

Community colleges -- setting a post-pandemic path forward



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Guest columnists

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Community colleges in the Chicago area and across the state will be essential to the country's post-pandemic economic recovery. Reflective of and responsive to the communities they serve, community colleges meet ever-changing employer needs and supply the region with a skilled workforce.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges and forced a sudden shift to online learning, area community colleges quickly responded with resourceful and innovative solutions. Some efforts include:

- Harper College is manufacturing personal protective equipment in its labs -- including thousands of face shields through a partnership with

High School District 214 -- for distribution to hospitals, senior care facilities and the college's very own police department.

- Oakton Community College established a Public Health Contact Tracer Paraprofessional program to prepare students to monitor the contacts of infected people and notify them of their exposure.
- College of Lake County, Elgin Community College, Joliet Junior College and numerous others launched fundraising campaigns to provide students with emergency resources. About 550 students have benefited from Harper's emergency fund, which recently surpassed \$250,000.
- Community colleges across the region are supporting students virtually through technology loans, call campaigns to check in on students, waiving course fees and sponsoring social media initiatives aimed at boosting connectedness and encouraging volunteerism.

With enrollment of 12 million students, the impact of two-year public colleges is widespread. These students represent 41% of all undergraduates, while nearly half of bachelor's degree earners previously attended a community college. Close to 80% of first responders are credentialed by community colleges, while 36% of community college students are the first in their family to attend college.

As the country moves toward economic recovery, community colleges have the unique capacity to reskill the workforce and meet the diverse needs of students and industry. Many occupations with the most opportunities require two-year degrees or certificates (but not necessarily four-year degrees) and will once again offer family-sustaining wages and strong employment prospects.

Community colleges also offer an affordable pathway for students who want to earn college credits close to home before transferring to a four-year college. In this era of high unemployment and families struggling to make ends meet, community colleges ensure that postsecondary education remains accessible -- without the burden of crippling student loan debt.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress authorized new workforce programs in which community colleges will play an essential role such as apprenticeships. Harper, for example, has emerged as a national leader in apprenticeship programs, collaborating with area employers to combine on-the-job learning experiences with job-related instruction through programs including Banking/Finance, CNC Precision Machining, Cybersecurity and General Insurance, among others.

Supporting the state's 48 community colleges is the Illinois Community College Trustees Association, which has worked diligently to coordinate information about COVID-19 and provide related guidance.

The two principal national associations, the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees, have worked to secure critical funding to meet basic needs of at-risk students and ensure community colleges have the resources necessary to continue teaching and learning so students can successfully complete their coursework.

With continued state and federal support and investment in Americans' education, community colleges are positioned to fulfill their essential role in helping the country in its economic recovery.

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