



One way to educate policy makers on the importance of workforce programs and the impact they have on the local economy and community is to invite elected officials – at the local, state, and federal levels – to tour your campus to see the facilities.

A Firsthand Understanding of Hands-On Skills

It's prime time for community colleges to demonstrate the value of and needed public support for skills-based education.

BY CARRIE WARICK-SMITH

THIS JULY, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN OUR ACCT Board and fellow staff members to visit Chair Jay Nardini's home institution, Hawkeye Community College. Located in Waterloo, Iowa, Hawkeye's facilities include a main campus and several training centers, one of which is the Automation and Robotics Center.

Upon its opening in September 2023, Dr. Todd Holcomb, president of Hawkeye Community College, said, "Automation will impact every business sector and will be the way for small and medium-sized businesses to survive the workforce crisis." The workforce crisis is outlined in the *College News* article highlighting the new building: "nearly one-third of all job openings in Iowa go unfilled due to lack of skilled workers."

Hawkeye's Automation and Robotics Center, located in a former John Deere building known as the TechWorks Campus, is next to the John Deere Museum — also housed in a former John Deere manufacturing building. While touring the museum, we were able to see the complex hydraulics systems of the modern farming tractors used today. For someone whose skill involves a computer monitor, seeing the sample hydraulics training station and then comparing it with a tractor whose tires are taller than I am was a stark "in real life" example of why what our colleges provide is so crucial to both students and communities.

While Hawkeye Community College is working to address the labor shortage, Iowa is not alone in this challenge. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a new series in July called "Understanding America's



Labor Shortage” (www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage). It includes profiles of the most-impacted industries, including durable goods manufacturing, and an interactive map of the most impacted states. By the U.S. Chamber’s measure, comparing job seekers with openings, Iowa has a severe shortage, but other states are ranked as more and most severe. In all, the U.S. Chamber finds that as of July 24, 2024, only 6.8 million unemployed workers are available to fill 8.1 million job openings. And that’s before you take into account the geographic location and skill sets of those unemployed workers, meaning the gap is likely even larger.

Given the worker shortages and growth in skilled jobs, it is not a surprise that many community colleges nationwide see growing interest in their skilled training and workforce development programs. These programs, frequently called “noncredit,” do not receive the same types of support as their academic counterparts for students on a pathway to an associate degree or transfer — in fact, Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana has renamed them “Skills Training” courses to better represent their value.

Given the growing importance of skill training to our institutions and the economies of our communities, ACCT in August launched the Funding Models for Community Colleges project. This project explores to what extent states fund credit-bearing, dual enrollment, and noncredit activity. Researchers Amberly Dzieszinski, Ph.D., and Eunji You of the Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that while all states fund courses for credit, only 35 fund dual enrollment and just over half, or 27, fund noncredit education. Only 22 states fund all three forms of education offered by community colleges.

These findings are outlined in a research brief and policy table but are also presented in an interactive dashboard on the Center for Policy and Practice section of the ACCT website. (www.acct.org/center-for-policy-practice/state-funding-models). I encourage trustees, presidents, and

other community college leaders and champions to examine the funding dynamics in your state — and neighboring states — using the tool. This newly released compendium can be a starting point for conversations in your state about how various streams of your work are funded, and how those relate to fulfilling the worker shortage.

One way to educate policy makers on the importance of workforce programs and the impact they have on the local economy and community is to invite elected officials — at the local, state, and federal levels — to tour your campus to see the facilities. Another is coordinating visits to nearby employers to see alumni in action. Just as I gained a better appreciation for reality when facing a tractor twice my height, seeing hands-on classrooms paired with the practical application of skills could spur supportive action in your elected officials.

The outcome of the upcoming election is uncertain. But the continued need for our colleges to support learners and workers in skilled training programs to fulfill in-demand jobs has only been increasing since the COVID-19 pandemic caused “the Great Reshuffle” in the labor market. This need is certain to continue. Investment at all levels for high-demand fields, particularly in the middle-skills fields, will support individuals in moving into better paying and more stable jobs and have greater impacts on our economy and society. Now is a prime time for colleges to work together, and with their states, to ensure they have adequate funding to support skilled training.



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