

*Testimony to the U.S. House Small Business Subcommittee on
Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Workforce Development*

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Introduction

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity. Chairman Crow, Ranking Member Young Kim, and members of the subcommittee, my name is Mordecai Brownlee, and I am the proud president of the Community College of Aurora (CCA).

CCA is part of the Colorado Community College System and serves over 10,000 students annually. At the onset of the pandemic, our enrollment dropped twelve percent. However, I am proud to share that our college has rallied hard for our students, and to date have recaptured seven percent of that loss and we won't stop until all our students have been accounted for. Uniquely, our institution serves in the most diverse region of the state and our student demographics represent that reality accordingly. As a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and Minority Serving Institution (MSI), sixty-four percent of our students identify as a student of color, fifty-one percent of our students are Pell grant eligible, and fifty percent of our students are first-generation college students. With five continents and over ninety countries represented at our institution, we are proud to serve a rich and diverse student body that includes the state's largest immigrant population. It is also important to note that our small business owners within our service area represent this rich diversity as well.

Community colleges, like ours, stand on the front lines and in service to the most disadvantaged students and those hardest impacted due to the pandemic through our

mission of open-access, affordable, high-quality postsecondary education and workforce training.

Through partnerships with community organizations such as our Aurora Chamber of Commerce, Aurora Economic Development Council, Arapahoe/Douglas County Workforce Development Council, and the BuildStrong Academy, CCA is utilizing data and feedback provided by small business and large industries to re-envision and transform our student learning experiences. Intended to train displaced workers, non-traditional adult students, and first-time in college students, these efforts seek to upskill or reskill to obtain industry-recognized credentials that align in-demand, high-wage occupations. Currently, we are designing new programs in healthcare, renewable energy, and construction management, and offer hybrid, online, and in-person instruction outside the typical working hours to accommodate our students' varied schedules.

Our students are directly impacted by the various socio-economic challenges that face other metropolitan communities around the nation. Lack of reliable transportation, childcare, broadband access, and a supportive network have historically created barriers to a quality education and the obtainment of their dreams. Listening to the voice of our students, CCA has worked in hand with our student body to eliminate barriers and provide resources to promote equitable access and opportunity for our students.

Take for example, Victoria Browning. Prior to attending CCA, Victoria held a full-time job earning \$14 an hour to support her two young children, while struggling to address thousands of dollars in student debt. Thanks to a grant created by the U.S. Department

of Labor, the Strengthening Working Families Initiative at CCA offered students like Victoria childcare, college counseling, and career support.

Or, take for example our Asegurando Learning Program. To address the equity gap in student achievement between students of color and their white peers, CCA was awarded a Title V grant from the U.S. Department of Education. From there, the Asegurando Learning Community was born.

Recently, CCA has established a new division within the college to focus strategically on the placement of students into career mentorships, internships, externships, and apprenticeships to level the field among those who have access to supportive networks and those who are not as privileged.

Supporting Community Colleges

Supports at the federal level are critical for our continued success. Pell Grant financing for very short-term programs, and fund increases for TRIO, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and the nation's Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) could dramatically transform institutions. Such transformation would provide the resources to create and sustain efforts aimed to retool and upskill the workforce necessary to power small businesses and local industries while helping our most struggling students finance college.

Additionally, our workforce programs, while innovative and responsive, are expensive to operate. For example, programs in healthcare and advanced manufacturing are in great demand, but are also among the most expensive programs to offer. To maintain our roles as leading providers of workforce training and maintain affordability for students, it

is critical that we make meaningful investments in career and technical education infrastructure at community colleges. Dedicated community college job-training programs, like those originally included in the Build Back Better Act, would fund these critical efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in today's culture, where the call for innovation and increased efficiencies are abundant, community colleges cannot afford to be viewed as inefficient and non-responsive. Our community small businesses and industry partners are depending on us to be responsive to their needs. Our students are depending on us to create an environment where equitable student success is fostered and every barrier towards the fulfillment of that success is removed. The Community College of Aurora stands ready to meet these needs for years to come. Thank you. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.