

Perspectives

APRIL 2021 www.ferris.edu/alliance

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

As the nation grapples with the many challenges related to the pandemic, colleges need to re-engage students who stayed away due to COVID.

- Clive Belfield and Thomas Brock

Associate degree and certificate recipients in late spring 2020 account for much of the loss in first-time graduates, reflecting the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on community college students.

- National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

COVID-19 Hit Us Hard, but Community College Enrollment Challenges Are a Pre-Existing Condition

Christina Royal, PhD

President
Holyoke Community College
Holyoke, Massachusetts

Holyoke Community College (HCC) is celebrating its 75th year anniversary this year as the oldest two-year public college in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. While HCC has never experienced a pandemic, it is no stranger to challenging times. In the fall of 1967, HCC moved into a beautiful new building and, four months later, a fire caused the entire college to burn to the ground. Resilience is part of our history, and that is exactly how we are approaching this moment in time.

The challenges faced by community colleges in this pandemic are not new. They are more extreme versions of the challenges that we—and our students—face every day. Since the peak of the 2008 recession, community college enrollment trends have shown continuing declines, and the pandemic has exacerbated that trend.

The pandemic has also disrupted the usual enrollment patterns. While enrollment in community colleges typically increases during economic downturns when unemployment rises, today's circumstances are extraordinary. Although unemployment increased last year, the economy is being supported by federal and state stimulus dollars. There is also great uncertainty as we continue to navigate the pandemic. This uncertainty has translated into a wait-and-see mentality for many current and prospective students, increasing the numbers of those who pause, dropout, or delay their start.

In some respects, the pandemic is a gift to community colleges because it has challenged us to revisit our approach to educating and supporting students.

We also know that marginalized communities, including low-income, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), disabled, and LGBTQ+ students, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and that community colleges educate the majority share of these populations of learners. HCC is geographically located in the city of Holyoke, in which more than half of the residents are Hispanic or Latinx. Our enrollment trends during the pandemic reflect this disproportion. Compared to fall 2019, among all students, HCC Hispanic students experienced the largest enrollment decline (-18%) in Fall 2020, followed by Black students (-16%). The same was true for Spring 2021, when Hispanic student headcounts dropped 28% from the prior Spring term. Another concerning trend is the severe drop in the number of

male students pursuing higher education. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the decrease of male students (-14.7%) attending two-year public institutions from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 was more than double as compared to female students (-6.8%). The share of enrollments of male students at HCC during the pandemic, decreased from 36% in Spring 2020 to 32% of all students in Spring 2021.

Despite the sobering trends, as I listen to HCC students describe their experiences during the pandemic, I am impressed by their resiliency, the creative ways they are navigating this crisis, and their commitment to improving their lives through education. However, I am dismayed by the disproportionate impact current conditions are having on some students. Community colleges were birthed out of the idea that a college education should be available to all. It's why we are affordable, open access institutions, embedded in our communities. But the experiences, and the obstacles, are not the same for all students. In some respects, the pandemic is a gift to community colleges because it has challenged us to revisit our approach to educating and supporting students, including a more profound understanding of the importance of tailoring the experiences to differing needs of our current and prospective students, and perhaps new strategies in which to approach student engagement and success.

Much of last year and this semester has been focused on crisis management and responding to the enormous challenges that our students, faculty, and staff faced in responding to a pandemic on a level that none of us have ever experienced. At the same time, we have been forced to confront the longer term impacts to our students and the institution. Some of the answers to our enrollment challenges are being addressed in response to the pandemic. We've added new systems, such as live chat for students, that will likely continue post-pandemic. We've procured a student management system that will improve tracking of data that will allow us to better understand which parts of the student experience are working well, and also identify those areas that need more attention.

HCC, for one, has been addressing basic and emergency needs since before COVID-19 arrived. In 2019, The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University (The Hope Center) surveyed 612 HCC students, and found that:

- ▲ 46% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days.
- ▲ 50% of respondents cannot afford to eat balanced meals.
- ▲ 51% of respondents worry about running out of food before they have money to buy more.

