



Community College Leadership Report

Maintaining a Focus on Reaching, Enrolling,
Supporting, and Retaining Students



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The Community College Leadership Report is based on a survey commissioned by Salesforce.org and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This report was written by Michael Anft.

Executive Summary

Community and technical colleges are at the forefront of driving social mobility. They serve as the cornerstones of communities across the country and provide equitable access to education. As COVID-19 persists, so do concerns about recruiting, retaining, and graduating students at the 1,000 two-year colleges in the United States. Faced with 2021 enrollment declines nearly triple the rate of those at four-year institutions, the nation's community colleges have been forced to re-evaluate how they bring in students and support them to graduation or certificate completion.

Community colleges continue to look for new ways to improve student engagement and retention. Less than half of community college officials (49%) say their institution possesses an adequate level of services and technology to holistically support students. And a bare majority (53%) say their institution has the right technology tools to meet the needs of students, post-pandemic. Many are implementing new technology or upgrading existing systems to support these efforts.



A survey of over 700 community college leaders nationwide found that the following issues present the most pressing challenges for two-year institutions today:

Enrolling, Retaining, and Graduating Students

Recruiting more students and retaining them represent top concerns for community college leaders. A sweeping majority rank improving their enrollment rates (87%) and retaining more students (78%) as their top two priorities for the coming year.

Increasing their institution's graduation rate ranked third among their priorities (59%). Yet, a large majority (86%) of respondents say that getting students to an associates degree or other credential is the most important metric in measuring student success—more so than retention rates (72%) and enrollment rates (42%).

Providing Students a Full Spectrum of Services

One major takeaway from the report is the need to deliver holistic student support. Seven in 10 college leaders say that offering more student support services represent one strategy they will use to bolster retention rates. Support services ranked second on a list of preferred retention strategies (and behind offering flexible course schedules, at 72%).

Top Two Priorities for Community College Leaders



Looking Ahead

Community college officials see strong student demand in the following categories:

- **Mental Health Services**
- **Academic Support and Counseling**
- **Help to Meet Basic Needs**
- **Financial Aid Advising**

Improving Transfer and Career Pathways

A solid majority (82%) of community college officials say their institutions adequately prepare students for a job in their chosen field, as well as provide a smooth transition to the workforce. More than half (56%) of respondents say their institution works effectively with industry partners to position students for jobs.

They also give a high rating (83%) to the support institutions provide to students looking to transfer, even though smoothing transfer pathways ranked eighth on a list of priorities (at 35%).

An Emphasis on Innovation

Institutions are increasingly leveraging technology to better reach prospective students. More than half of community college officials (56%) say that engaging prospective students is their top technology priority.

They also express some confidence that their institution is collecting data that helps identify enrollment and retention issues. Nearly three quarters (74%) say their college is at least somewhat effective at amassing and analyzing that data.

Overall, community college officials are overwhelmingly positive about the future. Nearly seven in 10 (69%) say they are at least somewhat optimistic about their campus' financial future. A comparable number (68%) say they are optimistic about future enrollment prospects.

About the Survey

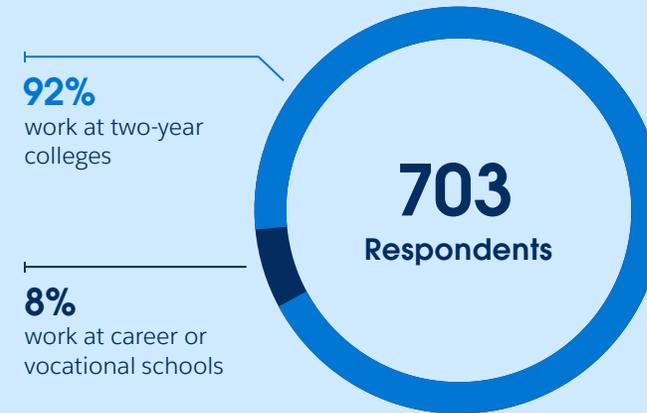
This report, created by Salesforce.org and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, was designed to gain a better understanding of the priorities and opportunities for community and technical college leaders in the COVID-19 era.

By engaging staff nationwide, this research aims to learn more about their sentiments and how institutions are engaging students throughout the education journey, from recruitment to enrollment to post-completion.

