

7 Problems with Community Colleges And What Can be Done about Them

By Grace Chen

SOLUTIONS
PROBLEMS



We examine a recent report by the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, which cited many of the problems these schools still face and what can be done to improve the experience for students.

The latest report from the American Association of Community Colleges “tells it like it is,” calling the American Dream imperiled and asking two-year colleges across the country to [raise the bar on higher education standards](#). While the new report does offer some positive feedback on the current condition of community colleges in terms of growth and success, it also provides feedback on where schools are lacking and what can be done to bring these institutions to the place where they can serve students and the business community most effectively. There are seven problems and seven solutions, providing a blueprint colleges can use to improve the quality of education and professional training across the board.

Shifting the Focus

The [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) explains that this report, titled, “[Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation’s Future](#),” is the culmination of several months of research by a 38-member community. Those involved in the report include college presidents, education-policy experts and leaders of non-profit groups.

“This is a brutally honest report,” Walter Bumphus, president of the American Association of Community Colleges, told the Chronicle. “For years we have been focused on access, and now we need to turn our attention equally to student access. It takes courage to say we can do better.”

The report offers a new perspective to the condition of community colleges, beyond their commitment to an open-admission policy and providing access to students who are typically underserved. Once the students are enrolled in the school, their success becomes the focus. That is precisely where community colleges can stand to see plenty of improvement.

“Some people within and outside the field will look at this and say, ‘wow’ and ‘ouch,’” Kay M. McClenney, co-chair of the commission and director for the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, told the Chronicle. “But it’s really hard to get better at things if you are not willing to look at the problems.”

1. Low Completion Rates

The first concern voiced in the report is that of [low completion rates among community college students](#). [U.S. News and World Report](#) states that according to the report, less than half of all students that enroll in a community college graduate or [transfer to a four-year institution](#) within six years. The report recommends that schools improve completion rates by 50 percent by 2020. At the same time, community colleges must preserve access, enhance quality and ensure all students have access to higher education.

2. Students Not Prepared for College

The report also deals with the large number of students who enter college, [unprepared for the rigors of a higher education](#). A press release at [Market Watch](#) cites the recommendation by the committee to improve college readiness 2020. This would involve reducing the number of students unprepared for college work by half, by increasing the number of students who take developmental courses before taking freshman-level courses. Developmental courses should also be accelerated to prevent them from becoming a hindrance to completion rates.

3. Wide Skills Gap

The report also recommends that community colleges do a better job of preparing students for the workforce, through focusing on career and technical education. Bumphus agrees with the recommendation. He told U.S. News and World Report that while community colleges have made great strides in this area, they are still a long way away from the “[community career centers](#)” President Obama envisions.

“We need to do a better job of moving the bar and graduating more students,” Bumphus said.

4. Undefined Mission

To ensure community colleges become more efficient in educating the students they serve, the report encourages schools to redefine their mission to meet the needs of students in the 21st century. In some cases, this might entail taking a second look at some of the services they provide to students. It might also include a determination of what missions should be abandoned, which services could be dropped, and what type of student the schools want to focus on attracting and graduating.

5. Minimal Collaboration between Schools

Because most areas have multiple community colleges available to students, the report also recommends providing structural support that would benefit multiple schools at one time. Currently, many community colleges are standing alone, which limits how many services and courses they can offer to students. Through collaboration between schools and outside sources, including philanthropy and secondary education, students may be better served.

6. Lack of Community Support

The report suggests that schools should enlist both public and private investments that would offer incentives for institutions of education and students to support local community colleges. In light of recent budget cuts nationwide, schools must look for other funding sources and areas of support to provide the highest quality of education for the lowest possible cost.

7. Lackluster Results

Finally, community colleges need to raise the bar on the quality of education they provide overall. The report recommends that schools “implement policies and practices that promote rigor, transparency, and accountability for results in community college.” McClenney told the Chronicle that the type of transformation envisioned by the commission involves much more than “tinkering around the margins.”

