

# Perspectives

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

*As the nation considers what is needed to recover, community colleges will play a central role in training people who need jobs and in helping employers find skilled workers.*

- Jim Jacobs and Maria Cormier

*[Business and community college] partnerships have become the real-time data source... creating that skilled pipeline and pathway of workers to make this economic recovery better and faster and more inclusive.*

- Rachel Vilsack

## Workforce Preparation: Where Today's Community Colleges Should Focus

**Glenn R. Cerny, EdD**

President  
Schoolcraft College  
Livonia, Michigan

After World War II, community colleges were at the forefront of providing the United States with a robust and highly skilled workforce, helping to create the world's greatest economy. The formula was clear: provide hands-on education focused on relevant skills for industry and foster foundational learning to transfer students successfully to a four-year institution. Accessibility was a key driver, enabled through significant Pell Funding, ensuring that all populations could take advantage of community colleges, which served as an innovative, economic engine that benefited students, business, industry, and surrounding communities.

*Currently, the United States is faced with a dramatic workforce development problem that has been a growing issue over the past twenty years.*

Over the past two decades, states have drastically flatlined or cut funding to community colleges. Instead of directly funding the economic engine that was responsible for the creation of a highly successful middle class prior to the start of the 21st century, community colleges are now relying on piecemeal funding through grants, government workforce departments, and other mechanisms that were intended to replace cuts that were occurring at the state level. At the same time, there has been a push to channel more high school students directly to four-year institutions, bypassing community colleges, decreasing the availability of business and industry-ready talent, and contributing to student loan debt approaching \$1.7 trillion dollars, the highest consumer debt category outside of home mortgages recorded in the history of the United States.

Currently, the United States is faced with a dramatic workforce development problem that has been a growing issue over the past twenty years. Global competition, the 2009 Great Recession, technological advancements, and now the COVID-19 global pandemic have contributed to a degradation of the workforce. At Schoolcraft College, we have learned to think outside the box to combat these challenges. One of the major solutions to the workforce problem would be to correct the funding model for community colleges, but I believe

there are a great number of alternative opportunities that community college leaders can leverage as we come out of the pandemic to help prepare our students to transition into the workforce.

Over the past ten years, I have learned that community colleges must look at developing long-term relationships that translate into sustainable solutions. Investing time and effort into these long-term or "home-run" initiatives enables the college community as a whole to have a greater impact. Shorter-term initiatives, or the "single hits", while important, often provide a limited, one-time boost, whether that is in terms of enrollment, credit hours, or the bottom line of college financial statements. When it comes to workforce preparation for students and an increased talent pipeline for business and industry partners, it is the home-run solutions that move us toward sustainability.

**Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA).** Higher education needs a renewed emphasis on the concepts of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA), starting with training and education for employees to foster safe and welcoming environments. This may begin as vital single-hit initiatives, but community colleges, due to their partnerships within the surrounding communities and local businesses, are poised to create more enduring home-run initiatives through a longer-term focus on IDEA training and education.

*When it comes to workforce preparation for students and an increased talent pipeline for business and industry partners, it is the home-run solutions that move us toward sustainability.*

Just as community colleges have acted as an economic engine in our communities, we can become a driving force for equity and cultural change, which is in alignment with the Missions and Values we have stood behind for years. It is time to take the steps necessary to become even more influential in our communities, bridging gaps as they emerge. We need to extend the education and training we provide beyond campus borders, and we need to invest in staff that can lead the way, effecting change within our institutions and forging partnerships within our surrounding communities.

**Outreach and Awareness.** Community colleges must focus on outreach and awareness to counteract stereotypes that have been perpetuated over that past several decades. With an eye towards the future, *(continued on page 4)*

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

These are exciting times for community colleges as the country is inching closer to the long-awaited reopening of the economy. Our sector is beginning to redefine itself in the wake of the pandemic and nowhere is this effort more impactful than in the economic recovery and workforce preparation arena, where we see community colleges helping to facilitate innovative community college/industry partnerships designed to support workforce development and bolster the local economy. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Keambra Pierson, MA

Associate Dean of Business, Entrepreneurship, and Professional Development  
Henry Ford College, Dearborn, Michigan

Historically, community colleges have transitioned to meet the needs of the community. They started as an extension to postsecondary education, providing vocational education, and later evolved to offer a curriculum compatible with the first two years of undergraduate university education as a pathway for students seeking a four-year degree. Finally, pre-pandemic community colleges continued to meet the community's needs by providing affordable education with a host of programs to produce students prepared to enter the workforce. As a result, community colleges are an integral factor in the community's economic development.

