

Jason Altmire ([00:04](#)):

Hello and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I'm Jason Altmire and I am extremely excited about today's episode because we talk a lot about community colleges. When you think about career education and the work that our sector does, meaning the proprietary sector, as well as just career technical education programs at all levels, the subject of community colleges comes up. We talked about apprenticeships a few episodes back. So I thought we would focus an entire episode just on community colleges and bring someone who knows probably more about it than anybody, and that's Dr. Davis Jenkins, the senior research scholar at the Community College Research Center at the Columbia University Teachers College. So eminently qualified to talk about community colleges in all kind of ways. So Dr. Jenkins, thank you very much for being with us.

Dr. Davis Jenkins ([01:03](#)):

Thanks, Jason. It's good to be here.

Jason Altmire ([01:05](#)):

Can you first talk a little bit about what exactly does the Community College Research Center do? I see it quoted everywhere. I've seen your name and others from the center speak and talk about community colleges. What is the mission of the center?

Dr. Davis Jenkins ([01:20](#)):

We're trying to work with these important institutions to help them achieve better outcomes for students and better serve their communities with the limited resources that they have. We're especially interested in enhancing their role in upward mobility, which as you know, the rates of which have declined in the United States in recent decades. So a lot of research looks at what works in education, and that's very important. But my take on and my team's work really is focused on how do we make it work at scale. And so very much focused on leadership and institutional change.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([02:08](#)):

So this is my 41st year in higher education. I started out working as a speechwriter for two guys who'd been very influential in mid-century higher education United States. They were 80 at the time, and they had worked with people like Clark Kerr and one guy, Alvin Eurich, had been on the Truman Commission, which as you know, had a big influence on community colleges and technical colleges in the United States.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([02:32](#)):

I have never in my career seen bigger set of forces for change, but also real opportunity for community colleges and career colleges generally. So the good thing is that so much of our education system has been focused on sorting people using educational standards, what I call Sputnik era mathematics, rather than by talent and by competency, which of course, career colleges and in their best cases, community colleges focus on. And a good thing, that's sort of hopefully breaking down. It will so exist at the very elite levels. The tough thing is that moving to competency base kinds of education and really focusing on

not just completion of degrees, but completion of degrees of value, it's a hard change to make for community colleges. I think they have a lot to learn from career colleges and have learned a lot. I've learned a lot.

Jason Altmire (03:34):

You've done obviously a lot of writing on this subject related to community colleges and you popularized the term guided pathways, especially recently. So what can you talk about? What are guided pathways?

Dr. Davis Jenkins (03:46):

So guided pathways are, this will seem familiar to community colleges, you start with the end in mind, where the end is career path employment, and you backward design programs and student supports to enable students to get onto a programmatic path that leads either directly to a good job that will pay a decent wage, but also offer opportunities for a learning on and off the job and for further education. Because increasingly even in technician fields, certainly this has been the case in healthcare for a long time, you need to move up. You can get a decent job with an advanced certificate. But to move to a family supporting wage, increasingly you need a degree and at least applied associate, increasingly a bachelor's degree and even more, plus experience.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

(04:43):

So guided pathways is really about, it's not creating structured pathways, but it focuses on three or four main areas. Number one, clarifying the paths for students to end goals because like I said, our systems sort of set up this sort students, and it's very confusing for students who aren't from elite, highly educated families who know how to work the system. Number two and very importantly, helps students get on a path. And that's not just from providing better information about careers, but the research suggests it's really about connecting with people who are your peeps, like people like to work with drones and people are interested in social service and people are interested in healthcare. These are my peeps, sort of at least from a career standpoint or the theater people or whomever. And then very importantly, becoming confident as learners. By learning, we mean not just being able to observe information and develop skills, that's very important. But to really learn how to learn and solve problems and create new knowledge, that's what real learning is about, especially in the age of where every piece of knowledge is at your fingertips.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

(06:05):

And actually, there's been a lot of research on this. A lot of it's sponsored by National Science Foundation and STEM, but I believe it applies cross field, which is the importance of active learning, of really solving real problems or even inside and outside of the classroom, solving tough problems like people in career technical fields do every day without clear answers, working together with other people and being part of a broader system of enterprise. So that kind of learning actually will suit you well for success in higher education as well as the workplace. And then also helping them get a plan a direction because especially at community colleges, students are taking too many courses that they really don't need and it's really problematic.

Jason Altmire ([06:59](#)):

There's been a lot of political support for community colleges going back decades. You mentioned the Truman Commission, and obviously the First Lady today, still, I believe, teaches at a community college. So one of the things that frustrates our members is the reluctance among some in the political community to take a hard look at outcomes and accountability measures for some of the more politically favored institutions. And I think it would be beneficial to our listeners to hear you, as someone who doesn't have a dog in the political fight certainly, but knows a lot about the subject, how would you define the outcomes of community colleges today? You talked about what we would aspire with regard to curriculum and methodology and how we get students into that guided pathway. But where we are today, where do you think the outcomes are at community colleges?

