

# RESKILLING

FOR THE PANDEMIC RECESSION AND RECOVERY



**ACCT**  
ASSOCIATION OF  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

Made possible by a grant from  **Guardian**



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was researched and written by Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) Senior Policy Analyst Allison Beer and Associate Writer Jacob B. Bray. The authors thank ACCT Senior Vice President Jee Hang Lee for his support and guidance. We also thank the community college leaders who contributed to the profiles of institutional supports featured in this report. The insights and experiences they shared during interviews were critically valuable to this work. Finally, we would like to thank the Guardian Life Insurance Company of America for their generous support for this project. We especially appreciate the support from Guardian's Head of Corporate Social Responsibility Veena Jayadeva.

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### November 2020

**Suggested citation:** Suggested citation: Beer, A. and Bray, J.B. (2020). *Reskilling for the Pandemic Recession and Recovery*. Washington, D.C. Association of Community College Trustees.

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## INTRODUCTION

Community colleges currently serve as the nation's leading provider of affordable workforce education. Community colleges serve a diverse student body looking to gain skills for career advancement. Many community college students looking for workforce training opportunities are adults, many among them work while enrolled, and are parents, low-income, from minority racial and ethnic groups, veterans, and/or immigrants, among other underserved and underrepresented groups. The sector's strength in being able to serve such a diverse student population is a result of the wide variety of affordable credential and degree offerings. For workforce education, community colleges offer programs including non-credit employer training, short-term credentials, applied associate and baccalaureate degrees, and earning-while-learning opportunities such as apprenticeships. Furthermore, the sector is a leader in training students to work in a variety of fields, including applied health care, information technology, mechanics and engineering, education, and public safety. As such, community colleges can offer students a variety of pathways for reskilling or upskilling to advance in their careers.

Historically, community colleges have been an affordable education option for students looking for reskilling opportunities during economic downturns. During the Great Recession of 2008, community colleges emerged as the leader in workforce training for economic recovery through initiatives such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program and stimulus funding for unemployed and dislocated workers as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.<sup>1</sup> In early 2020, the coronavirus pandemic generated a global health emergency and a sharp economic downturn. As non-essential businesses were required to close and travel halted to stop the spread of the virus, many Americans working in impacted industries were laid off or furloughed from their jobs.

As a result of the pandemic, the national unemployment rate drastically increased from 3.8% in February to 13% in May, swiftly surpassing the unemployment rate of the Great Recession.<sup>2</sup> While the economic downturn has been widespread, certain groups of Americans have experienced disproportionately high job losses. Women, Black and Hispanic individuals and people without a postsecondary credential have experienced disproportionately high job losses.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, layoffs have been concentrated in service industries such as tourism, hospitality, and restaurants. Jobs in these industries are among the least likely to allow for working from home and are susceptible to replacement from automation.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to unemployment benefits, many unemployed workers will need education and training in order to find new jobs in sectors that have been less impacted by the pandemic. According to a recent survey by Strada Education Network, many adults express interest in pursuing postsecondary education and workforce training.<sup>5</sup> However, community colleges are currently experiencing large enrollment declines. For the fall 2020 semester, the community college sector experienced an over 9% average decline in enrollment.<sup>6</sup> Likely causes of enrollment declines include prospective students' financial barriers, family responsibilities, and uncertainty about the future. Furthermore, initial enrollment data points to widening equity gaps in enrollments among Black and Hispanic students, who have historically been underrepresented in postsecondary education.

Community colleges, students, and unemployed adults continue to face challenges as the pandemic continues and the timeline for recovery remains uncertain. In this brief, we discuss the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic from March through October 2020; proposals for large-scale job training programs in response to high levels of unemployment; and community college strategies to support students in need of reskilling during challenging times. Due to the unique public health and economic needs of the pandemic, our analysis of community college strategies focuses on how community colleges are training students for professions in essential industries and the health care sector. To illustrate these efforts, the brief includes two profiles of workforce training programs: 1) Futures for Frontliners, a G.I. Bill-like program for essential workers in Michigan; and 2) health care training programs at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



## CORONAVIRUS ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The coronavirus pandemic has had a widely negative impact on the economy. As a result of the pandemic, the national unemployment rate drastically increased from 3.8% in February to 13% in May.<sup>7</sup> By September, the unemployment rate dropped down to 8%.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, the highest unemployment rate during the Great Recession was 10.6% in January 2010.<sup>9</sup> Another worrying economic indicator is that over 860,000 women (nearly four times the rate of men) have dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic, likely due to challenges of balancing family and work responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> The number of women who have dropped out of the workforce is in addition to those who have been laid off and furloughed. In addition to women, Black and Hispanic individuals and people without a postsecondary credential have experienced disproportionately high job losses.<sup>11</sup>

