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Community colleges and the economic recovery

by Julian L. Alssid

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President Barack Obama has urged every American to commit to at least one year of postsecondary education. There is a very good reason why. According to Georgetown University's Center for Education and the Workforce, at least 54 percent of the new positions created by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act will require at least a postsecondary certificate.

If the economy is to begin to recover and grow under the president's economic policies, now is the time to better educate America's workforce to fill jobs that require increasingly complex skills. There is a growing recognition among policy-makers at all levels of government that the nation's community colleges provide the most logical -- and, for all practical purposes, the only -- foundation for the kind of broad-based workforce development system that will be needed to meet industry demand for skilled talent.

All across the country there are hundreds of programs at community colleges that require only a short-term certificate to land a job that pays a decent wage. For example, a two-year certificate from a community college in mechanical engineering could lead to a job as a mechanical engineering technician paying over \$47,000 a year. Similarly, in two years, an individual can earn a certificate as a dental assistant and transition to a job that pays more than \$31,000 a year.

What's critical is that we as a nation need to ensure that postsecondary credentials earned at community colleges continue to meet the current and future needs of our economy. A Brookings Institution study finds that we need better accountability and tracking of student outcomes, adequate funding and innovation at the community college level to increase the number of students completing community college programs.

To do so, we will need the participation and commitment of all the relevant stakeholders.

Students need to do their homework before they enter a program. They need to know what the workforce needs are in their region and what they need to do to prepare. They need to determine whether the degree or certificate program will help them land a career-track job and what resources are available to help them pay for their education. It is critical that the investment they are making to earn their degree or credential pays off in the end.

Community colleges need to be responsive and flexible. They need to serve as

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a lynchpin between employers and students. To do this, they need to work closely with employers to understand their workforce needs and incorporate that information into the curriculum they are offering students.

Educators need to uphold academic standards and, at the same time, ensure their programs will actually lead to jobs in the community. Community college and high school educators are and will be on the frontlines of making sure that students have the technical aptitude, including functional math and science knowledge, to fill the complex jobs of the future.

Policy-makers need to focus resources on getting people the degrees and certificates that will help grow the economy. The upcoming reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act presents an opportunity to help make this happen. The jobs that are needed in our economy have changed since the program was created in 1998 and the act needs to reflect those changes.

Businesses have an obligation to work with local economic development agencies and community colleges to instruct them on what skills are needed to fill current and available jobs. By being active partners in designing postsecondary programs to meet future needs, they will benefit by having a steady pipeline of trained workers.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sets aside more than \$4 billion for workforce development. We have an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help the economy recover by using these funds to better develop the skills of our workforce. According to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 22 of the 30 fastest growing career fields require some postsecondary education, which means if we start investing in our workforce now, then when the economy begins to recover, we'll have the foundation in place to jump-start economic growth.

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