

# OPPORTUNITY IOWA:

Community college tackles the skills gap and leads statewide push to advance economic mobility



A CASE STUDY

## OVERVIEW

- Opportunity Iowa is a statewide coalition led by Rob Denson, President of the Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa's largest community college, and J. Barry Griswell, CEO of the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines
- The coalition is leveraging the **Opportunity Index** to deepen public conversation and spur cross-sector community actions that reduce barriers to economic mobility. The Index is helping local leaders develop concrete goals such as reducing unemployment, increasing on-time high school graduation rates and boosting postsecondary completion.
- With support from Opportunity Nation, the Iowa coalition has raised public awareness about expanding opportunity; influenced key political leaders; launched a worker-training program with a top local employer; and convened representatives of 200 community and education groups to share the Index and work toward improving county Index Scores.

## THE CHALLENGE IN IOWA

### IOWA'S YOUTH IN NEED OF SUPPORT

**9.4%** of 16-24 year olds not in school and not working in Iowa (national unemployment rate: 5.1%)

**17%** of 16-24 year olds in central Iowa not in school and not working

**#22** Iowa student ranking in National Assessment of Educational Progress (ranked #1 twenty years ago)

- Denson and Griswell learned about Opportunity Nation and immediately recognized that its mission mirrored that of community colleges and local philanthropies: to expand economic, civic and educational opportunity.
- They grasped the potential of the Opportunity Index to inspire their community, encourage cross-sector collaboration, and accelerate and amplify programs and efforts already underway in Iowa.

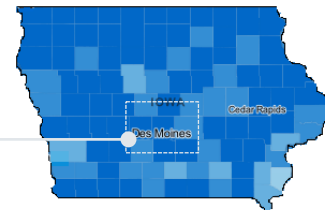
“It's all about people having the opportunity to get good jobs that pay family-sustaining wages and great benefits. Nationally, we have millions of good jobs open because employers can't find workers with the right skills. It's our job to make sure we have the right training programs aligned to those jobs and that we provide the support services – financial aid and other supports – students need to get that training.”

—Rob Denson, President of Des Moines Area Community College

## THE POWER OF THE OPPORTUNITY INDEX

The Opportunity Index measures the “Opportunity Score” of each state and county, and has enabled Iowa's leaders to identify *concrete* goals – such as how many more students must graduate from local high schools or enroll in post secondary institutions – that communities can take to boost economic mobility.

