



Reimagining the Land Grant College

Two-year colleges make ideal partners to help achieve the original goals of their four-year counterparts

BY DERIONNE POLLARD

When you see the words “land grant institution,” perhaps you visualize a place like my alma mater, Iowa State University. I always did, until I spoke with a colleague about the future of his university, a land grant institution that has become a major research presence. And it hit me: Community colleges are the reimagined, 21st-century version of the original land grant institutions.

As a graduate of a land grant institution, I have tremendous respect for the significance and value of the institutions that grew out of the Morrill Act. They now sit on the cutting edge of research, scholarship, and innovation; they are responsible for the infrastructure of our great country.

But, I would argue that as they build infrastructure and develop new technologies and innovations to move our country forward, original land grant institutions must have a partner. Community colleges are the natural choice to take up the land grant mantle. Our institutions are urgently needed to prepare the workforce—from biotech lab bench workers to nurses to engineers—instrumental to supporting the country’s infrastructure and, in doing so, helping rebuild the American middle class.

Community colleges are now being asked to play a role similar to the one envisioned for land grant institutions: to prepare the workforce, to speak to concerns about a system of higher education that is sometimes seen as unresponsive, and to ensure that the American dream of opportunity remains within reach for everyone.

Societal Need

Many of the circumstances that necessitated the initial 19th-century land grant movement are recurring in the 21st century. Even in today’s struggling economy, there still exists a need for trained workers.

National Skills Coalition data indicate a skills gap for middle-skill jobs, which account for the largest share of America’s labor market, including civil engineering

technicians, auto mechanics, registered nurses, and others.

In Maryland, about 44 percent of jobs are in so-called middle-skill occupations, but just 38 percent of workers have the appropriate training. The gap is even wider in states like Illinois, where 50 percent of the state’s jobs are middle-skill, but only 41 percent of the workforce is qualified.

Despite current economic challenges, employment opportunities exist for those with the right skills.

There is an urgent need to prepare our workforce for good, middle-class professions. The survival of the middle class—one of the reasons for creating that original land grant system—is at stake.

What Sets Us Apart

At the heart of the community college lies our ability to connect and to be relevant to the communities we serve. We know our students and our business community. We partner with K–12 schools and baccalaureate-granting institutions. We also know that for many of our students, we are their only affordable option.

What does a reimagined land grant college look like? How do we reflect our community? Montgomery College (MC) in Maryland, where I serve as president, is a good example.



Last year, our three-campus institution outside of Washington, D.C., enrolled more than 60,000 students in credit and noncredit education and workforce training programs. There is no majority race at MC. Our cultural and ethnic diversity is a point of pride, with students from more than 170 countries.

Like many Americans, our students often struggle financially. Last year, 7,200 of our students received Pell Grants, the largest source of need-based financial aid. The amount of financial aid to students increased 100 percent in the last five years, a figure that reflects the increasing financial need of our students.

Our job as community colleges is to help our students—no matter their income—develop the knowledge, confidence, and determination to change their lives.

National Science Foundation data tell us that nearly half of all science, engineering, and health students who go on to receive bachelor's or master's degrees attended a community college. At MC, our engineering transfer program enrolls more than 1,100 students.

Capital improvements complement workforce development efforts. We recently broke ground on a Bioscience Education Center that was developed in collaboration with local biotech companies eager to hire trained lab staff. Our planned Life Sciences Park recently signed a local hospital as its anchor tenant; we anticipate that the park will house several thousand employees.

Community colleges are best suited to the role of the new land grant institution because we understand and resemble the communities we serve. We are tightly coupled with business and industry. We have the essential connections needed for change and transformation.

Room to Grow

But we cannot become complacent. We cannot let declining resources and other barriers limit our scope or our vision.

A sense of urgency must underlie all our efforts. As our nation faces a crisis of confidence and as a generation wonders whether they will ever be as well off as their parents, there exists an urgent need to restate our belief in the American dream, to recognize the possible, and to understand that education for the broadest number of people is absolutely crucial to the future of this incredible country.

We are obligated to forge ahead, just as the first land grant institution pioneers did. We have a responsibility to not only educate and train a workforce, but to combat inequality and increase mobility through education. Government can help by investing in higher education and need-based financial aid; communities can help by connecting and encouraging higher education as a viable option; employers can help by engaging in productive conversations about their needs and by providing internships and other job opportunities. Our partners at

the K-12 level and in higher education are essential to collaborating on college and career readiness.

As for community colleges? We must be willing to be uncomfortable. We must have difficult conversations about how we function. While access is essential, we must also work toward consistent educational excellence and student success. Our greatest challenge: to ensure that all our students meet or exceed their goals. If our students acquire a credential, degree, skill, or transfer, the hope is that they will better their lives and contribute to an improved society.

Community colleges can establish potent and vital communities through higher education. It is both our responsibility and great privilege to be so essential to our country's economic future and to the very idea of the American dream.

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