

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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## Navigating the Changing Tides of Community College Enrollment

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Student enrollment is the lifeblood of higher education. When enrollment begins to decline, college leaders get anxious and questions from governing boards become more pointed. Few higher education institutions feel the localized impact of enrollment declines more than community colleges. With a predominantly local student population, and a geographically defined service area, community colleges are connected to the region in significantly different ways than other higher education institutions. Parents of students often reside nearby, employers who hire graduates are in close proximity, and those who govern have strong ties to the region.

Since the height of the great recession, enrollment at public community colleges has been in precipitous decline. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, fall 2010 was the last term of enrollment growth for community colleges. Between spring 2011 and spring 2017, public community college enrollment dropped over 17 percent. The most pronounced enrollment decline occurred among full-time students, for which community colleges have lost nearly a quarter of their students (23.7 percent). Full-time students generate more credit hours and fill courses at a faster rate than their part-time peers, making their marked decline even more concerning.

Community colleges across the country have been scrambling to stem the tide of enrollment drops, anxiously awaiting a plateau, or at best a year of modest growth. In developing a course of action to create a more certain future, it is imperative that we step back to reflect on the factors driving enrollment changes.

First, and likely foremost, enrollment changes are intricately tied to unemployment rates. Postsecondary Analytics found that for every one point change in May unemployment rates, enrollment changed 2.5 percent. Under this model the 5.4 percentage point reduction in the unemployment rate between May 2010 and May 2017 would account for a 13.5 percent drop in enrollment nationwide over that same period.

Second, according to College Board data, over the past decade community college tuition and fees have increased over 55 percent, far outpacing the cumulative 18 percent rate of inflation. Gone are the days of students working and saving over the summer months to pay their community college expenses. Steeply rising tuition and fees have placed a community college education farther from reach for some prospective students.

Third, competition for the diminishing pool of prospective students has heated up. Four-year public and private institutions, once seemingly indifferent to the community college-bound student, are offering deep tuition discounts and lucrative scholarship opportunities to enhance their perceived value and attract a new potential student base. The four-year institutions also generally have larger marketing and recruitment departments and budgets than the average community college.

Additionally, in some ways community colleges have matured to a point where the inherent bureaucracy may create unintentional barriers for students. Consider the well intentioned, but often ineffective, remedial education pathway traveled by some 1.7 million new community college students annually. As reported by Complete College America, more than 50 percent of entering community college students place into remedial coursework, of which less than one in 10 will graduate within three years. Many students placed in remedial education simply get discouraged and drop out. As educational leaders we sometimes forget that enrollment is as equally dependent on the students we retain as on the new students we recruit.

Finally, a disturbing trend is the movement to diminish the value of a traditional college education. A recent NBC News and Wall Street Journal poll highlighted that only 39 percent of 18 to 34 year olds believe a four-year degree is worth the cost, a figure that is down 17 percent since 2013. Exacerbating this

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fact is the plethora of readily available means of acquiring knowledge outside of the formal educational structure. Take for instance the recent surge in computer coding boot camp enrollments, where students learn complex computer coding and mobile application development skills in an intense, compressed learning format. Course Report notes that coding boot camp graduates nationwide have ballooned from just under 2,200 in 2013 to nearly 23,000 in 2017. It certainly impacts enrollment in community colleges when the core market of prospective students challenges the value of a traditional college degree.

Despite the concern generated by seven years of falling enrollments, the first rule of thumb for any college leader is: don't panic. Although down significantly from the peak, current enrollment is not far from pre-recession levels. With a bit of ingenuity and thoughtful planning, community colleges across the country are engaging their faculty and staff in developing new enrollment opportunities in systematic and strategic ways.

Community colleges are finding value in returning to their roots and refocusing efforts on strengthening workforce ready programs with connections to local employment. Involving businesses in an advisory capacity throughout the

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Colleges and universities that provide their students with meaningful academic, administrative, financial, and campus-life support can offset enrollment losses by improving student outcomes and reducing dropout or transfer rates.

- David A. Tomar

Community colleges must innovate to supply the enrollment pipeline with students from various backgrounds in order to progress toward the completion goal, and re-double efforts to keep students enrolled on their path to credentials.

