



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

# Supporting Community Colleges and Encouraging Continued Education and Lifelong Learning

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In order to ensure that the U.S. has a globally-competitive workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, policy makers, educators and business leaders must work together to ensure that all young people have access to postsecondary education where they can develop critical skills for success in work and life. While a college degree is not always a requirement for an entry-level job, postsecondary education has become increasingly important for career advancement in our knowledge-driven labor market. More than ever before a college credential is the dividing line between a job that pays a family-supporting income and a life of entry-level employment and poverty.

For millions of young adults, the community college system provides the perfect avenue to obtain a postsecondary degree. Together, the nation's 1,200 community colleges serve 46 percent of undergraduates. With the high costs of four-year colleges, many low-income and underserved students begin their postsecondary education in community colleges. Community college students frequently are the first in their families to attend college. And the system helps ensure that more minority students and immigrants earn degrees: 47 percent of

African-American college undergrads and 55 percent of Hispanic college students are pursuing their education through community colleges.

“Business and government must work together to strengthen our nation’s system of community and two-year colleges so they can play an increasingly important role in enhancing America’s workforce and competitiveness.” — *William D. Green, Chairman and CEO, Accenture*

In addition to preparing young people to embark on a career, community colleges excel at helping adult learners and workers become more competitive with a focus on lifelong learning, *continuing* education, skill building, and the frequent *retraining* required to advance in almost any career today. Community colleges that do it best work in

partnership with community leaders, industry experts and employers to identify skills gaps in their local labor force and to customize training programs to quickly meet those needs.

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While control of the community college system often resides at the local and state level, federal lawmakers could take a number of steps to ensure that community colleges are fully recognized for the invaluable services they provide to American students and adult learners. For example, we recommend:

- **Reauthorization of the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA):** The reauthorization of WIA offers Congress an opportunity to fully integrate community colleges into the nation’s education and workforce

training systems. The legislation should also encourage community college and Workforce Investment Boards to partner and promote training for high-growth industries, and to provide competitive grants and student loans as an incentive for students to enter those programs.

- **Business Workforce Partnership:** The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act could be used to strengthen ties between colleges and business workforce needs. A Business Workforce Partnership would fund collaborations between accredited colleges and employer groups to align course offerings with the needs of local employers.
- **Opportunity for College Transfer:** Community colleges are often the only option for disadvantaged youth to begin their postsecondary education. Congress should support legislation that provides these individuals with the opportunity to transfer to four-year institutions to complete bachelors' degrees.
- **Low-Income Assistance:** Congress should ensure that all Americans who desire a college degree have the opportunity to seek it, regardless of economic ability. This can be done by continuing and possibly expanding support for financial assistance programs to those who need it most. Programs such as TRIO, GEAR UP and Pell Grants give low-income students the funds and support services necessary for them to complete their college education.
- **Lifelong Learning Accounts:** Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs) are employer-matched, portable education accounts that workers can use to finance their education and training. These accounts would benefit an estimated 40 million taxpayers who do not earn enough money to qualify for existing education credits and deductions, and others who do not now qualify because they attend college less than half time. Congress should pass Lifelong Learning Account legislation so that American workers can afford the ongoing education and training needed to compete and excel in the global economy.