Present-day, there's an influx of help-wanted signs in the windows of local businesses. Job posting sites display an increase in postings, and many companies are open at reduced hours because they don't have staff. The health care industry is understaffed and overworked due to the post-pandemic labor shortage. Long before COVID-19 wreaked havoc on the economy, experts warned of two demographic storms on the horizon that would present significant challenges for employers—the first being an influx of retiring baby boomers, some earlier than planned due to COVID-19. Second, declining birth rates led to a decreased number of eligible workers. Pandemic health risks, child and elder care, and unemployment benefits also keep people from returning to the workforce.

Community college is a viable answer to a declining economy. Although the future status of returning to normal is unknown, community colleges must prepare to play a crucial role in building the workforce within their communities. The pandemic has brought about challenges as well as opportunities for community colleges to reemerge. Community college leaders and local business owners are facing unfamiliar territory. College leaders should build close connections with local businesses to understand their employment priorities and needs. These connections will foster professional relationships leading to job placement programs and internship initiatives to provide students with the skills needed to launch successful careers in their local communities immediately after graduation.

The future is bright for community colleges. According to Bastecki-Perez, V. L. (2021), in the last six months of 2019, employed Americans with an associate degree rose by 578,000 people, compared to just 314,000 Americans with a four-year degree. The trend will likely continue as many expect to fill STEM, technology support, and health and wellness positions, many of which require an associate degree. In addition, the need for an enhanced digital infrastructure will lead to increased demand for a variety of cutting-edge fields. Finally, with the business and employment landscape everchanging, community colleges must remain nimble and provide students with opportunities to learn new skills fit for a post-COVID economy (Bastecki-Perez, 2021).

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What might the community college role in economic development and workforce preparation look like, post-pandemic?**

### Stephanie Stuart, MS

Vice President for Communications and External Affairs  
Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois

If you're reading this, you play a critical role in one of the most important strategic assets of the American economy, the community college. Our present economy consists of complex, sometimes

competing, variables, including record unemployment, workforce shortages, and wage compression, to name a few.

As institutional leaders, we find ourselves at the nexus of crisis and opportunity. Our ability to capitalize on this moment for our students and communities will define the community college's role in economic and workforce development for decades to come. In this new era, we must revisit and reinvent best practices to spur economic recovery and accelerate workforce preparation efforts.

▲ **Reconnect with students.** Throw away your assumptions from pre-pandemic life regarding what students are looking for. As we envision new programs, formats, and scheduling, ask your students what works for their lives now. Identify emerging barriers to student success and leverage recovery funds such as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) III funds to help students overcome them.

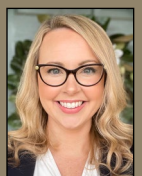
▲ **Reinvent the message.** Our communities and prospective students have completely reframed their thinking about life, work, and family. As a result, the community college's market position has shifted. It's time to ensure your campus messaging matches the needs of today rather than harkens to pre-pandemic times. Strategies such as focus groups, surveys, and face-to-face engagement wherever possible will help your team gain valuable insights for ensuring you're speaking the language of those who will benefit most from their local community college during this time.

▲ **Lean into employer and community partnerships.** In the COVID era, you likely forged deeper relationships with your regional Economic Development Organizations, Chambers of Commerce, and industry partners. Strategize with these partners on joint recovery initiatives and identify gap areas where new or reformatted programs can meet short- and medium-term needs.

Each of our institutions must undergo these transformations, emerge stronger, and welcome back students faster. The most successful institutions will galvanize these efforts into visionary grant proposals in this era of massive Federal investment in economic recovery. New grant programs such as the American Recovery Plan's Build Back Better and Good Jobs Challenge will fund the most promising regional economic and workforce collaborations. Now is the time for leaders like us to rise to the occasion and reaffirm America's community colleges as vehicles for economic recovery, upward mobility, and hope. The future of our communities—and, most importantly, our students—depends on it.



