

 SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Uncovering Who We Are, One Student at a Time: Utilizing a SEM Plan to Support an Everchanging Community

By Gregory Benedict

New Jersey's oldest community college faced a decade-long enrollment decline, struggling to differentiate itself in a competitive regional and national higher education market. Enrollment only began to turn around after the institution adopted strategic enrollment management (SEM) planning as a central planning framework.

Throughout history, traditions and norms have evolved within communities, comforting those who have rooted themselves within those systems. These customs are passed down from generation to generation with a common belief about how things should look and operate. Traditions can be transpired from the largest form, such as the country, down to a family. The same principles apply to organizations, which often preserve and adapt traditions over time to meet their needs. At UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ, the oldest community college in the state, traditions had been rooted in the resources provided, and culture had been formed over its 90-year existence.

Higher Education Background

New Jersey's economy is fueled by residents who have obtained a college degree or industry-valued credentials. Higher education is a critical component for ex-

panding the state's economic opportunity and ensuring prosperity for the residents of the state (OSHE 2019). New Jersey residents face high population density and a significant cost of living while they navigate working and possibly supporting a family. New Jersey ranked eleventh in the nation for population but highest in density in 2023 (World Population Review 2025). The state is also ranked the highest tax state, according to the Tax Foundation's analysis of the Census Bureau's most recent survey (Winters 2023). These statistics reveal that New Jersey is not the most affordable state to reside in on a family-sustaining wage without a college degree. More than 750,000 residents of the state have some college credit but no degree; 75 percent of its college-going students are of the working class; and 24 percent are 25 years or older and considered post-traditional, college-going students. (OSHE 2019).

Historically, there have been different retention and completion gaps between adult students and traditional-aged students. Post-traditional students do not fit into the traditional student pathways of attending college directly after high school graduation and taking a full-time credit load. There are also varying subpopulations of post-traditional students, including those who are 25 years and older, have delayed enrollment after high school, attended college part-time, work full-time, did not receive a traditional high school diploma, or are financially responsible for dependents (Spitzig and Renner 2022). Several factors that impact this demographic at a community college fall under these three areas: opportunity, access, and affordability. Post-traditional learners balancing other obligations are more likely to take courses at a conveniently located community college at more affordable rates. However, external commitments or responsibilities could also influence a student's decision to drop out. Some variables include finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and transfer opportunities—all of which significantly impact post-traditional students (Spitzig and Renner 2022). Since 2011, enrollment in higher education has fallen by 15 percent, or nearly four million students. These students are 40 percent more likely to be unemployed (Spiva 2023). Access, opportunity, and affordability to educational programs for post-traditional, college-going students, as well as the evaluation of prior learning credentials that may be obtained from working in another industry or field, are some additional barriers that the traditional-aged high school graduating student may not necessarily endure, allowing for an easier transition to college.

Who Is UCNJ

UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ is a public, two-year community college classified as a coeducational institution with four campus locations throughout Union County, New Jersey in suburban and urban environments. The college first opened as Union County Junior College in 1933, serving 243 students in the evening. By 1983, the college had grown to around 6,000 students, merged with Union County Technical Insti-

tute, and continued forward as a public college with the official name of Union County College. In 2022, the college changed its name to UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ, or simply UCNJ for short. This name change was made to embrace the growth and service the college provides to the Union County residents and the state of New Jersey. UCNJ currently has an enrollment of about 8,000 students, including matriculated and non-matriculated students. It offers two types of certificates and three types of associate degrees, including more than 60 different programs with both in-person and virtual modalities. UCNJ is also recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). UCNJ is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

The UCNJ mission statement is *Transforming Our Community...One Student at a Time*, that encompasses empowering its students to achieve their goals by providing access to high-quality and affordable higher education. The college provides career programs, transfer programs, developmental education, and lifelong learning opportunities, focusing on education. UCNJ outlines eight goals connected to its overall mission. These goals include providing: a relevant and coherent general education for all students; transfer programs for students planning to continue their education at a four-year institution; and robust career programs for students entering the workforce and who meet the workforce needs of various industries. UCNJ also provides the community with developmental education for underprepared students, as well as courses and programs that encourage lifelong learning and are responsive to the needs of business and industry. Another goal is to develop, encourage, and support effective and creative approaches to teaching and learning through innovative pedagogy. The final two goals include providing all students with support services throughout their college career and offering the necessary resources for student success (UCNJ 2024).

Most recently, UCNJ has been recognized for its student outcomes by the Aspen Institute College Excellence program for three straight cycles, being named a top 150 community college in 2021, a top 25 semi-finalist in 2023, and now a top ten finalist for 2025.

