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Written Testimony of Representative Donald Norcross (NJ-1)
Make It in America: What's Next?
PANEL 2: Skills Training for the Future

Thank you Whip Hoyer and I want to thank my colleagues, all of whom have given excellent and informative testimony about the challenges facing hardworking Americans. I'd like to use my time to share with you a few stories that I believe illustrate the importance of investing in education at all levels and for all students, regardless of their dreams and goals.

For most of my life before I came to Congress, I was an IBEW electrician installing power lines, wiring refineries and chemical plants. Before they sent me into the field I went through extensive training and was given my first set of tools. The lesson I learned was that if I had the right tools and the right training, I could succeed and grow on the job. If I didn't, I was in for a shock and I mean that literally.

Looking back over my career, one thing is clear: life will always bring twists and turns. Sometimes when you least expect it. But what has become equally clear to me in my time as an elected leader is this: if we give Americans access to the tools and training they need to succeed, they can make it in America, no matter what life throws their way.

My journey started in Pennsauken, New Jersey. One of four boys, I was raised in a typical middle class household – dad worked in a blue collar profession, mom stayed at home. After graduating from Pennsauken High School, my brothers and friends set off on their own paths – they were all relatively certain of what they were going to do with their lives. Like many young Americans today, my future was dead set on being uncertain.

I was interested in law enforcement, so I took a summer job patrolling the Atlantic City boardwalk as a Class II Officer. With a budding interest in Criminal Justice, I reached for the first tool in my belt: pursuing an associate's degree at Camden County Community College. For someone who was still not completely certain what he wanted to do in life, Camden County offered a quality education that was affordable. The key words here: quality and affordable.

The ability to attend classes part time – during nights and weekends – while working part-time jobs to make ends meet made Camden County Community College a perfect fit. Perhaps more importantly, the College made sure that my uncertainty didn't weigh me down or hold me back from exploring all the possibilities.

In the New Jersey Legislature I supported the "NJ TRANSFER" initiative that created a path from our community colleges to a four year degree from New Jersey state universities. Under the NJ TRANSFER program, students can enroll in their local community college with the opportunity to transfer up to 60 credits towards a bachelor's degree at places like Rutgers and Rowan Universities. This is an excellent example of a policy that would provide flexibility and opportunity to students across America, at little or no cost to the taxpayers.

It's also a tool that I wish I had had in my belt on my journey.

When we look back at life's many twists and turns, there's no denying that luck has a hand in where we end up. We learn that luck comes in two sizes – sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. And sometimes we aren't immediately sure how to characterize it. That happened to be the case on my first day of health class at Camden County Community College.

When taking attendance on the first day, the teacher called out the name "Norcross." Naturally I replied "here." There was some hesitation. The teacher sort of smiled the repeated "Norcross."

When I heard "here" from across the room, there it was a familiar and unmistakable voice. My mother. That's right. My mother and I were enrolled in the same class. A health class, nonetheless. As you can imagine, it was awkward at the time. I can also tell you, only one Norcross in that class finished with a 4.0 grade point average. You can guess who.

Looking back of course, this experience served as one of the best lessons of my college years. And for that, having my mom in my class actually ended up being a stroke of good luck. My mother decided later in life to attend Camden County College to learn a new skill and better herself. She went on to graduate and eventually started the Camden County Adult Day Care, where her work had a profound impact on countless families in our community.

Having my mother in that class taught me that no matter you are, where you are in life, how old you are, or where you came from, an education is that one thing that can change the trajectory of one's life. It can open doors that we never imagined possible. And it can inspire and motivate us in ways we never realized. It provides the chance for those who need more flexibility to earn a degree – the ability to personalize the educational experience to meet one's individual needs.

Not everyone in America wants or needs a college degree; but everyone needs a toolkit. Today apprentices make up only 0.2 percent of the U.S. labor force, far less than in Canada (2.2 percent), Britain (2.7 percent), and Australia and Germany (3.7 percent). Apprenticeships and non-traditional learning pathways should be part of Americans' tool kits, too.

The North American Building Trades Unions invest well over \$1 billion annually in apprentice and journey-level training; maintain 1,900 training centers across North America and train two thirds of all registered apprentices in the United States. Think about it this way: if Building Trades training system, which includes both apprentice-level and journeyman-level training, was a K-12 school district, it would be the fourth largest school district in the US, behind only New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Unfortunately, in spite of proposals by both the Administration and colleagues in both chambers to build upon and expand these privately funded initiatives, the federal government apprenticeship programs are funded at a paltry \$40 million. In an age where workforce qualifications are changing by leaps and bounds to reflect the growth in technology and efficiency, its unthinkable that we would deny Americans of all age this opportunity. More importantly withholding this tool from Americans' toolkits dulls our workforce's competitive edge in a global economy.

Even after I graduated, life's twists and turns brought me back to school, again Camden County Community College because of its excellent continuing education program. As I mentioned earlier, I eventually chose a career as an electrician, and took a course in Electrical Engineering at Camden County to refine my trade. Later, I even attended a Saturday morning computer class with my wife Andrea.

The world was changing, taking its own technological twists and turns, as it continues to today in real-time. I used the skills I learned through my training every day as I worked job sites up and down the Delaware River, installing power lines at refineries using some of the most advanced systems the world had to offer.

This is all to say that education never stops, nor should our commitment to it. I want thank my colleagues and Whip Hoyer for offering their time and thoughtful ideas today and look forward to working with you all to put tools in the next generation's toolkits.