

SREB

Community Colleges in the South

Strengthening Readiness and Pathways

Southern
Regional
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Board

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The Report of the SREB Community College Commission

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The Southern Regional Education Board works with 16 member states to improve public education at every level, from pre-K through Ph.D. A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. Member states are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

Community Colleges in the South was prepared by Cheryl Blanco, SREB vice president for postsecondary education, and Dave Spence, president, in consultation with Commission members and SREB leadership.

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Community Colleges in the South

Strengthening Readiness and Pathways

The Roles of Community Colleges

Community colleges are vital to the states and the nation. The importance of community colleges as providers of postsecondary education and training is well documented. Fulfilling both economic and social roles, these institutions have successfully created new markets and empowered new populations through educational opportunity.

In establishing a Commission on Community Colleges, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) recognized and celebrated the increasingly evolving and critical role these postsecondary institutions have in every state. SREB believes this is an opportune time to foster a robust discussion among its member states on the role of these institutions across the SREB region and their potential over the next decade. Much has been asked of community colleges — and even more will be required from them in the future.

Community colleges are essential to achieving state goals — increasing educational achievement of the population, increasing access and completion, eliminating achievement gaps, closing opportunity gaps, and addressing workforce and economic development objectives. These complex institutions are also flexible, adaptable, affordable, community-based, user friendly and proximate to the state's population.

The centrality of community colleges to the well-being and growth of a state is without question, but these institutions 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 returning college students. They need to become predominantly student and community centric, drawing on and enhancing the perceptions of students, schools, parents, business and industry, and policy-makers. They need to be able to read the marketplace and respond quickly and efficiently. And they need to do a better job of helping students complete certificates, degrees and transfer goals.

Community colleges serve students, employers and communities. This responsibility offers opportunities to open doors for all, particularly low-income, underprepared and under-represented populations, and challenges to provide the related credentials, programs and services these students need. They must meet opportunities to be broad and inclusive in programs and services when the economy is strong and overcome challenges in prioritizing and streaming when the economy is less strong. As one Commission member noted, two-year colleges are valued for what they do for individuals, employers and communities — not for what they are.

The Commission

SREB's Community College Commission met several times during 2013 and 2014 to recommend policies and practices to increase students' college and career readiness through effective community college and K-12 pathways. Composed of community college system leaders, legislators, national experts and others, the Commission examined multiple issues facing community colleges and concluded that readiness and structurally guided pathways are significant and related areas that, if addressed comprehensively and systematically in a state, have the potential to contribute to student success while addressing educational attainment and college completion goals.

The Commission focused specifically on a few key issues — readiness for success in postsecondary education and structuring pathways for success. These issues are critical today and will be over the next decade. The sections that follow first lay the framework for these issues by providing context through perceptions of two-year institutions, financing, student support services and leadership. Sections on Readiness and Structurally Guided Pathways follow with recommendations for policy-makers.

The Commission offers this report and its recommendations with the intent of using it as a baseline to continue strengthening the role of community colleges in the South and broadening the understanding of how these institutions serve students, families and communities.

SREB Community College Commission

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Joe Pickens, *President*, St. Johns River State College, Palatka, Florida

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Community Colleges

45% of all U.S. undergraduate students attend community colleges — that's **13 million** students.

60% of U.S. community college students are enrolled **part-time**.

771,000 associate degrees **436,000** certificates

were awarded by U.S. community colleges, 2011-12

Fall 2012

The Community College Student

More than **one-third** are **first generation** in their families to attend college.

Working full-time

22% of full-time students

41% of part-time students

Working part-time

40% of full-time students

32% of part-time students

Single parents: **17%**

Women: 57%

Men: 43%

22 or younger: **1 in 3** Average age: **28**

White: **51%**

Hispanic: **19%**

Black: **14%**

2 or more races, other, unknown: **7%**

Asian, Pacific Islanders: **6%**

Native American: **1%**

Nonresident alien: **1%**

All U.S. students, 2011-12 (the most recent data available)

Paying for Community College

58% of students received **financial aid** from one or more sources

38% federal grants

19% federal loans

12% state aid

13% aid from their college

Community College Funding Sources

16% federal funding

28% state funding

17% local sources

30% tuition

9% other sources

Community Colleges in the South

Goals to increase state educational attainment levels have policy-makers and education leaders examining more closely the responsibility of community colleges to contribute to that objective. While numbers vary by state, expectations are high that two-year institutions will award more certificates and degrees each year — and, in many instances, do so with less or level funding.

The role that community colleges play in a state is heavily influenced by its higher education structure generally and the governance structures for community colleges in particular. Like the nation, the South has examples of many different governance approaches. The presence of local boards and state-level governance are important factors in decision-making.

