Improving student success and institutional performance at community colleges

New approaches for community college leaders

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As a community college leader, you've already helped thousands of students enter higher education. Now, you need to help more of them succeed.

That means serving each student as an individual, helping him or her overcome often formidable obstacles to success. It means building an institution that's easier to navigate from first contact through completion, offers clear pathways to success, and lets fewer people slip through the cracks. It means strengthening linkages to the rest of the world, from high schools to workplaces. It means making sure you're serving more students you can benefit more effectively.

You need to do all this while balancing difficult challenges of access, quality, cost, and accountability.

While there are no silver bullets, community college leaders can overcome internal and external obstacles, significantly improving performance on the metrics you and your stakeholders care about most. This white paper is about making that happen.

This paper will help you:

- Identify opportunities to "move the needle" in key areas
- Align resources with their core goals
- Reshape your institution to succeed in a changing environment
- Consider strategic partnerships to achieve these and other goals

Research and strategy: Knowing who you're serving

It's essential for most community colleges to understand their prospects, students, and markets in far greater depth. Armed with this knowledge, they can more effectively design programs, messaging, and student support systems.

Most institutions already know their students have diverse backgrounds, challenges, and goals. But deeper research can help them segment, attract, and serve students more individually, based on their specific experiences and goals. It can also help institutions size segments and markets, and invest for maximum impact.

Research can improve your answers to questions such as:

Who aren't we serving now and how can we serve them?
(For example, can we reach more returning students? More non-participants in higher education? More reverse transfers?)

Exactly what outcomes do our students want?
How do those align with the employment and four-year-college outcomes available to them?

Which specific investments would have the most impact on persistence and completion?

Who are we really competing with?
(Other higher education institutions, as well as alternatives to higher education.)

**What do prospects know about us?** What do they believe that isn't true?

How are our stakeholder and local/regional employer demands shifting?
What new opportunities exist to meet them?

There is some valuable information already available to you. Examples include IPEDS survey data and BLS employment projections, Google Analytics search statistics, and your own raw data about enrollments, completion rates, and students who quietly "disappear" from your institution. Other data will require original research.

Challenges often arise in compiling this data, assessing it in context, performing in-depth analysis, creating a focused strategy, and building an action plan. Where community colleges don't have the internal expertise to do this, they may benefit from working with specialists in higher education market analysis and strategy.

Plan to integrate and optimize student experience from recruitment to completion

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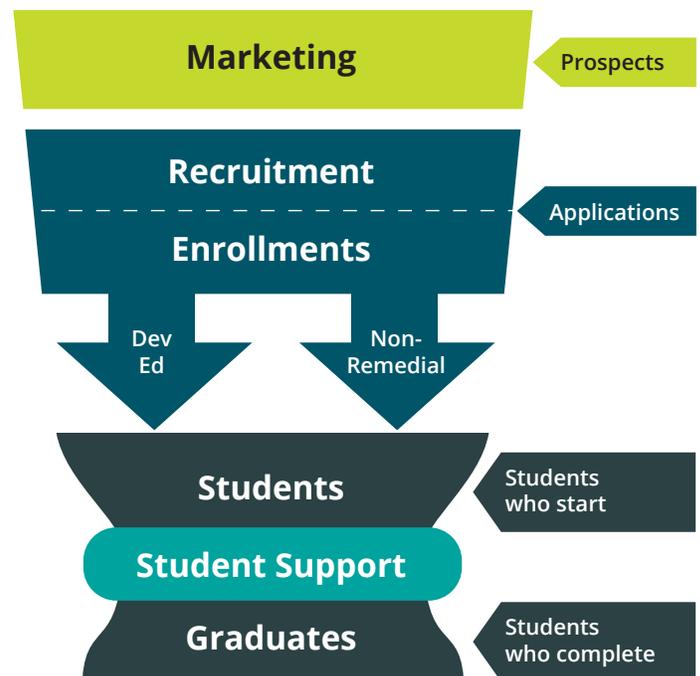
Marketing and admissions: Recruiting more of the right people

To connect with more students you can serve well, apply what you've learned in your research throughout your communications, your branding, and your choices of outreach channels. When these are consistent, your marketing investments can all support and reinforce each other.