A total of **703 responses** were collected in fall 2021 via an online quantitative survey. Of those surveyed, two in three work at community colleges with fewer than 10,000 students.

Qualified Respondents

Staff: Adults age 18 and over who are employed full-time or part-time at two-year colleges (including career and vocational schools) in the United States and are in a management/leadership or faculty role.



Introduction

Even before the advent of COVID-19, community colleges were facing a landscape marked by seismic pressure points. Yet, despite many challenges, their key position as a driver of social mobility in the U.S. presents two-year institutions with an opportunity to engage more students and better prepare a significant portion of our nation's workforce.

Charged with educating eight million students¹, the nation's 1,000 two-year colleges have long had their hands full when it comes to meeting their sector's goals and helping students play a strong role in developing local economies.

And yet the sector remains vital, providing a lifeline to prosperity for the people who most need it.



1. ([CCRC, 2021](#))

Ongoing Financial Concerns

Serving 46% of all college undergrads², two-year institutions generally educate a diverse student population. About half of community college students come from low-income households versus one in five students at four-year institutions³, according to a report from the Century Foundation.

But community colleges face their own financial challenges. On average, they receive \$8,800 less in education revenue from all sources per enrolled student than four-year institutions⁴, according to a report from the Center for American Progress.

Two-year colleges often need to work harder and smarter to bring in and retain students—many of whom are also employed or caring for children—to graduation and completion. They continue to try to retain students, using new tools and strategies to fulfill their missions.

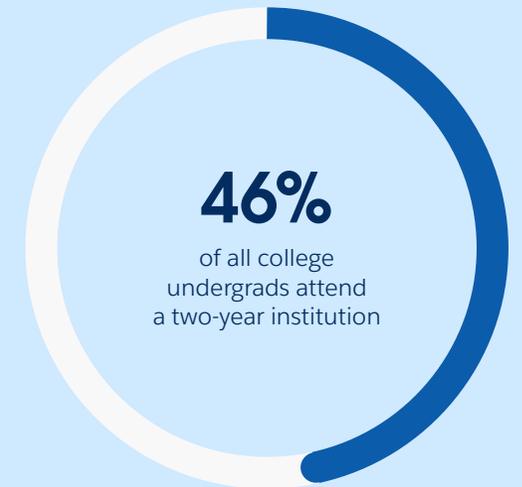
The pandemic has added some mini-quakes to the larger tectonic shifts affecting all of higher education. By some measures, community colleges have been hit three times harder by COVID-era enrollment declines⁵ than four-year institutions.

Despite a belief early in the pandemic that high school students would want to stay closer to home—and thereby help two-year colleges grow their enrollment—the opposite has actually occurred: Fewer traditional-age students are registering for classes at their local community college⁶.

Institutions have responded by stepping up recruitment and retention efforts, and by taking a fresh look at how technology can help engage more students and develop data profiles so they can better educate and support them.

Many colleges have put federal and state COVID relief funding to good use by implementing new technologies and fresh enrollment efforts. The question now, experts say, is how those institutions will maintain a high level of outreach once those funds have dried up.

President Joseph Biden’s goal of making community college education free for everyone—part of his \$1.8-trillion American Families Plan⁷—did not survive Congressional challenges, but experts say his efforts represent hope in the longer term for chronically underfunded institutions.



2. ([Vector Solutions, 2019](#))

3. ([The Century Foundation, 2019](#))

4. ([Yuen, 2020](#))

5. ([National Student Clearinghouse, 2021](#))

6. ([Faheid, 2021](#))

7. ([The White House, 2021](#))



An Evolving Education Experience

To keep students on a path toward a degree or certificate, community colleges are trying to serve them better by offering more holistic support in career advising, childcare, degree planning, and mental health.

As was the case with four-year institutions, COVID-19 forced two-year colleges to expand or accelerate implementation of remote learning platforms so students could continue to attend class virtually. Many are now taking the next step of upgrading or implementing technologies that help them monitor how well students are doing, both academically and in terms of health and wellness.

As they make those changes, community college leaders are also looking to use technology to help them run their operations more efficiently and effectively.

Pivoting Toward Future Success

Though making progress in a changing, funding-challenged landscape can sometimes seem daunting, community college officials remain optimistic about their future enrollment and financial prospects. Many express a strong belief in their ability to offer a good education at a low cost.