- Kent Phillippe, AACCC

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVE: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

Current higher education research reveals that following decades of enrollment growth, in recent years community colleges as a whole have been suffering steady enrollment declines at the same time that the four-year sector has been growing. Debate is ongoing regarding the root causes of these enrollment decreases, as well as possible strategies to address the issue. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Thinking Outside the Box About Enrollment

#### Andrew Crawford, MEd

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#### Heidi Nicholas, MEd

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For two-year institutions, the discussion surrounding low enrollment has been debated at length. Strategies for addressing the growing concern have been recycled, repurposed and reused across the community college landscape. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that community college enrollment has been on a steady decline since 2010. As enrollment continues to dwindle, our institutions are being forced to think outside the box when it comes to enrollment management. Taking a strategic, creative, and proactive approach to recruitment and retention can help stabilize enrollment numbers and revenues, while also yielding an increase in graduates. As administrators, policy makers, and other higher education practitioners often debate the root cause, it's critical for colleges to understand that there is a difference between navigating the enrollment challenges and combating them.

Institutions of higher education must be intentional in combating the growing enrollment concerns. By identifying weaknesses in our marketing, recruitment, and enrollment processes, we can begin to rethink the way we serve our constituents. Building a strong team that includes a cross-section of the institution is essential. With the cooperation of both internal and external stakeholders, community colleges can initiate strategies for increasing student success and completion results. The following tactics can shift an institution's mindset from navigating to combating the enrollment challenges:

**Keep the students we have – Focus on Retention.** Retention rates continue to be dismal (specifically for first-year students). By applying focused efforts to fortify the continuing student population, we can save ourselves the hard work of trying to make up enrollment numbers the following semester. Many of our institutions have FYE programs – use faculty and staff participants to case-manage students, fully develop an early attention program, and connect students to their pathway as soon as possible. Each student should have a plan, designated person, and identified purpose for their academic journey. A case management approach to ensuring student success has proven successful in certain models and should be adopted across the entire student population.

**Change the Culture of Late Registration.** Many of our continuing students tend to register last minute. By utilizing incentive programs, early registration, and campus events to encourage early registration, enrollment teams can get a jump on the subsequent semester. In some instances, institutions are using a forced appointment model for the continuing student population. Students will be scheduled lab time to confirm their academic plan and register before winter leave. This ensures that students stay on track and take courses in their pathway.

**Convert PSEOP/College Credit Plus Students.** Many institutions host hundreds of dual enrollment students each year. We need to ensure they not only enroll post-graduation, but also finish their Associate Degree before transferring to their four-year institution. Use recruiters and student

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What steps can today's college leaders take to begin to navigate these enrollment challenges?*

success staff to connect with these students and their parents early on. Discuss cost savings, transferability, and other benefits of earning a degree at the community college before transfer. Make earning the Associate Degree desirable.

**Use Data to Inform Enrollment Strategies.** Data can be used to focus enrollment efforts, including marketing and communications. Use data to track students throughout enrollment steps and focus

communications based upon where they are in the process. Emails, text messages, and phone calls must be personalized to student groups, giving them the information they need in a timely manner. Moreover, many institutions are now using predictive analytics in their daily work. In addition to tracking the front-end of the student experience, colleges have begun to dig deep into factors and influencers that contribute to student success.

**Convenience.** Often, community college enrollment processes can be difficult to navigate. Coming back and forth to the campus to turn in paperwork, make payments, and take placement tests can be inconvenient for our non-traditional student body. By combining enrollment steps or offering express enrollment options during weekends and evenings, students can take advantage of the services and more effectively proceed through the enrollment process.

**Advertising Short Term/Embedded Certificate Programs.** College can often be thought of as an unachievable, multi-year commitment. This notion could be intimidating for some students. Our institutions must do a better job of bringing awareness to our short-term certificate and imbedded certificate programs (on the credit and workforce side). For example, at Cuyahoga Community College, a student could earn a Phlebotomy Certificate that transfers into a Medical Assisting Certificate; both are embedded into the Medical Assisting Associate Degree program. This gives students the option to start working in the field while earning a stackable credential.

