The Value of Community Colleges: RECENT STUDENTS’ MOTIVATIONS AND OUTCOMES
To better understand the value community colleges provide to individuals and communities, we need to acknowledge the range of needs they serve.

Degree completion and transfer are important markers of success, but focusing exclusively on these outcomes obscures other contributions of these institutions. This study offers new insights by examining recent community college students’ motivations for enrolling and their self-reported perceptions of the value of their education and training experiences and the degree to which they achieved their goals for enrolling. We find that recent students’ motivations for attending community college include career advancement, personal fulfillment, and contributions to community. The outcomes they pursue are similarly diverse, ranging from skill development, to certificates, to degrees, to transfer. Career-related motivations are most common, yet fewer than half of career-seeking students report that their education helped them to fulfill these motivations. Likewise, less than half reported developing the skills that proved to be the most strongly associated with their subsequent outcomes — such as critical thinking, communication, or leadership. Finally, while motivations and goals are diverse, we find an earnings threshold below which recent students are far less likely to feel that their education was worth the cost or that it helped them to achieve their goals.

In trying to fulfill all the aspirations of their students, community colleges face complex challenges. They receive less than half the per-student revenue of their four-year counterparts, and the community colleges serving the greatest numbers of students facing systemic barriers are often the most under-resourced. Yet these institutions are vital to so many communities, enrolling the majority of students older than age 22, approximately half of Native American or Hispanic undergraduates, and more than a third of Black undergraduates. Community colleges also serve a much higher percentage of first-generation students [64% of their enrolled students] compared to their four-year counterparts [47%].
Discussions of the value of community college often center on completion or transfer rates. In this report, we add a new perspective to the topic by examining the performance of community colleges from the point of view of the students who attended them, focusing on recent students’ perceptions of value and goal fulfillment.

This report illuminates how recent community college alumni — those who attended, whether or not they completed a degree — reflect on their motivations, experiences, and outcomes. To collect this data, we partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago to administer the Strada Community College Outcomes Survey to a nationally representative sample of 1,139 individuals who attended a community college within the past 10 years and are not currently enrolled. Notably, only about 1 in 3 of these recent students had completed an associate degree. Some reported having this goal and falling short, while others indicated they had never intended to complete an associate degree but had other goals for enrolling.

By exploring completion goals along with motivations for attending — including career advancement, contributions to community, and personal fulfillment — this research provides an assessment of how community colleges perform against recent students’ own expectations and reflections. Our findings affirm the power of meeting objective markers of progress, with degree completion, transfer, and earnings linked to increased perceptions of educational value. At the same time, the findings highlight additional markers of value, such as the development of key skills linked to post-completion success and satisfaction.
The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes
Among the variety of motivations for enrolling, career motivations are most common, but least likely to be fulfilled, with just less than half of recent students reporting that their education helped them to achieve their desired career outcomes. Personal and community-related motivations are less widespread, but more likely to be fulfilled.

A narrow focus on completion rates, while highly relevant to economic and career mobility, obscures important contributions. Though only about 1 in 3 community college attendees in the study had completed an associate degree, most report achieving what they sought from their community college experience.

Degree completion or transfer matters. Community college attendees who complete an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution value their education at rates much higher than those who did not complete a credential, and comparable to or higher than recent bachelor’s degree completers. At the same time, value perceptions of first-generation students are about 20 percentage points lower than those of continuing generation students. This difference persists even when attainment levels are equivalent.

Perceptions of value diverge at an earnings threshold. Respondents earning less than the median of $48,000 are less likely to feel their education was worth the cost or helped them to achieve their goals. However, additional increases in earnings beyond this threshold are not tied to incremental differences in perceptions of value.

Self-reported skill development is closely tied to students’ post-completion earnings and their perspectives on the value of their education. Recent students who say that their education helped them to develop communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills earn more money and rate the value of their education more highly than those who do not feel that their education helped them to develop these skills.
Community college students have a variety of motivations for enrolling. Factor analysis of the survey responses to 11 different enrollment motivation questions reveals that motivations statistically group into three distinct underlying constructs, which we label work, personal, and community. The individual survey items that constitute the overarching factors are listed in Table 1 below, and the percent of respondents rating these as extremely or very important can be seen in Figure 1.