We strongly agree with the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) that "focusing attention on the front door of the college—ensuring that students' earliest contacts and first weeks incorporate experiences that will foster personal connections and enhance their chances of success—is a smart investment."

"New students want to know: 'What are my career options? What are the education paths to those careers? What will I need to take? How long will it take and how much will it cost?' How well do you think the information you provide to students answers those questions?"

—Thomas Bailey
Director, Community College Research Center

Your website is a central element of your outreach, and is likely the first place prospective students will go to learn what you have to offer. Beyond supporting your brand message, your site should be simple to navigate. It should answer prospects' and students' questions and help them make realistic plans. Most community college websites make this far too difficult, often because they're organized around institutional function rather than student/prospect need.

Attracting preliminary contact is just the beginning. You need to consistently support and engage prospects, by managing your recruitment and enrollment processes as effectively as possible. This means recognizing obstacles, eliminating them when possible, and helping individuals overcome those that can't be eliminated.

For example, many institutions simplify admission with fast-track events that offer immediate decisions. Whether you use fast-track or not, your institution should establish processes for timely prospect follow-up, including outbound calling to those who haven't taken the next step.

We believe robust advising and coaching should be incorporated into the pre-admission stage. This can help students gain direction and identify programs of interest. It also demonstrates that your institution intends to support the student through to completion.

Where you can't fully staff this function, a partner may be able to complement your existing resources.

Retention, persistence, completion: Guiding students to success

There's little value in enrolling students if you can't help them succeed. This requires consistency in your interactions with students throughout their entire educational experience.

From the student's perspective, everything is connected. If he can't solve an immediate financial aid problem, he can't buy essential books or focus on what's happening in class. If she's sent from one office to another and finds the offices unstaffed or unable to help, she may not return. If institutions craft class schedules without considering how classes relate to one another, students find it more difficult to access the right courses while working. They may instead choose other classes that are less appropriate or do not move them directly towards graduation: one reason today's average community college student must earn (and pay for) 80-90 credits before graduating.

"Many change reform initiatives are being enthusiastically led by dedicated, skilled people. But we haven't seen significant improvements in the sector's performance. Why? Often, reformers only focus on one segment of the student's experience. Then, the services disappear, and the benefits fade."

—Thomas Bailey
Director, Community College Research Center

Improving student outcomes means solving problems holistically, not in isolation. This means siloed functions and poor internal communication are an even greater problem than many community colleges realize.

Individualize communications for each student's current needs

New students	Existing students	At-risk students
Students in their first course	*Students between their second and final course*	*Students who show predetermined risk factors*
Require a high touch at predetermined touch points	Require less frequent touch points	Require close monitoring and frequent touch points

Rationalizing study with guided pathways

Coherence is especially crucial as your institution works to rationalize its courses of study around student needs. This is why guided pathways are so attractive. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) describes these as "clearly structured programs of study... organized around students' education and career goals," integrating both instruction and student services.

As CCRC Director Thomas Bailey observes, it's easier to help students who have goals than to help "undecided" students who are drifting through general education or developmental education requirements without direction.

Guided pathways help students and colleges work together to set realistic goals, and move more directly toward them. They also improve both pre-admission and post-admission advising, because advisors can become true specialists in areas directly relevant to their advisees. So, for example, a student interested in working in healthcare can start down that path, working with an advisor to refine goals and choose specialties along the way.

64% of public two–year students fail to obtain any credential after six years.

—New America Education Policy, Community College Online, February 2016

Only 44% of community college students say an advisor helped them "set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them."

—Center for Community College Student Engagement, Responses to 2014 SENSE Promising Practices Survey

Improving remediation and development

Beyond guided pathways, other opportunities exist to refine academic programs and improve student outcomes.

For example, remediation and developmental education represent an insurmountable obstacle for many students. They are often given placement tests before admission and are told they'll need several developmental courses before they can begin to earn credit. Some simply walk away—which is rarely the institution's intent.

