

Democracy's College

Episode 11: Policy trends and resources that support adult learners

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Anjalé Welton from OCCRL talks with Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, the Director of Upskilling Policy at the National Skills Coalition, about policy trends and resources that support adult learners.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: Amanda, welcome. Thank you for joining us.

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: Thank you so much Dr. Welton. I am really delighted to be here and looking forward to our conversation.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: The first question that I have for you is: If you could just talk a little bit more about what is the National Skills Coalition--what do they do? What are some supports and resources they provide, and what is the role that community colleges play in supporting the work of the National Skills Coalition?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: National Skills Coalition was founded more than fifteen years ago by a coalition of advocates including community college leaders, workforce boards, adult educators from community-based non-profit organizations, business leaders, labor unions, [and] labor management partnerships--really a broad array of advocates. What they all have in common was the belief that access to high-quality education and training opportunities is important in helping individuals gain access to middle-skill jobs. Equally important is insuring that businesses have workers who are trained to meet the skill needs that actually exist in local communities. You can tell based on that description that community colleges sort of had a home in our work right from the very beginning, because of our focus on middle-skill jobs, jobs that require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree. Throughout NSC's history, community colleges have really been a crucial part of our coalitions. We work primarily at the state and federal level as a policy advocacy organization. We are advancing strong policies. We are not ourselves providing direct services, although of course many of our thousands of members nationwide are serving students and adult learners directly.

A couple of key things to know about how NSC approaches this work: The first is, we have a strong commitment to ensuring that voices in the field, people who are doing the work on the ground, are able to take their expertise and share it with policymakers and help inform policies that are being developed at the state and federal level. So from a community college perspective that is of course critically important, not just in terms of traditional higher ed., but also in terms of the workforce development side of the house and the noncredit side of the house, because we know that to create effective career pathways for adults, particularly those who have been marginalized for whatever reason, because of economic circumstances, because of disability, because of status as people who have criminal records, because of limited English proficiency, because of race or ethnicity, community colleges have long been absolutely crucial in providing those onramps, both to help people build their foundational skills in adult education and literacy in English language, but also in allowing them to gain access to opportunities to

build higher-level academic skills and to acquire workplace-specific skills for particular industries or occupations. So, right from the get-go, community colleges have been part of the mix at National Skills Coalition, a part of our work.

Really, we work on a handful of fronts. We work around raising public awareness about the importance of these issues; we work on advancing strong public policies and developing public policy recommendations. For example, we have a national advisory panel on skills equity that has a number of community college members. Those recommendations that are developed within our national advisory panel and vetted by our national advisory panel then go forward as part of our state and federal advocacy. The third area in which we work, in addition to the strategic communications and the public awareness piece, and then the policy development piece, is really mobilizing in support of a policy. Let's say a state coalition wanted to increase the amount of money devoted to adult education in their state budget, or let's say that a group of advocates wanted to advocate for a better stackable credential policy in their state, or a more job-driven financial aid policy, or a stronger integrated education and training policy such as the I-Best model; NSC provides support to those state coalitions as they identify who are the partners they need to have at the table. They figure out how to mobilize those partners, they figure out what policymakers and influencers they really want to target, and then they roll out their campaign.

At the federal level we work similarly; we develop policy recommendations, we had a whole set of bi-partisan recommendations that we released in the end of 2016 that were directed around a policy agenda for the new president. We also work there around building public awareness, strategic communications, policy development, and vetting of policies, but also working to bring the practitioner voice, folks at community colleges in states doing the work on the ground, to Washington to make sure the policymakers are hearing directly from people who actually are doing the work. That in a nutshell is NSC's work. We exist to lift up good work that is happening at the state and local level, [to] make sure that policymakers are hearing about it, and to advance strong policies that can help adult learners and help jobseekers and workers to really build the skills they need so they can earn family-sustaining wages.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: It sounds like a bulk of your focus, related to policy, is on equity and promoting policies that target issues of equity.