Layoffs during the pandemic have been widespread, with industries such as tourism and hospitality experiencing some of the greatest losses. Jobs in these industries are among the least likely to allow for working from home and are susceptible to replacement from automation.<sup>12</sup> According to data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), from February through September, the industries with the greatest net decreases in employment included leisure and hospitality (3.1 million job losses); professional and business services (1.3 million losses) and education and health services (1.2 million losses).<sup>13</sup> Initially, the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided funding for businesses and industries to prevent layoffs. However, by September 2020, many companies had exhausted their stimulus funds leading to additional layoffs, notably in the airline and tourism industries.<sup>14</sup>

During the pandemic, the health care sector has faced a unique set of challenges. While hospitals and health care facilities have experienced shortages of doctors and nurses to treat coronavirus patients, early in the pandemic, other health sectors have faced financial challenges due to fewer routine patients. In addition, due to closures, colleges have had limited ability to train new health care workers and find clinical placements necessary to fill in-demand roles.<sup>15</sup>

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# ECONOMIC STIMULUS AND JOB TRAINING POLICY PROPOSALS

In the wake of economic downturn and large-scale unemployment, community colleges are at the forefront to provide unemployed adults with workforce training opportunities to gain skills for a new job or career. Federal stimulus has provided needed funding for community colleges to respond to students' needs during the pandemic, yet additional funding is needed for community colleges to expand workforce training opportunities. Several states have also proposed initiatives for workforce training; however, state budget cuts are likely to be a challenge in the coming years. This section provides additional details on federal and state programs.

## Federal

The greatest source of federal funding to benefit community colleges and their students during the pandemic has been the CARES Act. The CARES Act provided approximately \$14 billion in aid to the higher education sector, including community colleges, as part of the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). Notably, the HEERF provided emergency aid for students and institutional dollars to pay for expenses related to the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> The CARES Act also included \$3 billion for the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF), which provides flexible block grants to states to address challenges of the pandemic impacting either K-12 or postsecondary education.<sup>17</sup> The CARES Act provided a relatively small amount of funding specifically for workforce training. The stimulus included \$127 million for states to create or expand short-term training programs.<sup>18</sup>

While the CARES Act has provided needed relief for postsecondary education, the community college sector has continually advocated for new large-scale investments in workforce training, following the end of the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program that was enacted during the Great Recession. The TAACCCT program provided crucial grants to community colleges to support unemployed individuals and provide workforce training; however, the program ended in 2018.<sup>19</sup> Community colleges have advocated for a successor program, informally referred to as "TAACCCT 2.0," to re-invest in community college workforce training. In 2019, Congress created the Strengthening Community College Training Grants program, which provides \$40 million in grants to community colleges to expand partnerships for workforce training.<sup>20</sup> The new program provides community colleges needed funds to expand workforce training; however, the grants are much smaller in scale than the previous \$2 billion TAACCCT program investment and do not fully meet community colleges' needs to expand capacity for workforce training amid large-scale unemployment.

## State

The pandemic has left states facing looming budget crises that will likely result in long-term cuts to funding for postsecondary education and workforce training. Many states, including those with large community college systems such as California, have already announced likely cuts if additional federal stimulus is not provided.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the likely budget cuts, some states have provided resources for workforce training targeted towards adult students, unemployed individuals, and essential workers. One emerging state model is a "G.I. Bill" for essential workers, which provides scholarships for adults who have served as frontline workers in industries ranging from health care to retail during the pandemic. Michigan is the first state to have launched such a model; its Futures for Frontliners program is profiled in further detail in this report. A defining feature of Futures for Frontliners is that the state-based program currently relies on federal CARES Act funding in the wake of state budget freezes.



# HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH RESKILLING

Challenges arising from the pandemic have necessitated that colleges develop new strategies for workforce development or adjust existing ones. Top of mind for colleges is being able to meet students' increased financial needs; provide necessary supports for adult students who must balance competing priorities; and offer safe and appropriate instruction for training programs that often require hands-on or in-person classes.

## Emergency Financial Aid

During uncertain economic times, many students are seeking more affordable college options. Community colleges offer students low tuition, especially when compared with other sectors; however, many students need increased financial aid to enroll or persist at this time, as the pandemic has resulted in unexpected expenses or job losses. Through the federal CARES Act, community colleges were able to provide many students with emergency aid to pay for expenses related to the pandemic, such as food, housing, and technology. For example, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) used CARES Act funding to provide eligible students in need with \$500 - \$700 in emergency financial aid to pay for unexpected expenses related to the pandemic. In addition, NOVA loaned laptops to students without their own equipment and provided grocery gift cards to students with financial need but who did not qualify for emergency aid grants.<sup>22</sup> A shortcoming of CARES Act funding is that it provided colleges with less money for part-time students and excluded many students who were enrolled in career and technical education programs. Furthermore, most colleges exhausted this funding by spring or summer 2020, without continued federal assistance.