There is no one size fits all and the aforementioned suggestions are not a silver bullet, nor does the list end here. Many institutions are working diligently to innovate recruitment and enrollment practices. Perhaps, now more than ever, we need to collaborate with our colleagues and tackle these concerns in partnership. By expanding our network, meeting with peer institutions, and establishing new relationships, we can rethink the way we deliver services to our respective communities. We often associate enrollment declines with making cutbacks or reallocating funds. Our tendency is to concede or accept the enrollment issues as customary and ordinary. The reality is that if we don't start adapting to the needs of our community and leverage our resources to improve processes, those cuts will quickly become reality.

**Andrew Crawford** serves as the Dean of Student Affairs at Cuyahoga Community College – Eastern Campus, where the Office oversees the enrollment center, special services, student life, athletics, and counseling. Andy also serves as the Deputy Coordinator for Title IX, oversees the student judicial process, and chairs the Behavioral Intervention Team. He earned his MEd at Ohio University and is seeking his doctorate in the Ferris State University DCCL Program.



**Heidi Nicholas** serves as the District Director of Enrollment Management at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio. Heidi's expertise lies in strategic enrollment management, earning the 2017 Cuyahoga Community College President's Award for her contributions to the College's IPEDS graduation rate. She earned her Masters of Education in Adult Learning and Development at Cleveland State University and is currently enrolled as a student in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.

## NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Current higher education research reveals that following decades of enrollment growth, in recent years community colleges as a whole have been suffering steady enrollment declines at the same time that the four-year sector has been growing. Debate is ongoing regarding the root causes of these enrollment decreases, as well as possible strategies to address the issue. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Community College Enrollment Challenges: The National Perspective

**Jeanne Bonner, PhD**

President

BJB Higher Education Consultants  
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As community college leaders across the nation examine fall 2017 enrollment data, it becomes painfully obvious that the recent downward slide in enrollment is continuing unabated. While a select few colleges have managed to stem the tide, the community college sector as a whole is experiencing a continuation of the nationwide decline in enrollment which began in 2011. The AACC reports that each year since 2012, the enrollment decline at public community colleges has exceeded the overall postsecondary enrollment decrease. In fact, the two types of colleges with the biggest enrollment declines are community colleges and for-profit universities, both of which draw heavily from low-income and minority households. Clearly, community college leaders are faced with an enormous challenge if institutions are to remain both robust and financially sound.

Unlike various regional or state challenges faced by higher education, the college enrollment decline constitutes a nation-wide concern. Inside Higher Ed's second annual survey of community college presidents examined the presidents' perceptions of pressing issues in higher education; chief among these was the enrollment decline. The majority of presidents (nearly 80 percent) reported a stable or decreasing enrollment, with only 21 percent indicating an increase in enrollment from the previous year.

A 2017 Gallup/Inside Higher Ed survey of admissions directors found that a majority were very concerned about meeting their institution's enrollment goals for the coming academic year, with only 34 percent indicating that they had reached their enrollment goals by the traditional May 1 deadline. In fact, over 80 percent of community college admissions directors say their own institution has suffered enrollment declines in the past two years.

Historically, community college enrollment declines have tended to be cyclical, often fluctuating in conjunction with economic vitality and job health. Yet this recent downturn appears to differ somewhat from that pattern. Some have suggested that the nation was bound for this type of enrollment decline following decades of steady growth, especially given the enormous increases of the last decade, claiming that the college industry, saturated with various colleges and students, had simply reached its tipping point.

**National Drivers of the Enrollment Downturn.** An overwhelming number of the community college presidents surveyed by IHE indicated the factors they considered as very or somewhat important in impacting enrollment declines included not only an upturn in the health of the economy and employment, but also competition from new models of education and from for-profit institutions. Also identified as a critical factor in the decline was the recent public questioning of the value of a college credential.

Other factors include a significant drop in the number of adult students, age 24 and over, due in part to a resurgence in employment. The National Student Clearinghouse reports this category constituted by far the largest enrollment decrease. Also impacting enrollment is a dip in the national birthrate, resulting in fewer 18- to 24-year olds leaving high schools, with no discernible improvement likely until the middle of the next decade.

Lack of persistence has long plagued higher education. Given the community college enrollment mix, many potential students are expected to take general education requirements for a good portion of the time it takes to

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achieve their degree before receiving the training that directly corresponds to the desired career path. As a result, many of these students leave college and fail to re-enroll.

