

 SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Expanding Access and Improving Student Success: Modern Enrollment Management Practices in Community Colleges

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The enrollment outlook for public two-year and primarily associate-degree-granting baccalaureate (PAB) institutions, commonly referred to as community colleges, has fluctuated dramatically since 2020, with unique scenarios playing out across the country based on demographic shifts and local priorities. This article details these shifts and explores modern enrollment management opportunities for community colleges, emphasizing strategies that expand access and improve student success in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape. The contemporary practices analyzed include strategic enrollment management (SEM) planning, localized programming and stackable credentials, high school dual enrollment, financial aid programs, marketing and recruitment, student engagement and support services, transfer pathways, and alumni engagement. This article also highlights the critical role of community partnerships and workforce development, aligning enrollment management strategies with institutional mission and local labor market needs, and demonstrating the opportunities to fulfill the common goal of providing accessible and practical education and training.

Over the past decade, community colleges across the United States have navigated a rapidly changing land-

scape in higher education, marked by significant shifts in student demographics, economic volatility, and

technological advancements. Nationally, enrollment in public two-year institutions has fluctuated drastically since the COVID-19 pandemic, with spring term headcount decreases of 9.7 percent from 2020 to 2021 and 7.9 percent from 2021 to 2022; since then, enrollment has rebounded with gains of 1.3 percent from 2022 to 2023, 4.9 percent from 2023 to 2024, and 5.3 percent from 2024 to 2025. As expected, the public Primarily Associate-Degree Granting Baccalaureate (PAB) institutions were impacted similarly (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2025). The significant enrollment changes, influenced heavily by the COVID-19 pandemic, have created unprecedented challenges for institutions that serve as vital access points to higher education for millions of students, particularly those from historically underserved and non-traditional backgrounds. However, the enrollment patterns vary widely across different regions of the country. In the Midwest and Northeast, declining birth rates, outmigration, and economic challenges have compounded enrollment losses, making it difficult for community colleges to maintain their student bases (AACC 2023). Conversely, the South and West have experienced more resilience, with some community colleges in growing metropolitan areas even seeing slight increases in enrollment, driven by population growth and heightened demand for workforce development programs that align with local labor market needs (AACC 2024).

These regional disparities highlight the necessity for community colleges to adopt modern, flexible enrollment management practices that address immediate enrollment challenges and strategically position institutions to meet the long-term needs of their communities. This article details contemporary and emerging strategies in community college enrollment management, emphasizing the critical role of strategic enrollment management (SEM) planning, localized programming, stackable credentials, high school dual enrollment, financial aid programs, marketing and recruitment, student engagement and support services, transfer pathways, and alumni engagement. It also provides community college and enrollment management leaders with practical steps to enhance workforce and community

relationships to expand access and improve student success in an increasingly competitive environment.

Background

Two-year and PAB institutions represent roughly 25–30 percent of all higher education institutions in the United States and are integral to the nation's higher education system, offering accessible education to a wide range of student populations (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education 2024). These community colleges serve as the primary entry point for many students, particularly those from historically underserved groups such as first-generation students, low-income individuals, and adult learners. Their role is especially crucial in regions with limited access to four-year institutions. However, demographic shifts and evolving state priorities have significantly impacted these institutions' performance and enrollment trends.

Community colleges play a pivotal role in preparing students to transfer to and earn bachelor's degrees at four-year institutions or transition directly into the workforce. A significant proportion of community college students—about 80 percent—aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, yet only 33 percent successfully transfer to four-year institutions, and less than half of those complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Velasco, *et al.* 2024). Despite these challenges, community colleges serve as key entry points for low-income, Black, Hispanic, and older students, making them important in addressing equity gaps in higher education. However, the success rates for these students remain lower than the national average, indicating a need for more effective transfer pathways and stronger collaboration between two- and four-year institutions to improve student outcomes. Their ability to serve wide-ranging student populations makes them potential engines of social mobility, especially when dual enrollment and structured transfer programs are implemented effectively. However, transfer outcomes vary widely by state, with lower-income and minoritized students transferring and completing degrees at significantly lower rates than their peers (Velasco, *et al.* 2024). Efforts to reform these pathways through expanded dual enrollment op-

portunities, promotion of associate degree completion before transfer, and transfer agreements between two-year colleges and four-year institutions can increase bachelor's degree attainment and improve community college students' overall economic and social mobility.