### Table 1

Results of Factor Analysis of Motivations for Enrolling in Community College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORK</th>
<th>PERSONAL</th>
<th>COMMUNITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased earnings</td>
<td>Becoming the best version of self</td>
<td>Helping future generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Familiarization with people, ideas, and cultures of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting self and family</td>
<td>Being a good role model</td>
<td>Contributing to community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career-relevant skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>Making family and community proud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 1

Recent Students’ Motivations for Enrolling

Percent indicating the factor was extremely or very important to them.

- **Work:** 60%
- **Personal:** 54%
- **Community:** 33%
Almost half of recent students (48%) report that two of these three considerations were very important to them, highlighting their beliefs that education and training would improve their lives in multiple ways.

When looking at all 11 items, the average student categorizes at least seven of these reasons for enrolling as “extremely” or “very important.” The most frequently cited motivations are gaining skills to be successful in work (74%) and learning new things (73%), with 63 percent of recent students reporting both these motivations were a high priority for them. Nearly 7 in 10 identify other career and financial objectives such as supporting a family (69%), advancing a career (69%), and making more money (69%). Goals related to personal development, being a role model, and making family proud are endorsed by about 6 in 10 of recent students. Aspirations related to family, future generations, and communities range from 51-41 percent (see Figure 2). Ten percent of recent students report that none of the listed motivations were very or extremely important to them. These aspirations are very consistent with what we find in a survey that asks the same questions of recent bachelor’s degree completers. Students enrolled in two-year or four-year institutions prioritize career motivations, but also value learning and have other personal and community-related motivations.

**Figure 2**

**Recent Community College Students’ Retroactively Reported Motivations for Enrolling**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely or very important reason for pursuing education.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain Skills to Be Successful in Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Self &amp; Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make More Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn New Things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Version of Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a Role Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Others Proud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Future Generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different People, Ideas, Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students’ Motivations and Outcomes
The majority of recent students report fulfilling their personal and community-related motivations, but fewer report achieving their desired career outcomes. Examining goal fulfillment across the three factors of Work, Personal, and Community, fewer than half of respondents who identify Work objectives as an enrollment priority agree their goals were fulfilled, while nearly two-thirds of those who identify Personal or Community objectives as a priority agree they were fulfilled (see Figure 3).

Within these three factors, recent students are most likely to agree they fulfilled their goals when it came to discrete items (see Figure 4):

- Learning new things (70% of those with this motivation).
- Becoming familiar with people, cultures, and ideas different from their own (68% of those with this motivation).
- Being a good role model (67% of those with this motivation).
However, among recent students who cite work-related motivations, such as making more money, advancing their career, supporting self and family, and gaining skills to be successful in work, only about half agree that their education helped to fulfill them.

Overall, 75 percent of recent students who identify extremely or very important reasons for pursuing education agree or strongly agree their education helped them accomplish at least one of these goals.6
Just as they have diverse motivations for enrolling, recent students also report having diverse attainment goals across the spectrum of transfer, degrees, certificates, courses, and skills. Recent attendees were asked to look back and identify which education pathway(s) they intended to complete upon enrollment. Respondents were allowed to select more than one type of degree, credential, or other attainment goal. Approximately two-thirds (65%) indicate that their goal when enrolling was either to complete a credential, such as an associate degree or certificate, or to transfer their courses to another institution. The other third indicated they were seeking courses for skill, professional, or personal development as shown in Figure 5.