The report was summed up nicely by the commission itself, which states in the report:

The nation can take great pride in what America’s community colleges have accomplished, but the message of this commission is simple and direct: If community colleges are to contribute powerfully to meeting the needs of 21st century students and the 21st century economy, education leaders must reimagine what these institutions are – and are capable of becoming.

THE PROS & CONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

(from Scholarship.com – no author listed)

Community college is not what it used to be—in fact, there are major incentives to attending a local junior college. Not to mention the obvious financial advantage, junior college is a place where you can knock out your general courses and explore your other interests on a schedule that works for you. In my own experience, I found that junior college was a great place for me to figure out what major I was going to pursue and where I would eventually obtain my degree from. One of the most impressive professors that I have had the pleasure of learning from taught at the community school I attended, and some of the most interesting people I have ever met went there—think famous rock stars back from a tour in Europe just looking to learn a little Spanish. Maybe I just got lucky, but I'd like to think that community schools can offer something to everyone.

PROS

- **Cost of Tuition**

The most obvious reason that students attend community college is for the financial advantage. Many junior colleges cost less than two thousand dollars each semester to attend full time. Attending community college gives students the chance to prepare for the financial demands of a 4-year university if they plan on transferring.

- **Flexible Schedule**

Many students don't realize that if they plan on working while attending school, community college is hands down, the best option. They offer far more night classes than other universities and more schedule options. The workload, unfortunately, is lighter than a state school or private university and attendance is not usually required.

- **Give students an opportunity to explore major options**

Instead of spending thousands of dollars at a private university towards a major that you are less than sure of, consider attending a community school while you are making your decision. Classes cost less, so you will have the opportunity to explore interests that you might not have otherwise pursued.

- **Smaller Classes**

The class size is surprising to most students because the tuition is so reasonable. While classes aren't as small as those of a leading [private university](#), many have as few as twenty students. In a smaller class, professors have the opportunity to learn more about their students. Likewise, students will find their teachers more accessible and can get assistance when they need it.

- **Qualified Professors**

Everybody starts somewhere. Some of your professors will be fresh out of a master's program, but many will be well-seasoned academics who carry an impressive resume. Community schools are just as flexible

for the students as for the professors. Many accomplished instructors teach part-time at community schools to allow plenty of time to focus on their own pursuits and career goals. In fact, when I attended junior college I ran into one of the professors from the private university I had previously attended, and she was teaching a night class—case in point!

- **Transitional**

Countless numbers of college freshman transfer out after their first year of studies. Many return, some don't. Unfortunately, many of these students felt displaced and found that their expectations were not met by the university they attended. Attending community school gives students the opportunity to earn college credit while taking the time to select the 4-year institution that is right for them. Because there is little financial investment, most students are deterred from dropping their studies altogether.

CONS

- **Limited Curriculum**

Typically, community colleges are 2-year schools. If you plan on obtaining a 4-year degree you will have to transfer to another university at some point. If you're looking for a permanent residence, this probably isn't the best place for you.

- **Lighter Workload**

The workload is significantly lighter than at a [state university](#) or a [private college](#). There is sometimes very little course work aside from major exams but keep in mind that college is what you make it - putting in the time is entirely up to you.

- **Uninvolved Students**

This is probably the biggest deterrent for the junior college: Many of the students are uninvolved. Few have plans for an academic future outside of what they receive at the junior college level—and they study accordingly. This causes tension in the classroom, particularly with more accomplished professors who are not accustomed to dealing with complacent students. Outside of the lecture itself, classroom discussions are rarely stimulating as they are carried on solely by the professor and one or two enlightened individuals. Good news for the dedicated student: The professor will recognize your potential and reward you accordingly.

- **[Campus life](#) (or lack thereof)**

Junior colleges do have clubs and organizations, but campus life is not an integral part of the atmosphere. For most students at community schools, their schedule revolves around work and classes are done in the mean time. If you are looking for a lively social scene, again, community college is probably not for you.