

## Investing in Community College to Improve U.S. Economic Competitiveness

---

Since the 1980s, there have been tectonic shifts in the educational and skill requirements for the United States workforce. Where once a high school education was sufficient to secure a middle-class lifestyle, today, up to 80% of jobs require at least some education beyond high school. The most successful educational systems in the world have a robust set of postsecondary options for students that are closely linked to workforce needs and clear pathways into and between those options. The Lumina Foundation (2018), an independent foundation committed to making opportunities beyond high school broadly available, has established a benchmark of 60% postsecondary attainment for the United States to meet the current and future needs of the global economy, but the U.S. currently falls well short of that goal at 47% postsecondary attainment, representing a significant challenge to our global economic competitiveness. One of our most highly leveraged opportunities to move the needle on postsecondary education is investment in our community college system. It is here that we see the most significant leakage between the U.S.'s K-12 education system and postsecondary credential attainment. By focusing on improving matriculation into community colleges, completion of credentials, and transition into the workforce or additional postsecondary degree programs, we can make significant headway towards the benchmark of 60% postsecondary credential attainment.

### Challenges with Postsecondary Education

Much has been made of the shift in educational attainment requirements over the past three decades and the effects of this shift on both the individual and the United States economy. Since the 1980s, manufacturing jobs have been under assault by multiple forces. What used to provide a solid middle-class income and served as a foundation for the U.S. economy with a high school diploma, has largely been decimated by four simultaneous forces: “globalization, automation, upskilling, and the shift in good jobs away from

manufacturing toward skilled-services industries such as information technology and healthcare” (Carnevale et al., 2018, p.5). The combination of these four forces – the shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy - has made attainment of postsecondary credentials a necessity to secure a middle-class livelihood in the United States. Carnevale et al. (2018), estimates that 80% of so-called “good jobs” (those that result in median earnings of \$65,000 per year) require more than a high school diploma.

The Lumina Foundation (2018) has established a goal of 60% postsecondary attainment in order to keep up with other countries that have surpassed the United States in educational attainment and retain our position as a global economic leader. In real numbers, this means an additional 20 million postsecondary-educated workers by 2025 (Carnvale and Rose, 2010). While there has been some debate about the specific degree of postsecondary attainment required for the current economy, particularly in specific regions of the country (Harrington & Sum, 2010), there is no doubt that attaining some postsecondary education resulting in a high-quality credential is a far better bet than navigating the economy with a high school diploma.

The U.S. is well away from meeting the Lumina Foundation's benchmark of 60% attainment. Currently, just 47.6% of Americans ages 25-64 have completed a postsecondary credential (Lumina Foundation, 2018). There is hope – 15.4% of Americans ages 25-64 have completed some postsecondary education but have not attained a credential of some sort (a college degree or another high-quality postsecondary credential) (Lumina Foundation, 2018). These are individuals who have at some point signaled interest in postsecondary education by enrolling in a credential or degree program but did not complete the program. They have a head start on credential completion and if we can successfully help them do that, we can, in fact, exceed the Lumina

Foundation's goal of 60% postsecondary attainment.

### **The Untapped Potential of Community Colleges**

The place to start this effort is with our community colleges. While there has been considerable emphasis on college attainment for high school students over the last few decades (Samuelson, 2012), community colleges have often not been a part of that conversation, despite the fact that vocational education has largely taken a back seat in K-12 education and community colleges have taken up that mantle. Community colleges have the potential to provide credentials for valuable "middle skills" jobs - firefighters, electricians, law enforcement officers, and mechanics, as well as healthcare technologists, computer control operators, and surveying technicians, to name a few (Carnevale, et al, 2018). Community colleges and these middle skills jobs also serve as a critical entry point into bachelor's degree programs.