Aside from transfer preparation, community colleges are also responsible for preparing students for direct entry into the workforce. Community colleges play a crucial role in workforce development by offering accessible education pathways that equip students with the skills needed for the labor market. These institutions invest in targeted programs in collaboration with local industries, addressing both regional economic needs and national labor shortages. However, challenges remain, such as low completion rates and gaps in the alignment of credentials with labor market demands, which could hinder students' success in achieving long-term career goals (Holzer, *et al.* 2023). Community colleges are well-positioned to support historically underserved groups, particularly low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students, by providing essential training and job placement services. As the demand for skilled labor continues to rise and evolve with emerging technologies, community colleges must continue to innovate and expand their workforce development programs to ensure students are prepared for the job market (Holzer, *et al.* 2023).

Community colleges also prepare students through high school dual enrollment programming. These programs offer high school students a chance to earn college credits while still in secondary education. Through early exposure to college-level coursework, community colleges help bridge the gap between high school and higher education. This initiative is particularly beneficial for first-generation students and those from low-income families, enabling them to experience the rigors of college work in a supportive environment. This opportunity enhances college readiness, decreases the time-to-degree completion, and significantly reduces the financial burden of higher education. Furthermore, dual enrollment programs facilitate a seamless transition to four-year institutions by ensuring that students accumulate credits that can be transferred toward a

bachelor's degree. Through partnerships with local high schools and four-year universities, these programs promote academic success and create pathways that widen access to postsecondary education for traditionally underserved populations, supporting their long-term educational and career aspirations (Griffin, *et al.* 2024).

In recent years, community colleges have faced challenges due to a declining traditional college-age population, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast, where states like Illinois and Michigan have seen significant drops in high school graduates. This demographic decline has directly influenced community college enrollments, necessitating adaptive strategies (Schuette 2023; Strohl, *et al.* 2024). At the same time, the increasing diversity of the U.S. population has led to a higher proportion of Hispanic and Black students enrolling in community colleges, reflecting the changing demographic landscape of these institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2025).

State policy shifts have also played a critical role in shaping the landscape for community colleges. Many states have adopted performance-based funding models that link state funding to specific metrics such as graduation rates, job placement, and student retention (Shin, *et al.* 2023). This shift has increased the pressure on community colleges to not only enroll students but also ensure their success through graduation and into the workforce. Additionally, state-led initiatives aimed at aligning educational programs with local workforce needs have spurred the development of specialized programs in high-demand fields such as healthcare, information technology, and advanced manufacturing (AACC 2023).

Opportunities for community colleges to support education across the United States are further underscored by insights from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's (WICHE) recent report (2024). WICHE's analysis emphasizes the need for these institutions to navigate the complexities of changing student demographics and state priorities by leveraging practical degree pathways, innovative learning models, and emerging technologies. These approaches can help

community colleges better serve their local student populations and meet regional workforce needs.

Regional differences in enrollment trends at community colleges are significant and reflect broader demographic and economic patterns across the United States. These differences emphasize the need for tailored enrollment management strategies that address each region's distinct challenges and opportunities. In the South and West, community colleges have generally seen more stable or even increasing enrollments compared to other regions. This stability is largely due to population growth in these areas, driven by higher birth rates and migration patterns that have bolstered the number of traditional college-age students. For example, states like Texas, Florida, and California have experienced steady population growth, which has contributed to sustained or increasing enrollments in their community college systems. Additionally, these regions have experienced robust economic growth, particularly in technology, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors, creating a strong demand for vocational and technical education that community colleges are well-positioned to meet (Gardner-Cook 2023). Conversely, the Midwest and Northeast have faced more challenging circumstances, with declining populations contributing to a decline in enrollment numbers at community colleges. States such as Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania have been particularly affected by the outmigration of young people and a decrease in the number of high school graduates. This demographic decline has compounded economic challenges in these regions, where deindustrialization and a slow recovery from the Great Recession of the late 2000s have left many communities struggling to recover. As a result, community colleges in these areas have had to contend with fewer potential students and a greater need for retraining and upskilling programs to support displaced workers (Schuette 2023; Strohl, *et al.* 2024).