*Keambra Pierson, MA, currently serves as the Associate Dean of Business, Entrepreneurship, and Professional Development at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan. She is also a Henry Ford College alumna. She earned her MA in Counseling from Spring Arbor University in Michigan, and has a diverse background in the areas of health, counseling, and academia. Keambra is currently enrolled as a member of Cohort 10 of the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University.*



*Stephanie Stuart is the Vice President for Communications and External Affairs for Parkland College where she oversees the college's communications, economic development, continuing education, and government relations efforts, as well as several short-term workforce development efforts, including the Workforce Equity Initiative, Highway Construction Careers Training Program, and non-credit workforce training programs. She earned her MS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is currently enrolled in the FSU DCCL program.*

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

These are exciting times for community colleges as the country is inching closer to the long-awaited reopening of the economy. Our sector is beginning to redefine itself in the wake of the pandemic and nowhere is this effort more impactful than in the economic recovery and workforce preparation arena, where we see community colleges helping to facilitate innovative community college/industry partnerships designed to support workforce development and bolster the local economy. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Strengthen Work-ready Programs in Today's Community College

#### Rebecca Lake, EdD

President  
Rebecca Lake Consulting, Illinois

Community colleges are now situated in an unimaginable fast-paced changing environment, under many pressures, with Presidents and Boards of Trustees not sure what decisions make the best sense. Colleges are rethinking how to reshape every aspect of their work to strengthen links between degrees, certificates, and national portable credentials leading to life-sustaining employment for students and graduates. This reshaping can lead to an overhaul of organizational processes, procedures and systems, propelling colleges to become more situationally adaptive. The goal of college personnel should be to adapt organizational functions to the needs of students, implement a variety of support services so students can complete what they start, be hired into their field of study, and begin on their career path.

Since their inception, community colleges have provided affordable and accessible higher education and a career pathway for low-income students, students of color, under-prepared students, women, and those who can attend classes part-time. Today, the goal of these students enrolled in community colleges is to get a life-sustaining job. Community colleges can assist students reach their goals by providing accelerated short-term training and/or career and technical education (CTE) programs with stackable credentials. As more diverse students enroll to take advantage of these accelerated programs, colleges will be confronted with unique student support, equity, and diversity issues. Interestingly, as colleges prepare to offer more short-term workforce training programs and address diversity issues, in a March 5, 2021, article by Colvin T. Georges, Jr. about Strategic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives, Dr. Marcus Brown, senior director for academic affairs and student services at Illinois Community College Board, discussed the same topic. His comments seem pertinent at this time:

*We (colleges) need to be intentional about how we build DEI efforts in those strategic plans. Community college stakeholders need to consider equity at all times by specifically identifying which student populations have access to specific CTE programs of study. They also need to actively work to close existing racial equity gaps and institutional barriers to success.*

With logical, careful, and innovative stewardship by colleges, this shift to provide more accelerated workforce-ready (credit and non-credit) educational opportunities can be successfully implemented. This article presents a few ideas that can assist college as they are contemplating their next steps.

**Organizational Realignment:** Not to be left behind, the college needs a top-level administrative organizational structure to position itself advantageously in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. Because there is a need and a push for accelerated short career educational programs, as well as seeking new employers and partners to work with and hire students, adding a vice-president of Economic Development, Partnerships, and Innovation could truly benefit the college. Under this VP would be situated most of the outward-facing

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What might the community college role in economic development and workforce preparation look like, post-pandemic?*

college departments such as customized training, continuing education, children summer programs, office of registered apprenticeships, grants office, and small business development, just to name a few. Think of the out-reach activities performed by these departments as additional college marketing employees.