They have solid gains to point to as they move forward. Recent studies have shown that a community college education can greatly increase many students' lifetime earnings—even to the level of someone with a four-year degree.

An associate degree holder in certain occupations, especially those that involve computers and math,

will earn \$2.8 million over their lifetime—the same as the median amount for bachelor's degree holders overall.

On average, community college grads can expect to earn \$2 million over the course of their lifetime, \$400,000 more than a high school graduate⁸, according to an October 2021 report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

More than a quarter of individuals with associate degrees earn more than half of workers who earned bachelor's degrees, the report found—a clear sign that the value proposition of community colleges remains as appealing as ever.

Over the course of a lifetime, community college graduates, on average, can expect to earn more than high school graduates.



8. ([Georgetown University, 2021](#))

Section 1

Reaching, Enrolling, and Retaining Students are Top Priorities



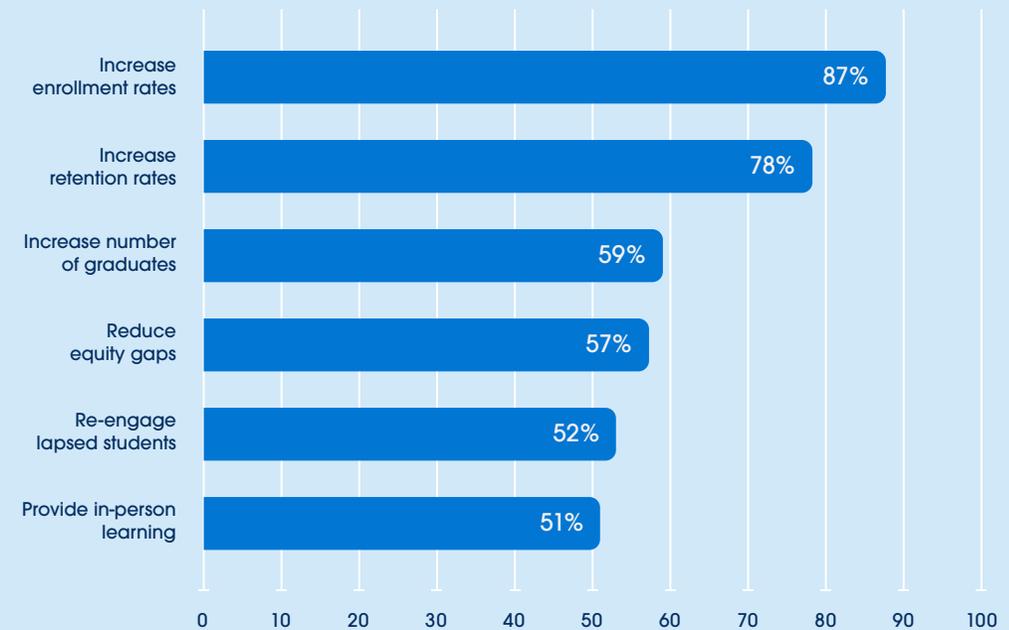
The most pressing issue for two-year institutions is engaging and enrolling more students, followed closely by retaining them.

When asked about their main priorities, community college leaders rate increasing enrollment (87%) and retention (78%) rates at the top. Increasing the number of graduates or completers (59%), reducing equity gaps among underrepresented learners (57%), re-engaging lapsed students (52%), and providing in-person learning (51%) were also important to most survey respondents.

