

TESTIMONY

Submitted by
New Jersey Council of County Colleges
Aaron R. Fichtner, Ph.D., President
for the Senate Higher Education Committee's Public Hearing on
Post-Pandemic Trends in Higher Education
March 4, 2024

On behalf of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC), I want to thank Chairman Cryan, Vice-Chairman Zwicker, and Members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, Senator Amato, Senator Moriarty, and Senator Singer, for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the critical topic of Post-Pandemic Trends in Higher Education.

From the Council's perspective, this public hearing is perfectly timed. Our 18 community college presidents have devoted enormous effort, individually and jointly through the Council, to assessing trends that are impacting higher education in the aftermath of the pandemic. To tackle these challenges, we have just released a new collective blueprint—***New Jersey's Opportunity Agenda: Building Pathways to Equity and Economic Prosperity.***

As two of our community college presidents and two student services leaders will testify before you today, the Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects of the student experience for those who were in community college in 2020 and beyond, with deep academic, social, and economic consequences for our students, and profound impacts on our overall operations. Community college students tend to be the most economically vulnerable college students in the state, often part-time students with complex lives and challenges that make college completion difficult under the best circumstances, let alone while weathering a global pandemic. In addition, our colleges know that middle and high school students likewise faced turmoil in their educational experience as a result of Covid-19, and the evidence of pandemic learning loss is significant and likely to be a factor impacting community college students, faculty, and staff over the next decade.

The pandemic also accelerated technological, economic, and social trends that were already underway. Facing rapid changes in digital technology and a tight pandemic-recovery labor market, New Jersey's employers increasingly turned to their local community colleges for workforce development assistance. And, as the pandemic made academic, economic, health care, housing, and other inequities more visible, our community colleges, which serve higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students than four-year institutions, have increased their focus on eliminating equity gaps.

In short, in the aftermath of the pandemic, our state's community colleges have made extraordinary progress, implementing:

- new modes and fields of instruction;
- new partnerships with high schools, four-year colleges and universities, nonprofits, unions, and businesses; and
- new models to support student progress and completion in earning credentials and degrees;
- a performance-based funding formula that rewards postsecondary access, equity, and student success;
- better data strategies to inform decisions and investments at all level, and
- an increased level of coordination and collaboration among the 18 community colleges.

Our Opportunity Agenda highlights innovative practices underway at each of our 18 institutions, demonstrating how community colleges are transforming our state's future. Our scale is substantial: **Each year, more than 230,000 New Jerseyans turn to their local community colleges, including more than 4 in 10 of all undergraduate students and over half of public undergraduates. Our community college graduates power the state's key industries, including health care, information technology, infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, and supply chain management.** Being both nimble and responsive to state and local workforce needs, our colleges have launched new academic and career pathways in AI, film, aseptic manufacturing, drone technology, renewable energy, and other emerging fields.

We have made considerable progress, but there is far more work to do—work that takes increased foundational and strategic investment in community colleges. Governor Murphy has been a champion for community colleges, launching the Community College Opportunity Grant that has helped tens of thousands of low-income students. Many of our recent initiatives to better serve our students, employers, and communities are a direct result of the \$20 million increase in operating aid included in the FY 2024 state budget. Given the post-pandemic challenges our state faces and the role our community colleges play as a solution to many of those challenges, we must not backslide in our state investment in community college operating aid.

OPPORTUNITY AGENDA ACTION PILLARS

In the aftermath of the pandemic, New Jersey’s community colleges together believe implementing the following is the best route to equitable academic, social, and economic mobility for all New Jerseyans and economic prosperity for our communities.

PILLAR 1: PUTTING ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON A PATH TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

New Jersey’s community colleges are building on their deep local roots and extensive collaborations with area high schools to ensure all high school students have equitable and expanded access to dual enrollment, college and career guidance, and financial aid. As New Jersey’s Dual Enrollment Study Commission noted, dual enrollment improves “college and credential access, affordability, and completion.” Yet the report also notes that access to dual enrollment is profoundly unequal in New Jersey. An expanded, statewide dual enrollment commitment tied to community colleges is needed to help rectify pandemic learning loss especially for low-income and students who are historically underrepresented in higher education.

