



Department of Education

The Evolution of Iowa's Community Colleges

Mission, History and Value

2025

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Introduction

“Iowa’s Community Colleges, the largest post-secondary system in Iowa, [further] a sound economy by providing every community member an opportunity and encouraging them to pursue the achievement of their full potential at all stages of their lives.”

Source: Iowa Association of Community College Trustees



The community college system in Iowa has evolved since the state’s first “junior” college was established in Mason City in 1918. Today’s community colleges are nimble and highly responsive to economic fluctuations. Strong community connections foster partnerships and collaborations that create efficiencies benefiting both students and industry. A focus on innovation puts Iowa’s community colleges in a unique position to tackle key higher education issues, ranging from cost and access to employment outcomes and community engagement.

Iowa’s 15 community colleges educate the largest demographic (42.2 percent) of all Iowa residents enrolled in public or private two- and four-year postsecondary institutions in the state [1], exceeding the national average of 32.1 percent as calculated from the last five years of available data from the National Center for Education Statistics [2]. In addition, the student body served by Iowa’s community colleges has become increasingly diverse. Students representing racial and ethnic minorities made up 24.7 percent of total enrollment during the 2022-2023 academic year (AY) [3].

The open-door approach adopted by community colleges ensures that nearly everyone who applies is accepted, which makes it possible for people of all ages and backgrounds to access higher education. To serve this diverse population, Iowa’s community colleges offer a wide range of programs to equip students with the knowledge and skills to succeed, whether they continue on to a four-year degree or enter the workforce. Offerings include arts and sciences college parallel programs designed to transfer to four-year colleges and universities, career and technical education (CTE) programs that prepare students for industry-specific careers, training and retraining programs for Iowa’s businesses and industries and a variety of adult education and noncredit courses for personal enrichment, academic preparedness and skill attainment.

As college costs continue to outpace corresponding increases in household income, community colleges provide an affordable option for students and families to access higher education. As a result, increasingly more first-time students are choosing community colleges as the starting point toward a postsecondary degree.

Community colleges are also essential components of state and national strategies for workforce development and are increasingly acknowledged for the quality of their academic programs. These programs help Iowans acquire the skills and credentials to meet the needs of local employers and help build a strong talent pipeline. While Iowa’s community colleges have evolved and adapted since their inception in the early 1900s, they maintain an egalitarian belief in the equality of all people who deserve equal access to the opportunities higher education affords.

[1] Iowa College Aid. Iowa College and University Enrollment Report. (Fall 2024).

[2] National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_303.70.asp

[3] Iowa Department of Education. Fall Enrollment: Iowa Community Colleges. (Fall 2023).

History

Community colleges have a long and robust history in Iowa, beginning in 1918 when the Mason City public school district established the first two-year postsecondary educational institution in the state. Mason City Junior College proved to be successful and was accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1919. Between the years of 1918 and 1953, a total of 35 different public junior colleges were established in the state through the operation of public school districts. These institutions were often organized with a dean who reported directly to the local superintendent and offered arts and sciences programs equivalent to the first two years of the baccalaureate program, a limited number of occupational programs and adult education opportunities.

In 1927, Iowa's 42nd General Assembly passed the first law to authorize the establishment of public junior colleges offering instructional programs at a level higher than high school courses. The individual colleges were required to be approved by both the local voters and the State Superintendent of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction (now the Director of the Iowa Department of Education). The law also authorized the State Superintendent to prepare standards and to provide adequate inspection of these junior colleges.

Acknowledging the need for more public postsecondary options across the country, the United States Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958, which in part made federal funds available to states on a matching basis to develop area vocational programs. To implement this legislation in Iowa, the Iowa State Board of Education modified the state vocational education plan to allow local school districts and Iowa State University to operate as "area schools." This included a specific allocation of funds to develop area vocational programs under NDEA's Title VIII, a designation of area vocational-technical high schools and the authorization for tuition-paying students to attend these schools and programs. Fifteen (15) schools were designated as area vocational-technical high schools and were utilized to initiate programming for the Manpower Development and Training Act.

Iowa Studies Higher Education Options with Intentions to Improve Access



Even with the influx of public junior colleges and area vocational-technical high schools throughout the state, postsecondary enrollment opportunities remained limited for most Iowans during the 1950s. In response, the 58th General Assembly appropriated \$25,000 in 1958 to the Iowa Legislative Research Bureau to conduct a policy study regarding higher education needs in the state. The resulting report included a recommendation to establish regional community colleges with building and operational costs covered in part (at least half) by the state. As a result of the policy study, the General Assembly directed the Iowa Department of Public Instruction to conduct a two-year study regarding the need for a statewide system of public community colleges.

