WHITE PAPER

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

AUTHORED BY DR. JIM BLACK

Both internal and external environmental factors impact student enrollment behaviors. An institution can control some of these factors while others can only be influenced or taken into account when planning. Though the signs of emerging environmental trends are often readily apparent, too many colleges fail to proactively mitigate threats and aggressively pursue the right strategic opportunities. This white paper is intended to raise awareness of environmental factors that most, if not all, community colleges are confronting.

Beginning with a high-level overview of the current enrollment reality, the white paper may provide some solace for those who draw comfort from knowing that their enrollment plight is a shared experience. However, common trends do not determine an institution's destiny. They simply help to explain the underlying nuances of a college's enrollment pattern. From our experience at many community colleges throughout North America, the authors are convinced that schools can, in fact, alter their trajectory.

To do so, you must have a clear grasp of shifting national and local demographic trends and the perceived value versus the cost of higher education. Internally, you must understand the drivers for student decisions to enroll and persist along with the motivators and barriers to their academic performance and success. Moreover, your institution's completion agenda needs to extend beyond graduation to employment or advanced education. Community colleges that are laser focused on facilitating the short-term and longer-term goals of the students they serve will thrive into the future.

Such a focus is not mere rhetoric or a mantra such as "retention is everyone's business." It must become a part of the DNA of an institution—embedded in teaching practices, curriculum design, course scheduling, service delivery, facilities planning, capacity management, budget prioritization, hiring practices, performance evaluations, data analysis, and strategy implementation, just to name a few. As suggested in this white paper, a learner-centered focus should be informed by the institution's environmental context. Who do you

serve today and will you serve tomorrow? What are their learner needs? How can the institution better align with learner needs? How do you ensure access to a high quality, affordable educational experience that leads to credential completion and employment or advanced education?

The white paper begins with a high-level overview of external environmental megatrends. National and state trends that may be relevant at the local level are presented to frame thinking around enrollment and retention strategies. Throughout this white paper, the focus is on the internal and external environment that consists of current enrollment trends combined with insights associated with issues that are paramount to all community colleges: access, affordability, student success, and completion. By leveraging this information and comparing the findings with an institution's local data, colleges will be equipped to strategically target enrollment stabilization and growth opportunities and where possible, mitigate threats.

THE CURRENT ENROLLMENT REALITY

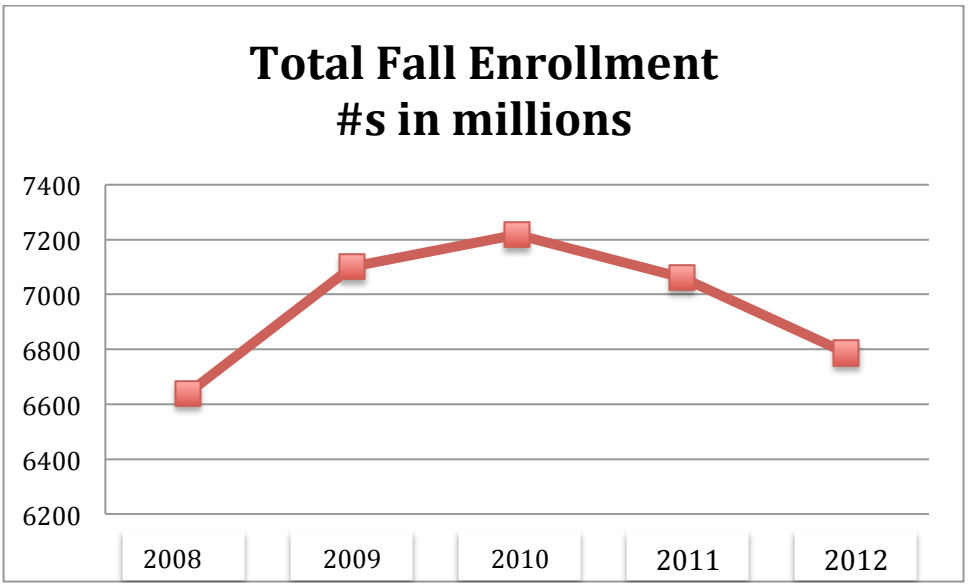
Arguably, the exponential growth of community college enrollments in 2009 and 2010 represents a "bubble" on the higher education landscape. Demographer Harry Dent has identified principles for "bubbles" that are worthy of consideration by community college leaders as the principles relate to each institution's respective enrollment histories (Dent, 2014). Relevant principles include:

1. *All growth and evolution is exponential, not linear.*
2. *All growth is cyclical, not incremental.*
3. *Bubbles always burst; there are no exceptions.*
4. *The greater the bubble, the greater the burst.*
5. *Bubbles tend to go back to where they started or a bit lower.*
6. *Bubbles become so attractive that they eventually suck in even the skeptics.*
7. *No one wants the "high" and easy gains to end, so we go into denial as the bubble evolves, especially in its latter stages.*
8. *Bubbles may seem fruitless and destructive when they burst, but they actually serve a very essential function in the process of innovation and human progress.*

As community college professionals are painfully aware, **enrollments have been declining at most two-year institutions** in recent years. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (*Figure 1*), 2012 fall enrollments at public two-year institutions have essentially returned to 2008 levels. Two questions logically stem from this national trend.

First, is this simply a market correction spawned by a modestly recovering economy? And second, can community colleges do anything to return to the enrollment zenith achieved in 2010?

Figure 1: 2008-2012 Total Fall Enrollments at 2-Year Public Institutions



Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013

The answer to the first question is clear. Almost certainly, this pattern represents a market correction with many adults returning to work along with a slight decrease in the college participation rate of high school graduates—69.0% in 2008 vs. 65.9% in 2013 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statics, 2014, April 22). Market corrections of this nature are typically not uniform across geographic jurisdictions given that they are affected by local conditions more so than by national or regional circumstances.

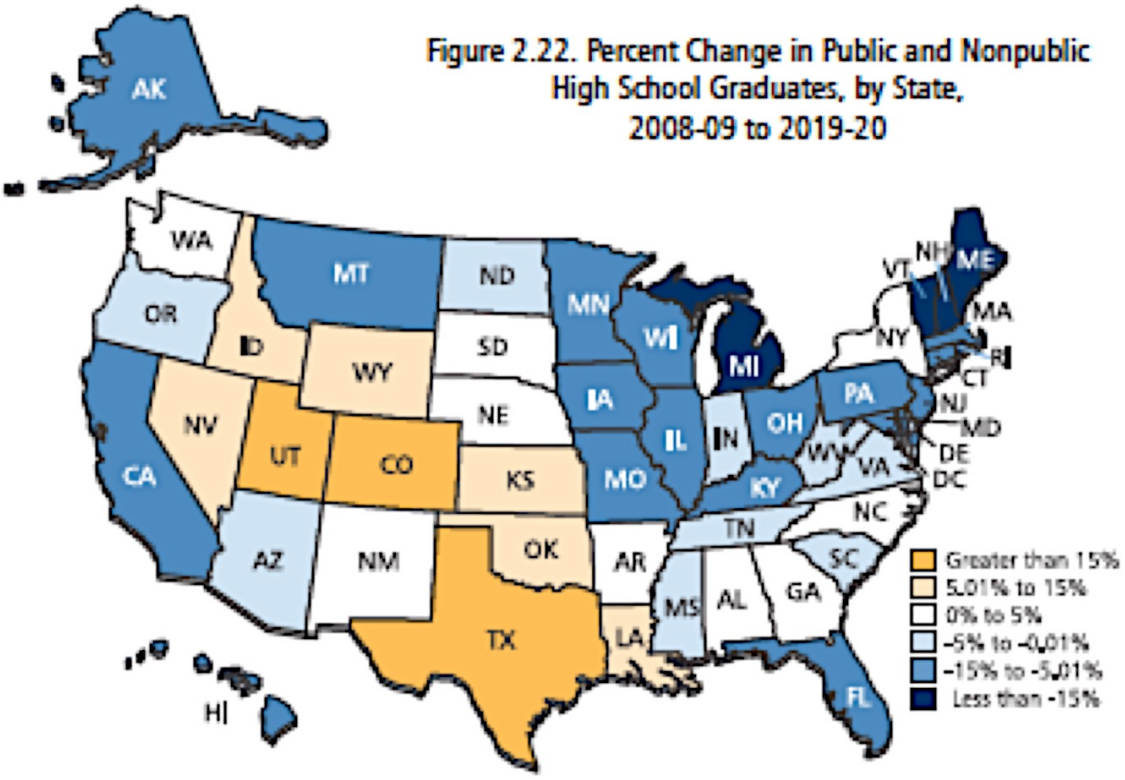
Regarding the second question, 2010 enrollment levels are not attainable for most community colleges in the near-term. With that said, it is possible to **stabilize enrollments and reverse the downward trend**. Although the exact formula for doing so will vary by institution, there are several strategic areas that must be explored. These strategic opportunities include:

- Increasing market share
- Entering new markets, particularly through niche online program offerings and identifying underserved populations within an institution's service region (e.g., Hispanic/Latino populations, immigrants, and veterans)
- Ensuring the academic program array aligns with existing and emerging market needs

- Increasing college participation rates
- Re-recruiting "stop outs"
- Improving student retention and completion

When considering which strategic opportunities to pursue, it is imperative to synchronize enrollment initiatives with local demographic trends. For example, an important student population for community colleges is **high school graduates**. *Figure 2* depicts high school graduate trends (actual and projected) by state.