PILLAR 2: FOSTERING STUDENT SUCCESS AND COMPLETION IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

New Jersey's community colleges serve an incredibly diverse population of students, many from low-income and marginalized communities, including high school students, older and working learners, student parents, refugees, immigrants, justice-impacted individuals, unemployed and underemployed individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans. To help this diverse array of learners succeed in their postsecondary journeys, community colleges across the state are helping them address their academic, financial, and basic needs, including mental health, child care, transportation, food, and housing. Our colleges know the evidence-based strategies that could be implemented with adequate resources to further help community college students succeed. For example, rigorous research has found that having one advisor for every 150 students contributes to better student outcomes, but this level of effort requires additional resources. We need state support to expand programs like EOF and Student Success initiatives.

PILLAR 3: BUILDING TRANSPARENT, SEAMLESS, AND STACKABLE PATHWAYS THAT RESPOND TO THE CHANGING ECONOMY

Technological, social, climate, and economic changes are impacting the skills and lifelong learning that New Jerseyans need to thrive in a diverse society and global economy. Community colleges, in partnership with other stakeholders and with state budget and legislative support, are committed to reimagining general education, smoothing transfer from two- to four-year institutions, providing access to applied baccalaureate degrees in high demand occupations, embedding industry credentials in more community college programs, expanding access to internships and credit for prior learning, and continuing to build out New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities.

Through the NJ Pathways Initiative, funded in the three past state budgets, community colleges, in partnership with the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, have built strong and enduring partnerships with hundreds of businesses, labor unions, high schools, universities, and community organizations with a focus on aligning programs with the needs of the state's key industries including health care, renewable energy, manufacturing, and data science.

PILLAR 4: HELPING ADULTS ATTAIN THE CREDENTIALS THEY NEED FOR CAREER MOBILITY AND LABOR MARKET SUCCESS

Community colleges play a critical role in assisting adults to obtain skills, credentials, and degrees throughout their lives and careers to help them thrive in a changing economy. New Jersey must develop strategies to provide financial support for workforce and short-term credential programs that have value in the labor market, either because they are recognized by employers and/or because they lead to wage premiums and opportunities for economic mobility, especially for underserved populations. New Jersey must also rethink strategic coordination of the community college and public workforce systems.

At this critical time for higher education in our state, NJCCC serves as a powerful catalyst for innovation and collaboration between the state's 18 community colleges. We now seek the help and leadership of the Senate Higher Education Committee and your colleagues in the State Legislature to advance legislation and a Fiscal Year 2025 state budget tied to our agenda, including support for operating aid, equitable access to dual enrollment; robust supports for student success; and funding for high quality workforce credentials for low-income individuals.

Thank you to the members of this Senate Higher Education Committee for holding today's hearing. NJCCC is ready to partner with you on helping our 18 community colleges provide the essential robust academic, economic, social, and basic needs supports our students need to succeed.

About the New Jersey Council of County Colleges

Governed by the presidents and trustees of the state's 18 community colleges and enshrined in state law, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) supports New Jersey's community colleges and the more than 230,000 students they serve annually across 49 locations by fostering collaboration and developing solutions that expand access to college, promote equity and student success, and create a skilled workforce to drive economic growth. NJCCC brings together the state's community colleges to build a world-class, flexible higher education and workforce development system that can respond to the needs of local communities and employers while having statewide reach and impact. NJCCC promotes innovation and policy changes to help New Jersey's community colleges in their efforts to achieve academic, social, and economic mobility for all residents. The Council's New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development builds statewide industry, education, and labor partnerships that align education and training with the needs of a changing economy.