



OPINION | CORONAVIRUS

# 6 Factors Community Colleges Should Consider in Their COVID-19 Response

By Gordon Freedman

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*This article is part of the guide [Sustaining Higher Education in the Coronavirus Crisis](#).*

The displacement of [more than 40 million American workers](#) from the employment ranks creates an unprecedented challenge. And community colleges will likely play a key role in helping prepare those workers for jobs as economies restart.

Before the pandemic, the economy was operating close to full employment, and the education and training establishments were equipped with reasonably accurate labor data about what academic and occupational programs were in demand. As a result, they could advise students and adult learners with some accuracy.

In the lingering aftermath of COVID-19, community colleges will largely be flying blind—gauging employer demand and tooling up to train and educate people to meet that demand will be very difficult.

What is not known—in addition to where the jobs will come from—is what changes in behavior will be permanent. What percentage of the population will stay out of retail establishments? What workers will seek only to be in safe environments? What employers will pay insurance claims for Covid-related illnesses, or will the government cover those?

“The sectors where we’re seeing the greatest job disruption—hospitality, restaurants and bars, retail, arts and entertainment and fitness—are exactly the sectors in which many community college students work to pay for fees, tuition and living expenses,” said Laura Kohn, director of early workforce development at the San Diego Workforce Partnership.

The labor market information provider EMSI has offered a new [Health Risk Index](#), an online tool to guide the campus decision. “The index accounts for the key factors that have given the coronavirus a stronger foothold in some regions while other places have been largely spared,” said Rob Sentz, EMSI’s chief innovation officer. “We believe the Health Risk Index will help colleges to decide whether to be online or on campus.”

While colleges, in the aggregate, are the largest, most flexible and most reliable “engine” of training in the country, at the ground level for each college the road has never been smooth.

Of the nearly 1,200 public community colleges, service and advising is often uneven. There are time lags between sensing job market shifts and gearing up with the right courses and programs. And there are built-in organizational conflicts that can make it hard to quickly build new programs. But some colleges are working to overcome those challenges to respond to the pandemic. “We moved all student services to online delivery. Career counseling, exploration, and placement services are online,” said Carlos O. Turner Cortez, Ph.D., president of San Diego Continuing Education, “and we

have held several online job fairs over the past several weeks using Zoom.” He added that the group will look to its regional workforce board and an industry advisory council to plan its offerings.

## Six Vectors of Community College Change

The need to change because of COVID-19 will come as financial pressure builds and colleges begin to realize that they can't afford to keep doing things the same way and meet the needs of the many students who are likely to head their way for degrees and retraining.

To thrive, community colleges will need to shift away from bureaucratic management to become networked organizations that can more flexibly deliver their services. To do this, they'll need to lead in technology rather than lag behind industry, and help define the new technologies they need to help students succeed.

"The connection to employers and aligning programs is critical," said Lee Lambert, chancellor of Pima Community College. "Workforce systems, community colleges and other educational and training providers need to understand these needs in real time. To do this, colleges must integrate advanced technologies into training to remain viable going forward."

Here are some of the vectors of change that could make a difference for learners, job-matching and institutional survival:

**Unify Academic and Occupational Programs:** Community colleges must follow different regulations and guidelines in offering for-credit courses and noncredit occupational courses. But they should make it easier for students to blend the two kinds of offerings toward the goal of finding work, and helping employers find qualified candidates.

**Manage Learning by Competencies:** Move courses to competency-based education (CBE), break instruction and assessment into well-defined, industry-recognized competencies, for example in math for nursing, layout each math competency that relates to exact drug ratios and measurement.

**Build Networks of Community College Programs and Services:** There are too many colleges all offering the same or similar programs and services. Individual colleges can be fortified by entering common noncredit marketing portals— sharing technology resources through shared cloud infrastructures to cut costs and improve service.

**Provide a Common “Learner Record”:** Learners need a common record that reflects all their learning and training from whatever sources. This not only gives the college a better way to advise and counsel but this record can be matched to employer needs and articulation for further education.

**Align Program Development to Regional Economic Forecasts:** Community colleges use labor market information services, but not always well. A new role in community colleges could be a data forecaster who routinely works with labor market information providers, regional employers, workforce boards, regional economic development agencies, chambers of commerce and students and faculty, publishing and aligning weekly return-to-work trends.

**Add Career, Management and Leadership Coaching:** Acquiring knowledge and skills is only part of landing a job or building a career. Understanding yourself—your weaknesses, and strengths and how to lead and manage—are best taught by mentors or coaches. Community colleges can invest in coaching programs or create sponsored programs with employers.

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