In a few states, such as Texas, locally elected boards oversee community colleges, while board members are appointed in Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. Some states do not have local boards — Kentucky, Louisiana, and South Carolina. State-level governance structures add another layer of complexity. The most prevalent model in the South is an independent state board that governs community colleges — Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. In Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas and West Virginia, an agency such as the state-level higher education coordinating board coordinates community colleges that have local governing boards. In Alabama and Florida, community colleges fall under the state board of education.

Community colleges are predominantly public institutions, which account for 85 percent of the nation's 1,132 two-year institutions.¹ In the SREB states, 91 percent of the 478 community colleges are public institutions.² *Community Colleges by the Numbers* revealed the student population is not composed of the typical residential student, living on campus and attending full time. Nearly two in three community college students attend part time and nearly three in four students work full- or part-time jobs. Among full-time students, 62 percent also work while carrying a full load of classes. Additionally, high percentages of new students — both recent high school graduates and returning adults — are not prepared to do college-level work, especially in math and English language arts.

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Community colleges were created to do things other institutions would not do, often in areas where existing institutions do not operate. The unique profiles of community college students, combined with the complexities of serving local and state workforce and community needs and the perceptions that the public has of community colleges, increase the challenges these institutions face. These challenges have been identified and discussed in other venues; this report highlights specific concerns that underscore the stereotyping and other issues raised in this report:

Common Community College Misperceptions:

- **Quality and productivity** — Misunderstandings of what community colleges are and what they require lead to views that these institutions are good for training and certificate-level work but not necessarily for college degrees offering high-quality educational experiences. They are perceived as lacking the rigor found in four-year institutions, and degree and certificate completion rates are generally much lower in community colleges than in regional or research institutions.
- **Credibility** — Multi-year studies and other data demonstrate that graduates with associate degrees and certificates often earn more right out of college than graduates with bachelor's degrees, but counselors and parents often do not know or believe this.
- **Lack of awareness among policy-makers and leaders** — State, regional and local leaders who attended traditional public or private four-year institutions often have limited understanding of the role of two-year institutions and what they do for students and their communities.
- **Inadequate support services for the students they serve** — Community colleges may not provide, or cannot meet the high demand for, support services such as counseling, advising, financial aid and time management that first-generation, underprepared and returning adult students often need.

The community college campus is a reflection of its community — usually a complex combination of students of all ages and backgrounds. Some seek short-term programs and others look for certificates or degrees and further education. It is often said that community colleges have sought to be all things to all people. While that strategy may have served them well in their developmental years, it may not be the optimal strategy in the decades ahead. Widespread concerns with financing, support services and leadership may help shape an era of reform and realignment for community colleges across the nation, and certainly for those in the South.

Financing

Underlying the significant challenges that community colleges face on a daily basis is the reality that they do not have adequate resources. Consequently, quality and productivity are at risk. Community colleges in most states have watched state funding decline considerably in recent years. The impact on institutions has been program and staff cuts and consolidations.

Commission members raised concerns regarding the level of funding and sources. Most community colleges rely on three revenue sources: state appropriations, local funding and student tuition. Unlike regional and research institutions, they do not have large endowments, extensive private support or an ample alumni base. At public two-year colleges nationally, state and local appropriations dropped from 62 percent of total revenues in the 2000-01 academic year to 51 percent in 2010-11.³ Among SREB states, state and local appropriations accounted for 57 percent of funding in 2011-12.⁴

Average In-State Tuition and Fees Public Two-Year Institutions, 2013-14

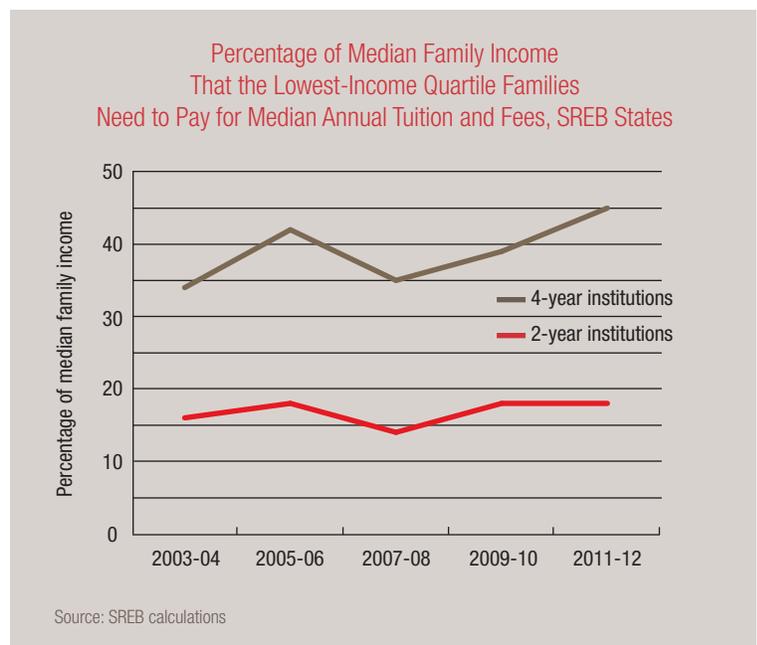
Alabama	\$4,200
Arkansas	\$3,003
Delaware	\$3,380
Florida	\$3,105
Georgia	\$3,620
Kentucky	\$4,320
Louisiana	\$3,292
Maryland	\$3,873
Mississippi	\$2,322
North Carolina	\$2,366
Oklahoma	\$3,385
South Carolina	\$3,844
Tennessee	\$3,783
Texas	\$2,397
Virginia	\$3,900
West Virginia	\$3,336
SREB states	\$3,137