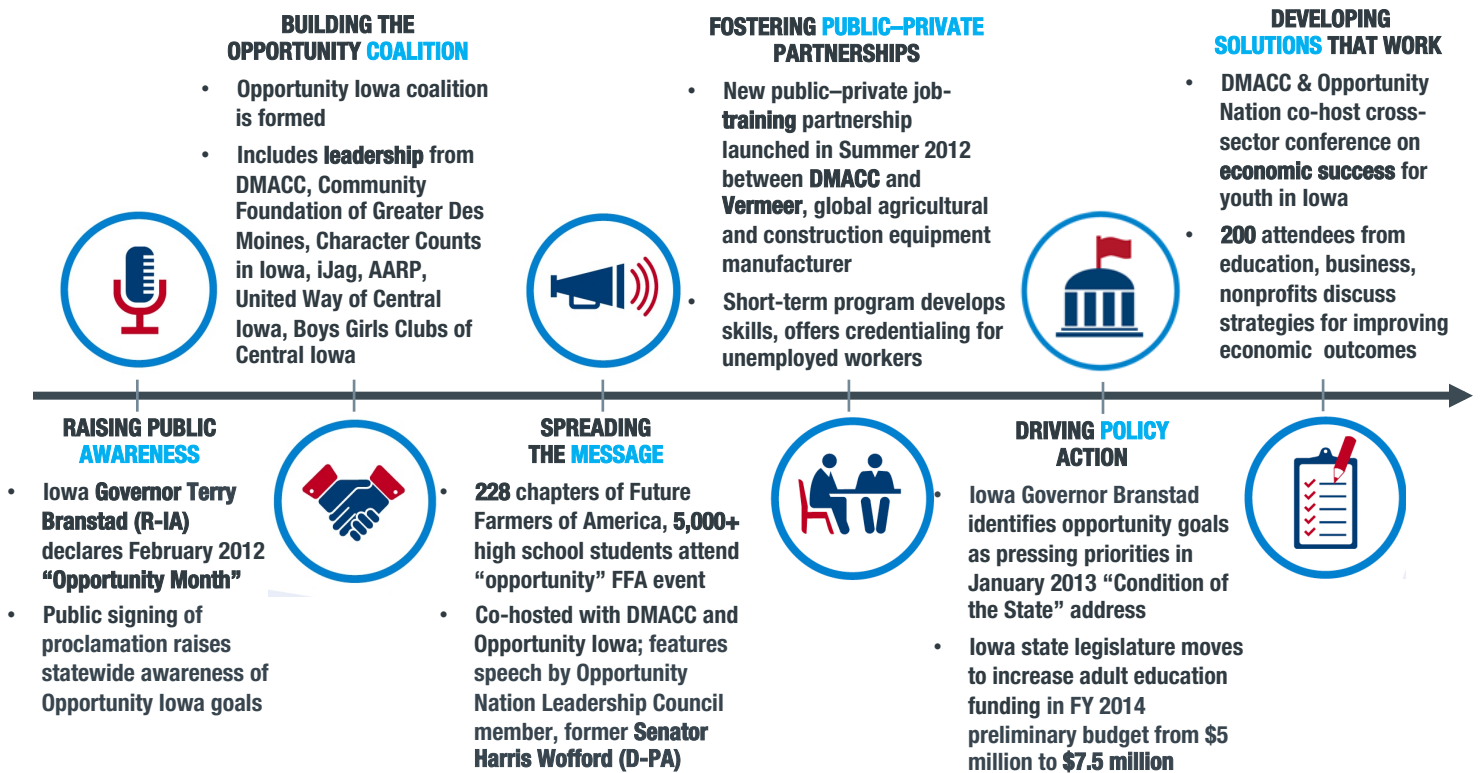
**POLK COUNTY**, which includes Des Moines, would have to connect 753 more youth to school or employment; increase the number of adults with an associate's degree or higher by 7,585, and find jobs for 2,286 unemployed people to boost its score from a B- to a B.



“We're always looking for common ground, and the Opportunity Index is it. We're all at the table – the community college, the foundation, nonprofits and employers. We know if we can positively impact the number of youth ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work, we can improve our Index score. Having targets breaks the work into something we can all understand, and we can go for it.” —President Denson

# The Opportunity Iowa IMPACT:

## MOBILIZING A CROSS-SECTOR CHANGE CAMPAIGN



“Iowa is entering a period of unprecedented opportunity and we don’t want to miss it. Our youth should be prepared. I am grateful that Opportunity Nation and our local Opportunity Iowa are helping Iowans focus on the urgent need to help more young people get the education and job training they need to succeed.”  
 —Governor Terry Branstad (R-IA)

## LESSONS FROM IOWA’S SUCCESS

- 1 SUPPORT COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS**  
 Identify local leaders who champion Opportunity Nation’s message and tools and can connect with regional programs and strategies already underway that advance opportunity
- 2 HARNESS CROSS-SECTOR RELATIONSHIPS**  
 Leverage existing relationships among educational, philanthropic, community and political leaders; reach out to Opportunity Nation’s national coalition members who are active in the local community
- 3 DRIVE CHANGE WITH THE OPPORTUNITY INDEX**  
 Use the Opportunity Index to bring diverse groups together around a common goal to improve the county or state Index score

**Our Support**

**How Opportunity Nation Helped Drive Change in Iowa**

- ✓ Promoted Iowa’s success across our national coalition of 250 organizations and at our annual summit; co-hosted state events
- ✓ Publicized Iowa’s efforts through print, online, TV and radio with local and national media outlets, including the Huffington Post
- ✓ Provided training and support to local leaders who joined our community of 150 Opportunity Leaders and Scholars nationwide
- ✓ Supported Opportunity Iowa’s use of the Opportunity Index to drive local conversations and concrete actions

Learn more about Opportunity Nation and how you can get involved:  
 857-400-0036 | [info@opportunitynation.org](mailto:info@opportunitynation.org) | [www.opportunitynation.org](http://www.opportunitynation.org)