

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE THAT NEEDS THEM

Westchester County employers say there are not enough qualified candidates for the projected positions in areas of high demand, many of which are “middle skills” jobs that could be filled by SUNY Westchester Community College (WCC) graduates. According to the Westchester County Association, a county-wide business organization, industries reliant on new technologies and engineering skills are on the rise. Film and television production is burgeoning, while the healthcare and cybersecurity industries continue to grow.

The Westchester Community College Foundation commissioned a report this year on behalf of the College from the Career Leadership Collective, a leading consulting group for colleges and universities, that lays out a series of steps to reach the College’s goal: to embed career preparation across the student experience. We now have a roadmap for the organizational and capital investments needed to fuel our students’ success.

Every potential student should be drawn to the school for the promise of a good paying job and a fulfilling career; every student should benefit upon enrolling from strategic advising, and each should have access to financial and developmental support. Every student’s WCC education should lead to a career opportunity or advancement, and the confidence they need to pursue it. Investing in our students is also an investment in the overall economic well-being of Westchester County and the region – so they can fill the jobs being created.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Students come to a community college for many reasons: to learn a new skill, pursue an Associate Degree, a Certificate or a Certification, or as a precursor to a four-year degree. Community colleges are the academic backbone of American higher education preparing students for fulfilling careers, providing the credentials for advancement, and promising economic mobility in an otherwise uncertain world.

Many Westchester Community College students come from challenging circumstances; they may have dependent families and other obligations that make the time commitment, sacrificed earnings, and cost of enrollment seem like insurmountable challenges. And yet we know that a degree, credential or training program completed at WCC can transform a life offering the promise of an accelerated step up the economic ladder and a launch to financial stability.

The College has significantly improved the student completion rate, so more now earn the diploma for which they originally enrolled. But completion is a dated metric. Success means students attain a living wage job and embark on a fulfilling career. WCC’s President, Dr. Belinda S. Miles, has stated, pointedly, this aim: each student will set a personally inspiring vision for their career goals and see a proven pathway to achievement.

The Westchester Community College Foundation (WCCF) has played a partnering role in WCC’s success since its founding in 1969, providing scholarships and student support; and enabling new programs, technologies, facilities, and approaches to the College’s important work. Now WCCF is preparing a next round of private investment focused on matching students with promising career trajectories from the time they enroll. We aim to fuel a talent pipeline that meets employer demand for qualified candidates in Westchester County and the Hudson Valley region and makes the promised ‘return on investment’ central to the school’s identity.

THE STUDENTS WE SERVE

More than 60% of Westchester Community College students are the first generation in their family to attend college; nearly 70% are students of color making WCC the most diverse school in the SUNY system. At our Valhalla campus, Extension Centers in Mt. Vernon, Ossining, Peekskill, and Yonkers, and through our online programs, WCC enrolls over 22,000 students each year – 15,600 pursuing degrees in over 65 courses of study, and 7,300 pursuing non-credit options, including skills training and professional certifications. Some come right from high school while others come later in life to “upskill” or to change careers.

Many of our students leave with the credentials they need for employment; others transfer to a four-year college. Yet too many come to WCC without clear career goals or clarity around the path they need to follow to achieve their ambitions. In addition to financial support, students need proactive advising, career exposure and marketable experience so they can draw a direct line from enrollment to employment with confidence.

The Foundation can help draw that line. Research and experience tell us that students who have a clear career goal and the support needed to attain it are more likely to complete a Degree, Certificate or Certification.

FUNDING A PATHWAY FOR EVERYONE

Philanthropic support can help students leverage their education into living wage jobs, fulfilling careers, and economic mobility. The Foundation plans to aid the College with \$30 million in new investments in:

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

- **CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: \$2 MILLION.** WCC will introduce new curricula and academic programs in high-demand fields and expand the number of for-credit and paid apprenticeships and internships that provide skills that give students an advantage when they apply for jobs.
- **EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS: \$1 MILLION.** WCC will centralize the administration of our work with employers including business, government, healthcare, and the nonprofit sectors to support paid internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship opportunities that are sustained over time.
- **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: \$1 MILLION.** WCC will provide ongoing training for faculty and advisors to put more experiential learning into the curriculum, and ensure that “career readiness” is a promise met in the classroom and in career guidance that responds specifically to market demand.

STUDENT SUPPORTS

- **ADVISING: \$5 MILLION.** WCC will introduce a new approach to career guidance for students from the moment they enroll, using human and AI-driven advising resources. WCC now employs just one full-time and two part-time career counseling staff. Funding will support the addition of up to 20 Peer Advisors overseen by a new Dean/AVP for Career Success & Applied Learning.
- **SCHOLARSHIPS & AID: \$7 MILLION.** WCCF will expand the funding available each year for scholarships, financial aid, and other student supports (e.g., transportation, childcare) so that more students remain enrolled to meet their goals. Note: the Foundation currently distributes about \$3.5 million annually.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- **FACILITIES: \$12 MILLION.** WCC will supplement SUNY and County-funded capital investments in new Film & TV teaching studios, a new lab for Respiratory Care, and updated classrooms that simulate and prepare students for real work environments along with a new Career Center that gives students a place to practice interview skills and meet with prospective employers.

- **ASSESSMENT: \$2 MILLION.** WCC will invest in technology to capture and analyze the kind of data that allow us to make ongoing decisions about academic programs, advising, marketing, and resource allocation, and report the ROI for each investment.

THE IMPACT WE WILL HAVE

As a result of these timely investments in providing clearer career pathways for students, we expect that:

- **More students will fully engage with career guidance, earn an Associate Degree that is relevant to their goals, complete a career-directed Certificate or Certification well-prepared to enter the workforce, or return so they can upskill to advance in their career of choice.**
- **More faculty will be better equipped to play a direct role in preparing students for their careers.**
- **The College will cultivate beneficial relationships with more employers in Westchester, offer tailored programs that directly respond to employer needs, and solidify a reputation as the go-to partner for the four Fortune 500 companies, 37,000 businesses, and expansive government, healthcare, and nonprofit sectors that make up the county's employers.**
- **More students will find satisfaction and fulfillment in jobs where they will advance and earn a living wage while helping the region flourish.**

Our goal is to help students accelerate into their careers, and we're confident in our promise. Enrollment in Associate Degree programs, Certificate and other workforce Certification programs is growing nationally despite overall declines in college enrollment. WCC is well-positioned to meet the challenge.

GIVING TO UNLOCK OPPORTUNITY

A recent project of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center called *Unlocking Opportunity* shaped our model; it aimed to increase the number of students in “high-value programs” that lead directly to promising careers or transfers to a four-year degree program. The initiative is notable for steering students away from pathways that are less likely to lead to good jobs or further education. This tipping of the scales toward suitable choices can only happen if students receive active and personalized guidance coupled with the capacity to absorb students into appropriate programs and support their success over the course of their education at Westchester Community College.

According to *Unlocking Opportunity*, too many students enroll in general studies tracks which are not clearly aligned with the labor market; and low-income students are disproportionately enrolled without clear academic or career direction. Westchester Community College can tip the scales while still providing deep exposure to the humanities and the arts, fostering development of critical thinking skills, and training in soft skills that will enable students to be successful in the workplace.

We are clear about the resources we need to join the leaders in higher education...and respond to the unique blend of students, their circumstances, and employer needs in Westchester County and the broader region. The Westchester Community College Foundation aims to raise \$30 million – over and above current annual fundraising – to underwrite these major job-readiness initiatives for the economic mobility of our students.

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