It's important to note that the countries in the world with some of the strongest educational outcomes are ones that have articulated clear postsecondary pathways for their students, including pathways through career and technical education and "junior college." Two of the best examples of these robust pathways are Finland and Singapore. Both countries have established multiple intermediate pathways between secondary education and university education, through "junior college" or technical/applied education (Tucker, 2011). Additionally, both countries incorporate multiple pathways into and out of these intermediate postsecondary steps, which provide valuable examples for primary training (immediately out of secondary education) and for re-training (to address skill obsolescence of older workers) (Tucker, 2011).

Singapore is an especially pertinent example for the purposes of this paper, as they put particular focus on the equivalent of the U.S.'s community college system, their Institute for Technical Education (ITE), which focuses on career and technical education pathways – the middle skills jobs referenced by Carnevale et al. (2018). Tucker (2011) explains, "In 1992, Singapore took a hard look at its own poorly regarded vocational education system and decided to transform and reposition it so that it was not seen as a place of last resort" ("Focus on Strong Math, Science, and Technical Skills," paragraph 4). They created the

Institute for Technical Education with a goal of creating a world-class technical education institution that is, according to Law Song Seng, former director of the ITE, "effective, relevant and responsive to the knowledge-based economy" (Tucker, 2011, "Focus on Strong Math, Science, and Technical Skills," paragraph 4). By establishing a clear vision of the role and importance of technical education, revamping the curriculum and workforce certification system, aligning courses with international corporate workforce needs, and rebranding vocational education as "applied learning," Singapore doubled ITE enrollment between 1995 and 2010, with 82% of enrollees completing their training and being placed into jobs (Tucker, 2011). There is much the U.S. can learn from this model to bolster its position as an economic powerhouse with an adaptive workforce ready to address the needs of today's multi-national corporations.

Community colleges also represent an opportunity to address differences across historically underrepresented groups in higher education. Forty-three percent of African-American undergraduates and 52% of Hispanic undergraduates attend community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Considering that community college students who successfully transfer into a four-year college have higher rates of graduation than those who enroll as freshmen, community college represents a prime opportunity to increase completion rates of bachelor's degrees for African-American and Latinx students. This is particularly important now as affirmative action policies are under fire. Jennifer Glynn, author of a report on community college student transfers to four-year colleges by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation states, "increased scrutiny of the way colleges consider race in admissions could encourage colleges to increase their numbers of community college transfer students" (Jaschik, 2019). The University of California (UC), for example, which is barred from using race and ethnicity in admissions decisions, has increased the number of students admitted at the most competitive UC institutions, the majority of which are from minority groups (Jaschik, 2019).

### **Policy Solutions**

Reforming a community college system of over 1,000 institutions is no small matter. However, by focusing very specifically on key aspects of

matriculation, completion, and transition through the community college system, we can dramatically improve the percentage of students who are able to attain the credentials they need to navigate our current and future economy. Key initiatives in each of these areas are highlighted below.

### Matriculation

First and foremost, we need to frame community college as part of a philosophically contiguous K-14 educational system. Just as secondary education was reframed as a necessary step in a person's educational career a century ago by establishing a publicly financed K-12 educational system, today we must do the same with community college education. Right now, community college is often seen as a last resort, rather than as an affordable, viable option for preparation towards continued academic rigor. Reframing community college in this manner will both create a foundation for new policy solutions and provide a foundation for long-term commitment to public financing of community college.

This starts by creating regional programs that establish this continuity such as one created in Chicago. Rahm Emmanuel, mayor of Chicago, recently outlined in *The Atlantic* the Chicago Star Scholarship, a program that started in 2011 and provides to all Chicago Public Schools students who maintain a B average in high school access to a free associates degree at one of the city's community colleges (Emmanuel, 2019). This program was established by reframing the educational system in Chicago as a K-14 system, which allowed leaders to provide financial support to take steps towards incentivizing student decision-making. Interestingly, a proposal by a current Chicago mayoral candidate to move a step (or perhaps several steps) beyond simply providing scholarships and actually merging Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago has been met with considerable resistance by several stakeholder groups. This suggests that the process of creating a truly contiguous K-14 education system would require incremental steps and considerable time. A potential pathway to a broadly adopted K-14 system could be starting with large cities or regions adopting a model similar to Chicago's, which could establish a "proof of concept" for the benefits of investing in the community college system. States might then

adopt statewide initiatives based on regional successes which could lead to national adoption.

