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**TENNESSEE BUSINESS LEADERS AND EDUCATION EXPERTS
SPOTLIGHT IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

*Greater Access to Higher Education, Particularly Community Colleges, Will Help Strengthen
the Economy of Tennessee and our Nation*

NASHVILLE, TN – Expanding access to community colleges and reforming certain elements of higher education are keys to fighting a looming shortfall of qualified workers that will damage our national and state economies in the years to come.

That's the central takeaway from a new ReadyNation report, "The Best Kept Secret in Higher Education," released on Thursday at an event at Nashville State Community College, and available [HERE](http://www.readynation.org/wp-content/uploads/RN-Comm-Coll_Finalv2_Web_NonEmbargoed.pdf). (http://www.readynation.org/wp-content/uploads/RN-Comm-Coll_Finalv2_Web_NonEmbargoed.pdf)

Several prominent, local leaders from the educational and business communities lent voices of support to the report's findings. Speakers at the event included **Ralph Schulz**, President and CEO of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, **James Powell**, Managing Partner of the Nashville office of KPMG and a member of ReadyNation, **Dr. Richard Rhoda**, Executive Director *Emeritus* of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and an Advisory Board Member of ReadyNation, **David Gregory**, Chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents, and **Randy Boyd**, Tennessee Commissioner of Economic and Community Development.

The report notes that the United States faces an estimated shortfall (or "skills gap") of five million workers by 2020, due to a lack of employees with the proper credentials or education to fill open positions. The report points out that community colleges are particularly good at giving students the skills they need to fill many of those roles, even in the modern workforce of today and tomorrow.

Ralph Schulz highlighted the skills gap problem in his remarks, emphasizing how "devastating" the effects could be on the economy. **James Powell** underscored Schulz' concerns, explaining that community colleges can play a big part in solving the problem.

“Community colleges can provide the level of qualifications needed for many, many positions, even in the job market of the future,” said Powell.

Powell went on to discuss the added financial benefits for community college graduates, noting that they enjoy a lifetime earnings advantage of \$450,000 compared to those with only a high-school diploma. He also mentioned that added schedule flexibility and lower cost make community colleges a good choice for many students who would otherwise miss out on college altogether.

Dr. Richard Rhoda built upon this point about community colleges being a path to the middle class, adding that “making sure barriers to entry are low” is a priority in order to increase access. “Helping people have access to higher education is essential to improving the lives of students *and* strengthening our workforce,” he said.

David Gregory praised the value of community colleges and discussed some of the initiatives being successfully implemented in Tennessee. He also outlined some other reforms to help current and prospective students, stressing that the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act is essential, particularly referencing the area of possible changes to grant-aid programs.

“Students should be able to access Pell Grants year-round,” and “We should also make it easier for students to use Pell Grants for non-traditional programs, including work-based experiences . . .” Gregory said, pointing to two specific changes that would help students.

Randy Boyd concluded by citing simplifying financial aid as a focal point for reform. “[Simplifying the grant-aid process] is an easy way to increase college attendance among lower-income or first-generation college students, who may lack the knowledge it takes to navigate the system,” said Boyd.

Senator Lamar Alexander was unable to attend the event. However, he issued a statement on the topic that echoed many of the sentiments expressed at Nashville State Community College on Thursday.

“Community colleges are a vital part of our higher education community and play an important role in helping students pursue higher education goals,” Senator Alexander explained. “I am working to make it simpler and easier for students to attend college—and that starts with simplifying the dreaded 108-question FAFSA that 20 million families fill out each year. I want to cut it down from 108 questions to as few as possible, allowing more Tennesseans to take advantage of Governor Haslam’s Tennessee Promise program to attend community college for free.”

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