Figure 2: Percentage Change in High School Graduate by State, 2008-09 to 2019-20



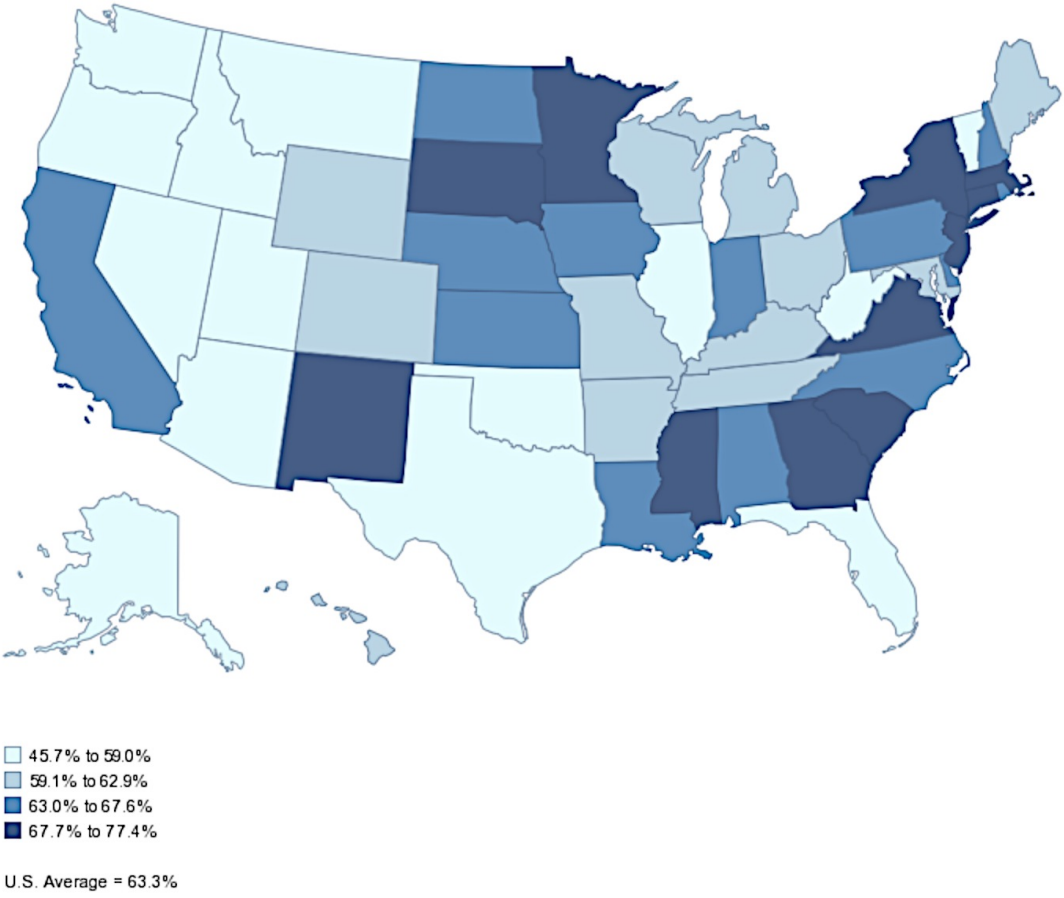
Source: WICHE, 2012

Many states in the Southwest will realize significant growth in high school graduates during this period, fueled primarily by an influx of Hispanic/Latino students in K-12. Notably, California, Florida, Montana, Alaska, as well as most states in the Midwest and Northeast will experience significant declines. For schools in these states, along with those with flat or modest growth projections, strategies to increase market share are critical.

Traditional high school outreach strategies are woefully inadequate to increase market share. The author posits that most community colleges have considerable opportunities for improvement in these areas.

Much like the high school graduation rates, college participation rates vary significantly by state. *Figure 3* illustrates this variance.

Figure 3: College Participation Rates by State



Source: Mortenson, 2009

States with the lowest college participation rates are predominantly clustered in the Western United Sates with notable exceptions such as Texas, Florida, and Illinois. Community colleges in these states will benefit the most by engaging in early outreach (grade 8 and above), educating students and their families about the value and affordability of a two-year college degree, and creating seamless pathways to college entry—including pathways and programs for individuals who have not completed a high school diploma.

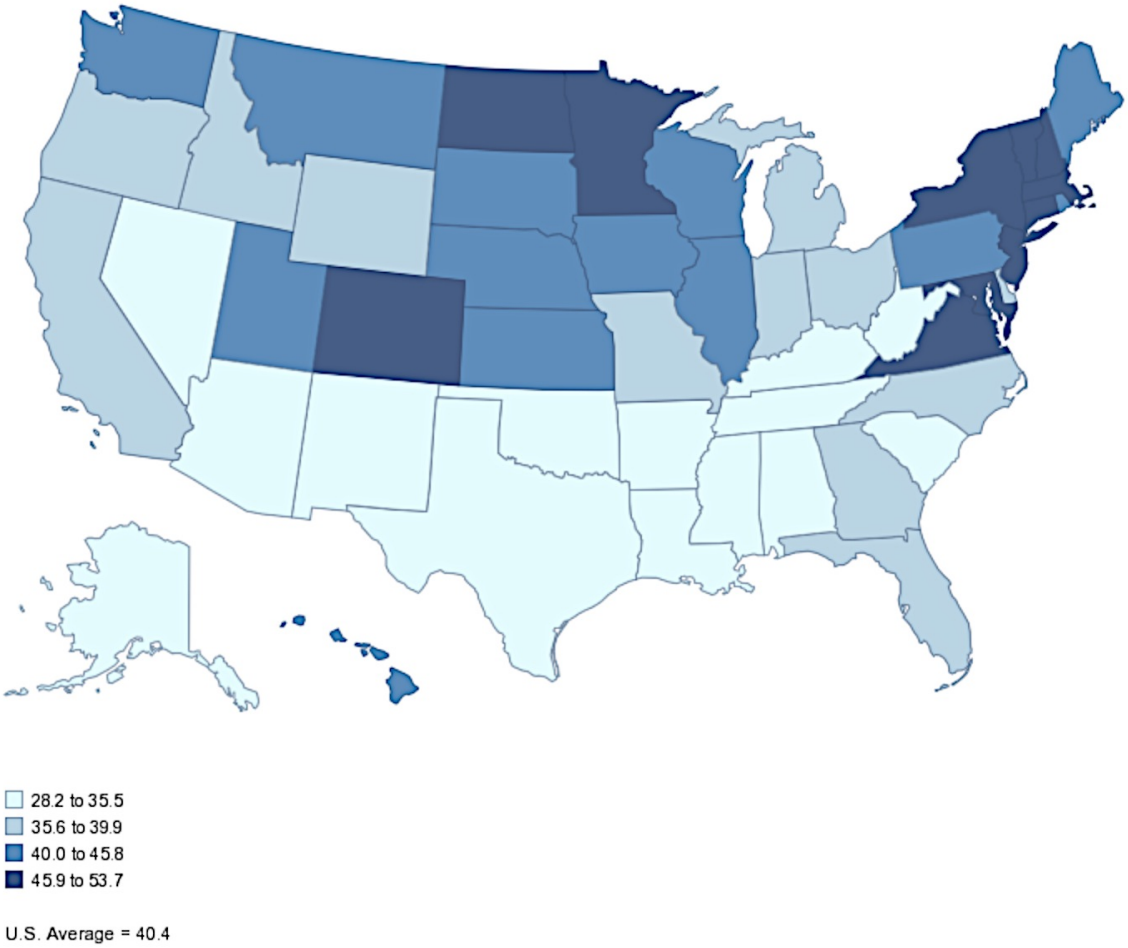
According to the meta analysis conducted by Adelman in 2006 under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, of 8th graders in American schools, the probability of graduating from college is minimal. Adelman concluded that two of every ten 8th graders will not complete high school; three of ten will graduate from high school but not attend college; about two of ten will attend college but will never earn a degree; and only three of ten will graduate from college. Arguably, community colleges are best positioned to address this national malady. For example, GED programs, developmental coursework, robust academic support services, faculty focused on teaching, dislocated worker transition initiatives, and outreach efforts to potential students who do not enter postsecondary education immediately after high school are commonplace at two-year institutions.

Another sizable population for community colleges is **adult learners**. This diverse group includes career changers, those seeking career advancement, individuals desiring professional development or personal enrichment, transfers, displaced workers, veterans, online learners, among others. Many in this student population will start or return to college because of some life "trigger" event such as the loss of a job, the loss of a spouse, an empty nest, and pressing family financial situations (Aslanian & Giles, 2012). Regardless of the impetus for pursuing a college education, their learning needs often include affordability, convenience, flexible learning options, accelerated time to degree completion, and a strong desire to succeed.

The vast majority of adult learners enrolled in community colleges are between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. It also can be argued that many students in the nineteen to twenty-four age-range possess similar attributes and educational challenges (e.g., balancing family, work, and school). *Figure 4* represents the adult population between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four who have earned an associate's degree or higher.

For community colleges in states with lower degree completion rates, mostly those in the Southern United States, the opportunity to attract adult learners is theoretically greater than in other states. However, there may exist compelling reasons as to why degree completion rates are lower in these states, namely population demographics and the availability of jobs. These barriers to entry must be addressed with a value proposition that clearly conveys the long-term benefits of completing a two-year degree or another credential. Ideally, such a value proposition should be combined with intuitive pathways to entry, flexible learning options, and credential laddering.