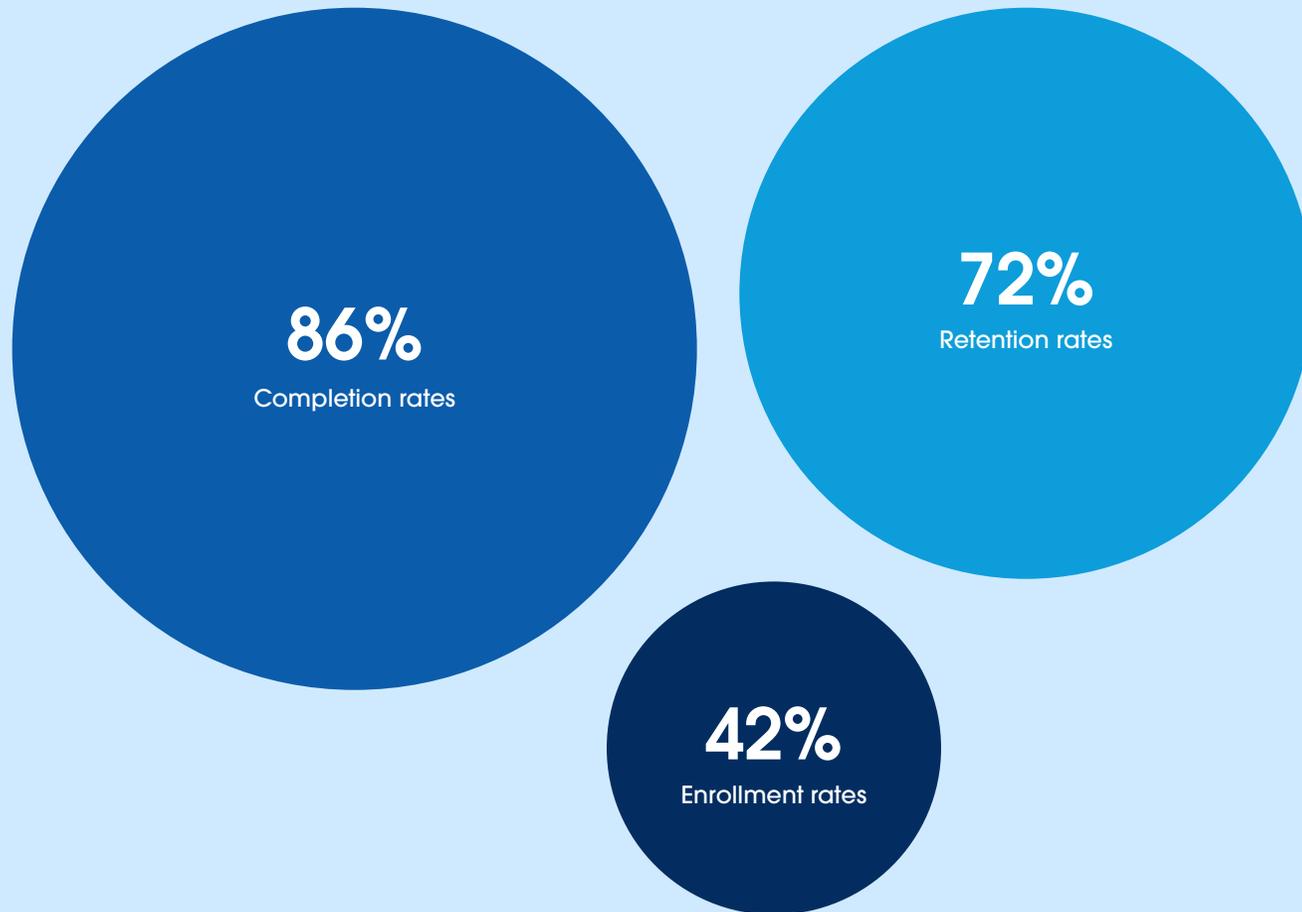
In a separate question, more than four in five (81%) respondents say that enrollment is an issue at their college, while 77% count retention as another.

When asked which strategies they are planning to use to bolster retention, most community college leaders (72%) say providing flexible course schedules that include hybrid or remote learning, while 70% cite offering more student support services, such as tutoring.

Ranking Community College Leaders' Priorities



Best Metrics for Measuring Student Success According to College Officials



When asked to name the best metric for measuring student success on their campus, a vast majority (86%) of college officials cite completion rates, followed by retention rates (72%), and then enrollment rates (42%).

During COVID-19, community colleges have stepped up efforts to boost enrollment, including cash giveaways for applicants and programs to connect with high school students.

But the engagement issues they face are nothing new as they reflect longer-term trends and needs. In order to improve enrollment numbers, some experts say two-year institutions have an opportunity to reformulate their academic and job-prep programs, as well as offer students stronger support systems.

“Community colleges have been losing students to four-year schools for a decade before COVID,” says Davis Jenkins, senior research scholar at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College. “That will continue if they offer programs that don’t lead to good-paying jobs.”

Section 2

Supporting Students Holistically is Critical



Community college leaders see a strong tie between student services and student success. Seven in 10 officials say that offering more student support services represents one strategy they will use to bolster retention rates.