(continued on page 4)

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

In recent times, community colleges have experienced drastic shifts in student enrollment patterns due to a variety of factors. However, in the past year alone, the coronavirus pandemic has had a formidable impact on community college enrollment. Whether students will return once the pandemic recedes – or whether the loss of some students will be permanent and result in long-term economic consequences – is yet unknown. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Lesha Montford Gregory, MS

Interim Vice President of Instruction
and Student Services
Metropolitan Community College
– Penn Valley Campus
Kansas City, Missouri

This past year has been challenging for everyone in this country. We had to deal with a pandemic, death, job loss, food and housing insecurities, racial hatred and divide, elections, and more. It has been said that we are in this together and we will get through this too. I do not know about you, but there have been a few times during the past year when I asked myself if we are really in this together. Whenever I contemplated this question, students at my institution would always come to mind because I wanted to know how they are coping with all of this and what can we do to help them press forward and not give up. Most higher education institutions, including mine, have done a good job of transitioning to a virtual environment and providing resources to students to ease the transition and if this is the case, then why have students given up, causing community college enrollment to plummet?

During a normal community college enrollment trend, enrollment increases when the economy downturns. Unfortunately, this trend has not been realized in the pandemic. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, enrollment at community colleges decreased by 10% and even more so among African Americans and Native Americans. While likely there are many reasons why students are not returning or enrolling in school, I wonder if one reason is due to our lack of personalized customer service and relationship-building. Such support would indicate that we not only want to educate and provide them with skills to improve their lives, but are also concerned about what else is happening in their lives.

A recent article revealed how Los Angeles City College retained students during the pandemic. They implemented a customer service approach that emphasized a caring aspect and a first-year experience program that helped build the relationship between the student and institution. At my institution, Metropolitan Community College – Penn Valley campus, we implemented a new program this past fall called Wolfpack Navigators. The program is designed for faculty, staff, and administrators to answer student questions, assist with identifying college and community resources, help students with any challenges they are facing, and ultimately, build relationships and make students feel valued by the college. Students can choose to opt out of the program, but those who remain receive this service until they graduate. After reading the article and the implementation of Wolfpack Navigators, I began to think about my personal undergraduate experience and how it could have been different if these options were in place when I faced major life issues that caused me to stop attending school.

Community colleges do an excellent job of educating and training students with the necessary workforce skills. But to educate more students, I am convinced that we must incorporate a more personal and caring aspect to our programs and services to support all our students.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community colleges begin to attract students back to college as the pandemic ebbs?

Archie Thomas, MBA

Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Ivy Tech Community College
Kokomo, Indiana

There has been a steady decline in community college enrollment of 2.2% since 2010. This equates to a decrease of more than one million students between 2010 and 2017. The number of

students attending community colleges during the Fall 2020 declined by more than 10% from the previous year according to National Student Clearinghouse data from mid-December. Additionally, there was a 21% decrease in first-time enrollment and an even more alarming drop of 29% enrollment of African American, Hispanic American, and Native American first-year students. Historically community college leaders argue there was a counter-cyclical relationship between enrollment and the state of the economy. A plunge in the economy increased enrollment and a boost in the economy decreased enrollment. As a result, many community college professionals would have anticipated an increase in enrollment due to the recent economic downturn brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the current economic dip is unparalleled in comparison to the Great Recession of 2008, clearly seen by the enrollment numbers. Furthermore, associate degree enrollments declined 8.7% from fall of 2019, students seeking certificates dropped 8.9% following a 2.3% decline in the fall of 2019, and enrollment of part-time students declined 10.1% compared to the same period.

Due to the decline in enrollment, coupled with the economic blow induced by the pandemic, community colleges could possibly encounter severe cuts to their funding allocations during a crucial time when more resources are needed. While many community colleges were able to quickly transition to virtual learning, their students are confronted with additional challenges. For example, with virtual learning, students need access to computers and Internet. Moreover, most community colleges have vocational and hands-on programs which are difficult to transition to an online format. Further, students also grapple with finances, affordability, mental issues associated with the pandemic, and remote learning among others.