Community colleges must adapt to demographic shifts, regional differences, and workforce demands as they prepare students for both transfer to four-year institutions and direct entry into the workforce. Strategic enrollment management efforts are necessary to improve student outcomes through dual enrollment,

transfer agreements, workforce programs, innovative financial aid approaches, student-centered engagement, and the integration of advanced technologies. These are essential for enhancing social mobility and addressing labor market needs, but additional reforms are required to close equity gaps and align educational programs with local economic demands. The next section outlines modern enrollment management practices to tackle these challenges.

Enrollment Management Practices

Community colleges have long been vital to the U.S. higher education system, providing accessible pathways for students from all backgrounds to achieve their educational and career goals. In recent years, as the academic landscape has evolved, so have enrollment management practices. Community colleges are embracing innovative strategies to recruit, retain, and support students from a mix of localized populations. These practices include data-informed decision-making, flexible credential pathways, and stronger community partnerships that align with local workforce needs.

The rise of strategic enrollment management (SEM) emphasizes a holistic approach to attracting and retaining students. SEM plans incorporate academic programming, student services, and institutional goals with an eye toward long-term success for both students and the college. Through data-driven strategies, community colleges are better equipped to address changing enrollment patterns, meet the needs of diverse student populations, and ensure that students complete their education with minimal financial burden. This section describes contemporary enrollment management strategies that are reshaping community colleges. Examples of institutions excelling in these areas are also highlighted to provide a practical look at how these strategies work in the real world.

SEM Planning and Data-Informed Decision-Making

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is at the forefront of effective community college operations, providing a framework for aligning high-level institutional

goals with specific student recruitment, retention, and completion initiatives. At the heart of modern SEM is data-informed decision-making, which allows colleges to use analytics to track enrollment patterns, identify at-risk students, and tailor academic offerings to meet community needs (Hanover Research 2024). Through an understanding of enrollment trends and the factors driving student success or failure, colleges can make informed decisions that optimize outcomes for both students and the institution.

Incorporating data analytics and predictive modeling is essential in SEM planning, as they ease the tracking of key performance indicators and provide actionable insights for institutions to track performance and tailor student engagement. Colleges can track performance in real-time and offer targeted support to students before they fall behind or drop out by monitoring factors such as attendance, real-time grades and course activity, and financial aid status. This is just one example of how a proactive, data-informed approach can integrate with SEM strategies and tactics. Incorporating data analytics and predictive modeling for decision-making should be utilized through all stages of the student journey, from prospect to graduate.

Scottsdale Community College (SCC) of Arizona emphasizes SEM planning as a foundational component of its institutional strategy, focusing on student success and operational efficiency. Their strategic plan highlights initiatives aimed at improving student access, persistence, and completion by leveraging data-driven decision-making and aligning academic programs with community needs (Scottsdale Community College n.d.). These efforts demonstrate a commitment to using SEM planning as a tool to support both student success and institutional sustainability. Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC) and SUNY Onondaga Community College (OCC) of New York also prioritize SEM planning as a means to support their missions. KCKCC's strategic enrollment plan focuses on strengthening partnerships, enhancing academic programs, and improving student retention by engaging in comprehensive data analysis to guide their enrollment practices (Kansas City Kansas Community College n.d.). OCC, through its SEM plan,

emphasizes a holistic approach that integrates academic offerings, student services, and financial aid to meet the evolving needs of its student population (SUNY Onondaga Community College n.d.). Both colleges illustrate how SEM planning enables institutions to strategically shape their student bodies and respond to regional educational demands.

