

# Community Colleges Today

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## ABSTRACT

*Dr. Jill Biden, Vice President Joe Biden's wife, has been teaching in community colleges for the past 18 years. Dr. Biden believes that community colleges are "...uniquely American institutions where anyone who walks through the door is one step closer to realizing the American dream." This is an inspiring sentiment. However, of all the first time college students who enrolled in community college in 2003-2004, fewer than 36% earned a post-secondary credential within six years. In light of the low completion rate, one has to question whether community colleges are fulfilling their promise. In this article we will look at the recent demographics of community colleges, compare the role of community colleges to that of proprietary colleges in post secondary education and discuss promising research initiatives aimed at improving the community college system.*

**Keywords:** Community Colleges, Student Success Rates; Initiatives

## THE STATE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE

In 2008, the United States Department of Education released a comprehensive statistical study on community colleges. The results of this study were enlightening. In general, the study found that the enrollment in community colleges was large, the students were older, more likely to be part time and in need of remediation and that the tuition and expenditure per student was lower. The highlights of the study follow.

In 2007, the latest year for which data is available, there were 1,045 community colleges in the United States with a total enrollment of 6.2 million students. Of all the students enrolled in post secondary education in 2007, 35% were enrolled in community college. In the fall of 2006, 62 percent of community college students were enrolled part time as compared with 27 percent of students at public four year colleges and universities and 25 percent of students at private 4 year colleges and universities.

In the fall of 2005, 19 percent of community colleges had minority populations of 50 percent or more of their total enrollment as compared with 15 percent of public 4- year institutions and 10 percent of private not-for-profit institutions. However, a higher percentage of 2-year and 4-year for profit institutions had minority enrollments that were 50 percent or higher, 38 percent and 34 percent respectively.

Community colleges have lower expenditures per student than public 4-year colleges. In 2005, the average full time expenditure per full time student at a community college was \$10,500 compared with \$31,900 at a public 4-year college or university. The instructional cost per full time student at a community college is \$4,000 as compared with \$8,000 at a 4-year public college or university.

In 2006, the average annual tuition for a community college student was less than half the average annual tuition at a public 4-year college or university, \$2017 per year versus \$5,865. In 2004, 29% of community college students were required to take one or more remedial course compared with 19% of students at public 4 year institutions.

As proprietary colleges have a similar student population to that of community colleges, we will now discuss the roles of community colleges and proprietary colleges in post secondary education today.

## **The Role of Community Colleges and Proprietary Colleges in Post Secondary Education**

Community Colleges are less expensive than proprietary colleges. Students who attend proprietary colleges on average incur two and a half times more debt than students who attend a similar program at a public community college. Community colleges have a track record that brings credibility. As established tax supported institutions, community colleges enjoy prestige and name recognition which exceeds that of proprietary colleges. Community colleges also tend to offer broader curriculum choices than proprietary colleges. Community colleges also offer a wide array of programs. At one end community colleges offer honors programs that appeal to talented students and at the other end they offer extensive remedial programs for students who are less academically prepared.

Community colleges are also usually much more involved in their communities than proprietary colleges. Community colleges offer a variety of cultural activities, concerts, festivals sports and forums that contribute significantly to their communities. Although proprietary colleges offer more limited course selections at far higher prices they do surpass community colleges in several areas.

Proprietary colleges are flexible and tend to adapt quickly to job market demands. They often go right to the students offering classes on –line and at the students’ workplace. Proprietary colleges are also effective at building relationships with local employers which may lead to excellent internship and employment opportunities for students.

Proprietary colleges outperform community colleges on completion rates for associate degrees. Sixty percent of students seeking a two year degree at a proprietary college graduate, compared with twenty two percent of students at public community colleges. However, the high completion rates achieved by proprietary colleges may be due in part to a lack of academic rigor at proprietary colleges. A report by the Government Accountability Office disclosed instances where officials at some proprietary colleges helped students pass basic skills tests or obtain invalid high school diplomas.

Proprietary colleges tend to be more professional and career focused. Students at proprietary colleges are encouraged to choose a career path upon admission. Students at community colleges are not so directed. The emphasis at community colleges tends to be more general education focused. The primary purpose of a community college is to prepare a student for a four year college whereas the primary purpose of a proprietary college is to prepare a student for a job. Both of these approaches have their merits for particular students.