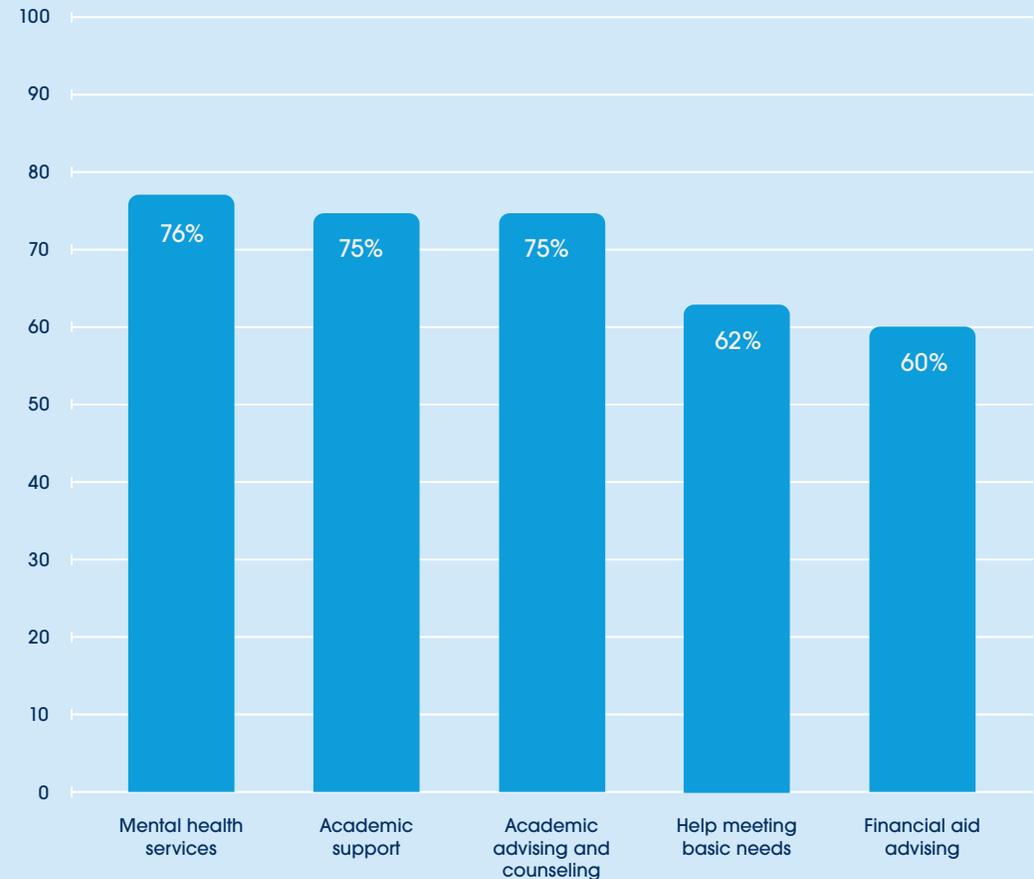
Looking ahead, community college officials foresee strong student demand for mental health services (76%), academic support (75%), academic advising and counseling (75%), help meeting basic needs (62%), and financial aid advising (60%).

Community colleges as a group have a higher percentage of homeless, impoverished, and unemployed students than do four-year institutions⁹.

Some colleges have begun programs that work to make sure students have the bare necessities—food, shelter, and help with childcare.

9. ([Wisconsin Hope Lab, 2020](#))

Focus Areas for Community Colleges
Based on Student Demand



Feedback From Community College Leaders About Holistic Student Support



In general, leveraging data to support students holistically can improve retention rates. Seven in 10 officials say that upgraded student services could bolster retention but less than half say they have the adequate technology in place to support student well-being. Additionally, only four in 10 (38%) respondents say they prioritize capturing and sharing a holistic view of each student.

At Amarillo College¹⁰, a community college in Texas, officials collected data that found that one in five of its 9,000 students had little or no transportation, and that nearly 100 were homeless. Amarillo College offered several types of services to support those students—something that has helped its graduation rate climb from 30% in 2015 to 58% in 2020, Amarillo officials say.

10. ([Swaak, 2021](#))

Survey results show that institutions have opportunities to improve their delivery of services—and the data-driven technology that can help impact holistic student support. Fewer than four in 10 institution leaders say they will employ a strategy to improve data gathering to impact student success—seventh on a list of nine choices. One in three college officials says they will put predictive analytics to work, and only 18% say their institution maintains very effective data operations. Some experts say those low response levels show that institutions can use analytical tools to better support students.

