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Community Colleges leading the way out of crisis

By Dr. Andrea Mayfield, Tom Downs, Dawn Erlandson
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Community colleges in Mississippi and nationwide have responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic, making contributions to enhance capabilities of emergency responders and health-care professionals. Two-year public colleges have the unique capability to re-skill the workforce as Mississippi and the nation prepare to return to productivity after the pandemic subsides.

Following the release of COVID-19 guidelines by state leaders, Mississippi community colleges took action to put safety first. The colleges transitioned face-to-face courses and workforce training classes to an online delivery format to ensure the learning and training process continued uninterrupted. To adhere to social distancing guidelines, the community colleges moved classes to an online platform, broke career and technical skills-based courses into multiple smaller groups of students to demonstrate skill-based competencies, closed dorms and cafeterias, and cancelled events to include fundraising activities. These changes resulted in significant additional costs incurred by the colleges.

On a statewide level, the Mississippi Community College Board has worked diligently to coordinate information about COVID-19 on behalf of the Mississippi's community colleges. The MCCB is zealously advocating for funding and assistance for these institutions to benefit their ongoing responses to the pandemic.

On a national level, the two principal national associations for community colleges – the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees – have made COVID-19 a top priority. They worked to secure critical funding to meet basic needs of at-risk students and to ensure the nation's community colleges have resources to continue teaching and learning as much as possible remotely while confronting the many impacts of COVID-19 on faculty, staff and students. They are providing guidance to help colleges safely provide critical in-person, experiential instruction that cannot be done at home for future welders and nurses, among others.

Community college graduates in Mississippi and across the country are today's essential workers – emergency medical technicians, truck drivers, law enforcement officers, respiratory therapists among many others. Community colleges have always welcomed students who are older, have families, attend part-time, and are in need of re-skilling. In this era of a global pandemic and high unemployment, they also offer traditional-aged college students the opportunity to earn college credits close to home at a very affordable price.

Prior to COVID-19, the U.S. Congress authorized new community college workforce programs. The following are among the sectors where community colleges are essential:

- Advanced manufacturing – Congress directed the Department of Defense to prioritize Manufacturing and Engineering Education Program funding for community colleges.
- Agribusiness – Congress prioritized Department of Agriculture appropriations for community college agribusiness programs.
- Automation and unmanned systems – Community colleges are establishing new programs in robotics, unmanned systems, and other emerging areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Recognizing these capabilities, Congress authorized a new Federal Aviation Administration program, “Community and Technical College Centers of Excellence in Small Unmanned Aircraft System Technology Training,” which was formally launched on April 30. Hinds Community College has been actively involved in this emerging program.
- Energy – Congress has prioritized appropriations for the Department of Energy to support community college energy-sector workforce training.
- Maritime – Community colleges train mariners as well as shoreside maritime workers for well-paying jobs moving commerce along the nation’s coasts and inland waterways. To elevate this role, Congress authorized a national community college workforce program, “Domestic Maritime Centers of Excellence,” under the U.S. Maritime Administration’s jurisdiction. Hinds Community College and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College are involved in this new program.
- Advanced Technological Education – The National Science Foundation’s ATE program funds community college education in high-technology fields that drive the economy. With the strong support of Mississippi’s community colleges, on May 13, U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) introduced the Advanced Technological Manufacturing Act, to double the ATE program’s funding level.

Community colleges in Mississippi and across the country will be essential to America’s post-pandemic economic recovery.

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