Powering Purpose

Invest now in community colleges to fuel economic opportunity

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NATIONAL REPORT

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Even as community colleges across the nation have experienced historic enrollment declines due to the pandemic, the percentage of working-age adults stating their intent to enroll within the next two years remains strong. Community colleges can address enrollment drops by implementing proven student success interventions designed to support access, completion, and better career outcomes. Investing in community colleges to more equitably and seamlessly meet the needs of working-age learners will provide a path to economic mobility for millions of Americans.

The dangers of declining enrollment

Massive social and economic challenges wrought by the pandemic have led to a dramatic decline in community college enrollment. Community college enrollment declined by 10.1 percent nationwide in Fall 2020, leaving behind more than half a million potential students.[1] Enrollment numbers for Spring 2021 show no meaningful improvement.[2]

The reasons behind this enrollment decline are many. Those who have lost jobs in the midst of a major labor market disruption may understandably be reluctant to spend time and resources on a degree. The demands of homeschooling and limited availability of child care have vastly reduced the amount of time parents can dedicate to their own education. With few options for in-person schooling, education may be out of reach for those without strong internet access and digital capabilities. Even adults with these resources may be hesitant to re-enter school without the support of in-person peers and instructors. Compounding all of these challenges is a pervasive sense of isolation and disconnection, chipping away at the confidence and motivation adults need to embark on a new learning journey.

These factors have contributed to enrollment disruptions that are unevenly distributed. Compared with overall declines for all community college students, declines among first-time community college students[3] were twice as large, and almost quadruple[4] for first-time students over age 24. The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people of color. The decline in Black, Latino, and Native American first-time enrollment is three times that of the overall community college drop (28.4, 27.5, and 29.3 percent, respectively).[5]

First-time students have the steepest enrollment declines, especially older students and students of color

First-time students overall

First-time students by race / ethnicity

Asian

Black

Latino

Native American

White

First-time students by age

Over age 24
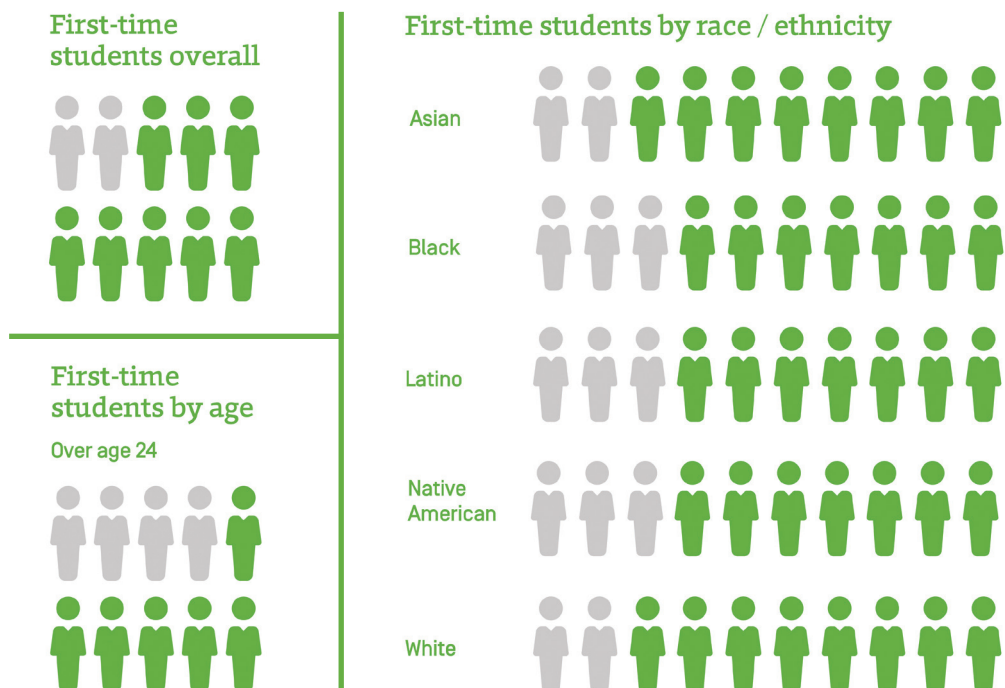
Community colleges are a vital path to economic mobility for millions of Americans, educating one out of three students who pursue postsecondary education. Community colleges serve more than half of Black and Latino postsecondary students, and the average age of enrolled students is 28.[6] Working learners and people of color who seek out community colleges stand to lose the most when they are unable to access the education and career training provided by these institutions. Addressing enrollment gaps is therefore essential for our economic recovery, and the best way to ensure we can achieve an equitable recovery that benefits all.

