

Community Colleges

A NEW JERSEY SUCCESS STORY

By Dr. Lawrence A. Nespoli



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Community colleges are one of New Jersey's greatest success stories. Created in the 1960s, New Jersey's 19 community colleges now enroll nearly 400,000 students at over 70 campuses throughout the state. While there may be differences of opinion as to what the most significant contributions of community colleges have been to the Garden State (many of which will be briefly summarized in this article), one thing is clear. New Jersey would be a far different place – to raise a family, to make a living, to start a business – had the state not created community colleges some 40 years ago.

Like in most states, our community colleges got their start through legislative action. Three acts of the New Jersey Legislature in particular were especially important in the development of our statewide community college system:

- The New Jersey County College Act of 1962;
- The New Jersey Higher Education Act of 1967; and
- The New Jersey Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994.

A ground swell of public support for more affordable higher education opportunities led to the state legislature's establishment of a community college system through the County College Act of 1962. Through this legislation, the state enabled freeholders to establish community colleges and committed state funding to support these new institutions. The first four community colleges – Atlantic, Cumberland, Middlesex, and Ocean – were established in 1966. Six more followed in 1968, seven more appeared in the 1970s, and the last two – Sussex and Warren – opened in 1982, bringing the total to the 19 community colleges currently operating in the state's 21 counties. In two cases, two counties jointly sponsor one college (Atlantic and Cape May sponsor Atlantic Cape; Somerset and Hunterdon sponsor Raritan Valley).

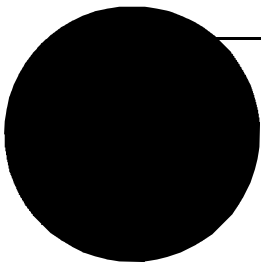
The early years for New Jersey community colleges were largely framed by state regulation and control created through the Higher Education Act of 1967. This legislation brought sweeping changes to the

state's higher education landscape by establishing a separate Board of Higher Education, the office of the Chancellor, and the Department of Higher Education – all charged with overseeing and carrying out a plan for a comprehensive state higher education system that included community colleges. While community colleges were successfully established in these early years, the local boards of trustees (and their presidents) operated primarily within a highly regulated system controlled by state officials.

All of this changed – and changed in a dramatic way – with passage of the Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994. No other single event comes close to this one in terms of the immediate, statewide, and lasting impact on New Jersey's community colleges. It dramatically altered the policy framework for our colleges by granting boards of trustees the local autonomy to govern their colleges. For example, because of this legislation our trustees are now primarily responsible for setting tuition, approving academic programs, and establishing associate degree standards – all areas of college operations that were previously controlled by the state.

While granting colleges more local autonomy, the Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994 also recognized the need for continued statewide coordination among the 19 community colleges. To that end, the legislation assigned to the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, a nongovernmental state association, many of the responsibilities previously carried out by the state. For example, the Council – working with its member trustees and presidents – submits an annual state budget request for the sector, coordinates capital funding to the colleges, and reviews courses to determine their eligibility for state aid. The Council fulfills these statutorily assigned state coordinating responsibilities while still focusing first and foremost on its advocacy efforts on behalf of the colleges in the Statehouse.

One of our presidents coined the phrase “coordinated autonomy” back in 1994 to describe New Jersey's statewide community college system. That label is as good now as it was then in describing how our colleges go about their business, both individually and collectively. Two words – a noun and a descriptive adjective. The noun (autonomy) makes clear that the cornerstone of New Jersey community college gover-



nance is local authority. Everything starts with the affirmation that local trustees and the presidents they hire know best how to serve the needs of their local communities. But the adjective (coordinated) drives home the point that local autonomy is not absolute. Autonomy only works when it is coordinated in statewide ways that serve statewide needs.

Community colleges across the country in other states operate through a number of different governance models. Some states have highly regulated centralized systems (like New Jersey had in the 1970s and 1980s). Other states have very decentralized approaches with little or no coordination among colleges. New Jersey's current approach is somewhere in the middle. And while no system is perfect, "coordinated autonomy" has served our colleges and our state exceptionally well since 1994. We point to the following timeline of community college initiatives as proof positive that our colleges are thriving and indeed one of New Jersey's greatest success stories.