Local Financial Aid Programs

Financial aid is crucial in ensuring access to higher education, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. While federal and state financial aid programs provide essential support, many community colleges are implementing local financial aid initiatives that target specific populations and remove financial barriers for students. These local programs are often designed in partnership with businesses, government agencies, or philanthropic organizations and help attract and retain students who might otherwise struggle to afford college.

Local financial aid programs are particularly effective for addressing the needs of first-generation college students, part-time students, and those balancing work and family responsibilities. These initiatives may offer tuition scholarships, grants for specific programs, or last-dollar scholarships that cover any remaining tuition costs after federal and state aid has been applied. These programs help ensure that more students can enroll and persist to completion by reducing the financial burden.

Initiatives such as the AlamoPROMISE from Alamo Colleges (Texas) and Osceola Prosper (Florida) are leading the way. The AlamoPROMISE program is designed to provide last-dollar funding to cover the cost of tuition and fees for eligible students in Bexar County, Texas, making college more accessible for recent high school graduates. This initiative aligns with the broader goal of eliminating financial barriers and increasing college enrollment among underserved populations, allowing students to focus on their studies without the burden of tuition costs (Alamo Colleges District n.d.). The program also includes wraparound support services to ensure students stay on track toward degree completion, underscoring the college's commitment to student success. Similarly, Osceola Prosper, a program launched by Os-

Osceola County in partnership with Valencia College, provides last-dollar scholarships to high school graduates, enabling them to pursue a degree or career certificate without worrying about tuition (Osceola Prosper 2025). The program is part of a broader economic development strategy aimed at enhancing workforce readiness and supporting local industries. Osceola Prosper helps bridge the gap between students' financial needs and the cost of college by offering financial aid that covers tuition and fees, enabling greater educational attainment and economic mobility in the community. Both programs serve as models for how local financial aid initiatives can remove financial obstacles and support students in reaching their educational goals.

High School Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college-level courses and earn credits that count toward both their high school diploma and a college degree. This model has gained popularity as a recruitment tool for community colleges and as a strategy to increase college readiness among high school students. Offering dual enrollment can help students reduce the time and cost associated with earning a degree while fostering a stronger connection between secondary education and postsecondary institutions.

Community colleges across the country have found success in utilizing dual enrollment to address educational inequities, particularly for underserved populations. These programs give students early exposure to college-level coursework and the confidence to pursue higher education. Moreover, these programs provide a direct pipeline for high school graduates to transition seamlessly into full-time community college students.

The City University of New York (CUNY) exemplifies this commitment through its "College Now" program, which offers high school students the opportunity to take college-credit-bearing courses while still in high school. The program, which has been in place for over two decades, is designed to increase college readiness by providing students with academic enrichment and college-level experience before graduation. Through collaboration with high schools, CUNY ensures that

students not only gain college credits but also receive support in areas such as advising and career exploration, making higher education more accessible and affordable (CUNY n.d.). North Carolina's Career and College Promise (CCP) program also provides students with pathways to postsecondary credentials and degrees while they are still in high school. CCP offers multiple pathways, including transfer pathways that enable students to earn credits that count toward a four-year degree and career and technical education (CTE) pathways that align with workforce needs. By partnering with local community colleges, the program helps reduce the financial burden of postsecondary education and shortens the time to degree completion. The program also provides students with access to structured support systems, helping them successfully navigate their academic journey (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction n.d.).

Noncredit and Continuing Education Programs

Non-credit and continuing education programs have become an integral part of community college enrollment management strategies. These programs offer short-term training and professional development opportunities that meet the immediate needs of local industries and adult learners. Noncredit programs often focus on skill-building for career advancement or personal enrichment, while continuing education caters to professionals seeking certifications or those looking to change careers. This approach allows community colleges to serve a broader demographic, including working adults, career changers, and lifelong learners, many of whom may not initially seek a degree.

Noncredit programs offer a flexible entry point for students who may later transition into credit-bearing courses or degree programs. Additionally, these programs are often designed in partnership with local businesses and industries, ensuring that the courses are aligned with workforce needs. Community colleges offering noncredit programs are increasingly recognized as vital to regional economic development, providing a direct link between education and employment.