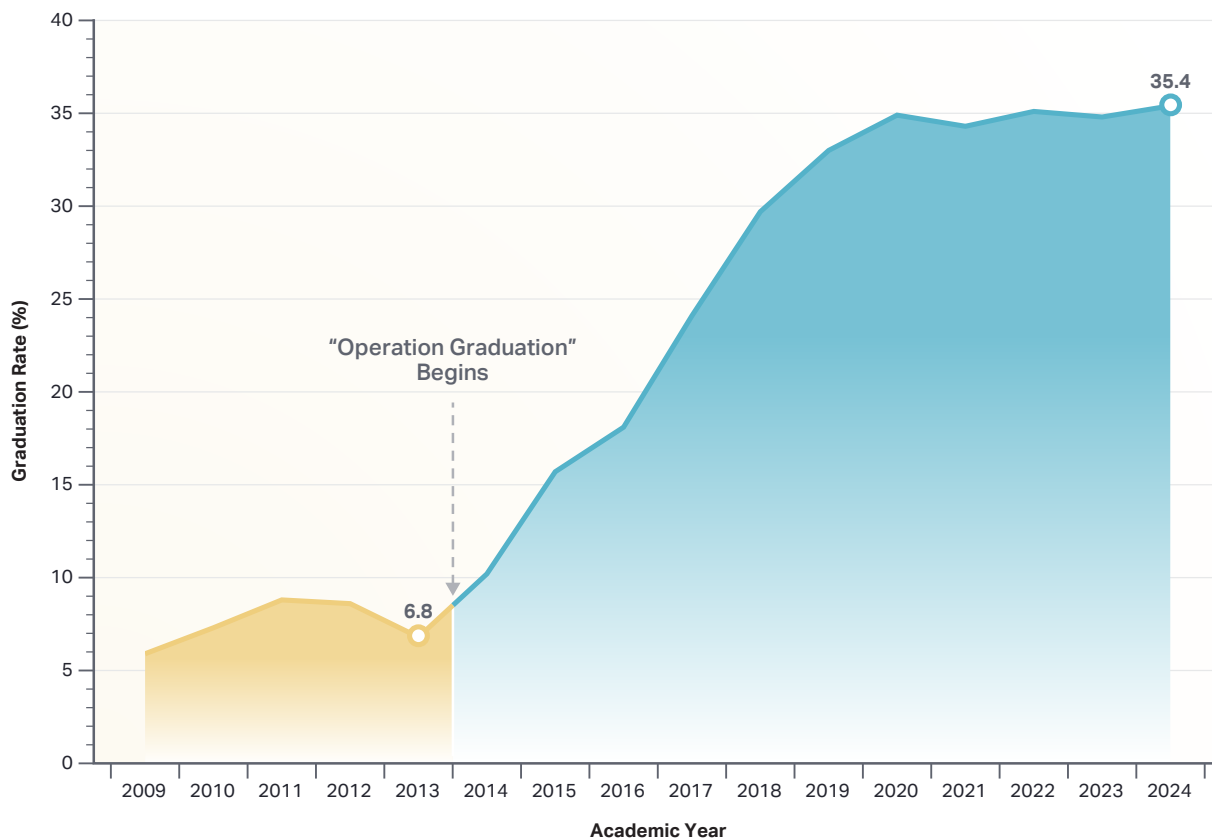


FIGURE 1 ➤ UCNJ Graduation Rates

The College Excellence Program initiates a thorough two-year process to grant the Aspen Prize. This begins with evaluating student outcomes at over 1,000 community colleges in the United States, which leads to invitations for 150 colleges to apply. From the applicants, a selection committee narrows the field to 20 to 25 semifinalists, and subsequently, 10 finalists. A distinguished Prize Jury then selects the winner (Aspen 2025). However, the path to becoming an Aspen finalist was not an aspiration or a recognition that the community at large may have associated with UCNJ fourteen years earlier. Being the first community college in the state, traditions and cultures had been rooted in the college, but they were not benefiting the community. Up until 2010, retention and graduation rates were among the worst in the state, and although enrollment was high, students were not successful.

A Turning Point

Union County College experienced a momentum switch when it hired its eighth and first female president, Dr. Margaret McMenamin, in 2010. Dr. McMenamin came into the college looking at a graduation rate of 5.9 percent in the prior year. This graduation rate was the worst in the state, and the new president viewed it as unacceptable. She had a mission to take care of her students, so she began working with faculty and advisors, who saw them the most. In the first three years, she applied pressure on the campus community to recommit to student success, and that meant getting in front of every student, if possible, and push them to the finish line. This effort resulted in an increase in the graduation rate, from 5.9 percent to 8.6 percent in two years, but then a drop, to 6.8 percent in 2013. This set the stage for a new cohort-based initiative—Operation

Graduation, a new intrusive advising model based on student data and needs.