The cost of a higher education, although most affordable at community colleges, is still an issue for many students. When combining student concerns about long-term college loan debt with the recent negative messaging about the potential value of a

college degree, the fallout becomes apparent. Many potential students are choosing to seek employment in lieu of a college credential.

**College Responses to the Challenge.** Community colleges across the nation are seeking alternative approaches to the traditional recruitment and retention processes. Examples include:

- ▲ Ivy Tech (IN). The Ivy Institute of Technology Program at Ivy Tech provides structured pathway career certificate programs, resulting in a dramatic increase in retention and completion rates.
- ▲ Jackson College (MI). Jackson has significantly increased its student success focus by bringing on more success counselors, as well as offering the Second Chance Pell Grant program that allows prison inmates to receive federal money to pursue a college education.
- ▲ Texas Association of Community Colleges (TX). In conjunction with UT-Austin, community colleges offer the New Math Pathways Project, designed to reform college mathematics in Texas by offering multiple math pathways with relevant and challenging content aligned to specific fields of study.
- ▲ Northwest Iowa Community College (IA). Like other colleges across the country, NCC is utilizing new digital marketing practices, including "geofencing," which allows them to spend less on mobile advertising by focusing ads on a particular geographic area or career field.
- ▲ Tennessee Community Colleges (TN). The Tennessee Promise scholarship and mentoring program is focused on increasing the number of students that attend college in the state. In addition to removing the financial burden, the program also offers individual guidance from a mentor to assist during the admission process.
- ▲ Wisconsin Colleges (WI). The UW System, in a unique effort to address budget pressures on the Wisconsin higher education system, state demographic changes, and declining enrollment at UW's two-year institutions, has just announced plans to restructure the University of Wisconsin System and merge the state's 13 two-year UW Colleges into four-year institutions in the same general geographic areas.

On the national front, the mission of the community college remains essentially unchanged: Community colleges are fundamental centers of educational opportunity, making higher education and training available to a wide range of individuals. In an attempt to meet national goals of a more educated population and workforce, increased enrollments in higher education are necessary, though currently insufficient. Only time will tell whether the myriad efforts underway to boost community college enrollment and completion will meet with sustainable success. Stay tuned.

**Jeanne Bonner, PhD**, is a former dean at Schoolcraft College (MI) and at DeVry University and currently serves as president of BJB Higher Education Consultants, Inc. in Farmington Hills, Michigan. She also has the pleasure of working in conjunction with the DCCL program team at Ferris State University as the Editor of Perspectives. Jeanne earned masters degrees from The University of Michigan and Central Michigan University, and her PhD in Higher Education Leadership at the University of Nebraska.



**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**2017 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors: A Study by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup**

by Scott Jaschik and Doug Lederman

*This 7th annual survey of college and university Admissions Directors seeks to understand how they view admissions, recruiting policies and issues such as student populations, enrollment goals, student debt, the potential for tuition-free programs, and the factors affecting community college admissions. Community college admissions directors view improving job prospects for those without a degree or certificate as the most important reason for enrollment declines. Access this work here: <http://bit.ly/2kPGIBj>*

**Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2016**

by Jolanta Juskiewicz

*The 3rd of a series of AACR reports finds that community college enrollments continue to decrease. Also examined are graduation rates published by the U.S. Department of Education, based on institutional level reporting, as well as the National Student Clearinghouse's completion rates, based on student level data. The completion rates that track students across institutions show much higher community college success rates than the department's official graduation rates. Access this work here: <http://bit.ly/1SgQm84>*



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design of curriculum, sends a message to students that the outcome of education has relevancy in the local job market and leads to a sustainable career. As the need for career relevancy grows, apprenticeship programs are seeing a resurgence. Harper College in Palatine, IL has become a national leader in registered apprenticeship programs. Harper's apprenticeship programs in key areas such as Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Industrial Maintenance Mechanic, CNC Precision Machinist, and General Insurance provide on-the-job training with a paycheck, and an industry-recognized college credential to completers.

