FREE REPORT

The Path Ahead for Community Colleges

3 ways to reset and succeed
Covid-19 has affected all sectors of higher education, but none more than community colleges. The socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic landed most heavily on the lower-income families and communities of color that the institutions often serve, leading to some colleges’ losing as much as a quarter of their enrollments between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020. Community-college leaders found that students who attempted to continue their studies remotely often didn’t have the technology to do so, or were dealing with their own children’s learning, lost jobs, sick family members, and other stresses that put education on the back burner. Coming at the end of nearly a decade of gradual enrollment decline for many community colleges, this crisis has summoned an existential moment for two-year institutions.

But, as they say, never let a crisis go to waste. Covid-19 has galvanized community colleges and their leaders, presenting them with huge challenges that, in some cases, bear on their flip sides enormous opportunities. The sudden pivot to online education spurred by the pandemic, for one example, charts a clear future in which community colleges can play a larger role online. “Higher education believed for a long time in the mythologies of what can be done and what can’t be done,” says Michael A. Baston, president of Rockland Community College, in Suffern, N.Y., north of New York City. “There were a lot of myths of what we can’t do that were broken, in part, by Covid.”

What do community colleges need to do to emerge from the pandemic strong, maybe stronger than ever? Their leaders may have to rethink traditional linchpins such as enrollment management, equity, and
student support. They’ll have to reimagine the way their institutions approach ensuring student success, serving adult students, laying out the academic year, and how they approach noncredit programs and transfer. And they’ll have to examine two of the most important factors in a college’s success: resources and leadership.

The specific answers will vary depending on their regions, whom they serve, and other individual factors. But there’s little question that the colleges will have to be more proactive, flexible, and student-focused than ever — even as the types of student they focus on most may need to change.

This country often underappreciates its community colleges, but there’s no question that it needs them and the job they do. Here are three specific areas that scholars, advocates, and community-college leaders say are vital to future success for two-year institutions, and some examples of those that are trying new strategies to help themselves reset and rebuild.

**RETHINK ENROLLMENT**

Perhaps the biggest practical challenge many community colleges face is rebuilding pandemic-damaged enrollments. Students who might ordinarily be furthering their education at two-year institutions are sitting on the sidelines, stuck in low-paying jobs or at loose ends.

“Our largest competitor is nowhere,” says Tyler Billman, executive dean of academic services at Southeastern Illinois College, in Harrisburg, where more than 40 percent of area high-school graduates in recent years did not attend college or enter the labor market. Since community colleges depend on tuition and fees for a significant portion of their annual revenue, sustained enrollment losses can have serious consequences for their fiscal health, too. Federal money disbursed during the pandemic allowed most community colleges to avoid layoffs or other serious financial cutbacks, but it won’t protect them if the losses persist over the longer term.

**‘Potentially an Existential Crisis’**

But Covid-19 only exacerbated the enrollment challenges many community colleges were already facing. Nationwide enrollment at two-year institutions peaked at more than eight-million students in 2010, in the wake of the 2008-9 recession, and had declined by more than a million students by 2017. The relatively healthy pre-pandemic job market made many potential students skip college for the work force, and continuing demographic shifts have forced community colleges into stiffer competition with four-year institutions for a waning number of new high-school graduates. “We’ve been so focused” on the enrollment drop “that occurred during Covid, which absolutely has been alarming,” says Thomas Brock, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College. “But the reality is, community-college enrollments have been declining for about 10 years now, so this is potentially an existential crisis for some community colleges.”

One way two-year institutions can reverse their enrollment fortunes is to stop thinking about admissions as their four-year peers do, says Karen A. Stout, president of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit group that...
advocates for student success at community colleges. “We still are moving students through what I would call a traditional inquiry process and enrollment-management pathway,” she adds. “We have to stop thinking about students coming into our inquiry pool as being the only students that we are designed to serve.”

Most community colleges already enroll substantial numbers of high-school students, through dual-enrollment programs, as well as working adults in both for-credit and noncredit programs, but neither group has been thought of historically as central to enrollment strategy. With the numbers of college-bound high-school graduates expected to continue to decline, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, that may have to change.

