

OPINION

Community Colleges essential to post-pandemic economic recovery in Alabama and nationwide

Dr. Vicki Karolewics, Tom Downs and Dawn Erlandson, Special to the Advertiser Published 7:43 p.m. CT May 8, 2020



Hundreds of graduates from the Class of 2020 at Wallace State Community College drove through campus Thursday morning to celebrate graduating from the college. An estimated 400 were greeted by cheering faculty and staff donning masks before stopping to receive a diploma cover and tassel from Wallace State President Dr. Vicki Karolewics. (Photo: Wallace State Community College)

Community colleges in Alabama and across the nation 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 the state and the nation prepare to return to productivity after the pandemic subsides.

Community college responses to COVID-19 to date have been remarkable. Alabama community colleges are working in partnership with the Alabama Department of Public Health to provide much needed medical equipment to hospitals. Supplies are being made available from simulated healthcare settings, where students train for medical careers. The equipment is the same, top-quality supply used in hospitals and healthcare facilities across the state.

Across the nation, community college contributions include –

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- Using advanced technologies such as 3D printing to manufacture PPE.
- Accelerating nursing and allied health course completion to meet workforce needs.
- Training medical equipment repair technicians.
- Offering campus facilities for siting temporary hospitals and equipment.

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 Alabama and across the country are today’s essential workers – emergency medical technicians, truck drivers, law enforcement, 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 college training and education.
- Agribusiness – Congress prioritized Department of Agriculture appropriations for community college agribusiness programs.
- Apprenticeship – Community colleges are funded by the Department of Labor to work with employers to establish apprenticeship programs that meet critical workforce needs in healthcare, information technology, manufacturing and cybersecurity.
- 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.”
- Energy – Congress has prioritized appropriations for the Department of Energy to support community college energy-sector workforce training.

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

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