

Executive Summary

SREB

# Community Colleges in the South

*Strengthening Readiness and Pathways*

Southern  
Regional  
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Board

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Commission on Community Colleges

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## Community Colleges in the South

Much has been asked of community colleges — and even more will be required from them in the future.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) established the Commission on Community Colleges to foster a robust discussion on the critical role of these institutions — and their evolving potential over the next decade to support the well-being and growth of their states.

Community colleges are essential to achieving state goals — increasing the educational attainment of the population, increasing access and completion, eliminating achievement gaps, closing opportunity gaps, and addressing workforce and economic development objectives. These institutions are flexible, adaptable, affordable, community-based, user-friendly and nearby for the people who need them.

But community colleges must do better if they are to overcome the challenges they face. Community colleges need to be the first choice — not the last choice — of more high school graduates and older students returning to college. They need to become student- and community-centric. They need to read the marketplace and respond quickly and efficiently. And they need to do a much better job of helping students complete certificates and degrees and meet their goals to transfer to other institutions.

The community college campus is a reflection of its community — a complex blend of students of all ages and backgrounds, some seeking short-term programs and others looking for a certificate, degree or further education. These institutions that serve so many needs now face widespread challenges — in financing, support services and leadership — that may shape an era of reform and realignment.

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## Strengthening Readiness and Pathways

To meet these challenges, SREB's Community College Commission focused on two key issues: **readiness** for success in postsecondary education and structuring **pathways** for success. The Commission offers these goals and recommendations with the expectation that SREB states will use this opportunity to strengthen the role of community colleges in the South and broaden understanding of how these institutions serve students, families and communities.

### Meeting the Postsecondary **Readiness** Challenge

While preparing students for postsecondary endeavors is the responsibility of the nation's high schools, it is important for higher education to take its fair share of responsibility. Relationships between community colleges and local high schools allow colleges to be partners with K-12. Once students reach campus, community colleges must ensure that developmental education prepares at-risk students to succeed in credit-bearing courses — and is no longer a major stopping point for students.

**Fix the Placement Process.** Postsecondary education needs to rebuild the process through which students' readiness to succeed is determined. Placement processes must connect to more effective ways to help at-risk students succeed.

**Reconsider the Readiness Skills Needed for Postsecondary Success.** The literacy and math standards students need to be ready to succeed in postsecondary work should be reconsidered during this examination of the placement process.

### Optimizing Structurally Guided **Pathways**

One of the most underutilized strategies to support students in completing credentials is emphasizing well-defined, rather narrow pathways where faculty have sequenced the courses and identified well-defined learning outcomes that students follow to complete associate or bachelor's degrees in a timely manner. **Structure and guidance are important, and costly.**

Elements of structurally guided pathways:

- Adequate and appropriate advising on careers and programs, rather than only on courses, to support students to stay on track with a graduation plan and declare a major early.
- Ways for students to build credit toward a certificate or skill base, so they gain some benefit even if they leave college before completing a credential.
- Opportunity to take accelerated courses such as dual enrollment and Advanced Placement in high school.
- Strong statewide transfer systems and agreements that protect students' credits when they move among institutions.
- Policies and practices that discourage, or perhaps prevent, students from accruing more credit hours than they need for their degrees.

# GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Affordability and Accountability

**Goal:** Keep college affordable by increasing state funding, tying those investments to specific attainment goals for public community colleges, and holding institutions accountable for increasing student access, persistence and completion.

### *States should:*

- 1. Commit to increased funding for community colleges**, taking into account better alignment of tuition, financial aid and appropriations.
  - Strongly consider using outcomes-based funding for public community colleges, with metrics that reflect the key missions and roles of these institutions in fulfilling state education goals of serving underprepared students and those from historically underserved populations.
  - Systematically review certificates offered by public community colleges and identify those that are “certificates of value” and eligible for outcomes-based funding and student financial aid awards.
  - Structure state financial aid programs to reward and encourage students who make reasonable progress toward a certificate or degree, including aid programs focused specifically on helping part-time students advance.
  - Design financing policy that supports innovative programs aligned with student needs and effectiveness in the labor market.
  - Ensure that financing policy provides for collecting and analyzing information that informs decision-making and identifies programs for expansion or termination.
  - Establish clear expectations for student support services on two-year campuses and provide sufficient fiscal resources to staff critical services and targeted programs.
- 2. Specify targets that community colleges should meet** to increase the numbers of certificates and degrees in the state.
- 3. Ensure that state higher education agencies and boards of trustees hold college presidents and other senior administrators accountable for student success.**

### *Institutions should:*

- 4. Ensure that the selection, performance evaluation and accountability of all campus administrators emphasize actions that reinforce the commitment to students’ completion** of certificates and degrees.
- 5. Conduct frequent and regular in-depth reviews** of associate degree and certificate programs to verify clear and close alignment with documented labor market needs.

# GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Readiness

**Goal:** Reconsider the literacy and math readiness skills needed to succeed in college and postsecondary career education and re-evaluate related placement procedures.