A more detailed breakdown is provided in Table 2, where percentages add up to more than 100, as many respondents select multiple goals. In our sample, only 37 percent of recent attendees report that they had intended to complete an associate degree — a marked contrast from the 4 in 5 current community college students who report they are seeking an associate degree through the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. While the survey samples and methodologies differ, the magnitude of the gaps between current and recent students highlight considerations of social desirability and cognitive dissonance for both groups. Current students may overreport their attainment aspirations and recent students may underreport them. Current students may be incentivized to report being degree-seeking for financial aid purposes. Recent attendees may not want to admit to missing their objective. It also could be that recent attendees have changed their perspective on what they wanted from their education and report those new values as their original goals. These are questions for further research, and they highlight some of the contextual considerations of retroactive self-reporting for this survey.
Table 2

Recent Community College Students’ Attainment Goals in Retrospect - Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDUCATION LEVEL</th>
<th>PERCENT OF RECENT STUDENTS WITH THIS GOAL (RETROSPECTIVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills for career</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest/ Enjoyment</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many community college alumni report multiple goals. For example, among the 65 percent who report a transfer or degree goal:

- 55 percent sought to develop skills for their career.
- 31 percent combined attainment with personal interest.
- 26 percent sought professional development.
- 22 percent reported concurrent interest in a certificate.

More than half (55%) of recent students had at least two goals, and a third (33%) had three or more goals.
The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students’ Motivations and Outcomes

**Fulfillment of attainment goals**

In our sample of alumni that had attended a community college anytime in the past 10 years, 29 percent had completed an associate degree — even lower than the national six-year completion rate of 43.1 percent. However, matching actual attainment with retrospectively reported attainment goals, gives a different measure of success. Among those who indicated that they had been seeking an associate degree, 58 percent completed this degree. Similarly, 60 percent of those who indicated that a certificate had been their goal had completed this credential (see Figure 7).

**Demographic variation**

The biggest differences in attainment goals by demographic group are by age of attendance (age 24 or younger or older than 24). Across both groups, roughly 4 in 10 report that their goal was an associate degree, and 1 in 3 say they did not intend to complete any credential or transfer. However, those who attended at age 24 or younger were more likely to intend to transfer courses without completing an associate degree compared to older students, while older students were more likely to report pursuing a certificate without intending to complete an associate degree or transfer (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6 Recent Community College Students’ Attainment Goals by Age of Attendance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Age 24 or younger</th>
<th>Older than 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer, no associate</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate, no associate or transfer</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses, no credential or transfer</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* signifies statistically significant difference at the p<0.05 level.
Many respondents completed multiple attainment goals. When consolidating attainment levels by highest level completed, as shown in Figure 8, we see that 29 percent completed an associate degree, 44 percent completed an associate degree or transferred, and 61 percent either completed a certificate, associate degree, or transferred.

Overall, most respondents (72%) report completing the highest level of education they were seeking at their community college. Furthermore, about 20 percent of the sample had gone on to complete a bachelor’s degree after leaving community college. Associate degree completers or transfer students were most likely to go on to complete a bachelor’s degree (about 1 in 3), while about 15 percent of certificate completers had gone on to a bachelor’s degree (see Figure 9).

These data suggest that the way completion rates are traditionally captured at the national level is not a complete reflection of what community colleges actually contribute toward the completion of relevant credentials.
To gain insight into how recent students view the value of their experiences, we examine the results from two questions focused specifically on their community college education:

Did your education help you achieve your goals?

Was your education worth the cost?

Recent students’ perceptions of the value of their education are relatively strong for students who complete an associate degree or transfer, but weaker for those who complete certificates or those who do not complete a credential or transfer (see Figure 10).

Overall, perceptions of the value of their education among recent community college students compare favorably to those of bachelor’s degree completers. In a 2022 survey, among bachelor’s degree completers from the past decade, 72 percent feel that their education helped them to achieve their goals and 63 percent agree or strongly agree that their education was worth the cost. In our analysis, recent associate degree completers and students who transfer have comparable or slightly higher perceptions of the value of their education. Among all community college attendees who complete the highest level of education that they had been seeking, 64 percent feel it was worth the cost and 68 percent feel it helped them to achieve their goals.
Demographic variation
Perceptions of the value of community college differ across demographic groups. Recent students who were older than 24 when they last attended or graduated are about 10 percentage points more likely to view their education as worth the cost and helping them achieve their goals compared to those who last attended or graduated at younger ages, as shown in Figure 11.

