Infrastructure Finally Hits Prime Time

The Biden Administration's $2 trillion proposal includes provisions that address longstanding community college needs.

By Jee Hang Lee

THE PASSAGE OF THE THIRD STIMULUS plan earlier this year allows Congress and the Biden Administration to shift towards addressing the post-pandemic economy and creating new jobs through infrastructure funding. Infrastructure can take on different meanings, from building roadways and bridges to telecommunications, but the priorities for community colleges focus around three key areas: capital construction funds for community colleges, a dedicated job-training program for community colleges, and broadband expansion, especially for rural communities. As with all forms of advocacy, community colleges will need to explain why these funds are critical and how these funds will be utilized. With the pandemic hopefully ending, there is much to be done to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to support our students and communities.

Capital Construction Funds

President Joe Biden recently announced a sizable infrastructure package totaling $2 trillion for major infrastructure projects, including $12 billion dedicated to community college infrastructure. The funding solely for community colleges is notable, representing a nod to the sector's enormous needs for deferred maintenance and new construction. ACCT and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) have asked Congress and the administration to support a community college infrastructure package at $50 billion. The expansion of community colleges took place over 50 years ago, and there is a major need to retrofit and modernize buildings. Colleges should

start refining project lists to include all infrastructure funding needs.

Infrastructure funds for community colleges to support capital construction, deferred maintenance, and equipment has been one of the longstanding legislative priority items for ACCT. As far back as 2008, Congress and the administration have come close to passing funds to support higher education infrastructure, but final passage has been elusive. One of the major problems that has hampered passage has been the desire to include all sectors of higher education within a package, including colleges with outsized endowments. The inclusion of highly selective and well-funded institutions has resulted in political talking points which ultimately doomed previous proposals. It is currently unclear whether other sectors of higher education will be included in a final package.

Dedicated Job-Training Programs

Over the last decade, one of the most popular federal programs was the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant (TAACCCT) program, which provided $2 billion in critically needed funding to support job-training programs during the height of the recession. Countless community colleges received these critical funds, which allowed for partnerships between industry, colleges, and other stakeholders. As constructed, TAACCCT also ensured that all states received funds each year under this program.

While Congress has recently funded a much smaller program, Strengthening Community Colleges, the demand for critical job-training programs has outpaced the funding available. With the changing economy and increased unemployment rate, community colleges could serve as important partners with industry and business if there were dedicated funds to

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support this initiative. In its infrastructure proposal, the Biden Administration outlined $100 billion to support job training and workforce development, but it did not outline how these funds would be targeted. ACCT strongly supports targeting some of these resources for creation of a significant job-training program at community colleges.

Broadband Expansion

With most courses and colleges going virtual during the pandemic, there was significant pressure on broadband networks in all communities, but especially in rural ones. The need for

improvements to access to high-speed broadband has reached a critical moment, and additional resources are needed to build out high-speed broadband to all communities. In our *Strengthening Rural Community Colleges* report, ACCT outlines some proposals for broadband expansion. The report can be downloaded at rural.acct.org.

Ultimately, however, it is not just rural communities that have lacked broadband access. Across multiple surveys of community college students, most students have indicated that they have access to the "Internet" through their smartphone but not necessarily through a computer (if they owned one). Lacking Internet access on a computer workstation greatly disadvantages students. During the pandemic, colleges provided countless students with wireless hotspots and computers, but more work needs to be done.

ACCT has a wealth of resources available around these and other legislative priorities. Visit ACCT's Advocacy web page, www.acct.org/advocacy, for additional information.

Make your voice heard by visiting your member of Congress and talking about these key issues. Request a meeting virtually or in person with your legislator and talk about the pressing issues important to your institution. To stay up to date on key legislative items, sign up for ACCT's Latest Action in Washington alerts by emailing publicpolicy@acct.org.

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