

6

This chapter describes how the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform and the 1998 Workforce Investment Acts affected community colleges' willingness and capacity to provide access to postsecondary education and training for Latinos and other low-income populations.

Work-First Federal Policies: Eroding Access to Community Colleges for Latinos and Low-Income Populations

Kathleen M. Shaw, Sara Goldrick-Rab

College access for America's most disadvantaged adults is being eroded by two major federal social policies. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (more commonly referred to as welfare reform) and the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) have replaced previous human capital federal policies that emphasized the importance of building skills and education so that all adults might become economically self-sufficient. Instead, welfare reform and WIA emphasize a work-first philosophy in which rapid job placement is the primary strategy to help the poor achieve stable employment and move out of poverty.

Latinos are more likely than whites or Asians to live in poverty and endure lower levels of education (Chapa and De La Rosa, 2004). In many ways, Latinos stand to benefit most from college access. Thus, by moving federal policy toward rapid employment and away from the forms of education and training that lead to higher-paying, more stable jobs, welfare reform and WIA have had direct and important consequences on the social and economic well-being of Latinos and other low-income populations.

In addition to erecting barriers to individuals' pursuit of postsecondary education, welfare reform and WIA also make it difficult for community colleges to continue serving economically disadvantaged students. This chapter examines the ways in which welfare reform and WIA have decreased the

community college's willingness and capacity to provide access to postsecondary education and training for Latinos and other low-income populations. After briefly discussing statistics on poverty, education, and the Latino population, this chapter outlines the establishment and expansion of the federal work-first philosophy and then illustrates how welfare reform has diminished access to postsecondary education for low-income Latinos.

Poverty, Education, and the Latino Population

Nearly 25 percent of persons living in poverty in the United States are Latino. Nearly half (47 percent) of all Latinos in poverty have not obtained a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma, and only 9 percent have earned a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Latinos attending postsecondary institutions comprise a small proportion of the total college-going population (8.7 percent) and are more likely to enter higher education through a community college than a four-year institution (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Welfare reform and WIA exacerbate these barriers by decreasing the community college's willingness and capacity to provide anything more than short-term training that does not lead to an academic degree. Thus, the work-first philosophy driving both welfare reform and WIA exacts a particularly high price for the low-income Latino population, effectively blocking them from the education and training that have proven to be one of the surest routes to economic stability.

Establishing and Expanding the Influence of a Work-First Philosophy

As we argue in more detail in other work (see, for example, Goldrick-Rab and Shaw, 2005; Shaw and Rab, 2003), the work-first philosophy is the product of a gradual movement away from human capital notions that frame education and training as an integral and necessary part of the process of helping individuals become active participants in the nation's economic and social structure. This shift in philosophy is reflected in a range of barriers to individual college attendance, as well as in new policies and procedures that make it difficult for community colleges to continue to address the needs of low-income students. In the following sections, we trace the effect of these policies on community colleges by briefly describing the emergence of the work-first philosophy through welfare reform and later in the WIA.

Welfare Reform. The development and implementation of the 1996 welfare reform legislation was based on the assumption that "rapid attachment to the workforce" is the surest route to economic self-sufficiency for the poor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). As a result, the law requires that a significant portion of welfare recipients work

twenty hours a week or more. Welfare is a result of the devolution movement, which decreased federal control over how states implement federal policies. The 1996 act stipulated that federal welfare dollars are to be delivered to states in the form of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grants, and each state will have significant autonomy in distributing this money as long as they meet federal guidelines, reporting requirements, and outcome targets. For example, states must meet the work requirements set by the federal government, but they have some leeway in what gets defined as work. According to the federal rules, vocational educational training can count toward work requirements. Therefore, the community college can play an important role in helping welfare recipients satisfy federal rules for receiving cash assistance, but this is possible only in states that allow vocational or other types of postsecondary education to count as work, and states vary widely in whether and how they support or promote postsecondary access for low-income adults and welfare recipients. As well, welfare recipients are required to begin working within twenty-four months of receiving cash assistance (Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001). As a result of these conditions, community colleges are often unable to provide welfare recipients with any education at all, and what they can provide is unlikely to lead to social and economic stability and mobility, since community colleges are limited to providing welfare recipients—many of them Latino—with short-term vocational training that does not lead to a degree.

