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## At Issue

# Reaching and Retaining Community College Students: A Call to Action

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*Recent years have seen a major decline in community college enrollments across the country. Although the market to attract secondary school students contains many pathways, the overall marketplace is very competitive as most schools are competing for the same body of students. The adult market is the largest and most neglected group of potential students. Publications of the colleges are almost completely online today. This needs to be revisited. Strong consideration should be given to provide readable and understandable ways to reach this population. Schedules and readable written publications sent to the homes of district residents should do much to tap this large market.*

The recent past has seen U.S. community college enrollments turn from almost yearly growth into major declines. The COVID-19 pandemic, extending over a two- to three-year period, has played a major factor in the decline.

It has been reported that 827,000 students dropped out of community and technical colleges since the start of the pandemic. In one year alone, between fall semesters of 2020 and 2021, the figure was 351,000 according to the National Student Clearinghouse (2022).

The president and chief executive officer of the American Association of Community Colleges, Walter G. Bumphus, spoke to this ongoing enrollment concern: “The situation is perplexing. I’ve never seen anything quite like the last few years in community colleges. Everybody’s concerned about enrollment. No doubt about it” (Anderson, N., 2021).

The decline, tracked over the past few years across all of higher education, found that the community college sector has suffered the greatest loss between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021. The National Student Clearinghouse reported that these enrollment declines were being disproportionately felt by low-income students and among Black and Native American males.

Proactive steps must be taken to preserve and increase diversity in the student body. Specifically, the trend of declining enrollment among both

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Black and Native American students can and needs to be reversed. It will take some new strategies to make it happen. The following changes should be of high benefit:

- work with secondary school teachers and counselors to identify minority students who should be considered for community and technical colleges' numerous vocational, technical, and transfer offerings
- enroll these students into dual-credit programs during the last one or two years of their secondary school education
- expand dual-credit programs for students to attend the college for some of these courses
- have college teachers meet with these students to discuss their programs
- bring the identified students to the college campuses and have short workshops (free of charge) to give students a "hands-on" experience on campus with the equipment and with students already part of the student body
- expand baccalaureate degrees in education to community colleges
  - Many colleges and universities are reducing or eliminating their teaching programs at a time when there is a need to develop a more diverse teaching staff throughout the country. Many minority and low-income adults today cannot afford the costs involved in attending senior universities and colleges. If they are not able to attend universities, the diverse faculty so many inner city and rural areas of the country need will not be forthcoming anytime soon.

Community colleges provide the gateway to all of this happening. Florida, Washington, and Oregon have started offering baccalaureate degrees in some limited education areas recently. California now offers baccalaureate degrees in areas that the universities have little interest in offering. They have, however, documented that the total cost of four years of a baccalaureate degree at their community college was less than \$11,000 total.

### **Increasing Underrepresented Populations**

It will be through baccalaureate degrees in education programs that many more future minority teachers will be enrolled. The costs of enrolling in community and technical colleges will be much more reasonable for

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those individuals with limited incomes, families, and who must continue to work. Those colleges that reach out to these potential students will also find that tuition waivers will assist greatly in this endeavor.

Once more of these minority teachers become available in the cities or rural areas they grew up in, they should be a major source of identifying and encouraging many more young people and adults to attend their local community or technical college. The present growth is limited due to a lack of diverse teaching faculty in so many areas of the country.

Dr. Constance Carroll, retired chancellor of the San Diego Community College District, started the California Community College Baccalaureate Association. Her next goal is to get bachelor's degrees in education into California community colleges. Watching her track record over the years makes one think that it will happen very soon. It should be close to happening in numerous other states that continue to see teacher shortages.

### **Enrollment Concerns from Numerous State Community and Technical Colleges**

According to a report published by Imed Bouchrika, “there are 4.25 million students seeking an associate degree across all institutions. Associate degree enrollments dropped by 10.9% in all community colleges. There is a 9.5% decrease in the enrollment rate in community colleges. This is equivalent to 476,000 fewer students” (Bouchrika, 2022).

South Carolina community and technical college enrollments were down 19.2% between 2014 and 2019. This was the second largest drop, led by West Virginia, as reported by the Southern Regional Educational Board. The report from 2011 through the fall of 2019 showed the South Carolina decline to be near 30% (Ullrich, 2021).

