



# 11 REIMAGINING COMMUNITY COLLEGE ELEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

As the nation rebuilds in the wake of the pandemic, millions of Americans will need fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling before they can return to work. No institution is better positioned to take up the challenge—new demand for safety training, technical training, IT training and more—than the nation’s 1,100 two-year community and technical colleges.

A new report by a group of educators and policy thinkers outlines a strategy for community colleges—urging them to step up in the wake of the Covid crisis as the nation’s premier provider of workforce education.

**A**mong the most profound likely consequences of the Covid shock: it will hasten the arrival of what was once called the “future of work.”

Americans at all education levels will need to adjust. But the burden is likely to weigh most heavily on workers with less education and fewer in-demand skills. And many who were thrown out of work by the virus will find it necessary to learn new skills before they can re-enter the labor market.

Many—perhaps millions—will need quick, job-focused upskilling and reskilling.

Across the economy, employees in every setting will need to learn new safety protocols to protect themselves and others against the risk of infection. Workers in other fields will need new skills to keep up with changing technology. Still others will need reskilling to help them move from a struggling industry to a sector where demand is more robust.



Read the full report: "The Indispensable Institution"  
[www.opportunityamericaonline.org/indispensable](http://www.opportunityamericaonline.org/indispensable)

In the wake of the crisis, community colleges have an opportunity to embrace a new, more ambitious role—to accept and champion that they are the nation’s primary provider of job-focused education and training.

Community colleges should put workforce skills—career preparation and midcareer upskilling—more at the center of their mission and culture. They should shake off their dependence on four-year colleges and universities, moving beyond a singular focus on preparing students to transfer to a four-year institution. And they should assume the broader responsibilities that come with their new role—including responsibility for the talent pipeline that will be needed for a national economic recovery.



## ELEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS



### 1 ROOTED IN THE LOCAL LABOR MARKET

Unlike traditional higher education, focused largely inward and guided by its own intrinsic, academic standards, community colleges should be outward-looking and responsive to the changing labor market.

In good times and bad, community college planning and decisions should be shaped by trends in the local economy.

Programs, credentials and strategic initiatives should be geared to regional workforce needs. The primary goal for most learners: not credentials for credentials’ sake, but employment and, ultimately, economic mobility—leaving the college well prepared for a high-demand, high-paying job.

## 2 MIDCAREER ADULTS

In the wake of the pandemic and into the future, as automation and artificial intelligence transform the economy, community colleges should revamp to better serve midcareer adults.

What older students often want from college are short-form, applied courses designed to help them get a job or a better job in the near term. Today, even more than in the past, they are in a hurry to return to the workforce and resume earning. And they are more likely than traditional college-age students to enroll in the noncredit, nondegree side of the college.

Community colleges seeking to attract older learners should offer more classes, credit and noncredit, in the evenings and on weekends. Even more than younger students, working learners pressed for time will gravitate to online instruction. And whenever possible, programs should be offered in partnership with employers who help design the content and stand ready to hire graduates.



## 3 JOB PLACEMENT



Unlike traditional academic educators for whom the finish line is graduation, community colleges should be held accountable for what happens after learners leave the college. The most important metric by which they should be judged is not completion, but employment.

The change that's needed starts with policy: community college funding should be geared more closely to job placement and wages.

What's needed at the college: additional resources for placement staff, more robust career services, better coordination between curriculum and the labor needs of local employers.

## 4 ENGAGING EMPLOYERS



Most community colleges maintain rosters of regional employers and consult them about course offerings. But all too often, these partnerships are more perfunctory than meaningful.

The best collaboration is day to day, with no detail too small for college and company to consider together. And ultimately the relationship must be a two-way street.

Employers need to offer honest, actionable feedback. Educators need to listen and act on it, and when they do—when they produce well-trained, job-ready graduates—local companies should be prepared to hire them.



## 5 ACADEMIC AND TECHNICAL SKILLS

Wherever learners are headed in the short term—straight to the world of work or onto further higher education—they need grounding in two crucial, complementary realms: foundational skills and career-focused competencies.

Foundational skills start with critical thinking, problem solving, communication, creativity and basic research techniques. Essential job-focused competencies—essential for all students—include workplace communication, applied math, teamwork, time management, data analytics and the rudiments of coding.

The best community college programs braid both kinds of learning, helping students advance along both fronts.



## 6 WORK-BASED LEARNING

All community college students, traditional college-age and older, should have an opportunity for work-based learning—an internship, an apprenticeship, a co-op job, time at a simulated worksite or other similar experience.

Colleges seeking to expand work-based learning need dedicated outreach staff and funding to subsidize interns' wages. Policy-makers and philanthropic donors can help by providing additional resources and holding educators accountable for creating work-based learning opportunities.

Colleges also need to develop programs that recognize what working students learn in conventional entry-level jobs, coordinating the skills learners pick up at work with related college instruction.

## 7 INTEGRATING CREDIT AND NONCREDIT EDUCATION

Some of the most exciting innovation taking place at community colleges is in the noncredit continuing education division.

Both credit and noncredit divisions bring distinct advantages to preparing learners. Noncredit programs are often more agile and responsive to the local labor market, offering just-in-time preparation for in-demand jobs. Credit-bearing instruction is often broader or more comprehensive, and many learners want degrees—a ticket to better job opportunities and higher education.

The challenge for community colleges: how to take advantage of both divisions' strengths and build bridges between them. Credit and noncredit divisions have much to learn from each other, and learners should be able to move easily between credit and noncredit programs.



