

Des Moines Register

Sunday, May 3, 2026

Will Iowa let its community colleges innovate? | Opinion

Iowans need more from these institutions at the very moment colleges have less room to pilot new approaches and build what's next.

Erika Liodice
Guest columnist

- Erika Liodice is executive director of the Alliance for Innovation & Transformation, a nonprofit association that empowers higher education leaders to transform their institutions.

When I spoke April 24 with community college leaders in Iowa, as part of the annual Iowa Community College Leadership Institute, I asked them how things were going. The answer came quickly, and it wasn't sugarcoated: They feel like they're on pins and needles.

Not because they've lost confidence in their mission. These are some of the most committed educators and administrators I've encountered in my work across the country. But the ground beneath them is shifting.

Resources are tightening. Workforce needs are accelerating.

The pressure to keep costs low for students — which is the right pressure — leaves little margin for the kind of experimentation that builds the future. And the pace of change in the sector is outrunning the pace at which institutions can respond.

These aren't abstract budget problems. They're constraints on the institutions training Iowa's nurses, welders, precision agriculture technicians, and advanced manufacturing workforce. Iowans know this better than anyone. And when community colleges can't innovate, the workers and communities that depend on them pay the price.

I work with community and technical college leaders nationally who are navigating these exact pressures in real time, and Iowa is not alone in feeling them. What I've learned is that the colleges thriving in the face of disruption aren't the ones waiting for conditions to improve. They're the ones asking a different question — not "When will this get easier?" but

"What can we do right now to meet this moment and support our students on the path to a better life?" Consider what happened at Yavapai College, a small rural institution outside Phoenix, Arizona.



Terra State partners with BGSU for 4-year engineering degree

Terra State Community College President Ronald Schumacher speaks on new partnership with Bowling Green State University.

A few years ago, a signal of change caught their attention: A handful of universities were quietly piloting three-year bachelor's degrees, compressing time-to-completion to reduce student debt and get graduates into the workforce faster.

Yavapai's team asked a simple but transformative question: What if we became the first community college to do this?

They didn't have all the answers, and they didn't wait until they did. They moved quickly, reaching out to their accreditor, partnering with organizations who'd studied the problem, and building as they went. In fall 2025, Yavapai College realized their vision, becoming the first community college in the United States to offer a three-year bachelor's degree: an optimized 92-credit Bachelor of Applied Science in Business, delivered fully online, for under \$10,000 total.

No textbook costs. No student fees. The equivalent degree at an Arizona State University runs an average of \$52,000 in tuition alone, and more than \$115,000 when room and board are factored in.

That's not a marginal improvement. That's a rethinking of what a degree can cost and who it can reach.

It happened not because Yavapai had more resources than its peers, or more favorable conditions. It happened because a team of leaders decided to meet the moment, and they built something the sector will be following for years.

Iowa's community colleges have that same capacity for innovation, and their leaders are already asking the right questions. They're experimenting with shorter terms. They're exploring open-access course materials to reduce costs for students. They're considering how emerging technology can support programs serving incarcerated learners. They're pursuing strategic partnerships that let them capitalize on their strengths and close gaps they can't fill alone.

They're expanding concurrent enrollment to reach high school students earlier. They are ready to act.

But the tension they face is real: Iowans need more from these institutions at the very moment colleges have less room to pilot new approaches and build what's next. Asking the right questions isn't enough without the conditions to act on them.

Iowa's community colleges are not seeking to be shielded from change. The leaders I spoke with are not resistant to transformation. They're hungry for it. The question is whether Iowa will create the conditions for them to pursue it.

That means recognizing what's at stake when these institutions are squeezed. The students who need affordable, accessible pathways to good jobs — the first-generation student who can't afford to move away from home, the single parent balancing work and family, the laid-off worker who needs to retrain without taking on debt — are the ones who feel it first when community colleges lose their ability to innovate.

The future of Iowa's workforce won't be decided by circumstances alone. It will be shaped by Iowa's community colleges, and by whether they are empowered to keep innovating for the learners, employers and communities counting on them.

Erika Liodice is executive director of the [Alliance for Innovation & Transformation](#), a nonprofit association that empowers higher education leaders to transform their institutions.