

Community college tuition plan is a ‘game changer’

By DeRionne P. Pollard

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I sat in my first community college class when I was 6 years old. After my mother’s death, I lived with an aunt who was taking certification classes for an in-home day care license. With her own four daughters — and now me and my sister as her fifth and sixth — she saw community college as a ticket to a career path with a living wage. Sitting with my cousins in the back of those evening classes, I dutifully copied my letters into a notebook, pretending that I was a real college student. And someday I would be.

Today I’m the president of Montgomery College (MC), which serves 60,000 students a year. Those same programs that trained folks in the Chicago projects where I grew up are giving people in Maryland an entrée into middle-skills professions. Programs like auto and computer repair, HVAC technology and apartment maintenance, as well as biotechnology and engineering, number 130 at MC. Such jobs give people in poverty a fighting chance to inch toward the American Dream.

That’s why President Barack Obama’s “America’s College Promise” proposal is a game-changer. Two years of tuition-free study at a community college can be transformational. With potentially 9 million people eligible for the benefit, this initiative would have an extraordinary impact on communities traditionally left behind. Last year, 622 students earned certificates at MC, making them eligible for in-demand jobs such as medical sonographer, dialysis technician and pharmacy technician. With health care jobs among the fastest growing fields, the demand for skilled workers is on the rise. The cybersecurity and information technology industries are calling for more skilled workers in Maryland, with thousands of positions going unfilled each year. Employers even pay community colleges to train incumbent workers for industry-specific roles — our faculty trained 2,800 employees last year at MC.

The Obama administration has long appreciated how community colleges respond to these needs. Last month, Montgomery College and 13 other community colleges in Maryland were awarded a U.S. Department of Labor grant for \$15 million to prepare workers for cyber and IT jobs. The grant was given through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program. Since 2010, the program has given \$470 million to 270 community colleges nationwide to boost training for local, industry-driven needs. Matching well-trained workers with middle skills jobs is a win-win, propelling industry growth and boosting income tax returns to states. It’s a long overdue plan.

A hundred years ago, in a dramatic paradigm shift, public high school education was made available to all Americans. Formal education had previously been only for the wealthy, but this change democratized literacy and training. Infused with waves of skilled workers, the U.S. experienced economic growth and prosperity for decades. Now, facing new economic challenges, it’s time we go back to the education well that has proven so reliable. Investing in community colleges allows a broader class of Americans to master skills for the 21st century. Rather than limit our workforce to those who can afford an education, why wouldn’t we use all of our resources to propel the economy? U.S. Labor Secretary Tom Perez captured this sentiment precisely on a visit to MC when he said, “there are no spare Americans” in this tight economy.



Forty percent of college students are already enrolled in one of the 1,100 U.S. community colleges. Many schools have unique partnerships with industry, designing curricula specifically aligned with workplace skills. At Montgomery College, for example, partnerships with the National Restaurant Association, the National Apartment Leasing Association, and the Automotive Service Excellence/National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation help students move directly into the workplace. Moreover, many community colleges provide transfer options in fields like bioscience, humanities and engineering. Montgomery College has 1,400 engineering students enrolled in the largest community college transfer program in the nation. Students have gone on to four-year degrees at prestigious institutions like MIT, University of California Berkeley, Georgia Institute of Technology and University of Maryland, College Park.

Opportunities like these — and the path my aunt took to a successful home business — are what community colleges do best. Why we're not investing more in these valuable local engines of economic development is the only question that remains.

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