Figure 4: Percentage of Adults Age 25-44 Who Have Earned an Associate's Degree or Higher by State



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey

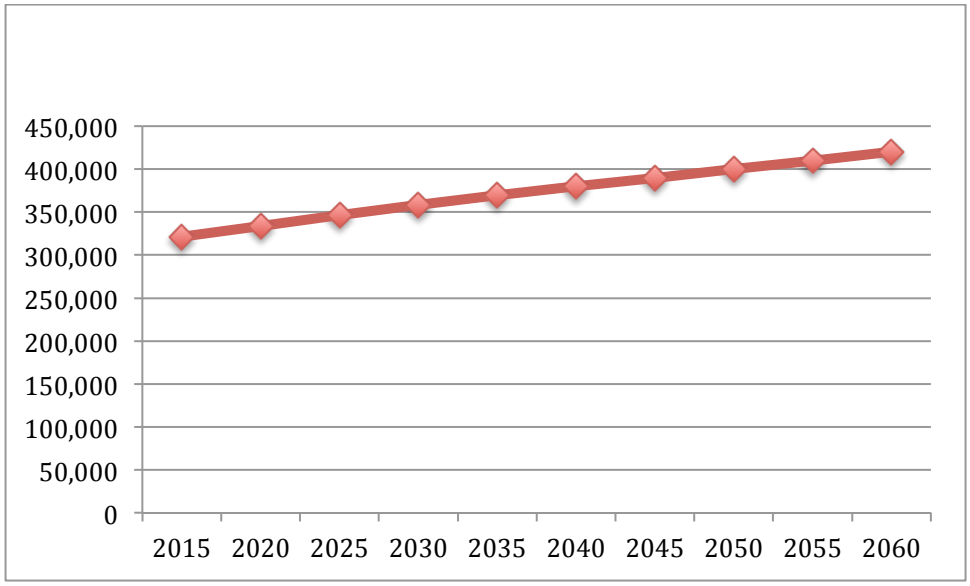
ACCESS: DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

"Demography is destiny" was a phrase coined by the nineteenth-century social scientist Auguste Comte. If you subscribe to this notion, you may find temporary comfort in population growth. As of the writing of this white paper, the U.S. population is over 318 million, and the world population has exceeded seven billion. Though these numbers reflect steady growth, there is more to the story.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), international migration is projected to become the primary driver of U.S. population growth for the first time in nearly two centuries. The U.S. population will become considerably more racially and ethnically diverse as well as older by 2060 as the growth rate slows. *Figure 5* illustrates the overall projected population growth

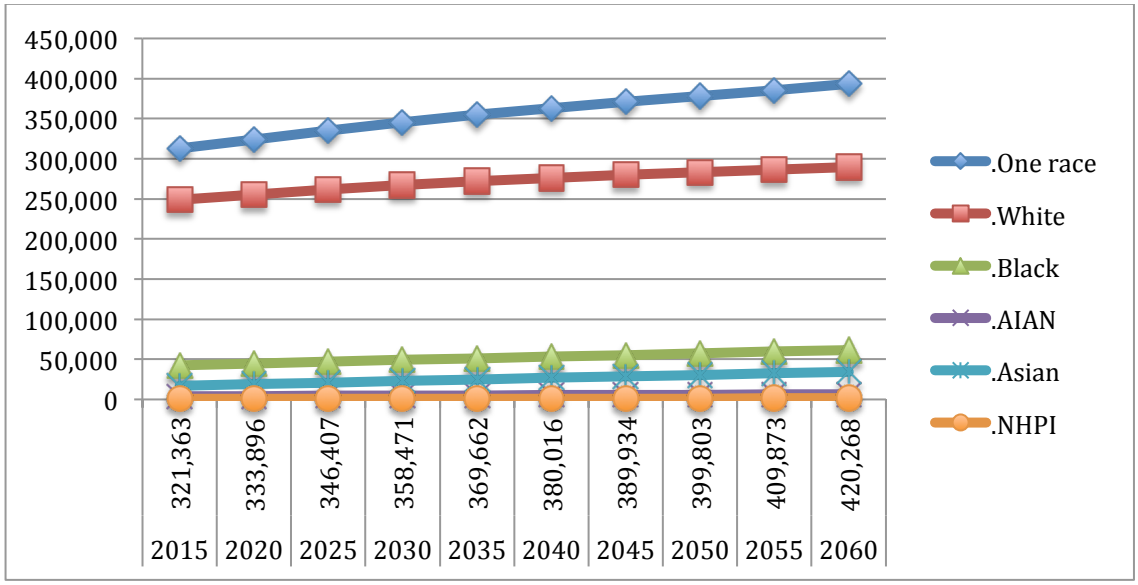
in the U.S. while *Figure 6* shows population projections for select racial/ethnic groups and *Figure 7* reveals population forecasts for select age groups.

Figure 5: U.S. Population Projections 2015-2060 (numbers in thousands)



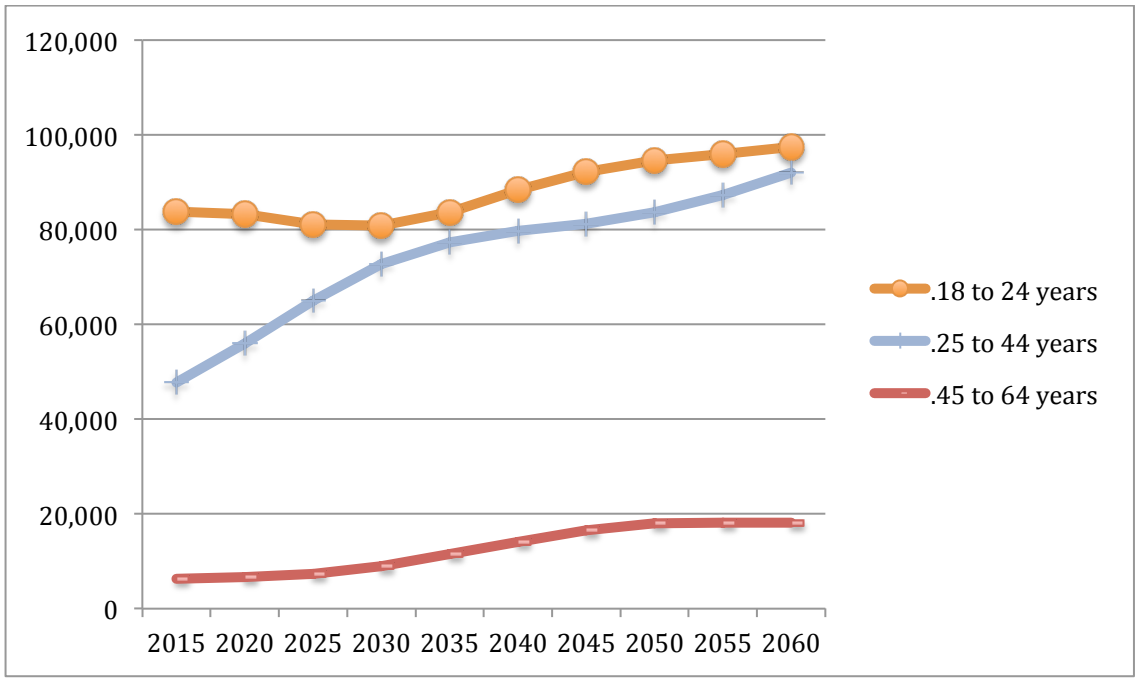
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

Figure 6: U.S. Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity (numbers in thousands)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

Figure 7: U.S. Population Projections by Age Group (numbers in thousands)

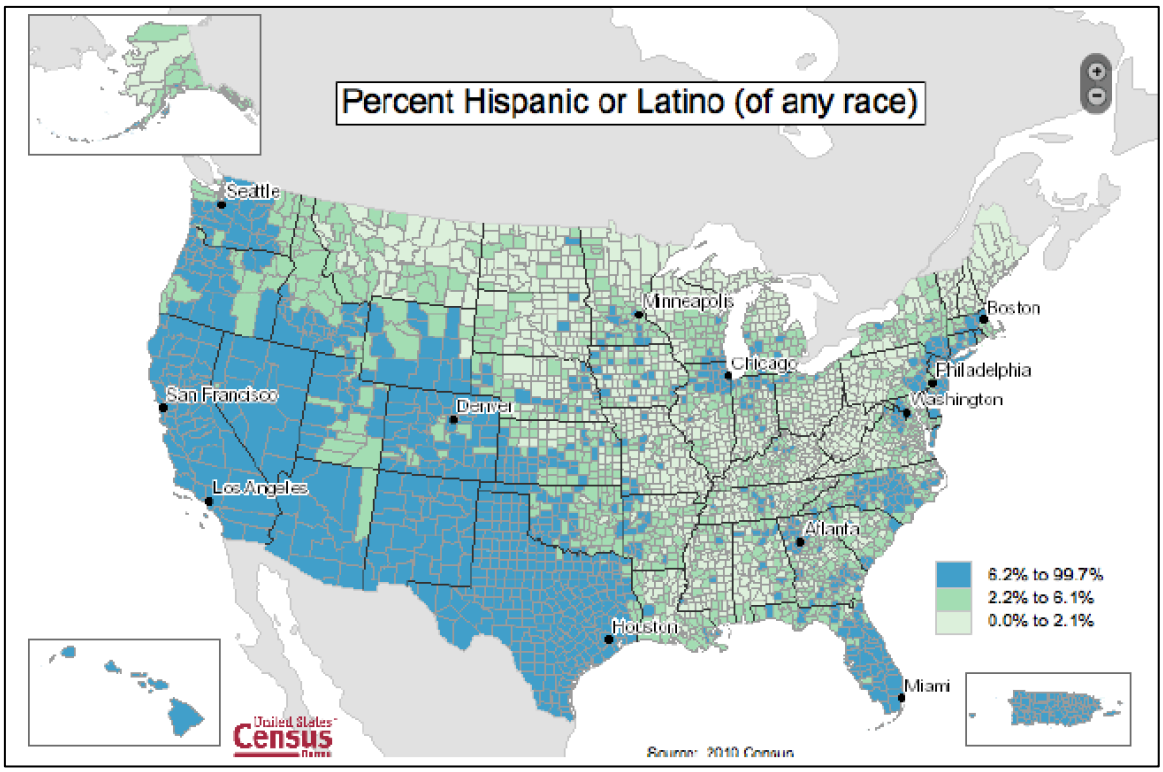


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

These projections suggest overall population growth through 2060 with variation by **race/ethnicity** and **age**. As extensively publicized by the media and demographers, the fastest growing racial/ethnic group is expected to be Hispanics. For colleges, this presents an affordability problem in that an estimated fifty percent of this population is undocumented and thus, are ineligible to receive federal financial aid and in most states, state-provided financial assistance. Although it varies by state and age group, the white population is projected to grow during this period as well. Blacks and Asians are predicted to grow at more modest rates.