Too many individuals are being stranded without a clear path toward educational and professional advancement at a time when career opportunities and earning potential for those without a postsecondary degree are shrinking. Adults who never complete a degree are highly vulnerable to economic displacement. Those with the lowest educational attainment levels have experienced the highest unemployment stemming from COVID-related job loss. In April 2020 — when unemployment levels due to the pandemic reached their peak — 19.2 percent of people with just a high school education were unemployed, compared with 13.9 percent of people with associate's degrees and 8.5 percent of people with bachelor's degrees.[7]

Enrollment declines mean that fewer people are preparing for jobs in many high growth industries such as construction, cybersecurity, healthcare, and manufacturing — industries that were already facing a shortage of skilled labor.[8] Without a degree, adults will be left without a path to career advancement; without these workers, employers will be unable to fill in-demand jobs.

Mapping the distance between decline and demand

More than half of the workforce will need to learn new skills in order to perform their jobs.[9] Even in the past year, millions of adults have continued to seek out opportunities to upskill and reskill. Enrollment declines at community colleges are not due to lack of interest among potential students. National data from Strada Education Network's Education Consumer Survey show that the number of adults expressing an intent to enroll in postsecondary education has remained strong. **An estimated 20.5 million working-age adults ages 25 to 64 say they intend to enroll in community or technical college in the next two years.**[10]

20.5M

working-age adults say they intend to enroll in community or technical college in the next two years
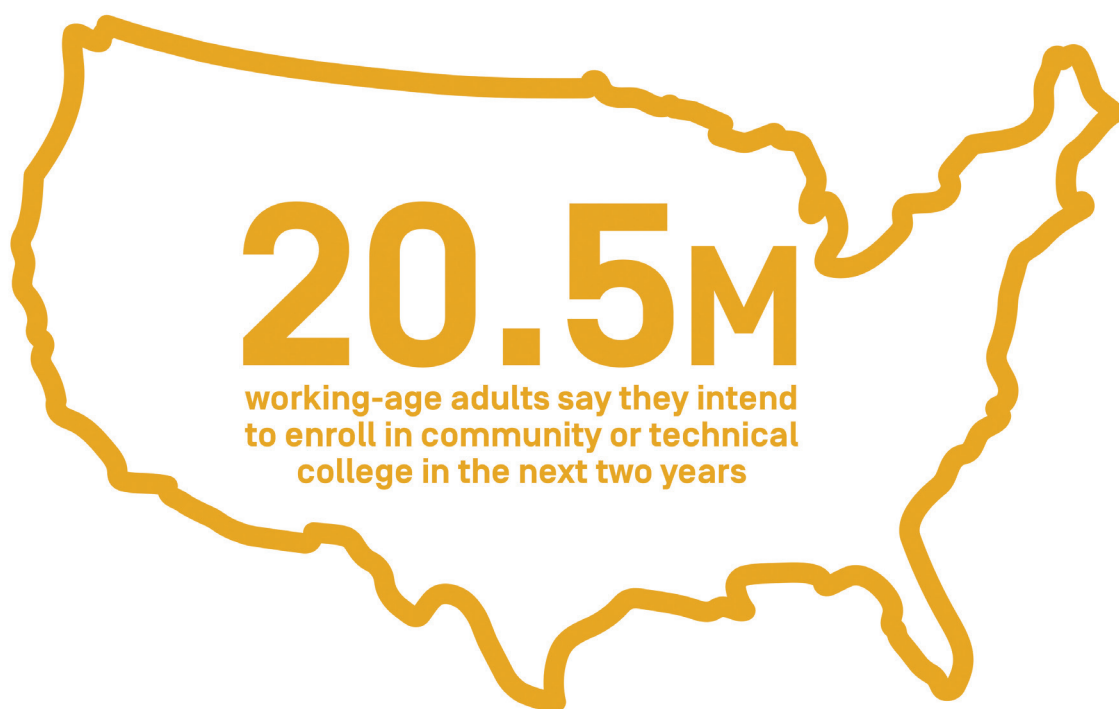
A similar picture of community college demand is taking shape at the state level. Data from College*APP* show that even as community college enrollment is declining, millions of adults in states across the country are still expressing a strong intent to enroll in the next two years.[11] **Click into our state spotlights to explore data at the county, city, and street level for Florida, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Texas.**

Mobilizing students from intention to enrollment

To effectively engage their potential student population, institutions must support learners in overcoming the barriers they face. Identifying and developing the right supports requires deep and careful listening to adults who are trying to make progress in their education and careers. Through their lived experience, learners have already identified the challenges that interfere with their goals, and envisioned the solutions that could best support them.

Strada Education Network's research lifts up the learner's point of view through large-scale surveys and direct interviews, including more than 100 hours of interviews with adult learners. Insights from this research have illuminated key challenges these learners face and the types of support that are critical to their success.