“That gets back to technology and using it well,”

says Monica Trent, vice president of network engagement at Achieving the Dream, a national network of 300 community colleges that works to create equitable learning situations.

“You need to know which students are succeeding, falling behind, or not completing enough courses to graduate. And you need data to do that.”

However, institutions around the nation have put data to work in hopes of substantially increasing their retention and graduation rates, notes Kenneth Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project. Besides setting up a strong analytics system, the most successful of those institutions have also made investments in staffing to connect students with counselors and other college support staff. Many colleges, both two-year and four-year, have an opportunity to supplement their data analysis with more hands-on support, Green adds.



Section 3

Evolving Transfer and Career Pathways

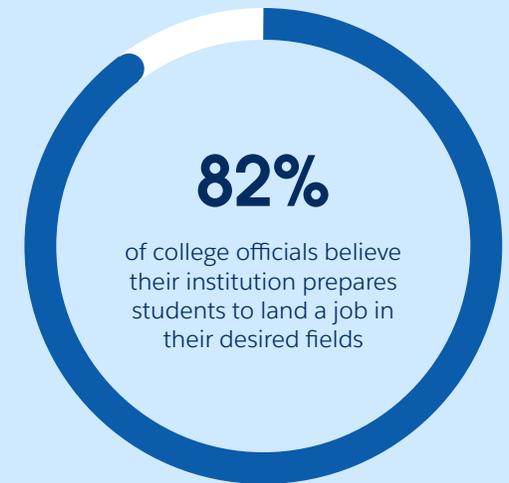


When asked which services students will need post-COVID, career advising (at 45%) finishes well down the list. Yet, when asked how well their college prepares students to land a job in their desired field, 82% of college officials say their institution does so at least somewhat well. Some experts still see a strong opportunity for institutions to increase their focus on career advising and support.

“Many career training education programs at community colleges do not prepare students for decent-paying jobs,” says Jenkins from the Community College Research Center. **“Career advising is what students want and what first-generation students especially need.”** Institutions have opportunities to improve their online career advising services, he adds.

Other survey results show a discrepancy between the number of officials who say support services are important for retaining and graduating students and those who say their institution’s transfer services are adequate. Smoothing transfer pathways ranked eighth on a list of 10 priorities (at 35%).

While increasing the student body and retaining learners is the clear focus of community college officials, surprisingly, fewer cite learner satisfaction (18%) or employment rates (29%) as an important measure of student success.



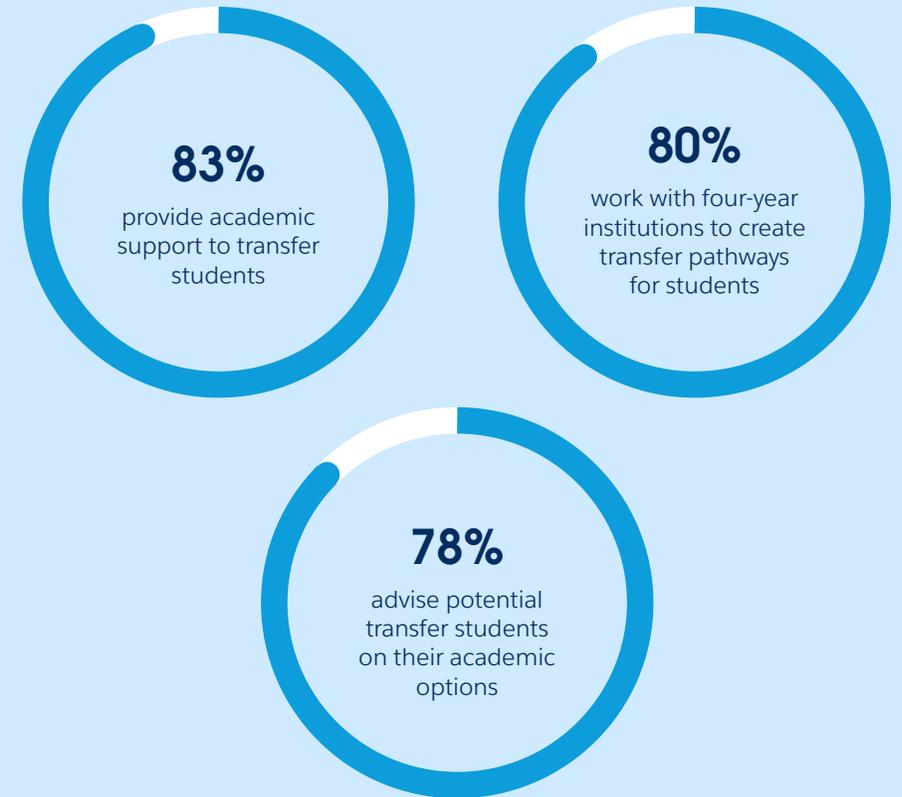
“Colleges should not place so much emphasis on recruitment that they miss out on ways to improve other parts of their operations,” says Jenkins. “A failure to