Figure 8 shows the highest percentage of Hispanics and Latinos relative to a respective states overall population. The majority of this population resides in Western states, Florida, and select East Coast states—primarily in large urban areas. Given the projected exponential growth of this population, community colleges located in these regions of the country should reap the benefits of said growth—assuming affordability is not an insurmountable barrier and college participation rates increase.

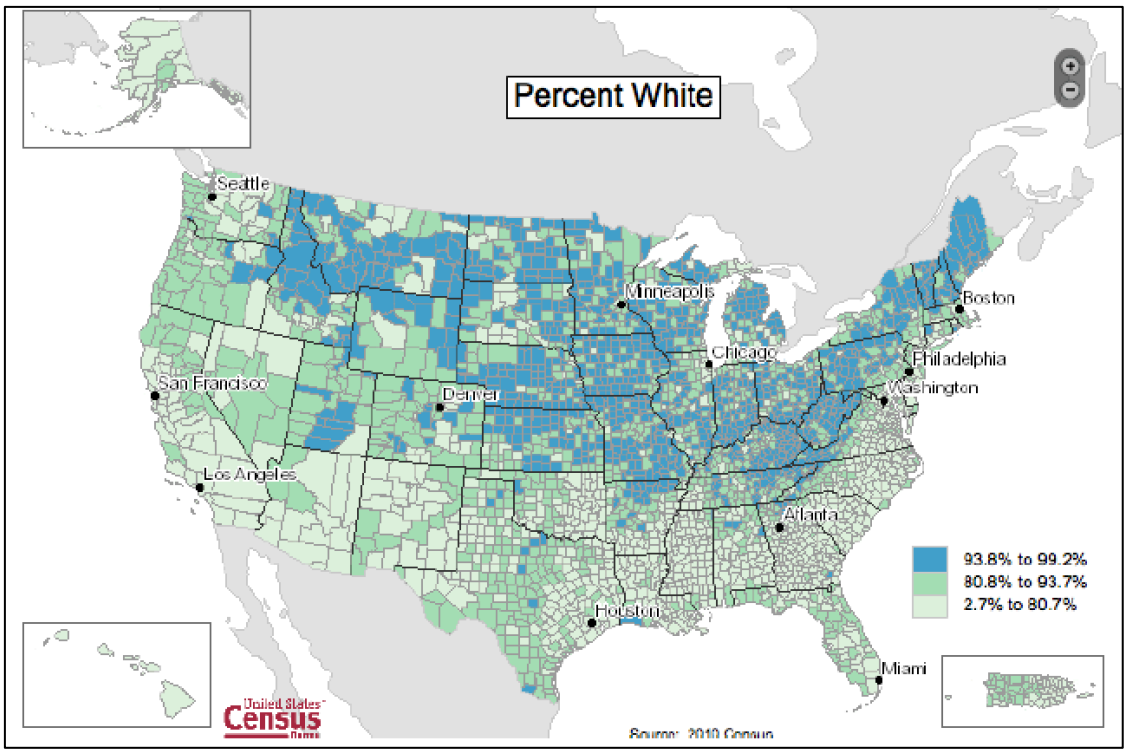
Figure 8: Percentage of the Hispanic and Latino Population by State



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

As *Figure 9* depicts, the highest percentage of whites relative to a respective states overall population are concentrated in Northern states. Assuming these states will have a growing white population of college bound individuals, community colleges in these jurisdictions should enjoy corresponding enrollment increases.

Figure 9: Percentage of the White Population by State



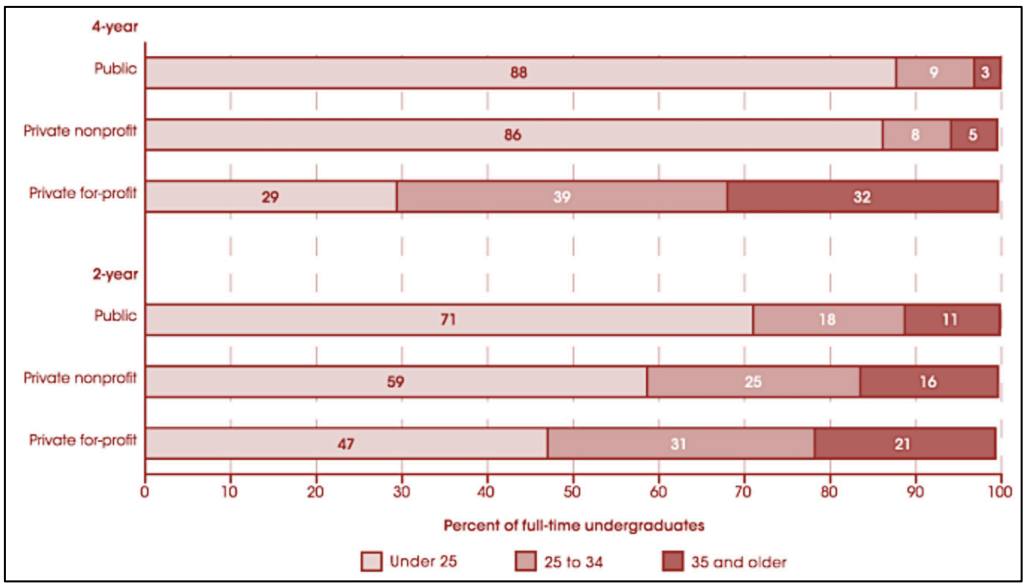
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

The two populations with more modest growth projections, blacks and Asians, are somewhat dispersed across the U.S. The highest concentration of blacks is in Southern states and urban areas in other states, primarily on the West and East coasts, Illinois, and Michigan. The Asian population is more widely dispersed with high density on both coasts. With the exception of states with a significant percentage of Hispanics, Latinos, and whites, community colleges in these regions will struggle to maintain or increase enrollments.

From the perspective of **age**, the fastest growing age group is those between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four—the prime adult learner market for community colleges. Of concern, however, the eighteen to twenty-four age population is expected to decline nationally through 2030 before a resurgence in the latter years of these projections. As inferred in the high school graduate projections presented in *Figure 2*, the population trend for this age group will vary significantly by state—with some winners, some losers, and others maintaining their current levels. In states with declining populations of eighteen to twenty-four year-olds, losses may be offset, in part, by enrolling increasing numbers of adult students, including growing numbers of individuals in the forty-five to sixty-four age group. With that said, *Figure 10* reveals that in Fall 2011 full-time students under the age of twenty-

five represented 71% of public two-year college enrollments (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

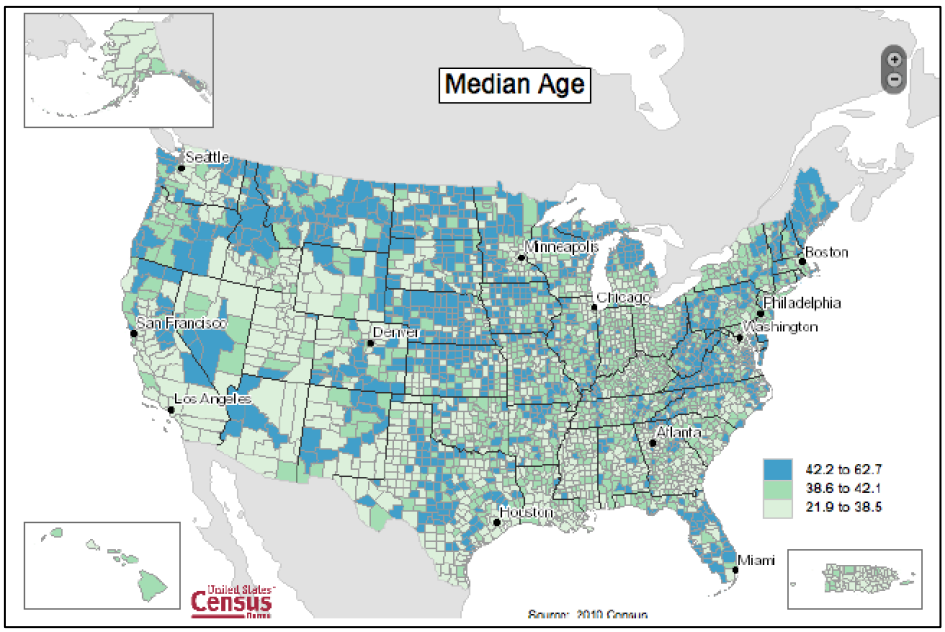
Figure 10: Fall 2011 Distribution of Full-time Undergraduates by Institutional Type



Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012

Though a U.S. map by age was not available, the median age map presented in *Figure 11* does allow for directional inferences. A slightly higher distribution of older adults exists in Northern and Midwestern states, Florida, and Texas. Other states have more college-age residents per capita and thus, theoretically better enrollment opportunities.