Additionally, we need to reinforce community colleges as a valuable and trusted resource for re-training beyond the proposed K-14 system. This requires investment and commitment from regional employers to see their local community colleges as a resource for retraining workers with obsolete skillsets. Partnering closely with regional employers could help establish community colleges as "anchor institutions" in the region, critical to retaining regional economic competitiveness with a ready source of well-trained employees. Such partnerships could also lead to valuable financial investment by corporate partners, which could help address the persistent funding challenges they face, in part due to dwindling state and federal funds and in part due to a lack of affluent alumni to support community colleges (Alter, 2015).

### Completion

There are several challenges with completion of instruction at the community college level. In one study, roughly 35% of students in a sample of almost 5,000 students, enrolled in community college, but did not continue beyond a single semester (Crosta, 2014). These individuals had a notably higher percentage of students who were African-American and/or had at least two courses in which they required remediation. The study highlighted multiple patterns of student enrollment that provide potential opportunities for guidance counselors at community colleges to identify students who are at risk of drop out (Crosta, 2014). This requires, however, a highly qualified and extensive guidance staff.

It follows, then, that it is critical to improve the quality of instruction and guidance programs at community colleges. One way to achieve both of these goals is to establish more robust career and technical education (CTE) programs, similar to Singapore's overhaul of its technical education system (Tucker, 2011). Such programs would provide a structure for guidance counselors to direct students and support progression through specific CTE tracks. This is an opportunity to engage the business community in identifying the technical education needs, which, as noted above, opens up opportunities for corporate investment in community colleges. Another strategy for bolstering the guidance capacities of community

colleges is to engage faculty and administration in advising and supporting students as guidance counselors. Many community colleges have one guidance counselor for every 1,500 to 2,000 students (Alter, 2015). Enlisting the help of faculty, administrators, and even coaches and other staff members in the guidance functions of the college would go a long way towards supporting students towards employment and educational goals and would help identify drop-out risks early on.

Last, but not least, it is critical to address the significant remediation requirements of many students who enter community colleges. Crosta's (2014) research suggests that the number of subjects for which students require remediation has a notable potential effect on the likelihood of those students dropping out. One of the problems that remediation classes present is that they may not be credit-generating, which means time and money spent in classes (which students have likely already taken in high school) that don't create perceived progress towards a credential. Community colleges need to consider alternative strategies for supporting students through remediation classes, such as accelerated courses, intensive tutoring covered under technical education programs, and online courses that allow for concurrent enrollment with credit-generating courses.

### Transition

With more effective strategies for completion of community college certificates and degrees, we can turn to the transition between community college and further postsecondary education or into employment. It is critical to improve the linkages between community colleges and four-year institutions. Padron and Marx (2013) note that "when Amherst College... opened more transfer spots for community college graduates, it found that they had higher GPA and completion rates than those who entered as freshmen." Interestingly, it was also noted in a 2014 memo from the American Council on Education's regarding the federal Postsecondary Institution Ratings System, that Amherst College was rated as top value in two of the five ratings systems represented in the memo. Putting aside the concerns about college ratings systems, which may be valid, but are beyond the scope of this brief, it is interesting to note that perhaps a greater focus on community college transfers is a strategy to

improve multiple ratings factors for institutions and improve student completion rates.

Dickinson College provides another example of an effective partnership between a four-year institution and local community colleges. Dickinson works with faculty members in honors programs at community colleges to identify potential students and then provide academic advising support so that they are able to transfer as much credit as possible when they enroll at Dickinson (Jaschik, 2019). This type of partnership not only smooths the transition between community college and a four-year college, it is also a creative strategy to bolster strapped guidance departments at the community college level.

