



WHITE PAPER

The Rising Popularity of Community Colleges

How demographic shifts, economic realities, and evolving student needs are reshaping higher education — and what your institution can do to thrive.

motimatic.com

Introduction

Community colleges play an essential role in higher education. They're typically focused on providing career-oriented programs that prepare students to enter the workforce or to further their education at a four-year institution. More than 1,000 community colleges across the U.S. serve approximately 40% of all postsecondary students nationwide.

In the 2024-25 academic year, community colleges gained 325,000 students — a 5.9% increase from the previous year and the highest growth of any sector in higher education.

This paper will explore the recent evolution of community colleges, the many benefits that drive students to choose them, and the steps your institution can take to continue the trend of increasing enrollment across the country.

1,000+

Community Colleges
across the U.S.

40%

Of all postsecondary
students served

325,000

New students gained in
2024–25

5.9%

Enrollment growth —
highest of any sector

Demographic Shifts Are Creating More Diverse Campuses

Community colleges serve a wide range of students, including recent high school graduates, dual-enrollment students, and adult students. Approximately 44% of community college students are above the age of 22 — and in the last year, enrollment among students aged 30 and greater grew by 2.2%.

Increased diversity is re-shaping community college campuses, which are an entry point to higher education for many first-generation, low-income, Black and Hispanic students, as well as older students and workers who need to retrain. To help address the specific needs of an expanding and diverse student body, community colleges must adjust their course and program offerings accordingly and add important support services to meet fluctuating student needs.

Demographics by the Numbers

Nontraditional Students

A nontraditional student is defined as someone who has delayed enrollment in postsecondary education by more than a year and/or has a job and family responsibilities. Research demonstrates that 34% of nontraditional students are 25 or older, 18% have dependent children, nearly 80% work, and 44% are financially independent from their parents.

The growth of nontraditional students has been driven by several factors, including changes in the economy, employers requiring new skills, a desire for greater career advancement, and an increase in flexible learning options.

Minority Students

Minority student enrollment in community colleges has been growing year over year, while white student enrollment has trended downward slightly. In the 2023-24 academic year, enrollment grew for Hispanic (5.5%), Asian (6.3%), and Black (2.1%) students, while White student enrollment declined (-2.1%).

First-Generation Students

First-generation students — meaning students who are the first in their family to attend college — comprise approximately one third of all community college students. This number has risen steadily since 2016, when only 23% of first-generation students were enrolled.

What Are the Benefits of Attending a Community College?

Everyone's educational journey is unique, and multiple pathways can lead to the same outcome. There are many reasons why an increasing number of students are choosing to attend community college over a four-year institution — and with that information, community colleges can work to ensure they can both meet and exceed student expectations.

1. Economic Feasibility

The cost of a college education has skyrocketed over the last twenty years, rising by more than 70% at public, four-year institutions. By comparison, tuition at a community college can be significantly less expensive.

Institution Type	Avg. Annual Tuition & Fees
Community College (in-district)	\$3,990
Public 4-Year (in-state)	\$11,260
Public 4-Year (out-of-state)	\$29,150
Private 4-Year	\$41,540

It's also true that a growing number of students feel strongly about avoiding student debt. Like college costs, student loan debt in the U.S. has grown enormously in recent years — currently standing at \$1.7 trillion — and is now the largest form of consumer borrowing in the country after mortgage debt.

Good News!

As of 2024, a total of 35 states offer tuition-free community college through state-funded grants and scholarships.

Strategies for Greater Success

Even though the cost of community college is considerably lower than other higher education institutions, many students need financial aid to afford the tuition. Make sure financial advisors are on hand to provide financial counseling and help students make wise decisions. Consider monetary incentive programs for students who achieve a certain level of grades. Emergency aid and student vouchers will play an important role if a student's finances become a barrier to program completion.

2. Transfer Pathways to Four-Year Institutions

Many students use community college as a stepping stone to a four-year institution and a bachelor's degree. This allows them to take general education credits at a lower cost before applying to a four-year institution, ultimately graduating with a bachelor's degree while only paying for two years of higher tuition.

Some community colleges have formal transfer agreements, called articulation agreements, with colleges and universities in their area. These agreements ensure that community college credits earned can be seamlessly transferred to a bachelor's degree program at one of these institutions. Some of the agreements guarantee admission to a specific four-year college or university if students meet the requirements of the agreement.