**New Tactics**

How can community colleges bring in, or bring back, more students outside the traditional funnel? By more aggressive outreach. “We can’t just throw a net, hoping that students will enroll,” says Keith Curry, president of Compton College, in Compton, Calif. Compton lost about 30 percent of its students in 2020, and to regain them, Curry is turning to tactics more familiar from for-profit education. Compton has staffed a call center with current students to contact former students who have stopped attending and try to interest them in returning. Curry also plans to use individually targeted robocalls from Compton faculty and staff members, as well as mailers. And he intends to use census data and data obtained from a partnership with the local public-school district on recent graduates who haven’t attended college elsewhere. The college’s budget proposal for the coming fiscal year seeks $500,000 for marketing and outreach, an increase from the $130,000 set aside in 2021-22.

The Alamo Community College District, in San Antonio, is taking its enrollment efforts to the streets. In the spring of 2021, local high-school seniors got visits from an Alamo staff member who left front-door hangers “like the ones when you have politicians campaigning,” says Mike Flores, the district chancellor. Palo Alto College, one of the Alamo institutions, has teamed up with a community agency to beta-test home visits to students who have stopped attending and dropped out of touch, “to say,” Flores adds, “Hey, we’re still here. We’re interested in you coming back. Would you like to come back? What assistance would you need to be able to do that?”

But successful student outreach doesn’t require extra printing costs or street teams, Stout says. It can be an extension of the kind of relationships that colleges already build with local community organizations, employers, and schools through collaborations on student support, work-force needs, recruitment, and dual enrollment. “We need to really be much more embedded in the community,” she says.

### Student Enrollment Drops, Per Sector, 2019-21

Community colleges have seen the steepest declines in enrollment over the past two years of any type of institution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>2019-21 Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public 4-year</td>
<td>-4.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private nonprofit, 4-year</td>
<td>-3.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private for-profit, 4-year</td>
<td>-11.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, 2-year</td>
<td>-14.80%</td>
</tr>
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Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center
Community-college leaders seeking inspiration for how to make their institutions more friendly to students might consider a somewhat unlikely source — for-profit higher education, which has excelled at a few key things:

**Recruiting.** “They have call centers where people are calling students over and over again,” Keith Curry, president of Compton College, in Los Angeles County, says. Compton is trying to rebuild its enrollment with a student-staffed call center, robocalls from faculty members, and plans for $500,000 in new marketing next year.

**Customer service.** When potential students contact a for-profit college about classes, they’re often chatting with a recruiter within minutes, rather than waiting days or even weeks for a response. Many for-profit colleges offer courses with rolling enrollments, so that students can begin their studies without delay.

**Agility.** With the work force ever more in flux, some for-profit colleges have shown a knack for “spinning up new programs quickly and getting them out there quickly,” Curry says, “and connecting them to the job market.” Community colleges must be equally agile about creating partnerships with local businesses and keeping programs up to date.
Students are beginning to return to class at some community colleges, but the recovery from Covid-19 is slow and uneven. Enrollment in the Colorado Community College system has started to rebound, according to Joseph Garcia, the chancellor. Head-count enrollment, while still down from pre-pandemic levels, increased by nearly 2 percent in the spring of 2022 from the previous year. But the increase in head count doesn’t necessarily signal a return to normal. “Students are signing up but taking fewer courses, on average, than they did two and three years ago,” Garcia says. He thinks that students are less worried about Covid than about “economic uncertainty — it’s inflation, it’s gas prices.” Those hit hardest by the pandemic are still feeling its impact.

**CATER TO ADULTS**

The pandemic has proved that community colleges are not immune from the forces that affect higher education more generally — in fact, the sector is more vulnerable to some of them.

Community colleges lost about 21 percent of their freshman enrollment between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021, compared with about 10 percent for public four-year institutions, according to data compiled by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. But the average age of students at community colleges is 28, according to the American Association of Community Colleges, and fall enrollment among students ages 21 to 29 fell by about 18 percent at community colleges between 2019 and 2021, according to Clearinghouse data.

Two-year institutions are already working hard to rebuild connections with high schools, but the looming downturn in college-bound high-school graduates projected by Nathan D. Gravé, a professor of economics at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minn., will continue to affect competition for traditional-age college students across the country for the next decade. Many college leaders — both at four-year and two-year institutions — recognize the importance of educating adult students.