Dr. Davis Jenkins ([07:55](#)):

Well, they're not strong, and they're not strong enough. Completion rates are relatively low. 43% of students who start at a community college end up getting any kind of degree six years later. It varies greatly by state. South Dakota, which is very much on the technical college model, like your college, has much higher completion rates compared to other states. Which one issue is that Community colleges vary greatly by state. But beyond overall, not great completions. And that includes bachelor's degrees for students who transfer. So the majority of students are coming out with nothing, although a lot of them, 10, 15% are still enrolled six years later with nothing, which is really problematic. But the outcomes are especially not strong, although it varies greatly for students of color and low income students.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([08:52](#)):

And then a big focus of our research and work nationally has been community colleges have improved completion rates over the last 20 years, about 25%. But the issue is not just completion rates, but what are they completing? As I alluded to this earlier, a big focus of our research is on post completion value. Are students able to get a living wage job directly out of school, and or are they transferring to bachelor's degrees? Because again, I mentioned to get a family supporting job increasingly need a bachelor's degree. So community colleges, as with career colleges, our enrollment was hit very badly by the pandemic. But community college enrollment has been tanking nationally since 2011. There are a lot of reasons for this, beyond community colleges control. But we say that one of the big reasons is especially because state support hasn't kept up with costs, that one of the reasons is in many cases, the programs aren't worth completing. Why should students spend this much money? I say this with deep respect for community colleges, and I think they're really a critical, play an important role.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([10:10](#)):

I've also done work with career colleges in the past, like DeVry and other, Fox College and other colleges throughout the country. And I have enormous respect and learned a lot from career colleges, which do take advantage of federal financial aid, which is not state support. But in general, like I mentioned, we're in another period of ethical change for higher education and our society, like we were in the early '60s when community colleges really came to the fore and many of your career colleges really came to the

fore. Both sectors really got to rethink what we do and how we provide value because students are voting with their feet. They talk about performance funding, the biggest performance funding is tuition. And are we providing value for our customer and our student?

Jason Altmire ([11:06](#)):

And with regard to value and return on investment, you've mentioned a few times the idea of the family supporting wage. And if I'm not mistaken, I believe and the center defines that as a minimum of \$35,000 for workers between ages 25 and 44, and at least \$45,000 for people between the ages of 45 and 64.

Dr. Davis Jenkins ([11:32](#)):

Well, actually, that's more like a living wage for an individual. It obviously varies by locale. When you look at something like the MIT living wage calculator in the living wage for someone that say in Cook County where Chicago is about \$18 an hour, just a little bit more than 35 grand. But for a family with one adult and one child, it jumps up to like \$33. And we distinguish between living wage for the individual and family supporting wage. And of course, it's even higher if you're even two adults with two children. But the reason we use that 35,000 is that Tony Carnevale, at the Georgetown Center uses it. And also, especially in urban areas, as you know, the prevailing minimum wage for unskilled work, even at fast food places sometimes, certainly Target and the like, it's 15 to \$18. So 35 grand is sort of like, I think it's actually 17 to \$18 an hour.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([12:35](#)):

So that's what we're looking at. But we're looking at that as a minimum. So we're saying, and we find that the majority of the degrees that community colleges give, the associate degrees, and also the majority of the certificates, the occupational certificates they give don't have those kind of returns. And then community colleges will rightly say that many of their associate degrees are designed for transfer. But again, we've shown our research, especially CCRC's research has shown that just this associate of general studies does not enable students to transfer effectively, with that, apply their credits toward a major. The university will take all your 90 credits, but you'll start often as a first term student in the major. So we've really got to rethink the career pathway for students coming out of high school.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

([13:30](#)):

Speaking of high school, I think, and this is a big focus of our research because community college enrollments of older students, 25 and older, are at historic lows, far lower even than the '90s. Community colleges have also lost market share to traditional college-aged students to public regional four-year universities, and to some extent, these online, like SNU and others. They have backfilled with dual enrollment students, high school students taking college courses. And our focus is, in many cases, we call them random acts because it's just sort of like random courses that students may take that the high school wants to offer, and programs of privilege, meaning that they're often taken by students who are likely to go to college anyhow, which is fine. But we see a huge opportunity in creating much more purposeful pathways.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(14:28\)](#):

And the biggest opportunity, from my standpoint in some ways, is through high school career academies. And we just have been doing research in Texas and in both the Panhandle, Florida and Miami, we worked in Texas, we worked in urban areas, Southern Houston and rural area south of Dallas. And we're seeing Title I high schools, urban large high schools, and urban technical schools as well as rural schools create these academies within them, these high school academies, which of course you know has been around a long time.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(15:02\)](#):

The problem is that while high school academies, especially for young men, have enabled them to get fairly decent jobs out of high school, not young women on average, they've been not good in propelling students to also pursue post-secondary education, career technical or transfer. And I need to make that distinction, because I've been fighting against it. And so we saw Title I high schools, not early college high schools or P-TECHs, which we're big fans of, but they're small, very large, really restructuring around this idea that I think career colleges have had career relevant degrees. They want pathways and their families here, from poor urban and rural communities want pathways. And I think with the breakdown of the sorting system and the fact that employers, there's so many good jobs at this living wage, and then with degrees, bachelor's degrees, the family supporting wage, there's a real economic opportunity to help propel students out of poverty in upward mobility. And career colleges have been doing this, and community colleges need to learn to do it better.