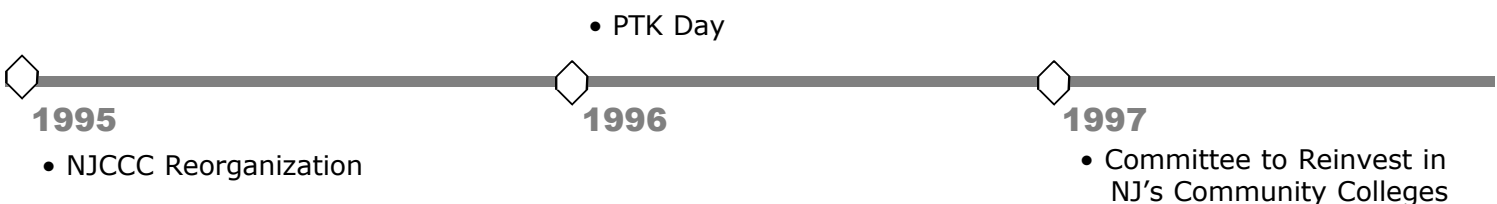
1. Reorganization of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (FY1995) – With the passage of the New Jersey Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994, there was much work to be done before community colleges could successfully move down the path of "coordinated autonomy." The Council developed "model policies" to ensure statewide consistency as our colleges moved to implement their new responsibilities under the legislation. The Council also quickly reorganized itself in order to fulfill its new responsibilities under the legislation, which included developing a

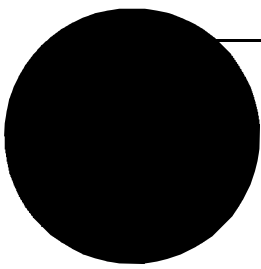
new funding formula for distributing state operating aid and a new Chapter 12 capital funding allocation process.

2. Phi Theta Kappa Day (PTK) (FY 1996) – PTK is the international honor society for community college students. When PTK International approached the Council about hosting a reception in the Statehouse for New Jersey's PTK students, we quickly agreed and have hosted an annual PTK day ever since. Governors, legislators, and other dignitaries have joined parents and loved ones over the years in celebrating the wonderful accomplishments and truly inspirational stories of our PTK students. PTK International now promotes our New Jersey PTK Day as a national model by mailing a DVD of our event to PTK chapters throughout the world.

3. Committee to Reinvest in New Jersey's Community Colleges (FY1997) – The Council appointed this special "blue ribbon committee" to lead a grassroots statewide lobbying campaign seeking more state funding to community colleges. The Committee, comprised primarily of business leaders throughout the state, engaged national community college experts, convened numerous Statehouse press conferences, and invited legislators to publicly endorse its recommendations. By year's end, 62 legislators endorsed the campaign, and 17 newspapers ran editorials supporting our recommendations. As a result, the Governor and Legislature provided an \$8 million increase (8 percent) to our colleges.

TIMELINE OF





4. Multi-Year State Aid Increases (FY1998) – The Committee to Reinvest campaign set the stage for even greater success the following year when the Governor announced a \$12 million increase in state aid to community colleges, and pledged additional \$12 million increases in the next three years of her term (all of which were fully funded). This four-year \$48 million increase (44 percent) to our colleges was unprecedented. Several of our colleges responded with multi-year tuition freezes.

5. Chapter 12 Increase (FY1998) – At the same time that the Council secured additional state operating aid for our colleges, it also undertook an unprecedented effort to strengthen and increase capital funding to our colleges through the Chapter 12 program. This resulted in a \$120 million increase in Chapter 12 and a new option to use the New Jersey Educational Facilities Authority for bonding when counties found that an attractive alternative.

6. New Jersey Virtual Community College Consortium (NJVCCC) (FY1999) – Online and hybrid courses are an increasingly important part of the community college delivery system. For lots of reasons, it made sense for our colleges to pool their resources and expertise in this area. And that's exactly what has happened through the creation of the NJVCCC. What started as primarily a seat exchange program (through which students at any one of our colleges could take online courses at the other colleges) has blossomed into a more robust consortium that secures deep discounts for our colleges through

several statewide leases with major software companies to support our collective online efforts. Over 20,000 New Jersey community college students enrolled in online courses last year.

7. New Jersey County College Joint Purchasing Consortium (NJCCJPC) (FY1999) – It also makes sense for our colleges to pool their considerable purchasing power for other goods and services. The NJCCJPC was created for this purpose. Participating colleges have saved millions of dollars over the years through a variety of joint purchasing agreements. Savings through joint contracts for gas and electricity have been especially impressive.

