

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRACTICE-RESEARCH-POLICY EXCHANGE  
HIGH PRIORITY RESEARCH TOPICS

The following high-priority research topics were identified in focus groups with presidents and state directors of community colleges in ten states (AZ, AR, CA, CT, LA, MA, MI, NJ, PA, WA). An additional conversation was conducted with a group of presidents of Achieving the Dream Leader Colleges of Distinction. An extensive list of research topics resulted from these conversations. We analyzed the results, found the most common threads across the conversations, and grouped them by major themes. The nation's 1000+ community colleges are obviously not a homogeneous group of institutions. The identified research topics will thus be more (or less) important depending on the characteristics of colleges and the communities that they serve. But taken together, these research topics represent an important step forward in identifying a first-of-its-kind *practitioner-defined* community college research agenda.

PREFACE: Equity cuts across the research topics noted below, and thus research is needed on how it applies to each of them. Closing equity gaps has proven one of our most persistent challenges. Even our own student-facing college practices need examination. While community colleges pride themselves on their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, some of our structures and practices can be barriers for students who are without the "social capital" necessary to navigate and succeed in them.

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#### ACCESS AND EQUITY

- **BACHELOR'S DEGREES:** Debra Bragg has provided the most recent inventory of community college bachelor's degrees across the country. While 24 states now authorize them, community colleges in only a few states (most notably Florida and Washington) have built them out in significant ways. What kinds of research will help advance the future growth of this important movement?
- **DUAL ENROLLMENT:** Dual enrollment is growing rapidly at many community colleges. But many questions remain. What can be done to expand the reach of dual enrollment to advance equity goals? What are the best approaches for creating intentional pathways for students through dual enrollment? How can community colleges help high schools create structures to support dual enrollment? Why don't more dual enrollment students enroll at their local community college after high school graduation? What is the impact of dual enrollment on degree completion? And what are the best funding models for dual enrollment? CCRC'S new Dual Enrollment Equity Pathways (DEEP) project will be focusing on these kinds of questions to better inform scaling of dual enrollment programs.
- **ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT:** We need a better understanding of the deep enrollment losses suffered by community colleges during COVID, when other higher education sectors did not have similar enrollment losses. What were the factors that caused these enrollment declines for our colleges? Where did the students go? How do we get them back?

- **MINORITIZED STUDENT POPULATIONS:** Some boutique programs have shown promise. But they are typically only as successful as their funding streams will take them. We need broader institutional approaches that can take these efforts to scale. Are more sustainable successful approaches emerging?

## MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING

- **COMMUNITY COLLEGE 2.0:** A frequent theme in our conversations with presidents was that our colleges will have to reinvent themselves in meaningful ways to meet the challenges that lie ahead. Our current “business model” (and the revenues it produces) is not sustainable. Many colleges will soon be at risk. In fact, they would already be at risk were it not for the federal COVID relief dollars. In short, new approaches are needed. As to what these new approaches might look like, several common elements emerged in the suggestions presidents offered. Things like skills-based programs, competency-based education, subscription services for instructional content, breaking down noncredit-credit barriers, supplementing the academic calendar with a “boot camp” approach. One of the more thoughtful [commentaries](#) on these possibilities was recently penned by Lee Lambert, Chancellor of Pima Community College.
- **FORECASTING:** There was considerable consensus that the higher education landscape is dramatically changing and that higher education leaders need to be equipped with information to assist them in seeing the changes coming and learning to manage the inevitable shifts in the delivery and consumption of higher education products.
- **FUNDING MODELS:** This is a broad category including a wide range of important topics like federal funding issues (short-term Pell, for example), the loss of state funding in many states and what to do about it, performance funding models that often seem to penalize colleges that enroll more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, plus strategic financing and fiscal integrity issues at the campus level.
- **GOVERNANCE:** It has been more than ten years since Terry O’Banion published his research on the “rogue trustee.” What kinds of research might be done now to provide new insights on important community college governance issues including the special challenges in collective bargaining states.
- **MERGERS/RIGHT-SIZING INSTITUTIONS:** While not yet a common occurrence for community colleges, there are enough recent examples of mergers between neighboring institutions and even mergers of statewide systems (Connecticut, for example) to warrant future research on this topic. The larger question is how can colleges innovate and thrive in a time of disruptive change? One possibility is to consider mergers, consolidations, and collaborations. Some specific questions might be: Can national association standards (NASFAA, AACRAO, and others) provide third-party validity in these efforts? What data systems are most needed to support mergers? What has been the response of regional accreditors to mergers?

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

- **FACULTY RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION:** Several states commented on the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified faculty. Among the challenges were faculty pay, professional

development, and keeping up with the changing instructional, academic, and workplace landscapes.

- **INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES:** Several issues arose regarding instructional strategies. Colleges throughout the country quickly ramped up online, hybrid, and hyflex courses in response to COVID. Many presidents observed that these remote classes are often the first to fill up, suggesting they are important for expanding access. Others were more skeptical. It's time to take a closer look through longitudinal research on student outcomes, while always disaggregating the data for different student groups. Professional development for faculty is also a key factor in this conversation. Poor student outcomes are in large part due to poor faculty preparation in delivering remote instruction. Additionally, related issues like non-classroom learning, competency-based education, and prior learning assessment were also raised.
- **GUIDED PATHWAYS – TRANSFER AND CAREER:** Much terrific research has been done on community college transfer programs and ways to improve the baccalaureate completion rates of our community transfer students. For example, the work done by Davis Jenkins and John Fink at CCRC plus Aspen's Tackling Transfer project are noteworthy. And yet the seamless transfer of our students without loss of credit remains an elusive goal. What research might point the way to greater success on this key part of the community college mission? On the career side, JFF has recently launched a new Guided Career Pathways Framework to better address the needs of today's students in ways that align postsecondary programs with the needs of the labor market.
- **STUDENT SUPPORTS:** If COVID has taught us one thing it's that student success is as much determined by nonacademic factors (housing, food, childcare, transportation, mental health, and the like) as it is by academic supports. What are the best emerging practices for colleges to either provide nonacademic student supports themselves or, more likely, serve as a clearinghouse to connect students with providers of these services in local communities.
- **WORKFORCE:** Tony Carnevale offers encouraging news on strong job growth coming out of the pandemic and continuing through the next decade. And yet community college enrollments declined significantly during COVID. What research might help us better understand this disconnect and do something about it? Are there data points across the states that point to ways we can add new workforce programs in ways that better serve our students (especially nondegree programs for adult students)? New America's New Models for Career Preparation (in collaboration with Lumina) is doing interesting work in this space.

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**POSTSCRIPT:** What are the lessons learned during COVID that will be most useful in helping to reposition our colleges for the future? For example, there is emerging evidence that many students (K-12 and high school) have suffered significant learning loss. We need more research on that student loss of learning and the impact it will have on our programs and services so that we can better figure out what to do about it.

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