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## Community Colleges: A Gateway to a Stronger Economy

One of the best kept secrets in our communities is also one of the most important keys to a stronger economy. It's a place where employers can look for a skilled workforce. It's a place where high school students can save money while learning the skills to succeed. It's also a place where people looking for a new job can receive training for new opportunities.

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One of the best kept secrets in our communities – and our nation – is our system of community colleges. Simply put, community colleges are a gateway that can strengthen our economy – and our middle class.

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Community colleges have seen the fastest growth of any segment of our higher education system over the last thirty years. Jobs requiring an associate's degree are growing twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience.



If we are going to fill the rising demand in these jobs – and attract new ones – we need to ensure our community colleges can meet the challenge. And across Ohio, we already are. Leaders of Ohio's 23 community colleges are connecting with businesses and workforce development boards to fill the needs of our local and regional economies.

A coursebook at one of our community colleges offers a blueprint for students to acquire skills and education our workforce needs to anchor our nation's prosperity. Our community colleges are training graduates for jobs in emerging industries like health information technology, advanced manufacturing, and clean energy. Future nurses and teachers, business owners and engineers are learning the skills that will help rebuild our economy and the middle class.

But we can do a better job of connecting college graduates to career opportunities in Ohio – and in aligning our workforce investment programs with growing sectors. This is the basis for the [Strengthening Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success \(SECTORS\) Act](#), which would connect our education, job training, and economic development programs with key industry sectors to strengthen regional economies. Sectors strategies work, yet our stove-piped workforce systems do not facilitate them. If we want to attract employers in high-growth industries, we must assure them we have the regional workforce to meet their needs. That's why I've authored the SECTORS Act, which would foster these collaborative efforts to help grow regional economies.

Community colleges also fill the gaps between resources and the demand for higher education, helping more Ohioans earn the college degrees they seek. From our veterans returning home, Ohioans re-entering the workforce, and students preparing for four-year

degrees, community colleges are providing new opportunities to talented Ohioans throughout our state.

But we need to do more to reduce the attrition rate so that more Ohioans complete community college degrees. That is why I'm working with the Ohio Community College Association to advance the [Building Student Success Act](#), which would support strategies to make sure that once students enroll they have the resources to succeed in the classroom.



It's clear community college graduates will become our next educators and entrepreneurs, civic and business leaders, teachers and police officers. By setting a national goal of increasing the number of community college graduates by 5 million by 2020, President Obama recognizes these institutions will help lead the nation out of the recession and into a new era of prosperity.

This month, I'll be attending commencement ceremonies at some of Ohio's great community colleges. Thousands of Ohioans will earn the distinction of being college graduates – in addition to being mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, veterans and workers. Some – just old enough to drive – will receive an associate's degree one week and a high school diploma the next.

That's the power of community colleges – to prepare our workers, strengthen our economy, and rebuild our middle class. And it's high time this secret source of success takes the spotlight.



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