8. Trustee Ambassador Program (FY1999) – The Trustee Ambassador Program was created to get more trustees involved in state-level lobbying efforts. It has been an unqualified success. In fact, other states are now duplicating this model throughout the country. Each college identifies a few of its trustees who have the time and interest to get involved in state-level activities. The Council convenes these trustees in an annual Trustee Ambassador Day in the Statehouse for meetings with the governor and legislators. We keep the team engaged through monthly conference calls and greatly value their personal participation in the Council's lobbying efforts throughout the year.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Multi-Year State Aid Increases
- Chapter 12 Increase

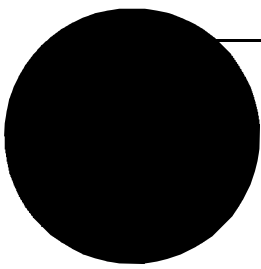


1998



1999

- NJVCCC
- NJCCJPC
- Trustee Ambassadors Program



9. Chapter 12 Increase (FY2000) – The Council secured another Chapter 12 increase (\$50 million). With this second increase, capital funding through the program more than doubled over two years.

10. New Jersey Community College Leadership Program (FY2000) – When one of our presidents, while serving as a board member of the nationally recognized Academy for Leadership Training and Development, recommended that the Council develop an affiliated leadership program in New Jersey, the Council moved quickly to sponsor the yearlong national program and supplement it with a series of sessions focusing specifically on New Jersey community college issues. Since then the Council has sponsored six Community College Leadership classes for over 200 of our campus leaders.

11. Best Practices Conference (FY2001) – The Council sponsored a Best Practices Conference featuring presentations by campus administrators, faculty, and staff. Over 200 people attended. This event has blossomed into an annual premier professional development day for New Jersey's community college leaders.

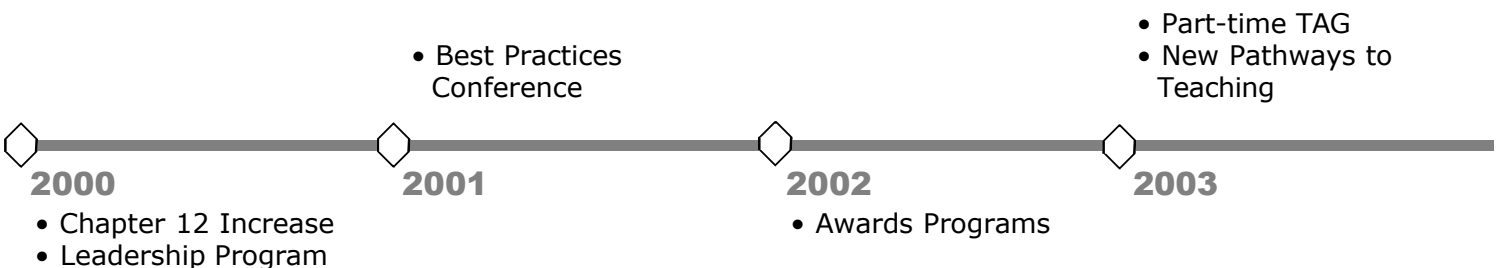
12. Awards Programs (FY2002) – The Council started a Legislative Excellence Award to recognize legislative leaders. The Council also started its Community College Spirit award to thank special friends and supporters including business leaders, government leaders, leaders from organized labor, and individuals from our campuses. Over the years, these

annual awards have become an important way for the sector to recognize individuals who have made special contributions to the New Jersey community college system.

13. Part-time Tuition Aid Grants (TAG) (FY2003) – Part-time TAG (financial aid for part-time students) was a top priority for the Council for many years. A lot of hard work and perseverance eventually paid off. In a year when most programs were cut, the Legislature started a pilot program just for community college part-time students. This was a real breakthrough. Since then, this Part-time TAG Program has been fully funded, with nearly 10,000 part-time community college students now receiving over \$6 million in financial aid each year.

14. New Pathways to Teaching in New Jersey (FY2003) – Our colleges have long sought a more prominent role in preparing classroom teachers. When the Commissioner of Education approached the Council about developing a community college "alternate route" teacher preparation program for career changers, the Council and our colleges quickly responded in a statewide way with over 500 students enrolling in the program's first year. The program has been offered every year since, and it has received widespread acclaim by school superintendents and principals throughout the state. Students can receive up to 15 graduate credits toward a master's degree from New Jersey City University for the completion of this community college program.

