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**Testimony**

**Presented to the House Appropriations Committee  
FY 2026-27 Community Colleges Budget Request**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the House Appropriations Committee. We are advocating for the increased support of 6% in operating funds and further funding streams, as described below, for the 15 community colleges across Pennsylvania, which play a pivotal role in shaping the future of our state's economy, workforce, and educational landscape.

## **BACKGROUND**

Community colleges are an essential part of Pennsylvania's higher education system, providing accessible, affordable, and high-quality education to students from all walks of life. Our colleges offer programs that prepare individuals for a wide range of careers, including those in fields such as healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, and skilled trades—areas that are vital to our state's economy.

Furthermore, the institutions in our sector often serve as the backbone of their communities. They add an economic impact and return on investment of taxpayer contributions, embrace the role of convener for important community gatherings, and enhance quality of life opportunities for the citizens they serve.

Community colleges directly contribute to the growth and prosperity of our state. According to a recent study, our 15 community colleges generate over \$13.6 billion in economic impact each year while serving as a major employer in the communities we serve. These institutions provide students with the skills needed to meet the demands of employers across Pennsylvania. They are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between the education system and the workforce, offering specialized, shorter-term training programs and credentials that lead to good-paying jobs, apprenticeships, and certifications that employers value.

Our state's manufacturing, healthcare, technology, and construction sectors rely heavily on the graduates of community colleges, many of whom go on to fill critical positions in these industries. The success of these graduates directly contributes to the expansion of Pennsylvania's labor force and strengthens our local

communities. Most recently, some of our institutions have been instrumental in providing workforce development solutions as large corporations like AWS and Eli Lilly expand into Pennsylvania.

One of the greatest strengths of Pennsylvania's community colleges is our commitment to providing affordable education to all residents, regardless of income. Tuition at our community colleges is significantly lower than four-year institutions, making them an excellent choice for students seeking a quality education without incurring crushing debt. During the 2024-25 academic year, over 48,363 Pennsylvania community college students were awarded over \$206,174,174 million in Pell Grants – an average grant of \$4,316 per student – to help them cover the costs of tuition, course materials, transportation, and living expenses. While this helps our students, there are still significant unmet needs.

For many students, especially those from low-income or rural backgrounds, community colleges are the only feasible option for continuing their education. They offer not only a gateway to higher education but also the flexibility to attend classes while working, caring for family, or living in communities where a traditional university may not be accessible.

Moreover, our institutions provide a critical pathway for students to transition into four-year universities, either through articulation agreements or by completing two-year degrees that seamlessly transfer into bachelor's programs. This "two-plus-two" model has empowered countless Pennsylvanians to earn bachelor's degrees who might not have otherwise had the opportunity. While we have always collaborated with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education at an institution-by-institution level, last year's legislation to guarantee seamless transfer benefits our students and the Commonwealth as a whole.

## **OUR REQUEST**

We, the Pennsylvania community college sector as represented by the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges (PACCC), are respectfully requesting the Committee consider increasing funding in the following key areas:

- 1. Operating Funds for Community Colleges**
- 2. Capital Funds for Campus Improvements**
- 3. Non-Credit Workforce Development Funding – PA Works!**
- 4. Funding for First Responder Training**

These increases are critical to ensuring our community colleges continue to meet the educational and workforce needs of our state, and to ensure Pennsylvania's economy remains competitive in the future.

### **1. Increase in Operating Funds for Community Colleges - 6% Increase in Funding**

Community colleges represent the very best of higher education opportunities for many Pennsylvanians. We offer affordable, accessible education to students from diverse backgrounds, equipping them with the skills necessary to succeed in the workforce. Last year, we collectively educated over 264,000 students, many of whom are the first from their families to attend an institution of higher learning. However, funding for operating costs has not kept pace with inflation, recent increases in student enrollment, and the growing cost of maintaining high-quality programs.

As the demand for education and training continues to grow, it is essential our institutions receive a 6% increase in the operating funds for community colleges. A 6% increase in operating funds will allow institutions to continue offering high-quality programs such as registered nursing. Seventy-five percent of the Commonwealth's RNs are trained by one of our state's community colleges. Further funding will help us to retain qualified faculty and staff and ensure that students have access to the resources and services they need to succeed. Otherwise, level-funding limits these resources and stunts growth of academic and workforce programming. Such an investment will continue to pay dividends for Pennsylvania. Our community colleges contribute \$13.6 billion annually to the state's economy.

## **2. Capital Funds for Campus Improvements**

Many of Pennsylvania's community colleges are struggling to maintain a safe, accessible, and conducive physical environment for learning as well as keep up with the demand for a virtual, technologically advanced learning environment. However, our sector as represented by the PACCC, acknowledges this is a unique budgetary year. Therefore, we will fall back on the already-established capital funding process administered through the Pennsylvania Department of Education for our 2026-27 capital needs. In doing so, we are respectfully emphasizing the need for an increase in operating fundings and other specific requests as outlined below.

