

Community College Role: a State Perspective**Barbara Roberts**Governor of Oregon
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This paper is based on the remarks of Governor Roberts at the AACC Convention in Portland, Oregon, April 28, 1993.

Oregon is a state that has taken the community college theme "Building Communities for Tomorrow" to heart. From the Oregon bottle bill and the most comprehensive land use laws, to the Oregon Health Plan and the Educational Act of the 21st Century, Oregon leads this nation in planning today for the communities we are building for tomorrow. As a former chair of the Mt. Hood Community College Board, I know how innovative and creative community colleges have been, not only here in Oregon but across this nation. Some people think that community colleges are simply a small patch in the educational quilt. But that is not this governor's view and I know it is not the view of our new President. We know the community colleges play a much, much larger role. We understand that community colleges are essential for job training, for displaced and transitional workers, for access to affordable higher education, and for building partnerships for a better quality life in the communities of this nation. Here in Oregon, community colleges are an absolutely vital and valuable partner for reaching our goals using this state's very unique tool called "The Oregon Benchmarks."

Oregon is the first state in this nation to establish goals or benchmarks for progress over the next 20 years—a 5-year, 10-year, 20-year goal—and then to implement a system to measure our performance at intervals over that 20-year period. With the Oregon Benchmarks, we know where we are now and where we want to be in the future on more than 150 separate goals relating to our people, our quality of life, and our economy. Every two years, we chart the gains and the losses toward each of the Benchmarks that we have selected in this state.

I believe so strongly in those Benchmarks as a way to make government work better and produce better and deliver better, that I used them to pull together my 1993-95 budget, even as I had to make 1.2 billion dollars in cuts from a 6 billion dollar general fund. Let me give you an idea how our Benchmarks work. Like the governors of all the states in this nation, I want to create high paying jobs for the citizens of our state because I

know how critical it is for a healthy state. But creating jobs means having highly skilled workers who are ready to fill the more technological jobs of a changing workplace and a changing economy. And Oregon has a Benchmark to meet that goal. We have a goal to have the best educated and prepared workforce in the nation by the year 2000, and equal to any in the world by the year 2010. When I developed my state workforce agenda and put it in my new budget, I looked for the strategies that would improve our progress on that Benchmark. We have a lottery program in Oregon; it raises about 300 million dollars in a two-year budget period. It is dedicated by the people of this state to economic development. In this state, it has always meant infrastructure and business development. Well, I took out of that lottery budget 125 million dollars and dedicated it to Oregon's workforce preparation. I invested in the Benchmark for the workers of my state. I know clearly, and I think you know, that we cannot create jobs in a vacuum in this culture. We must acknowledge the immense changes in our world.

We have been transformed in this country from a domestic economy to a world economy through a revolution in technology, in communications, and in transportation. Today, production flexibility, quality products, and market innovation make the difference as we compete internationally. With this changed marketplace, we have all felt a shock wave—declining working incomes in many parts of this country, layoffs and restructuring in what have been basic industries in many states. Here in Oregon, that's meant a shift to service industries and high technology firms, to value-added economy strategies, and to a decentralization that has literally changed the way business operates, the way jobs are implemented, and the way our lives take place. Now, when I go out of the state and talk to business leaders in other parts of the country who have decided or are about to decide to move their business operations here to Oregon, one of the first things they ask me about now is not our tax structure. They ask me about the Oregon workforce. They want to know—do our employees have good educations, do they have strong technical skills, and do they have a proven work ethic? We have found that more than any other thing, our workforce is what is bringing business to the state of Oregon. And because the recruiting of new businesses is so important to Oregon, as it is to other states, we don't want to slip backwards on education and workforce training if we are going to continue to recruit businesses that want to locate in our state.

But while states are trying to recruit businesses one state

from another state, we know something else here in Oregon. Approximately 70% of the new jobs that will be created in our state in the 1990s will be created by existing or home-grown Oregon businesses, and most of them are relatively small. For small growth business, workforce quality is absolutely critical; there is no margin for error when you are a small firm struggling along month by month. What small businesses know is they want quality workers but they don't necessarily have the resources to train or retrain those employees. And 85% of our workforce who are going to be working in the year 2000 are currently working today. The question is are they working up to speed, do they have the skills to be competitive in an international marketplace, and can we prepare those workers for a changing workplace so that we don't lose the economic race against the international competition this country now faces?

So Oregon and the rest of this nation are faced with a choice about how to compete in this new international economy. There are really only two choices. We invest in high skills or we stay competitive through lower and lower wages. We can attempt in this state, in your state, in this country to become the cheapest producer by just constantly cutting costs, contracting out work, hiring temporary workers, avoiding health benefits, and other typical low-wage strategies.

Our state and your state can compete on the basis of innovative new ideas, high quality products, and workplace flexibility. But that second kind of company requires a highly skilled workforce. So in Oregon our businesses and our workers both can be winners. We commit our state to a high-skilled strategy for our workers and our businesses. In 1991 we laid the groundwork with the creation of my Workforce Quality Council. The Council is a high-powered group of state leaders that coordinates education and workforce training across both state and local government, and encourages increased training among the businesses of this state. We are well aware that we cannot dictate what is the right training option for every community in this state. We know that's not the proper role for the state. So in Oregon, with its many regional economies and with a variety of needs for regional training and job skills, we have looked at those regions and said there is a regional way to deliver a quality workforce. That is one of the reasons the small business development centers created a few years ago are located and based on our community college campuses, because there they can customize what they do to the regional and community needs of their area.

