

Viewpoint: Celebrate Career and Technical Education and its community impact

By Michael Berndt, President

February is Career and Technical Education (CTE) month, a national awareness campaign that celebrates educational programs that directly prepare students for high-demand careers. As proud CTE providers, Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College connect students to critical fields like Nursing, Graphic Design, Medical Assisting, Emergency Medical Services, Paralegal, Electrical Construction, and Veterinary Services, to name just a few.

Our institutions graduate over 1500 students annually, many of whom support local companies in the transportation, construction, healthcare, and service industries. I meet these graduates all the time when I am out in the community.

Of course, we are out in the community a lot less this year. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the importance of CTE fields and the challenges of finding qualified workers. Many of our graduates fill front-line positions or work in critical industries. They are our line workers, healthcare workers, mechanics, construction and manufacturing workers, and commercial drivers ensuring essential infrastructure is maintained.

Unfortunately, many of these industries lack the workers they need. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, the November unemployment rate of 3.8 percent has returned almost to pre-pandemic levels, but we know the story is more complicated. Many of us have stepped out of the workforce because we are caring for children, anxious about our own safety, or we work in industries impacted significantly by the pandemic—retail, restaurants, and hospitality.

As our sense of the post-COVID landscape becomes clearer, CTE programs will play an important role in our economic recovery. Working with employers, our chambers of commerce, and our workforce development agencies, our colleges can help incumbent and dislocated workers upskill or retrain for industries where we most need talent. The goal is to match employer needs with people ready to re-enter the workforce.

February is also Black History Month. This is our opportunity to celebrate Black history and the many accomplishments of Black leaders, business persons, scholars and artists. It is also our opportunity to address long-standing inequities experienced by Black residents. These inequities have also been exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, women and persons of color are disproportionately represented in those industries hit hardest by social restrictions, including retail, restaurants, and transportation.

As a member of our workforce system, DCTC and Inver Hills also have opportunities to eliminate disparities in our educational outcomes. We have been committed to doing this work, creating more equity-informed policies, support services, and teaching practices. We want inclusive colleges committed to the success of all our students.

February reminds us that career and technical education is invaluable to our future workforce, providing clear pathways to high paying careers. This month also reminds us that post-pandemic efforts to rebuild our economy must be informed by a commitment to equity. We have great opportunities to rethink those systems that perpetuate disparities in median income, labor force participation, and opportunities for career advancement.