

US Community Colleges: Innovators and Influencers

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Community colleges are sometimes viewed as the bedrock of the US higher education landscape, and at other times as the stepchild. They are not often regarded as the trendsetter or the bellwether of change for the entire tertiary education sector that they are. Enrolling approximately 34 percent of undergraduate students, the sector should be central to any analysis of US higher education overall. These nearly 1,100 institutions are perceived simultaneously as an extension of secondary education, a low-cost option for the first two years of university education, and a trustworthy delivery mechanism for postsecondary vocational education and training (VET). Today, reacting and adapting to social, economic, and political events, these institutions are driving some key transformations that we see in overall US higher education.

Genesis of the Practical, Nonelite Sector

By the early twentieth century, private junior colleges offering two-year associate degrees were originally intended as finishing schools for young women or as a generic transfer opportunity to four-year colleges. Yet by the 1950s, thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill), the federal government offered tuition reimbursement to thousands of returning World War II soldiers. To accommodate the demand, there was a rapid expansion in the number of public two-year colleges, such that the public sector quickly eclipsed the private sector. Public community colleges thus grew and developed

Abstract

US community colleges are scrappy, agile, and adaptive. Some recent innovations have been workforce development and microcredentials; a diversification of cost-sharing arrangements for professional development; transition of traditional remedial education toward developmental education; a simplification of administrative hurdles to speed up graduation via guided pathways; and college credit to high school students who take college-level courses through dual and concurrent enrollment. These innovations have influenced the university sector to embrace similar changes.

as open-access entry points to higher education, meaning that any high school graduate could (and still can) gain admission. In a nutshell, US community colleges have evolved admirably to serve local needs without the barrier of elitism.

Community colleges have also artfully melded liberal arts with career and technical education, often leading to essential licensure in many technical professions. Many in the population find the shorter and often more vocational community colleges to be better suited to develop rapid skills for employment or transfer. While 80 percent of community college students state that they wish to transfer to a four-year college or university, only 30 percent on average do so. This sector of US higher education has fully embraced adult education and workforce development while maintaining a core focus on equity and access. The university sector has attempted to evolve in similar ways, engaging in efforts to open doors to opportunity and embracing competency-based education. But community colleges have proven to be the most agile and adaptable segment of US higher education.

Emphasis on Shorter (and Shorter) Programs

There has been remarkable growth in shorter, applied, credit-bearing programs at community colleges. This started with the advent of specialized one-year professional certificates in technical fields. Such one-year certificates are generally eligible for federal financial aid. As US degree-seeking enrollment has declined, there has also been a marked uptick in even shorter nondegree (noncredit) technical training and professional development programs offered by community colleges. The catch: Students in such nondegree programs are not eligible for federal financial aid. The emergence of microcredentials—codification and recognition of technical competencies through short nondegree programs—has led to the practice of badging, whereby participants who demonstrate technical competency are awarded a credential or “badge” that memorializes their acquisition of specific skills and knowledge. Universities are waking up to microcredentials, but with less vigor than the community college sector.

Because such training is not eligible for US Title IV federal financial aid, these programs operate completely on a cost-recovery basis, with the participants, the state government, and local industry typically sharing the cost. There is now discussion at the federal level of broadening student financial aid to include reimbursement for nondegree workforce training programs. Such an expanded opportunity for student subsidy would be a game changer, taking the nondegree and workforce badging out of the shadows and prominently onto the balance sheets. There are a handful of visionary philanthropists grasping the importance of noncredit workforce development, providing important financial support at a critical time. If charitable giving for workforce training grows, it could alter the US human development landscape more quickly than government, improving life chances and livelihoods nationwide for generations.

Things That Matter to Communities

While rankings have recently been vilified as gaming the higher education system, there is one league table that stands out as genuinely helpful: the Aspen Institute ranking of the top 120 US community colleges. This ranking has been most palatable as it focuses on verifiable data on the issues of equity, access, retention of degree-seeking students, degree completion, and transfer rates to four-year colleges. Absent are the more subjective competitiveness measures used in the various rankings of four-year institutions, which tend to be based on nebulous admission criteria, test scores, research productivity, and other perceived prestige factors. The very local emphasis of community colleges means that few students will choose a college far from home, so the Aspen Institute ranking of this sector is helpful mostly by showcasing the institutions that excel in their very noble equity mission.

Community colleges have equity at their core, but have also redoubled their efforts to break down barriers to access, affordability, student retention, racial diversity, and degree completion. Concerns about college readiness have grown, with institutions shifting their interventions from remedial education of underprepared students to concentrate instead on developmental education offered in a *corequisite model* nested with parallel student supports. The intent is to ensure that students make progress toward

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their degrees from the very start of their academic trajectory, thereby compressing the time to completion. There is strong evidence that this shift to corequisite developmental education is more effective. As four-year colleges and universities are competing with community colleges for enrollment, they are also experimenting with effective corequisite developmental education to increase matriculation; such practices, however, tend to erode the precious veneer of elitism.

In parallel, community colleges are looking inward at their own administrative apparatuses to identify burdensome policies and practices that have grown in number and complexity; the goal is to identify ways in which institutional operations can get in the way of student enrollment and progress. This requires institutions to conduct frank internal assessments of admission, registration, and degree requirements so that they can clarify and simplify *pathways to guide students* in meeting their academic goals without bureaucratic tripwires, byzantine “requirements,” and circuitous routes to degree completion.

As enrollments decline in the United States, colleges are seeking creative ways to reverse the trend. Engaging high school students directly in college-level coursework has grown in popularity not only as a recruitment tool, but also as a way for prospective students to save time and money toward degree completion. *Dual and concurrent enrollment* programs for high school students are proliferating; these are often labeled as “early college” or “bridge” programs. Today, many community colleges have significant portions of their headcount in dual and concurrent registrations, thereby masking the much steeper decline in traditional enrollment. In some states, dual enrollment is free-of-charge to high school students, essentially an unfunded (costly) endeavor. Other states reimburse colleges for tuition and fees of dual-enrolled students, thereby helping support college budgets. Also concerned about enrollments, state and private universities are now endeavoring to compete with community colleges by launching and promoting their own early college initiatives.

US community colleges have evolved as scrappy, agile, and locally revered organizations doing yeoman’s work. Their recent innovations ensure that the sector will remain a bulwark against inequity while bolstering the vital workforce development goals of diverse communities across a vast country. ▲

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