look at their programs and support services that help students explore a program aligned with their interests is a big reason why community colleges have been losing enrollment,” he says.

The transfer process that moves community college completers on to four-year schools was ranked highly by the survey respondents. More than four in five (83%) say their institution is at least somewhat effective in providing academic support to transferring students; 80% say their community college is effective at working with four-year institutions to create transfer pathways for students; and 78% say they are effective at advising potential transfer students on their academic options.

However, transfer rates were ranked as the fourth most important metric for determining student success (31%), following completion, retention, and enrollment rates. Jenkins notes that this speaks to the opportunity community colleges have to improve how they help students move from two-year institutions to four-year colleges or jobs. Colleges should work to make sure students earn credits that integrate well with their major curriculum at a four-year institution.

Reasons Transfer Process is Believed to be Effective by School Leaders





“Our research suggests that many, if not most, students are not on clear programmatic paths that will prepare them to transfer with few extraneous credits in their major field of interest,” Jenkins adds. **“A strong transfer system can bolster graduation rates.”**

“Community colleges need to keep working on creating more transfer agreements with four-year colleges,” says Lawrence Nespoli, a trustee at Mercer Community College and the former president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.

The real challenges lie at the department-chair level, Nespoli adds. A lack of coordination between department heads at two-year and four-year colleges on the credits a student needs for their major remains a hurdle—one that too many students are forced to clear. “There are many students who have to take classes in their major twice,” he says, an added burden few students have the time or money to afford.

Organizations are advising colleges in some states, including California¹¹, to improve system-wide coordination to make the transfer process more smooth and transparent.

11. ([Johnson, 2020](#))

Section 4

A Focus on Technology and Innovation



During COVID-19, two-year institutions accelerated the pace of innovation, often using federal and state relief funds to implement technology solutions that allowed students to learn remotely and campus employees to work from home.

Still, community colleges use digital tools most often to recruit, survey results show. A majority of officials (56%) say that outreach and engagement of prospects is the top technology priority for their college. Few officials say they plan to implement mobile apps for learners (20%) or leverage artificial intelligence or predictive analytics (17%).

While four in 10 (41%) community college leaders say they plan to improve technology to better support students, survey results show a definitive opportunity for them to do so. More than one in three college leaders say that they lack the right technology tracking systems overall and 28% cite a lack of data in current systems.

“It’s not uncommon that a community college lacks the capability for predictive analytics,” says Trent, from Achieving the Dream. **“You need it to improve student success.”**

A slim majority of community college leaders (53%) say their institutions possess the right technology to meet the needs of post-pandemic America.

Overall, community college leaders are starting to understand that financing and implementing new technology is important for them to reach their mission, Trent says. **“The thinking now is that most students must leave with a credential so they can earn a decent living,”** she adds. **“Data analysis is essential for that.”**

56% of officials say that outreach and engagement of prospects is the top technology priority

1 in 3 college leaders say that they lack the right technology tracking systems

Section 5

Strong Hope for the Future



Despite the many challenges facing community college leaders, survey respondents indicate high levels of confidence about the future. Nearly seven in 10 (69%) say they feel at least somewhat optimistic about the future financial ability of their institution to support improvements in the student and employee experience.