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: We are very interested in ensuring that policies are implemented in a way that is intentionally inclusive of every individual to make sure that folks are not unnecessarily excluded or left behind when an upskilling policy is being implemented. My particular background in this work is from a community-based organization in Philadelphia, where we worked primarily with immigrant and African-American community members. My experience on the ground is with adult learners and workers who may have been marginalized or may have been vulnerable to being excluded. So, for me, a driving force in our policy recommendations and our policy advocacy is: How do we design policies that are universal, that are inclusive of people who may have been marginalized? It can be kind of abstract to say: Oh, I work on workforce policy. It's not very abstract if you say: Look, there are 20,000 folks in our community who may have graduated from high school, [or] may not have, but have some literacy gaps or have some needs around math skills, and these folks could have better access to higher paying jobs if they were able to pursue high-quality upskilling opportunities. What would it look like if we created a world where folks had better access to those opportunities? What would change? How would things be better not only for workers themselves but for businesses in our community that want to find a talent

pipeline of people with skills that they need? So really that's my job. I'm the conduit or translator between the folks on the ground doing the work and the policymakers and others to really make sure that information is flowing in both directions.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: So what specific tools does NSC have that are effective for adult learners and support adult learners, specifically?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: I am so glad that you asked that question. We're a policy advocacy organization, of course, so we're not ourselves focused on direct provision of services, but we do have a number of materials that are really designed to help adult education advocates make the case for the importance of adult education and to advance policies, whether those are formal policies like a piece of legislation or a governor's administrative policy, or more informally, perhaps even within their own institutions if they are a community college, for what we know works. Research and evaluation are so important, and there is this growing base of knowledge in the field about what does work. What does NSC have to offer? Well first and foremost we have materials. We have fact sheets. We have reports that either provide a quick distillation in just a page or two of what are the issues facing adult learners, what are the issues facing community colleges, and what policy levers or what interventions are most effective in helping folks advance or address those issues. We have fact sheets around important federal legislation, like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, the Higher Education Act, that sort of make the case to policymakers why those are important from the perspective of adult learners. We have more general ones. We have one on, for example, a short fact sheet on adult education and middle-skill jobs--really making the case for connections between adult education and those onramps that I talked about earlier that allow adult learners and workers to access those good family-wage jobs. Then for advocates who want to get a bit deeper and go beyond a fact sheet or two, we have both reports and we have policy toolkits.

The reports, the most recent example is: *Foundational Skills in the Service Sector*. It's a report that really looks at workers in the service sector, so retail, hospitality, and entry-level healthcare, who have skill gaps. Maybe [these are] literacy needs, maybe numeracy needs, or digital problem-solving skills. What are the interventions that can help those adult learners and those workers? How are businesses partnering with community colleges and partnering with training providers to help their workers upskill and advance to better jobs? That report, that *Foundational Skills in the Service Sector* report, is a perfect example of marrying the data with the advocacy. Here is the data. We let you know what the problem is and what landscape looks like. Here are some examples of strong state and local partnerships between community colleges and employers, and here are some policy recommendations for how we can really bring these strong examples to scale.

Then the last area where we have resources is something I'm really excited about; it's state policy toolkits. This came out of our conversations with a lot of community college folks and others in our network who said: We care about these issues, we know about interventions like integrated education and training or the I-Best-like models, and we know they work for many of our learners, but we are stuck making the case on an individual basis. We might make the case within our institution to try to get a grant proposal written or to launch an individual program, but it would be so much better if we had broad-based support. Could we get a state policy, or could we get state funding to support this kind of work? So, we developed, for example, a half a dozen of these toolkits.