#### **Enrollment/Admissions/Advising Adjustment:**

The new focus on short-term workforce training and CTE programs and its successful growth in enrollment is dependent on those in Enrollment/Admissions/Advising. In any college, the predominate task of all employed in enrollment/admission services is to increase student inquiries (leads) and convert them to enrollments. Enrollment specialists will need to broaden their outreach activities to a variety of venues such as churches, cultural centers, and predominately African American high schools. These students may arrive unprepared, underprepared, or just scared and unsure about everything related to college. It is logical to believe a more diverse student body will begin to enroll at colleges requiring different types of support. A variety of student support services to increase retention and completion must be quickly implemented. If this is done well, it can make a difference to mitigate college enrollment decline.

**Institutional Cultural Readjustment:** Because offering more accelerated education programs will actually change the college to some degree, it is a perfect time to "look under the hood" of the organizational culture. The new focus requires college personnel to readjust their perceptions and recognize their unconscious biases towards short-term workforce education and students in these programs. We all view life in our own certain way and through our own unique lens. A critical examination to discover organizational and systemic barriers that negatively affect diverse students is crucial and must be satisfactorily addressed. The growth of short-term workforce training and CTE programs at the college offers new educational opportunities for all students, improves the community racial and socioeconomic equity, fosters a better life for these students and their families, and sets them on a career pathway.

Colleges must not be stuck in the past. How community colleges did business before the horrendous COVID-19 pandemic is done and gone, never to return. Colossal change is apparent throughout the country's social, educational, political, and work environments. For community colleges to stay viable, healthy, and responsive to the needs of all their stakeholders is essential.

*Rebecca S. Lake, EdD, is retired and has now started her own company, Rebecca Lake Consulting. She is an ApprenticeshipUSA Leader and an invited speaker at workforce and apprenticeship conferences across the county. Rebecca is particularly well-known for hosting large national apprentice conferences and writing articles on apprenticeships. Throughout her career, she has successful written and managed large community college grants. Previously, Rebecca wrote and taught in the Community College Leadership (CCL) doctoral program at National Louis University, serving as program director for 10 years. She spent the first half of her professional life involved in health planning, hospital and health care administration, and nursing, with the second half in community college teaching and administration. Rebecca has held community college positions of faculty, assistant dean, career and technology (CTE) dean, and academic vice-president. Dr. Lake is ready for consultation projects and can be reached at her website, Rebecca Lake Consulting.*



**QUICK TAKES  
Highlights  
from the Field**

**Arizona Reskilling  
and Recovery  
Network Framework:  
A Workforce  
Development and  
Education/Training  
Framework**

by the Arizona  
Network Team

Given this uniquely severe global crisis, leaders of all types of organizations need new operating models to respond quickly to the rapidly shifting environment and sustain their organizations. The authors stress that the COVID-19 operating environment requires that leaders reexamine their collective thought processes and challenge their own assumptions since the radically changed circumstances call for not only new forms of leadership, but new ways of working, and new operating models.

Access this work here:  
<https://bit.ly/3jWN1iZ>

**COVID-19 Crisis Pushes  
US Students into an  
Uncertain Job Market**

by Wan-Lea Cheng,  
Jonathan Law, and  
Duwain Pinder

The pandemic is changing the employment landscape for Americans without college degrees, with the COVID-19 crisis wiping out millions of low-wage jobs. But ongoing job creation will likely be concentrated in high-wage fields such as healthcare, engineering, mathematics, science, and technology, which typically require college degrees. This article focuses on the most critical insights and problem-solving mind-sets to evolve from these trying times, with implications for both colleges and businesses.

Access this work here:  
<https://mck.co/3EOTO36>

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Published by the  
Alliance for Community College  
Excellence in Practice,  
Ferris State University,  
Doctorate in Community  
College Leadership  
Big Rapids, Michigan

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**Workforce Preparation...** (continued from page 1)

we need to focus on middle schools and develop partnerships with K-12. Community colleges can serve as an early provider for career and technical programs that are required by states. Not only does this educate students at a younger age about high-paying careers they may not know about, it allows us to shift the perspective of what community college is all about, not only for the student but also for their parents. Schoolcraft has only just begun to work with its local districts to bring middle school students to our campus, giving them hands-on opportunities in areas such as welding, manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology.