This is why community colleges are experimenting with three promising reforms. First, they are administering placement tests after admission. Second, they are carefully crafting co-requisites to enable students to master related remedial and credit-bearing material at the same time and quickly start earning credits. Third, they are using adaptive technologies to personalize remediation, so students don't waste time re-learning what they already know.

Providing incremental opportunities for success

Completing a full Associate's degree all at once may be a tall climb for students facing difficult work and personal challenges. But, like mountain climbers, they welcome "base camps" partway up. So, institutions are increasingly crafting incremental opportunities for success, such as certificates that students can earn as they reach milestones on the journey toward a full A.A. or A.S. degree.

Finally, no matter how you structure your programs, today's community college students require personalized advising and life/success coaching that follows them from enrollment through completion, helping them overcome isolation. Ideally, as often as possible, the same individual should be there to help them navigate the entire journey.

Of course, making the changes we've described requires detailed coordination across departments and institutional functions, as well as with external employers, four-year transfer institutions, and other stakeholders. Here again, some institutions may benefit from the assistance of an experienced partner.

Linking to the world: K-12, 4-year colleges, and employers

You succeed when your students succeed in the world outside your institution. To help them, you need to deepen your linkages with that world. That means:

- Promoting K-12 student readiness by ensuring that all local high schools know what you expect from their graduates and understand the educational and career pathways you will offer them. There may also be value in expanding dual-enrollment opportunities where you can.

- Improving articulation (transfer) agreements with the four-year colleges your graduates are most likely to attend. Currently, too many community college graduates find themselves disappointed with the transfer value of their credits. This may result from inadequate communication between institutions, and with their students. Together, colleges can work together to understand why credits are being rejected and address those concerns. Within the community college, advisors can get the tools to ensure appropriate course recommendations. Students who have expressed an interest in a four-year degree should be told exactly what they must do to earn transfer credit.

- Linking learning to job ecosystems by working more closely with employers to meet emerging job requirements, establishing corporate partnerships to provide relevant education on behalf of employers, and providing more timely information about the value of what's been learned (e.g., via badges or microcredentials).

Process and technology:
Doing more,
without overstressing the institution

To implement changes like these without overstressing people and departments already stretched nearly to the limit, community college leaders need to make better use of process and technology. For example:

- Many students drop away during their first weeks of class, but learning management systems may be able to identify at-risk students more quickly and expedite personal contact with them. Especially in large institutions, both process and technology are essential for, in CCSSE's phrase, "making engagement inescapable."

- Improved retention and outcomes are associated with greater personalization and instructional relevance; 24x7 just-in-time tutoring services may be able to provide this support to students who are encountering specific problems.

- Over the long term, institutions may consider providing more online options for segments of students more likely to benefit from these, such as returning adults. Where appropriate, online options can allow for more student entry points (e.g., not just in September and January), expand the college's ability to deliver high-demand courses, and reduce bottlenecks to completion.

- Institutions need to systematically capture data about what they are doing and use it to analyze where they can improve and whether their changes are working. They can also compare themselves to others, using data such as the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) and Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS).

When you can't do it all alone:
Finding the right strategic partnership

Often, community colleges have relatively clear goals and a general sense of how to pursue them. However, they may not have the resources or flexibility to make the fundamental changes that are necessary.

Many colleges solve this problem through external partnerships. The right partner may contribute:

