



Practitioner Insights for Recovery

Five Reasons Why Community Colleges Are Key to Our COVID-19 Recovery

JFF's Policy Leadership Trust

June 2020

At a Glance

In March, the world changed. COVID-19 hit the nation, impacting the health, economic security, and way of life of many Americans. Education also was severely disrupted. The traditional model of much of higher education is [simply at odds](#) with the reality of the pandemic. With so much at stake, it would be wise to consider what the nation's public community and technical colleges have to offer for students, workers, and the economy.

As community college practitioners serving on [JFF's Policy Leadership Trust](#), we offer these five reasons why investments and policies that support our institutions are essential to combatting the COVID-19 crisis and revitalizing the economy. We believe that community colleges have an essential role to play for the following reasons:

1. They train the workforce vital for treating the sick and keeping the nation safe
2. They specialize in career-oriented programs that can get people (back) to work quickly
3. They offer a promising first step for students seeking bachelor's degrees
4. They have deep roots in their local communities
5. They have a track record of adapting to changing circumstances and priorities.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works.

www.jff.org

About the Policy Leadership Trust

The Policy Leadership Trust is a select group of education leaders who let experience be their guide in developing state and federal policies that help students attain credentials for greater success in the labor market. The Policy Leadership Trust brings evidence of what works, speaks to practical considerations and trade-offs of different policy approaches, and voices the needs of students and local communities to ensure that policy designs meet desired goals.

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Disclaimer

Policy positions of the Policy Leadership Trust represent the prevailing viewpoints of its membership and do not necessarily reflect perspectives of all individual members.

Call to Action

In March, the world changed. COVID-19 hit the nation, impacting the health, economic security, and way of life of many Americans. Education also was severely disrupted. College students across the country went home and transitioned to remote learning. Meanwhile, institutions of higher education went through their own period of adjustment, preparing faculty for the transition to online education and making sure students had the resources they needed to succeed in the new environment.

Colleges and universities are still in crisis mode today, but many have nonetheless started releasing [plans to reopen this fall](#). That may be a problem for students, because the traditional model of much of higher education—residential living, costly on-campus amenities, and four years of semester-based courses—is [simply at odds](#) with the reality of the pandemic. Students may not want to travel far from home, if at all; many of them are now in precarious financial situations and may feel greater urgency to focus on building skills for the rapidly changing economy.

With so much at stake, it would be wise to consider what the nation's 1,000 public community and technical colleges have to offer for students, workers, and the economy. Community colleges have always been leaders in crisis response. Because they emphasize affordability, flexible education delivery, and connections to regional economies, community colleges are well positioned to help Americans access postsecondary education and prepare them for work. That is why, especially in times of economic downturn, government, communities, and families ought to look to community colleges as engines of recovery.

As community college practitioners serving on [JFF's Policy Leadership Trust](#), we offer these five reasons why community colleges are the right choice at this time and why investments and policies that support our institutions are essential to combatting the public health and economic crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reason 1

Community colleges train the workforce that is vital for treating the sick and keeping the nation safe

COVID-19 has made abundantly clear how important health care workers and first responders are to the well-being of our nation. With no end to the pandemic in sight, the nation will need a steady supply of highly skilled health care workers and first responders.

What Works

Many who serve on the front lines of the pandemic received their education and training at community colleges. Among registered nurses, about [half](#) of the current workforce and newly graduating classes of nursing students started at community college. More than [three-fourths](#) of emergency medical technicians and firefighters go through community college programs. Many respiratory therapists, lab technicians, and nurse aides also hail from community colleges.

What's Changing

This spring, the talent development pipeline was thrown into disarray. Hospitals terminated student clinical rotations, and students even had difficulty practicing their skills in simulated settings in labs because many schools shuttered their campuses.

What Recovery Requires

Colleges, states, and regulatory bodies can take a number of [actions](#) to put health care training back on track—at hospitals and clinics and in labs that offer simulated experiences—to ensure that students are able to realize their career aspirations to care for their communities in this time of great need.

Reason 2

Community colleges specialize in career-oriented programs that can get people (back) to work quickly

With more than 43 million Americans filing for unemployment insurance in a matter of weeks after COVID-19 struck, helping workers find jobs in a pandemic-battered economy will soon become our nation's top priority. The need for retraining could be huge. Some [economists](#) predict that as many as 42 percent of recent layoffs will result in permanent job losses. In one survey, [one-third](#) of adults indicated that if they lose their job because of the COVID-19 crisis they would expect to need *more* education to land another job that pays a wage comparable to what they had been earning. An even larger share of workers said they would anticipate switching career fields altogether.

What Works

Since their [inception](#), community colleges have embraced an open-door mission for offering occupational education and training to serve the workforce development needs of business and industry and the skill needs of students and workers. Today, community colleges award more than half of all associate degrees and nearly all shorter-term certificates in [career-oriented fields](#), and they are increasingly introducing [applied baccalaureate](#) programs to meet rising skill demands.

What's Changing

Demand for short-term training is [skyrocketing](#) in the COVID era. In a survey, a majority of adults who were considering enrolling in an education or training program said they would prefer an industry certification or a skill-building course, rather than a lengthier degree program.

What Recovery Requires

With the emergence of boot camps, online learning platforms, and corporate training initiatives, community colleges need to adjust to changing marketplace to remain relevant and responsive to student demands. To support the nation's recovery, community colleges must establish stronger partnerships with businesses—such as the partnerships launched as part of the [TAACCCT](#) program—and develop the muscle to understand and quickly respond to changing labor market shifts in our communities. The Policy Leadership Trust has articulated a [vision](#) for what a career-connected postsecondary system could look like and how policy, funding mechanisms, and accreditation standards would need to evolve to achieve it.

