NEW AMERICA

Strengthening Community Colleges for Advanced and Emerging Industries and the American Dream

Testimony of Mr. Shalin Jyotishi

Founder & Managing Director, Future of Work & Innovation Economy Initiative, New America

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Thank you, Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Committee, for the privilege to speak with you about the vital role community colleges play in preparing for the future and expanding access to economic security, the American middle class, and the American Dream.

My name is Shalin Jyotishi, and I lead the Future of Work & Innovation Economy initiative at New America. Our mission is to ensure that technological innovation and tech-based economic development translate into economic security for American workers and their families. Community colleges are central to that mission.

Our nation's more than 900 community colleges enroll about 40% of all undergraduate students. They disproportionately serve low-income students: Nearly 57% of their students come from households earning below 200% of the federal poverty level.[1] Through apprenticeships and work-based learning, career and technical education, and other workforce credentials, community colleges offer affordable, accessible, and industry-aligned pathways to the jobs that keep our communities running in healthcare, public safety, skilled trades, manufacturing, IT, and more.

[1] https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45686.pdfrunning

But increasingly, rapid advances in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence have meant that community colleges must prepare students for a much more complex labor market. From coast to coast, colleges are expanding training programs focused on AI,[2] biotechnology,[3] microelectronics,[4] energy innovation, and advanced manufacturing to promote economic development and meet industry needs.

More than half of America's 36 million STEM workers belong to the "skilled technical workforce," meaning they need education beyond high school, but not necessarily a bachelor's degree.[5] Community colleges are critical to educating this population. These workers tend to outearn peers with similar levels of education in non-STEM sectors, and they represent a bedrock of America's middle class and our key to continued and expanded economic prosperity and standard of living.

But community colleges are facing this responsibility while contending with long-standing underinvestment. Despite their focus on serving low-income students, they receive much less public funding per student compared to four-year institutions.[6] If we expect our community colleges to deliver strong workforce outcomes in our most advanced industries and during this period of accelerated technological change, they will need targeted and strategic investments to position them for success.

In September 2024, New America partnered with the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) to launch the Accelerator for Community Colleges in the Innovation Economy. A first-of-its-kind effort to provide capacity-building technical assistance to

[2] https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/whats-new-in-ai-focused-skilled-technical-workforce-education/
[3] https://www.forbes.com/sites/shalinjyotishi/2022/11/10/biotechnology-industry-gets-a-boost-from-community-college-degrees/
[4] https://micronanoeducation.org/about/
[5] https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20245
[6] https://www.ccdaily.com/2025/10/datapoints-revenue-by-source/

community colleges located in regions where tech-based economic development is concentrated. It is funded by private philanthropy and supported by a national network representing governors, mayors, businesses, community college presidents and trustees, workforce development boards, and research universities.[7] Drawing on our analysis and direct work with colleges, I offer the following recommendations for the committee to better leverage the Department of Education (ED) and the Department of Labor (DOL) to build community colleges for advanced and emerging technology industries:

First, ED and DOL should be given the resources and mandate to deepen collaboration with federal agencies advancing R&D and economic development in emerging technology areas of national interest,[8] including the National Science Foundation, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy, and other agencies.[9] These collaborations should focus on **a)** identifying the sectors aligned with national priorities, including national security and rural development; **b)** identifying the regions of priority for capacity-building investments, given ongoing federal and private sector activity; and **c)** coordinating relevant workforce funding opportunities for community colleges.

These actions would align with the administration's AI Action Plan, which has already called for Departments of Labor, Education, Commerce, and the NSF to "prioritize AI skill development as a core objective of education and workforce funding streams."[10] For illustration, the NSF's Advanced Technological Education (ATE)

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[7] https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/press-releases/nsf-and-new-america-announce-strategic-initiative-to-empower-community-and-technical-colleges/ ; https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/empowering-community-colleges-partnerships-for-economic-development-and-indeffectivelyfirst fiveustrial-policy/

[8] https://www.nsf.gov/focus-also areas/technology

[9] Including the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, and the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Infrastructure.

[10] https://dcjournal.com/how-community-colleges-can-realize-the-promise-of-ai-action-plan/

program has generated many best practices in community college capacity-building for advanced industries. NSF ATE funds the National Applied AI Consortium led by Miami Dade College, Houston Community College, and Maricopa Community College District. This consortium has partnered with Microsoft, Google, Intel, OpenAI, and other leading tech companies to support nearly 2,000 faculty and staff across more than 300 community colleges spanning 49 states to scale AI education.[11] There is much DOL and ED can learn and scale in collaborating with agencies closest to R&D and tech-based economic development,[12] as as part of this mandate, they should report their collaborations back to Congress for further evaluation and refined coordination.

Second, DOL and ED should be given the resources to accelerate community college capacity-building in advanced and emerging industries. DOL's Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants (SCCTG) program would be a good existing funding vehicle.[13] An expanded, targeted allocation for colleges focused on advanced and emerging industries and in regions poised to see the most tech-based growth would go a long way. Additionally, the Carl D. Perkins National Activities appropriation could also be harmonized with SCCTG funding to achieve this goal. Priorities for capacity-building investments include, but are not limited to:

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[11] https://www.forbes.com/sites/shalinjyotishi/2026/02/25/openai-google-microsoft-intel-bet-on-community-colleges-for-ai-talent/

[12] https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/energy-department-funds-first-iacs-at-community-colleges-trade-unions/; https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/nsf-funding-fuels-workforce-innovation-at-community-colleges/; https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/edas-stem-talent-challenge-grants-workforce-funding-for-the-innovation-economy/ ; https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/nsf-epiic-funds-community-colleges-capacity-building-and-innovation/ ; https://www.forbes.com/sites/shalinjyotishi/2025/01/15/work-based-learning-for-emerging-technologies-and-advanced-industries/ ;

[13] https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/skills-training-grants/scc

- Modernizing colleges' data infrastructure to better leverage labor market information in studying industries, jobs, and skills that are rapidly changing;
- Procuring industry-standard equipment and teaching tools necessary to deliver high-quality education and training for our advanced and emerging tech sectors;
- Establishing a sustainable and systematic process to upskill instructors, so they can stay current with the frontier skills associated with cutting-edge technologies;
- Strengthening grants infrastructure to better leverage public and private capital and to effectively partner with industry and universities on tech-based economic development initiatives, such as the NSF's Regional Innovation Engines program and the Commerce Department's Regional Technology and Innovation Hubs;
- Scaling work-based learning with employers and industry intermediary organizations to scale registered apprenticeships, youth apprenticeships, internships, micro-internships, and project-based learning in advanced sectors;
- And improving workforce collaboration approaches with research universities, industry, and R&D organizations, including our national laboratories, ManufacturingUSA Institutes, and other federally funded R&D centers.[14]

Across red states and blue states, community colleges have always been at the forefront of serving our most low-income students. With strategic and coordinated capacity-building investments, they can help further realize the promise of economic security and the American Dream during this period of rapid technological change.

[14] https://ncses.nsf.gov/resource/master-gov-lists-ffrdc