The Iowa Department of Public Instruction submitted its report, "Education Beyond High School Age: The Community College," to the General Assembly in December 1962. The report made recommendations and proposed enabling legislation to restructure the county educational system and form 16 area education districts by drawing boundaries along existing school district lines. These districts were intended to replace the county boards of education and provide programs and services that would complement those provided by local school districts. It was envisioned that the area districts would also serve as legal structures through which a statewide system of community colleges could be developed.

Although the 60th General Assembly (1963) took no action on the report, an interim legislative committee concluded that it would be appropriate to combine vocational and two-year college

education into a single comprehensive system, but separated the county board consolidation issue (area education agencies were later established by the legislature in 1974). Staff of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction worked closely with various groups throughout the state and arrived at conclusions similar to those of the interim committee. Passage of the federal Vocational Education Act of 1963 provided additional impetus to this planning, requiring quality, relevant vocational educational programs with flexibility to remain compatible with changing economic and workforce needs.

Laying the Groundwork for Iowa's Community College System

After receiving the interim committee's report in 1964, the 61st General Assembly enacted legislation in 1965 that permitted the development of a statewide system of two-year postsecondary educational institutions, identified as "merged area schools." The Iowa Department of Public Instruction was to direct the development of these merged area schools as either area community colleges or area vocational schools. The legislation provided for the fiscal support of these institutions through a combination of student tuition and federal, state and local funds. Individual colleges were granted authority to establish tuition rates, not to exceed the lowest tuition rate charged by any one of Iowa's three public universities. Local funds included a local three-quarter mill levy on properties within the merged area for operational purposes and an additional three-quarter mill levy for the purchase of sites and building construction. State general aid was distributed to community colleges on the basis of \$2.25 per day for the average daily enrollment of full-time equivalent students who were Iowa residents. (The 63rd General Assembly changed this formula in 1969 to determine enrollment and state aid on the basis of actual contact hours of instruction.)

The pivotal legislation approved in 1965 was enthusiastically received, with the first plan for a community college being submitted to the Iowa Department of Public Instruction on July 5, 1965, just one day after the legislation was effective. This first plan combined Clinton Junior College, Muscatine Junior College and the vocational-technical programs of the Davenport schools to become the new Eastern Iowa Community College District. Plans for the other community colleges followed in quick succession. Although the original model called for 20 merged areas, the number was first reduced to 16 areas and then to 15 when Area 8 was split among adjacent areas.

Fourteen (14) community colleges were approved and organized in 1966 and a 15th in January 1967. While seven of the colleges began as comprehensive community colleges (North Iowa Area, Iowa Lakes, Iowa Central, Iowa Valley District, Eastern Iowa, Des Moines Area and Southeastern), eight of the colleges were originally approved as area vocational schools (Northeast Iowa, Northwest Iowa, Hawkeye, Kirkwood, Western Iowa Tech, Iowa Western, Southwestern and Indian Hills). By July 1970, all of the area vocational-technical high schools and existing junior colleges had either merged into the new system or were discontinued. All areas of the state were included in community college service areas by July 1971.



The Colleges' Role Expands

The community colleges and area vocational schools grew quickly, both in terms of students served and services offered. In 1983, the Iowa Industrial New Jobs Training Act was established by the legislature, adding contracted customized job training to the list of services provided by community colleges. Other job training programs followed, further expanding the role of community colleges in economic development. Currently, all 15 institutions operate as comprehensive community colleges, offering college transfer, career and technical education (CTE) and adult and continuing education programs.

In 1989, the 73rd General Assembly passed Senate File 449, requiring that secondary vocational programs be competency-based and that the competencies be articulated with postsecondary vocational education. This prompted an increased cooperation between local education agencies and community colleges, resulting in more programs that awarded college credit to high school students through articulation. The Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) Act of 1989, and later, supplemental weighting, allowed high school students to jointly enroll in college credit courses in significantly greater numbers.

The Division is Established

The Division of Community Colleges (division) within the Iowa Department of Education (Department) was established in July 1989 by the 73rd General Assembly via an amendment of the Code of Iowa related to the merged area schools. The role of this new division was to provide effective leadership to the community college system and increase the status and support for community college activities throughout the state. The Department was restructured to move the Bureau of Area Schools and the Bureau of Career Education, both previously under the Division of Instructional Services, to the new division. This restructure resulted in division responsibilities to include not only community college activities, but also secondary CTE oversight and veterans' postsecondary education responsibilities.

