



New Jersey
Council of
County Colleges

New Jersey's OPPORTUNITY AGENDA: Building Pathways to Equity and Economic Prosperity

A CALL TO ACTION AND PARTNERSHIP
FROM NEW JERSEY'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

MARCH 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are in a moment of complex and rapid economic, social, technological, demographic, and climate changes.

New Jersey's economy is evolving toward higher value-added industries that rely on new knowledge, technologies, and innovation to drive productivity, and entry to good jobs in these industries increasingly requires postsecondary education, either two- or four-year college degrees or other credentials. We must prepare all New Jerseyans for technologies that are changing how we live, work, and learn. Our workers also need analytical, creative thinking, and other "robot-proof" human skills. To meet these needs, New Jersey's community colleges are committed to reimagining curricula, creating new academic and career pathways, and partnering with employers and other stakeholders to build a strong economy with bridges for students to family-sustaining careers.

Each year, **more than 230,000 New Jerseyans turn to their local community colleges, including more than 4 in 10 of all undergraduate students and over half of undergraduate students in public colleges and universities. These students form the core of New Jersey's skilled and educated workforce and are essential to the success of the state's innovation economy. Community college graduates power the state's key industries, including health care, technology, infrastructure, renewable energy, manufacturing, and supply chain management. Many of the teachers, nurses, police officers, firefighters, and other first responders who live and work in our communities are community college graduates.** Increasingly, more New Jersey residents will need to earn a postsecondary degree or credential that is aligned with the needs of employers in order to contribute to the rapidly evolving knowledge economy. Community colleges offer a unique value proposition to fill this need, based on access, quality, affordability, and innovation.

As New Jersey's community colleges lay the groundwork for our evolving economy, we must recognize that economic opportunity is not equally available to all New Jerseyans, with disparities persisting along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Currently, 60% of New Jersey adults have a postsecondary credential or degree, but stark disparities exist: only 37% of Black and 30% of Hispanic residents have an associate degree or higher, compared to 59% of white and 80% of Asian and Pacific Islander residents. While we know that education alone is not a guarantee of equitable economic success, **postsecondary education—bolstered by efforts to reduce occupational, housing, health care, and other forms of segregation—is a critical component of broader strategies to achieve equity.** New Jersey community colleges, which educate higher shares of Black and Hispanic students than four-year colleges, must lead the way forward.

Disproportionately from marginalized and low-income backgrounds, New Jersey community college students are often the first in their families to attend college. In addition to high school students, community colleges serve older and working learners, student parents, refugees, immigrants, justice-

impacted individuals, unemployed and underemployed individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans. **Helping this incredibly diverse array of students achieve academic, social, and economic mobility is the core mission of New Jersey's community college system.**

In recent years, New Jersey's community colleges have made extraordinary progress toward achieving this core mission, individually and collectively, undertaking new modes and fields of instruction; new partnerships with high schools, four-year colleges and universities, nonprofits, unions, and businesses; and new models to support student progress and completion in earning credentials and degrees. To strive toward continuous improvement, New Jersey's community colleges developed a performance-based funding formula that was accepted by the State of New Jersey in 2021. This formula is now used to distribute state investment to community colleges in a manner that rewards postsecondary access, equity, and student success. New Jersey's community colleges are also committed to using data to better inform decisions and investments at all levels.

The progress has been considerable, yet our community colleges recognize that there is more work to do.

ACTION PILLARS

To address urgent equity concerns and meet our core mission in a changing world, New Jersey's community colleges together are committed to the following action pillars. Some call for new legislation or funding, while others advocate for new partnerships between community colleges and with external stakeholders. Many can be undertaken by community colleges themselves, reinforcing and building on progress they are already making. These action pillars represent our collective priorities and will shape our focus in the years ahead. We believe implementing these strategies is the best route to equitable academic, social, and economic mobility for all New Jerseyans and economic prosperity for our communities.

PILLAR 1: Helping All High School Students Access Pathways to Postsecondary and Career Success

STRATEGY 1: Ensure all high school students have the opportunity to earn at least six college credits while in high school

SOLUTION: Create a consistent statewide dual enrollment program built around community colleges, providing all high school students an opportunity to achieve a minimum of six college credits, entirely free of charge for low-income and historically underserved populations.

STRATEGY 2: Ensure all high school students know their options and have a plan for further education and a career

SOLUTION: Support high school-community college partnerships, navigators, guidance, and college readiness.



PILLAR 2:

Fostering Student Success and Completion in Postsecondary Education and Training

STRATEGY 1: Commit to making community college tuition-free for more New Jerseyans

 **SOLUTION:** Ensure individuals with adjusted gross household incomes of \$125,000 and lower can attend a New Jersey community college tuition-free through an expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) program.

STRATEGY 2: Launch an expanded, evidence-based Community College Student Success Initiative

 **SOLUTION:** Invest in a statewide student success initiative targeting low-income and underrepresented students, student parents, justice-impacted students, students with disabilities, veterans, and others.

