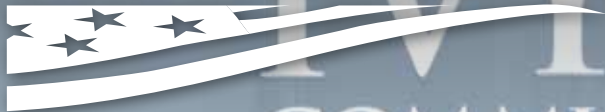


Center for American Progress



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COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Re-imagining Community Colleges in the 21st Century

A Student-Centered Approach to Higher Education

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Executive summary

Contemporary community colleges are on the brink of crisis, facing both praise and criticism on so many dimensions that it is difficult to make an overall assessment of their legitimacy. Each of the primary missions of community colleges faces a broad spectrum of challenges, made more complex by misapprehensions about the various roles of community colleges, lack of clear and consistent data on outcomes, and the relative weakness of the institutions and their students in state and federal political and policymaking processes. And the diversity of inputs and outputs in community colleges defies easy categorization. Their identity in the media, in the policy community, and in the institutions themselves is problematic, contingent upon perspectives and contexts.

Community colleges provide benefits to an array of constituents, but we argue that their primary responsibility is to students. There is an essential need for community colleges to re-imagine several critical areas in order to serve these students and improve institutional and student performance on a number of fronts: in curricula, including vocational and occupational education, developmental education, and university transfer education; in the structural and procedural norms that shape everyday activities; and in the political life of these institutions.

The transformation and recovery of the institutions begins with a more nuanced understanding of the needs and potential of the diverse student body that community colleges serve and leads to re-envisioning the institution. A student-centered approach to each of the colleges' primary missions will enable institutional leaders and constituents, in collaboration with policymakers, to improve outcomes for all students and achieve synergies between and among the three fundamental areas of community college activity: developmental education, vocational-occupational education, and university transfer.

Re-imagining community colleges necessitates recognizing the connection between students who attend these institutions and the advanced learning and working environments beyond the community college. We try to bridge a gap between the two conditions with a direct approach that fits form to function: one that enables institutions to better understand a function and then to construct appropriate forms—or structures—for those functions. To do this, we think of community colleges as institutions with multiple missions and also imagine community colleges with organizational and governance structures that are aligned with multiple functions.

These functions must focus on students. Placing students at the center of the institution requires re-imagining community colleges as sites of equitable opportunity and outcomes. Political leaders and policymakers will need to move past normative understandings of community colleges and their students and expect no less of these institutions and no less for their students than the best that is offered to students at any level of postsecondary education. To accomplish this, we offer a number of recommendations for transformation in vocational and occupational education and training, developmental education, and the transfer function. We also suggest specific institutional, state, and federal policies that will facilitate that transformative change:

- **New approaches to training and credentialing.** Rapidly shifting demand for skills in state and national labor markets calls for new approaches to sub-baccalaureate training and credentialing. States and federal legislation should support innovative, credit-based training programs that respond to student and industry needs, while allowing students to build credit-based platforms for future training and degree attainment. Legislation should also support data collection and assessment of student credit and noncredit course-taking patterns to assist institutional adaptations in this area.
- **Funding for colleges and financial support for students.** Community colleges suffer from a lack of the financial resources needed to serve their students and other constituents. This problem is brought into focus when comparing community colleges' per student allocations to similar programs in four-year institutions. The increase in the maximum Pell grant available under Section 101 of H.R. 3221 is a welcome addition to the pool of financial aid available to eligible community college students. But students in community colleges need new and more comprehensive forms of aid if national goals for degree attainment are to be realized. This section of the bill could be strengthened through the creation of an additional financial support program modeled after the "Post 9/11 G.I. Bill." The additional aid would include student stipends for full-time or part-time community college attendance and allowances for books and supplies. This form of aid would be a bold step for legislators, but in order to improve our position in global rankings of degree production, we will need to do more to approach the amount and forms of aid offered by those nations we are measured against.
- **Policies to promote developmental education.** States have for too long failed to develop clear policies on responsibility for developmental education. States must institute clear policies that support innovative uses of data, as they require collaboration between their elementary-secondary and postsecondary systems to improve K-12 preparation and to align standards for high school graduation with college readiness. The goal should be to significantly reduce the need for postsecondary remediation through early assessment, intervention, and continuous accountability at all levels of state educational systems.
- **Higher transfer rates to four-year colleges.** Despite considerable effort already generated in legislatures, the policy community, and institutions, levels of transfer from com-

munity colleges to four-year institutions can be improved. Legislation that has focused on articulation, outreach, and finance should be augmented with policies covering more sophisticated data collection, common course numbering, institutional policy alignment across segments, joint-baccalaureate programming and technology-mediated information systems for students seeking transfer and baccalaureate attainment.

- **More modern infrastructure and technology.** Section 351 of H.R. 3221 the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act offers considerable federal assistance for construction, renovation, and modernization of community college facilities, including information technology facilities. The language in the bill that supports expansion of computer labs and instructional technology training facilities should be broadened to include building institutional information technology systems such as student record data management centers, information portals for student outreach, and course and credit articulation. Extending support to institutional information management systems would be consistent with Section 503 of the bill, which calls for increasing students' electronic access to information on transfer credit, and Section 505, which calls for developing improved data systems and data-sharing protocols as well as increasing states' abilities to collect and analyze institutional level data.
- **Better data collection.** Section 504 of H.R. 3221 includes language requiring states that seek eligibility for funding to have "a statewide longitudinal data system that includes data with respect to community colleges." Community college data collection could be significantly enhanced if the bill specifically called for data on student enrollments in credit and noncredit courses as well as developmental education programs. These data could be used for improved outcomes in community college developmental education programs, and would also have considerable utility for collaborative efforts with elementary-secondary systems designed to reduce the need for remediation at the postsecondary level.
- **Common standards for assessing student learning and institutional effectiveness.** Given the significance of developmental education in community colleges and the increasing mobility of students, federal legislation providing funding and guidelines for states to develop common standards for assessing students' developmental needs would enhance student progress and increase institutional effectiveness. Such legislation should also provide incentives for collaboration between elementary-secondary and postsecondary systems in the development of common assessment standards.

The rapid pace of change in the education arena requires innovative approaches to institutional practices at every level. New competition and new opportunities demand that community colleges re-imagine their goals and practices to better serve student needs. That process will require that policies specific to the various domains of the community college—transfer, occupational, and developmental activities—place students first. Institutional policies should also focus on new forms of collaboration with four-year institutions, community-based organizations, and business and industrial partners.

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