Guidance and coaching are essential to addressing the challenges many adult learners experience with self-doubt and a lack of access to clear information. Slightly more than half of adults who say they intend to enroll in community college nationwide would be the first generation in their families to complete college (58 percent).[12] Almost half of adults fear they won't be successful students, or that they have been out of school for too long.[13] Few adults — less than a third — feel that they have a very good understanding of critical aspects of the educational journey, like what skills they should learn, which program they should attend, and how long a program would take.[14]

For the many low-income adults who intend to enroll in community college, their ability to enroll, persist, and succeed will depend upon access to essential needs, such as housing, food, and transportation. Among the 20.5 million adults who say they intend to enroll nationwide, 31 percent earn an income less than $24,000 annually.[15] Broadband access has emerged as a critical need as well, especially in rural areas.[16]

Support with balancing school and life makes college possible for adults juggling education, work, parenting, and other responsibilities. Among the adults across the country who say they intend to enroll in community college, two-thirds are employed (52 percent employed full time) and more than half (53 percent) have children living in the household.[17] Child care can be a critical form of support for student parents. The many adults who work while in school can benefit from opportunities to learn on the job, such as with apprenticeships, paid internships, or other forms of work-based learning that will support them in succeeding academically without falling behind in finances, or in their career.

Integrating equity-based approaches into all of these services will support students of color across the entire learner journey, from enrollment and completion to career outcomes. More than half of the adults in the U.S. who say they intend to enroll in community colleges are Black

[20 percent] or Latino [33 percent].[18] Improving higher education access and completion for these groups is critical to addressing equity gaps in postsecondary attainment. Overall, higher education is not producing Black and Latino graduates at the same rate as white and Asian students.[19] Even among graduates, the benefits of having a degree are not distributed equally: Whites still earn more than Blacks and Latinos with the same level of educational attainment.[20] However, some community colleges are already succeeding at closing completion gaps, such as Valencia College in Florida. After adopting equity-focused practices such as earlier advising, support with academic and career planning, and a student success course focused on organization, planning, and goal setting, Valencia College eliminated completion gaps by race.[21]

Implementing solutions for enrollment, completion, and career

Institutions can grow their enrollment numbers and build up their region's talent pipeline by implementing proven interventions to overcome the barriers adult learners experience.

Strada Institute has developed a framework, called the Learner-Centered Ecosystem, that encompasses the services, supports, and resources needed to increase higher education access and success.[22] Centered on the needs of adult learners, especially those who have been historically excluded from education and career opportunity, the framework is designed to help institutions systematically think through and strategically prioritize the solutions that will remove barriers to enrollment, completion, and strong career outcomes. With equity at their core, these solutions work together to create more seamless pathways between education and employment that give all learners greater access to economic opportunity and mobility.

The Learner-Centered Ecosystem comprises five elements, enabled by strong technology and data systems. Here we present the elements of a Learner-Centered Ecosystem, along with evidence and select examples from community colleges that have already successfully implemented solutions for their student population.

Navigation

Challenge	Solution	Best practice

967,734
credential and degree programs[23]

Adults need guidance to choose and enroll in the best program for their education and career goals.

With navigation, learners can evaluate their skills, interests, and goals to map out potential education and career pathways.

1.5x more likely to re-enroll

383% return on investment

InsideTrack coaching helped Wake Tech students navigate their return to the right program for them.[24]

Wraparound Supports

Challenge	Solution	Best practice

44% of students report food insecurity

60% housing insecurity[25]

When essential needs aren't met, education falls to the bottom of the priority list.

Assistance with food, housing, child care, and transportation are some of the wraparound supports that help learners stay focused and motivated.

2x completion rate

Compton College's emergency grants program facilitated by Edquity enabled more students to complete their degree.[26]

Targeted Education

Challenge	Solution	Best practice

7 YEARS
to complete 2-year degree[27]

Adults seek a direct path to a credential that makes the best use of their time and resources.

Targeted programs are designed for working learners, offering flexible, affordable training in the right skills at the right times.

20+ percentage point increase in grads

9 to 14 months sooner

Data from CAEL and WICHE show that prior learning assessments save students time and money by recognizing what they already know.[28]

Integrated Earning and Learning

Challenge	**Solution**	**Best practice**

70%
of college students work

Low-income students who work are less likely to have jobs related to their studies, more likely to work longer hours, and less likely to complete their degrees.[29]

Integrated earning and learning enables students to learn on the job and gain experience that enhances their education.

2.75x
more graduates

Students enrolled in an apprenticeship program graduated at a higher rate and gained valuable academic and career outcomes.[30]

Transparent Hiring

Challenge	**Solution**	**Best practice**

62%
of employers are considering skills-based hiring[31]

Colleges need to connect curriculum to the skills employers seek.

