.

Eliminate the Stigma of Attending a Bridge Institution

Globally, post-secondary education that falls outside of a four-year research college or university is perceived to be of lesser quality. This is compounded by the mistaken perception that the low socioeconomic status of the students somehow lowers the quality of the institution. That stigma affects funding, reputation and the perceived status of the graduates.

Yet TVETs and community colleges and their graduates are playing a critical role in local, national and global economies. The growing dependence on the TVET sector to meet workforce needs, coupled with sweeping reforms that require bilingual education and enhanced technology and entrepreneurship, should drive policymakers to reduce the inequities in higher education across the Americas. They can do this by crafting new incentives that encourage excellence in the TVET sector. And the definition of excellence should align with desired and necessary student learning outcomes.

There are many faculty at these institutions who know what is best for the future of their students; yet they are powerless to act. Latin America must invest in the professional development and graduate degree attainment of its TVET faculties.

U.S. community colleges still struggle to overcome the perception that they are "trade schools" for students who are not academically inclined. However, both universities and community colleges are accredited by the same regional accrediting bodies, which ensure parallel faculty credentials, course content and quality between the two types of institutions. This is arguably the single most important characteristic of the U.S. model: unlike in similar systems around the world, a student's ability to change careers or obtain higher degrees is not limited by the choices he or she makes at the beginning of the educational process.

In fact, a recent study shows that students who transfer into a university from a community college actually have higher rates of graduation with a four-year degree than students who began at the university. In the U.S., 45 percent of bachelor's degree–holders started at a community college, supporting the assertion that community colleges can provide a quality education equal to universities.

U.S. and Latin American bridge institutions can address the stigma and improve student training by offering broader study abroad and higher education partnerships. There are a number of partnerships between U.S. community colleges and higher education institutions in the region that enable students in Latin America to take their first two years of study in community college courses accredited in the United States. For example, Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3) in Dryden, New York, in partnership with a private university in Colombia, trains faculty with its curriculum and accepts credit from students who enroll in the courses in Colombia, provided they complete a portion at TC3's campus. Students earn an associate's degree from TC3, which opens the door to transfer to universities across the United States.

In a similar program, Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has arrangements with universities around the world, including one in Peru, that allow students to earn the full associate's degree in their home country and then transfer those credits to a four-year U.S. university or college.

This model of partnership with appropriate institutions in Latin America—which may be part of the TVET systems or may be universities—could be one option for expanding access to students. The model has the

potential to be further adapted for countries that seek to prepare students for jobs in high-demand fields. U.S. institutions and universities around Latin America would benefit greatly by providing opportunities for more students and faculty—many of whom currently do not travel outside their country.

Improve the Recognition and Reward of Bridge College Faculty

In Latin America, there is a distinct difference between the academic credentials for faculty at TVET institutions and faculty in four-year universities. Salaries, benefits and prestige are much lower. Faculty members of technical and industrial programs are not researchers. Yet national indicators of quality continue to focus on research outputs.

Again, thanks to the accreditation system in the U.S., technical college faculty degrees and experience must be comparable to their counterparts at universities. That includes, at a minimum, a master's degree in their field. However, community college faculty members are, first and foremost, teachers. They spend 20 to 30 hours per week in the classroom (without teaching assistants), are held accountable for students achieving learning outcomes, and must continuously adapt to the changing nature of the students. They are research-informed practitioners who must stay current in their fields.

If certain programs become irrelevant to the job market, they are phased out. Faculty members are not expected to publish or conduct research; nor are they necessarily evaluated on their ability to receive grants. They are expected to serve the needs of their students, which over the past few decades have included a shift toward designing and offering online and hybrid courses, as well as courses on evenings and weekends.

Nevertheless, there is still a perception that community college faculty is of lower quality than university faculty, and that faculty at community colleges are simply waiting to "move up" into a position at a university. In reality, the jobs are so different that the comparison is almost absurd.

