

## COMMENTARY

# Lessons learned

## Adult ed, community college roles overlap

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In 2002, Mahamed Yusuf arrived in the United States as a refugee from Somalia. He found a full-time job organizing supplies at a hospital while completing his high school diploma at Portland Adult Education. After graduating and taking on a second job as a medical interpreter, he persisted with classes at PAE to prepare for community college. He heads to Southern Maine Community College in the fall.

Yusuf epitomizes what adult basic education does best. It provides the most motivated and hardest working adults with the academic skills they need to move into higher education and better jobs. In a decrepit former elementary school, Portland Adult Education teaches the alphabet through algebra. This year 1,700 adults learned English, acquired diplomas or prepared for college at PAE. Nearly 250 students earned their high school credentials in 2010; that's half the number that

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graduated from all three of Portland's high schools.

We serve all these students at a low cost. PAE's expenditures represent only 1% of the total budget for Portland public schools. All adult education funding in Maine totaled just over \$22 million in 2009. The College Transitions Program, one of 22 in the state that help adults get ready for college by making the process free or affordable, has served nearly 4,500 students for considerably less than a million dollars annually.

In a tough economy, these costs may sound high, but Maine needs working-age students like Yusuf. Even if we solved the problems of our K-12 system, graduated all current students from high school and enrolled 100% of them in college, we would still not have a highly educated work force.

Maine already has the highest median age in the nation; plus, the number of people under age 18 is projected to decline, even as the population over 64 grows. A 2009 report by the Maine Compact for Higher Education indicates that only 39% of Maine adults have a college degree and advocates generating 40,000 additional degree holders by 2020 to be competitive.

This means we also need Lynne Perry to get a degree. Perry grew up in Maine, completed high school and then spent years working on boats. She settled down to start a café. When the business foundered, she

decided to go to college to become a veterinary technician. She is 50, so high school was long ago. This year she's taken algebra, English and science courses at PAE to prepare for her future.

Unfortunately, Yusuf and Perry are too rare. In 2006, Maine had more than 35,000 adults between the ages of 25 and 49 without high school diplomas. This education deficit exists at a time when the Maine Department of Labor anticipates that by 2014, jobs requiring post-secondary degrees will increase at nearly twice the rate of those requiring less education.

Two years ago, Yusuf had his diploma and could have gone to SMCC. Why not choose a school with more prestige, better facilities and broader course offerings? Perry had the same option when she chose College Transitions. What they realized, but what most of us prefer to forget, is that many students — whether recent grads or old timers — are not ready to succeed in college.

Community colleges have made it easy for us to forget by developing non-credit courses to teach basic academic skills. These courses duplicate those offered by adult education. A 2004 survey indicated that 37% of students at community colleges in Maine take at least one remedial course. Only 31% of all Maine community college students complete degrees.

Remedial, non-credit courses at the college level are expensive. Average full-time tuition per year at a Maine community college is \$3,400. By contrast, the average annual enrollment cost for a Maine adult education program is \$193. Adult education is part time, explaining some of the difference, but at \$84 per credit hour, a single community college course costs more than \$250, whether it awards a credit or not.

The higher costs impact both students and taxpayers. Even without providing credit, remedial courses are eligible for financial aid. In 2009, SMCC awarded \$16.9 million in federal aid. While only some of those dollars support remediation, the relative expenditure is still striking. The 22 College Transitions programs in Maine cost approximately \$760,000.

Community colleges are the most affordable post-secondary schools for our students. We rejoice when Yusuf and Perry are prepared for them. We also value partnerships with community colleges, but true partnerships are tough when such an imbalance of funding exists. For Maine to educate enough adults to power its future economy, it must enhance adult education's capacity to teach secondary skills and encourage community colleges to focus on higher education. Ask Yusuf and Perry if it works. They studied the issue. ■