



Point of View: Community colleges setting a path forward after pandemic

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Community colleges in Oklahoma and nationwide have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, making contributions to enhance capabilities of emergency responders and health care professionals. They can help reskill the workforce as Oklahoma and the nation return to productivity once the pandemic subsides.

Oklahoma City Community College instruction in cyber, information technology, unmanned systems and health care are critically important during this time. OCCC trains students to neutralize threats to security, preventing commission of fraud with increased unemployment claims and stimulus payments, and barring hackers from infiltrating health care systems.

The Oklahoma Association of Community Colleges has worked to coordinate information about COVID-19. OACC is advocating for assistance to benefit ongoing responses to the pandemic.

The American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees have made COVID-19 a priority. They work to secure funding to meet basic needs of students and ensure that institutions have resources to continue teaching and learning remotely while confronting the many impacts of COVID-19.

Community college graduates are today's essential workers — nurses, emergency medical technicians, respiratory therapists, law enforcement and others. Community colleges have always welcomed students who are older, have families, attend part time, and need reskilling. In this era of global pandemic and high unemployment, community colleges offer students the opportunity to earn college credits close to home at an affordable price.

Congress has recently advanced community college opportunities:

- **Advanced manufacturing.** The Defense Department is directed to prioritize manufacturing and engineering education program funding for community colleges.
- **Agribusiness.** Agriculture Department appropriations prioritize community college agribusiness programs.
- **Unmanned systems.** OCCC trains first responders, law enforcement officials, insurance claim adjusters, farmers and others to operate drones legally and safely.
- **Energy.** Energy Department appropriations prioritize community college workforce training. Community college can play an important role in ensuring a highly skilled workforce to meet the demands of employers in one of Oklahoma's top industries.
- **Advanced Technological Education (ATE).** The National Science Foundation's ATE initiative funds community college programs educating technicians in industry sectors that drive the economy. On May 20, a Senate committee approved legislation doubling the ATE budget as an effort to reskill the post-pandemic workforce.
- **Tax credits for reskilling.** On May 20, a bipartisan group of senators introduced the Skills Renewal Act to provide tax credits for participation in community college programs to reskill the American workforce in response to COVID-19.

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

Erlandson is chair of the board of directors of the Association of Community College Trustees. Downs is a consultant and founder of the Community and Technical College Consortium.

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