



Hidden in plain view

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BY DEBRA D. BRAGG APRIL 5, 2026

Newly released **reports** from the Hidden Innovation Infrastructure (HII) research project reveals the roles community colleges play in regional economic development that are often unseen and underappreciated.

Viewpoint

Funded by the **National Science Foundation** (NSF) **Advanced Technological Education** (ATE)

program, the study sheds light on the

many ways community colleges facilitate partnerships with industry that are not well-known. This research confirms that community colleges are major suppliers of workforce training, but their contributions to regional economies are much wider and deeper than heretofore reported. A major takeaway from this study is: **Community**

colleges play a transformative role in regional economic development but much of that work remains hidden and undervalued.

Beyond workforce training

Findings from surveys, case studies and quantitative analysis of federal datasets conducted by the HII research team show how community colleges use systemic approaches to economic development that go beyond workforce training. The numerous ways community colleges contribute to regional economies are broader and deeper than is often reported by the media and in academic literature. The misalignment of community college engagement to conventional workforce and economic metrics further complicates this picture.

Some of the most enlightening findings of the HII study come from case studies that delved into four regions of the country. These in-depth descriptions detail community college engagement in regional economic development, spotlighting how community college leaders forge and sustain regional partnerships with industry groups, employers and community leaders.

Mark D'Amico, professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and chair of the HII advisory group, praised the research team's approach to uncovering what community college engagement in regional economic development looks like on the ground. He observed the HII research "shed light on a gap in understanding about the community college role, whether it's education, whether it's workforce development, whether it's economic development. The project shows that community colleges have an important role to play in the economic development conversation."

D'Amico gave kudos to the team for giving not only **case examples** but for proposing a framework and **checklist** tool to help community college leaders see how they can take similar action.

Economic-responsive approaches

The HII study also documents the importance of community colleges balancing their mission, goals and needs with regional labor markets, including embracing how student needs and aspirations align individual employment goals with regional industries. Instead of viewing the priorities of different stakeholders as competing interests, the HII research team found the community colleges they studied sought to align different interests and advance mutual benefits.

For example, the colleges prepared students for high-demand technical roles while working with employers to advocate for their graduates to secure jobs that offer fair wages with career advancement opportunities. Working closely with industry partners, community college leaders employ a holistic approach to preparing graduates for jobs that offer individual and collective economic benefits for communities in their regions.

Recapping the major findings and implications of this research, Michelle Van Noy, HII principal investigator and director of the **Education & Employment Research Center** (EERC) at Rutgers University, observed that this study highlights how the work of the NSF ATE program supports community college technician programs in ways that can contribute to regional economic development.

“While so much interest has existed in workforce development, we sought to take a slightly different lens to better understand what economic development means and how to begin to capture these more complex outcomes,” Van Noy said.

Research to practice

Drawing lessons from the research, the HII team developed practical tools to help community college leaders move this type of work from research to action. Experts who evaluated the HII project praised the frameworks and templates developed by the team to assist community colleges to achieve a comprehensive approach to regional economic development.

These tools help guide:

- The alignment of technical programs with regional industries, using active advisory groups
- The use of high-support programming to retain technical students to completion and quality jobs
- The strategic engagement of industry via focused business supports

Emphasizing these strategies be matched to regional economic development priorities, the research-informed tools reinforce local decision-making and engagement over one-size-fits-all solutions.

Next steps

The HII research makes an important contribution to community college research and practice by providing useful descriptions of frequently unseen or overlooked regional

economic development efforts employed by community colleges. Showing their impact lies not only in workforce training, but in developing and sustaining regional ecosystems, we get a fuller picture of what community colleges do. We see the many ways community colleges can play instrumental roles in strengthening regional economies for the better.

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Debra D. Bragg, President of Bragg & Associates, Inc., was contracted by Rutgers University to conduct the external evaluation of the NSF ATE research grant on the Hidden Innovation Infrastructure (HII) project.

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