“Current and Future Roles of Community Colleges in Defining the Country’s Future"

Alicia B. Harvey-Smith, Ph.D.
President River Valley Community College

Education is a Bridge

Education is a bridge, a structure that stands before us
Carrying those who seek passage to opportunity
A chance to grow, expanding capacity, value added
Transcending the divide to knowledge
A bridge across the wet unknown
The barren and unproductive familiar
It carries us back
Reflecting on the lesson of what was
It carries us forward
Defining the now and the yet to come
This fixed link connects, the past, present and future
Bonding each traveler to his dream

Good-evening and thank you,

I am so honored to have been invited to talk tonight and to visit my dear friend Dr. Monique Claque. Monique, thank you so much for extending the invitation and for arranging for tonight’s talk.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleague Dr. Steve Tyrell, President of North Country Community College and to congratulate his Radio-logic Technology Class of 2015 for their 100% First Attempt Pass Rate On The American Registry of Radio-logic Technology Examination.

This is one example of the great work occurring across the country at America’s Community Colleges.

I believe the most important task before the 1,123 Community Colleges around the country is to build bridges for our communities from here to there, whether it’s from our doors to transfer, from our doors to employment, or from our doors to professional development or to
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customized training. We are in essence building a bridge to the future for our students and while doing so defining America’s future.

Tonight’s talk, “Current and Future Roles of Community Colleges in Defining the Country’s Future” is timely and one that I am passionate about.

I wrote the poem, Education is a Bridge, for tonight’s talk as I reflected on our topic.

I have always seen myself as a bridge builder, with a role of bringing people, systems and processes together for the sake of making improvements.

This perspective compliments my role as President, as I work with my college to bridge, connect and improve the lives of students and their families, to ignite and sustain economic development within our region, and equally as important to support early pathways to education and training through partnerships and with K-12, transfer institutions and business and industry.

I would like to share just a little about my institution, River Valley Community College (RVCC). A rural college established in 1968, it is located on the Western Border of New Hampshire. RVCC is one of seven colleges within the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH).

We currently offer more than 40 Programs including in such specialized areas as Allied Health and Nursing, Cyber Security Healthcare IT and STEM.

With campuses in Claremont, Keene and opening spring 2016 in Lebanon, NH, our service area is approximately 100 miles. Of the students attending, 70% of them are female with an average age of 27. River Valley students are but a sample of community college students across the country benefiting from superb teaching and learning environments at these responsive institutions.

Community Colleges are playing a key role in defining and redefining America’s future. I think that there is no better time to be engaged in the work of Community Colleges than right now. The acclaim and attention being levied at Community Colleges at this moment in their history is really unprecedented.

As America positions itself to achieve global leadership in post-secondary education, these institutions are at the center of leading change and will play a pivotal role in this country’s transformation.
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For the first time in American history, a United States President has publically and repeatedly touted the importance of Community College in moving the nation forward.

In doing so, he has given additional credibility to the work that has been done since 1901, when Joliet Junior College the oldest existing public two year college opened its doors in Illinois.

The current attention being received by Community Colleges is not only opening the eyes, but the minds and hearts of many families to the value of Community College, many who previously failed to consider them at all or who viewed them as mere second choices.

Community Colleges have moved into positions of prominence in both economic and workforce development across the country. Our colleges are looked to as a primary source for trained workers.

The role of community colleges in economic development has expanded beyond career and technical to include activities as diverse as cyber security, manufacturing management and technical assistance for new and small businesses to partnerships with states in economic development activities, and contract or customized training for industries.

America’s Community Colleges have been identified as a critical linchpin in the country’s ability to educate its way to greater prosperity and economic equality.

And it is certainly my opinion that Community Colleges are essential to individual economic security and to the nation’s economic growth.

These institutions are wonderfully positioned to support the US in its attempt to regain its lead in postsecondary attainment by 2020 as set by President Obama.

By 2020, it’s projected that two-thirds of all jobs in the United States will require an education beyond high school. And yet more than 60% of adults in this country are unprepared to meet that need.

This shortfall threatens the strength of our economy and the health of our society.

According to the Aspen Institute: Community Colleges are an essential part of America’s solution to economic revitalization.

I believe by widening access to education and training to larger numbers of students of color, first generation college students and adult learners with little to no exposure to higher education, we will better enable the US to fill skills gaps and compete in the new economy.
Jobs within the skills gap or middle-skills jobs require more education and training than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

This is consistently reported as an obstacle facing our workforce and community colleges are best positioned to respond.

As an example of the widening skills gap, let’s take a look at this slide. In the area of US Manufacturing, over the next decade nearly 31/2 million manufacturing jobs will be needed. 2 million are expected to go unfilled due to the skill gap.

The skills identified as most deficient are technology/computer skills at 70%, problem solving at 69%, basic technical training at 67% and math skills at 60%.