One hundred years ago, college was not necessarily intended for the masses, says Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College system. It was meant for a relative few, and a high-school education was sufficient for most Americans to prosper. In 2022, however, “we have now transcended the high-school diploma as being the standard,” Sullivan says. More than 60 million working-age Americans with a high-school diploma or less “need education and skills to be able to participate in this economy,” he adds. “So, the question becomes: Who’s going to educate and skill that group?”

Understand Adults’ Specific Needs

But lingering socioeconomic effects of the pandemic may continue to disrupt the lives of adults — both disconnected students and potential new ones — for some time, and the typical college experience isn’t designed well for the needs of students with full-time jobs or families. Daytime classes and daytime office hours, for example, present a challenge for learners with day jobs. “We still have a very
**BLUE RIDGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE’S ACTIONS**

- Fine-tuned communication by emphasizing “better skills, better jobs” alongside messages about its free-tuition program.
- Took the outreach on the road. Employees visited food banks, diaper drives, veterans’ organizations, and a local church.
- Identified adults between ages 25 and 44 who had completed 50 percent of a program at the college in the past five years but never earned a credential.
- Used grants to hire two success coaches just to work with adult students.
- Produced a list of credentials one can earn in less than 12 months.

### Headcount From Blue Ridge Community College, Fall 2019-Fall 2021

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Adult Learners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2,334</td>
<td>586 (25.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2,388</td>
<td>606 (25.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>2,607</td>
<td>848 (32.53%)</td>
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Source: Blue Ridge Community College

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**Key Outcome:**

The enrollment of adult students rose 40 percent in one year. Eighty-five percent of all the adult students enrolled in the fall re-enrolled for the spring.
fixed mind-set in this country about who is the college student, and it’s the 18-, 19-year-old, early 20s maybe,” says Brock, of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College. “We still just lack an understanding of — and really an imagination for — the older student and what their needs are, and what it might take to bring them back.” As a result, many community colleges, he adds, “are just bleeding when it comes to older students.”

Unlike many two-year institutions, Blue Ridge Community College, which has three campuses in Western North Carolina, didn’t lose many students to the stresses of Covid-19. Its enrollment in the fall of 2020 stayed flat. But the college’s leaders knew that the number of high-school graduates was waning, and that millions of adults nationwide had some college credit but no degree. Many local residents had been disconnected from education, the local economy needed workers, and the college needed to future-proof its enrollment.

“There was a sense of urgency on my part,” says Laura B. Leatherwood, the president. “How are we going to solve these problems before we get so far down that we’re going to have trouble recovering?”

In the early summer of 2021, Leatherwood and other administrators set about trying to bring back adults, perhaps the most difficult student demographic to recruit and serve well.

The first thing that had to change was the message. Blue Ridge’s typical recruiting message was aimed at traditional-age students coming from high school. Through working with a marketing firm to reach adult students, the college discovered “a couple of things that are really important to them when you’re trying to re-engage them,” Leatherwood says. “How long is it going to take me? And how much does it cost?” The college ran with a new recruiting message that emphasized “better skills, better jobs” alongside messages about the college’s free-tuition program.

How the message was spread changed, too. While the Blue Ridge marketing staff continued using many of its usual methods — including radio, television, and digital advertising — they also went back to some older methods. “We printed a lot of stuff,” says Lee Anna Haney, director of marketing and communications, who is retiring in 2022. Older potential students “like to have something in their hand,” she says. “They want the phone number and the email address.” Employees also took their outreach on the road. They made visits to food banks, diaper drives, and veterans’ organizations. They even made a pitch for Blue Ridge after the Sunday-morning service at a local church.

“We were a little apprehensive, because I felt like I’m standing between these folks and lunch,” says Kirsten Bunch, vice president for student services. “And it was fantastic. We had lots of follow up and great conversation from working with that group.”

Administrators at Blue Ridge had identified a ready-made audience of 2,388 adults between ages 25 and 44 who had completed 50 percent of a program at the college in the past five years but never earned a credential. They also tried to reach other adults in the college’s two-county service area, which brought in several hundred leads. In the fall of 2021, Blue Ridge’s enrollment rose by 9 percent over all, but its enrollment of adult students rose from 606 in 2020 to 848 in 2021, an increase of 40 percent.

