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Researcher to study impact of community colleges

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An Iowa State University researcher will use a \$270,000 grant from the Iowa Department of Education to determine the economic impact of the state's community colleges.

Frankie Santos Laanan, an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies, will examine the links between education and economic development.

Laanan's first project will look at what students earn after attending community colleges as a measure of economic growth from primarily vocational-education programs, while a second project will be a model for providing adult educational opportunities. That basically involves continuing education offered through Iowa's 15 community colleges, many of them targeting recent immigrants and unemployed citizens.

Both studies will stress the impact of education on better jobs and financial prosperity.

The study is good news for Iowa Western Community College President Dan Kinney, who said the data formed should help Iowa's community colleges, especially as federal legislators keepasking for additional information.

"In its limited scope the research should be valuable," Kinney said.

Laanan said he's aware of the important role Iowa's community colleges play in educating a diverse population. One goal of the study is to see how the benefits of adult literacy programs can be shared with young children.

"Parents can have a significant impact on their children's learning, especially those who are non-English speakers," Laanan said.

Child-care centers at community colleges will help link those efforts.

"In order for the family literacy program to come to fruition, it's going to have to involve dependents," he said.

Laanan also plans to study the post-college earnings of students who complete or leave vocational and associate's programs. Those likely will be one and three years after leaving the community college, he said.

Right now it's easy to determine if people are employed, but researchers hope to determine if they're employed in their field of training, he said.

"If they pursue vocational training in a nursing field, are they actually working in that field?" Laanan asked.

Laanan will work with Iowa Workforce Development and the Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Preparation in the Iowa Department of Education.

It's known that people who graduate with four-year degrees often work outside their field of training, but conventional wisdom has it that they are making more money than high school graduates, he said. Unemployment rates also tend to decrease as education levels increase.

"It's the community college impact that legislators are still trying to understand," Laanan said.

High school diplomas are an achievement, but community colleges provide a new set of credentials. Laanan wants to find out what that training is worth.

The research team will match students' educational data with unemployment insurance wage records.

As part of the project, community college faculty who work with career development and technical education will be taught how to use the earnings data and labor market information to improve programming and increase student success.

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"If students just take a handful of courses, what does that mean? Does it actually get them jobs?" he asked. Another element will be to find if people remain in their communities after they receive the training.

The research will be used to report student success and respond to federal accountability requirements, as well as to alert students to the employment and economic benefits of a community college education.

Laanan estimated it will take at least six months to iron out the research details. He also will visit faculty and talk about labor market information.

Kinney said he'd like to see the research go further and track what happens with community college students who go on to earn bachelor's degrees.



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