

Viewpoint: Community and technical colleges perfect for those wondering “what’s next?”

By Michael Berndt, interim president of Dakota County Technical College & Inver Hills Community College

Starting this fall, Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) and Inver Hills Community College (IHCC) will commemorate 50 years of providing higher education in Minnesota. As we reflect on our history, I am reminded of the special role that community and technical colleges play in higher education.

Going back to the early twentieth century, junior colleges represented a unique American invention in higher education. They offered the first two years of a four-year education, providing access to affordable collegiate education to a growing number of communities. By 1940, more than 450 junior colleges offered associate-level education. Career and technical education was present from the beginning, but it expanded rapidly during the Great Depression as students sought access to employment opportunities.

By the 1960s, junior colleges were becoming community colleges, reflecting their broader missions in transfer and career and technical education, as well as their embeddedness in local communities.

During the 1960s, the number of community colleges in the country increased again to accommodate a growing number of high school students and veterans looking to realize the educational benefits of the GI Bill. Enrollments in community colleges expanded from about 170,000 in 1950 to 2.1 million in 1970.

Founded in 1969, Inver Hills and DCTC illustrate the responsiveness of leaders and legislators to meet the growing educational needs of their communities.

Today, our colleges embrace the broad missions of community and technical colleges. We continue to provide the first two years of a four-year degree. We continue to provide short-term certificates and two-year degrees for employment in high-demand fields. We continue to provide broad access to higher education while maintaining the same institutional accreditations as four-year colleges and universities.

Our work goes so much deeper, though, and I encourage you to consider where your interests might align with those of the many learners or organizations we have served.

We help adult learners accelerate their career. Alumnus Matt Simpson took advantage of our Adult Success through Accelerated Pathways (ASAP) program at Inver Hills to advance within the fire service. Matt is now the assistant fire chief for the Saint Paul Fire Department.

We help learners navigate higher education. Alumna Maria Navidad Sanchez Resendiz came to DCTC as a TRIO student. TRIO programs help students who may be new to higher education plan for success. With help from TRIO, Maria graduated in May with an AAS degree from the Energy Technical Specialist program. She will pursue a BS in Electrical Engineering at Bethel University this fall.

We connect students with potential employers through internships, job shadowing, career fairs, and more. Inver Hills alumnus Nick Gorell found a job as a sales operation specialist with Metro Transit. He credits his employment to an internship he completed while earning his AAS degree. Nick has since been back to campus to promote internship opportunities at the Met Council.

We provide customized training solutions to support area businesses. We have partnered with organizations like Hired and the YWCA to provide skills training that prepares adults for a class B commercial driver's license. These completers are helping to fill the critical need for truck drivers.

We support community organizations through volunteering and community-based learning. Students at Inver Hills partnered with Daily Work, a St. Paul nonprofit that supports job seekers, to plan their annual fundraiser. Students served as liaisons between the organization and vendors, foundations, clients, and corporations, exercising the small-group communication skills they were learning in school.

Regardless of why learners come to Inver Hills and DCTC, we work hard to provide them the information and skills to reach their goals, from career exploration to free tutoring and advising.

I invite you to come learn what our colleges have to offer you this fall, or to see how we might partner to meet your organization's needs. DCTC has Tuesday Campus Visits every Tuesday at 1 p.m., and Inver Hills offers weekly campus visits throughout the summer.

Take the first step toward your own bold future with DCTC or Inver Hills.