## Focus on Adult and Out-of-Work Learners

Workforce training during an economic recession requires colleges to pay extra attention to adult learners. Due to layoffs and furloughs, community colleges have an important role in supporting adults. Community colleges must also recognize the unique needs of adult students during the pandemic, as many balance new family responsibilities, such as at-home child care and schooling. Some states and colleges have created new financial aid programs targeted towards adult and out-of-work learners. For example, the University of Hawaii Community Colleges established a scholarship program for individuals laid off due to the pandemic and, in particular, those in Hawaii's tourism industry.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the Michigan Reconnect program, profiled in this brief, aims to support the efforts of adult learners working in essential industries to return to college to earn a degree or credential for career mobility.

Other strategies colleges could implement to support adult learners include offering asynchronous online classes for students to be able to complete coursework on their own schedules; simplifying course and degree requirements to support completion; connecting students with new child care options; and providing counseling and mental health services.<sup>24</sup> Adult students may also benefit from short-term credential programs that allow them to quickly learn a new skill necessary for employment.<sup>25</sup>



## Hybrid Learning Options

After the start of the pandemic, many community colleges were required to close their campuses and shift to virtual learning without prior planning. While necessary for public health, the shift to virtual learning has created many challenges for students who lack access to necessary technology, such as at-home computers and internet access. Many community colleges have worked to expand technology access, especially for low-income students and those living in rural areas; however, this continues to be a substantial challenge worsened by the lack of state and federal funding.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, many community college workforce-training programs that require hands-on learning do not translate to virtual formats. This is a particular challenge for health care and manufacturing programs that require on-site training. Colleges such as Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa have developed hybrid learning options in order to continue critical workforce training programs. Using this model, students complete most of their coursework virtually, supplemented with small-group, in-person classes for required hands-on learning. Kirkwood Community College's hybrid health care programs are profiled in the following section of this brief.

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## MICHIGAN: FREE COLLEGE FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced plans for a new program designed to provide tuition-free pathways to essential workers who do not hold college degrees. Called Futures for Frontliners, the program provides financial aid to adults who work in a wide range of coronavirus frontline industries from health care workers to grocery store clerks, based on the governor's declaration of essential services. This program is like the federal government's G.I. Bill, educational support for veterans, but at the state level. The program formally launched in September 2020 and recipients will be able to start using their scholarships in 2021.<sup>27</sup> To learn more about this program, the authors interviewed representatives from the Michigan Governor's Office, the Michigan Community College Association, and Henry Ford College.<sup>28</sup>

According to the Michigan Governor's office, approximately 625,000 residents served as essential workers from April through June 2020 and will be eligible to apply. Many of these essential workers have not previously pursued postsecondary education or begun their studies without having previously completed a degree or credential. The Futures for Frontliners programs seek to engage many of these adults and meet the state's goal for 60% of the working population to earn a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2030. Wage gains from earning a postsecondary credential have been well documented for many decades. Today, earning a postsecondary degree has become even more important, as employment data indicates that individuals without at least some postsecondary education have been more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic.<sup>29</sup> In addition, staffing shortages in industries such as allied health care demonstrate the need for more individuals to earn credentials that will allow them to work in high-need fields.

Michigan established the Futures for Frontliners program by using the Governor's Education Emergency Relief Fund (GEERF), which is part of the federal CARES Act. The GEERF gives states flexibility to fund educational needs resulting from the pandemic, including for postsecondary education. Michigan decided to use the GEERF for the program in the wake of a state budget freeze that halted plans for the previously announced Michigan Reconnect adult postsecondary attainment promise program, modeled after the Tennessee Reconnect adult college promise program. In September, the state legislature passed funding to continue the adult promise program.<sup>30</sup>

According to Doug Ross, senior advisor for Michigan Prosperity, an initiative "dedicated to educating Michigan citizens about creating economic opportunity for everyone," the governor's office is working closely with Michigan community colleges to effectively launch and implement the program. Each community college has been asked to designate a Futures for Frontliners point of contact who will interface with the governor's office and lead student recruitment and outreach. As of October, over 70,000 students had applied, demonstrating a strong interest among adults to pursue a postsecondary credential.

Futures for Frontliners students will be able to participate in courses of study related to their current professions or to pursue a new career path. Russ Kavalhuna, president of Henry Ford College, located a couple miles from downtown Detroit, anticipates students will be interested in programs related to local, in-demand industries such as automotive technology, energy, supply chain management, robotics, and manufacturing. In addition, Kavalhuna and his colleagues expect increased student interest in programs directly related to the pandemic health emergency, including nursing and respiratory therapy.