Montgomery College of Maryland is a leading example of a community college that prioritizes noncredit continuing education programs to meet the needs of adult learners and the workforce. Their Workforce Development and Continuing Education (WDCE) division offers a range of noncredit courses designed to enhance employability, provide industry-recognized credentials, and support lifelong learning. From healthcare and cybersecurity to business and technology, Montgomery College addresses the growing demand for specialized skills through flexible, short-term training programs that cater to both individuals and employers (Montgomery College n.d.). This comprehensive approach underscores the college's commitment to economic development and community empowerment. On a larger scale, the Florida Department of Education highlights the importance of noncredit career and technical education (CTE) programs at community colleges across the state. These programs offer adults opportunities to develop new skills or enhance existing ones without enrolling in credit-bearing degree programs. Many Florida community colleges offer workforce-oriented courses in areas such as automotive technology, healthcare, and information technology, responding to the needs of local industries and the state's economy (Florida Department of Education n.d.). Through these noncredit offerings, Florida's community colleges are playing a crucial role in upskilling residents and supporting the state's workforce readiness initiatives.

Community and Workforce Partnerships

Strong partnerships between community colleges and local businesses or workforce organizations are vital to ensuring that academic programs align with local economic needs. These partnerships enable colleges to offer relevant training and education that directly prepares students for high-demand jobs. Community and workforce partnerships not only enhance the employability of graduates but also serve as a critical enrollment strategy, attracting students who seek direct paths to employment.

Community colleges can offer specialized programs, apprenticeships, and internships that provide students with hands-on experience in their chosen fields

through collaboration with industry leaders. These partnerships also offer employers opportunities to engage directly with the college, helping shape curricula and providing resources such as equipment, funding, and mentorship. Workforce partnerships are particularly important in fields like healthcare, information technology, and advanced manufacturing, where there is a high demand for skilled workers.

Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) and Durham Technical Community College (Durham Tech) of North Carolina have been recognized for their collaborative efforts in workforce development through partnerships with local businesses and industries, ensuring that students receive the necessary skills to meet regional employment demands. These partnerships have resulted in effective apprenticeship programs, career pathways, and workforce training initiatives, positioning both colleges as leaders in preparing students for high-demand careers (*The Wake Weekly* 2024). Likewise, Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) of Utah prioritizes workforce development by fostering strong industry partnerships through its Institute of Management and Innovation (IMIN). The college collaborates with local companies and national organizations to create tailored workforce training programs that align with industry needs. SLCC's investment in these partnerships has not only strengthened the regional economy but also enhanced the employability of its students, bridging the gap between education and the workforce (Salt Lake Community College n.d.; National Council for Workforce Education n.d.). These initiatives underscore the critical role community colleges play in equipping students with skills that directly contribute to local economic growth.

Stackable Credential Pathways

Stackable credential pathways have become increasingly popular in community colleges, providing students with flexible options for advancing their education and careers. These pathways allow students to earn short-term credentials that can be "stacked" toward a more advanced degree over time. For students balancing work, family, and other responsibilities, stackable credentials provide

a practical way to achieve educational and career goals without committing to a full degree program upfront.

Stackable credentials are particularly beneficial for adult learners and working professionals who need to gain new skills quickly while maintaining employment. These programs are often developed in partnership with local industries, ensuring students' credentials align with workforce demands. Stackable credentials offer a pathway to career advancement while providing flexibility for students to return to college at their own pace to pursue additional certifications or degrees.

Lone Star College (Texas) has developed a range of stackable credential options within its online degree programs. These credentials allow students to earn short-term certifications that directly contribute to completing an associate degree or bachelor's degree, making education more accessible and career-relevant (Lone Star College n.d.). This approach enables students to accumulate academic and professional milestones incrementally, creating pathways for those seeking to enter or advance in the workforce without interrupting their educational journey. Miami Dade College (MDC) of Florida also prioritizes stackable credentials through its comprehensive offerings, which include industry-recognized certifications, technical certificates, and degree programs that build upon one another. MDC's initiative aligns with the goal of equipping students with skills that meet immediate workforce demands while providing opportunities for continued education and career growth (Miami Dade College n.d.). These flexible pathways enable students to transition seamlessly between various levels of credentialing, ultimately fostering long-term career development in multiple fields.