- ✓ **Santa Monica College, a community college in Santa Monica, California, offers a Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) to UCLA — rated #1 on U.S. News and World Report's list of Top Public Schools and the most-applied-to school in the country and the world. To qualify, students must meet the GPA and coursework requirements outlined in the TAG agreement.**

Strategies for Greater Success

If your institution doesn't have articulation agreements in place, foster strong partnerships with four-year institutions in your area to establish them and streamline the transfer process. Provide potential transfer students with solid advising and clearly communicate transfer requirements. Developing major-specific pathways and coordinated student support services can be a significant help.

3. Flexibility and Accessibility

When a flexible fit is the best fit

Quite often, students who attend community college need the flexibility of working or raising a family while learning. Most community colleges offer part-time, evening, weekend, online, and hybrid class options that give students the freedom to truly tailor their education to fit their lifestyle. Community college allows students to learn on their own schedule and move at their own pace.

Easy access does the trick

Most community colleges have open admission policies, meaning that almost everyone who applies is accepted. Community colleges typically don't require students to submit standardized test scores, compose essays, submit letters of recommendation, or meet GPA standards to gain admissions. Some community colleges also offer rolling admissions, which means that applications are accepted throughout the year.

- ✓ Some of the more in-demand programs at community colleges — such as nursing or engineering — may practice more selective admissions.

Strategies for Greater Success

Come up with new and interesting ways to expand the flexible learning options you currently offer so education becomes more accessible to a broader spectrum of learners, particularly those who must balance academic pursuits with work and personal commitments. If possible, expand the variety of programs offered so your institution has greater appeal to a wider swath of students. And make sure to create a welcoming environment for students of all backgrounds.

4. Career Readiness

Generation Z (GenZ), which includes all those born between 1997 and 2012, is often called "the toolbelt" generation. Gen Zers, who tend to want a well-paying career without the burden of student debt, are increasingly choosing vocational training and skilled trades over traditional, four-year colleges.

Community colleges serve as a hub for vocational and technical programs that can equip students with the skills and certifications they need to succeed in a variety of industries. To accommodate these students, community colleges offer a wide array of non-credit program options, such as workforce education programs, stackable credential options, and certificate programs — all of which have helped expand overall enrollment. Of the 10 million students enrolled in community colleges, four million are enrolled in non-credit offerings.

- ✓ Undergraduate certificate program enrollment grew for the fourth consecutive year, up 9.9 percent in fall 2024, reflecting increased student interest in short-term, career-focused pathways.
- ✓ Many community colleges now offer fast-track programs, or micro-credential programs — short, highly focused programs designed to provide in-demand skills that help students quickly advance their career, often in just a single semester.

Partnerships with Local Industries

Most community colleges actively engage with local industries to create mutually beneficial partnerships and dynamic workforce education programs. These programs provide hands-on experience through internships, apprenticeships, and customized training programs that help put students on a career path while supplying a strong pipeline of skilled talent to local employers.

Stackable Credential Programs

Stackable credentials enable students to earn multiple credentials — such as a certificate and a degree — by completing courses that meet overlapping requirements. These pathways offer an efficient, cost-effective way to acquire specialized knowledge and showcase expertise. They also demonstrate a commitment to ongoing skill-building and professional development.

Certificate Programs

A certificate program is a short-term educational course designed to provide focused training in a particular field. It typically involves a concentrated set of courses covering a narrow area of expertise and can be completed in a shorter timeframe than a degree program.

Strategies for Greater Success

Make sure your community college offers technical and vocation programs that are aligned with in-demand jobs. Provide strong career counseling and advising, and help students attain internships and work-based learning experiences in their fields of interest. It's also highly important to develop and maintain close ties with local employers to better understand the current needs of local industry.

5. Support Services

As mentioned earlier, diverse student populations require a diversity of support services that help remove barriers to educational access and success — including financial aid, academic advising and tutoring, and career services. These support systems help further retention, persistence and the completion of a degree or credential.

As diversity across campuses continues to grow, many community colleges have had to come up with new and creative ways to support educational engagement through wraparound supports, sometimes referred to as basic needs support, including access to food, housing, transportation and the technology needed to complete coursework.