Adult students often need more and different types of support than traditional-age students. Blue Ridge used grant money to hire two success coaches just to work with adult students. The college keeps laptops and Wi-Fi hot spots ready for students with technology needs to check out, Leatherwood says: “We didn’t want anything to derail their efforts.”

About 130 of the more than 2,300 former students contacted during the summer enrolled in the fall of 2021, and 94 percent of the adult students who saw success coaches completed the term. (A small percentage did not connect with the coaches.) About 85 percent of the adult students from the fall re-enrolled for the spring semester of 2022.

College leaders plan to keep up the adult recruitment and retention efforts and further refine them. Blue Ridge recently produced a list of credentials one can earn in less than 12 months. Some of them are certificates that can increase salary for those who already have a job — a qualification for a new piece of

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software, for example — but others, like emergency-medical-technician qualifications, can provide entry into a new career. “That really resonates with this population,” Haney says. “One of our discoveries is that people need to see this easily.”

Paradoxically, community colleges have long been seen as the sector of higher ed that caters to older students. “We do it better than four-year universities,” says Garcia, the Colorado Community College system chancellor, “but that doesn’t mean we do it as well as we should.” For example, institutions in the system continue to schedule classes mostly at the convenience of the faculty — during regular weekday business hours — rather than at the convenience of older students with jobs and families, he says, “and we’re really having to aggressively rethink that and try to do more to serve student needs and not our needs.”

One unexpected side effect of the pandemic has been that many of the practices adopted by community colleges as work-arounds have included potential benefits for adult students. Conducting academic advising and financial-aid and mental-health counseling sessions over videoconference was initially considered an inferior substitute for in-person, on-campus meetings. But under the old system, “offices were only open from 8 to 5,” says Pamela L. Eddy, a professor of higher education at the College of William & Mary, in Williamsburg, Va., “so if you were working and coming to a night class, you didn’t always get the services you needed, or an adviser there.” Some colleges found that remote sessions increased access and provided welcome flexibility for busy students, and often for employees as well.

Work isn’t the only challenge facing older learners. Among the Alamo Community College District’s 60,000 students, about 14,000 of them are parents, which creates additional hurdles. In addition to the financial, academic, and other supports those students might need to continue their education, says Flores, the chancellor, they may need drop-in child care in the evenings. They may need help with child care outside of the typical semester schedule, during breaks or over the summer, so that they can take an extra class remotely or at night. “Some folks may say, this isn’t your swim lane,” Flores says. “But anything that gets in the way of a student being able to cross the finish line is of critical importance to us.”

Additional Hurdles

Obstacles and outright barriers to adult students accessing and persisting in higher education remain, even at community colleges. Some apply to all students. The finan-
When you get someone new in you can always ask that question: Well, why do we do it that way? And what might we do differently?”

ccial-aid-verification process, for example, in which the U.S. Department of Education requests additional information and paperwork from certain Pell Grant recipients, can prove onerous. The department suspended it temporarily in the summer of 2021 and, anecdotally, some admissions counselors say they’ve seen more applicants actually enroll as a result. Diagnostic testing and remedial-education classes, a controversial aspect of college admissions because of their role in discouraging students from staying the course, have been waived or modified at many institutions in recent years.

Some hurdles are unique to older students. While 47 states have free-college programs of some kind, most programs focus exclusively on recent high-school graduates attending classes full time, and “programs for adults are emerging,” says Martha Kanter, a former undersecretary in the U.S. Department of Education and chief executive of College Promise, a nonprofit organization that advocates for college access and affordability. Federal relief dollars have been used to add part-time students to some free-college programs, she adds, but “the big challenge is, will they be sustainable?”

The high-school diploma itself as a requirement for admission is under review in some places. Six years ago, the Board of Supervisors for the Louisiana Community and Technical College system eliminated the requirement, “not because we don’t value the high-school diploma,” says Sullivan, the system president, “but because as a state, we were limiting 600,000 working-age adults from being able to access our colleges.”

Perhaps no hurdle obstructs working adults like the demands of their lives weighed against the demands of completing an education. “The biggest enemy is not commas and decimals and fractions,” Sullivan says. “The biggest enemy is not even testing. The biggest enemy of student success is time. The longer someone is in that program, the more likely they are to have life happen.” For learners with jobs and families and sometimes other responsibilities besides, waiting for a month or two to start a program that may take a couple of years of dedicated effort is a daunting prospect.