Hispanic or Latino respondents are least likely to feel their education was worth the cost or helped them to achieve their goals, as seen in Figure 12.
However, the differences between recent students who were the first in their families to attend college and those whose parents had gone to college are even larger. Value perceptions of first-generation students are about 20 percentage points lower than those of continuing generation students, as seen in Figure 13. In fact, when first-generation status is taken into account, the differences by race and ethnicity are no longer statistically significant. The differences in value perception by first-generation status hold across every attainment level.

Further research could illuminate whether the different value perceptions we see by age, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status are tied to additional factors, including family socioeconomic status, high school preparation, additional responsibilities during community college attendance, and enrollment in different fields of study. For example, at the bachelor’s degree level, we know that first-generation students and Black and Latino students are overrepresented in fields of study that tend to lead to lower earnings, such as education or social work, and underrepresented in high-earning fields, such as computer science and engineering. Additional research could more deeply examine the distribution of fields of study by race, income, and first-generation status at the community college level. While this sample size does not allow for analysis by field of study, we are able to explore the relationship between value perceptions and post-education earnings.
Post-education earnings

The median earnings for recent attendees in our study who are employed full time is $48,000. This threshold appears to be associated with differences in value perceptions. Above the individual income threshold of $48,000 annually, recent community college attendees are more likely to report their education was worth the cost and helped them achieve their goals. Individuals above the wage threshold are nearly 20 percentage points more likely to believe their education is worth the cost and 15 percentage points more likely to report it helped them achieve their goals. However, there is much less variation with income among those above the wage threshold (see Figure 14). Above this $48,000 threshold, there is no statistically significant relationship between post-attendance earnings and perceptions of value or goal achievement.

**Figure 14** Recent Community College Students’ Perceptions of Value by Post-Completion Earnings Quartiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achieved goals</th>
<th>Quartile 4 (More than $75,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 3 ($48,001 to $75,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 2 ($34,001 to $48,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 1 ($0-$34,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worth the cost</th>
<th>Quartile 4 (More than $75,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 3 ($48,001 to $75,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 2 ($34,001 to $48,000)</th>
<th>Quartile 1 ($0-$34,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study did not have sufficient sample size to disaggregate earnings by program, but prior research has found wide variation in earnings outcomes by field of study at both the associate and certificate level.¹²

In our data, we find large earnings disparities by race and ethnicity among those now employed full time, with 58 percent of white community college alumni earning more than $48,000 per year, but only 47 percent of Latino alumni and 35 percent of Black alumni meeting this threshold, as shown in Figure 15.

**Figure 15**

Percent of Full-Time Employed Respondents Earning at Least $48,000 Per Year, by Race/Ethnicity

- **White**: 58%
- **Latino**: 47%
- **Black**: 35%

* signifies statistically significant difference at the p<0.05 level.
Differences in earnings are significantly associated with whether a student has gone on to earn a bachelor’s degree (see Figure 16). About two-thirds of recent attendees who had completed bachelor’s degrees met the $48,000 income threshold, while fewer than half of recent attendees with associate degrees or certificates and about half of attendees without a credential or transfer met this threshold. This is consistent with Bureau of Labor Statistics information about earnings by educational attainment.¹³

When controlling for the level of education completed, differences between the percentage of white and Latino alumni meeting this threshold are no longer statistically significant, but gaps between white and Black alumni remain at about 20 percentage points. This tracks with data from the National Center for Education Statistics that shows that earnings disparities by race remain, even among individuals with the same level of education.¹⁴ The magnitude of these differences points to the need for further research to identify potential solutions that could close these gaps.
In order to assess the institutional practices associated with stronger student outcomes, the Community College Outcomes Survey includes items focused on student experiences while enrolled, including academic support, career services, student support, and skills development (see appendix for a complete list of survey items). To uncover the variables most strongly associated with recent students’ perceptions of value, we ran a series of regression models — controlling for gender, first-generation status, race and ethnicity, year of attendance, field of study, level of education completed, and post-completion income. We find that the strongest predictor of positive perceptions of value is the extent to which recent students feel they developed specific skills during their education.