The enrollment challenges of community colleges have a tremendous impact on future economic development. For example, 54% of construction companies have difficulty finding qualified workers according to the Associated General Contractors of American. This shortage also includes engineers, estimators, and other occupations trained at community colleges, such as nurses, cybersecurity experts, and manufacturing employees.

Although the magnitude of declining enrollment is alarming, community colleges have encountered an influential ally in the White House in Dr. Jill Biden, the nation's First Lady and an English professor at Northern Virginia Community College. Hopefully, the Biden administration will begin to advocate strongly for community colleges and their students.



Lesha Montford Gregory is serving as Interim Vice President of Instruction and Student Services at Metropolitan Community College – Penn Valley campus in Kansas City, where she is responsible for leadership and direction in coordinating, implementing, and evaluating instruction and student services for the Penn Valley campus. Lesha earned her MS from Amberton University in Garland, Texas, and has completed her first year in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



Archie Thomas, MBA, serves as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Ivy Tech Community College in Kokomo, Indiana. His passion is to design and implement student success initiatives that will aid in the empowerment of under-resourced students. He received his Master's in Business Administration from Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana, and is currently pursuing his doctorate degree in the Ferris State University Doctorate in Community College Leadership program (DCCL).

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

In recent times, community colleges have experienced drastic shifts in student enrollment patterns due to a variety of factors. However, in the past year alone, the coronavirus pandemic has had a formidable impact on community college enrollment. Whether students will return once the pandemic recedes – or whether the loss of some students will be permanent and result in long-term economic consequences – is yet unknown. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

The Importance of Fostering a Sense of Belonging in Attracting and Retaining Community College Students

Linda L. Garcia, PhD

Executive Director
Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center)
The University of Texas at Austin (UT)

Courtney Adkins, PhD

Assistant Director of Publications
Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center)
The University of Texas at Austin (UT)

Last March, community colleges were faced with the daunting task of making rapid decisions about how to best shift operations and instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many faculty members had to restructure their courses to fit within an online environment, and while it is too soon to know the impact of the pandemic upon all students, we know that COVID-19 amplified the inequities that already existed for many. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, in fall of 2020, community colleges experienced the largest enrollment declines of entering students across all segments of higher education. The largest of those declines were among Native American, Black, and Hispanic students.

A recent **report** by the Center for Community College Student Engagement highlights some of the challenges that students who were able to enroll faced: struggling to pay for college, struggling to complete coursework due to a lack of child care, and struggling to access the internet from home.

Now the task at hand for community colleges is to continue to help those students—and to bring back the students who stopped out because the challenges of the pandemic made it impossible for them to stay enrolled. While colleges cannot solve all of the problems their students encounter, they can work to ensure that students have interpersonal foundations that are essential to their success. To do so, colleges must be intentional in their communications with future and returning students—making certain that they feel like welcomed members of the college community and that they are aware of available support services.

The virtual world likely made the work of fostering connections with students more difficult. In fact, the Center’s recent **report** shows that while only 5% of surveyed students said “no” when asked if their college had support services to help them cope with stress related to the pandemic, over half (57%) said that they didn’t know if their college had such services.

The work is not impossible, however. One student said this of how his college demonstrated he belonged before he ever went to the campus:

“I got a call from not one but two advisors. One was my actual advisor... He [said], ‘Hey, just wanted you to know who I am... If you have anything that goes on over the summer, don’t be afraid to call me’... My second one was my multicultural advisor... He [said], ‘Hey... I just wanna check in and make sure you meant to take this [many credits] over the summer. That’s gonna be a lot...’ This process made it feel like they cared about my education... It made it really easy for me to transition into the school because I felt like I

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

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had people already without having attended a single class. I did all online classes, hadn’t been on campus once yet, and I still felt like it was somewhere I could call home...”

Another student shared the following about returning to college after a five-year break:

“I came back this year. My advisor still had my file. She let me know throughout the years that

she had kept it... She said, ‘I’m really glad you’re coming back.’ It’s just a whole lot more personal and everybody’s so much more involved than I thought it would be. I thought [I’d] be just one in a crowd. I really feel like people know me here. This is a really good community.”