So my workforce agenda for the '93 legislature emphasizes regional workforce development. It will allow the state's 15 regional workforce quality committees to design their own strategies to meet the regional workforce needs that they have; these will be plans that are tailored to the existing skills of the workforce and to the current demands of the regional economy. And Oregon's community colleges, and particularly their presidents, are playing key roles in those regional committees. The regional workforce committees will have many options as they look at how they use their funding dollars. They could use those monies to implement Oregon's ground breaking educational reform act. They can provide the local community colleges with professional and technical equipment to meet the needs of specialized industries in their areas, or they can support training that is tailored to some vital industry in their region such as a new agricultural technique, or high technology innovation or, in our changing wood products industry, to a secondary wood product market.

This workforce agenda is going to assist businesses in modernizing their workforce and workplace. It will involve the private sector in designing and directing training programs that are responsive and flexible and accountable. It will jump-start our educational reform efforts in Oregon. It will maintain the capacity of our community colleges to provide that absolutely critical technical training for the future. It will expand professional education and strategic occupations; it will move more and more of our disadvantaged, dislocated, and disabled citizens from tax users to taxpayers and it will help us meet one of Oregon's Benchmarks. Oregon's community colleges are absolutely major partners in the success of this agenda.

Which brings me to one other point I'd like to share with you about some of the unusual roles that community colleges play. In this state community colleges have a major role in welfare reform. I'd like to tell you how it's working here in Oregon and the role our community colleges play. We understand that we must break the cycle of poverty that saps the resources and the potential of our cities, our states, our nation, and our people. America's financial future is strained under the increase in welfare families, the working poor, and our homeless. A lot of regions in a lot of areas in a lot of states and jurisdictions can't figure out how to get out of that box. We decided in Oregon that those of us who wanted to help had to redirect some of the compassion we felt away from the traditional welfare model that basically requires us to spend

most of our time calculating an applicant's meager financial assets to a model that allows us to spend most of our time determining how we can change the education and training liability that keeps applicants dependent on a failed and costly welfare system. We in Oregon believe the issue is not about spending but rather about investing. Oregon lawmakers financed welfare reform above the federal funding cap capturing all of the money it was possible for us to get from the federal government. We have something that is called JOBS for Oregon's Future. It is our welfare reform program. This program is just two years old and already its acceptance has set the stage for a welfare system that is framed by self-sufficiency and results. Let me share what it is delivering.

Twenty-five percent of Oregon's mandatory AFDC caseload is participating in our JOBS program. The national average is 10%. Eighty-four percent of our eligible teen parents have either returned to the classroom or have completed their classroom program. Our high school equivalency training gets results in Oregon. For two years running, our JOBS participants have received the state's highest scores on the GED test. Not only that, Oregon recently received an award from the American Council on Education for the largest annual increase in the number of GED tests administered in any state in this nation. Oregon's rate increased 30% from 1990 to 1991 and our JOBS program participants are responsible for two thirds of the growth in that program.

The child care component of the JOBS program is also one of the most important tools in the Oregon program and it is important that it remains there if we are going to take young women off welfare. You pull out child care and you find instantly that your success plummets because it will not work without child care. The General Accounting Office reports Oregon has the second highest rate of transitional child care in the country and it is an investment that has proven results as shown by those other numbers I have just shared with you.

Now what all this means is that young welfare mothers are succeeding. Currently, about 600 Oregon JOBS participants are finding work every single month in the state and the jobs are getting better and better as we get better and better at the program. In just over two years since the program started, more than 12,000 young people have moved off welfare into the workplace and the JOBS participants are staying in that workforce and they are not recycling back into welfare. These women deserve a lot of credit for changing their own lives, but

I want to tell you there are other major players, and at the top of that list are our community colleges. Community colleges are working on the training with us, helping us with the GED programs, and making sure we have the training and support that will allow these young women to take the jobs that they need to support their families. We all understand that poverty creates a circle of barriers, things like low self-esteem and teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness, and family dysfunction and school dropouts. It traps families, not for just one generation, but many times for more than one generation. Our JOBS program, though, has shown us that we can work together, major and minor players throughout Oregon, to break those barriers and to return those families to self-sufficiency. We have been willing to try those fresh approaches to our problems and our needs here in Oregon. Over the last few years, other states and other governments have also come to realize that as the world economy changes, we must change as well. We cannot do things in old ways if we are going to succeed.

Earlier this year, this nation's 50 governors unanimously adopted a policy from their Committee on Economic Development and Commerce, and I would like to present this because I want you to know that no matter what state you come from, your governor voted for this. The policy states: "The governors are vitally concerned with the competitive economic position of our states and our nation. A world class economy will require both high performance firms and workers. U.S. firms must upgrade production processes, improve products, seek new markets, and invest in workforce skills to compete successfully on an international basis." It goes on to state "Government should support private sector modernization and quality improvement efforts and radically restructure its own strategies for delivering education and training services in order to build a world-class workforce." The final paragraph reads: "To ensure that these efforts succeed, we must strengthen partnerships among business, labor and education and make workforce development an integral component of national, state and local economic development policy and funding." I am happy to share those words with you, to take them home while your legislature works on your community college budget. I will read it often in Oregon during this budget cycle.

Community colleges are literally at the heart of change in this country. You have all the possibilities and all the potential to make this nation's workforce the best educated and prepared on the face of this globe. In partnership with our

nation's community colleges, as state leaders, as governors, as mayors, we can truly build strong and healthy communities for tomorrow, but we will not do it without those of you who work in the community colleges. We will work in partnership because we know that divided we will not succeed. Joined and committed together on workforce preparation, on education and on training, America can be the best on the face of the earth.

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