*States should develop statewide policy that guides institutions to:*

6. Place greater **emphasis on the skills students need to read complex texts** across a range of disciplines and explain in writing the meaning of these texts.
7. **Clearly distinguish the math readiness skills** needed by students who will enter non-STEM fields from those needed by students who begin in math-based majors.
8. **Evaluate lower-division gateway courses** in English and math to specify courses needed as general education degree requirements or as substantive prerequisites for subsequent work.
  - Specifically identify the math, reading and writing skills needed to succeed in courses and programs that are not English composition or literature-based and that are not math-based.
  - Evaluate which gateway courses are needed and which literacy and math skills are required in non-gateway courses. Use the results to identify the literacy and math readiness skills that students need upon entry for first-year gateway courses and for other general education and major-related courses.
9. **Reform the placement process**, incorporate multiple measures for entering students and align placement requirements with the literacy and math readiness skills identified in No. 8 above.
  - Ensure that readiness assessments address with highest validity the specific kind and level of skills needed.
  - Involve four-year institutions in the re-examination of the placement process so that transfer is based on a shared view with two-year institutions of course and skill requirements.
10. **Guide students who need further development** of target skills to one of the following paths, monitor all at-risk students and evaluate learning supports for effectiveness and cost.
  - Begin degree-credit course work without learning support while the college monitors performance.
  - Undertake some form of learning support in parallel with degree-credit course work or embedded in the degree-credit courses. Performance should be monitored carefully.
  - For students with significant academic deficiencies, limit developmental support to one term in a course tightly aligned with gateway math or English courses.

# GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Pathways

**Goal:** Provide structurally guided pathways that clearly align with documented labor market needs and smoothly transition high school students, as well as returning adults, into community colleges and on to four-year institutions and work.

### *States should:*

11. Require community colleges to develop **structurally guided pathways** for programs of study that align with student and industry needs and lead to a certificate or a degree.
  - Require community colleges to conduct frequent and regular program reviews to determine labor market alignment and the potential for program expansion or termination.
  - Ensure that structurally guided pathways emphasize early choice of major program, a graduation plan, mentoring and interventions to keep students on their graduation plan. Full-time enrollment should be encouraged. However, because many students cannot afford to attend full time, state policy should also require pathways with requirements sequenced over a longer period, tailored for part-time students.
  - Ensure that each program is transparent. Students graduating from high school and adults returning to college should see clear and meaningful entry, exit and re-entry points.
12. Ensure that state financing policy and practice provide **sufficient funding and flexibility to support community colleges that are nimble** and responsive to local and regional workforce needs.
  - Support community college efforts to expand acceleration mechanisms, such as dual enrollment and early college programs, to create entry points directly into college work.
  - Support collection and analysis of data to inform decision-making for effective structurally guided pathways.
  - Use financial aid policy to favor students who progress appropriately in or successfully complete structurally guided pathways.
13. Ensure that students have a **guaranteed, statewide college transfer system** based on standard, lower-division curriculum requirements recognized by all public community colleges and universities.
  - Develop a common, statewide lower-division (freshman and sophomore) core curriculum of 60 credit hours for an associate transfer degree for all two-year colleges and universities in more popular major fields. The 60-hour core should include all general education, pre-major prerequisites and electives.
  - Ensure that community college students who take the core 60 credit-hour lower division course work will be able to complete a baccalaureate degree at any public university by successfully completing only the number of hours remaining for a specific bachelor's program.
  - Require articulation officers at each institution and at state agencies to facilitate, monitor and support student transfer.

## GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### *Institutions should:*

14. **Collaborate with local workforce and economic development agencies** and organizations to identify local and regional job markets and the credentials needed for employment in them.
  - Conduct in-depth, comprehensive reviews of each Associate of Applied Science degree program to determine appropriate alignment with certificate and baccalaureate programs and relationship to workforce needs.
  - Embed the credentials identified in these reviews within associate degrees and offer these programs within structurally guided pathways that include systematic on- and off-ramps so students can move from certificates to degrees easily and cost effectively.
15. Ensure that all structurally guided pathway programs contain **four key elements**: early choice of major, a student graduation plan, mentoring and interventions to keep students on their plans.
16. **Encourage students to complete the associate degree** before leaving the community college and consider providing a sub-associate general education credential recognized for university transfer.

## Credentials Other Than Degrees

**Goal:** Statewide recognition of pathways within pathways that enable students to move from certificates to degrees easily and cost effectively.

### *States should:*

17. **Identify options for stackable certificates and badges**, especially industry-endorsed certificates that can be stacked in manufacturing and other areas.
18. Review financial aid programs to explore how to **support part-time students** with need-based financial aid.
19. Design GEDs linked to specific workforce needs, examine the cost of **contextualizing the GED** and develop recommendations on how to share the cost with students, districts and the state.

### *Institutions should:*

20. **Collaborate with local workforce and economic development** agencies and organizations to identify local and regional job markets, the credentials they require and the pathways to those credentials.
21. Intentionally **link each GED pathway to a postsecondary credential** and degree program.

# SREB Community College Commission

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