Transparent hiring takes a skills-based approach to recruitment and talent development, with hiring decisions made based on what a worker can do.

<1 MONTH
to align curricula with skills

Emsi has found mapping curricula to in-demand skills takes colleges only a few weeks[32] and better positions grads for job-market success.[33]

Ecosystem Enabler: Interoperable Data and Systems

Challenge	**Solution**	**Best practice**

26%
of students struggle with reliable internet and computer access[34]

Students need internet access, devices, and digital literacy to succeed.

A strong Learner-Centered Ecosystem is enabled by a robust and interoperable data and systems infrastructure. For learners, this infrastructure should include broadband access and tools and training to support digital literacy.

81% institutions loan laptops
47% loan mobile hotspots

Following the sudden shift to online learning, institutions made devices and internet access available to students.[35]

Note: InsideTrack, CAEL, and Emsi are part of Strada Education Network and Edquity is a Strada investee.

Benefits that extend from the student to society

Based on a series of economic impact analyses of 45 community colleges across the country conducted by Emsi for fiscal year 2018-19, investments in community colleges pay off in both savings and increased revenue for individuals, communities, and states. On average, across all the colleges studied, for every $1 invested in community college, students gain $5.20 in lifetime earnings, taxpayers gain $2.10 in added tax revenue and public sector savings, and society gains $10.20 in added income and social savings.[36]

For Every $1 Invested

Students gain

$5.20

in lifetime earnings

Taxpayers gain

$2.10

in added tax revenue and public sector savings

Society gains

$10.20

in added income and social savings

Yet just as all stakeholders benefit from the rewards of education, they all stand to lose when adults miss their opportunity to pursue a degree. **At this crucial moment when the strength and pace of our economic recovery hangs in the balance, we cannot afford to lose the rich returns that can come from a deeper commitment to community colleges. When community colleges invest in effective interventions, they make an even more significant impact on the entire region.**

The CUNY ASAP program at the City University of New York offers an effective holistic model providing many of the resources and services essential to a Learner-Centered Ecosystem. A program for full-time students, it provides more intensive and personalized academic advising, enhanced career support, financial assistance for transportation, and, for students receiving financial aid, a tuition waiver to fill any gap between financial aid awards and remaining tuition and fees. The graduation rate for students in the program is almost double that of students not in the program.[37]

At $16,300[38] per student for the CUNY ASAP program, the cost of adding these additional services is daunting. Yet impact analyses have found that the program yields substantial returns in revenue and savings well exceeding program costs, for both the institution and the regional economy. Even though the cost of enhanced services means that CUNY spent more on ASAP students, more students from the program graduated, making the cost per degree lower than the cost for students not enrolled in the program.[39] These benefits extended to the city and state level as well. Every dollar spent on the program yielded a return of $3 to $4 to taxpayers, which includes benefits from higher tax revenue and lower spending costs on criminal justice, public assistance, and public health.[40]

These results have been replicated beyond New York. An analysis of a completion program called SAIL at Ohio's Lorain County Community College, modeled after CUNY ASAP, found similar benefits at the individual, institutional, and societal level. The graduation rate for SAIL program participants was almost double that of non-participants.[41] As with CUNY ASAP, this increased graduation rate meant that the cost-per-graduate for SAIL participants was lower than for non-participants. Over 10 years, the program yielded $8.6 million in benefits at the federal, state, and local level through increased revenue through graduates' earnings and savings in public benefits and healthcare costs.[42]

These models show that **investing in the innovations and interventions shown to improve completion and career outcomes can multiply the benefits that colleges bring back to their communities.**

Now is the time to invest in proven interventions

Beneath the declining college enrollment numbers making headlines across the country lies a more complex story about intention, motivation, and untapped potential. At the same time that enrollment in community college has dropped precipitously, there are millions of adults nationwide who intend to enroll in community college in the next two years. Somewhere on the path between setting their educational goals and taking steps to enroll, these adults are experiencing challenges that could derail their economic futures, and have a ripple effect on their families and communities.

The distance between demand and enrollment signals an unmet need that, if addressed, would improve education and career outcomes for individuals, and also yield dividends for government, taxpayers, and the economy as a whole. Rather than reading enrollment declines as a cue to reduce community college funding and resources, policymakers should instead seize this opportunity to direct resources toward building up enrollment and completion for a student population already waiting in the wings. The time is now to infuse funding into our community colleges so that we can bring students back and enact practices that will deliver results. Creating more inclusive pathways into and through community colleges can fuel an equitable recovery, powering economic health and prosperity long into the future.

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