Redefining Short-Cycle Higher Education across Europe: The Challenges of Bologna

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A Special Issue from Community College Review crw.sagepub.com

The October 2010 special issue of the Community College Review focuses on European short-cycle higher education, which offers vocational and technical academic qualifications that are considered to be the equivalent of an U.S. associate degree. Beginning in 2003, short-cycle higher education qualifications were incorporated into the Bologna Process, a European-wide initiative aiming to make higher education across Europe more transparent and compatible. This has led to a dramatic transformation in short-cycle higher education. Whereas prior programs were separate from universities, now they are meant to become an integral part of bachelor’s programs. The overriding goal is to expand access to advanced studies and promote lifelong learning by offering professionally trained graduates of short-cycle higher education programs the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree.

This special issue discusses the transformation of short-cycle higher education across Europe and the challenges European countries face in their attempts to align their short-cycle higher education with the Bologna framework. Four country case studies from Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Bulgaria highlight emerging national approaches. The issue focuses on the role of short-cycle programs in increasing participation in higher education, the struggle of short-cycle programs for social and academic recognition, the central role of business in creating, maintaining and supporting short-cycle programs, the difficulties in bridging vocational and academic preparation, and the critical place of short-cycle programs in lifelong learning systems.

Many of the issues discussed in this publication are also highly relevant to U.S. community colleges. Just as in Europe, U.S. community colleges must meet the educational demands of an ever more rapidly changing world of work. The efforts across Europe to link vocational, adult and employer-sponsored education with student lifelong learning may shed valuable light on the challenges American community colleges face today.
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