STRATEGY 3: Commit to broader, sustained partnerships to address the basic needs of students

 **SOLUTION:** Support collaborative efforts of community colleges, state agencies, local social service agencies, employers, and community-based organizations to address students' basic needs.

PILLAR 3:

Building Transparent, Seamless, and Stackable Pathways That Respond to the Changing Economy

STRATEGY 1: Revitalize general education

 **SOLUTION:** New Jersey community colleges, in collaboration with four-year institutions, should refocus general education on contemporary essential skills such as innovation; design thinking; collaboration; creativity; analytical thinking; resilience; empathy; diversity, equity, and inclusion; social influence; and digital, artificial intelligence (AI), and cyber skills.

 **SOLUTION:** New Jersey community colleges, in partnership with state leaders, technologists, and other stakeholders, must address the implications of AI for students, staff, and faculty.

STRATEGY 2: Launch applied baccalaureate programs in high-demand occupations at community colleges

 **SOLUTION:** Allow community colleges to offer applied baccalaureates tied to local labor market demand.

STRATEGY 3: Streamline transfer pathways

 **SOLUTION:** Ensure that all credits earned as part of an associate degree will transfer to a public four-year institution in New Jersey and that community college students have the transfer support they need.

STRATEGY 4: Ensure all community college students can complete a high-quality, paid internship work experience

 **SOLUTION:** Expand and make more flexible the state’s Career Accelerator Internship, guaranteeing all CCOG students access to funds for high-quality paid internships.

STRATEGY 5: Embed industry-valued workforce credentials in community college programs

 **SOLUTION:** New Jersey community colleges should partner with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development to develop and maintain an Industry-Valued Credential List to guide community college efforts.

 **SOLUTION:** Identify funding for low-income students to cover non-tuition-related costs of embedded industry credentials and certification exams.

STRATEGY 6: Build collaboratively designed statewide and regional pathways connecting students to credentials, degrees, and lifelong learning

 **SOLUTION:** Make a long-term commitment to the New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative.

PILLAR 4: Helping Adults Attain the Credentials They Need for Career Mobility and Labor Market Success

STRATEGY 1: Fund noncredit programs for low-income students

 **SOLUTION:** Amend CCOG to support low-income students pursuing high-quality, industry-valued credentials.

 **SOLUTION:** Modernize New Jersey’s Workforce Development Partnership Fund and Supplemental Workforce Fund for Basic Skills to create a New Economy Opportunity Skills Fund for community college workforce and literacy programs and to address the impacts of AI in the workplace and prepare New Jerseyans for jobs of the future.

STRATEGY 2: Develop a consistent, statewide approach to Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)/Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

 **SOLUTION:** Develop a statewide CPL/PLA policy to boost awareness and usage of CPL/PLA, addressing transparency, affordability, access, and quality to help more adults complete postsecondary degrees and credentials.

STRATEGY 3: Reenvision the state's workforce development system centered around community colleges

 **SOLUTION:** Launch an intensive planning effort to build a new “opportunity system” that would:

- Integrate Workforce Development Boards into community colleges to increase strategic coordination on economic development and to better address local labor market needs; and
- Designate community colleges as the preferred provider of postsecondary education, workforce training, and adult literacy.

Through the implementation of these bold policy initiatives, New Jersey community colleges are committed to leading the nation in creating a blueprint for a sustainable future grounded in equity, resilience, collaboration, and opportunity. We seek to build a reality where all New Jerseyans pursuing postsecondary education and workforce training at community colleges have equitable access to robust academic, career, and basic needs supports; state-of-the-art facilities and technology; dynamic, flexible curricula; and work-based learning opportunities that provide clear pathways to credentials of value and connections to family-sustaining careers.

We now seek input and partnership from all stakeholder communities—educational institutions, community and faith-based organizations, employers, unions, the philanthropic community, the Governor’s Office, the State Legislature, state and local government agencies, researchers, and others—to join us in implementing this agenda, building pathways to equity and economic prosperity for all New Jerseyans.

We are eager to work with all who share this commitment to equity and opportunity.



About the New Jersey Council of County Colleges

Governed by the presidents and trustees of the state's 18 community colleges and enshrined in state law, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) supports New Jersey's community colleges and the more than 230,000 students they serve annually across 49 locations by fostering collaboration and developing solutions that expand access to college, promote equity and student success, and create a skilled workforce to drive economic growth. NJCCC brings together the state's community colleges to build a world-class, flexible higher education and workforce development system that can respond to the needs of local communities and employers while having statewide reach and impact. NJCCC promotes innovation and policy changes to help New Jersey's community colleges in their efforts to achieve academic, social, and economic mobility for all residents. The Council's New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development builds statewide industry, education, and labor partnerships that align education and training with the needs of a changing economy.

