

# A CALL TO ACTION, FROM ONE TRUSTEE TO ALL TRUSTEES

TRUSTEE ROSAELENA O'NEIL CHALLENGES YOU TO CHAMPION  
THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES LOUDLY AND PROUDLY.

BY ROSAELENA A. O'NEIL



AMONG THE MANY CHALLENGES POSED IN 2020, THE PANDEMIC AND THE ASSOCIATED ECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS have revealed serious shortcomings in the higher education sector with a spotlight on high costs, questionable value, outdated education models, and uneven outcomes. Higher education is under the microscope and one thing is clear: the narrative around community colleges has to shift. For too long, our community colleges have been mired with a perception of “less than” and considered the education option of last resort. As community college trustees, we know better.

Our challenge is to amplify the value proposition of community colleges and to elevate our colleges as agile institutions that are innovative, responsive, and focused on delivering equitable education outcomes and a pipeline of talent. Our call to action as trustees is to connect with our communities and get the word out that our colleges are a beacon of hope and opportunity. We all know the power of messages going viral. We need to seize this unique moment in history and publish bold public statements that lift our colleges and students. As our national and state legislatures prepare to meet, we must push, with one voice, for the policies that will reset our economy and shine the light on equity in education and our colleges as the engine that will propel us forward.

The following is one example of an opinion piece I shared in my community reframing my college by highlighting academic programs, workforce initiatives and resources, and the all-important value proposition of our community college.

Community outreach efforts like these have the power to change perceptions, to demonstrate to those within our communities that our colleges offer great financial value and great educational value. Community colleges are second to none in higher education. As trustees, we know this, we have the platform through which to make it known to others, and doing so is part of our fiduciary commitments to our colleges and our communities.

The op-ed that follows is designed to open eyes and minds to the often-overlooked value of community colleges. It demonstrates this value with multiple *specific* examples of what my community college does for those in our community, including students and area businesses. It demonstrates how Northern Virginia Community College is *connected with*, not divided from, excellent four-year universities and schools in the area. It showcases the successes of some of our typical students — our neighbors and local ambassadors for the college’s value.

I urge you to join me in publishing a similar special piece for your community during or before Community College Month this April. Your voice has great power. Use it!

## WANT EQUITY AND VALUE IN HIGHER EDUCATION? LOOK IN OUR OWN BACKYARD.

MY DAUGHTER FINALLY CONVINCED ME TO UPGRADE MY cellphone. I had been operating with a device that was about seven generations behind the times. She said “Mom, it’s an investment worth making. What are you waiting for?” When I fired up the new phone, I couldn’t believe what I had been missing. I have a new appreciation for a “cellphone” – turns out it is a supercomputer!

In a similar vein, when we talk about higher education — and community colleges in particular — some people maintain an outdated, limited worldview. Some believe community colleges like Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) are “grade 13” or the higher education alternative for those less fortunate.

While the mission has always been to promote economic and social mobility, NOVA has seen an enormous “upgrade” in recent years. NOVA embodies equity and excellence in higher education.

Joel Vargas, a 2011 Wakefield High School alumnus, earned his associate degree in engineering at NOVA. He

is an established business owner and project manager and he notes, “my NOVA education gave me skills and perspective that uniquely positioned me to be successful leading diverse teams. In my business, we like to groom and grow talent. I see a bright future and long-term career in construction management.”

Look at some of the factors that enable equity: *cost* (less than half of the tuition and fees of other institutions); *access* (easy enrollment, flexible schedules, targeted advising, and nearby campuses on public transit); *responsiveness and agility* (wraparound services that meet students where they are and a key partner to the business community). A few examples:

- NOVA is urgently deploying the Reemploy Virginia Initiative launched by Gov. Ralph Northam in October. NOVA already distributed nearly \$2.6 million for tuition and fees to reskill northern Virginians who are unemployed or underemployed due to the pandemic for jobs in high-demand fields.

## NOVA IS THE TALENT PIPELINE OF THE REGION, AN INDISPENSABLE REGIONAL ASSET, A UNIQUE AND CRITICAL PARTNER TO THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY AND THE PATHWAY FOR THOSE SEEKING A TRADITIONAL FOUR-YEAR EDUCATION.

- NOVA was awarded the Greater Washington Innovation Award for Jump Start, a tuition-free summer online course program for graduating high school seniors to earn college credit — a pandemic rapid-response program.
- NOVA and Arlington Public Schools are partners. Arlington graduates pursue technical and baccalaureate pathways or launch into ADVANCE — a co-enrollment pathway with George Mason University concluding in a four-year degree at a fraction of the cost. Our high school students benefit from increasingly diverse dual enrollment opportunities — college credit-bearing freshman and sophomore courses in English, social sciences, math, and specialized science labs.

NOVA's engagement with employers builds on our engagement with K-12 partners and ensures our future workforce understands the skills needed for and pathways to successful employment. Developing signature education and apprenticeship partnerships with companies showcases NOVA's ability to quickly respond to the specific needs of critical employers that offer high paying top demand jobs.

Information is power. NOVA's business-engagement team serves as the go-to resource on labor market information for the northern Virginia region. The team provides data reports on the State of the Workforce and on our local Arlington economy and jobs. This research supports businesses and consumers alike. Anyone can see career pathways and coursework that connects education with opportunity.

Kate Bates, president and CEO of the Arlington Chamber of Commerce, notes, "Businesses in Arlington need a well-educated and skilled talent pipeline. NOVA is essential to achieving the goal of an educated regional workforce."

NOVA is *THE* talent pipeline of the region, an indispensable regional asset, a unique and critical partner to the business community and the pathway for those seeking a traditional four-year education. We are an innovator, a partner, an agile, equitable, diverse, and inclusive institution of higher education that serves *everyone* — the high school graduate, the adult learner, the career switcher, our veterans, the person wanting to upskill to maintain a competitive edge. NOVA hosts students with bachelors, masters, and PhD degrees. Our faculty is credentialed, nationally recognized, and experienced.

Arlingtonian Kallan Moore, who says she "wandered" after finishing a liberal arts degree, notes, "I'm more confident today in my ability to gain new skills. I credit NOVA for helping me see

that I was capable of working in a field that I had perceived as inaccessible and intimidating. NOVA took the mystery and jargon out of tech. I can see building a career that connects tech with my current work in the law."

Dr. Villagran-Glover, vice president for student services at NOVA's Alexandria campus, adds, "This is what education equity is all about — open access, guidance, and support — for everyone."

As for the future, NOVA is partnering with Virginia Tech, via its emerging Innovation Campus next to the new Amazon campus, to design a comprehensive pathway that could connect Arlington students as early as middle school on through master's degrees or beyond. Imagine the benefits to an eighth-grader at Williamsburg or Gunston Middle School, a sort of zipline to applied internships and possibly a full-time high paying job.

NOVA has been in our backyard for more than five decades. Today NOVA's enrollment is up — nearly 2.5 percent over last year. It has become the talent pipeline of the region, a critical partner to the business community, and one pathway for those seeking a traditional four-year education.

"Students of all ages and walks of life build their education and high-demand skills here," says Dr. Annette Haggray, provost of NOVA's Alexandria campus. "They build dreams and economic opportunity for themselves and their families."

NOVA is not just an alternative path; it is an education superhighway with many ramps.

*This op-ed was adapted from "Want Equity in Higher Education? Look in Our Own Backyard" by Rosaelena A. O'Neil, originally published in ARLnow, December 14, 2020.*



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