How the EWD Program Aims to Meet Workforce Needs

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The Economic and Workforce Development Program (EWD) aims to support California's economy by aligning community college educational programs with workforce development needs. The program connects employers and community college educators through a network of workforce training resources and partnerships called "Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy" (Doing What Matters).[1] Doing What Matters is overseen by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), in conjunction with other career technical education (CTE) programs.

After the California State Legislature reauthorized EWD in 2012, the CCCCO created a new structure for the program based on seven geographic regions. Each region selected five rapid-growth, high-demand industry/business sectors, and EWD services in each region were targeted to those sectors. This brief outlines perceived strengths and weaknesses of this restructured program and offers recommendations for improvement. The information is drawn from an evaluation of the EWD program, Aiming to Meet Workforce Needs: An Evaluation of the Economic and Workforce Development Program.

The following positions and organizations provide services through the EWD program:
- Sector navigators (SNs) who operate as statewide experts in their industry sectors;
- Deputy sector navigators (DSNs) who support a region's needs in a particular industry sector;
- Industry-driven regional collaboratives (IDRCs) that support short-term workforce projects within selected regions;
- Centers of Excellence for Labor Market Research that provide analyses of the state and regional economy and workforce needs for SNs, DSNs, and IDRCs; and
- LaunchBoard, a data system that tracks the progression and outcomes of CTE students.

Evaluation Used Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

EdInsights conducted the evaluation of EWD from July to December 2015. Staff analyzed quantitative data and grantee accountability reports provided by the CCCCO, conducted 46 interviews with EWD service and technical assistance providers, and administered surveys to 110 service providers, CTE deans, regional consortia chairs, and employers. Due to data limitations, findings are based on perceptions of program effectiveness. For more information, see Aiming to Meet Workforce Needs.

EWD's structure, roles, and outcomes viewed favorably

The CCCCO linked a range of funding sources in support of economic and workforce development, and this was perceived as contributing to program effectiveness. Based on interviews and surveys, there were six main perceived program strengths.

The new regional structure helped the program respond to employers' changing needs.
By responding to workforce trends, EWD improved employer engagement with community colleges.

The Doing What Matters framework facilitated strategic planning and interaction. The Doing What Matters framework helped SNs and DSNs engage with community colleges and industry to prepare students to enter and stay in the job market.

EWD supported regional partnerships focused on economic and workforce development.
The partnerships included such entities as K–12 schools, businesses, community colleges, and workforce organizations.

The focus on high-growth sectors was beneficial. EWD positioned itself on the leading edge of changing labor markets.

The program supported career pathways in K–12 schools. EWD provided information and professional development for teachers, counselors, and principals to support pathways from K–12 schools to higher education and to the workplace.

"Continuous improvement" was more than a buzz phrase. EWD created an environment that supported efforts to fine-tune and improve program services.

Perceptions were Positive about EWD's Effects

- Nearly all (97%) DSNs surveyed said that EWD was meeting its goals either "very well" (47%) or "somewhat well" (50%).

- The majority (61%) of CTE deans surveyed reported that the program was either "very effective" (17%) or "somewhat effective" (44%) in fulfilling its mission.

- All the regional consortia chairs surveyed said that the program was either "very effective" (29%) or "somewhat effective" (71%) in fulfilling its mission.

- All the employers surveyed who knew of EWD said that it was meeting its goals "somewhat well."

EWD's challenges typical of a newly restructured program

While interviewees and survey respondents were generally positive about EWD's design and ability to connect businesses with community colleges, they identified the following program challenges. Many of these challenges are typical of a newly restructured program, and the CCCCO is still defining new roles and processes.

Lack of awareness about EWD limited employer engagement. The lack of program awareness—among employers, in particular, but by college faculty and administrators, too—made promoting and delivering EWD services more difficult and time-consuming, leading to less engagement and coordination with employers.

Lack of clarity on program roles created some confusion. DSNs were responsible for regions, but were located on campuses. As a result, DSNs' priorities in serving the needs of both their host campus and region sometimes caused confusion, as did their lines of accountability to their host campus, SN and the CCCCO.

Complicated funding and grant mechanisms created barriers. EWD funds were distributed by the host college and overseen by the CCCCO, which in some cases created duplicative or inconsistent approval, reporting, or funding processes.

Data limitations prevented self-evaluation and evidence-based improvement. EWD prioritized evidence-based improvement, but LaunchBoard's flaws prevented the program from more effectively quantifying its impacts.

The structure and culture of community colleges created barriers. Interviewees said that many community colleges responded to requests and made changes slowly, had faculty who were unwilling or unable to revise their courses to align with the needs of regional economies, operated without accountability, and were hampered by other bureaucratic processes.

The regional structure was useful, but geographic boundaries were sometimes problematic. Some regions were difficult to serve because they were very large or included many community colleges. Also, some boundaries conflicted with those of K–12 school districts, making it unclear how to make school connections.

The regions' processes for selecting sectors were problematic. Interviewees reported that employers were not consistently at the table, and that some regions did not use criteria or data in selecting sectors. They said this sometimes led to the selection of sectors that did not have the greatest workforce needs or well-paying jobs.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Based on the perceptions of interviewees and survey respondents, EdInsights offers the following recommendations for the CCCCO and legislature to improve EWD. Many of these recommendations overlap with those of the CCC Board of Governors' (BOG) Task Force on Workforce, Job Creation and a Strong Economy.[2] The CCCCO has already begun acting on the task force recommendations.

Build awareness of EWD, particularly for employers and community colleges. The CCCCO needs to lead the effort to build greater awareness of EWD.

Clarify program roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority. In doing this, the CCCCO needs to clarify the relationship between DSNs and their host colleges. The use of host colleges to distribute funds for regional and statewide work posed some conflicts of interest. We suggest that the CCCCO and the legislature explore alternate structures, such as a joint powers authority.

Refine funding and grant management to improve program efficiency. The legislature could provide EWD with multi-year funding to encourage long-term planning and projects. The CCCCO could develop a single web portal for all grants managed by the CCCCO. Such a portal could reduce time spent by grant recipients[3] and assist the CCCCO in managing grants.

Improve use of data and metrics. The CCCCO should hone in on fewer key metrics aligned with EWD's mission. LaunchBoard should be taken offline by the CCCCO until it is fully functional. Once it is back online, potential users need training and clarity as to data entry responsibilities and data definitions. Centers of Excellence could further enable SNs' and DSNs' data use by providing more training on the use of labor market data.

Increase community colleges' ability to respond quickly to employer needs. The CCCCO could examine and streamline its role in curriculum and program review and assist campuses and regions in streamlining their curriculum review and approval processes.

Refine the regional focus to encourage greater collaboration. The CCCCO should reconsider the divisions and subdivisions of its large regions and pursue additional funding, if needed, to support more DSNs.

Formalize a more transparent and data-driven process for selecting industry sectors. The CCCCO should provide stronger guidelines and greater support—and should consider developing requirements—for how regions identify priority and emergent sectors.

Endnotes

1   Doing What Matters is the CCCCO's overarching strategy to improve workforce skills. For more information, see http://doingwhatmatters.cccco.edu/Overview/DWMFramework.aspx.

2   For the CCC Board of Governors' Task Force on Workforce, Job Creation and a Strong Economy, see http://doingwhatmatters.cccco.edu/StrongWorkforce/ReportRecommendations.aspx.

3   EWD grant recipients are sector navigators, deputy sector navigators, industry-driven regional collaboratives, Centers of Excellence, and technical assistance providers. However, such a portal should include grant recipients for all grants managed by the CCCCO.