Recognize—and Expand—Lifelong Learning

In the U.S., community colleges are recognized for the role they play in lifelong learning. Certificates, diplomas and associate's degrees include some element of general education or electives that contribute to educating the whole person, rather than focusing on one particular skill. Colleges offer continuing education and corporate training programs to meet the changing needs of the workforce in their communities.

For this reason, students of all ages and backgrounds at different stages in their careers use the training and retraining services of the community college.

In contrast, TVET programs in Latin America are focused on perfecting very specific skills. A combination of technical courses and apprenticeships ensure that a student gains proficiency at a very specific job. Little if any attention is paid to language skills, technology training, the soft skills, or the global competencies that are increasingly in demand in the twenty-first-century workplace.

While this approach may serve students well in the short term—and fill current jobs—the rapidly changing nature of the workplace may leave these students unprepared should there be a major shift in industry within their communities or regions.

There needs to be a greater emphasis on educating the whole person, and providing him or her with the ability to change pace according to the demands of technology and innovation.

A country needs to show that its workforce is adaptable and easily trained in order to attract appropriate

growth industries. For Latin America, this includes English language skills at the very top of the list—something not typically offered at TVET institutions.

Given the importance of languages to global competitiveness, we can only hope that the U.S. will overcome its own complacency over the value of bi- and multilingual education in institutions such as community colleges.

Increase the Visibility and Leadership of Bridge Institutions

When major decisions are made that affect the education system of a country, bridge institutions need to have a voice. Reforms and scholarship programs in Latin America are grand and impressive, but rarely are they inclusive of non-research university–focused institutions or students.

For example, when Brazil's *Ciência sem fronteiras* (Science Without Borders) program was announced, it was touted as funding to provide exchange opportunities for the "top engineering students" from Brazil's "best universities" to attend top-ranked universities around the world. The targeted students were clearly in Brazil's top 1 percent, and already studying at the country's best schools.

Considering the importance of broad human capital development and growth in more modest fields such as information technology, hospitality and tourism, Brazil is in dire need of trained English speakers and technicians.

Exalt the Diversity and Inclusiveness of Bridge Colleges

One notable difference between U.S. community colleges and many TVET institutions in Latin America is the age and levels of life experience of the student body. Many TVET institutions focus on an apprenticeship model that is ideal for 16 to 20-year-olds new to the job market.

In the U.S., the community college's lifelong learning approach services this population as well, but also is geared to serve students of all ages, at any point in their lives—whether to upgrade skills or perhaps earn a credential for a different type of career, often with the planning and development support of local businesses. Such needs are met with both for-credit and not-for-credit continuing education courses at non-traditional hours tailored to those already in the workforce.

A good example of this is in North Carolina, where a once-thriving furniture manufacturing industry moved overseas and left behind empty mills and huge numbers of unemployed workers, particularly older workers. The North Carolina Department of Commerce selected aerospace as one of four sectors for its targeted growth strategy.

The state's community college system was part of the strategy to provide state-of-the-art training for workers to prepare for the new advanced manufacturing economy that has now attracted over 180 aerospace and aviation companies engaged in manufacturing and employs more than 9,500 workers in the state.

Michigan and Ohio went through similar transitions due to the recession's impact on the auto industry. In both cases, the community college was seen as a key player in the revival. For example, in Ohio, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded $5 million to BioOhio and its partners to conduct a job training program to help Ohio's displaced workers from declining automotive and related industries find new career opportunities in the state's bioscience industry. Six community colleges served as the leads, and partnered with unions and adult learning centers to identify and channel training candidates to the colleges.

Give Vocational and Community Colleges a Seat at the Table

If a goal of a bridge institution is to meet industry needs, there must be a certain level of local control and decision-making authority. Community college leaders in the U.S. are highly engaged with business and industry in their delivery areas, which informs program planning and curriculum design.

A key attribute of U.S. community colleges is the support and advocacy network provided by professional associations that represent them. For example, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) sits on a committee with leaders of other large higher education associations to ensure any policy will not unfairly affect one type of higher education institution. Having this seat at the table is vital. It is rare to find leaders of TVET institutions at the leading higher education conferences and summits around the world, and this further limits their access to partnerships, funding opportunities, research and innovation, and mobility programs. While there are equally important events for the TVET sector, the lack of overlap all but ensures students and faculty in one are denied access to the opportunities of the other.