## **3. PA Works! A Unique Approach to Workforce Development - \$15 Million in New Funding**

The demand for skilled workers in Pennsylvania continues to outpace the supply, particularly in fields such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology. Non-credit workforce development programs at community colleges – including those in the trades -- are designed to rapidly respond to these needs, offering certifications, technical training, and specialized courses to help individuals gain the skills required by employers. Last year, we partnered with over 1,800 employers statewide to align training programs with workforce development needs. Furthermore, our community colleges are leading the way in unique collaborations that address workforce needs for hyperscale data centers, shipbuilding, aviation, and more.

Entitled, PA Works!, this unique, comprehensive workforce approach highlights pre-apprenticeships, microcredentials and working with Pennsylvania's Career and Technical Schools.

More specifically, Pennsylvania's 15 community colleges, under the guidance of the PACCC, will join forces to offer three Academies that focus on these important workforce offerings.

These Academies are as follows:

### ***A Career & Technology Academy***

**Program description:** Innovative regional partnerships formed by community colleges and career and technical center high schools to create new pathways for career and technical center students to earn post-secondary credentials in technology and the skilled construction trades. *These programs tend to take 1-2 years to complete since students typically take classes as a junior or senior in high school.*

**Program goal:** Serve underserved populations of students in career and technical center high schools to build a consistent workforce pipeline of entry level technicians and skilled trade workers.

### **A MicroCredential Academy**

**Program description:** Mobile, rapidly developed post-secondary credential programming that makes upskilling career credentials for Pennsylvania workers efficient, cost-effective, and accessible. *These programs vary in length but typically range from one to two semesters of classes – 4-9 months.*

**Program goal:** Serve Pennsylvania workers where they live and work by identifying high-demand industry clusters and providing online, mobile, and campus based microcredential programming that empowers workers to advance to a high-wage, high-demand career.

### **A PA Construction & Trades Pre-Apprenticeship Academy**

**Program description:** Strategic partnership between Pennsylvania community colleges and Pennsylvania construction & trades to build a pre-apprenticeship pipeline of students who will learn from a foundational curriculum that will prepare them to enter registered apprenticeship programs and secure employment in the skilled building and construction trade industry. *These programs tend to take 11-16 months to complete.*

**Program goal:** Promote, educate, and drive interest in students pursuing careers in the trades to meet the growing demand for skilled trade workers in the Pennsylvania economy.

One such example of PA Works! is the debut of a Technology and Trades Workforce Consortium in the Expanded Northeast Region of Pennsylvania that involves Luzerne County Community College, Lehigh Carbon Community College, Northampton Community College, and Bucks County Community College. This collaborative effort addresses workforce needs in the construction and buildout of Amazon Hyperscale Data Centers planned for Salem Township in Luzerne County and Falls Township in Bucks County.

The consortium model, as coordinated by the PACCC, will replicate throughout the state with other regional community colleges when more hyperscale data centers are constructed. PACCC leadership is already meeting with appropriate parties from across the Commonwealth related to this workforce development need.

The PA Works! approach strategically coordinates resources, avoids duplicative investments in equipment, and fosters innovative college and industry collaborations that will streamline a fragmented workforce development system to deliver the highest quality workforce in Pennsylvania history.

## **4. Funding for First Responder Training - \$10 Million in New Funding**

First responders are the frontline heroes who keep our communities safe. Community colleges are integral to providing high-quality training to police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and other first responders across the state. Last year, we educated 80,839 first responders. These programs are critical to ensuring that our first responders are prepared for the increasingly complex and dangerous situations they face.

Unfortunately, funding for first responder training was discontinued decades ago and ALL the community colleges offering these training programs are doing so at a loss, essentially subsidizing the training so communities are kept safe. Re-establishing funding with an initial investment of \$10 million for first responder training will allow community colleges to enhance their training facilities, purchase state-of-the-art equipment, and offer specialized courses that reflect the latest developments in emergency response. It will ease the burden of subsidization so

funds can be spent on students and training. Supporting these programs is an investment in the safety of our communities and the well-being of those who serve them.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Pennsylvania's 15 community colleges are vital to our state's educational, economic, and public safety infrastructure. The increases we are requesting—operating, workforce development as part of our PA Works! strategy, and funding for first responder training—are critical investments in the future of our state. They will help ensure that our community colleges can continue to provide affordable, high-quality education and training that meets the needs of our workforce, enhances the safety of our communities, and strengthens the economic foundation of Pennsylvania.

I urge the Committee to consider our funding requests in the upcoming budget, as they represent a direct investment for the people of Pennsylvania.

- Operating Funds for Community Colleges – 6% Increase in Funding
- Non-Credit Workforce Development Funding: PA Works! - \$15 Million in New Funding
- Funding for First Responder Training - \$10 Million in New Funding

Thank you for your time, your continued commitment to education, and your consideration of these essential funding needs.