Fostering a sense of belonging also means helping students succeed academically. This includes intentionally asking students about challenges that may impact their academic progress and connecting them to specific resources to help them overcome those barriers. For instance, Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College has students complete an onboarding survey, which asks the following questions:

- ▲ *What subjects are the most difficult for you?*
- ▲ *How many hours per week do you plan to commit to your coursework?*
- ▲ *If employed, how many hours do you work in a typical week?*
- ▲ *Do you need any special services or accommodations in order for you to be successful?*
- ▲ *How will you primarily access online courses?*

Community colleges enroll students who are diverse in every way, and many of these students bring significant challenges with them to college. But we should assume this much about each of them: All students come to college with high aspirations and hopes of finishing what they start. To help them achieve their goals, it is imperative that colleges communicate a sense of belonging to students at the beginning of their college journeys and all along the way.

Reference

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2020, October 22). COVID-19: Stay informed with the latest enrollment information: Previous reports: Fall 2020 (as of Oct 22). <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>

Dr. Linda L. Garcia is the Executive Director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). Prior to this role, she served as the Assistant Director of College Relations at the Center. Previously, Linda was Vice President of Community College Relations at the Roueche Graduate Center at National American University, and she has worked at Lone Star College, Maricopa Community Colleges, The University of Texas at Brownsville, and Texas Southmost College. She served as a coach for the American Association of Community Colleges Pathways 2.0 and continues in this same role for the Texas Pathways Project. She earned her doctorate at The University of Texas at Austin.



Dr. Courtney Adkins is the Center’s Assistant Director of Publications where she provides guidance to the Survey Operations team and manages all publications and website content for the Center. In addition, she represents the Center at various national conferences and workshops. Courtney previously served as College Liaison and Survey Operations Coordinator at the Center. She earned a doctorate in English literature from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Before coming to the Center, Courtney taught full time at Baton Rouge Community College and also taught part time at Southern University and as an adjunct faculty member at Austin Community College.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Undergraduate Degree Earners, January 2021

by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

The annual Undergraduate Degree Earners report series provides demographic and educational profile data for all students graduating with an undergraduate credential – including associate and bachelor's degrees and certificates – each year. The current report reveals that within just a few months after the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the nation has come to a standstill in undergraduate degree recipients, with early effects likely to persist.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3a95Zxi>

The Pandemic Hit the Working Class Hard. The Colleges That Serve Them Are Hurting, Too

by Stephanie Saul

The coronavirus pandemic has been uniquely hard on America's working class, driving higher unemployment among people without college degrees and eliminating low-wage jobs by the millions. Now, the education system created to help those very workers also is in jeopardy with the community college system disproportionately hurt, and tens of thousands of students being forced to delay school or drop out due to the pandemic and the economic crisis it has created.

Access this work here: <https://nyti.ms/3mlhqRC>

COVID-19 Hit Us Hard (continued from page 1)

- ▲ 35% of food insecure students utilize Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Compared to survey respondents at two-year institutions nationwide in 2019, HCC has a higher rate of food insecurity (46% at HCC vs 42% nationwide). These responses reflect pre-pandemic conditions, although The Hope Center has conducted new research to show that food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are significant issues affecting our students during the pandemic, and disparities have worsened for some students. It is important to note that these numbers likely reflect underreporting of these issues, since students actively in crisis may not be in a position to respond to a survey. Since HCC moved all non-emergency personnel off campus and shifted to remote instruction in March 2020, students have had only limited access to the campus. In response, the HCC Food Pantry, part of our Thrive Student Resource Center, started pre-packaging food for scheduled drive-through pickup and also making deliveries throughout the region to students in need.

As we prepare for a post-COVID world, community colleges will be critical to helping students prepare for new jobs through short-term workforce training programs.

