

Words to the Assembly from Dr. Will Austin, President Warren County Community College

Thank you Chairwoman Pintor Marin, Vice Chairman Burzichelli, Assembly Republican Budget Officer DiMaio, and honorable members of the Committee for allowing me to speak on behalf of the 19 community colleges in our state, representing the more than 300,000 students who attend our sector's colleges annually.

Community colleges have made amazing strides over the past several years, and with increased support, the advancement of our respective mission of education, community support, and economic development can continue. We thank you for this ongoing support, and do appreciate the Governor's proposed support for the coming year, particularly with the expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant program to extend to all 19 community colleges.

The Community College Opportunity Grants represent a true investment in the human capital of our state. The residents who benefit from this program might never pursue a higher education if not for this 'college promise' of support for achievement, advancement, and graduation.

Whether directly benefiting from CCOG or benefiting from another program like TAG or PELL, lives have been drastically changed for the better thanks to this initiative.

The Governor's proposed budget requests \$58.5 million for the expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG). This investment in New Jersey's students and economic prosperity will assist a significant number of individuals to obtain a post-secondary degree or credential, helping them to get on the path to a family supporting career while building the skilled workforce that will close critical skill gaps, and help keep New Jersey's employers profitable enough to remain in our state. The program is particularly important to the independent / adult students who do not receive adequate amounts of financial to attend college. It is an efficient, effective, and vital strategy to meet the state's post-secondary education goal of 65% by 2025.

I can tell you from first-hand experience at my institution, Warren County Community College, the pilot effort for Spring 2019 has had a significant positive impact on students. Overall, thousands (9,000 eligible) of students attending the 13 selected colleges who are in households earning less than \$45,000 per year have received these last dollar scholarships. CCOG has reduced the financial burden on students, ensuring their persistence in

college. \$5 million in the in the proposed new budget for student support and outreach is essential for ALL of the 19 community colleges to develop and expand important student services that have proven to be successful at improving student outcomes. Such services have proven to be statistically significant when studied in ensuring that students succeed and graduate.

We do want to suggest some modest modifications to the Governor's budget while still remaining at the proposed investment of \$58.5 million. These changes will ensure that the program positively impacts more students.

1. Student Support and Outreach Grants to Colleges:

The grants to colleges during the pilot effort have been critically important, ensuring that colleges have the resources needed to strengthen support for CCOG and all other students and to increase outreach to former students and possible new students. A total of \$5 million is needed to assist colleges in outreach, advising, mentoring, tutoring and other student support models that will ensure the success of the initial CCOG investment.

2. Raise the Income Eligibility Threshold: By raising the income eligibility criteria above \$45,000 adjusted gross income, the CCOG program will be able to serve a larger number of students who need financial assistance including working adults. We humbly suggest that the state consider increasing the income qualifications to a household income of \$77,000 (the state's median household income). Increases could occur in increments over a number of years if funding is not available for the full increase immediately.

3. Continued Support for Part Time Students: The CCOG pilot program requires students to enroll in at least 6 credits to be eligible for the program. The current proposal raises the requirement to 12 credits for dependent students, making it more difficult for students who work to receive the financial assistance they need. Many of our students, even with tuition and fee free education, must work to provide for their families while studying to better their lifetime economic situation. A policy that does not support those who must work and study does not seem to support either these hard working students or the vital businesses they support with their work.

4. Summer Support: The CCOG program does not provide assistance to students during summer sessions. In its current form, it only supports classes during the antiquated agrarian academic year, these students do not need summers off, they need support to get to their next career as quickly as possible. This is better for them, for graduation rates, and for our state's economy.

5. Fees for Vital Workforce Programs that Support the NJ Economy: Career and the technical education programs, including but not limited to nursing, medical and health related fields, emergent technology, and culinary/hospitality, serve important labor market needs and have significant enrollments at the state's community colleges. Again, we humbly suggest that fees for these programs should be covered by the CCOG grant program. These programs are already the most affordable at your community colleges, limiting these students from enrolling in the most economically upwardly mobile programs in favor of "ology" degrees is not necessarily the best economic investment.

In closing, we believe that these modifications, essentially without impacting the proposed budget figure requested by the governor, will strengthen our community colleges at a time when nationally other states have realized that community colleges are a key component of their economic success and future.

Thank you for allowing me to address you. I welcome any questions?