Marketing and Recruitment

Effective marketing and recruitment strategies are essential for community colleges seeking to attract and enroll students in a highly competitive higher education environment. Colleges increasingly use digital marketing tools, data analytics, and personalized outreach to engage with prospective students. These efforts help increase enrollment and allow colleges to target specific populations, such as adult learners and online students.

Marketing strategies for community colleges often include social media campaigns, email marketing, and targeted advertising based on data insights. Personalized communications and follow-up strategies can make prospective students feel more connected to the institution, increasing the likelihood of application and enrollment. Community colleges are also using technology to streamline the application process, making it easier for students to apply and receive timely responses.

Maricopa Community Colleges (Arizona) recently won a national award for their innovative marketing efforts to increase student enrollment and raise awareness of their programs (Maricopa Community Colleges 2024). The district's marketing department employed data-driven techniques to target prospective students and develop personalized outreach strategies, resulting in a significant increase in student interest and enrollment. This award recognizes the institution's dedication to using modern marketing tools and approaches to connect with diverse student populations. Hillsborough Community College (HCC) of Florida has also garnered national attention for its marketing campaigns, receiving honors from the Marketing Council in 2023 (Hillsborough Community College 2023). The college's marketing initiatives focus on reaching underserved student groups and promoting workforce development programs that align with regional industry needs. HCC's approach emphasizes community outreach and strategic partnerships, positioning the college as a valuable resource for prospective students seeking flexible educational pathways. Through their integration of traditional and digital marketing strategies, both Maricopa and HCC have demonstrated a commitment to enhancing recruitment efforts and improving student access to higher education.

Student Persistence and Completion

Ensuring student persistence and completion is a critical component of enrollment management at community colleges. Persistence refers to a student's ability to continue from one term to the next, while completion focuses on earning a degree or certificate. Colleges are increasingly investing in comprehensive support ser-

vices to help students overcome obstacles that might otherwise cause them to leave school prematurely.

Support services, including academic advising, tutoring, career counseling, and financial aid assistance, are essential for fostering student success. Early alert systems, which allow faculty and staff to monitor student progress and intervene when necessary, have also become a dependable tool in improving persistence rates. By identifying students who are struggling academically or facing personal challenges, colleges can provide timely interventions that help keep students on track to complete their education.

Mott Community College of Michigan recently secured a grant to support immigrant students' success. The funding is dedicated to developing strategies that address unique barriers these students face, such as language proficiency and navigating unfamiliar educational systems. These tailored support services aim to increase persistence and completion rates among this growing student population (Goetz 2023). Washington State's Guided Pathways Initiative and the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) have also made significant strides in student success. Washington State's Student Success Center developed a technical assistance model to help colleges implement Guided Pathways, streamlining students' academic journeys and reducing time to degree completion (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges 2024). CCP's 2021–2025 Academic and Student Success Master Plan emphasizes integrated advising, first-year experience programs, and academic support, which are essential to improving retention and completion outcomes for all student groups (Community College of Philadelphia 2021).

One-Stop Services

Holistic student support has emerged as a powerful enrollment management strategy, with many community colleges adopting “one-stop shop” models for student services. These models consolidate academic advising, financial aid counseling, career services, and personal support into a single location—often both physical and virtual—to streamline the student experience and make it easier for students to navigate college life. These cen-

tralized services help reduce the complexity students often face when managing academic, financial, and personal challenges, leading to better retention and completion rates.

The one-stop shop model is especially beneficial for first-generation students and those unfamiliar with the higher education system. It removes barriers by providing a single point of contact for all student services, thereby reducing the confusion and frustration that can lead to student attrition. Colleges implementing this model often report higher student satisfaction and increased persistence rates.