Where to Begin?

On May 15, 2014, the U.S. Department of Education announced a $75 million "First in the World" competition to spur innovation in higher education. The competition was aimed at helping more students access and complete a college degree or credential. In addition to the level of funding being offered, it is, significantly, not funding for research; nor is it limited to just bachelor's or graduate degrees. The "or credential" clause underscores the belief that success and value are broadly defined in the U.S. and that flexibility and inclusion are paramount.

Broadening the reach of Latin America's technical and community colleges can only be achieved with an approach that is as diversified as the problem it is seeking to solve. Partnerships will play a vital role. Supporting such partnerships needs to be a government priority. Specific approaches may vary across the region, but everyone can agree that the future health and prosperity of any society is directly related to the ability to prepare a greater and more diverse number of our citizens to meet the challenges of a complex and unpredictable world. Improving tertiary education for a broad segment of society will not only help create a more mature and diverse labor market; it will also help build greater social inclusion.

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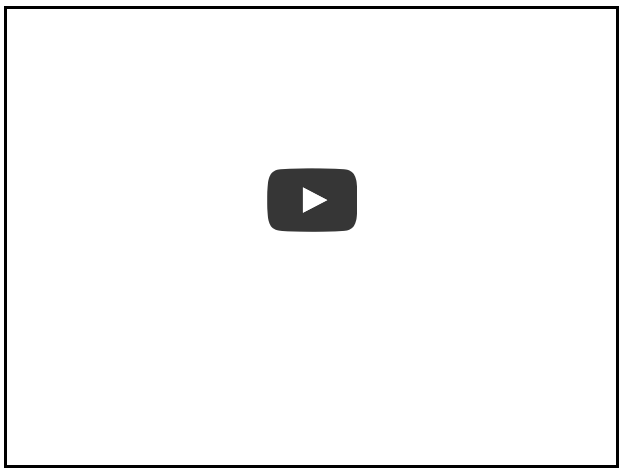

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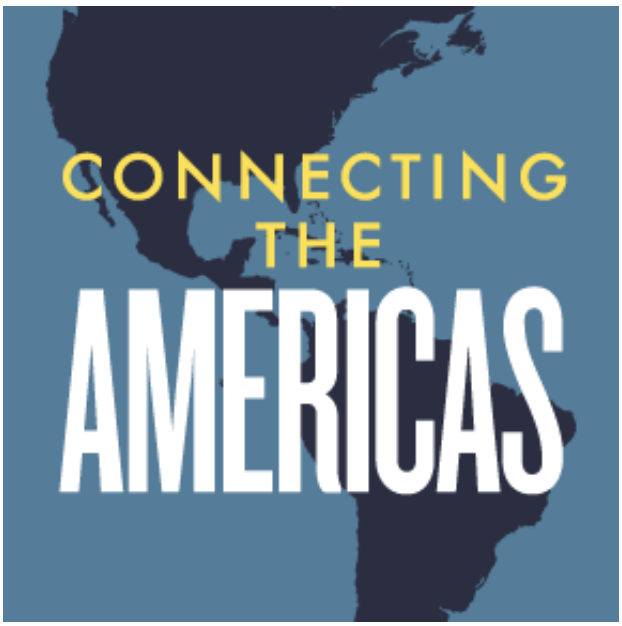

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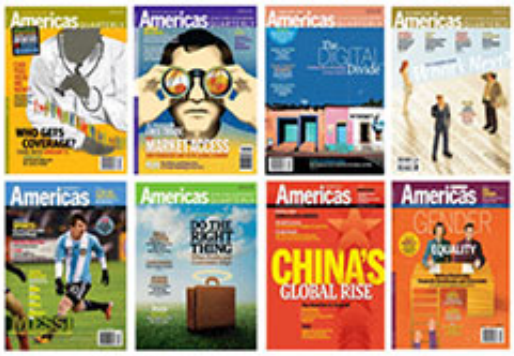

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