



Community Colleges: Student Engagement and Workforce Development

By Cindy P. Veenstra

Have you driven past a community college lately and seen an overflowing parking lot? There is a reason for this—the number of students enrolled at them has jumped 17% in the past two years.¹ With the rising demand for an affordable education, U.S. community colleges are increasing the number of courses. President Obama’s educational goal of increasing the percent of the population with college degrees by the year 2020 and his proposed American Graduation Initiative recognize the important role of community colleges in increasing the educated workforce for the next decade.^{2, 3}

As a result, there is much more emphasis on helping community colleges graduate more students with degrees and certificates. In his speech on the American Graduation Initiative, President Obama called for 5 million community college students to earn degrees or certificates or go on to four-year colleges by 2020.⁴

A renewed commitment

This is the strongest commitment a president has made to the community college system for several decades. Typically, for education funding proposals, community colleges have been sidestepped in favor of the much more prestigious research universities and four-year colleges. Yet community colleges are the backbone for higher education access in the U.S. higher-education system; 40% of all first-time freshmen enroll at community colleges.⁵ In addition, the community colleges have provided a connection between higher education and the local community, connecting the community college students with future local employers. Employers are placing more emphasis on college degrees—65% of employers are requiring at least an associate degree for new employees.⁶

The current weak economy and global competition are forcing many workers to retool their job skills through more education so they can work in the knowledge industry. When all these factors are put together, there is much more interest in a public policy that recognizes the strength of the community colleges for workforce development.

Added to this is the need for a larger educated workforce in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines. Community colleges have provided many technology degree programs the four-year colleges have not been interested in developing, so they are



also gaining importance in delivering a STEM education to interested students.

American Graduation Initiative status

As a note on the progress of the American Graduation Initiative, which will provide new funding to community colleges, Congress passed the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (H.R. 3321) for funding the American Graduation Initiative in September 2009. Significantly, the same act also increases student financial aid support by increasing the Pell Grant scholarships to \$5,550 in 2010, simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form and keeping interest rates low for federal student loans. The Senate is now considering its draft bill corresponding to H.R. 3321.^{7, 8}

Enrollment statistics

Community colleges have an open-access admission policy and grant associate degrees in general college education (for transferring to a four-year program) or a workforce degree program that prepares a student for a particular career, such as nursing or computer technology. Here are some basic—and interesting—facts about community colleges from the American Association of Community Colleges:⁹

- Numbers: Close to 1,200 community colleges are operating in the United States, with 6.7 million students enrolled for credit courses.
- Higher-education access: Forty percent of all first-time freshmen enroll at community colleges. Additionally, 43% of all African-American college students and 52% of all Hispanic students are enrolled at community colleges.
- Full time vs. part time: Only 40% of community college students are enrolled full time, so the student characteristics of a typical community college are quite different from that of the four-year colleges.
- Students who work: Half of the full-time students work part time and another 27% work full time.



- Demographics: Thirty-six percent of the students are minorities and 39% are the first members of their family to attend college.
- High percent of adult learners (non-traditional students): Thirteen percent of students are older than 40, and 40% are between 22 and 39.
- Affordability: For those who commute from home, the average cost of attending college is the cost of the community college's tuition and fees (\$2,400) compared to an average tuition of \$6,600 for four-year colleges, plus the cost of housing.

Therefore, with the price of tuition, enrollment in a community college is very attractive to students. In addition, students may choose to attend a community college for a number of other reasons, including an interest in a degree or certificate that leads to a particular career.

Student persistence—a challenge

Only 23% of full-time students who first enrolled in a two-year public (community) college with plans for an associate degree achieved their degree within three years. An additional 55% were still enrolled or had transferred to another college.¹⁰ The graduation rate is seen as a broad measure of student learning outcomes and accountability. The challenge is to develop an education system that increases the graduation rate or prepares students for successful transfer to a four-year college.

Higher-education scholars have found that student engagement and involvement in college activities are important for continued attendance. Lack of perceived connectedness with the college can lead to students dropping out, even after one semester. Thus, one indirect measure of quality is student engagement with faculty and other students.

Campus surveys can help us understand enrollment trends, student engagement, quality of education and accountability in community colleges. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) published its 2009 report on a survey that provides some of this understanding. This survey is known as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and is similar in content to the better-known National Survey of Student Engagement. Paired with the CCSSE survey is a faculty survey known as the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE). The 2009 CCCSE report includes responses from students at 663 participating community colleges and is focused on understanding the connections made between students and faculty and staff at the community colleges.¹¹



Student engagement with faculty

As an indication of the issues of engagement, only 16% of the students indicated they “discussed ideas from readings or classes with an instructor outside of class” often or very often. Only 56% of the students responded “received prompt feedback from instructors on performance” often or very often compared to a response of 92% by full-time faculty—a major disagreement between students and faculty.

In total, 60% of all community college students are part-time students. The CCCSE report references a National Center for Education Statistics report that indicates 67% of community college faculty are part-time faculty.¹² The fact that the majority of students and faculty are part time can contribute to less engagement and connectedness, leading to a decreased quality learning experience. This is especially true for night courses, which have a high frequency of part-time students and faculty.

Table 1 compares student engagement activities for full-time and part-time faculty (teaching nine to 12 hours per week) and the percent of faculty who indicated zero hours of activity (from the CCFSSSE faculty survey).

Table 1

Faculty activity	Full-time faculty	Part-time faculty
Advising students	15%	40%
Involved in other interactions with students outside the classroom	22%	47%
Working with students on activities other than coursework	50%	82%

Source: Making Connections: Dimensions of Student Engagement (2009 CCSSE Findings)

Forty percent of the part-time faculty spent no time advising students compared to 15% of full-time faculty. Yet the student survey showed that students consider academic advising to be important. Additionally, 47% of the part-time faculty spent no time involved in interactions



with students outside the classroom. Thus, there is reason for concern about the quality of education and active student engagement with faculty when close to half of the part-time faculty, which constitutes two-thirds of faculty on average, spend no time advising or interacting with students. If a full-time student takes four courses, he or she will have a part-time instructor in two of the four courses.

Tinto has indicated that for community college students, engagement with students begins in the classroom. In fact, this may be the only engagement students receive with faculty.¹³ The survey statistics are supportive of this possibility. Another consideration is that traditional students transitioning from high school attend the same classes as the non-traditional students returning to improve their job skills. This suggests the need for a classroom teaching style that engages students with the faculty member and also engages students with one another.

One of the strengths of the community colleges is their connectedness to the workforce community. The community colleges have provided excellent access, and now there is a need to retool for a systems approach that emphasizes student success and higher graduation rates. The CCCSE report on the survey results shows that more engagement is needed between students and faculty. The full report is worth reading and in the reference section.

Vincent Tinto said, “Settings that actively involve students in learning, especially with others, are settings that yield increased time on task and in turn greater learning.”¹⁴ If a student is encouraged and involved in the first semester of college, he or she may continue into the next and eventually earn a degree. Therefore, creating a setting with an emphasis on more engagement and advising with community college students is one of the strategies for higher graduation levels and increasing the education of the workforce of the future.

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