In its first year, 2014, this new approach raised graduation rates to 10.2 percent in 2014 and 15.7 percent in 2015. The consistent review of data uncovered gaps within the graduation rates, and soon after, Project Achievement was developed. This effort focused on African American males, as this demographic group was not experiencing an increase in graduation rates alongside the college total. With a unique approach to this group utilizing mentorship, experiential learning inside and outside the classroom, and weekly cohort meetings, the gap began to close. Over the next decade, graduation rates rose to 34.8 percent, placing UCNJ at the top of the state in graduation rates. Project Achievement also raised its graduation rates by more than 30 percent, and the college is among the highest rates in the country for African American students. Another two cohorts were formed, Inspire the Future, which focuses on Hispanic students, and the female version of Project Achievement; both focus on advancing student success through intrusive advising and provide unique needs to large demographic populations at the college. Over her fourteen-year tenure, Dr. McMenamin has quintupled the graduation rates and created a new culture for student success outcomes.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the enrollment funnel, incoming student enrollment and retention rates began to decline in 2010. This prompted the president in 2021 to revitalize the Office of Admissions and rebrand the college in the community, both physically around the state and digitally through various marketing tactics.

Adding A Little Flair

Around this time, the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting higher education across the nation. At UCNJ, enrollment had plummeted from 13,008 students, a record in 2010, to 7,810 in 2022. Graduation rates were at an all-time high, but there was a need for students to fill the top of the enrollment funnel to keep that momentum up. A new problem, the “enrollment cliff,” was also a national concern for higher education. The

phrase, coined by Nathan D. Grawe (2021), describes a looming drop in college-going students out of high school. The cause is due to a couple of factors but is primarily attributed to the consistent decline of birth rates in America.

From 1920 to 2012, the birth rate dropped about 50 percent, and from 2012 to 2029, areas like the Northeast are expected to see a 15 percent decrease in students graduating from high school. “Nathan Grawe suggested that regional institutions have more to lose as the enrollment cliff begins than do elite institutions. While regional institutions are to see a decline in enrollment, elite institutions are predicted to see an increase. This finding is based on institutional reputation and student-demographic of those institutions” (Campion 2020). This lingering dilemma required UCNJ to pivot and strongly push to highlight outcomes.

In addition to the revamping of the Office of Admissions, the goal of the team was to begin to walk and talk like an elite institution that had the best value for its education. The new leaders in the Student Development Division aimed to rebrand admissions materials to align with the new name and establish events that mirrored those of elite four-year institutions. However, they wanted to maintain the community college’s level of care, fostering a sense of connection among faculty, staff, and the partnerships with local organizations and communities that would elevate the value of education. The “College of the County” campaign was created and was a theme that carried through new events such as the Open House, Owl Info on Demand, and New Student Orientation. These events brought the community together and allowed the college to demonstrate what it had accomplished since 2010 and through the pandemic. For the first time in a decade, in Fall 2021, UCNJ increased enrollment by 0.4 percent.

Although a subtle win, UCNJ needed to sustain the growth and continue to increase new student enrollment to balance out the retention gap that was occurring. In 2022, UCNJ started a larger digital marketing effort, being the first community college in New Jersey to be featured on “The College Tour,” a series on Amazon Prime that showcases colleges and universities

nationwide. The college also began developing stronger campaigns on social media to connect to high school graduates on platforms they were familiar with. These efforts worked, and the college experienced another enrollment increase in Fall 2022. However, with the enrollment cliff lingering, UCNJ needed a sustainable plan with real, tangible goals. With the support of the administration, the college connected with AACRAO Consulting (AC) to develop the college's first strategic enrollment management plan.

Introducing Strategic Enrollment Management

SEM has been defined as “a concept and process that enables the fulfillment of institutional mission and students’ educational goals” (Gordon and Wankel 2023). This idea of infusing the mission into a plan excited the UCNJ leadership team, and the AC roadmap led the way for UCNJ to uncover who they are, and how they were going to navigate the future.

UCNJ worked to establish goals that lived throughout the entire enrollment funnel, not just one area, team, or division. This “holistic learning journey,” the college learned, started from every access point but lived through touch points of the student life cycle during college and as alumni. That piece of the plan is what connected the steering committee and enabled the groups to work more closely, not only as individual leaders across campus but as units connected through the same goals and plan toward success. This discovery phase was by far the biggest game changer to UCNJ’s plan.