The skills included in the survey are drawn from the most in-demand skills for employers according to job postings as well as key skills identified by higher education partners and alumni. This set of skills overlaps significantly with those in both the National Association of Colleges and Employers competencies and the American Association of Colleges and Universities Essential Learning Outcomes.

Through factor analysis of the survey responses, we identify three cohesive groupings for the 14 individual skills (see Table 3). We characterize these clusters of skills as:

- **Synthesis skills** — characterized by the ability to think and communicate effectively, solve problems, learn new things, and mobilize others.

- **Collaborative skills** — characterized by the ability to build productive relationships with others and identify opportunities and creative solutions.

- **Analytic skills** — characterized by knowledge of quantitative, organizational, or digital skills.
Table 3: Results of Factor Analysis of Self-Reported Skill Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYNTHESIS SKILLS</th>
<th>COLLABORATIVE SKILLS</th>
<th>ANALYTIC SKILLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Networking and building relationships</td>
<td>Data analysis or statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Digital literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking/problem-solving</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Project management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to learn new things</td>
<td>Cultural awareness and inclusivity</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alumni who feel their education strongly developed their synthesis skills — verbal and written communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, ability to learn new things, and leadership — are significantly more likely to feel that their education was worth the cost and helped them achieve their goals, as shown in Figures 17 and 18.

Recent students who report developing these five synthesis skills “a great deal” are more than 60 percentage points more likely than those who say they did not develop these skills at all to report that their education was worth the cost and helped them to achieve their goals. Even moving from “some” skill development to “a great deal” of skill development is associated with a 20-percentage-point greater likelihood of feeling education was worth the cost or helped a student achieve his or her goals.

Examined in a model together, the other two skill clusters — collaborative and analytic — are not significantly connected to perceptions of value, but this is because they are highly correlated with synthesis skills. On their own, each of these skill clusters are also associated with stronger value perceptions.
Figure 17
Recent Community College Students’ Perceptions of Cost Value by Self-Reported Skills Development

Figure 18
Recent Community College Students’ Perceptions of Goal Achievement by Self-Reported Skills Development

* signifies statistically significant difference at the p<0.05 level.
Perceptions of synthesis skill development are also associated with increased earnings: $1,883 more in predicted current annual earnings for each step up on the skill development scale, translating to about $7,500 higher annual earnings for going from the lowest level to the highest level, or just over $3,700 higher earnings for going from “some” skill development to “a great deal.” Perceptions of collaborative skill development and analytic skill development are also associated with increased earnings, but the relationship is not statistically significant; a larger sample size could better test the relationship between these variables.

Looking at specific skills within the synthesis skill factor reveals that just under half of recent students report their education helped them develop critical thinking and communication “quite a bit” or “a great deal.” Approximately 1 in 3 report strong development of leadership skills or any of the collaborative or analytic skills, as shown in Figure 19. This highlights the opportunity community colleges have to examine their support for students to develop these skills.

Figure 19 Recent Community College Students’ Self-Reported Skills Development

Education helped to develop “quite a bit” or “a great deal.”
Conclusion and Recommendations
Over the past few years, steep enrollment declines have coincided with policy proposals for free two-year degrees and federal investments in workforce education, such as Build Back Better and the Good Jobs Challenge.\textsuperscript{17,18} These new resource investments reflect renewed focus on the importance of America’s community colleges. The high expectations placed on community colleges cut across multiple roles — from community connector to workforce developer, to postsecondary education entry point. Across all these diverse stakeholder expectations, this report explores the value that community colleges offer their primary constituency: students. We add to the existing literature by shedding light on the full range of reasons students pursue community college and the role that career outcomes and earnings play in student perceptions of value.