North Carolina's community colleges have implemented one-stop centers that consolidate services such as advising, financial aid, and career counseling into a single location, making it easier for students to navigate complex administrative processes. These centers are designed to meet the unique needs of the student population, particularly those facing financial barriers or first-generation students who may struggle with navigating multiple offices. As highlighted by EdNC (2022), one-stop centers have proven invaluable in helping students receive the services they need in a timely manner, thereby reducing the frustration and confusion often associated with higher education administration. Another example comes from Central Piedmont Community College, which offers its Single Stop program as part of its broader one-stop service model. This program offers students access to critical services, such as public benefits, tax preparation assistance, and legal advice (Central Piedmont Community College n.d.). According to Mowreader (2023), such models are also gaining traction nationwide, with many colleges consolidating touchpoints to improve retention. These one-stop models save time and foster a more supportive environment, allowing students to focus on their academic success rather than logistical challenges.

Transfer Pathways

Community colleges serve as a gateway to four-year institutions for many students, making clear and efficient transfer pathways essential. Transfer agreements between community colleges and universities allow

students to transfer credits seamlessly, ensuring that their academic progress is recognized and reducing the time and cost required to earn a bachelor's degree. Community colleges are increasingly developing formal articulation agreements with four-year institutions to guarantee that credits earned in an associate degree program will transfer and count toward a bachelor's degree.

Transfer pathways also include dedicated advising services to help students navigate the transfer process. These services guide course selection and degree planning to ensure that students meet the requirements for both their associate degree and their intended transfer institution. Strong transfer pathways benefit students and enhance community colleges' reputation as a valuable stepping stone to further education.

Pierce College offers a comprehensive transfer guide, highlighting specific articulation agreements that ensure seamless transfer into universities in Washington State. This commitment to clear transfer pathways supports students in achieving their bachelor's degrees while minimizing the loss of credits, ensuring both time and cost efficiency in their education journey (Pierce College n.d.). The creation of structured pathways through articulation agreements serves as a model for other institutions looking to enhance their transfer processes and improve student outcomes. The Direct-Connect to UCF program in Florida is also an exemplary transfer initiative that guarantees admission to the University of Central Florida for students graduating from partner community colleges. This program has been instrumental in creating access to higher education for a diverse range of students, particularly from underserved communities, by providing a clear and affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree (University of Central Florida n.d.). Additionally, George Mason University offers a Guaranteed Admissions Agreement (GAA) with the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), ensuring that qualified students from VCCS can transfer seamlessly to GMU, provided they meet the outlined academic requirements (George Mason University n.d.). These transfer agreements demonstrate the increasing importance of collaboration between community col-

leges and universities in supporting student success in higher education.

Alumni Engagement

Although traditionally focused on recruitment and retention, community colleges are now recognizing the importance of alumni engagement as a key component of enrollment management. Engaged alumni can mentor current students, provide networking opportunities, and contribute financially to the institution. Strong alumni networks help build a sense of community and pride, encouraging graduates to stay connected with their alma mater and give back to support future students.

Alumni engagement can also serve as a valuable resource for career services, offering students access to job opportunities and professional connections. Community colleges are increasingly investing in building alumni networks, recognizing the long-term value that alumni can bring to the institution. Through events, newsletters, and volunteer opportunities, colleges keep graduates involved and leverage their success to attract and retain new students.

Ivy Tech Community College exemplifies this approach by maintaining a robust alumni network designed to keep graduates connected to the college through various programs and events. The college encourages alumni to stay involved through mentorship, professional development opportunities, and philanthropy, fostering a lasting relationship between former students and the institution (Ivy Tech Community College n.d.). This enhances the alumni experience and strengthens the college's community impact. Harper College also places a strong emphasis on alumni engagement through targeted events and initiatives. Their alumni association offers a range of programs designed to keep graduates connected, such as the annual Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) event, which celebrates alumni achievements while fostering professional networking opportunities (Harper College n.d.a). Additionally, Harper College's alumni-focused events help to build a community where former students can continue to engage with the institution, en-

sureing that the college remains a valuable resource long after graduation (Harper College n.d.b).