Jason Altmire [\(16:19\)](#):

And one of the things I like most about the center is you use data and research to support your work and to inform the work that you're doing. And a data tool that you created allows users to examine individual college programs and even post-graduation pay for institutions across the country using data from the IPEDS system with the National Center for Education statistic.

Dr. Davis Jenkins [\(16:46\)](#):

But also the college scorecard, which is very powerful data for students who receive financial aid. It looks on their tax records. It's better than unemployment insurance where we've done a lot of work on. So it doesn't get a lot of students who take certificate programs that they pay for or their employers pay for.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(17:07\)](#):

But again, upskilling is very important. My focus is on where the real value to society of education comes from. I'm not knocking the upskilling training, but enabling especially a low income individual to get into a career path job that's paying individual and family supporting wages and just as important. And then we'll pay for your further education by vendors. They'll help pay for your bachelor's degree if that is valuable and not the student or the taxpayer. That's where the real career pathway opportunity is. Now across industries and companies are so hard up for these people. I think it will only increase because

ChatGPT and AI is going to be doing more and more of the even rote mental things like writing, but there's still going to be a need for people to be creative problem solvers and to work with AI tools in every field.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(18:10\)](#):

So I think it's a real time of opportunity. But people who are thinking that, well, things are going to change or it's going to snap back or whatever, the world has changed.

Jason Altmire [\(18:21\)](#):

You also talk about the earn to learn structure, which means two days of classes and three days at work, and how you'd like to see that expanded. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dr. Davis Jenkins [\(18:34\)](#):

Well, employers will give you an interview based on your degree or your credential, but they will give you the job based on your experience. Now, for someone, again, I'm concerned with someone entering a field. That's problematic because they don't have experience in the field. But what employers are looking for as you know well is evidence of this kind of learning that I'm talking about, problem solving. They're also looking at motivation. Actually, I think they're first looking at motivation. Is this student getting certificates? Is this student interested in drones or have they been doing work in their community that's substantive?

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(19:15\)](#):

The other thing is that I've done a lot of work in the past on apprenticeship systems, which sounds good, but they don't work well in the United States because we have a very different economy and history than Europe. But we can create employers because they need these people with degrees plus experience. Employers could, as part of these learn to earn arrangements, essentially work as a temp to perm hiring agency to both help train the student in conjunction with a community college or career college and help train and then hire these people because employers are looking for local people, they're looking for diverse talent workforce who reflect the communities that they serve.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

[\(20:07\)](#):

So it's a real win-win, but employers in this country especially have just, I think, relied too much on degrees and not enough on degrees plus experience. So again, I think there's real opportunities. And actually, it's a competitive advantage for employers if they work with community colleges and career colleges to basically build their own. And in these new industries like Tesla with battery manufacturing, much different than other industries. There's new industries emerging, new occupation.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

(20:44):

I was talking to folks at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, and they were working with local hospitals, local convention centers and churches, megachurches to have sort of like a combination meeting planner, AV tech, you know what we used to call AV tech, got to be pretty skilled. And now they're people who manage these things online. These are good jobs, but they're not like jobs that exist that we're clearly, or they're not going to be in the affirmative labors list of occupations from the whenever.

Jason Altmire (21:17):

That's always been an issue with the American education system generally, even K through 12. We don't identify the jobs that are going to be here in the future. We still train people and educate people for jobs that were here in the past.

Dr. Davis Jenkins (21:30):

Because we have an extremely elitist system. But I'm saying that is breaking down, at least in the margins, and it's a lot of opportunities. So I appreciate what the career colleges are doing and hope to continue to learn from you folks.

Jason Altmire (21:45):

Well, thank you for that. This has been an incredibly interesting discussion. Our guest has been Dr. Davis Jenkins, Senior Research Scholar for the Community College Research Center at Columbia University Teachers College. Dr. Jenkins, how could our listeners find you and contact you or learn more about your work?

Dr. Davis Jenkins (22:06):

Well, you can look at our website, Community College Research Center, CCRC, or you can email me at pdj2102@tc.columbia.edu.

Jason Altmire (22:19):

Dr. Davis Jenkins, thank you for being with us.

Dr. Davis Jenkins (22:21):

Nice to be here. Thanks, Jason.

Jason Altmire (22:27):

Thanks for joining me for this episode of the Career Education Report. Subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. For more information, visit our website at career.org and follow us on Twitter, @CECUed. That's @CECUed. Thank you for listening.