

Viewpoint:

# Competitiveness and the Community College





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**R**apid growth in emerging economies, closer economic integration across geographies, and unparalleled advances in information and communications technologies are creating a new wave of competitive pressure for U.S. businesses and communities.

As a result, America faces the challenge of keeping its workforce competitive. The best hope for dealing with this issue lies in business and government focusing more resources on education. Fostering an environment that rewards critical-thinking skills, analytical reasoning, and problem solving is critical to a competitive future. And I believe that, in reaching for that future, the often underestimated community college will be an increasingly important player.

The programs offered through community colleges can benefit the communities they serve, improve business productivity, and enhance U.S. global competitiveness through their workforce development activities. Studies of corporate training indicate that community colleges are one of the largest single public providers of formal training of hourly workers in the United States. They are also the largest provider of retraining services for dislocated workers.

At the same time that they are boosting the national economy, community colleges are also helping individuals and their communities. That's because, for many, these institutions are a stepping-stone to rewarding careers and improved standards of living.

For some students a two-year program may be the launching pad for a four-year

degree or an MBA. For others it may mean getting a certificate in a marketable skill and moving to a more fulfilling career or higher pay.

The benefits of starting out at a community college or other two-year program are tremendous, as I know from firsthand experience. I am an example of what a community college can help people accomplish. The school that put me on the right path was the two-year program at Dean College in Franklin, Massachusetts.

### **Taking the First Step**

When I finished high school, I wasn't really thinking about going on to college. Like my father before me, I thought I would become a plumber. In fact, I spent the summer after high school doing construction work, and college was the farthest thing from my mind.

Then one day, I went to visit some friends who were students at Dean, and my mind-set began to change. As I walked around campus and listened to my friends talk about their experiences in the classroom and on campus, I realized this was an opportunity to change my path and take another shot at learning—an opportunity that might never come again. Dean reached out a hand to me, and I can honestly say it was a life-altering experience.

Dean's philosophy is to educate, energize, and inspire. Attending Dean helped me build my confidence. In fact, it was at Dean that a professor named Charlie Kramer ignited my passion for economics and taught me how to think analytically. After all these years, I still have my notes from his

economics classes, and I've referred back to them from time to time—even as I went on to Babson College, where I earned my bachelor of science degree in economics and then an M.B.A.

I'm not sure I would have felt comfortable enough or confident enough starting off at a four-year institution right after high school, and I believe that there are millions of students and potential students out there who feel the same.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are more than 1,200 community colleges in the United States, most of them publicly funded. They serve nearly 12 million students. In New England alone, there are an estimated 200,000 students enrolled in community and technical colleges.

What's especially striking is that community colleges serve a large share of those minority students who attend college: 47 percent of African American undergraduates nationwide attend community colleges, as do 55 percent of Hispanic undergraduates. Additionally, there are nearly 100,000 international students—about 39 percent of all international undergraduates in the United States.

### **The Workforce Future**

What makes the community college so important to our future? For starters, no other institution is so attuned to the needs of our communities. Fifty percent of new nurses and the majority of new health-care workers are educated at community colleges, according to the AACC. Nearly 80 percent of firefighters, law enforcement officers, and

emergency medical technicians also receive credentials at these schools.

Additionally, community colleges excel at working with local businesses to identify specific needs, whether helping displaced workers gain new job skills or providing local companies with a steady supply of qualified workers.



Another plus: community and technical colleges are convenient. Located all over the United States, they are within 30 minutes of most centers of business activity. Wherever there is a large manufacturing plant, a nearby community college is likely to be cooperating with it on technical training. The plant improves productivity, and employees gain better skills and better pay. Moreover, when employees feel more secure, they spend more—another way their education and training help the economy.

A list of notable community college graduates reveals a virtual Who's Who of executives past and present at the top of some of the world's largest corporations. Additionally, there are astronauts, well-known lawyers, judges, journalists, members of Congress, and leaders of government organizations and social service organizations who first graduated from a community college or other two-year program.

Clearly, it is a misconception that community college students have less potential

than students at four-year schools. There are good reasons why people choose to attend a community college. High on the list is that the schools offer an excellent education, whether students plan to use their associate's degree to pursue further education or to get a job right away.

The colleges mirror the communities they serve. They enable students from low-income communities to continue their education at a more affordable cost, to develop careers in a wide range of fields, and to get the training they need either to advance their careers or to change careers and find greater job satisfaction.

As a business leader, I have frequently urged others like me to support community colleges, reminding them of the many ways the schools have served business. Corporate support is especially important today as state funding—which constitutes an estimated 38 percent of community colleges' financial resources nationwide—continues to decline. It is heartening to see more companies donating funds, recruiting students, offering community college students career counseling, and encouraging company employees to teach at these schools.

Nevertheless, the best interventions are strategic, and I recommend that businesses use their resources and experience to help community colleges get even better. One concern has been program completion. National surveys indicate that 17 percent of students starting community college do not complete 10 credits within eight years of high school graduation. Another 33 percent complete 10 credits or more, but never earn a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year college. Within eight years, 18 percent

of those who started at a community college earn a bachelor's degree, 15 percent an associate's degree, and 6 percent a certificate. We need to do whatever we can to encourage students to finish the requirements for degrees and certificates.

I applaud Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick's proposal to fund two years of community college for the state's high school graduates. Two-year programs have been underappreciated for too long. In my view, however, we must go beyond mere access and push for program completion and accountability. Simply making college free does not guarantee that students will go far enough to become productive citizens.

### Leading by Example

There are many actions the business community can take to support America's junior and community colleges. Accenture, for example, has just created a scholarship program for students who are making the transition from a two-year program to a bachelor's program. In our first year, there were 20 scholarships, renewable for up to one year or until a bachelor's degree is earned. Our aim is to do all we can to encourage young people to continue their education, and attending a community college can be a great portal to lifelong learning.

Our hope is that the scholarship program will inspire more colleagues in the business community to support junior and community colleges. The more attention we all focus on education—whether we work to improve schools or simply encourage Americans to continue their education and earn a degree—the greater the chances are that U.S. business will maintain its competitive edge and that local communities will be economically strong.

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