Figure 11: Median Age by State



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

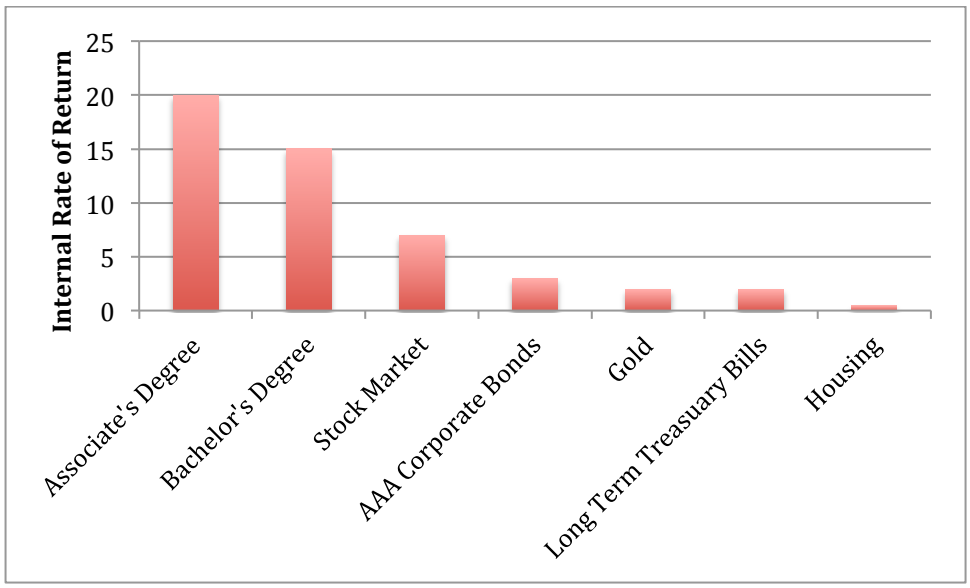
A meta analysis of demographic trends suggests that community colleges in most regions of the country have both enrollment opportunities and threats by population. The key to improving your enrollment position in the context of state and local demographics is to seize the opportunities and mitigate the threats where possible. If you do not have dedicated personnel monitoring these trends and conveying findings to the institution's leadership, building this capacity is a logical place to start. For those who practice demographic trend analysis and apply learnings to enrollment strategies, you possess a critical competitive advantage.

AFFORDABILITY: PERCEIVED VALUE, COSTS, AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

With the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, the discourse associated with the **perceived value of a college degree** began to shift. Rising college costs combined with declining household wealth and in some cases, unemployment, fueled much media and Internet hype about the declining value of a college and university degree. For example, a widely respected publication, *The Economist*, conducted a meta analysis on the value-added of higher education (2012, December 1). Their findings were quite damning, among them the academy's failure to innovate (saving costs) and student loan debt doubling over the past fifteen years with thirty percent of students dropping out saddled with loan debt.

While it is true that college costs have been rising to unprecedented levels, student loan debt in total surpassed credit card debt in the United States a few years ago for the first time in history, and the current economy has not been kind to new graduates, it also is true that a college education remains one of the best investments a person can make. On the strength of an analysis conducted by Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney of Brookings, the lifetime rate of return on investments in associate's degrees are much more substantial than other common investment alternatives, including bachelor's degrees (2011, June 25). Regarding college, this calculation consists of the cost of education compared to lifetime earnings—a powerful value proposition that too few community colleges leverage or promote

Figure 12: ROI in College Compared to Alternative Investments



Source: Greenstone & Looney, 2011, June 25

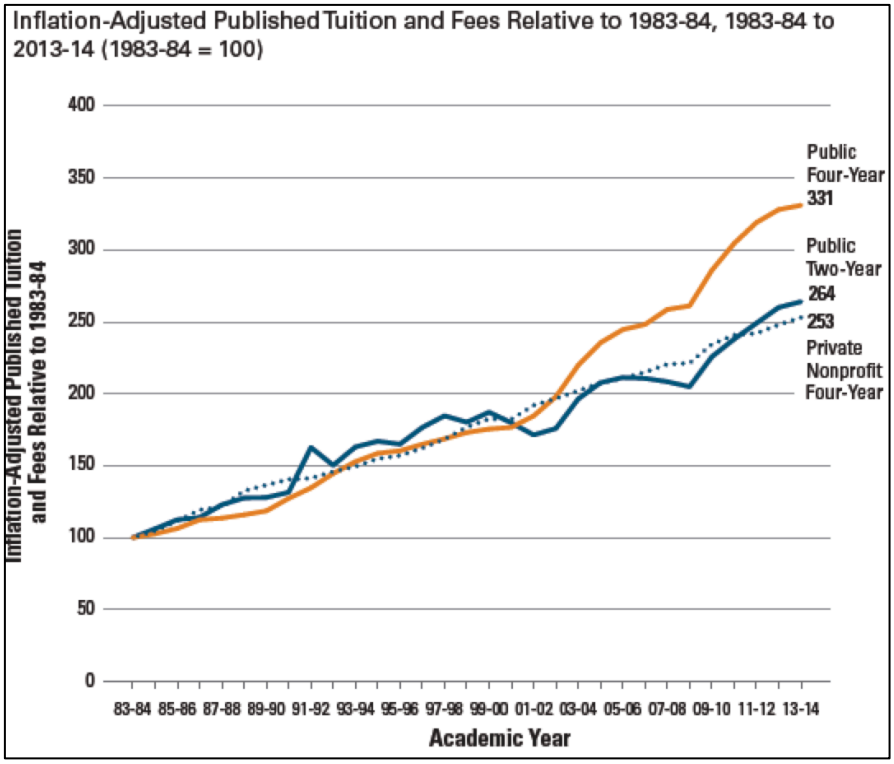
A more recent study produced by the Pew Research Center (Caumont, 2014, February 11), reveals that the median annual earnings among full-time workers ages 25 to 32 is $2,000 higher for associate's degree recipients and those with some college than for high school graduates. Other studies have shown that this gap widens over one's lifetime. At the time of the Pew Research Center study, the unemployment rate varied significantly for associate's degree recipients versus those with a high diploma (8.1% vs. 12.2%, respectively). Moreover, the study concluded that the cohort with an associate's degree or some college is much less likely to be living n poverty than those with only a high school diploma (14.7% compared to 21.8%). Not surprisingly, the study also showed that individuals with an associate's degree or some college are more satisfied with their jobs than high school graduates.

Most often the level of degree attainment correlates to earnings—the higher the degree, the higher the wages. However, income does vary by program of study. A report issued by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (Prueter, 2013, October 7) claims recipients of technical associate's degrees (e.g., information technology, health administration) often earn more than their counterparts with bachelor's degrees. Within the community college context, the report also asserts that longer-term certificates have more market value than certificates that require a year or less to complete and have comparable market value to associate's degrees.

The value story for community colleges is generally extremely positive and makes a compelling case for attending a two-year institution, especially on the path to a four-year degree. But, as previously mentioned in this white paper, too few colleges are aggressively promoting this value proposition. Instead, promotions tend to focus solely on affordability (low cost). Without touting the other dimensions of this market position, namely career outcomes and academic quality, the message may be unintentionally interpreted as "We cost less... and therefore, we are worth less." While many adults will gravitate to this diluted value proposition, you will never increase market share of students entering directly from high school with this message. Therefore, you are strongly encouraged to evaluate your institution's value proposition to ensure the proper balance between affordability and outcomes/quality.

College costs have always been a decision-making factor for many students and their families. That has never been more valid than it is today—in a recovering but still somewhat uncertain economy. The College Board's report, *Trends in College Pricing 2013 (Figures 13-16)*, illustrates the pricing trend since 1983 by institutional type (*Figure 13*). Since the late 90s, tuition and fees have increased exponentially across all institutional types. However, over the last few years, the amount of increases at two-year public colleges have mirrored those at four-year publics and exceeded those at four-year privates.

Figure 13: Tuition and Fee Trends by Institutional Type



Source: The College Board's Trends in College Pricing, 2013

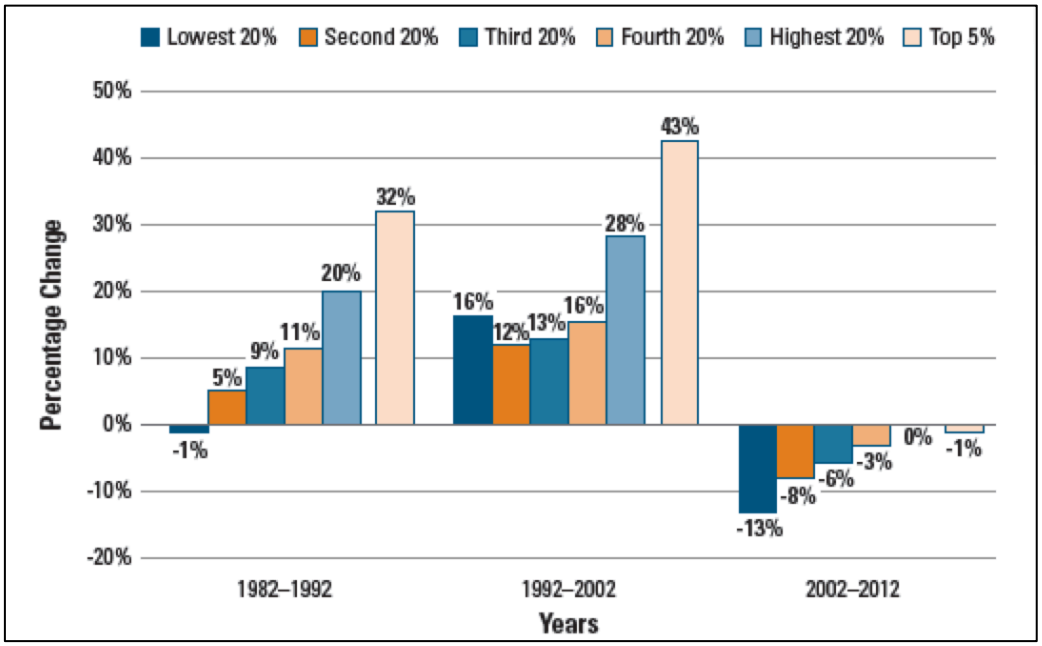
The trends related to tuition and fee charges presented in *Figure 14* have been converted to 2013 dollars. Applying 2013 dollars to the trend comparison is particularly insightful given the family income distribution depicted in *Figure 15*. After adjusting for inflation, family incomes are significantly lower in 2012 than in 2002—making college much less affordable for families across income levels. In this scenario, community colleges have become a more appealing option for the masses.