Before the kickoff week of meetings, the steering and data teams provided as much data as possible to AC to provide an idea of where the college was in terms of enrollment, the student body, and support services. This process also helped uncover the go-getters that the steering committee could rely on as additional steering committee members and subcommittee members. The AC team’s review helped target some key areas of focus—improving connections with students and creating goals, strategies, and tactics that aid all students, instead of just one type of student.

The steering committee then gathered input from faculty, staff, and students that may not have been considered before from the student services side. This included the modality of courses, and whether the classes and services were meeting students where they are in terms of scheduling. This process also allowed leadership to better understand the variety of student demographics served, how they are advised, and what processes they experience. Ultimately, the college created a steering committee and three sub-committees that aligned with each division and the leadership who could make the decisions on improvement strategies and tactics. From that point, the planning took off.

UCNJ came up with a total of five teams. The executive team consisted of the vice president of student development, who was the connection to the rest of the president’s cabinet, and the president herself. The steering committee consisted of three members from the academic affairs division, including the vice president of academic affairs, the dean of the Elizabeth Campus and Institute for Intensive English, and the director of our Business Center and a faculty member, as well as, the assistant vice president of finance in the finance division, and the assistant dean of enrollment management from the student development division. Following the steering committee development, the recruitment subcommittee, the retention subcommittee, and the data team were established. Each subcommittee had eight members, and the data team had four members.

The Future

As Gordon and Wankel (2023) wrote, “Good evidence-based decision-making and goal setting can only be built on relevant and reliable data” (27). UCNJ committed to a focus on data, and the steering committee wanted to make sure there was no stone left unturned. The college found that its student demographics included primarily students who the New Jersey Department of Education had wanted the college to focus on all along—post-traditional learners. However, the college was not fully built for that demographic from a student services lens. To explain, for years, the recruitment team was focused primarily on traditional high

school-aged students, and it tailored all the marketing, events, orientations, and onboarding to that demographic. Unknowingly to the Office of Admissions and Student Development Division, 65 percent of the full- and part-time student body was 21 years of age or older. These students fit the profiles of students who may be working, have a family, and have some college but no degree, and yet they would come to the new student orientations and listen to a presentation geared toward high school graduates. Meanwhile, they had more precise questions about the enrollment process that they had to navigate independently.

Once the SEM teams had the data, they began goal setting and strategies. The SEM team identified who the college believed it wanted to be in size so that it could best serve their students and meet the needs of the college's boards and administration. UCNJ created expectations for five years—a new way of thinking to the campus community—and began to develop a culture around SEM planning that ensured the SEM planning work would be ongoing.

Throughout the first year of the college's five-year plan, the college implemented a few new, but critical, reorganizations to align the staff within the Student Development Division with the new goals in place. The subdivision of enrollment management was created and led by the assistant dean of enrollment management, and the Office of Admissions and the Office of Student Accounts moved under that unit. Also, two new assistant deans were hired to oversee the growing subdivisions of Student Success Initiatives, the Advising, Career, and Transfer (ACT) unit, and the one-stop centers. The development of the post-traditional learner cohort was created, and under the new assistant dean of ACT, the office of Career Services gained a new director and three advisors who focused on that student demographic. Moving forward, the college plans to create an even more tailored approach to enrollment management, with goals that align with the students and community it serves. These three subdivisions will usher in a new era of SEM at UCNJ.

Conclusion

UCNJ started with six goals: three for recruitment and three for retention. The overall institutional goal is to increase enrollment by 12 percent by 2026. Since the development of the SEM plan, the culture at the college has changed, and it led to the development of three subdivisions in the Student Development Division, and a sub-division of Enrollment Management that leads the SEM plans. Between 2022 and 2024, UCNJ's new student enrollment increased, on average, by 7 percent year over year for full and part-time students collectively. In Fall 2024, UCNJ reported a 2.8 percent overall headcount increase and a 2.4 percent overall increase for credit and full-time equivalency (FTE) hours. The new student enrollment collectively has set a new all-time record for the college with a 14 percent increase from the 2012 record enrollment year. At the conclusion of the Spring 2025 enrollment cycle, we had a 6.6 percent increase in headcount and a 7.6 percent increase in credit and full-time equivalency. This brought the fiscal year enrollment figures above the 4 percent goal. Due to the tactics in place for the retention subcommittee, UCNJ had a 5.2 percent overall retention increase from fall to spring and a record 85 percent retention rate for the first-time, full-time student cohort.