California experienced a loss of over 300,000 students between the fall enrollments of 2019 and 2021. The state infused some \$120 million into the 116-member community college system to assist in overcoming what they referred to as an enrollment “collapse” in 2020. Progress since has been very uneven. Only 17 of the colleges had any enrollment increases while 42 lost even more students (Zinshteyn, 2022).

Community colleges in Michigan had a 3.37% rebound between the fall semesters of 2020 and 2021. The previous year they had a 13.11% decrease (Michigan Department of Education, 2022).

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The University of the District of Columbia reported having 1,344 community college students in the fall of 2021. This number represented a 29% decrease in enrollments since 2019 (Anderson, 2021).

The community and technical college system in North Carolina faced an enrollment decline of 27% between the fall enrollment periods of 2010 and 2020 (Ezzone and Shapiro, 2022). The state community and technical colleges had continuing enrollment declines in most of their colleges over the past two or more years. They determined that, by moving the majority of their classes online, they were unable to reach many of the students who may have otherwise enrolled. A 2019 report shows broadband and affordable high-speed internet access was available to only 39% of North Carolina homes (Tanberk, 2022).

### **Impact of Inviting Secondary School Personnel to the College**

Illinois Valley Community College decided some years ago to invite their service area secondary school teachers, counselors, and administrators to campus. They explained their programs, provided a campus tour, and met with their program colleagues at the college. Attendants found it to be a valuable program to those attending. Respondents anecdotally reported that they were “surprised how many and varied programs the college offers” and that they had “never been on a community college campus prior to today.”

The college learned the value of these visits to the campus and carried them out for three years. The turnover of faculty, counselors, and administrators over an 8- to 10-year period is significant enough to offer these visitation programs to the campus every few years.

### **Effectively Improving Graduation Rates**

One major concern across the country is how to increase degree completion rates. Little has been written that addresses what can be done in this area. One five-year study, considered experimental at the time, was conducted by Illinois Valley Community College (Andrews, 2018).

A review of recent students leaving the institution before completion of both one-year certificate programs and associate degrees was conducted. It was determined that far too many students assumed that the college faculty and/or counselors would take care of getting them to completion of their program of study. The records office provided the baseline statistics on the numbers of certificates and degrees completed the year prior

to the beginning of this five-year study. They also provided the necessary baseline of students who had left college programs the prior three years without their program being completed.

The college leadership decided that it was an institutional concern and should involve most all segments of the institution: administrators, counselors, records office personnel, and faculty members in all one-year and two-year vocational and career-oriented programs.

Over each of the next five years, records were kept. Table 1 shows the following outcomes from the base year forward:

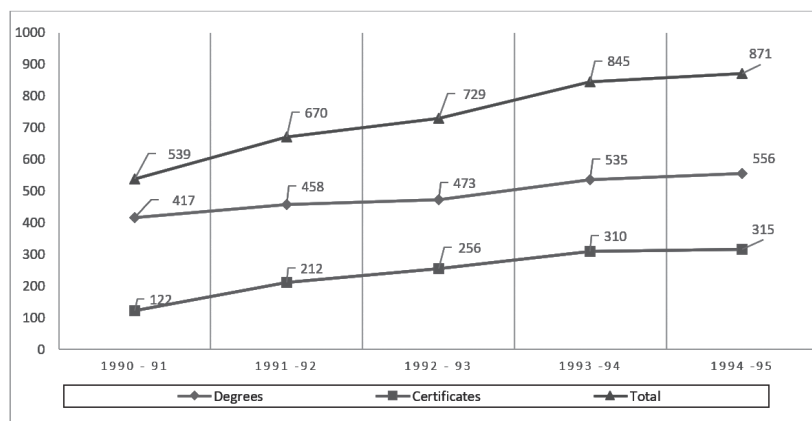
**Table 1. Degrees and Certificates Granted by Illinois Valley Community College 1990–1995**

	Associate Degrees	Certificates	Totals
1990–1991	417	122	539
1994–1995	556	315	871
Increase	33%	158%	61%

There was a 33% increase in the associate degrees awarded from the first year of the study to the fifth year. The number of certificates awarded increased by 158% over the same time. This was summarized to show a 61% increase overall (Andrews, 2018).