TIMELINE OF



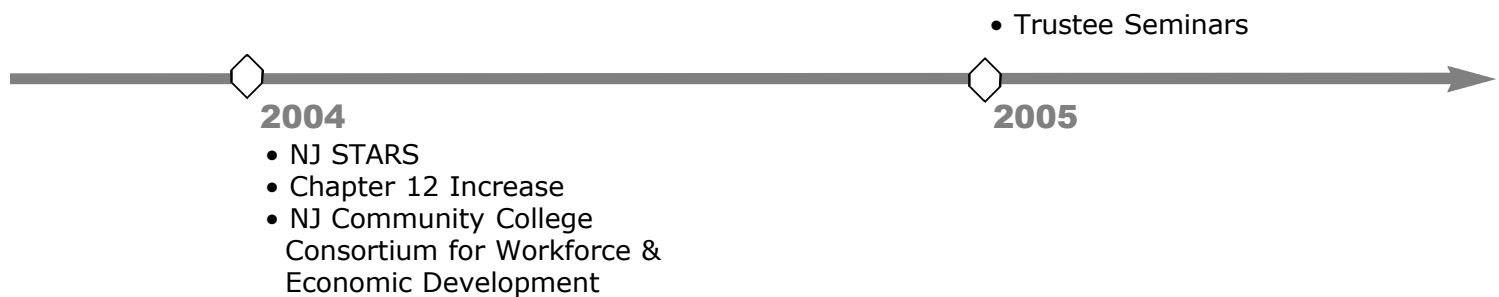
15. NJ STARS (FY2004) – NJ STARS is a state-funded community college merit scholarship program that initially covered the cost of tuition and fees for high school students who graduated in the top 20 percent of their class. This landmark legislation was the first program of its kind in the country to target merit-based scholarships specifically to community college students. It has garnered a lot of national attention as community colleges are increasingly becoming the college of first choice for many high school students. Over 1100 students enrolled in the first year of the program. Although state budget pressures have required some amendments to NJ STARS (for example, students must now graduate in the top 15 percent of their class to become NJ STARS eligible), the program continues to grow. Over 4,300 NJ STARS students enrolled at our colleges in 2008-2009, receiving about \$13 million in merit scholarships.

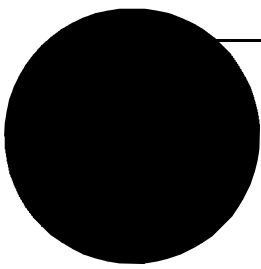
16. Chapter 12 Increase (FY2004) – Two weeks after the NJ STARS bill was signed into law, another bill was passed to again increase the Chapter 12 program – this time by \$200 million. This was by far the single largest increase in the history of our capital funding program. Taken together, these two pieces of legislation (NJ STARS and Chapter 12) were in a very real way a defining moment for our colleges – a clear signal and state policy recognition that community colleges were now a much more prominent part of New Jersey's higher education system. With this latest Chapter 12 increase, the annual bonding cap for the program was now at \$530 million.

17. New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development (FY2004) – Our Workforce Consortium is one of the Council's proudest accomplishments. We created the Consortium to better connect our colleges to the state's economic development programs, to better serve businesses throughout the state, and to enhance the revenue generating capacity of our colleges' customized training programs. In all of these respects and more, the Consortium has been an unqualified success. To date, the Workforce Consortium has greatly strengthened our partnerships with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, it has provided training to nearly 30,000 employees at over 1,200 companies throughout the state, and it has returned over \$5 million in training revenue to our colleges. The New Jersey Business and Industry Association recently awarded the prestigious Leonard C. Johnson Award to the Workforce Consortium in recognition of its outstanding training programs for businesses large and small throughout the state.

18. Trustee Seminars (FY2005) – The Council initiated a new trustee seminar series. To make these seminars as convenient as possible for trustees, the seminars are delivered in a one-hour format prior to the Council's regular bimonthly business meetings. The Council then follows up by mailing an audio CD of the seminars to all trustees throughout the state. The seminars feature state leaders, college presidents and trustees, and national experts. Seminar topics include campus issues like internal auditing and construction

ACCOMPLISHMENTS





project management plus state and federal community college issues. Trustees consistently give high ratings to these seminars in Council surveys.

