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YOUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

**AN INVESTMENT IN
IOWA'S FUTURE**

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Community colleges may be the most American of American institutions. Their foundation is belief in the value of every individual. Their practical and efficient programs serve entire communities with a vast spectrum of means to achieving individual American dreams. Whether they intend to own a business, landscape a yard, become a registered nurse, transfer to a four-year school to study engineering, upgrade and update work skills, or win independence from the welfare system, students are increasingly turning to community colleges for realization of their dreams. To the extent they succeed, Iowa and America will be able to rely on a skilled, flexible work force that remains strong and competitive in a rapidly changing global marketplace.

The Iowa economy has rebounded from its protracted slump. For the first six months of 1995, unemployment rates hovered around 3.4 percent, the lowest ever in the records maintained by the Department of Employment Services. For many years, 4.0 percent unemployment had been considered "full employment." Now, as the Iowa economy continues to grow, the labor pool, once the state's greatest asset, appears to be in short supply.

A closer look, however, reveals many Iowans who are under-skilled and under-employed, who could double or triple their income with one or two years of training and education. These people are the future of economic development. Now more than ever, Iowa's community colleges are the door to their independence and that future.

THE CHALLENGES

On the federal level. Proposed changes in the way the federal government funds and restricts use of student aid could deprive community college students of millions of dollars previously thought assured, therefore limiting their opportunities.

Congress is also moving away from categorical program funding to a more streamlined system of block grants to reduce costs as part of a federal budget deficit reduction strategy. This reduction in program funding will place additional burdens on Iowa's community colleges who have relied heavily on these federal programs for financial support.

On the state level. In 1988, the Iowa legislature adopted a visionary funding plan for community colleges. Unfortunately, the budget crisis, the undisputed need to return to generally accepted accounting principles, and the need to balance the budget forced sacrifices on everyone in the years that followed. Community colleges were no exception. Their sacrifice was compounded by rapid enrollment growth during that period of time.

Iowa's community colleges have continually shown evidence of the ability to assist men and women in moving from dependency to self-sufficiency through educational programs. Lack of adequate support could inhibit the ability of community colleges to successfully carry out their mission.

There is deep concern about the many issues impacting our society's well-being, but one underlying issue is ignored – the expense of staying on the current path. If the costs of crime and welfare programs continue to increase, and most predictions offer no indication otherwise, funding for constructive assistance will have to be reduced and the quality of life in Iowa will decline.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES

New service delivery systems are evolving to manage the new federal funding processes. A system of regional work force development centers is taking shape in Iowa. Iowa's community colleges:

- stand ready to provide the leadership and support necessary for the successful implementation of this new integrated system.
- have functioned as systems integrators for a broad range of education, employment and training programs for many years.
- work comprehensively with the future work force, the existing employed work force, and the potential work force that is either unemployed, underemployed, displaced, or disadvantaged.

Iowa's community colleges have, since their inception, been the primary access to college and postsecondary education for many residents. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to help dependent individuals gain the skills to become self-sufficient, thus providing business and industry with a much needed quality work force and saving Iowans millions of dollars.

Through the Iowa Industrial New Jobs Training Program (260E, Code of Iowa), Iowa's community colleges have issued \$210 million in certificates through 886 contracts with Iowa businesses and industries, supporting the planned creation of 65,776 new jobs in Iowa since 1983. Over 14,500 Iowans were retrained from 1989 to 1994 through the Iowa Training/Retraining Program (260F, Code of Iowa). Iowa's community colleges have developed a comprehensive array of business and industry services, including customized training, industrial modernization and small business assistance programs.

THE UNSUNG HEROES

United States Department of Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently said it best, "Community colleges are the unsung heroes of the nation's middle class." Community colleges are the primary access for the essential postsecondary education that leads to jobs and self-sufficiency. For substantial numbers of Iowans, community colleges are the bridge to independence.

Nationally, 42 percent of community college students come from families with an annual income of less than \$30,000. In the fall of 1994, 53,000 persons enrolled in credit classes at Iowa community colleges. The student population at a typical community college in Iowa is diverse:

- 80 percent are low income, first generation college students or individuals with disabilities
- 70 percent hold jobs
- the average student works more than 20 hours per week
- 50 percent of graduates are older than 23 years

In an address on April 24, 1995, United States President Bill Clinton chose the following words to describe the student body of community colleges:

The community colleges of America look like America. Community colleges are open to people of all races and backgrounds and religious faiths and views. They bring people together. They are America at its best.

Iowa's community colleges provide more than postsecondary education. For many, the local community college is also the source for high school completion. Each year, about 5,000 Iowa students drop out of high school. In 1994, 5,200 General Equivalency Diplomas (GEDs) were awarded through Iowa community colleges. It is hoped that many of these students will now enter the wide array of college credit offerings to advance their skills and become fully employed.

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

For the state of Iowa, the cost of education, when compared to the cost of maintaining persons in dependency is, as the old saying goes, "cheap at twice the price." In fiscal year 1994, Iowa community colleges educated students at an average cost of \$3,177 per student, which is considerably less than the cost per student for K-12 systems. When compared with the cost per student at public universities, the disparity is even greater.

On the other hand, Iowa spent approximately \$18,000 for each person incarcerated in prison. When thinking in wider terms of the debilitation of social health through rising crime and increased dependence on the system, it is clear that major changes must be made in priorities. If postsecondary education carries such positive implications, does it not make sense to support the very colleges that have been engaged in this war on poverty since their inception?

For students, Iowa's community colleges are not the bargain they could be. Nationally, public two-year colleges rely on student tuition and fees for an average of 19.9 percent of revenues. In Iowa, that figure is 36.3 percent.

Nonetheless, a growing number of students are selecting Iowa's community colleges as their college of first choice because of program relevancy, affordability, accessibility, quality and flexibility. Students and parents are becoming far more sophisticated in their educational investment decisions. They are coming to Iowa's community colleges because they are cost-effective, they are student- and outcome-focused, and they are driven by student success. In the fall of 1994, one-third of all credit students enrolled in Iowa colleges and universities were enrolled at public community colleges. Convenience and flexibility also influence their selection. Community colleges are convenient because of their location and utilization of alternative delivery systems, including the Iowa Communications Network.

Iowa community colleges have been effectively serving their constituents in rural areas, towns, and cities for over 25 years by enabling them to become productive and independent. As Iowans increasingly choose community colleges for postsecondary education, additional funding is necessary to ensure mission achievement for the colleges and goal achievement for the students.

RENEW THE PARTNERSHIP

The community colleges of Iowa operate in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration. Partners have included businesses and industries, particularly through the Iowa Industrial New Jobs Training Program; secondary school systems, most recently through tech prep and school-to-work efforts; communities, through credit and non-credit courses, outreach programs, and cultural events; and other public sector and human service agencies. The rewards of working together are mutual and many. It is time to renew the partnership and the investment in Iowa's community colleges.

Investing in Iowa's community college system represents a unique opportunity to respond to the state's economic and work force development needs. Successful and effective work force development is becoming a prerequisite for successful economic development and job creation.

Community colleges can provide the leadership necessary to make Iowa one of the most competitive states in the nation. Iowa needs progressive leaders to recognize that potential, place their confidence in community colleges' ability to get the job done, hold them accountable, and take a strong advocacy role on their behalf. Maintenance of the status quo will not meet the demands of the twenty-first century. Visionary leadership is essential during this time of great change.

It is time to invest in Iowa's future
by reinvesting in Iowa's community colleges.

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