Business and civic leaders, educators, and policymakers are sharing trepidations over the erosion of America’s middle class and economic polarization.

At the heart of the issue is this anomaly: while millions of aspiring workers remain unemployed and underemployed, employers across industries and regions find it hard to fill open positions.

By providing the training, development and education needed to fill the growing numbers of jobs available now—and those emerging over the next decade—community colleges will provide a solution to reversing the decline of America’s middle class.

Report after report has documented the growing need for more skilled labor in the U.S. workforce.

In the most recent quarterly survey of the National Association for Business Economics, 35 percent of respondents said their companies experienced shortages of skilled labor, up from about 25 percent in the three previous surveys.

Community Colleges can have a critical impact by training the next generation to fill the existing and projected skills gap affecting business and industry in the regions in which they serve.

By working with area employers to identify the jobs available and the skills needed to fill them, community colleges can respond quickly to close those gaps.

Another important role that community colleges are playing in redefining America’s future is actively supporting and enhancing economic development in their regions. This is particularly important in smaller, poorer or rural communities.
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As many research studies have well documented, educational attainment is directly correlated
to income earning potential and is one of the keys to increasing economic opportunities in our
communities.

In many regions in North America, community and technical colleges serve a critical role in
supporting, and often lead, regional economic prosperity planning and collaboration.

As seen on this slide, earlier this year, the President also unveiled his plan “America’s College
Promise” to make community colleges free and simultaneously proposed increased funding for
career based and job training programs.

This $175 million investment would fund grants placing 34,000 students into apprenticeships
and will promote vocational education and career readiness.

Since that announcement, Tennessee and Oregon began offering tuition free community
college and it appears that Massachusetts and others are soon to follow. This is a clear
indication of Community Colleges redefining the country’s future and taking the lead in
shaping it.

Community Colleges are uniquely American institutions and are poised for this level of impact
as we examine their history. Authors Mellow and Heelan argue that “America as we know it
today would not exist without community colleges.”

In their work, Minding the Dream, they noted what they described as the inclusive, democratic
and merit-o-cric impulses of community colleges as well as, the transparent boundaries and
unique interplay between college, work and social life.

They found in their research that Community Colleges were seen to honor the promise of
advancement and opportunity unlike other educational institutions.

They argue that “without community colleges, America would not have a middle class and that
the financial disparities that currently plague the U.S. would be far worse.”

I am an advocate for community colleges and certainly recognize that these are not perfect
institutions nor are they achieving perfect outcomes, they are however perfectly positioned
within their mission to provide a solution to the perfect storm of creating jobs, building the
middle class, filling the skills gap and achieving the 2020 goal of increased credentialing by
post secondary institutions.
Community colleges already play a significant role in U.S. higher education. They enroll almost half of all U.S. undergraduate students and are essential for workforce training and retraining.

Compared to a traditional four-year college, a community college has several important advantages for students: an open admission policy, making it easier to enroll regardless of one's prior academic record; lower tuition and fees; savings on room and board; and a more flexible curriculum and class schedule.

As we examine this slide from the American Association of Community Colleges, you can see the impact that community colleges are having across the country.

Of the 1,123 Community Colleges currently operating, 992 of them are public and 35 are tribal. As of fall 2013 there were over 12 million students attending and during that same period over 700,000 degrees were awarded and 41% were first time freshmen or new to college.

When examining earnings data, there is an increase in annual earnings of 5 to 8 percent associated with each year of education at a community college. And this is comparable to a year of education in a four-year college.

When reviewing retraining efforts by community colleges, it was also found that one year of community college education increases the long-term earnings of displaced workers by about 9 percent for men and about 13 percent for women, when compared to earnings for similar workers who did not attend community college.

So as I conclude, the current and future roles of community colleges in defining and redefining the country's future will continue to evolve and will likely center around the areas of enhancing America’s workforce, closing the skills gap, economic development and expanded access.

It will be important for community colleges to continue to be a bridge to access, student success, quality teaching and learning, sustainability, and responsiveness to the communities they serve.

Families of high school graduates who are unable to afford the high cost of private and public 4-year colleges, will value community colleges as a bridge to the most practical and affordable choice.

Dislocated workers who could not find work, will value community colleges as a bridge to the most pragmatic educational avenue to update skills and ready them for new adventures.
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Industries seeking to fill skills gaps, will value community colleges as a bridge to accelerate training.

Regions striving to enhance economic development, will value community colleges as a bridge for establishing and sustaining partnerships.

America is rediscovering its community colleges as a bridge to building the middle class and valuing the tremendous roles they have played and continue to play in shaping a healthy economy and strong workforce.

America’s Community Colleges must continue to ride the wave by serving as a champion to those who need it most, by deepening partnerships and by improving economic development as we build a stronger middle class.

Community colleges must continue to play the vital role of bridge builder for a stronger future for America. After all, education is a bridge.

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Presented in Keene, NY at Keene Arts on September 26, 2015.

References