19. NJ STARS II (FY2006) – NJ STARS became an even stronger program with the passage of NJ STARS II. NJ STARS students who graduated from their community college with a 3.0 GPA or better earned substantial scholarships for their junior and senior years at a New Jersey state college or university. As with NJ STARS I, state budget pressures have required some amendments to NJ STARS II (for example, students must now graduate from their community college with at least at 3.25 GPA). But it is still a very strong program. More than 1,400 NJ STARS II students enrolled at New Jersey's state colleges and universities in 2008-2009, receiving over \$5 million in merit scholarships.

20. Transfer Legislation (FY2007) – Transfer problems for community college students have been around for decades – in New Jersey and nationally. While the Council was very cautious in seeking legislative action on this issue, in the end most of our presidents felt that action by the Legislature to mandate a statewide transfer agreement would be in the best interests of our students. It says a lot about the importance of this issue and the public policy commitment to the New Jersey community college transfer mission that the Assembly passed the bill unanimously (75 to 0), and the Senate did the same (37 to 0). Pretty remarkable. While challenges remain in implementing this legislation, most agree that the transfer

process for our students has improved since the Legislature weighed in on this important issue.

21. Statewide Academic Agreements (FY2007) – Seeking common ground with senior colleges on transfer issues depends in large part on community colleges reaching common ground on important related academic issues on our campuses. The good news in New Jersey is that our community colleges have agreed to a common general education program for associate degree programs, which is accepted as a block of credits toward the baccalaureate general education requirements at New Jersey's state colleges and universities. Additionally, our community colleges use the same placement tests with the same cut scores to determine which students are required to complete remediation programs before enrolling in college-level English and math courses.

22. Community College Leadership Doctorate Program (with Rowan University) (FY2007) – Many of our presidents, vice presidents, and deans will be retiring within the next five years or so. We will need to find ways to replace this critical senior leadership on our campuses. In response to this challenge, the Council partnered with Rowan University to create a new Community College Leadership Doctorate Program. About 40 students (mostly New Jersey community college employees) are currently enrolled in the program. To date, eight of our presidents are teaching in the program and serving on dissertation committees. With the leadership and continued support of our presidents, this program has the potential

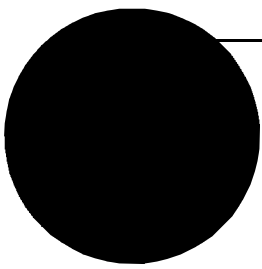
TIMELINE OF

- NJ STARS II

2006

2007

- Transfer Legislation
- Statewide Academic Agreements
- Community College Leadership Doctorate Program
- Health Insurance Reform



to become a national model for building the pipeline for the next generation of community college leaders.

23. Health Insurance Reform (FY2007) – New Jersey’s community colleges currently spend nearly \$100 million per year on health insurance coverage for our employees – about 11 percent of our total budgets. There seems little doubt that these costs will only go higher in the future. In fact, the state health benefits plan in which most of our colleges are enrolled recently announced a 23 percent increase in its annual premiums. This represents an \$18 million statewide increase to our colleges’ operating costs. Most New Jersey public employers – the state, counties, school systems – now require employee contributions toward the cost of their health insurance. For years, state law prohibited this kind of cost sharing at community colleges. But we eventually succeeded in getting the law changed so that our colleges now have the same flexibility that other public employers have to negotiate health insurance costs with their employees. These will be very tough negotiations. But one of our community colleges recently did get significant employee contributions to health insurance costs in its most recent three-year contract.

24. NJ Council of County College Bylaws and Policies (FY2008) – The Council has come a long way since the 1994 Higher Education Restructuring Act greatly expanded its role and responsibilities. It is widely respected by public policymakers and campus leaders as a very effective statewide voice for New Jersey’s community college system. But the Council

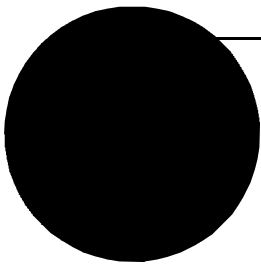
became even stronger when it approved major revisions to its bylaws, a series of new policies, and a succession plan. With these organizational systems in place, the Council is better prepared to represent our colleges in the future.

