

**Albert Lewis, Jr. Ed.D.**  
**Vision for the Future of Berkshire Community College**

**The Role of Community Colleges in Contemporary Higher Education**

I came to community college work not as a career move but as a calling, born from witnessing education's transformative power in my own family. My father, who completed only third grade, instilled in me an unwavering belief in education as the pathway to opportunity. That foundational truth has shaped my vision: community colleges are America's most powerful engine for achieving the American Dream.

Early in my community college journey, a moment crystallized the meaning of our work. A retired factory worker crossed the commencement stage to receive his GED—fulfilling a deathbed promise he made to his mother decades earlier. In his eyes, I saw what student success truly means: creating mechanisms and pathways for every individual to achieve their educational goals, whether pursuing an associate degree for transfer, workforce credentials for immediate employment, or specialized training to upskill for economic advancement. Our commitment must be to meet each student exactly where they are and honor their unique reasons for seeking postsecondary education.

**Today's reality demands this student-centered approach.** With 72% of jobs requiring postsecondary credentials by 2031, community colleges are perfectly positioned to provide affordable, accessible pathways to economic mobility. I have witnessed single mothers transition from TANF recipients to living-wage earners through our programs. I have seen dual enrollment students reduce their time to bachelor's degree completion while saving families tens of thousands of dollars. These are not anecdotes—they represent our fundamental purpose.

Yet rural-serving community colleges face distinct challenges and opportunities. In regions like Berkshire County, we are not merely an educational option—we are often the primary anchor institution for economic development, cultural enrichment, and social mobility. Rural colleges must be deeply embedded in their communities, understanding local workforce needs, partnering with regional employers, and adapting quickly to economic shifts. The geographic isolation that defines rural areas makes our accessibility mission even more critical; for many students, we represent the difference between pursuing education or foregoing it entirely.

My leadership philosophy centers on repositioning Berkshire Community College as **THE** choice after high school, not the alternative. This requires four commitments:

- **First**, delivering academic rigor that equals or exceeds the institutions to which our students transfer, ensuring their seamless success at four-year universities.
- **Second**, building robust workforce pathways aligned with regional labor markets, creating immediate economic opportunities for graduates.
- **Third**, cultivating belonging and community for diverse student populations—from recent high school graduates to returning adults, from first-generation students to career changers.
- **Fourth**, a commitment to community engagement by building collaborative relationships with K-12, 4-year colleges, business, government, non-profit, and philanthropic communities.

The contemporary higher education landscape is experiencing profound disruption. Community colleges must lead this transformation by demonstrating that excellence and accessibility are not competing values but complementary imperatives. Rural-serving institutions like BCC can model how higher education can be simultaneously affordable, rigorous, responsive to community needs, and transformative for individual lives.

This is the vision I bring: community colleges as gateways to opportunity, economic anchors for rural regions, and institutions where every student's success is our collective mission. It is work informed by personal experience, proven through measurable results, and driven by the belief that education remains America's most reliable pathway from aspiration to achievement.