The first year of SEM for UCNJ was a great success; however, it is the beginning of a new journey of strategy, assessment, and innovation that requires community buy-in. UCNJ is fortunate to have an administration that understands that need and doubles down by embedding it in their mission and values for the community it serves. As the college assesses its outcomes from a benchmark year heavily focused on the overall goals tied to the recruitment and retention subcommittees, it will use the upcoming year to assess the tactical approaches as they relate to the strategies in place. A large component is the new meta-major advising model and the data surrounding the KPIs affiliated with successful completion. The college will look to increase the graduation rate, and both recruitment and retention strategies play a vital role in students reaching the finish line.

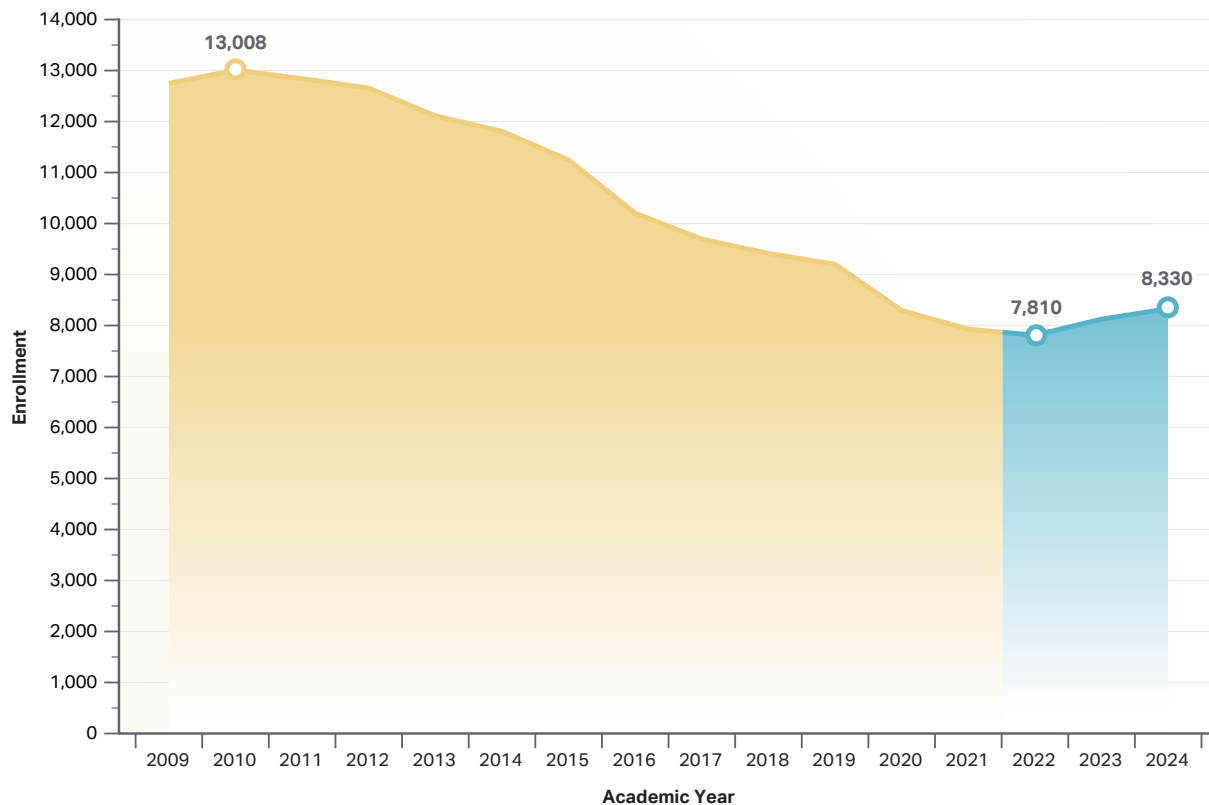


FIGURE 2 ► UCNJ Yearly Enrollment

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About the Author



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Greg earned his B.A. degree in History and M.P.A. in Public Administration from Kean University and is pursuing his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership with a concentration on Higher Education from Rowan University. At Kean, he began working as a student ambassador and became an admissions counselor upon graduation. He later was promoted to assistant director and recruited throughout

New Jersey, as well as along the east region of the United States. At UCNJ, prior to becoming Assistant Dean, he served as the director of admissions beginning in 2021, where he started the development of strategic enrollment management (SEM) at the college and created and chaired the SEM plan. He currently chairs the SEM committee.