25. Legislative Ambassadors (FY2009) – The Council invited 18 key state legislators to become “Community College Legislative Ambassadors” – nine each in the Assembly and Senate. This state-level legislative group is similar to the federal community college caucus in the U.S. Congress. We will convene these state legislative ambassadors a few times each year to keep them informed about key community college issues. And when the time comes for seeking legislative sponsors of important community college legislation and budget priorities, we will first approach these ambassadors for their support. This new initiative worked well in its first year. We convened several breakfast meetings in the Statehouse with the ambassadors, and they all jointly signed a letter to the Governor asking for his support of community colleges in the state budget. We plan to continue to build the Legislative Ambassadors program as one of the centerpieces of our future state-level lobbying efforts.

26. New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development Statute (FY2010) – The Council partnered with the New Jersey Business and Industry Association and the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development on the “New Jersey Basic Skills Training Program for Economic Growth Act.” This bill, which

MPPLISHMENTS





passed during the closing days of the 2010 “lame-duck” legislative session, dedicates 13 percent of the state’s annual Supplemental Workforce Fund to the Community College Workforce Consortium for training purposes. As a matter of law, this program now connects community colleges to the state’s economic and workforce development agenda like never before.

Taken together, these 26 brief summaries of important community college milestones make a compelling statement about the great success that the Council and New Jersey’s community colleges have achieved – especially since the Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994. While there have been many reasons for this success, perhaps the main reason is that we function as a sector. Not perfectly and not everyday. But there is no doubt that New Jersey’s community colleges have distinguished themselves because they know how to get things done as a statewide team in statewide ways – again, “coordinated autonomy.” And that has made all the difference.

Of course, all of this success does not guarantee future success. And make no mistake about it, the next decade will be especially challenging for our colleges. The overall fiscal climate for higher education generally is very sobering. State finances are beyond bleak, and our county government partners are similarly stressed. Worse still, this is the way it will be for the foreseeable future – a “new normal” for America’s community colleges, as some have called it.

In a very real sense, our current “business model” for delivering public postsecondary education is just not sustainable. “Business as usual” will no longer work. We need new and better ways to do what we do as community colleges – and we need them now.

To initiate a dialog on these important issues, the Council convened a retreat of community college trustees and presidents in November 2009, and then followed up with a series of meetings to begin identifying key strategic directions for our colleges in the coming decade.

There will be no quick and easy solutions. We know these are tough times. But these are also times of great opportunity. Building on our past successes, we can look to the future with confidence in knowing that the Council and our colleges are as well positioned as

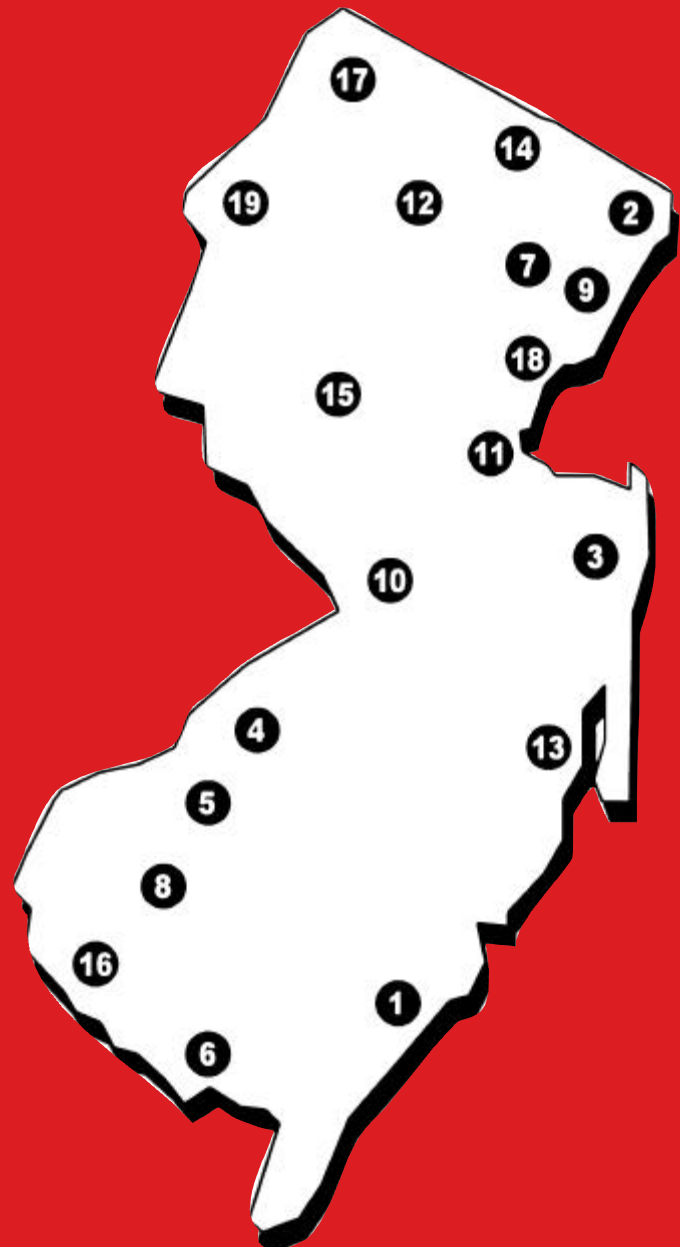
anywhere in the country to work with state and local leaders to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