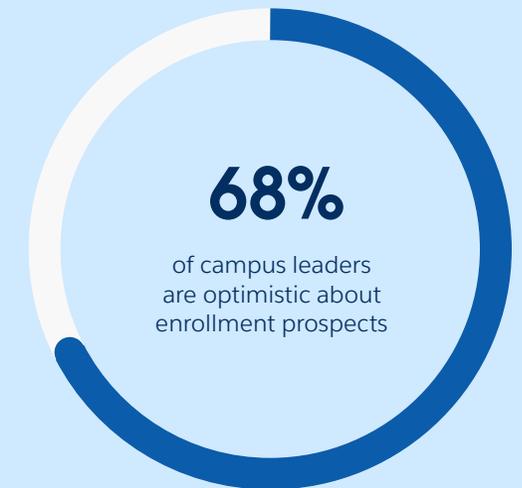
Officials who say they are “very optimistic” cite funds held in reserve, COVID-19 relief funding, consistent state government support, strong institutional leadership, and the resilience their college has demonstrated during the pandemic as reasons for their positive outlook.

A significant number (68%) of campus leaders say they are at least somewhat optimistic about their institution’s enrollment prospects. They cite everything from a “return to normal” to expanding degree options to the high cost of education at other institutions—something that makes community colleges more attractive to students.

That perspective might reflect a belief that higher education will rebound quickly once the pandemic subsides. “There could be an enrollment spike, post-COVID,” says Jeff Strohl, director of research at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. “People could come back to college and the downturn is only a one-time event.”

Looking ahead, institutions should turn to what has shown promise or worked well for them during the pandemic, says Nespoli, from Mercer County Community College. Did advising students remotely prove to be effective? What about the online delivery of other services? And how did remote learning change how students and faculty view education?

“We just don’t want to go back to what we did before COVID,” Nespoli adds. **“A lot of students don’t want to go to campus five days a week anymore. We need to be more flexible in what we can offer students and employees.”**





Nespoli also says he understands the optimism of his colleagues. Many are now putting an infusion of COVID-relief funds to work to improve their campuses or make them safer. At the same time, their institutions are now viewed by a group of political leaders as a major component in efforts to narrow socioeconomic gulfs nationwide.

“The Biden community college agenda didn’t make it to the finish line. But the fact that it was put in play by the President and Congressional leaders is just breathtaking,” Nespoli adds.

The College Promise¹² organization, with its goal of making community college education available to more people, might also play a role in college leaders’ attitudes, Trent adds. College Promise provides gap funding for Pell-eligible students. Officials hope that extra financial boost will keep students in college longer.

The survey pointed to many opportunities for improvement, such as the lack of adequate staff and support, cited by 53% of respondents, as institutions attempt to create more certificate and non-credit training programs. Those programs, designed to be less expensive and more targeted ways to prepare people for jobs, are seen by many in higher education as a major part of the future of two-year institutions¹³.

Silos separate for-credit and non-credit administrators, holding those kinds of programs back. “We need to find ways to hard-wire the connections between both sides of the shop,” Nespoli says. “There’s a bit of a blind spot there.”

12. ([Faheid, 2021](#))

13. ([Cision PR Newswire, 2021](#))

Conclusion

Community colleges have indeed taken a hit during the pandemic. Enrollment numbers that were already on the decline plummeted, forcing college leaders to focus on new ways to draw in more students and work harder to keep the ones they have.

But those challenges have been eased by the strong focus community college leaders maintain on engaging and serving more students. Institutions face a looming downturn in the number of available high school graduates¹⁴ beginning around 2025 and the potential budget headaches that come with fewer students. Yet the considerable value that community colleges offer—as well as the hopeful attitudes of those who lead them—ensure they will remain vital.

As shown in the report's survey results, college leaders are well aware of the need to focus on enrollment and retention strategies. They seek to do more to serve students holistically. And, though less pressing for most of them, a considerable number want to improve college transfer pathways and students' job prospects upon graduation. Many are looking to weave technological innovations throughout a wide variety of campus functions—everything from recruitment and enrollment to communications and student support—and around larger strategies designed to help them and their students succeed.

14. ([Hoover, 2020](#))



Methodology

Sample Staff

Adults age 18 and older, who are employed full-time or part-time at two-year colleges (including career and vocational schools) in the United States and are in a management/leadership or faculty role.

Data Collection

A total of n=703 interviews were collected in fall 2021 via an online quantitative survey nationwide. The questionnaire was developed by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in collaboration with Salesforce.org. Programming logic/branching was included where appropriate depending on the audience. On average, it took 10 minutes to complete.

Student	Community & Technical Colleges
<2,499	141
2,500–4,999	162
5,000–9,999	169
10,000–19,999	119
>20,000	112
	703 Total Respondents

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