



NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION
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Create an Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges within the Department of Education

- **National Skills Coalition (NSC) proposes the Biden administration develop a new position of the Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges who reports directly to the Under Secretary of Education**
- **The position would elevate and oversee community and technical colleges' essential, multiple-mission work, closely coordinate with other agencies and offices, and implement the new community college grant programs the President-elect has proposed**

President-elect Biden's proposals for postsecondary education are ambitious. They include a grant program to assist community colleges in improving student success, \$50 billion for high-quality training programs, and funding for community college facilities and technology. Given their magnitude, they deserve to be administered by a newly created Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges who has the power within the Department of Education (ED) to elevate the administration's community college mission in ED and across other departments, including Labor and Health and Human Services.

If the United States wants to increase the attainment of postsecondary credentials and degrees, community and technical colleges are foundational to doing so. They provide high quality, cost-effective education. They provide training for the 35-year-old mother of two who seeks a credential to lead her out of low-wage employment. They open their doors for previous college dropouts to restart their education and training and first-generation students who need to stay close to home. They provide a curriculum for workers developed in conjunction with their employer. They provide academic transfer pathways for students seeking entry to a four-year degree. In some cases, they are offering four-year degrees themselves. They are a linchpin to our country's economic well-being and will be essential in our recovery from the COVID-19 recession.

Elevating the Community College Agenda to succeed

Given community and technical colleges' importance to our nation's success, NSC proposes the Biden administration develop a new position of the Assistant Secretary for Community and

Technical Colleges who reports directly to the Under Secretary of Education. When the position for community colleges was originally developed, it was intended to be a policy advisor to the Secretary of Education. The re-imagined position would oversee community and technical colleges' essential, multiple-mission work and implement the new community college grant programs the President-Elect has proposed. It will assist in the implementation of the President-elect's proposal for individuals to access two years of community college or training without debt. It will help ensure community college reforms that support student success -- such as remediation and transfer -- are scaled through policies at the federal level. If we are to tap into the transformational nature of community colleges, their position at the federal level must reflect their importance.

The current administrative setting in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education is inadequate and outdated

Currently, the main federal staff position related to community colleges—the deputy assistant secretary of community colleges—resides in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE). OCTAE's primary responsibilities include overseeing Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE), Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA-Adult Education) and Corrections Education. The Perkins program largely provides funding for state career and technical education in high schools, with much smaller dollars flowing to community colleges. The Adult Education component of OCTAE supports adults and immigrants seeking basic skills, literacy, and English language instruction, the instruction of which may or may not reside in community colleges.

It may have been appropriate for the main federal official responsible for community colleges to reside in OCTAE when two-year colleges had a narrower mission, but times have changed. The students that community and technical colleges serve—44 percent of undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education programs in 2017-18—need to be recognized within ED by elevating the official responsible for the diverse goals they hope to accomplish. This position should also be provided with a staff that will focus on ensuring community colleges, and their students, succeed. It does not make sense that the responsibility for community colleges, which are primarily funded through higher education and workforce legislation, should reside in an office that is largely focused on much smaller funding streams and programs of CTE and Title II of WIOA.

Recent polling shows that 75 percent of voters want to see more nimble, short-term education and training options. The goal of making post-secondary training more responsive to the needs of workers is precisely the type of target this new position could prioritize as our post-secondary education and training systems are revamped.

Recommendations:

- The new assistant secretary should be engaged with all relevant interagency coordination, such as with the Department of Labor (DOL), as well as intra-agency coordination with offices like the Office of Postsecondary Education and OCTAE.

Coordination with DOL is particularly important given the post-secondary workforce funding administered by the Employment and Training Administration. This position could also help align investments made in community colleges, including those currently administered through OPE, such as grant programs for minority-serving institutions and TRIO (particularly Education Opportunity Centers and Student Support Services programs residing in community colleges).

- The new assistant secretary could help coordinate policies to better align anti-poverty and postsecondary programs, including public benefits access for community college students, based on the joint agency letter released Nov 15, 2016 during the Obama administration. In addition, the assistant secretary could review all negotiated rulemaking changes that impact community colleges and were made over the past four years.
- The new assistant secretary position should also be responsible for corrections and re-entry education and coordinate with other administrative units in ED involved with corrections education. Moving the Office of Corrections Education from OCTAE would elevate the importance of postsecondary corrections education, which is particularly relevant as interest in corrections education grows and the ban on Pell Grants supporting such programs is reconsidered.
- NSC would also expect that the new assistant secretary would be involved in the issuance of any further state education stabilization dollars that might be included in a future stimulus package and any substantial investments in infrastructure.
- The position should also have responsibility for any administrative and national activities related to new major community college grant funding. Such funding could be used not only for the direct emergency needs of students, but also to develop career pathways, provide seed funding for industry partnerships to quickly train individuals who have been negatively impacted by Covid-19, and bolster financial aid for such programs.

We anticipate there would be broad support for the creation of this position, given community college's essential role in educating and training millions of Americans. If the administration wants to address the inequitable outcomes and higher levels of indebtedness among Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other populations of color who attend for-profit institutions, the

elevation of community colleges will help ensure these public institutions have the support needed to advance equity.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.