Figure 1 shows how the growth was recorded over each of the five years:

**Figure 1. Degrees and Certificates Granted by Illinois Valley Community College 1990–1995**



While this particular study is now almost 30 years old and should not be taken as a model for campus reform, it is nonetheless a reminder that if community college leaders wish to seriously increase their graduation

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rates, they need to give strong consideration to making it a total institutional commitment as Illinois Valley did.

## **College “Website Limitations” In Attracting Adult Students**

Community colleges require a new strategy to attract adults who have never attended a college. Secondary school students on the other hand have teachers and counselors to guide them in deciding to attend a college or to pursue a career option.

Large numbers of adults who did not go directly to a college are very likely unable to understand how to enroll in a college course, certificate, or associate degree program. Most every community and technical college now has their own website. The college catalogs, formerly printed on paper, as well as class schedules, enrollment dates, and so on, are now all uploaded to the website.

While secondary school students who are considering college have a wide choice of colleges to select from after high school graduation, many of these students will have already completed dual-credit college courses. They may have obtained one semester, one year, and/or an associate degree by graduation from their high school. These students also have strong support from their counselors within their schools.

Adults in community college districts need to be reached differently than secondary school students. These adults would likely be much more in favor of enrolling in community college classes if they had the class schedule brochures sent directly to their homes. Publishing them in area newspapers would also reach many potential adult students.

These paper-based promotional ways to reach students were widely used before the advent of college websites. They should, once again, prove to be one of the more proactive ways that more adult students can, and will be, attracted to college courses and programs.

Kellogg Community College, some years ago, utilized their evening and off-campus counseling staff to call every adult evening student who had enrolled in college courses that had been canceled due to insufficient enrollment numbers. This personal touch led to over 75–80% of them selecting another course option through this counseling outreach program.

A similar approach with those students who had recently not returned after the years of the pandemic should provide a decent degree of success. Counselors and/or teachers who had worked with these students in prior years would make a positive impression on these former students

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through person-to-person telephone contacts. They might find that offering a “first course back tuition-free” or a “tuition waiver” on the first semester would provide the extra encouragement needed.

## **Tuition Concerns and Proposals**

There are 20 states that have responded to assisting students with ways to enroll through tuition waiver options. The federal government’s proposal to allow “free tuition” to all community college students did not receive approval. Tuition waivers or reduced tuition for eligible students are some of the ways being used to draw enrollments back up (Panzica, 2022).

State funding for community colleges in South Carolina is determined by each college’s enrollment numbers. Any declines can lead to a cut in their state funding depending on legislative action.

Olney Central College (OCC) in Illinois greatly expanded their community college tuition waivers during the late 1990s. The outcome was a significant increase in college enrollment. At the beginning of this period, college enrollment was at 1,050. At the conclusion of the sixth year, enrollments had risen to just over 1,800.

The college’s faculty members were encouraged to go to secondary schools to meet with their department counterparts to inform them of the tuition waiver program. The emphasis was on low-income, secondary students who normally would not be able to attend a college program.

The most highly successful program was the music program that grew from around 27–28 students to 94 after only two years. Other programs also saw significant growth with the tuition waivers being offered and accepted. The Illinois Community College Board enrollment statistics showed OCC with the largest enrollment increase of the 50 community colleges, a 71% increase over this five-year period (Andrews, 2022).

Seeing that this program was doing much to get large increases from the area secondary schools, it was expanded to attract adult students in the day, evening, and off-campus programs. Again, many adults saw this as a way to improve their job opportunities (Andrews, 2022).

## **Summary**

Community college enrollment has taken a serious tumble, the first sustained decline in many decades. Working with a total institutional commitment can do much to keep presently enrolled students longer and help greatly to improve graduation rates in both certificate and associate degree programs.

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There are several rather creative ways available to assist each community and technical college to bring back and attract larger enrollment numbers. The expansion of tuition waivers has proven one way in some 20 states. Olney Central College's tuition waiver program showed what could be accomplished over a four- to five-year period with its enrollment growing more than 70%.

Reaching out to secondary school teachers, counselors, and administrators can do much to help educate these professionals as to what a community college is about. It is a way to bring them to the campus and meet faculty members in their education areas.

Possibly the largest growth will come by making college promotions, catalogs, and class schedules once again available to be delivered to homes throughout the college district. Adults who are not computer savvy will once again be able to consider enrolling in colleges who turn to well-developed paper documents to assist them.

It is now time to get to work. The severe enrollment declines will only end with some proactive and creative work on behalf of each community and technical college.

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