

**Testimony of Dr. Chris Cox,
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Development**

**Building Pathways: Advancing
Workforce Development in the
21st Century**

**Presented to the Senate
Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions
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Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Blunt Rochester, and distinguished members of the Committee: Thank you for the honor and opportunity to provide testimony for the committee's hearing on Building Pathways: Advancing Workforce Development in the 21st Century. I am Dr. Chris Cox, Deputy Chancellor for Instruction, Research, and Development at the Alabama Community College System.

The Alabama Community College System includes a network of 24 community and technical colleges serving over 160,000 individuals annually. Our core mission is not merely academic; it is economic. We function as Alabama's primary engine for workforce development, operating under a singular mandate: to equip citizens with the skills highly demanded by industry and to serve as a critical partner in recruiting and retaining businesses across our state.

Our impact is measurable. We deliver a **direct, measurable return on investment in the American worker: For every dollar invested in the ACCS for 2023/2024 year, we return \$1.20 in added tax revenue and public-sector savings.** Recent economic impact studies show that the ACCS and its alumni contribute over **\$8.1 billion** in added income to the state economy, supporting the equivalent of **one in every 26 jobs** in Alabama.

With "Community" in our name, we prioritize accessibility. The ACCS operates over 130 locations across Alabama to ensure we provide a local opportunity for education and training to residents in all areas of the state. We recognize that each community has its own strengths, opportunities, and challenges, and our ability to connect with local employers allows us to design community-specific solutions. Through our colleges and training providers, we are equipped to deliver industry-aligned curriculum and hands-on training from as little as two weeks up to a two-year associate degree. In Alabama we believe that everyone is "college material" and we have a goal of ensuring we find the right program fit for each student. Our colleges meet people where they are in life and help them reach where they want to go.

Workforce Development in the 21st Century requires understanding the continually growing and changing needs of the local business and industry ecosystem as well as an infrastructure that can quickly adapt to those needs. The ACCS has continued to invest in the people, technology, equipment, and processes that help deliver education and training programs that align with the feedback we receive from every business sector in Alabama – from small businesses to large corporations, and manufacturing to healthcare and anything in between. The modern community college in Alabama is an active participant in economic recruitment, not a passive bystander. When a major manufacturer, aerospace company, or technology firm considers establishing operations in Alabama, their first and most critical question is, "Can you provide the talent?" The ACCS's ready-to-deploy training infrastructure allows us to answer with a definitive "Yes."

Proven Models: Industry-Driven, Flexible Pathways

We have developed a set of proven models that combine industry engagement and a student-centered design. These models leverage employer input to adapt to changing market demands,

ensuring responsiveness to industry needs, demonstrating how community and technical colleges serve as central economic drivers while delivering measurable workforce outcomes.

Rapid Response and Custom Training: We leverage the **Alabama Technology Network (ATN)**, an entity within the ACCS, to provide specialized training and services directly to business and industry. This network enables us to rapidly develop and implement customized training protocols for new and expanding businesses. For example, if a new auto supplier moves into the state, the ACCS can quickly create a training pipeline for their specific machinery, quality control, and safety needs, ensuring the company has a skilled workforce ready on Day One.

Skills for Success Program: Our **ACCS Innovation Center** developed the "Skills for Success" program, which offers customized, rapid-delivery, non-credit, industry-recognized training in high-demand fields like commercial truck driving (CDL), welding, construction, and healthcare. This program is often offered at **no cost** to the participant, swiftly moving individuals from unemployment or underemployment into family-sustaining careers. By reducing the time-to-competency, we accelerate the state's ability to attract new industry jobs. What distinguishes this program is its industry-driven design. Businesses identify their specific workforce needs, and we convene a task force of leaders from across that sector to develop the curriculum. Their combined expertise ensures that our training is precisely aligned with current hiring demands and upskilling priorities.

Apprenticeships and Work based learning Partnerships: We facilitate state-of-the-art apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, working together with major industry groups like the Alabama Hospital Association, Alabama Board of Nursing, Alabama Nursing Home Association, Alabama Automotive Manufacturers Association (AAMA) and the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council (MSSC). This employer-driven model ensures that our curriculum remains perfectly aligned with real-world technological and professional standards. ACCS is proud that each of its 24 colleges are registered apprenticeship sponsors. ACCS is also proud to support a first-in-class nursing registered apprenticeship program in partnership with the Alabama Board of Nursing.

A key component of our programs is to provide highly trained employees with the flexibility to grow into the career they desire - even if it requires multiple steps to get there. Today's workforce needs credentials that are relevant, portable, and stackable. The ACCS delivers this through a multi-tiered approach:

Immediate Employability Credentials: Through programs like Skills for Success, students can earn a certification (e.g., an industrial maintenance technician credential or a CDL Class A license) in a matter of weeks or months through self-paced, accessible learning environments.

Pathways for Advancement: We offer a wide variety of credit programs, short-term certificates, and two-year **associate in applied science (AAS) degrees in technical fields** such as advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, and practical nursing. These programs often include industry-recognized credentials built directly into the curriculum. Our **AAS degree graduates** see an average annual earnings increase of over **\$9,200** compared to a high school

diploma equivalent. Our vast array of programs provides multiple points of entry and exit opportunities into training and the workforce.