In 2017, HCC and the HCC Foundation, with the support of generous donors, created the President's Student Emergency Fund, to provide assistance to students experiencing unexpected financial emergencies. As the pandemic continued, the college expanded its definition of what constituted an emergency and worked to create greater awareness of its existence and purpose. The design of this fund is unique: 1) the application is short, recognizing that students dealing with the stress of a hardship need simplicity and support, and 2) payment is distributed to students within 24 hours of reviewing the paperwork, recognizing that students in financial distress need relief quickly. The greatest needs have been housing (58%) and utilities such as water, electricity, and internet (17%), with the remainder reflecting technology, food, transportation, childcare, medical, and other expenses.

While HCC has strived to keep tuition and fees low, the cost of obtaining a degree or certificate can still feel out of reach for some students. Many of our students are working one or more jobs while attending college, and still have unmet financial needs even after receiving financial aid, grants, and scholarships. In October 2019, we started a college-wide conversation about our drop for non-payment procedures. In the three years prior, HCC had dropped an average of 837 students in the fall and 636 students in the spring semesters. In Spring 2020, we piloted the elimination of drops for non-payment and the creation of a process in which students create a reasonable plan for repayment. While it's too soon to assess the long-term impact to students or the institution, an early analysis of this pilot reflects that of 469 students with outstanding balances, 276 students were allowed to continue to register for classes, reflecting some progress with respect to retention.

As we prepare for a post-COVID world, community colleges will be critical to helping students prepare for new jobs through short-term workforce training programs. The

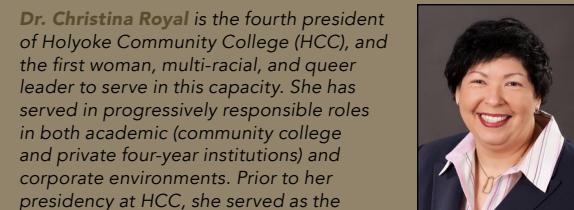
need for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training in our region is reflected in the diversity of student languages represented in our ESOL programs. HCC currently serves students from more than 45 countries; they speak around 36 different languages; and their average age is 41 years old. This spring, HCC offered a new program called Accelerated Career English, where students complete a 12-week contextualized ESOL class focused on career exploration (nursing assistant and culinary technician) and readiness, followed by a flexible add-on experience in which they get targeted support (academic, advising, financial) based on their desired next steps. The completion rate for the first cohort was 82% and the second cohort is in progress. The addition of other occupational training areas is being explored.

As we address the current challenges and prepare for other potential bio-threats, we are simultaneously preparing for a world that will require flexible scheduling, classroom technology upgrades, professional development for faculty on digital learning and distance learning, expanded short-term workforce programs, and expansion of our equity work.

In many respects, the pandemic has brought out the best in our institution and its employees and students. This is not how we expected to celebrate our historic 75th year, although we are learning lessons that will serve us well in the future and strengthen our ability to better support our students and the community. I am hopeful that the recognition of the pre-pandemic factors affecting enrollment call attention to the role that community colleges play in post-secondary education, and the need for increased funding to support our work. I am deeply grateful to be part of an institution that is not just weathering the storm, but focused on continuing to make itself a stronger and more resilient beacon of hope for our students and community.

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Dr. Christina Royal is the fourth president of Holyoke Community College (HCC), and the first woman, multi-racial, and queer leader to serve in this capacity. She has served in progressively responsible roles in both academic (community college and private four-year institutions) and corporate environments. Prior to her presidency at HCC, she served as the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Inver Hills Community College in Minnesota. Growing up as a first generation and low-income college student, she understands some of the challenges our students face and the importance of having an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive. She believes that representation matters, and our students must see aspects of themselves reflected in college to form a connection to the institution. Dr. Royal was recognized by BusinessWest as a 2020 Woman of Impact. She was also recognized for outstanding leadership on the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Cengage in 2021. Dr. Royal is also the recipient of the 2012 United States Distance Learning Association International Award for Outstanding Leadership by an Individual. Dr. Royal earned her MA in Educational Psychology from Marist College, and a Doctorate in Education with a specialization in instructional design from Capella University.

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Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

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