Proprietary colleges and community colleges both have an important role in post secondary education today. There are some areas where community colleges are more successful in providing a quality education there are others where proprietary colleges have an edge. Due to the affordability of community colleges they are a more attractive alternative for many students. Integrating the successful practices of proprietary colleges into community college programs would enhance these programs. We will now discuss promising research initiatives and innovative programs that are endeavoring to improve student success in community colleges.

### **Improving Student Success in Community Colleges**

Research has found that there are several factors which impede student success in community colleges. These factors include a lack of basic educational skills, particularly in math, overwhelming and ill defined programs of study and inability to navigate the application and financial aid process. The following is a discussion of promising research initiatives focused on improving student success in community colleges.

The Carnegie Foundation conducted a study on improving student success in community colleges. They found that developmental mathematics courses are often roadblocks to success. Carnegie Foundation President, Anthony S, Byrk commented, “rather than a gateway to a college education and a better life, mathematics has become an unyielding gatekeeper.

To help ameliorate this problem the Carnegie Foundation along with four other charitable foundations is funding a \$14 million math initiative in community colleges. The program aims to build two new developmental mathematical programs, the Statistics Pathway and the Quantitative Literacy Pathway. The Statistics Pathway will move developmental math students to and through transferable college statistics in one year. The Quantitative Literacy Pathway is a one semester course, replacing elementary and intermediate algebra, followed by the completion of a college level math course.

The Carnegie initiative is a two year pilot program. The program is currently less than halfway completed, but the foundation is hoping the well funded initiative will provide a successful model for improving developmental math programs in community colleges.

David Jenkins a Senior Research Associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University believes that a major but often overlooked reason that community college students fail to earn post secondary credentials is that they do not enter college programs of study. His research shows that it is essential for students to enter a program of study as soon as possible. Students who do not enter a program within a year of enrollment are far less likely to ever enter a program and therefore less likely to earn a credential.

Based on his research Jenkins suggests that community colleges offer a limited set of clearly defined program options that have well structured or prescribed paths to completion. He also suggests that basic skills be taught in the context of instruction in content area subject matter. Wherever possible he believes that higher level remedial students should be mainstreamed into college level classes with added support. Finally, Jenkins believes that community college students are more likely to benefit from student support services that are integrated into the educational experience and that help students create social relationships, clarify aspirations and enhance commitment, develop college know-how and address conflicting demands of work, family and college.

Research studies have also found early intervention to be successful. When community colleges start working with students while they are still in high school graduation rates increase significantly. An innovative program in Virginia, "Pathway to the Baccalaureate" which was started in 2005 has been successful in achieving increased graduation rates. In this program community college counselors began working with at-risk students, students with financial, social or academic challenges, during their senior year of high school.

Students were met with individually and in groups. Workshops were held on college transition including the application process and financial aid. Additionally, students were prepared for the college placement tests and the tests were administered during their senior year in high school. Therefore, if a student needed remediation they could get it while still in high school and retake the placement test prior to graduation. This approach saves both time and money.

The students also visited the community college during their senior year of high school. During the visits they were introduced to the retention counselors who would work with them when they started the community college program. In 2009, the graduation rate for Pathway students was twenty eight percent as opposed to sixteen percent for students who were not in the program.

Another early intervention approach that has successfully increased graduation rates is combining the high school and community college curricula. In Asheville Tennessee a program called "Early College High School" had a graduation rate of 74%. Sixty students were chosen by lottery to participate in the five year program. The students in the program earned a high school diploma and associates degree in five years. Classes were taken both at the high school and the community college. Due to its success this program has been expanded. Similar programs in which high school students attend community college in their junior and senior years have also successfully improved graduation rates.

The research initiatives discussed above along with many other well funded research projects on improving community colleges herald a new dawn for community colleges. We will now conclude with a brief look at the future of community colleges.

## The Next 100 Years

In 2011 community colleges in the United States are celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In recent years, community colleges have been receiving enormous amounts of attention from both politicians and the press. President Obama has promised billions of dollars of support for community colleges proclaiming that “community colleges have for far too long been treated as the step-child of higher education, relegated to the side lines.”

Each day newspapers and periodicals from *The New York Times* to the *Journal of the National Association of Scholars* run feature articles on community colleges. The articles cover topics ranging from soaring enrollment to the diversity of the student population.

So what do the next 100 years hold? Will community colleges fulfill their promise of opening the door to the American dream? In 2011, with the spotlight shining brightly, community colleges have been afforded a new found respect and pledged unprecedented amounts of support both financial and intellectual. If these pledges are kept, yes, the promise of community colleges to open the door to the American dream will be fulfilled.

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