Additionally, the adult learner who has experience in the workforce but needs additional skills is an overlooked opportunity. Community colleges need to assess and evaluate adult learners' work experience to provide credits based on competencies that don't require additional classroom hours. This approach, paired with the expedited courses needed by adult learners to pursue new pathways, will facilitate a faster turnaround for degree and certification attainment. This helps move students forward in their careers, and it also helps close the workforce gap.

**Community colleges need to assess  
and evaluate adult learners' work  
experience to provide credits based  
on competencies that don't require  
additional classroom hours.**

**Institutional Effectiveness.** Advisory committees have been an important aspect of community college programs, but I would classify them as a single hit. By developing a more relationship model with local businesses and industry, colleges and their community and industry partners end up having skin in the game. Both parties, if they are committed to the success of the relationship, become more aware of the needs of the other partner. This is a home-run solution for the college because it increases funding, enhances relevant skills-based education, allows for internships and practicums, and develops new hiring paths for students. For business and industry, the home-run solution opens up access to assets that would not have been available to them without the college partnership. Business and industry have greater access to an increased pipeline of qualified talent, and they can translate their skill requirements and needs into a curriculum and program of ongoing training. As the relationship with a college develops, a myriad of additional opportunities begin to grow organically.

**Student Success and Engagement.** The reason we as college and leaders and administrators are all here is to ensure that our students are successful. One of the many ways we can do this is to engage students on campus, as well as in the community. Colleges need to create services and systems that inform, educate, and support the student's pathway, whether that leads to further education or directly into the workforce. This approach should include providing students with a well-rounded experience that features a variety of coursework options, as well as experience exercising softer skills that can be obtained through involvement in student activities, music, arts, or sports. It is our job to train students to be

well rounded, highly skilled individuals who can enter university or the workforce and then excel.

It is also vital to our students and our community that we expand college career centers. Not only should we be preparing students for participation in the workforce, but we should also be facilitating their exposure to in-demand jobs and then helping to place them.

**Conclusion.** The states will ultimately need to step up and invest in community colleges as they did in the decades leading up to the 21st century. State funding will be a catalyst for solving long-term workforce shortage problems and will support the continuous improvement initiatives that I have outlined. Investment at sufficient levels is necessary to improve this long-term problem, and community colleges should be held accountable for directing that investment to the most effective initiatives. I believe that the areas I have addressed, if appropriately funded, will be the basis upon which extensive improvement and expansion of the workforce talent market will be built.

We need to ensure that community colleges focus on Institutional Effectiveness; Outreach and Awareness; Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access; and Student Success and Engagement. Each of these areas requires initiatives that are continually developed, deployed, and then measured with reliable data. This data should be continuously analyzed and should drive how community colleges invest in the initiatives, ensuring that what it does is utilizing resources effectively.

Best practices in workforce development will require that community colleges ensure the effective movement of students through programs and processes that yield generations of highly skilled workers and leaders. Over the past ten years, Achieve the Dream has invested millions of dollars to identify the "super elixir" of solutions, and the bottom line is: there is no golden solution. Progress will necessitate an array of continuous improvement initiatives, many that tie back to the four areas that I have described. Expanding and diversifying the pathways that our students may pursue to enter the workforce is the best way for us to increase the talent pipeline for our business and industry partners. The problem of scarce industry-ready talent has been brewing for years. If we don't start to address the issue creatively, it will only get worse.

*Dr. Glenn R. Cerny, President of Schoolcraft College, has served in leadership and teaching roles in higher education for more than 30 years. His career has focused on serving community colleges and supporting the mission of these essential institutions as they help students of all backgrounds access high-quality education as a means of advancement and a bridge to professional success. As an influential voice in Michigan community college education, Dr. Cerny has worked collaboratively with elected officials, community leaders, and the media to advocate on behalf of Schoolcraft College as well as the many other community colleges in the State of Michigan. Dr. Cerny earned his MBA in Finance and Strategic Planning from Eastern Michigan University, and an EdD in Community College Leadership from Ferris State University. In addition to his leadership roles at Schoolcraft College, Dr. Cerny has served as Secretary and Treasurer of the Michigan Community College Risk Management Authority, and also Treasurer of the Michigan International Technology Center Redevelopment Authority.*

