

Preparing for the Future: America's Community College

**Testimony Before
Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee**

United States House of Representatives

March 4, 2026

Patricia Sims, Ed.D.

President

Drake State Community & Technical College

Good morning Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Patricia Sims, and I proudly serve as the President of Drake State Community & Technical College in Huntsville, Alabama (Drake State). I want to thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to share my insights and highlight the return on investment that Drake State has demonstrated, both locally and regionally, in workforce development, public-private partnerships, and student success.

Evidence of Success

J.F. Drake State Community and Technical College is a Historically Black Community College (HBCC) located in Huntsville, Alabama, with a rich history rooted in providing technical and vocational education to the region. Drake State Community and Technical College demonstrates the transformative potential of industry partnerships. We have developed proven models that blend strong industry engagement with a student-centered

approach. By incorporating employer input, these models quickly adapt to evolving market demands, ensuring they meet the needs of today's workforce. They highlight the role of community and technical colleges as key economic drivers while delivering measurable, result-oriented workforce outcomes.

Drake State offers extensive work-based learning and apprenticeship programs that connect students directly with Alabama employers. Students gain hands-on experience through these programs, including registered apprenticeships that provide structured, employer-led training. For example:

1) Huntsville Hospital LPN Launch Program

The LPN Launch Program was launched as a public/private partnership designed to meet the growing need for practical nursing to support the growth in North Alabama. The program is a unique example of how business and industry should partner with community colleges to meet workforce needs. Students enrolled in the program become Licensed Practical Nurses after three semesters. Industry provides support for students during training, including tuition, books, fees, and the opportunity to apprentice. In return, students agree to a three-year work commitment. This deeper investment in student training results in an employee who can seamlessly transition into the work environment.

This program is being scaled to meet the demand for registered nurses. It has received statewide and national recognition as a successful model for addressing the nursing shortages while providing accessible career pathways.

2) **NASA/MSFC**

Drake State launched its partnership with NASA in 2020 when it became the first and only Historically Black Community College in the nation to win a Cooperative Agreement Notice (CAN) since the program's inception in 2013. The agreement launched Drake State into the research arena in support of the Moon to Mars Project. Specifically, students were exposed to 3D printing technologies and were trained to support additive manufacturing technologies.

Drake State continues its strong relationship with NASA. It is currently home to the PUNCH Initiative (Postsecondary schools United with NASA to Create Hardware) program. PUNCH is a project-based learning program for students to learn skills by designing and fabricating valued products for NASA.

Advancing Debt-Free Education

Debt-free technical education fundamentally changes students' economic trajectories, allowing them to purchase homes, start families, and invest in their communities' years earlier than peers burdened with loan payments. As President of Drake State, my goal is to expand access to debt-free education and training. Drake State serves a unique population. Our average age is 28, and over 93% of our students seek aid to attend school. Many students come to us already with some experience in higher education and student loan debt.

My goal is to put them on a path to gainful employment without further indebting them.

The key to success is reimagining how business and industry partner with community

colleges to meet the collective goal of developing a skilled workforce. This journey can start in high school through Dual Enrollment courses.

Dual enrollment has been one of the mechanisms to reach students at an earlier age, exposing them to industry-driven, college-level material. There are over 40,000 students currently enrolled in dual enrollment in Alabama, and 46% of those dual enrollment students are from rural areas.

Since 2015, the Alabama Community College System (ACCS) colleges have experienced a 230% increase in DE students, and we only expect this number to continue to climb higher as more students and families are aware of the benefits and education possibilities these programs provide, also creating a faster pathway for pursuing a career in the workforce.

Strengthening partnerships between industry and community colleges represents a transformative solution to three critical challenges facing American workers and employers: the skilled workforce shortage, rising student debt, and the disconnect between education and employment. By expanding proven models that eliminate student loan debt while developing job-ready talent, we can create sustainable pathways to economic mobility and address pressing workforce needs.

Conclusion

The question is not whether industry should deepen partnerships with community colleges, but how quickly we can scale proven models.

Drake State Community and Technical College and similar institutions have demonstrated what's possible when industry, education, and community commit to developing talent through partnerships that work. The path forward requires expanding these successes from innovative exceptions to standard practice, ensuring that debt-free technical education with guaranteed employment becomes accessible to all students seeking middle-class careers. I appreciate your support for Workforce Pell, which will support our efforts and allow us to strategically partner with industry to identify and invest in areas of need. Request ongoing support of HBCUs/HBCCs as we continue to do our part to support national priorities, even though we do so with aging facilities, beleaguered faculty, and small but mighty teams.

Again, I greatly appreciate this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.