About the Author

Dr. Lawrence A. Nespoli is President of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, the statewide coordinating and advocacy organization for New Jersey’s community colleges. He also teaches in Rowan University’s Doctorate Program in Community College Leadership. Nespoli previously served in a number of campus and state-level positions in Maryland and Pennsylvania. He has published extensively in the area of college finance and legislative trends, serves as a board member for several national community college organizations, and is a frequent presenter at national, regional and state conferences. He holds a bachelor’s degree from Bucknell University, a master’s degree from Catholic University, and a doctorate from Pennsylvania State University.

NEW JERSEY'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

1. **ATLANTIC CAPE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
5100 Black Horse Pike, Mays Landing, NJ 08330-2699
(609) 343-4900 • www.atlantic.edu
2. **BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
400 Paramus Road, Paramus, NJ 07652-1595
(201) 447-7100 • www.bergen.edu
3. **BROOKDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
765 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft, NJ 07738
(732) 224-2000 • www.brookdalecc.edu
4. **BURLINGTON COUNTY COLLEGE**
County Route 530, Pemberton, NJ 08068
(609) 894-9311 • www.bcc.edu
5. **CAMDEN COUNTY COLLEGE**
PO Box 200, Blackwood, NJ 08012
(856) 227-7200 • www.camdencc.edu
6. **CUMBERLAND COUNTY COLLEGE**
PO Box 1500, 3322 College Drive, Vineland, NJ 08362
(856) 691-8600 • www.cccnj.edu
7. **ESSEX COUNTY COLLEGE**
303 University Avenue, Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 877-3000 • www.essex.edu
8. **GLOUCESTER COUNTY COLLEGE**
1400 Tanyard Road, Sewell, NJ 08080
(856) 468-5000 • www.gccnj.edu
9. **HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
70 Sip Avenue, Jersey City, NJ 07306
(201) 714-7100 • www.hccc.edu
10. **MERCER COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
1200 Old Trenton Road, West Windsor, NJ 08550
(609) 586-4800 • www.mccc.edu
11. **MIDDLESEX COUNTY COLLEGE**
2600 Woodbridge Avenue, PO Box 3050
Edison, NJ 08818-3050
(732) 548-6000 • www.middlesexcc.edu
12. **COUNTY COLLEGE OF MORRIS**
214 Center Grove Road, Randolph, NJ 07869
(973) 328-5000 • www.ccm.edu
13. **OCEAN COUNTY COLLEGE**
College Drive, PO Box 2001
Toms River, NJ 08754-2001
(732) 255-0400 • www.ocean.edu
14. **PASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
One College Boulevard, Paterson, NJ 07505
(973) 684-6800 • www.pccc.edu
15. **RARITAN VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
PO Box 3300, Route 28 & Lamington Road
North Branch, NJ 08876
(908) 526-1200 • www.raritanval.edu



16. **SALEM COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
460 Hollywood Avenue, Carneys Point, NJ 08069
(856) 299-2100 • www.salemcc.edu
17. **SUSSEX COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
One College Hill, Newton, NJ 07860
(973) 300-2100 • www.sussex.edu
18. **UNION COUNTY COLLEGE**
1033 Springfield Avenue, Cranford, NJ 07016
(908) 709-7000 • www.ucc.edu
19. **WARREN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
475 Route 57 West, Washington, NJ 07882-4343
(908) 835-9222 • www.warren.edu