Our findings show that students bring many different motivations and goals to their community college education, and often do not share the singular view of attainment used by educational leaders and policymakers. Most recent students we surveyed retroactively report they achieved their completion goal, whether that was a degree, transfer, a certificate, or another objective. Yet in terms of fulfilling their motivations, many recent students experienced challenges in translating what they were learning into career advancement or increased earnings. Likewise, fewer than half reported developing the skills that proved to be the most strongly associated with subsequent outcomes — such as critical thinking, communication, or leadership.

Community colleges are vital to our education and training ecosystem, particularly as they provide an affordable, open-access option for upskilling or reskilling. To better fulfill the aspirations of their students, we offer the following recommendations.
Clear Outcomes

This study found that alumni earning less than $48,000 per year were significantly less likely to say that their education was worth the cost or that they had achieved their goals, compared to their higher-earning peers. In addition, we find large racial and ethnic disparities in the percentage of recent students meeting this threshold. Yet too many community colleges lack data on the outcomes of their students after they graduate, and so are unable to assess their employment and earnings outcomes. The recommendations below speak to promising practices and use cases for better state and federal longitudinal data.

States, community colleges, and learners need to understand more about the employment outcomes of graduates, including earnings, the occupations students enter, and their career trajectories. The lack of data is especially acute for students who complete nondegree credentials. One promising initiative to fill data gaps is the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes partnership between states and the U.S. Census Bureau to provide earnings and employment outcomes for college and university graduates by degree level, major, and postsecondary institution.

More needs to be understood about effective approaches to closing outcomes disparities for Black, Latino, and first-generation students. These disparities may, in part, be attributed to program of study. A strong longitudinal data infrastructure could illuminate the link between K-12 academic preparation and exposure to high-wage career pathways, such as through career and technical education or dual enrollment, and subsequent enrollment in high-value fields of study. In addition, to better understand disparities in student enrollments and completions in particular programs on their campuses, colleges can employ tools such as the Community College Research Center (CCRC) guide with examples and instructions for analyses.

If, after analyzing their data, institutions find disparities in enrollment in high-wage fields, they need to know what to do next. To this end, the CCRC is working with the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program on a project called Unlocking Opportunity to partner with 10 community colleges in supporting students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds to enter and complete programs leading directly to jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage or to efficient completion of a bachelor’s degree. Strategies that are identified as effective from this program may inform other institutions looking to close their own enrollment and earnings disparities.
Quality Coaching

As this report highlights, community college students have diverse goals. Institutions may be limited in their ability to customize the student experience, but personalized coaching can help students recognize and draw pathways to meet their unique goals. The recommendations below speak to what states, institutions, and researchers can contribute in this regard.

**State funding could provide more resources for coaching and advising, both at the community college level and before.** For example, Mississippi recently designated $8 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to put dedicated career coaches in every high school.\(^\text{20}\) Nationally, average student-to-counselor or advisor ratios are far higher than recommended. Additional funds could bring these ratios down to ensure that students get the personalized guidance they need to choose the pathways that are best for them.

**Students entering community college would benefit from better information and guidance on the career outcomes and wages associated with various education pathways.** The variety of programs available can be confusing, and many community college students may not have a clear idea of what their chosen career path is and how education can help them to get there. The Community College Research Center’s Ask-Connect-Inspire framework and the practices outlined in the National Institute for Student Success accelerator provide examples of how community colleges might re-imagine student onboarding to connect individuals to programs of value that interest and inspire them from the start.\(^\text{21}\) This includes having early conversations with students about their interests, strengths, and aspirations in order to help them find an academic and career path that is a good fit; proactively organizing opportunities for all students to meet with faculty, other students, alumni, and employers in fields of interest to them; and encouraging every student to take at least one course in their field of interest in their first term, rather than waiting until after all general education courses are complete.