I am going to focus on the integrated education and training one, because that is the one I worked on that's directly connected to adult education. It is a 50-state scan that says: What is the current status for every state in the U.S. and the District of Columbia, [and] do they have a state-level policy about integrated education and training? Not just "Are there isolated examples at the local level?," and not just "Are they doing what the feds say they have to do around WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) implementation?," but "Do they actually have a state level policy?" Then accompanying that 50-state scan is a policy toolkit that says: Here are examples of four or five states that have strong policies, and here is model language that you can use in your state. You can literally copy and paste this if you wanted to advance a strong policy either of state legislation or policy with your governor's office, or even at the local level with your mayor's office. Our goal was to make it as easy to use as possible for advocates at the community college level and elsewhere, who are busy people. They are practitioners, they are doing research, they may be engaged in policy conversations, but they aren't funded, typically, to do policy development in an intensive way. Our toolkit is a way to give them an off-the-shelf "take this document," "steal this resource," I like to say. Steal this resource and use it in your state and with your partners to help move forward the kind of interventions that we know really work.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: The toolkit, does it have the ability to be adapted based on shifts in the policy context?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: While we created the toolkit to be something that people could copy/paste and literally use the language exactly as is if they wanted to, we are also very sensitive to the fact that different states have different political landscapes, different strategic considerations, and frankly as times go by there are different issues that rise to the top at the state level or the federal level. Last year Minnesota had a billion-dollar state budget surplus, and Illinois and Pennsylvania were dealing with massive state budget crises. Different state environments can look really different. The other thing to know is that our resources are not just: Here is a piece of paper and good luck. We also have technical assistance available, and it is available for free. NSC's staff are available to work with community college advocates and others. If you take a look at something that we published and you say: You know, I like where this is going, but I want to tweak it or I want to talk to you about who else might have moved a policy like this in a community college context, [then] pick up the phone [or] drop us an e-mail. We are here, we are freely available to you, and we would love to talk. If there are folks listening to this podcast who are thinking: This sounds great, but I'm not really in a position to move a policy forward by myself, we certainly don't expect that people are going to do this solo, and we are absolutely available to help.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: That's wonderful. Related to policy context and adapting to policy changes, let's talk about policy trends. What do you think community colleges need to know about what policies are coming down the pike?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: At the federal level it's no surprise to anybody to say that we are in a very uncertain time with regard to the federal budget. There are competing agendas on the hill and from the President's administration with regard to what is the vision for federal spending and what are the prospects. One thing that is really not disputed is that there is strong support for an education and skills agenda on both sides of the aisle. When the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act was reauthorized 3 years ago, it was overwhelmingly bipartisan. If folks are really interested in staying up to date in the ups and downs of what is happening on the federal landscape, National Skills Coalition does

offer regular free webinars, and other updates, including action alerts and sign-on letters. If you go to our [website](#), you can sign up for our newsletter right on the front page of website in the top corner and find out about our webinars and find out about our action alerts.

We also know that at the state level there are issues going on there too. Let me talk a little bit more about the federal piece. We've heard some back and forth in Congress about whether the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act or the Higher Education Act is likely to come up for reauthorization next. Both of them are due for reauthorization. In both cases we see a couple of overarching trends at the federal level. The first is tighter connection between business and education sides of the house. What is the feedback loop so that folks who are developing curricula, developing programs, know that they are helping adult learners and participants really prepare for jobs that actually exist in their local communities? Many community colleges have been doing this on an individual basis for a long time, making connections with those local employers, with those local industry sector partnerships, but this is really amping up at the federal level. How can we tell that the kind of education and training programs that people are participating in are really preparing them for jobs that actually exist? Our former labor secretary used to say, "We don't just want to train and pray." Right? We don't want to train people for a job and then pray they get the job. We really want there to be some confidence that the job actually exists in their communities. The second trend we see is around data. Community colleges gather a wealth of data. They are subject to a wide range of privacy safeguards to ensure that that data is collected in a responsible way. But something that both state and federal policymakers have been increasingly curious about is: How do we know what happens to folks after they go through a degree program, or get a certificate, or get a short-term occupational credential? There has been work at the state and federal level to say: Let's fund these state longitudinal data systems, so that with appropriate privacy safeguards in place, we can track and see what happens when somebody graduates from a K-12 system, enters into a community college or other higher education system, and then ultimately enters into the workforce. What can we learn about the earnings that people have, about how long it takes them to find a job, or how long they stay unemployed? So, that's just an increasing trend both at the federal level and the state level, and I think it's only going to get more intense. The third trend is: How do we provide appropriate supportive services to people to allow them to be retained and to persist in their educational goals? We know that for a lot of folks on the ground, they are parenting, they have caregiving responsibilities, [and] they are holding down jobs. How do we provide, whether it is childcare assistance, transportation assistance, other supportive services, or navigator positions as some people call them, to really make sure that adults get the support they need so they can persist in their education and complete their education? That's been the third trend that we see really coming up over and over again at both the state and the federal level.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: Finally, what do you see community colleges advocating for in terms of policy and trying to make sure that policymakers are paying attention to?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: I see community colleges as having a couple of really unique roles to play in the policy conversation. The first and most straightforward of course is that community colleges are on the ground doing the work. I think that just cannot be overemphasized. You have policymakers, who often have the best of intentions but may not have come out of the world of community colleges, or the world of education and workforce, so hearing directly from folks on the ground is critically important in saying: This works well, this needs to be tweaked, [and] this we have some concerns about. [This] is really important in helping those policy proposals get improved so that they can be as good as they