The changing role of community colleges in higher education, and increasing emphasis on institutional effectiveness, led to the passage of legislation in 1990 requiring the creation of a state accreditation process for Iowa's community colleges. This legislation outlined requirements for new standards and an accreditation process to address the issues of quality, access, accountability and institutional improvement.

In the late 1990s, the majority of Iowa's community colleges expanded their roles in workforce development by becoming primary service providers for the federal Workforce Investment Act (currently the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act), as well as housing American Job Centers (a.k.a. One-Stop Centers). These centers are designed to provide job seekers with a full range of assistance under one roof.

The Workforce Training and Economic Development (WTED) Fund was established in 2003 as part of the Grow Iowa Values Fund. This fund is an important source of financing for new program innovation, development and capacity building at community colleges, particularly for CTE. Community colleges may use WTED funds to support the following activities: career academy programs; CTE programs; entrepreneurship education and small business assistance; and general training, retraining and in-service educational initiatives for targeted industries.

In 2013, the Iowa Legislature made a historic investment in a portfolio of education, workforce development, job training and adult literacy programs designed to address Iowa's growing shortage of skilled workers. The Iowa Skilled Worker and Job Creation Fund was created to support worker training and job creation efforts with funding from the state's gaming industry receipts. This investment is shared between the Iowa College Student Aid Commission, the Iowa Economic Development Authority, Iowa Workforce Development, the Iowa Board of Regents and the Iowa Department of Education. The

allocations received by the Department allow Iowa's community colleges to serve more Iowans from all socioeconomic backgrounds and help them acquire the skills and industry-recognized credentials needed to secure gainful employment. The allocations administered by the Department support the following programs:

- » Workforce Training and Economic Development (WTED) Fund (260C.18A);
- » Pathways for Academic Career and Employment (PACE) Program (260H);
- » Gap Tuition Assistance Program (260I);
- » Work-Based Learning Intermediary Network (256.40);
- » Accelerated Career Education (ACE) Infrastructure Program (260G);
- » Adult Basic Education and Adult Literacy Programs (260C.50); and
- » Education and Workforce Preparation Outcome Reporting.

In 2023, the Governor signed into law Senate File 514 restructuring the state government. As a result, in part, the Department of Education absorbed Iowa College Aid and the Board of Educational Examiners. The Division of Community Colleges and Postsecondary Readiness evolved into the Division of Higher Education which includes the following bureaus:

- » Board of Educational Examiners
- » Community Colleges
- » Career and Technical Education & Postsecondary Readiness
- » Iowa College Student Aid Commission



Governance and Planning

Iowa's community colleges are governed by locally elected boards of directors, each consisting of five to nine members elected for four-year terms. The Iowa State Board of Education provides statewide oversight and coordination of the colleges. Additionally, Iowa Code 256.31 mandated the establishment of a six-member Community College Council to assist the Iowa State Board of Education with substantial issues directly related to the community college system. The Council consists of four members from the State Board of Education, a community college president appointed by the Iowa Association of Community College Presidents and a community college trustee appointed by the Iowa Association of Community College Trustees. This governance structure was reaffirmed through a study mandated by the 78th General Assembly and conducted by the Iowa Department of Education in 1999. The study also recommended that the Community College Council develop a statewide strategic plan for the system of community colleges.

An initial five-year strategic plan was approved by the Iowa Association of Community College Presidents, the Iowa Association of Community College Trustees and the Iowa State Board of Education, and forwarded to the legislature in July 2001. The plan's goals included providing access for all Iowans to high-quality, comprehensive educational programs and services; developing highly skilled workers; maximizing financial and human resources; and demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency for achieving the system mission and goals. The initial plan was amended in January 2003, to include the full spectrum of services to persons of underrepresented groups (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) in all programs.

In spring 2006, the Iowa State Board of Education approved the second five-year statewide community college strategic plan, and in the subsequent fall, approved corresponding performance measures. Baseline data on each of the measures was reviewed annually, with a comprehensive condition report provided to the Iowa State Board of Education. Acknowledging that each community college has its own individual strategic plan and mission, Iowa Code 256.31 and its corresponding rules were updated in 2011 to discontinue the statewide strategic plan.

Accreditation Process

In 2008, the 82nd General Assembly mandated a comprehensive study of community college accreditation and accountability mechanisms, in which the Department was directed to review the accreditation process and the compliance requirements contained in the accreditation criteria. The review requirements specified for the Department to consider measures that would ensure statewide consistency in program quality; adequate Iowa State Board of Education oversight of community college programming; consistency in definitions for data collection; identification of barriers to providing quality programming; identification of methods to improve compensation of faculty; and development of system performance measures that adequately respond to needs and concerns. The bill also required the Department to look at accreditation processes and system performance measures from other states and regions.