Building more flexibility into community colleges will benefit more than adult learners, especially given the uncertain future the institutions face. “If we build these colleges for adults,” Sullivan says, “they will also benefit traditional-age students.”

LOOK FOR NEW LEADERSHIP

Change is coming to community-college presidencies. The institutions are in the midst of a “gray tsunami” of retirements, says Rockland Community College’s Baston. In 2017, 51 percent of community-college presidents were over 60, according to the periodic American College President Study conducted by the American Council on Education.

More than two-thirds of community-college presidents surveyed in 2015 and 2016 by the College of William & Mary’s Eddy said they planned to retire in the next five years. And, as with many other positions during the pandemic, some people are simply switching jobs. Covid-19 has complicated the wave of leadership transitions sweeping two-year institutions, delaying some departures and hastening others, but it hasn’t stopped the change.

The Colorado Community College system, for example, has replaced more than half of its 13 presidents over the past two and a half years, and it will replace a few more in the year to come. “It’s just dramatic,” says Garcia, the chancellor. “Now, a lot of those people had
planned to retire — maybe they’re retiring a year or two early. But we’re facing the same challenges of holding on to people that all other industries are.”

Potential for New Approaches and Profiles

While all these departures and searches can be disruptive to regular operations, they also present an opportunity, says Eddy. Community-college leaders and staff members gain “a really nice opportunity to rethink and reconsider some of the practices we have,” she says. “Because when you get someone new in, you can always ask that question: Well, why do we do it that way? And what might we do differently?” Those questions may lead to new ideas and new practices.

Hiring a new community-college president these days also presents an opportunity to hire a leader who might not closely resemble a typical community-college president: an older white man from a faculty background. Presidents of two-year institutions are more diverse than those at other types of colleges. According to the ACE survey, 36 percent of two-year institutions were led by women in 2016, compared with 30 percent of colleges over all, and 36 percent of two-year colleges had minority leaders, compared with 17 percent over all. Eddy believes that the rise in presidents coming from outside the traditional leadership track — or even outside higher education altogether — along with the increasing consciousness about inclusion “bodes well for this next stage, because then individuals within the institutions that may not fit these historical norms, like either I didn’t come through the faculty route or I’m a person of color, are beginning to see possibilities for themselves to be a leader.”

“I don’t think this is easy work,” Eddy adds. “But I really think people are up for that as a challenge. It’s something that’s going to have to happen out of necessity, as well.”

Leadership shouldn’t happen only at the top, says Regina L. Garza Mitchell, a professor of educational leadership in higher education at Western Michigan University. Mid-level managers, the administrators who run an institution’s offices and units and keep the place...
functioning, can be instrumental in effecting change. Among middle managers, “there are more women, there are more people of color, and there are people who tend to stay in an institution longer than a president does these days,” Garza Mitchell says. Giving them more responsibility and more say can help shift an institution’s culture.

Garza Mitchell is not sanguine, however, that the current turnover in leadership will lead to a revolution in who leads and how. “I’m going to be cynical and say no,” she says. Presidents are still hired by boards of trustees, which are often not as diverse as community-college leadership or student bodies. “But it’s not just numbers,” she adds.

“Are people looking at leadership differently? Are they allowed to lead authentically? Are they allowed to lead in ways that reflect their culture? Or are they going to be forced out because they don’t conform to existing conceptions of leadership?”

Whoever leads community colleges through the years to come, they will need one core skill, says Eddy: contextual competency. She cites the old saying that to a hammer, everything looks like a nail. If a leader comes into a new institution with “this is the solution set that I have,” she says, that person will be unlikely to succeed. Now more than ever, higher education is not a one-size-fits-all scenario. But if a leader comes in with eyes and ears open, eager to read the situation and adapt to it, he or she may have a chance. “I think savvy leaders are doing some intensive environmental scanning, to understand, What are the services in the area? What are the needs internally to the institution? What does our data say? How do I pull the data in a way to understand what those patterns are so I can now begin asking questions?”

If community-college leaders can’t learn and adapt on behalf of their institutions, the rest may not matter.

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“Why Covid-19 Could Force Colleges to Fix Their Transfer Problems”
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