Figure 14: Average Tuition and Fee Charges in 2013 Dollars

	Tuition and Fees in 2013 Dollars					
	Private Nonprofit Four-Year	Five-Year % Change	Public Four-Year	Five-Year % Change	Public Two-Year	Five-Year % Change
1973-74	$10,783	—	$2,710	—	$1,445	—
1978-79	$10,517	–2%	$2,446	–10%	$1,163	–20%
1983-84	$11,909	13%	$2,684	10%	$1,235	6%
1988-89	$15,778	32%	$3,111	16%	$1,575	28%
1993-94	$17,806	13%	$4,101	32%	$2,014	28%
1998-99	$21,054	18%	$4,648	13%	$2,224	10%
2003-04	$24,071	14%	$5,900	27%	$2,425	9%
2008-09	$26,356	9%	$7,008	19%	$2,530	4%
2013-14	$30,094	14%	$8,893	27%	$3,264	29%

Source: The College Board's Trends in College Pricing, 2013

Figure 15: Percentage Change in Inflation-Adjusted Mean Family Income by Quintile



Source: The College Board's Trends in College Pricing, 2013

Obviously, gross cost is important in the college selection process, but the more consumer-savvy students and families also are comparing the net cost after **financial assistance** in the form of grant aid has been applied. Community colleges need to proactively address "confusion" regarding costs through prospective student communication strategies. As *Figure 16* demonstrates, students whose families are in the lowest income quartile on average have a net tuition and fee balance of $0—meaning that no affordability competitive

advantage exists for community colleges. However, there is a considerable cost competitive advantage among all other quartiles.

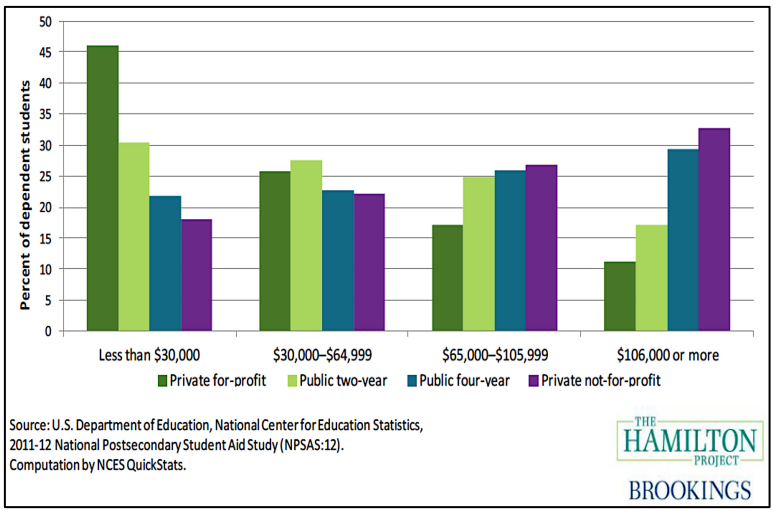
Figure 16: Net Cost by Income Quartile

	Income Group			
	Lowest	Second	Third	Highest
Public Two-Year				
Net Tuition and Fees	$0	$0	$2,172	$2,279
Net Room and Board and Other Costs	$7,022	$9,817	$10,227	$10,450
Average Grant Aid	$5,691	$3,160	$1,050	$816
Published Cost of Attendance	$12,713	$12,977	$13,449	$13,544
Public Four-Year				
Net Tuition and Fees	$0	$2,105	$6,512	$8,071
Net Room and Board and Other Costs	$11,755	$13,028	$13,250	$13,669
Average Grant Aid	$9,835	$6,667	$2,967	$2,576
Published Cost of Attendance	$21,590	$21,800	$22,729	$24,316

Source: The College Board's Trends in College Pricing, 2013

Even though community colleges have no clear competitive advantage at the lowest quartile, and there is less of an affordability gap in the second income quartile, they enroll the highest percentage of dependent students who are from families in the $30,000-$64,999 income bracket and are second only to private for-profit institutions in the less than $30,000 income band. *Figure 17* represents enrollment patterns by type of institution for each income quartile (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Figure 17: College Enrollment by Family Income Level



Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012

According to the College Board's report, *Trends in Student Aid 2013*, 42% of associate's degree recipients did not borrow money to attend college. This fact, along with the comparatively low cost of attending a community college, makes enrollment at two-year schools a bargain. With the right mix of federal, state, and institutional aid, some community colleges would get more traction positioning affordability through the lens of a "debt-free education" rather than as the "low cost leader."

SUCCESS: PERFORMANCE, RETENTION, AND PROGRESSION

Central to the mission of community colleges is the realization of student success. However, in our experience with two-year institutional clients, few have defined what student success looks like at a granular, metric-based level. Perhaps this is the case because student success is extremely difficult to quantify in simple terms. In point of fact, desired outcomes differ by stakeholder and by student. For example, **government-driven key performance indicators** (KPIs) for student success often include year-to-year retention, graduation rates, and time to degree completion. On the other hand, **industry** may define the success of your graduates in terms of preparation for the workforce, employee productivity, and fundamental skills such as teamwork, problem solving, and communication. The **communities you serve** may determine success by community service and leadership, citizenship, as well as contributions to the local economy and tax base.

Internal stakeholders, such as **faculty**, may define student success as academic performance, engagement in learning, achievement of desired learner outcomes, and course or program completion. The **institution** typically aligns its definition of student success with

government KPIs, along with enrollment goals, revenue targets, employment rates, and university acceptance rates. **Students** have their own ideas regarding success. Usually, success for the individual student relates to lead indicators such as academic performance and time to credential completion as well as lag indicators like employment, career advancement, university transfer and completion, professional development or personal enrichment.

Regarding the latter, one community college client requests that students identify their goals at the point of application, again at orientation, and during each registration. Given that student goals change over time, such an iterative process is necessary to accurately capture the most up-to-date goal in the institution's student information system. This information is used to stream goal-oriented communications to prospective and current students with audience-relevant content and engagement opportunities; to inform advising and counseling sessions—allowing for conversations around goal progression and related barriers; and to intervene on behalf of students as deemed appropriate. Tracking goals systematically and reporting on goal progression provides an institution with valuable insights into the student experience that can be leveraged for individual students as well as to uncover patterns that cut across student cohorts and can guide broader enrollment and retention strategies.

To further illustrate the value of defining student success, one of our clients has defined this along three dimensions: academic success, career success, and life success. Under each dimension of success (labeled as Promise Pillars in *Figure 18*), this college has identified desired lag outcomes, lead indicators (effectiveness measures), and selling points. At the time this white paper was written, work at the college is still underway to frame proof points (evidence to support selling points) and eventually infuse lead and lag success factors into the fabric of the institution (e.g., employee hiring, training, and performance evaluations; service and instructional delivery; curriculum reform; facilities management, budget prioritization).

Figure 18: Sample Student Success Construct

Promise Pillars	Promise Pillar Outcomes	Effectiveness Metrics	Selling Points	Proof Points
Life Success	Engaged Citizens	Participation in community service, service learning, community leadership	Citizenship opportunities: national government center	
Academic Success	Lifelong Learners	Completion of courses and credentials	Flexible learning options, student-centered education	
Career Success	Employed, Productive Workers	Participation in Work Integrated Learning, employment rates, employer satisfaction	Hands-on learning, digital leader, practical job skill development, networking opportunities	

In terms of **student success trends** in community colleges, the narrative can only be described as disconcerting. For example, the best predictors of future **academic success** are past academic performance and preparation. According to research presented by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2011), the number of community college students requiring remedial courses surpasses 50%. Some studies indicate that more than 60% of community college students take remedial coursework. Even worse, more than half of these students do not complete their remedial courses and only 25% earn a certificate or two-year degree within eight years.

The two major standardized test providers in the United States, ACT and the College Board, have each established benchmarks for first-year college course performance. Based on a study of some 230,000 students, ACT (2014) has identified benchmarks that predict a 50% chance of earning a B or higher grade in first-year college courses and a 75% probability of making a C grade or higher (*Figure 19).* Of these ACT test-takers, 28% met no benchmarks, 15% met only one, 17% met two, 15% met three, and 25% met all four benchmarks.

Figure 19: ACT Benchmarks

College Courses	ACT Subject Tests	ACT Benchmark
English Composition	English	18
Social Sciences	Reading	22
College Algebra	Mathematics	22
Biology	Science	23
*** ACT Subject Tests scores range from 1 to 36.**		

Using the College Board's benchmarks, which consist of a composite 1550 SAT score (critical reading, mathematics, and writing), a 3.33 or B+ high school GPA, an Academic Rigor score of ten or higher (four years of English, three years each of mathematics, science,

and social science/history), only 43% of SAT test-takers met these benchmarks. On the basis of the College Board study (2011), students meeting these benchmarks have a 65% probability of earning a first-year GPA of a B- or better.

Considering the ACT and College Board benchmarks, it is important to note that community colleges enroll a disproportionate number of students who do not meet the established benchmarks. This fact suggests that the data presented herein are artificially inflated for two-year college students. Thus, the challenge of supporting underprepared students is significantly more profound at community colleges.