Reason 3

Community colleges offer a promising first step for students seeking bachelor's degrees

The incoming freshman class are facing an unenviable decision about whether to matriculate this fall—and they could quite possibly face that decision for the next couple of academic years, until a COVID-19 vaccination is widely available. The prudent decision for many students may be to postpone plans to attend a residential institution and instead enroll in their local community college, whether classes are offered in-person or remotely.

What Works

Community colleges already serve at the intersection of K-12 and higher education. [Half](#) of bachelor's degree holders have spent time at a community college. And, upwards of [800,000](#) high school students take dual enrollment courses through local community colleges.

What's Changing

The transfer path from a community college to a four-year university is [riddled](#) with unrealized dreams and rejected credits. COVID-19 has raised the stakes for getting the transfer process right, given the sheer number of students who, due to health and financial concerns, may decide to enroll in community college this fall with the goal of transferring eventually. For students thrust into online courses, the widespread move to pass/fail grading policies further complicates the matter. Four-year colleges often [don't accept pass/fail credits](#) for transfer, especially not toward a student's major.

What Recovery Requires

More must be done to ensure that courses taken at community colleges are recognized for credit at four-year colleges and universities. In an increasing number of states, community colleges and universities are working together to design [transfer program pathways](#) that ensure that associate's degree holders who transfer to universities will enter as rising juniors in their desired fields of study. Through [sound policy action and shared accountability structures](#), these programs can be expanded in time to help students who start their higher education journeys in community colleges this fall.

Reason 4

Community colleges have deep roots in their local communities

Unlike many four-year universities that draw students from across the country and around the world, community colleges are connected to their local communities and serve local students. This presents an opportunity for community colleges to be regional hubs that holistically serve the needs of students and their families—an especially important role at this time.

What Works

Evidence shows that students are more likely to [persist](#) and [complete](#) their courses of study when community colleges partner with human services agencies to provide nonacademic supports, such as assistance with child care, transportation, housing, and food.

What's Changing

COVID-19 exposed just how many [students are living perilously on the edges of society](#). Across the country, community colleges have responded to the COVID crisis by committing to personal outreach to students, and they have been tapping campus food supplies, emergency aid programs, and technology resources, among other assets, to help students meet their most urgent needs.

What Recovery Requires

Now is the time to expand the role of community colleges as regional hubs of services and supports. [Federal](#) and [state](#) policy action is needed to break down siloes across government programs, build the capacity of institutions, and increase access to public assistance for students.

Reason 5

Community colleges have a track record of adapting to changing circumstances and priorities

Throughout their history, community colleges have transformed themselves to respond to the needs of evolving communities and changing times. But their agility is being put to the test as the COVID-19 crisis unfolds. To meet the urgent needs of their students, community colleges have had to overcome many challenges, including the need to transition to remote instruction. This fall will undoubtedly bring more challenges—and more opportunities.

What Works

Distance learning was already on the [rise](#) before the pandemic struck. In the 2015–16 school year, 45 percent of all community colleges students took at least some courses online, up from 18 percent in 2003–2004. Among community college systems in California, Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina with the largest distance learning programs, enrollment has [doubled](#) in the past eight years. Many community colleges also have committed to undertaking evidence-based reforms, such as [guided pathways](#) and [co-requisite remediation](#), to address unacceptably low rates of student persistence and completion.

What's Changing

The pandemic is ratchetting up the scale and scope of uncertainty, affecting every facet of operating an institution and creating a [dizzying array](#) of options and decision points for delivering a quality education wherever it occurs and ensuring that students succeed.

What Recovery Requires

Community colleges should lean into the challenge, not just by making small adjustments to courses and programs, but by working to realize longstanding goals to [transform](#) the college experience.

This starts by ensuring that all distance learning experiences are of equally high quality, and that they are accessible and effective for all learners, especially those from underserved and marginalized populations. Moreover, more colleges should follow California's lead; community colleges in that state are fast-tracking an effort to move from a “seat-time” model, where students earn credit for completing courses, to a model in which students earn credentials based on their [demonstrated competencies](#). Likewise, colleges should strongly consider switching to

[abbreviated seven-week semesters](#), which would support an effective approach to intensive learning and will make it easier to manage future disruptions to academic activities.

Moreover, in light of the sudden cancellations of proctored high-stakes college readiness exams, it is time for states and community colleges to adopt [evidence-based approaches](#) that use multiple measures, such as high school GPAs, to assess incoming students and place them into classes. Adoption of such a model could even empower students to self-place.

Sound policy can help community colleges make these changes permanent and enable them to continue pushing to scale up student success reforms that will help boost completion rates and close equity gaps.

Future Forward

Serving at the crossroads of education, work, and personal well-being, the nation's public community and technical colleges are well positioned to make important contributions during the public health crisis and the long road to economic recovery. However, we need to enact the right policies and make the right investments to harness and unleash the full potential of community colleges.

JFF's Policy Leadership Trust has plenty to say about what needs to be done. As the crisis continues to unfold, the Trust will continue to share ideas and recommend policies designed to help ensure that all Americans have access to high-quality postsecondary opportunities that lead to economic advancement. Check back at jff.org/trust for future blogs and virtual conversations in our *Practitioner Insights for Recovery* series.

JFF's Policy Leadership Trust

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