Workforce Investment Act. Following on the heels of welfare reform, WIA can be seen as its philosophical cousin. WIA focuses on placing individuals in employment without, if at all possible, sending them to a community college or other institution for additional training and education. This goal is accomplished with a three-tiered, hierarchical system of service delivery.

WIA clients become eligible for job training only if they are still unemployed after completing two superficial levels of job-search training and workshops (for example, résumé preparation, job counseling, or computer job searches). As a result, the majority of WIA clients never receive training. In addition, WIA's extensive and multilevel accountability system is significantly more comprehensive and onerous than the accountability systems present in its predecessor (the Job Training Partnership Act), and this dissuades institutions, including community colleges, from providing educational and training services to WIA clients.

Data Sources

This chapter is drawn from a larger study that examined how welfare reform and the WIA have affected college access for the poor and how community colleges in particular have responded to these policies. This project was supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the

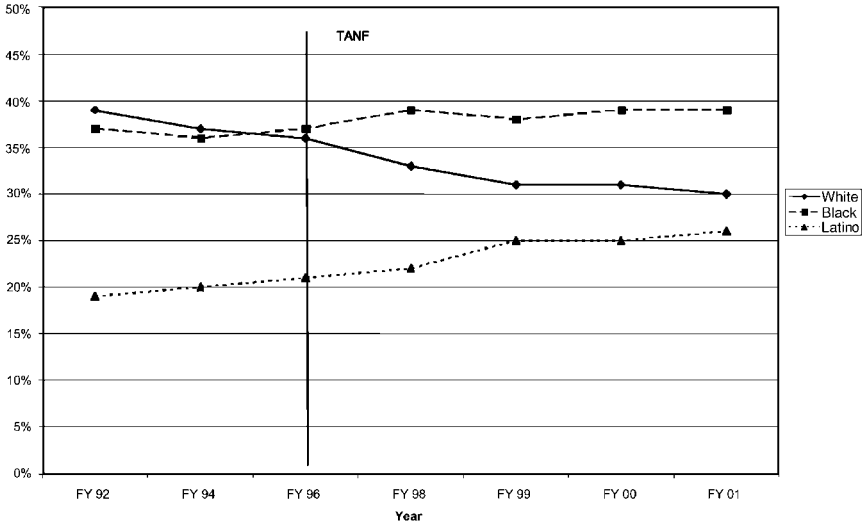
Annie E. Casey Foundation. As part of the larger study, we examined data from six states that varied significantly in terms of their general approaches to welfare reform and the Workforce Investment Act: Washington, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. All data describing the number of adults receiving training prior to the enactment of WIA are drawn from the 1997 Standardized Program Information Reports for the Job Training Partnership Act, the federal workforce training policy that preceded WIA. Post-WIA data are drawn from 2001 state WIA reports. As part of the larger study, we also conducted over one hundred interviews with faculty, administrators, and students in sixteen community colleges located in the six states and interviewed twelve welfare caseworkers. Although these interviews are not discussed in detail in this chapter, they inform many of our conclusions.

Access to Postsecondary Education Under Welfare Reform

Five years after welfare reform was passed, there was a 56 percent decrease in the number of adults receiving cash assistance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). To provide a sense of the magnitude of this change, in the six states that we studied alone, more than a half-million people were dropped from the welfare caseload during this time period. As the overall number of welfare recipients has declined dramatically, our study indicates that the composition of the welfare caseload has also shifted. As Figure 6.1 shows, between 1992 and 2001, the proportion of welfare recipients who were Latino increased from 19 to 26 percent, while the proportion of welfare recipients who were white dropped from 39 to 30 percent. The proportion of African Americans remained essentially unchanged during this period (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). These changes may be due to a number of factors, including overall growth in the Latino population in the United States and the likelihood that those with higher levels of education are more likely to exit the welfare system and succeed in the job market under work-first policies than those with little formal education (Peterson, Song, and Jones-DeWeever, 2002). The fact that a disproportionately large number of Latinos have received inadequate formal education also plays a role in their growing presence on the welfare rolls.