Chicago has also established itself as a model for linkages with employers. Upon learning in 2011 that the region's employers would create 200,000 new jobs in the coming decade and the city's community college graduates were not qualified to fill those jobs, Mayor Rahm Emmanuel revamped the community college system through partnerships with local employers. City Colleges of Chicago partnered with 70 local business partners who helped to design curriculum such that each school specialized in an area – information technology, business, health care, advanced manufacturing, hospitality, transportation, and logistics (Alter, 2015). Community colleges could take this one step further by incorporating internships with the local employers, establishing partnerships which position community colleges as integral to regional workforce sustainability while generating goodwill and financial investment in these institutions.

### Conclusion

Community colleges represent a critical link in our ability as a nation to remain economically competitive on a global scale. Research suggests that to remain on par with or surpass our closest global economic competitors, we must aim to have 60% of individuals between the ages of 25-64 complete a postsecondary credential or degree. We are well away from this goal at this point, in part because a significant percentage of people who pursue a credential or degree do not complete it. The community college system is the leaky valve in our workforce pipeline. Too many students who enter into the community college system are left behind due to a lack of resources for these integral

postsecondary institutions. It is critical that we invest resources into specific policy solutions to address challenges with matriculation into community colleges, completion of credentials or successful transfer, and transition into the

workforce or further postsecondary education. Such an investment will go a long way to helping us meet and exceed the goal of 60% postsecondary attainment.

## References

- Alter, J. (2015, January 24). The Free Community College Plan is Obama's GI Bill. Retrieved March 2, 2019, from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-free-community-college-plan-is-obamas-gi-bill>
- A Stronger Nation* (Rep.). (2019). Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation.
- Broad, M. C. (2014, January 31). Postsecondary Institution Ratings System RFI [Letter to Richard Reeves]. Washington, DC.
- Carnevale, A. P., Strohl, J., Ridley, N., & Gulish, A. (2018, October 16). *Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs* (Rep.). Retrieved March 14, 2019, from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce website: <https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/3ways-FR.pdf>
- Carnevale, A. P., & Rose, S. J. (2011, June 27). *The Undereducated American* (Rep.). Retrieved March 17, 2019, from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce website: <https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/undereducatedamerican.pdf>
- Crosta, P. M. (2014). Intensity and Attachment: How the Chaotic Enrollment Patterns of Community College Students Relate to Educational Outcomes. *Community College Review*, 42(2), 118-142. doi:10.1177/0091552113518233.
- Emmanuel, R. (2019, January 6). A Simple Proposal to Revive the American Dream. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved March 15, 2019, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/rahm-emanuel-case-free-community-college/579319/>
- Fact Facts 2018. (2018). American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved March 17, 2019, from <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-Fast-Facts.pdf>
- Harrington, P. E., & Sum, A. M. (2010, November 8). College Labor Shortages in 2018? [Web log post]. Retrieved March 18, 2019, from <https://nebhe.org/journal/college-labor-shortages-in-2018/>
- Jaschik, S. (2019, January 22). The (Missed) Potential of Transfer Students at Elite Colleges. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved March 14, 2019, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/01/22/study-finds-elite-institutions-admit-few-transfer-students-community>
- Padron, E., & Marx, A. (2013, May 23). Community Colleges: Separate and Unequal. Retrieved March 2, 2019, from <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2013/05/23/community-colleges-need-more-funding-for-services-they-provide>
- Samuelson, R. J. (2012, May 27). It's time to drop the college-for-all crusade. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 18, 2019, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-time-to-drop-the-college-for-all-crusade/2012/05/27/gJQAzcUGvU\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.74831cb7953f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-time-to-drop-the-college-for-all-crusade/2012/05/27/gJQAzcUGvU_story.html?utm_term=.74831cb7953f)
- Tucker, M. S. (2011). *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*. [e-reader version] Cambridge (MA.): Harvard Education Press.