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AN UNHERALDED HERO OF THE REVOLUTION

By Kenneth C. Green

Recession. Rising unemployment. The shadow of war. Seem all too familiar? We've been here before, just over a decade ago.

Others are far more qualified to offer a political assessment of these events. But one lesson from the last recession has important economic consequences for how we emerge from the current one.

During the last recession, some 300,000 people in Southern California lost their generally well-paying jobs in the aerospace and defense industries.

Many of these folks already had one, sometimes two college degrees, often in technical fields. So "going back to college" for yet another college degree was not necessarily a viable alternative for tens of thousands of 30- to 60-year-old, experienced aerospace and defense industry employees.

These folks had families and homes. They had an immediate need to acquire new skills as the Southern California economy shifted from defense and aerospace to high-tech and entertainment industries. For many, a new (or another) degree from the four-year colleges or universities that dot the Southern California landscape would have cost too much money and time to complete.

For the thousands of aerospace and defense industry employees and others affected by the last recession, educational needs for the emerging tech-based economy could be defined by a set of four "C" factors:

- **Content:** curriculum in the emerging high-tech areas such as HTML and Web design, or perhaps even accounting and other core business courses;
- **Certification:** a structured course or program that provides credible certification for potential employers;
- **Convenience:** easy access to courses and educational/training programs that would not disrupt job and family commitments; and
- **Cost:** low-cost, high-quality educational/training programs.

And where did they go? Where did aerospace workers and others find content, certification, convenience and cost? *At community colleges!*

Community colleges in California and across the nation provided timely, high-quality, low-cost courses and certificate programs for the tens of thousands of individuals affected by the last recession.

Yet this sector often lives in the shadow of other sectors of higher education, even as community colleges account for 61 percent of total college enrollment, and upward of 25 percent of individuals taking courses in community colleges already have a college degree!

Indeed, the nation's community colleges have always been critical to tech training and transfer. Beginning with the arrival of "user-friendly DOS" for the IBM-PC in the early 1980s, community colleges have offered tens of thousands of courses and provided computer and other technology training to hundreds of thousands of individuals who need a quick, convenient, cost-effective way to master new technologies, ranging from PC-DOS, Lotus 1-2-3 and dBase in the mid-1980s to Office XP, HTML, XML and Cisco networking technologies today.

No less an authority than management sage Peter Drucker has hailed community colleges for their contributions to the American economy. Writing in his 1999 book, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, Drucker states that: "The United States is the only country that has actually developed [the] advantage [of educating technologists] -- through its so far unique system of community colleges. The community college was actually designed (beginning in the 1920s) to educate technologists who have both the needed theoretical knowledge and the manual skill. On this, I am convinced, rests the still huge productivity advantage of the American economy."

As states struggle with budget deficits, and various sectors of public education compete for dwindling public money, we should remember the critical role that community colleges play in providing tech training and transfer. Without question, community colleges are an unheralded hero of the technology revolution.