According to the 2000 Current Population Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), Latino welfare recipients are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than other groups of recipients (see Figure 6.2). In addition, the disparity in enrollment between recipients and nonrecipients among Latinos is quite large (3 percent of Latino welfare recipients enroll in postsecondary institutions, compared to 30 percent of Latino nonrecipients). Although this disparity is also evident among white recipients and nonrecipients (11 percent and 49 percent, respectively), it is much smaller for African Americans

Figure 6.1. Trends in the Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Welfare Family Caseload Before and After TANF

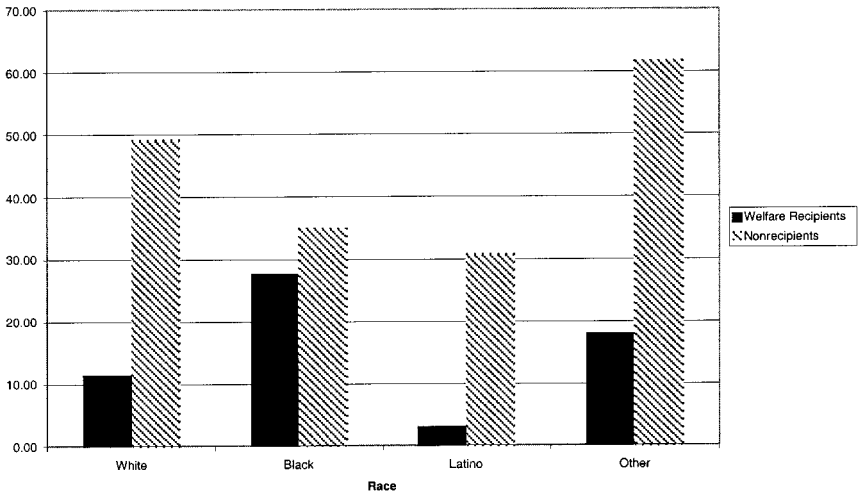


(28 percent, compared to 34 percent). These descriptive statistics suggest that the negative effect of welfare receipt on postsecondary enrollment may be stronger for Latinos and whites than for African Americans. However, this hypothesis cannot be tested with a multivariate analysis due to small sample sizes.

Variations Across States in Latino Access to Training

To what extent do states vary in providing access to postsecondary training for Latinos? The data available to address this question are limited because states are not required to provide breakdowns of service delivery by race in their annual reports. However, Stevens’s recent analysis (2003) of WIA Standardized Record Data allows us to examine this question in three of the six states we studied: Florida, Illinois, and Washington. In Florida, where the majority of Latinos are Cuban, the proportion of Latino adult WIA clients who receive training as part of their welfare package is relatively small when compared with other racial and ethnic groups. On average, 47 percent of WIA clients in Florida obtain training. However, as can be seen in Figure 6.3, only 27 percent of Latino WIA clients obtain training compared to 65 percent of white WIA clients. In fact, Latinos have the lowest rate of training among any ethnic or racial group in the state. The only comparable demographic group consists of WIA clients whose first language is

Figure 6.2. Percentage of Female High School Graduates, Ages Sixteen to Twenty-Four, Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Race and Welfare Receipt



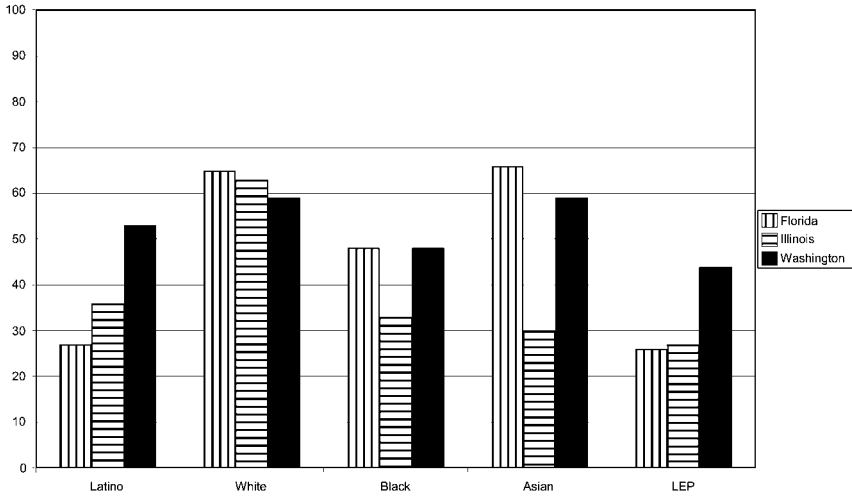
not English; only 26 percent of this population receives training as part of their welfare package.

