

Community-college grads add billions to Arizona

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Into the Mind: Jack Lunsford talks about the economic impact and need to rethink funding for the state's community colleges.



(Photo: Justin Johnson)

You're taking over leadership of the Arizona Community College Coordinating Council. What is its purpose?

Its role is to advance community colleges in term of positioning in public policy discussions, the linkages with K-12 and the universities, and to provide evidence to the broader community.

OUR VIEW: [Wanted - A new community-college model \(/story/opinion/editorial/2015/01/29/arizona-community-college-funding/22490791/\)](/story/opinion/editorial/2015/01/29/arizona-community-college-funding/22490791/)

Who are the council's members?

The presidents or chancellors of the 10 community college districts. That's it. They're my bosses.

Do they agree or disagree on what the future of community colleges should be?

They agree on the mission — to provide job training, transfer capabilities, skills training and personal enrichment.

Is the goal to reverse the state trend of less support for community colleges, or to find new sources of money?

We'll have, at our meeting this month, our initial conversations about where we go from here. We haven't looked at education finance in a comprehensive way in 35 years. It's time we do that. Universities can't look at this in a vacuum. Neither can community colleges. Our financing system is broken and deserves a focused, concentrated look.

You plan to unveil an economic impact study later this month. Can you give us a preview?

It will be statewide and by district. It will show direct economic contribution from salaries, services purchased and student expenditures. It will show the impact of alumni from increased wage earning and less dependence on social services because they are better employed. We'll talk about return on investment for taxpayers and for students.

Numbers?

The economic impact of Arizona community colleges is 6 percent of the gross state product. That's really important. Direct expenditures are \$1.5 billion by colleges and students. Alumni impact is \$14.2 billion in added income in 2013-14.

Arizona community colleges serve 375,000 students. We award more than 40,000 degrees and certificates a year. We transfer more than 10,000 students to our public universities, and that doesn't include private universities. We graduate or train more than all other providers in the state in the areas of nurses, allied health professions, emergency services — EMT, police and fire.

How will you measure success?



One, greater awareness of community colleges and their role, so when critics say you're not graduating students, the community will understand no, we're not, but here's what we are doing. We're transferring students, we're issuing certificates.

Secondly, in the short term, to help the organization lead the discussion on education finance. How can we be thought of in the same context, when the stories are written, as the universities and K-12.

ROBB: [Obama's free college plan is bribery \(/story/robertrobb/2015/01/26/obama-community-college-death-of-federalism/22369711/\)](/story/robertrobb/2015/01/26/obama-community-college-death-of-federalism/22369711/)

What do you think of President Obama's free community college tuition idea?

Jack Lunsford (Photo: handout)

Our council has not discussed that. As he has proposed it, it requires a match from the state. The state's contribution to community colleges has been declining rapidly.

I would rather see us fight some other battles that are really important to us. I don't believe it's going to be high on our council's radar screen.



President Obama announced Thursday evening that he will call on Congress to pass legislation that will make community college free to two years.

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