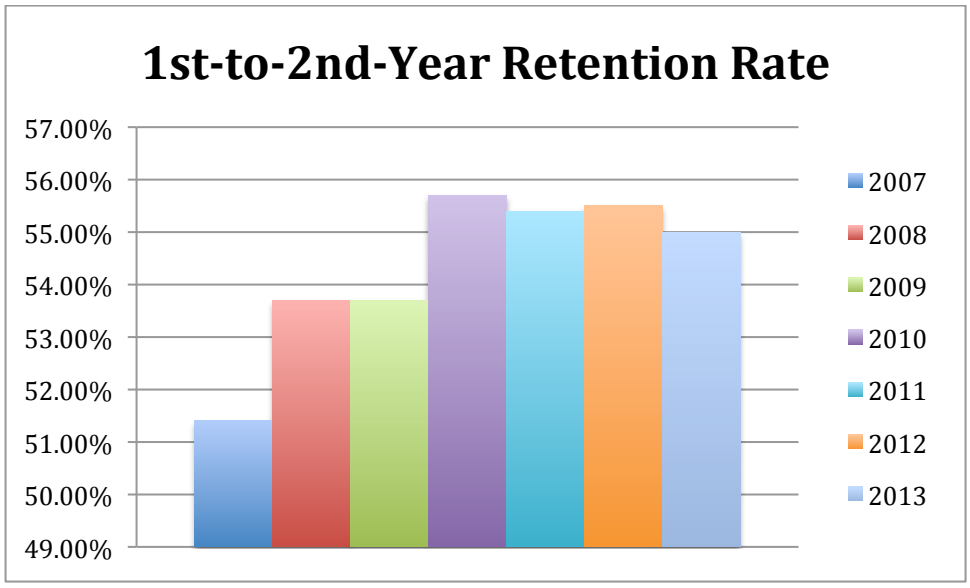
An article written by Paul Fain (2013, May 7) for Inside Higher Ed suggests that the standards practiced by community college instructors set the bar too low. However, the aforementioned studies infer that developmentally many students entering two-year institutions are not prepared for college-level coursework. Others posit that the completion agenda has pressured faculty to lower standards in order to retain and graduate students. Regardless of the rationale, academic success for many community college students is an uphill climb. While these students have severe obstacles to academic success, a lack of academic rigor will not serve them well in the job market or in university studies. Watering down the curriculum or grade inflation is not the answer. Colleges must find innovative ways to bridge the gap between academic deficits and becoming college-ready.

One such innovative approach exists at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). This institution's Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) allows students enrolled in upper-level developmental writing to concurrently take an introductory college-level English course (English 101). A study conducted by the Community College Research Center (2010) found that students participating in ALP were significantly more likely to pass college-level English courses than students who took the highest remedial writing course by itself. Equally as innovative, CCBC has been a leader in offering accelerated, modular-based developmental courses designed to target specific learner deficits and improve time to course completion.

With respect to **student retention**, the mean first-to-second-year retention rates at public two-year institutions are presented in *Figure 20* (ACT, 2014). From 2007 to 2008 retention rates increased two percent and reached a high of 55.7% in 2010. Since 2010, mean first-to-second-year retention rates have slipped slightly but still remain higher than in past years. To put this in perspective, the 2010 retention rate was the highest in recorded history (since 1983).

This phenomenal accomplishment is likely due to the retention efforts on campuses, the emerging completion agenda, and the instability of the economy. As the availability of jobs continues to increase in many jurisdictions, the lure of employment opportunities will make it increasingly difficult to retain students at current levels. Unquestionably, retention initiatives will need to be further strengthened in order to maintain and potentially elevate retention rates.

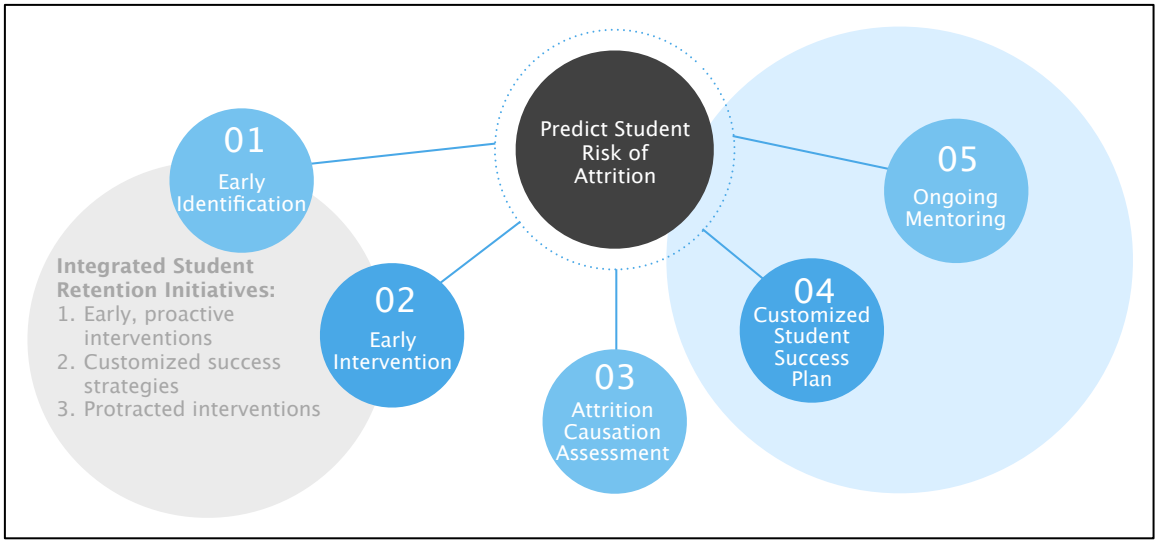
Figure 20: Mean 1st-to-2nd-Year Retention Rates at Public Two-Year Institutions (2007-2013)



Source: ACT, 2014

From our consulting experience at community colleges across North America, we fervently believe that there are four key ingredients to improving student retention: (1) a deeply rooted student success culture that permeates every corner of a campus, (2) active teaching and learning practices that are relevant to each student's career or advanced educational goals, (3) faculty/student engagement and mentoring inside and outside the classroom, and (4) an integrated approach to retention programs and services. Regarding the latter, *Figure 21* illustrates an integrated construct that consists of early identification of students at-risk; a diagnosis of each individual's attrition causation factors; the development of a customized student success plan that addresses identified risk factors and seamlessly bundles cross-boundary services and supports for a single student; and protracted interventions, including ongoing mentoring, to systematically focus on the learner's needs over time.

Figure 21: Integrated Student Retention Construct



With this in mind, consider the high-impact practices to increase student engagement and thus, retention identified by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2013):

- Academic goal setting and planning
- Orientation
- Accelerated or fast-track developmental education
- First-year experience courses
- Student success courses
- Learning communities
- Experiential learning beyond the classroom
- Tutoring
- Supplemental Instruction
- Assessment and placement
- Registration before classes begin
- Class attendance
- Early alert and intervention

Of course, first-to-second-year retention is just one snapshot of the retention opportunity at colleges. Term-to-term and year-to-year **progression** as well as progression to on-time credential completion represent the full spectrum of the current student lifecycle. In a book, *Time Is the Enemy*, published by Complete College America in 2011, a state-by-state analysis reveals that full-time students seeking a two-year associate's degree on average take anywhere

from 2.6 years (Missouri and Mississippi) to 6.4 years (Louisiana). For part-time students, the same degree requires 2.7 years (Mississippi) to 7.8 years (Hawaii) to finish. Moreover, the reported data show that 40.0% of all students are enrolled part-time and only 7.8% of them complete an associate's degree within four years. Nationally, the average time required to complete an associate's degree for full-time students is 3.8 years, and it takes 5 years for part-time students. The book outlines several alternatives intended to provide faster pathways to earning certificates and degrees that include:

- **Utilize block scheduling**, with fixed class times that allow part-time students to juggle life responsibilities while maximizing the course credit earned in a given term.
- **Increase the pace at which certificates and degrees can be earned,** with shorter academic terms, less time between terms, and year-round scheduling.
- **Simplify the registration process** by enrolling students once in a program of study rather than through term-by-term registrations.
- **Reduce the time students must spend in class** by leveraging online instructional technology and competency-based learning—allowing students to move on once they have demonstrated subject competency.
- **Form peer and support networks** among students in the same program.
- **Embed remediation** into the regular college curriculum.
- **Provide better information on** program outcomes, costs, etc.—allowing students to make informed decisions prior to enrollment.

Inefficient progression for students translates to time, educational costs, lost or delayed income, and potentially insurmountable barriers to credential completion. While many obstacles to efficient progression exist within the life choices and circumstances of students themselves, institutions also contribute to the progression conundrum. Protracted remedial coursework, inaccurate advising, and inflexible course scheduling options are but a few of the institutionally created challenges that community college students face. Even though most associate's degrees require sixty hours of earned credit to graduate, the analysis conducted by Complete College America indicates that the typical associate's degree recipient will have earned seventy-nine hours. Arguably, these additional credits could be the result of changing programs of study, poor academic course performance, non-transferrable credit from a prior institution, or decisions to take elective courses for a variety of valid reasons. Regardless of the cause, additional courses extend the time to degree completion.

Progression shares a symbiotic relationship with academic success and retention. In fact, focusing on student progression interventions and strategies may produce better results than

retention efforts alone. Knowing when student progression stalls and why provides college personnel with keen insights into the critical junctures in the student lifecycle where interventions can be most productive. These often include transitions between terms, successful completion of gateway or high-risk courses, changing majors, recovery from poor academic performance, or issues related to financial aid Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements. Analyzing institutional data to determine the critical points of progression and then developing the right strategies to assist individuals in working through progression challenges is fundamental to student success.