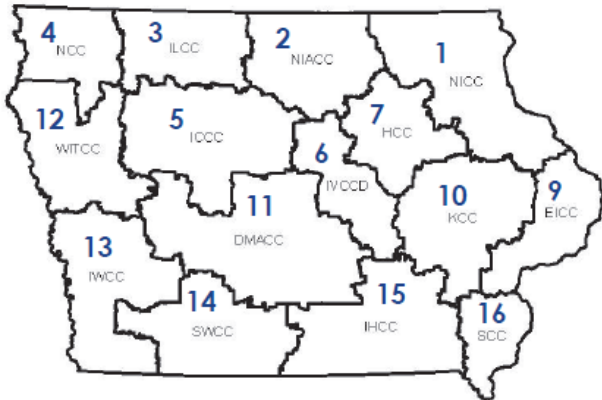
The Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee was convened to conduct the mandated review. Membership included at least one member from each college, representing the various functional units of community colleges, including presidents, chief academic officers, faculty, human resource administrators, business officers, student services administrators and academic deans. The committee developed recommendations, which the Department included in the final report to the legislature in January 2010.

The report recommended an overhaul of the state accreditation process to make it more focused and efficient while reaffirming Iowa's approach to ensuring state standards are met through peer review. Recommendations included removing duplication with the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) accreditation process by focusing state reviews on standards in state law that are not reviewed by the HLC, as well as any other issues identified by the state or colleges. Additionally, enhanced pre-visit desk reviews and streamlined interim visits were recommended to reduce the time and cost of site visits.

Iowa Code was aligned with the revised HLC criteria regarding faculty qualifications in 2016, thus increasing the required number of graduate credits in the field of instruction from 12 to 18 semester hours for instructors teaching liberal arts and science transfer courses. Code was also updated to reflect the equity review process that is now integrated with the accreditation process. Code was also aligned in 2017 with the HLC general education requirements that state that an AAS or AAA degree program shall include a minimum of 15 semester credit hours of general education. A maximum of three of those 15 credit hours may be documented through an embedded general education model as adopted by the chief academic officers in consultation with the Department.

The rules for the state accreditation process, as currently approved, set the standards for minimum faculty standards, faculty load, special needs, career and technical program review, strategic planning, physical plant and facilities, quality faculty plans and Senior Year Plus standards. The Advisory Committee continues to play an important role in assisting with the development of review protocol and providing feedback to the Department.

Iowa Community Colleges



Area 1 (NICC)

Northeast Iowa Community College
Box 400
Calmar, Iowa 52132

Area 2 (NIACC)

North Iowa Area Community College
500 College Drive
Mason City, Iowa 50401

Area 3 (ILCC)

Iowa Lakes Community College
19 South 7th Street
Estherville, Iowa 51334

Area 4 (NCC)

Northwest Iowa Community College
603 West Park Street
Sheldon, Iowa 51201-1046

Area 5 (ICCC)

Iowa Central Community College
One Triton Circle
Fort Dodge, Iowa 50501

Area 6 (IVCCD)

Iowa Valley Community College District
3702 South Center Street
Marshalltown, Iowa 50158

Area 7 (HCC)

Hawkeye Community College
1501 East Orange Road, Box 8015
Waterloo, Iowa 50704

Area 9 (EICC)

Eastern Iowa Community Colleges
101 West Third Street
Davenport, Iowa 52801

Area 10 (KCC)

Kirkwood Community College
6301 Kirkwood Blvd., S.W., Box 2068
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52406-2068

Area 11 (DMACC)

Des Moines Area Community College
2006 South Ankeny Blvd.
Ankeny, Iowa 50023

Area 12 (WITCC)

Western Iowa Tech Community College
4647 Stone Avenue, Box 5199
Sioux City, Iowa 51102-5199

Area 13 (IWCC)

Iowa Western Community College
2700 College Road, Box 4-C
Council Bluffs, Iowa 51502-3004

Area 14 (SWCC)

Southwestern Community College
1501 West Townline Street
Creston, Iowa 50801

Area 15 (IHCC)

Indian Hills Community College
525 Grandview Avenue
Ottumwa, Iowa 52501

Area 16 (SCC)

Southeastern Community College
1500 West Agency Road, PO Box 180
West Burlington, IA 52655

Note: There is no Area 8. This area, which was originally going to serve the Dubuque area, was ultimately split among adjacent areas.