possibly are. The second thing is that community colleges often identify trends earlier than policymakers. Again, community colleges knew probably ten years ago that the “traditional college student” was no longer the “traditional student.” That is, some people say we are in a “post-traditional student phase,” that most community college students, at this point, are adults, many have kids, [and] many are juggling paid work along with their classes. So this fantasy that everybody is an 18-24 year old who is living on campus and supported by their parents is just absolutely a fantasy. Community colleges have been on the ground and they’ve seen this happening. So recommendations around things like supportive services and more flexible financial aid, those are coming straight out of community college expertise on these issues. To say: Hey policymakers, we’re in a new world here. It’s not 1950; it’s not 1970; it’s not 1990; it’s 2017, and these are the issues that are confronting the adults that we are working with, and these are the policies interventions that we think can help those adults to succeed. So that’s a really interesting and important thing. Then the last area where I think community colleges really have a lot to offer is curiosity. Community colleges are question askers. They ask questions of their own data through their institutional research arms. They ask questions about sort of iterating their own curricula and say: Okay how did that work last semester [and] how am I going to change it this semester? Being curious and asking those questions, and having that sort of lens that says: How do we improve? What’s the next step? That’s what leads you to your next policy advocacy goal. Because you don’t know what you want to advocate for until you understand what works well in your current system and what needs to change. I really see community colleges as being that fount of creativity and questions that say: Alright, we’re here now, but where could we be in the future if we asked a few more questions, if we got a little more creative, if we were a little more innovative in thinking about the people we serve and where we’re trying to help them get, where we are working with individuals in our programs and in our classrooms to achieve their educational and vocational goals?

Dr. Anjalé Welton: Can you talk a little bit more about some of the resource and support discussions related to your line of work in supporting immigrants?

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: Sure. National Skills Coalition has specific policy recommendations around federal immigration policy that say that we think it is important that middle-skills pathways be included. For example, if the “Dream Act” moves forward, [or] if comprehensive immigration reform moves forward, we think it’s important to think not just about the legal status question, which a lot of people have thought very hard about for a long time, but: What happens after you get status or a green card? What do skill-building opportunities look like in English language and workforce? That’s at the federal level, but there’s also another set of considerations, and here’s where our partners in the field become important. There are three organizations that are working on issues around supporting immigrant adult learners and immigrant community college students in different respects, so I would just point your listeners to those three organizations to learn more. The first is the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education. They have published a range of materials for community colleges, specifically both about model programs and efforts in different states, but also about things that educators and faculty can do to support immigrant students. The second resource is Educators for Fair Consideration. They are focused on specifically supporting young immigrant dreamers or DACA recipients, individuals who have deferred action for childhood arrivals status. The third organization is called Global Talent Ridge. They have published a really interesting guide for community colleges on supporting immigrant students, and they are particularly focused on immigrants who actually have some credentials from their home country but might be working in a low-wage job in the U.S. and trying to return to community college.

Those three organizations are particularly important at this moment in time, I think, because in some cases we're not at the stage of policy development or policy recommendation. It's really at the level of practitioner questions of: What can we do on campuses now, and how can we support the educational and vocational ambitions of immigrant learners, in what is clearly a very tumultuous and for some people a very frightening time in terms of the policy roller coaster that we are on? The three organizations that I mentioned are really excellent free resources available to community college educators to help build capacity and provide resources to support immigrant students at this time.

Dr. Anjalé Welton: Thank you so much!

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock: Great. Thank you very much!

For more information about policy trends and resources that support adult learners, we recommend that you read the [National Skills Coalition's](#) integrated education and training 50-states scan, integrated education and training policy toolkit, and adult education and middle-skills jobs fact sheet. The National Skills Coalition has also produced seven fact sheets on federal policy topics such as Perkins, WIOA, and TANF. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrl.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occrl. Tune in next month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL talks with Dr. Gina Garcia, an assistant professor in the Department of Administrative and Policy Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, about the retention, success, and identity development of Latina/Latino college students and the role of Hispanic-serving institutions. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.