

An Introduction to Community Colleges and Their Students

Community colleges serve about 8.6 million students per year, or about 40% of all undergraduates, depending on the definition of community college used.^{1,2,3} The nation's more than 900 community colleges are found in rural, suburban, and urban areas and are more affordable than four-year colleges, providing access to higher education for nearly all Americans.

Community colleges play an essential role in higher education.⁴ They provide instruction in a wide variety of fields that lead to employment in sectors such as health care, public safety, information technology, business, and manufacturing. They also prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities, and allow high school students to earn college credits through dual enrollment. They teach adults who are preparing for GEDs or learning English. And community colleges partner with local employers to train or upskill workers needed for regionally important industries and occupations.

How Many Community Colleges Are There?

It depends on the definition

Public two-year colleges

Federal data sources define public two-year colleges as colleges that offer associate degrees but not bachelor's degrees. About 830 of these colleges enroll about 6.5 million students, 30% of undergraduates.^{5,6}

Community colleges

CCRC uses a more expansive definition (similar to the one used by the American Association of Community Colleges) that includes public two-year colleges plus another 130 or so colleges that primarily offer associate degrees but also offer some applied bachelor's degrees. These 912 colleges enroll about 8.6 million students a year, 40% of undergraduates.⁷

What the Research Tells Us

Community colleges are an entry point to higher education for many first-generation, low-income, Black, and Hispanic students, and they provide another chance for older students and workers who need to retrain.

- In fall 2023, enrollment at community colleges was 6% Asian, 12% Black, 29% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Native American, and 41% White.⁸
- Community colleges serve a large number of students from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. In fall 2023, 42% of students enrolled in public two-year colleges were Black or Hispanic, compared to 30% of students enrolled in public four-year colleges and universities.⁹
- About 29% of public two-year college students are 25 or older, and 23% have dependent children.^{10,11} About two thirds attend part-time.¹²
- Fifty-seven percent of students attending community colleges have household incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, compared to 46% of students attending public four-year institutions and 42% of students attending private four-year institutions.¹³
- More than 2.8 million high school students enroll in dual enrollment courses each year, with more than 70% participating through community colleges.¹⁴

Community colleges are relatively affordable, educate students in a wide range of fields, and accommodate large numbers of working students.

- In 2024-25, the average published tuition and fees for a full-time student at a public two-year college was \$4,050, compared with \$11,610 at a public four-year college.¹⁶
- About 80% of part-time and 44% of full-time students at public two-year colleges work while enrolled.¹⁶
- Community colleges offer three main types of credentials: associate degrees that prepare students for transfer to a bachelor's degree program; applied associate degrees that prepare students for direct entry in a skilled occupation; and certificates (requiring less than two years of full-time study) that focus on specific skills in a career/technical field.
- A growing number of community colleges also offer bachelor's degrees in high-demand, workforce-oriented fields.¹⁷

Community college degrees boost the earning power of graduates, and the colleges contribute to local and national economies.

- Associate degree holders age 25 and older have lower unemployment rates and higher median weekly earnings than people with a high school diploma.¹⁸
- Some community colleges play a major role in helping students from low-income backgrounds move into middle- and upper-income levels, showing their potential to be engines of upward mobility.¹⁹ Shortages of workers with certificates and associate degrees aligned with high-paying middle-skill occupations create another opportunity for community college graduates.²⁰
- Community college alumni contribute to economic activity and bolster government tax revenues.²¹ The colleges are often anchor institutions in rural areas, facilitating community and economic development.²²

Community college students have lower graduation rates than students who start at four-year colleges, and there are equity gaps in success rates.

- About 44% of community college students earn credentials from a two- or four-year institution within six years. The rate for public four-year college students is about 71%.²³ There are substantial gaps by race and ethnicity in six-year completion rates for students who begin at community colleges. Over half of Asian (58%) and White (52%) students earn credentials in six years, compared to 34% of Black students and 39% of Hispanic and Native American students.²⁴
- Six-year completion rates are higher for women (47%) than for men (42%).²⁵
- Several factors contribute to lower community college completion rates, including that many students attend part-time. College practices can also contribute to poor outcomes.^{26 27}
- Improvements to college structures and practices—including onboarding, program planning, advising, and financial supports—can boost early momentum and completion rates.^{28 29 30}

The governance and funding of community colleges varies between states.

- Some community college systems are highly centralized, with a state higher education agency setting policy. In other states, colleges are governed by local boards.³¹
- Community colleges receive much less funding than public four-year colleges. They are supported by a mix of state and federal funding, with some also receiving local funding.³²

Endnotes

1. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) excludes community colleges that offer any bachelor's degrees from its definition of public two-year colleges; using this definition, 832 community colleges enroll about 6.5 million students annually. See NCES (n.d.-a). *12-month unduplicated headcount enrollment at Title IV institutions, by control of institution, student level, level of institution, and distance education status of student: United States, 2023–24*. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search?query=&query2=&resultType=all&page=1&sortBy=date_desc&overlayTableId=36523
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