In response to the economic and health challenges many students are facing as a result of the pandemic, Henry Ford College is connecting several support services to the Futures for Frontliners program, for students participating in both virtual and in-person classes. Everyone who enrolls through Futures for Frontliners will have access to advisors and one-on-one live video counseling sessions. Advisors will help students identify their areas of interest and expertise to ensure their chosen path of study is rewarding, and something they will be motivated to complete.



## KIRKWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE, IOWA: MEETING HEALTH CARE LABOR NEEDS

Community college health care programs are leaders in training essential workers to treat people during the pandemic. Nationally, a challenge for these programs has been figuring out how to offer courses that require hands-on training and in-person clinicals, while maintaining social distancing and protecting the health and safety of participating students and faculty. Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has been a leader in quickly adapting their programs to meet both students' needs and the needs of local health care employers. The authors interviewed leaders from the college to learn more about how they are implementing programs during challenging times.<sup>31</sup>

At the beginning of the pandemic, administrators worked to put safety measures in place for the entire college community, including a COVID-19 hotline to inform the campus of possible virus exposures. While Kirkwood mostly transitioned to virtual learning, they also created protocols for in-demand technical programs to partially continue on campus, including for health care.

A first step was to make as many aspects of health care programs as virtual as possible. For the course components that could be done virtually, Kirkwood tried to use high-fidelity simulations whenever possible. “For all of our labs, we increased the level of personal protective equipment (PPE), we did as much simulation as possible without taking away from the quality of a hands-on learning experience with actual patients,” said Dr. Nicky Cline, dean of allied health at Kirkwood. In contrast to low-fidelity simulations, high-fidelity simulations make use of lifelike mannequins and provide students with much greater detail and interactivity. A high-fidelity mannequin would have features as close to human anatomy as possible, for example, variable heart rate and a chest that breathes, among other features that give students a more engaging and practical understanding of their learning. A low-fidelity mannequin is more static and would be used for an activity like CPR training. It was necessary for Kirkwood to work with accreditors to fine tune the balance of in-person instruction and virtual simulation. Accreditors released new requirements for lab classes that required Kirkwood, in some instances, to host their own clinical course components and hire additional adjunct faculty. The lab component of some courses was also delayed, giving Kirkwood time to develop a new infrastructure while still allowing students to meet lab time requirements set by accreditors.

Though there is a high need for health care workers, Kirkwood experienced some challenges with student recruitment and satisfaction. Health care programs, in particular nursing, often have long waitlists for students to enroll. However, Mike McLaughlin, dean of health occupations, explained that enrollment was down or steady because many students were fearful of entering the medical field during the pandemic and risking exposure. Some students who were participating in on-campus classes were initially frustrated with the PPE they were required to wear; however, it was important for Kirkwood to emphasize that they would be wearing similar PPE if working in an actual medical setting.

Despite the changes, Kirkwood has not seen a drop in registration for health care programs. In fact, there is still a waitlist for most programs. Furthermore, Kirkwood experienced trouble placing students in health care facilities to earn clinical hours, as many non-essential facilities closed or others stopped accepting student trainees. Going forward, for the next few semesters, Kirkwood plans to keep as much instruction virtual as possible. Despite shifts in instructional practice, it will be important for Kirkwood to keep enrolling and graduating students from health care programs in order to meet the current and future needs of local health care providers.



## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a challenging and unprecedented economic downturn. As Americans respond to the health consequences of the virus, many are also facing unemployment and economic uncertainty. The economic challenge has been disproportionately high for certain segments of the population, including women, Black and Hispanic individuals, and individuals without a postsecondary credential. People who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic will need robust supports to ensure their well-being, including education and training to gain the skills for new job opportunities.

Community colleges have a central role in providing reskilling opportunities for the individuals most impacted by the pandemic and resulting recession. Historically, the community college sector has responded to America's education and workforce training needs during recessions, such as during the Great Recession. New challenges are present in the current recession, helping students stay healthy and balance work and family responsibilities while pursuing education. In this brief, we outlined several programs and proposals to provide stimulus funding to colleges and students, including the CARES Act and other workforce training proposals. We also described interventions that colleges can use, including providing emergency aid, focusing on adult learners, and offering hybrid learning options. The profiles of the Michigan Futures for Frontliners program and Kirkwood Community College's allied health programs are two examples of how community colleges are working to support students in challenging times.

At the time of publishing the report, the U.S. has been facing the pandemic for over nine months. We expect the health and economic situation to continue to evolve in the coming year and for the economic effects to be long-lasting. This will make community colleges central to the work of supporting students in the current challenging times and for months and years to come as the country recovers.


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