**More needs to be learned about how students make choices about what to study and how and when they can be guided or coached toward options that have greater probability of bringing about the career and earnings outcomes they seek.** Prior research has established that earnings outcomes are influential for students but that students also make choices based on their own skills and talents to select a major in which they perceive themselves to have a comparative advantage.\(^\text{22}\) Furthermore, while the most common source of advice on what to study comes from informal social networks, these networks are not as available for first-generation college students, and other sources of advice may be more valuable.\(^\text{23}\) Further research could illuminate the role of information, messaging, lived experience, relationships, and self-perception and identity among other factors in student decision-making.
Employer Alignment

Career-related motivations were most important to recent students and yet were also the area in which they are most likely to say that their education fell short. At the same time, a powerful predictor of students feeling that their education helped them to achieve their goals and was worth the cost was the extent to which they felt they had developed certain skills that are commonly valued by employers. Taken together, these findings suggest that institutions can better support career-seeking students by focusing on high-demand skills. The following recommendations offer a few ways that institutions and states might consider approaching this work.

**Institutions will serve students well by helping them to develop the skills that are most valuable in the workplace,** including a combination of career-specific and transferable skills. Part of this effort involves employer and industry sector partnerships grounded in data-informed assessment of talent needs. In its Workforce Playbook, the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program offers a number of practical tips for how community colleges can engage employers. Some examples are: creating easy on-ramps and business-friendly systems for partners; executing a data-driven and strategic program approval process focused on regional supply-demand talent gaps for high-wage jobs; engaging people from different parts of a company when defining needed skills and credentials for students not only to be hired, but also advance in the company; integrating meaningful work-based learning into programs; hiring program leaders with industry experience; and working toward continuous improvement by providing channels for honest and critical feedback.

**State funding models also can help by encouraging institutions to offer more high-demand high-wage programs that also may have higher operating costs.** If the state were to subsidize these programs or reward institutions for credentials awarded in high-demand industries, community colleges could expand capacity and increase access for students. One example of this is the new Texas model that awards most state funds based on student outcomes including credentials earned in high-demand fields, university transfer rates, and enrollment of “economically disadvantaged” and “academically disadvantaged” students. Other models to learn from include engineering, manufacturing, and computing initiatives across various states in which new funding has been dedicated for institutions to create additional capacity if the institutions match the new funding — often by reallocating from programs that are not connected to high-demand jobs.
The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes


Advisors in the creation of the survey included leaders from Dallas College, Honolulu Community College, Ivy Tech Community College, Northern Virginia Community College, and Rio Salado College.

A general population age 18-plus sample was selected from NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel for this study. After screening, adults age 18-plus who attended community college in the past 10 years and are not currently enrolled qualified for the survey. Responses are weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and census division to benchmarks from the Current Population Survey for the population of U.S. adults age 18-plus who attended community college in the past 10 years. The survey was fielded from December 2, 2022-January 23, 2023.

Approximately 10 percent of students do not identify any of the above reasons as extremely or very important for them.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement is administered in the spring to mostly returning students. The 2020-2022 cohort consists of 438 institutions. Results can be found here.


This 20-percent bachelor’s degree completion rate is slightly higher than the national six-year bachelor’s completion rate for community college transfers of 15.5 percent. The difference between these two metrics is that the respondents in this survey varied in terms of how long it had been since their community college attendance, rather than being part of a single comparable cohort.


According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, median wages in 2021 for associate degree holders age 25 and older employed full time was approximately $50,000. The equivalent for the some college, no degree population was about $47,000. The population of this study is slightly different in that it is focused on recent attendees only and includes attendees younger than 25 years old who are no longer enrolled.


Top in-demand skills based on job postings were provided by the labor market analytics firm Emis, which is now Lightcast.
References

16 This is consistent with the findings in the 2022 Strada Outcomes Survey for bachelor’s degree recipients in that perceived skill development is the strongest predictor of value.


About Strada Education Foundation
Strada supports programs, policies, and organizations that strengthen connections between postsecondary education and opportunity in the U.S., with a focus on helping people who face the greatest challenges. We advance this mission through research, grantmaking, social impact investments, public policy solutions, and Strada-supported nonprofit organizations, including CAEL, Education at Work, InsideTrack, and Roadtrip Nation. We collaborate with students, educators, employers, policymakers, and other partners to help create more equitable pathways to prosperity. Learn more at stradaeducation.org.