The situation in Illinois is quite similar. Although an average of 47 percent of all Illinois WIA clients receive some form of training as part of their welfare package and 65 percent of whites receive training, only 36 percent of Latinos do so (see Figure 6.3). Similarly, only 27 percent of recipients whose first language is not English access postsecondary training under WIA in Illinois.

As Figure 6.3 illustrates, the pattern is somewhat different in the state of Washington. In contrast to Florida and Illinois, the majority of Latino adults who receive WIA assistance in Washington receive training (53 percent), albeit at lower rates than either whites (59 percent) or Asians (59 percent). In fact, the majority of every racial and ethnic group receives WIA assistance (except African Americans, whose training rate hovers at 48 percent). This is true despite the fact that Washington's WIA clientele is overwhelmingly white (74 percent); Latinos comprise only 8 percent of the population. However, adults with limited English proficiency are still less likely than any other group to obtain training in this state (44 percent).

Finally, the overall degree of access to training since WIA has dropped in all three states, although the size of the decrease varies. While access is relatively low in Florida and Illinois, the state of Washington has maintained a relatively high level of training for its WIA clients. In addition, access to training for nonwhite WIA clients is lower than that for white

Figure 6.3. Percentage of WIA Clients in Training by Race or Ethnicity and Limited English Proficiency in Three States



clients, often markedly so. And across all three states, individuals whose first language is not English access training at rates that are far below those of the general WIA population.

Barriers to Community College Participation in WIA and Welfare Reform

When taken together, welfare reform and WIA remove important incentives for community colleges to continue to serve our most economically disadvantaged populations. While space does not afford us the opportunity to fully describe this phenomenon, we provide several examples of the ways in which these policies have negatively affected the community college’s ability and willingness to participate as an active partner in educating and training welfare and WIA clients.

Welfare Reform Challenges the Community College’s Mission. The work-first emphasis of welfare reform directly challenges the community college’s traditional purpose: to serve the wider community by providing education and training for all individuals regardless of race or income. Moreover, when training is allowed under welfare reform, time limits and other restrictions dictate that most education will come in the form of short-term, non-degree-granting programs that may help to prepare recipients for low-wage employment but do not substantially increase their chances for long-term economic stability and mobility.

Massachusetts illustrates this mission conflict. Until 2004, Massachusetts did not allow welfare recipients to count any form of postsecondary education toward their work requirements (they are now allowed to count twelve months of vocationally oriented education). However, the state exempts so many individuals from this restriction that, in effect, close to 75 percent of welfare recipients in the state are eligible to obtain some form of postsecondary education for up to four years.

In addition, Massachusetts developed a community college–based training program—the Community College Voucher Program—that is designed to deliver “intensive, high caliber, short-term academic skills training and employment services [so that] recipients can access employment opportunities that enable them to transition from welfare to successful employment” (Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, 2003). On its face, this policy would seem to be congruent with at least a portion of the community college mission. However, as of 2001, very few of the state’s community colleges had chosen to participate in the Community College Voucher Program. Through our interviews with an array of faculty and administrators at four Massachusetts community colleges, we learned that many of these colleges chose not to participate because there were too many job placement outcomes attached to state funding for the program. These outcome measures were seen by many to conflict with the educational mission of the colleges. As one administrator stated, “We are a college, not an employment agency.” Many administrators thought that being held accountable for what happens to students after they leave the institution was unreasonable.