Financial resources

Partners can invest in new programs and staff in exchange for some of the revenue they generate later, through higher enrollment and retention.
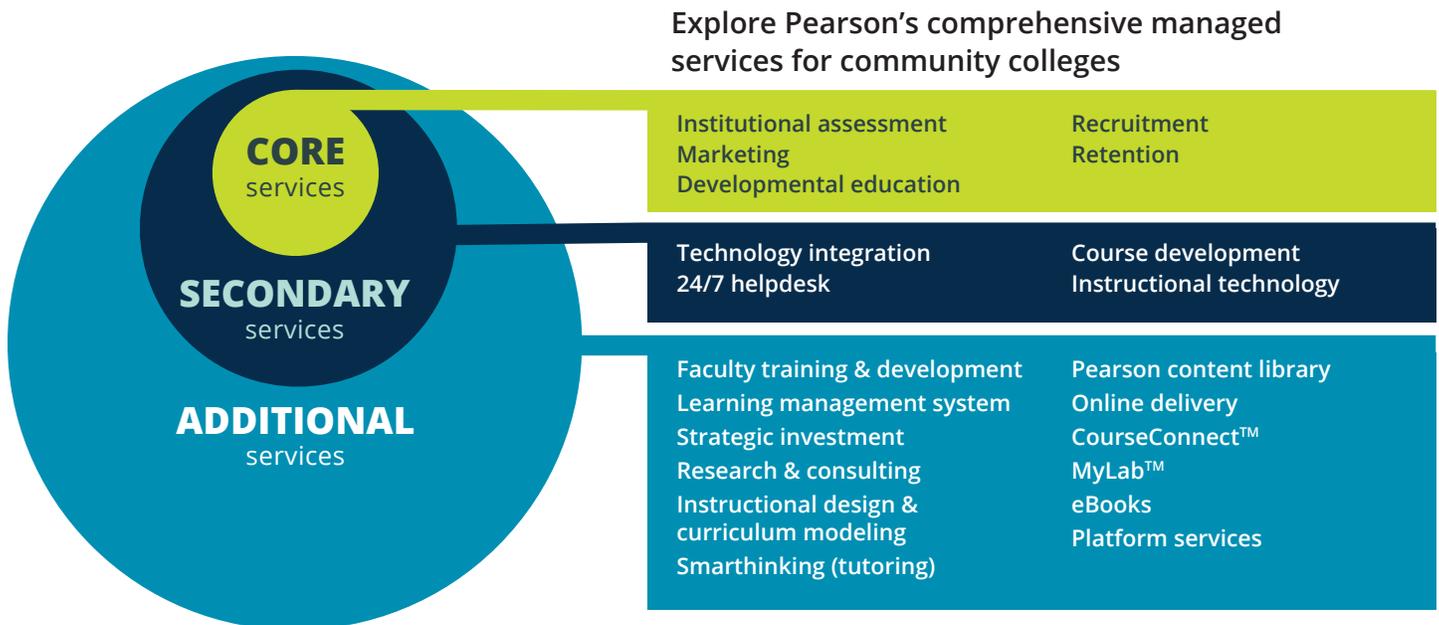
People and skillsets

Partners can fill gaps in your capabilities— for example, in marketing, advising, course development, or in establishing employer relationships.

Best practices

Partners can help you introduce innovative programs and processes that have been proven elsewhere.

Technology

Partners can introduce technology to quickly improve student support and cost-effectively scale improvements.

Successful partnerships are built for the long term, sharing risk and reward. Your partner should be willing to invest significantly; to magnify (not simply replace) existing capabilities; and to listen, customizing solutions around your unique institution.

A partner should have strong research skills to help shape strategy and tactics. It should be skilled at integrating functions holistically, so students don't fall through the cracks. It should collaborate closely to help you define success, measure progress, and overcome obstacles. Finally, your partner should be there, with a strong on-campus presence.

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CORE services

Institutional assessment	Recruitment
Marketing	Retention
Developmental education	

SECONDARY services

| Technology integration | Course development |
| 24/7 helpdesk | Instructional technology |

ADDITIONAL services

Faculty training & development	Pearson content library
Learning management system	Online delivery
Strategic investment	CourseConnect™
Research & consulting	MyLab™
Instructional design & curriculum modeling	eBooks
Smarthinking (tutoring)	Platform services

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"We are engaging with a select group of colleges to determine areas where Pearson can provide a focused set of services to help them enable their goals as they grow student enrollments and work to improve retention throughout the student lifecycle."

—Todd Hitchcock
Senior Vice President, Pearson

"It's an exciting opportunity for Cincinnati State to work with Pearson; they will help the college leverage its resources to provide the very best in terms of marketing, recruiting and student support. Pearson is willing to work with us in a revenue sharing model, instead of charging us large agency fees which is typical for work of this kind."

—Monica Posey, Ph.D.
Interim President, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College

For 20 years, Pearson has pioneered the partnership model. Let's discuss whether partnering may be your best strategy. To learn more, speak with us, or request a consultation, please visit pearsoned.com/managed-services.

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