## 8 CREDENTIALS OF VALUE



Every credential earned at a community college, including the traditional, academic associate of arts degree, should be designed to have value in the labor market.

Community colleges must also do more to fulfill the promise of stackability, ensuring that all credentials are additive and all students can build on what they have learned in the past as they progress, often over many years, through college and career.

Among the most promising tools available to connect learners to the labor market, competency-based industry certifications should be better integrated into college programming.

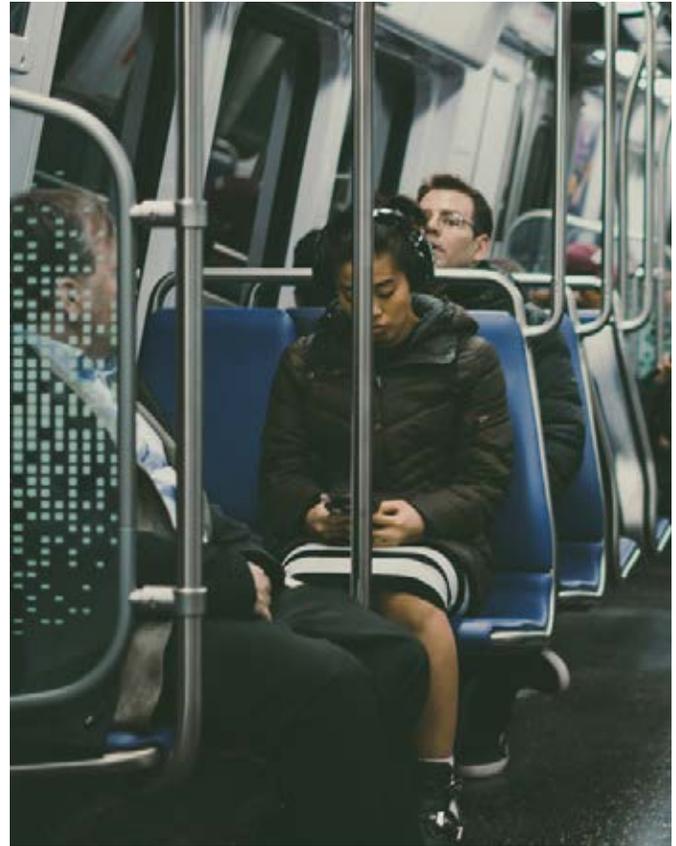
State education authorities can help by determining which industry certifications have value for regional employers. And as with all credentials earned at community college, learners should be able to leverage industry certifications for college credit.



## 9 STUDENT NAVIGATION AND SUPPORTS

Students, traditional college-age and older, need better labor market information. They need career maps. They need data about the jobs available in their regions. And they need unvarnished facts about the likely outcomes of college programs, including the realistic likelihood of transfer and attaining a bachelor's degree.

Midcareer adults need special attention and supports—most importantly, readily available credit for prior learning. No working adult returning to the classroom should have to retake courses or relearn skills, and they should receive college credit for any relevant learning acquired on the job.



## 10 TOWARD A SINGLE PUBLIC WORKFORCE SYSTEM



A globally competitive United States cannot afford two overlapping, duplicative job training networks: community colleges and the public workforce system.

Community colleges and local workforce boards seeking to cooperate more closely can start with small, practical steps: colocation, combining staff and sharing labor market information.

More ambitiously, colleges and workforce boards should join forces to steer regional economic development. A joint entity convened

by the college can provide a single point of contact for employers seeking better-trained workers. Together, the two institutions can create a single, integrated talent pipeline to fuel economic growth across the region.

Also essential: the two networks should be held to the same standards—perhaps the performance indicators mandated for the workforce system by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

# 11 FUNDING

Policymakers need to rethink funding levels for higher education and workforce training. They should also reconsider *how* they fund community colleges—the metrics, incentives and allocation of resources.

First, instead of state support based on raw enrollment totals, states should ground community college funding in a vision of regional economic development, and programs that deliver value should be funded more generously.

Second, whatever their regional economic payoff, programs that achieve their objectives and hit their performance goals should receive more funding than less successful programs.



Reform is also needed at the federal level. Pell Grants should be available to students enrolled in short, job-focused community college programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials. And Congress should reconsider the lifetime cap that bars Pell funding for students who spend more than an accumulated six years in college. Learners moving in and out of lifelong higher education need more flexible funding options.

## CONCLUSION

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Can the nation keep its promise of equal opportunity for all? Today, that promise hinges more than ever on access to postsecondary education—including, for many, job-focused career and technical education. Few institutions are better positioned to provide what's needed than the nation's two-year community and technical colleges.

Will they succeed? Can they live up to their potential as the nation's indispensable institution? Our working group is betting they can if only they set their sights high enough, clarifying and committing to the mission we as a nation need them to undertake.

### OPPORTUNITY AMERICA

Opportunity America is a Washington nonprofit promoting economic mobility—work, skills, careers, ownership and entrepreneurship for poor and working Americans. The organization's principal activities are research, policy development, dissemination of policy ideas and working to build consensus around policy proposals. [www.opportunityamericaonline.org](http://www.opportunityamericaonline.org)

### OPPORTUNITY AMERICA WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE WORKFORCE EDUCATION

This report is the work of 22 educators and education policy experts united by a shared belief in the potential of community colleges. The group met seven times over the course of a year, hammering out a consensual roster of recommendations. Opportunity America president Tamar Jacoby wrote the report on behalf of the group.



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