A Study of Workforce Training Challenges Faced by a US Community College and a Comparable Chinese Institution

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative comparative case study examines the workforce training programs offered in a US community college and the vocational and technical programs offered in a comparable Chinese postsecondary institution. The study sought to identify transferable qualities and characteristics that could contribute to improving the workforce training programs in both countries. Globalization makes international collaboration between institutions and programs ever more important, particularly considering the many shared problems and potential for shared solutions. The study’s findings resulted in four primary recommendations that could be adopted by both the US and Chinese case institutions: (a) create timely new programs and courses, (b) seek new funding sources and alternatives for reducing operational costs, (c) recruit qualified full-time or part-time faculty who have industry experience, and (d) add a critical thinking component in all courses. Moreover, recommendations for each of the institutions were developed.

Keywords: Career and Technical Education, China Postsecondary Education, Community Colleges, Comparative Education, Globalization, International Study, Vocational Education, Workforce Training

INTRODUCTION
This qualitative study involved two cases, a US community college and a comparable Chinese institution selected on the basis of criteria equivalences. Contrasts between the two cases were based on systemic factors including philosophical, cultural, economic, political, and functional differences. The researchers conducted fieldwork at the institutions and data were primarily gathered from interviews with administrators and faculty. Four main objectives of the research were to (a) understand the concepts behind workforce training programs in a US community college and a Chinese institution; (b) identify and explain the workforce training model employed at each institution; (c) describe and analyze the similarities and differences of the workforce training programs;
and (d) explore the possibility of adopting, or adapting positive characteristics from each of the workforce training programs to benefit the postsecondary education systems in both countries.

Although the study was guided by five research questions, this article specifically focuses on the findings of the fifth culminating question: What similarities and differences exist between the workforce training programs of a US community college and comparable Chinese institution? The other four questions were used to conduct the individual case studies: how are the workforce training programs organized and operated; what administrative decision-making processes are used when establishing a new workforce training program; how does each institution plan for a workforce training program in relation to financial support, teacher preparation, and student services; and what strengths and challenges do the workforce programs exhibit?

In addition to providing insights into workforce training programs in the US and China, the research resulted in strategies and suggestions to help meet the challenges of educating a high quality workforce for a globalizing economy, which requires community colleges and other postsecondary vocational institutions to educate an increasingly skilled and globally competent workforce.

**Review of Related Literature**

The US community colleges have been a major contributor in training the workforce to meet local community needs for over a century. Since the 1980s, workforce training in US community colleges has grown so rapidly, particularly in health, office automation, and technology programs, that the US is perceived to hold an advantage in workforce training program development when compared with most other countries (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Keating, Medrich, Volkoff, and Perry (2002) reported that recent US vocational education reforms have emphasized greater academic preparation and further education and training. Moreover, Smith (2007) argues that the US community college model, which focuses on career education in health care, law enforcement, business, and other fields, has a positive effect in other countries.

The US government recognizes the importance of community college workforce training programs, as shown in a Government Accounting Office (GAO, 2008) report:

“Community colleges are providers of education and training for those seeking basic skills for entry into the workforce as well as those seeking to acquire new skills or upgrade existing ones to obtain a different job or retain current employment.” (p. 1)

Also, US President Barack Obama (2011) has announced that industry partnerships with community colleges will lead an initiative called Skills for America’s Future, which aims to help workers gain new skills to make America more competitive in the global economy and to help employers find the trained workforce they need to compete internationally.

China has been considered one of the largest manufacturers and labor markets in the world for the last few decades, producing a massive quantity of products and goods for the world economy (Yu, 2004). To sustain its booming economy and compete with the world, China must continue to cultivate a large number of skilled and knowledgeable workers who receive internationalized higher education (CICTE, 2009; Jie, 2007). Entering the new century, China has been making comprehensive reforms, integrating vocational education with economic and societal development, and using advanced teaching methods and technology (Li, 2003; Yang & Zhang, 2003; Shi, 2001). The new market economy has created both a critical demand for career development of the masses and increased openings for career professionals (Zhang, Hu, & Pope, 2002).

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