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Dubois, Erlandson and Downs: Community colleges – Setting a path forward after the pandemic

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Submitted photo



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Community colleges in Virginia 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.

In Virginia, our colleges are open for business and working with experts to determine the safest way possible to offer the classes that cannot be offered exclusively through a screen. Implementing deep cleaning, social distancing, smaller classes and other best practices will be essential to offering the short-term, career and technical training that people will need to begin a new career and provide for their family. Further, we are helping those pursuing traditional associate and bachelor's degrees by offering easy access to our more than 10,000 online courses through CollegeAnywhereVA.org.

Virginia's Community Colleges (VCCS) is diligently coordinating information about COVID-19 on behalf of the state's 23 community colleges and 40-plus campuses. VCCS is zealously advocating for funding and assistance for these institutions to benefit their ongoing responses to the pandemic.

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 Virginia and across the country are today's essential workers — nurses, emergency medical technicians, respiratory therapists, firefighters, truck drivers, law enforcement officers, 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, 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. Manufacturing Technology/Technician instruction is provided at Blue Ridge Community College, Central Virginia Community College, John Tyler Community College, Paul D. Camp Community College, Thomas Nelson Community College and Virginia Western Community College.

Advanced Technological Education (ATE) — For nearly 30 years, the National Science Foundation’s ATE program has funded community college programs educating technicians in industry sectors that drive the economy. With the strong support of Virginia community colleges, on May 20, 2020 the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation approved the Advanced Technological Manufacturing Act, doubling the ATE program’s funding level as an effort to retrain the post-pandemic workforce.

Agribusiness — Congress prioritized Department of Agriculture appropriations for community college agribusiness programs. Agriculture programs are available at 12 community college across the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing instruction in animal science, forestry and forest management, viticulture and enology, and other areas.

Automation and unmanned systems — Congress authorized a new Federal Aviation Administration program, “Community and Technical College Centers of Excellence in Small Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) Technology Training,” which formally

launched on April 30, 2020. Several Virginia community colleges have established UAS/drone programs and are already engaged in the new FAA initiative.

Energy — Congress has prioritized appropriations for the Department of Energy to support community college energy-sector training. This can include offshore wind energy — an emerging area of workforce with the Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind (CVOW) project.

Maritime — Community colleges train maritime workers for well-paying jobs moving commerce along the nation’s coasts and inland waterways. Congress authorized a national community college workforce program, “Domestic Maritime Centers of Excellence,” under the Maritime Administration’s jurisdiction. Tidewater Community College, home to the NSF ATE funded Southeast Maritime and Transportation (SMART) Center, hosted a national maritime workforce conference for community colleges in 2019.

Tax credits for retraining — On May 20, 2020, a bipartisan group of United States Senators introduced the Skills Renewal Act (S. 3779), to provide tax credits in 2020 and 2021 for participation in community college programs to retrain the American workforce in response to COVID-19.

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