In contrast, community colleges in the state of Washington were willing to preserve access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients by working closely with the state’s human services agency to develop shorter-term training and workforce development programs. Washington community colleges were initially reluctant to work with the state because of its emphasis on job training, which contradicted the academic mission of many of Washington’s community colleges. Yet in the end, pragmatism won over ideology, and Washington’s community colleges decided to cooperate with the state in order to retain some access to college for welfare recipients by providing them with short-term training

WIA Accountability Measures Challenge Community Colleges. In many instances, community colleges are generally reluctant to serve as WIA training providers, often because of the program’s performance measures (Shaw and Rab, 2003). “Customer satisfaction” is one of WIA’s core elements, and training providers are required to deliver services that are satisfactory to both the state and individual clients. Community colleges (like their four-year counterparts) have traditionally defined their role as providing a combination of education and services to enable students to achieve their educational goals. However, WIA holds training providers responsible

for clients' long-term employment and earnings; to many, these requirements conflict with the community college's educational mission and identity. As well, many community colleges consider WIA reporting requirements to be such a burden that they reduce or end their participation in WIA altogether. Colleges that do participate tend to only offer programs that are likely to produce the best outcome measures, often short-term programs that lead to immediate employment.

Data from our interviews with community college administrators suggest that if community colleges are asked to choose between enrolling the few students who actually receive WIA assistance and enrolling a larger number of students in a wide array of programs, they will choose the latter. Many colleges make this decision in part because WIA provides little additional money to colleges yet imposes extra work and reporting requirements.

Conclusion

The work-first philosophy embodied by welfare reform and WIA has resulted in a significant shift away from providing access to education and training for our most economically disadvantaged populations. It has become ever more difficult for community colleges—the institutions best suited to provide education and training to those with no other options for social mobility, as well as the institutions most likely to enroll Latino students—to maintain their commitment to open access, as welfare recipients generally cost more to educate and are less likely to succeed than their more privileged peers.

The implications of our analyses are clear: postsecondary education is no longer an option available to most individuals receiving welfare or WIA services. Although the details vary across states, emerging trends do not bode well for Latinos and other low-income populations who wish to avail themselves of the benefits of postsecondary education. These implications are important to keep in mind as both welfare reform and WIA move toward reauthorization in the near future.

Work-first is a simple idea. In fact, its strength lies in its simplicity: poverty can be alleviated by moving the poor off welfare and into a job as quickly as possible. However, instead of treating education and training as integral components in the process of obtaining living-wage employment, work-first policies decouple education and work, even though there is increasing evidence that they must be linked (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). In doing so, the work-first ideology effectively ignores the critical role that high-quality education and training play in helping our fellow Americans, especially the most vulnerable populations, achieve self-sufficiency. By eroding the community college's willingness and ability to provide access to high-quality postsecondary education and training for economically and socially disadvantaged populations, work-first policies and practices have

further weakened this country's already fraying social safety net, effectively ensuring that Latinos and other low-income adults will be sorted into low-paying jobs with little chance for advancement.

References

- Chapa, J., and De La Rosa, B. "Latino Population Growth, Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics, and Implications for Educational Attainment." *Education and Urban Society*, 2004, 36(2), 130–149.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., and Shaw, K. "Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Impact of Work-First Reforms on Access to Postsecondary Education." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 2005, 27(4), 291–307.
- Golonka, S., and Matus-Grossman, L. *Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2001. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/101/execsum.html>. Accessed Nov. 15, 2005.
- Grubb, W. N., and Lazerson, M. *The Education Gospel*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. *Report on "Education That Works."* Boston: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, 2003.
- Peterson, J., Song, X., and Jones-DeWeever, A. "Life After Welfare Reform: Low-Income Single Parent Families, Pre- and Post-TANF." Washington, D.C.: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2002.
- Shaw, K., and Rab, S. "Market Rhetoric Versus Reality in Policy and Practice: The Workforce Investment Act and Access to Community College Education and Training." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2003, 586, 172–193.
- Stevens, D. "WIA One-Stop Client Flow Demographics and Status." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy and Research, Employment, and Training Administration, 2003.
- U.S. Census Bureau. *Current Population Survey, 2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.
- U.S. Census Bureau. *Current Population Survey, March 2002*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) "Fall Enrollment" Surveys*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Second Annual Report to Congress on TANF*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1999.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Trends in AFDC/TANF Recipient Characteristics: FY 1992-FY 2001*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/annualreport5/exhibit2.htm>. Accessed Nov. 15, 2005.

KATHLEEN M. SHAW is associate professor of urban education and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Temple University.

SARA GOLDRICK-RAB is assistant professor of educational policy studies and sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.