

THE NEWS-TIMES

WWW.NEWS-TIMES.COM | Friday, March 20, 2015 | SINCE 1883 | \$1.00

WHERE I STAND

Community colleges aid business

By U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty and Dr. Daisy Cocco De Filippis

Three years ago Darlene Blumenthal sat in the New Opportunities' office in Waterbury. Like too many other veterans, Darlene, a Navy veteran, struggled to find a good-paying, full-time job.

Then, one night, during New Opportunities' "In-The-Making" class — a training program for unemployed or under-employed women — Darlene heard about a new manufacturing program at Naugatuck Valley Community College (NVCC). Darlene enrolled, and she quickly emerged as a leader in the classroom, refining the technical and leadership skills she learned while serving in uniform. Three years later, Darlene now runs two Computer Numerical Control machines at a manufacturer in Newtown.

At a time when wages remain flat and income inequality deepens across our country, community colleges offer students like Darlene a leg up and a way forward. That's why, as we sat together in the U.S. Capitol listening to President Obama highlight his proposal on community colleges during his State of the Union Address in January, we couldn't help but think about Darlene.

Certainly, much of the chatter has been about the President's proposal for free tuition for two years, a bold, forward-thinking goal to open the door to higher education for millions of students and reduce student loan debt.

But President Obama also highlighted other important efforts, such as establishing a new American Technical Training Fund and increasing federal grants that support collaboration between community colleges and local businesses.

Why are these programs so important? If community colleges rethink their relationships

Even in an increasingly divided Congress, Democrats and Republicans from around the country support strengthening community colleges and workforce training. Our communities expect Congress to work together on solutions that connect students with good-paying jobs — without forcing them to take on crushing loan debt.

with businesses in the community looking to hire workers and work closely with them — and our national, state, and local policies better support these partnerships — we can better align skills taught in the classroom with those needed for jobs in demand.

Connecticut is home to almost 5,000 manufacturers that provide good-paying jobs for thousands of workers. But with an aging workforce and an ever-changing technical landscape, manufacturers often struggle to find new workers with the right skill sets.

NVCC's Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center is rethinking these community partnerships — and it's working. Since opening in 2012, the center has placed over 90 percent of its graduates in manufacturing careers — a job placement rate that colleges nationwide envy. More than a statistic, Darlene is one of their many success stories.

With support from a recently awarded federal grant, NVCC now offers Advanced Manufacturing Technology Programs at Henry Abbott Technical High School in Danbury and W.F. Kaynor Technical High School in Waterbury. These two new programs are direct responses to requests from the college's community partners — the local manufacturing council, the City of Danbury, the Smaller Manufacturers Association, and the Chambers of Commerce of Waterbury and Danbury — and they underscore how effective commu-

nity relationships can address the skills gap.

Closing the skills gap in our workforce, particularly for high-demand industries like manufacturing and information technology, is one of the single most important steps we can take to boost middle-class jobs.

And even in an increasingly divided Congress, Democrats and Republicans from around the country support strengthening community colleges and workforce training. Our communities expect Congress to work together on solutions that connect students with good-paying jobs — without forcing them to take on crushing loan debt.

So let's get to work. Community colleges are rethinking their relationships and creating strong partnerships in our communities — engaging with local businesses and local high schools to better link students and workers to employers that are hiring now.

It's time for national, state, and local policies to recognize the economic necessity and the opportunity of these community partnerships and help support the vital role community colleges play in our country's future.

U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, is the congresswoman for Connecticut's 5th District, which includes northwest and central Connecticut. Dr. Daisy Cocco De Filippis is president of Naugatuck Valley Community College, which has a branch in Danbury.