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Opinion

# Community colleges – poised to re-skill the post-pandemic workforce | Opinion

Posted May 15, 2020

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**By Hector R. Ortiz, Dawn Erlandson and Tom Downs**

The world is in a path of uncertainty during this global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought health and financial instability that affects everyone. However, like anything in life, any challenge brings opportunities for people and organizations. The fact is that with or without our consent, this unexpected change is altering the way we live, demanding an imperative to adapt to the “new normal” under the umbrella of ongoing transformation.

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Community colleges in Pennsylvania and across the nation have responded 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 once the pandemic subsides.

Pennsylvania community colleges, working together under the umbrella of the Pennsylvania

Commission on Community Colleges, have had their own initiatives and challenges during this pandemic challenge. For instance, Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) created a COVID-19 task force to engage in discussions with stakeholders to ensure health and safety precautions. Other college leaders are discussing delivery platforms for summer and fall as well as best practices in applying remote and online learning.

HACC President Dr. John Sygielski believes one of the lessons learned is the clear distinction between remote distance, virtual/digital, and online learning. The transition to online, hybrid or remote delivery of instruction has been embraced by most community college constituent groups. These modalities have benefits and challenges for the community. They have offered faculty, students, and administrators new perspectives in absorbing, adjusting, and adapting to new learning opportunities. Examples include online professors helping other professors to get acclimated to remote teaching, nursing students tutoring their peers, and employees learning and sharing methods to connect remotely with others.

Community college responses to COVID-19 to date have been remarkable. Pennsylvania community colleges are providing 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. There are many other ways that community colleges, students and alumni are also giving back in these times of need. For instance, Annette Patchell, owner of Supreme Safety and an alumna of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program at the Community College of Philadelphia, donated N-95 masks to Philadelphia area emergency responders. Across the nation, community college contributions include:

- Donating personal protective equipment (PPE) to COVID-19 responders.
- 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 Pennsylvania and across the country are today's essential workers – nurses, emergency medical technicians, respiratory therapists, truck drivers, law enforcement, 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.

There is a strong connection between education and workforce demands, which certainly has a direct impact on employment and the economy. It is why upskilling/reskilling the workforce is a societal responsibility (Medros, 2019). The fact is that these challenges bring opportunities, and community colleges are adapting to ensure theoretical, technical, and experiential skills bring students success, enhance employability, and satisfy ongoing market demands. Community colleges in Pennsylvania and across the country will be essential to America's post-pandemic economic recovery.

***Hector R. Ortiz is a member of the Board of Trustees at Harrisburg Area Community College, President of the Latino Association of Community College Trustees, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Community College Trustees.***

***Dawn Erlandson is Chair of the Board of Directors of the Association of Community College Trustees.***

***Tom Downs is a Washington, D.C. consultant and founder of the Community and Technical College Consortium.***

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