Seamless Transfer: For students seeking four-year degrees, our articulation agreements with universities ensure a smooth transfer of credits, preventing wasted time and tuition dollars. This dual function, providing technical skills for immediate work *and* foundational knowledge for higher education, makes the community college the most efficient educational investment available. ACCS is demonstrating that academic and technical skills are not mutually exclusive and are, in fact, integrally connected.

Expanding Opportunities

Dual Enrollment: The Alabama Community College System takes a forward-thinking approach by exposing students to industry-driven college level material at an early age. In the 2024-2025 Academic Year, the system served over 40,000 dual enrollment students who were able to simultaneously attend high school and college-level classes. This number represents an even bigger picture with a **230% increase** in enrollment since 2015. While dual enrollment itself is not unique to the ACCS, what makes our programs unique is that we provide low tuition year-round, accessible instructors and resources, lower GPA requirements, and high-quality education opportunities that offer full transferability and academic rigor across all 67 counties in the state of Alabama. Additionally, many of our dual enrollment instructors are local high school teachers credentialed by community colleges, a model that supports K-12 teacher retention and expands instructional capacity statewide. Through dual enrollment, we are providing opportunities to reach those who may not initially see themselves as college-bound, widening the state's talent pipeline and preparing students for in-demand careers. With over one in ten youth nationally not enrolled in school and not working, efforts to ensure that students have access to postsecondary opportunities in high school are helping to increase the labor force participation rate for youth.

Supporting Adult Learners, Special Populations, and Justice-Involved Students: The Alabama Community College System is committed to expanding opportunity for every Alabamian, and a central component of that mission is serving individuals who come to us from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, and life circumstances. While these groups have distinct needs, they share a common goal: gaining the education and skills necessary to build a better future. Our system provides tailored pathways that meet each learner where they are, academically, geographically, and personally, so they can move toward meaningful employment and long-term economic stability. The story of our nation has always been grounded in expanding economic, social, and geographic mobility, and our efforts at ACCS are helping to ensure more Alabamians realize newfound levels of mobility, which is **essential to achieving a modern, competitive American workforce**.

Adult learners form a significant share of Alabama's emerging workforce, and our colleges are designed to help them pursue new skills without uprooting their lives. Through flexible schedules, online and hybrid learning, short-term training, and the support of our Adult Education programs, individuals can earn a GED or high school equivalency credential, build foundational academic skills, and transition directly into workforce training or degree programs.

This approach enables working adults to access high-demand, high-wage opportunities that strengthen both their families and Alabama's economy.

This approach covers a large population of individuals with disabilities, low-income families, single parents, displaced homemakers, and those entering the workforce after involvement with the criminal justice system. These individuals make up a significant, largely untapped, segment of Alabama's workforce. By investing in underrepresented individuals, we can connect them to education, training, and employment opportunities that further strengthen Alabama's talent pipeline and drive inclusive economic growth. There is no better way to increase the labor force participation rate than by providing integrated education, workforce pathways, and supportive services to Americans facing one or more barriers to entering the workforce.

The Alabama Community College System served more than 1,000 justice-involved students in the Fall of 2024 alone, and soon, we will also be providing on-site vocational training in the new Elmore County Mega-Prison Complex. These opportunities prepare incarcerated learners for employment immediately upon release, reducing recidivism and improving community stability. Our investments strengthen families, improve public safety, and contribute directly to Alabama's workforce and economic competitiveness.

Rural Access: Since nearly half of Alabama's population lives in areas designated as 'rural', the ACCS has launched programs that fit the unique requirements of rural communities. Healthcare workers continue to be in short supply and yet high demand across the country and perhaps no place experiences that challenge more than rural hospitals and care facilities. The ACCS conducted surveys with local healthcare providers to better understand what skill gaps existed at the local level. By working with providers like Bibb Medical Center in Centreville, Alabama, the ACCS was able to diagnose the specific issues they were facing and begin to co-develop training programs that now provide the critical care workers that residents desperately need through a long-term, viable talent pipeline. Many local and regional hospitals have been faced with either shutting services down or shifting patient load to other facilities due to staffing shortages for roles such as Nurses, Surgical Technologists, Respiratory Therapists, and Medical Laboratory Technicians.

Agility as Workforce Strategy

A core strength is our ability to be agile. We can adapt to meet the evolving needs of students, employers, the state, and the nation. Our system and colleges operate with a unique turnkey training infrastructure, allowing us to respond immediately when new industry demands arise or when students need flexible pathways to meet their definition of success. This mindset ensures that our students pursuing career credentials, stackable certifications, or further education achieve outcomes that support economic growth and retain talent within Alabama. We are proud to say that 74% of our graduates one year after completion remain in the state of Alabama, directly supporting the state's economy through our talent pipeline. The return on investment is evident. By continuously aligning our programs with employer needs, we make certain that community and technical colleges remain the most effective and reliable engine for workforce development in the 21st century.

The Alabama Community College System is committed to solving the skilled labor crisis from the ground up as the keystone of Alabama's talent development system. We are a crucial piece of the national economic infrastructure, linking federal investment to local job creation, and ensuring that our citizens, regardless of their starting point, have a clear, affordable pathway to a rewarding career.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today on a topic that is not only important to the Alabama Community College System but is shaping the future prosperity of generations to come. We stand ready to partner with this committee and Congress to ensure that community and technical colleges across the nation receive the support necessary to continue driving economic competitiveness and strengthening the American workforce.