Services Many Community Colleges Now Offer:

- **Mental health support**
- **Free or reduced meals**
- **Food pantries**
- **On-campus childcare**
- **Free internet access**
- **Transportation subsidies**
- **Emergency financial aid**
- **Housing support**
- **Disability services**
- **Mentorship programs**

Strategies for Greater Success

There's a good chance that your community college doesn't offer every support service listed above. Are there things you can do to widen the range of services you provide? And can some services be made accessible via virtual platforms for greater student flexibility?

Make Sure Students Are Aware of What You Can Do for Them

Although community college numbers are on the rise, it's still a smart decision to work with an expert in the field who can help you continue to boost enrollment, focus on student success, and enhance your all-important workforce development programs.

Motimatic is a programmatic platform that leverages expertise in motivation science to significantly enhance marketing effectiveness. Motimatic has partnered with more than 300 institutions since 2015 to drive better student outcomes — setting in motion more than 89,000 student registrations in 2023 and more than 114,000 registrations in 2024 alone.

Through strategic social posts, Motimatic inspires students to take crucial steps like finishing their applications or registering for the next term.

Recent Achievements

Enrollment Improvement

In 2023, Motimatic drove over 89,000 student registrations.

Retention Strengthening

Delivered 20x ROI and the re-enrollment of 308 at-risk students at the University of Wisconsin Whitewater.

Re-enrollment Growth

Delivered 15x ROI and procured the re-enrollment of 501 stop-outs at Texas A&M; San Antonio.

Workforce Development

In July 2024, partnered with the Missouri Workforce Department to launch a pilot program promoting their QUEST grant. Within two weeks of launch, efforts led to a 24% increase in call volume and engaged over 71,000 students on Meta and Snapchat. Additionally, 4,130+ students actively interacted with the content.

Motimatic can partner with your institution's enrollment and marketing teams to boost total enrollment and deliver 3–5x ROI.

To learn more, visit motimatic.com

About Motimatic

Motimatic's fully managed solution helps higher ed leaders shift student mindsets and drive outcomes. We apply science-backed strategies and learnings to reach, motivate, and enroll more students — without adding staff or integrating software.

Trusted by 250+ Colleges and Universities

60+ California Community College Partners

2 Million+ Learners Served

200,000+ GuidePosts™

We deliver results, or it's free

References

1. Community College Daily, AACC Fast Facts 2024 (February 19, 2024). <https://www.ccdaily.com/2024/02/aacc-fast-facts-2024/>

2. Higher Ed Jobs, Community College Enrollment Rises Despite Lingering Challenges (April 26, 2024). <https://www.higheredjobs.com/Articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=3899>
3. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Current Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2024 (January 23, 2025). <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>
4. U.S. News and World Report, 5 Reasons to Consider Community College (May 19, 2022). <https://www.usnews.com/education/community-colleges/articles/reasons-to-consider-community-college>
5. Community College Daily, Enrollment growth continues at community colleges (January 24, 2024). <https://www.ccdaily.com/2024/01/enrollment-growth-continues-at-community-colleges/>
6. Manhattan Institute, When the Exception Becomes the Norm: The Rise of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education (January 16, 2025). <https://manhattan.institute/article/rise-of-nontraditional-students-in-higher-education>
7. Reality Changers, Breaking Barriers: Exploring First Generation College Student Statistics (June 11, 2024). <https://realitychangers.org/breaking-barriers-exploring-first-generation-college-student-statistics/>
8. Lumina Foundation, First Generation Students (2025). <https://www.luminafoundation.org/topics/todays-students/first-generation-students/>
9. Best Colleges, Cost of College Over Time (January 30, 2024). <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-costs-over-time/>
10. American Association of Community Colleges, DataPoints: Students' college costs for 2023-24 (December 6, 2023). <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/2023/12/06/datapoints-students-college-costs-for-2023-24>
11. Council on Foreign Relations, Is Rising Student Debt Harming the U.S. Economy? (April 16, 2024). <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-student-loan-debt-trends-economic-impact>
12. Coursera, Is Community College Free? (In Some States, Yes) (November 22, 2024). <https://www.coursera.org/articles/is-community-college-free>
13. College Vine, Most applied to college worldwide? (2024). <https://www.collegevine.com/faq/112441/most-applied-to-college-worldwide>
14. Community College Daily, The trades' growing appeal (February 13, 2025). <https://www.ccdaily.com/2025/01/the-trades-growing-appeal/>