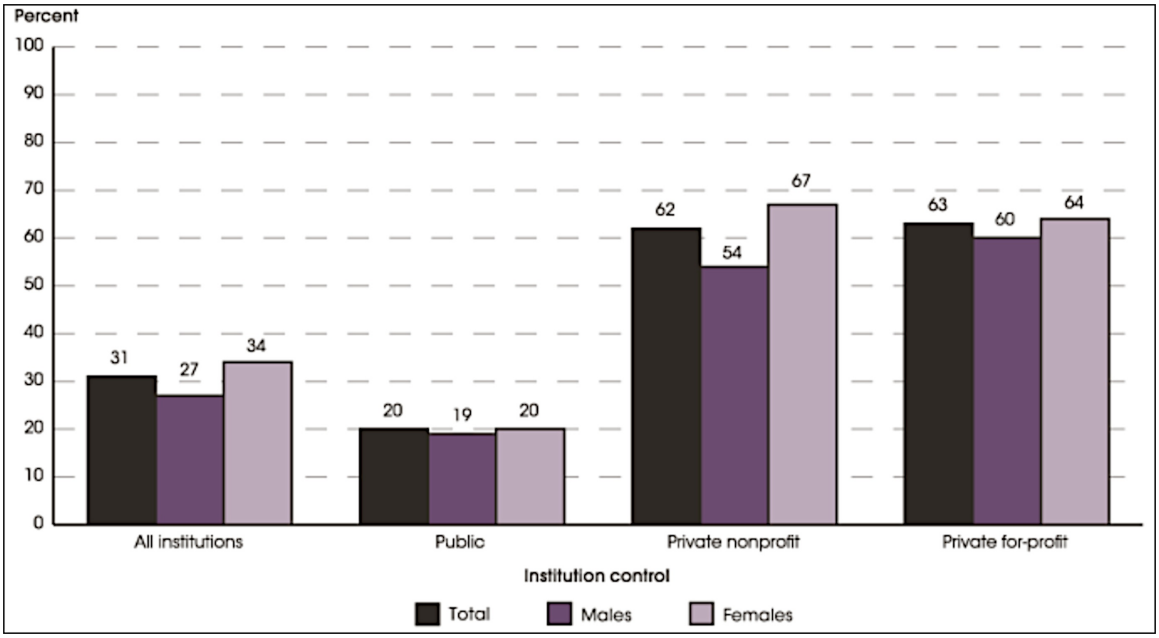
COMPLETION: GRADUATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND ADVANCED EDUCATION

The student lifecycle does not end at graduation. Though the completion agenda has deservedly received much attention, increasingly government entities and educational consumers are evaluating colleges by lag indicators of success, namely employment rates and earnings as well as university acceptance rates, university academic performance relative to native students, and degree completion. Admittedly, these indicators are convoluted by the non-linear enrollment patterns of today's students (e.g., full-time vs. part-time status, stopping out in the midst of the pursuit of a degree). Even so, community colleges are compelled to focus on student credential completion and preparation that leads to successful employment or advanced education—outcomes that institutions do not have direct control over but can certainly influence.

Nationally, three-year **graduation** rates (150% of time-to-degree) declined precipitously from 2003 (30.6%) to 2008 (27.5%) when combining all institutional types of two-year schools. This decline has been followed by a rebound in graduation rates starting in 2009 (NCHEMS Information Center, 2010). A more recent view reveals a 31% three-year graduation rate for all two-year institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013, Spring). However, *Figure 22* elucidates a performance gap between males and females, with females being more likely to graduate in three years regardless of institutional type, as well as a significant gap between the completion of students at public two-year colleges versus those at for-profit and nonprofit private schools (20% at publics compared to 62% at private nonprofits and 63% at private for-profits). Causation related to the differences by institutional type is unclear. Explanations for the gap between public two-year institutions and the privates may be related to factors such as the demographic and academic profile of students served by each, the impact of Satisfactory Academic Progress policies on students at public colleges, course scheduling and academic program practices, and the effectiveness of retention efforts. Regardless of the reason, public two-year institutions would be well

served by studying the causation factors further and adopting appropriate strategies to close the gap.

Figure 22: Three-Year Graduation Rates at Two-Year Colleges



Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, Spring 2013, Graduation Rates component. See Digest of Education Statistics 2013, table 326.20.

EMSI and Burning Glass Research provide respected resources for monitoring **employment** and career trends. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' occupational outlook data are equally as valuable. While national and local trend data help institutions understand the big picture, the more important information is found among the employment of each college's graduates. Regrettably, the author's consulting experience suggests that graduate-specific outcome data are sparse and rarely are systematically collected and analyzed.

The U.S. Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center website (http://collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard/) already provides educational consumers with scorecards for colleges on attributes such as costs, graduation rates, loan default rates, and median borrowing. Longer-term, the Center aspires to include employment information (e.g., employment rates and average earnings). Before this becomes a government mandated reporting requirement, it behooves colleges to engage in employment-related data gathering practices.

Data collection and even analysis are meaningless without corresponding action. The challenge for community colleges is to first define desired employment outcomes and then

to develop strategies and programs designed to positively impact those outcomes. Too many institutions rely primarily on career services or job placement offices to influence these employment outcomes. Even though these departments often provide exemplary support, the student uptake of available services is modest at best. On the strength of our numerous consultancies, we approximate that about 20% of enrolled students on a given campus take advantage of related employment services. This alone will never move the employment needle sufficiently.

Campus-wide faculty and advisor career mentoring; career-focused instruction and curriculum; experiential learning opportunities such as internships, co-ops, clinical and field placements; and industry engagement and networking must complement departmentally-based services in order to improve employment outcomes. A successful transition from classroom to work requires that students develop discipline knowledge, career-related practical application, and workplace essential skills. With that said, most students also need guidance in exploring career options along with dexterities related to job search techniques, resume writing, career portfolio development, interviewing skills, and even methods of negotiating. To adequately prepare students for the transition to employment in today's highly competitive and tenuous job market, most institutions will have to become much more intentional and systematic about said preparation.

Regarding the pursuit of **advanced education**, a College Board report, *The Promise of the Transfer Pathway*, indicates that twenty-six to twenty-seven percent of students who start their education at a public community college and enroll full-time at their initial institution for at least one semester transfer to a four-year institution (Handel, S. J. & Williams, R. A., 2011). Research conducted by the National Science Foundation (2011) demonstrates that half of the recipients of bachelor's degrees in science, engineering, or health fields attended a community college at some point in their academic journey. Equally as impressive, 41% of master's degree recipients and 12% of doctoral graduates in these fields took at least one course at a community college.

The principal question is how do community college students fare when they enroll at four-year universities. An article written by Grace Chen for the Community College Review presents substantial evidence to support the common hypothesis that these students compare favorably with their native university counterparts (2014). For example, a North Carolina study revealed that students who transferred from community colleges had similar or better outcomes than native students by the end of the sophomore year. In Texas, the Dallas Community College District conducted a study, which discovered that 22% of

students enrolled in four-year institutions transferred from community and had graduation rates virtually identical to native students.

For some, the transition to university study is just as difficult as the transition to the workforce. Community colleges can assist university bound students through advising and mentoring practices, overcoming academic deficits, rigorous coursework, completion of the admission application process, and preparation for the phenomenon commonly referred to as "transfer shock." Much like the effort described for employment transition, colleges must be intentional and systematic in delivering related supports to impact university degree attainment.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The days of achieving enrollment aspirations by simply doing more are over. A strategic, data-driven approach to enrollment efforts is the only prudent approach. **Focusing** your limited organizational bandwidth on the initiatives that matter most will produce optimal enrollment results within your institution's environmental context. Most certainly, the right focus is only half of the equation. You also must possess the institutional **will** to act. This not only means doing the right things but correspondingly letting go of less effective strategies. While the latter may seem relatively easy, it is the single most difficult challenge facing community college enrollment and retention enterprises. Therefore, you are encouraged to provide leadership and related accountabilities in the evaluation of existing strategies.

Without this critical process, most institutions will not possess the human or financial resources to effectively implement new strategies—an essential element of improving enrollment outcomes. For most, it will be imperative to build infrastructure, capacity, and competency around the enrollment effort. Newly created or repurposed positions (e.g., an enrollment analyst), investments in new and high-performing existing strategies and enabling technologies, and professional development will be required in order to gain/sustain competitive advantage and improve retention and graduation rates. This may only be feasible through the recalibration of existing resources.

Ultimately, your competitors can replicate every enrollment strategy. Thus, your competitive advantage exists in your ability to execute better than others. The capacity to produce enrollment results resides within your people. So, invest in developing and retaining them.

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About the Author

Jim Black, Ph.D.

SEM Works President and CEO

The president and CEO of SEM Works, Dr. Jim Black, is an internationally recognized expert in enrollment management as well as in change management. He has published a monograph titled, *Navigating Change in the New Millennium: Strategies for Enrollment Leaders,* and four books, *The Strategic Enrollment Management Revolution,* considered to be a groundbreaking publication for the enrollment management profession, *Gen Xers Return to College*, *Essentials of Enrollment Management: Cases in the Field*, and *Strategic Enrollment Intelligence*, Canada's first book on enrollment management. Among his other published works are numerous articles and book chapters including a feature article in College & University, *Creating Customer Delight;* a chapter, *Creating a Student-Centered Culture*, for a book on best practices in student services published by SCUP and sponsored by IBM; a chapter on enrollment management in a Jossey-Bass book on student academic services; as well as a bimonthly feature in The Greentree Gazette.

Dr. Black is the founder of the Community College Enrollment Management and Student Marketing Symposium and the National Conference on Student Retention in Small Colleges as well as the cofounder of the National Small College Admissions Conference and the National Small College Enrollment Conference. He formerly served as the director of AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Conference.

Black was honored as the recipient of the 2005 AACRAO Distinguished Service Award and was selected as the 2012 Alumnus of the Year by his graduate program in higher education and student affairs at the University of South Carolina. He has been interviewed by publications such as The Chronicle of Higher Education, Converge Magazine, The Enrollment Management Report, The Lawlor Review, and was interviewed for AACRAO's

Data Dispenser. Black also was featured in an international teleconference on enrollment management sponsored by The Center for the Freshman Year Experience at the University of South Carolina, and a PBS broadcast on "Blending High Tech and High Touch Student Services." In 1999, Jim Black was named an IBM Best Practices Partner, one of only twenty-three in the world. He was invited by The College Board to Heidelberg, Germany, to evaluate the APIEL Exam and most recently was invited to lead conferences on enrollment management and student services in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Dr. Black has served on the boards of several technology companies and has consulted with companies such as Microsoft, Blackboard, and the SAS Institute. Higher education clients have included over 400 two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions.

Jim earned a B.A. in English education and M.A. in higher education administration from the University of South Carolina, as well as a Ph.D. in higher education curriculum and teaching from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His doctoral experience provides our clients with unique perspectives into innovative pedagogical, curricular, and program opportunities that impact enrollment outcomes.