More often than not, students need to see the connection between their education and long-term prospects for employment. This is especially true among adult learners. Many adult learners return to school to prepare for a career shift, whether planned or unplanned. The end goal is generally to ensure a quick and efficient pathway to the workforce, which may require additional training, but not necessarily a degree. Short-term stackable credentials are proving an effective means of meeting workforce needs, while encouraging enrollment. For example, in 2013 Lake Land College in Mattoon, IL entered into a partnership with North American Lighting, Inc. (NAL) for an intensive eight-week manufacturing skills boot camp training program focused on filling positions at NAL's newly expanded manufacturing facility. The program operated eight hours per day, five days per week for eight weeks. Upon completion of the boot camp, students were awarded a 16 credit hour certificate and the guarantee of a job at NAL. The stackable credential itself served as the first series of courses towards several manufacturing related degrees, establishing a pathway for students to continue advancing their skill sets and career prospects.

It seems that too often college leaders focus the preponderance of their efforts on recruiting new students to the college, perhaps overlooking the fact that strong retention efforts are equally as beneficial to enrollments. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, only 49.1 percent of students enrolled in community college in fall 2015 persisted to fall 2016 at the same institution, and only 62.7 percent persisted to any institution. To put that into perspective, a community college that enrolls 2,000 new freshman annually will, on average, lose over 1,000 students by the following fall.

***With a bit of ingenuity and thoughtful planning, community colleges across the country are engaging their faculty and staff in developing new enrollment opportunities in systematic and strategic ways.***

Complete College America's Game Changers focus on five key areas to boost retention: developing program-relevant math pathways, encouraging 15 credit hours per semester for full-time students, introducing structured schedules to provide stability to busy students' lives, enabling guided pathways through highly structured degree plans leading to seamless transferability or a career, and implementing co-requisite remediation. At Lake Land, for example, students enrolled in a yearlong pilot of co-requisite math remediation showed a persistence rate of more than nine percentage points higher on average than those taking traditional math remediation. In essence, the more barriers we are able to remove for students, the less likely they are to get discouraged and quit. Improving retention rates by just five percentage points could have a distinctly positive

impact on student success, and ultimately enrollment.

The rising popularity of promise programs, where recent high school graduates meeting certain requirements can attend community college tuition free, will undoubtedly impact student enrollment in community colleges. Currently, nine states have either implemented or are in the process of implementing a promise program. The Tennessee Promise program was one of the first. Since its inception, first-time freshman enrollment at community colleges has increased by 30 percent, and Promise program students succeeded at a rate 17 percentage points higher than non-Promise program students. Many individual colleges across the nation are developing their own promise programs and are finding the programs impactful for both recruiting and retaining students.

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Community colleges must promote their success achieved over decades of honing the craft of educating students. For far too long, community colleges have acquiesced to the stigma that they are something less than their more expensive university partners. A quality and low cost education alone will not drive enrollment; community colleges must shift their thinking to a more holistic and competitive mindset. Leveraging technology and data to enhance student success and manage the enrollment funnel will continue to grow in importance. Usage of sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) systems can create a highly personalized recruitment experience for prospective students, while modern campus amenities such as coffee shops, charging stations, and rock climbing walls can keep students engaged once enrolled. More often than not, students want to feel a social and emotional connection to their college, as much as an intellectual one.

As community college leaders navigate the maze of opportunities and challenges surrounding declining enrollment, it is important that we act boldly and deliberately, while not losing sight of the fact that it is not the quantity of students served that matters. Rather, it is the quality of the educational experiences we deliver that will produce a well-educated and productive citizen.



**Dr. Jonathan Bullock** joined Lake Land College in Mattoon, Illinois, as its 7th President on July 1, 2013. Prior to joining Lake Land College, Dr. Bullock served as the Vice President for Strategic Advancement at Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac, WI. Over his 25 years in higher education, he has served as an adjunct faculty member and administrator, following a successful leadership career in the private sector.

During his time at Lake Land, Dr. Bullock initiated a comprehensive strategic planning process, an institutional rebranding, a recruitment redesign, and CRM implementation. Dr. Bullock earned a PhD from Marian University in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, a master's in business administration from the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh, and a bachelor's of business administration from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He is an active adjunct faculty member in the Doctorate in Community College Leadership (DCCL) program at Ferris State University.