Integrated Technologies for Student Communication and Support

In today's digital age, integrated technologies are crucial for effective student communication and support. Many community colleges are adopting tools such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, AI-powered chatbots and assistants, and mobile apps to enhance communication with students and provide real-time support. These technologies streamline administrative processes, making it easier for students to access services such as academic advising, registration, and financial aid assistance while also offering academic support through digital platforms.

As community colleges seek to improve retention and completion rates, advanced retention analytics and AI-powered student support systems are becoming increasingly popular. These tools utilize machine learning algorithms to predict student behaviors and outcomes, enabling colleges to identify at-risk students earlier and offer targeted interventions. These AI systems analyze data from multiple sources—such as attendance records, grades, real-time course performance, and financial aid statuses—to provide personalized recommendations and alerts to students, improving their chances of staying on track.

AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants also enhance student communication by offering 24x7 support, answering common questions, and providing guidance on registration, financial aid, and academic planning. These systems not only improve operational efficiency but also help students feel more connected and supported throughout their educational journey. AI can also play a role in personalized academic advising, guiding students toward courses and programs that align with their goals and academic history.

Integrated technologies help create a more connected and responsive college environment, allowing students to receive timely information and support without having to navigate multiple offices or systems.

For example, mobile apps can send push notifications reminding students of deadlines, while chatbots and digital assistants provide 24x7 support with common questions. These tools are particularly valuable for institutions serving large numbers of online or part-time students who may struggle to access on-campus resources.

The Alabama Community College System (ACCS) has made significant strides by implementing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system designed to streamline student communication and improve engagement. The ACCS was recognized for its CRM Administrator's contributions to higher education, which played a crucial role in centralizing communication efforts across the system's 24 colleges. This technology enables colleges to tailor their communications to meet the specific needs of students, ensuring they receive timely updates on critical information, such as enrollment deadlines, academic support, and advising services (Alabama Community College System 2023). Likewise, Monroe County Community College (MCCC) has embraced integrated technologies to boost student engagement. MCCC's Student Engagement Report highlights their use of digital platforms to track student participation and interaction, enabling faculty and staff to provide targeted support to students who may be struggling academically or socially. Additionally, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) launched a "digital co-pilot" to guide students through the college website, offering real-time assistance and personalized support. This AI-driven technology enhances the user experience by helping students navigate complex processes such as course registration, financial aid, and academic advising, reducing barriers and improving overall student success (Monroe County Community College 2023; Virginia Community College System 2024).

Conclusion

Community colleges continue to play a pivotal role in the U.S. higher education landscape, offering flexible and affordable pathways for students from a wide range of localized backgrounds. As the demands of higher education evolve, so too must the enrollment management

practices of these institutions. Modern approaches such as strategic enrollment management (SEM), stackable credential pathways, dual enrollment, and local financial aid programs enable community colleges to better address enrollment fluctuations, meet workforce needs, and support student success. Institutions that embrace data-informed decision-making and integrate technology into their operations are more likely to achieve long-term sustainability and ensure that students receive the necessary support to complete their educational journeys.

The regional differences in enrollment trends and the increasing diversity of the student population highlight the importance of tailored strategies for each community college. Institutions in the South and West may focus on capitalizing on population growth and workforce development, while those in the Midwest and Northeast must address the challenges of declining traditional college-age populations. Regardless of

geographic location, community colleges must remain responsive to the evolving needs of students, including first-generation and non-traditional learners. Strong partnerships with local industries and four-year institutions enable community colleges to create seamless transfer pathways and workforce programs that enhance social mobility and support regional economic development.

Ultimately, the success of community colleges in navigating these challenges will depend on their ability to innovate and adapt. With a commitment to student-centered engagement, robust support services, and a focus on equity, these institutions have the potential to close educational gaps and improve long-term outcomes for students nationwide. Continued investment in modern enrollment management practices will enable community colleges to uphold their mission of providing accessible, high-quality education and contributing to the economic vitality of the communities they serve.

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