Source: SREB 2013-14 State Data Exchange, preliminary data

As state appropriations have declined, institutions have relied more heavily on tuition as a major revenue stream — jeopardizing one of their major attributes: affordability. From 2000 to 2010, net tuition and fees at community colleges nationally increased from 21 percent to 34 percent of revenues per full-time equivalent student.⁵ Among SREB states, tuition and fees accounted for close to 28 percent for the 2010-11 year.⁶ Among the hardest hit by these increases are students who receive Pell Grants. As more of their grant funds are used for tuition and fees, the less these most-needy students have for books, transportation and other expenses.

Nationally, public two-year in-state tuition and fees at community colleges in 2013-14 ranged from \$1,424 in California to \$6,736 in New Hampshire. Between 1983-84 and 2013-14, average published tuition and fees for in-state students at public two-year colleges rose by 164 percent, from \$1,235 (in 2013 dollars) to \$3,264. At four-year institutions over the same period, average published tuition and fees increased by 231 percent from \$2,684 to \$8,893.⁷

Preliminary reports indicate that average in-state tuition and fees at public two-year institutions in Southern states ranged from \$2,322 in Mississippi to \$4,320 in Kentucky for 2013-14.



The impact is most severe for families in the low-to-middle income brackets. In 2010-11, for families in the lowest fifth income category, the percentage of median family income required to pay median annual tuition and fees at four-year colleges and universities was nearly 40 percent, compared to 18 percent for students at two-year colleges. By 2011-12, those percentages had risen to 45 percent of median family income for students in the lowest fifth income bracket going to four-year institutions, but the percentage was unchanged at 18 percent for those attending two-year colleges. However, at public two-year colleges in the region, the 23 percent of

first-time students who took on debt in 2010-11 was up 10 percentage points from 2005-06; the average student loan was \$4,500, an increase of \$1,900 over the period.⁸

Reducing student debt, making community colleges more affordable and increasing enrollment among low-income students are important concerns shared by policy-makers and educators alike. Tennessee lawmakers recently approved an option allowing recent high school graduates to attend local community colleges tuition-free for the first two years. In May, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam's Tennessee Promise, a scholarship and mentoring program to provide graduating high school seniors free tuition and

The percentage of median family income that the lowest-income families need to pay for median annual tuition and fees has increased only two percentage points at two-year colleges, compared to 11 percentage points at four-year institutions.

fees at a community college (up to two years) or a college of applied technology, became law. Neither financial need or academic credentials determine eligibility for the program; mentors will provide participants with individual guidance. Surplus lottery reserve funds will be used to create an endowment to make the Tennessee Promise sustainable. The program begins with the high school graduating class of 2015 and is a major component of Governor Haslam’s “Drive to 55” initiative — to increase to 55 percent the number of Tennesseans with postsecondary credentials by 2025.⁹

Fewer resources mean priorities are reordered. In the process, some argue, college budgets have become more institution-centric when they should be student-centric. At the same time, colleges are expected to advance state goals, such as increasing completion numbers and responding to workforce and economic development objectives. To the extent that student needs and state goals are congruent, the efforts of the community college can be more focused. In periods of restricted budgets, however, colleges are faced with a difficult choice: attending to student-centered needs or state-centered needs.

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In an effort to tighten the connection between state goals and funding, approximately half of the states in the nation are moving to outcomes-based funding. In states such as Ohio, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Tennessee and Washington, state support — all or in part — is derived from a funding formula with metrics specifically designed for community colleges. Program designs in most states would reward institutions on a range of measures, including rewards for students who reach momentum points such as successful completion of a specified number of credits, transfers, success with underserved populations and at-risk students, completion of STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) programs, as well as completion of certificates and degrees. Programs with higher rates of completion receive incentive funding for contributing to a state’s educational attainment goal. Although now used widely, outcomes-based funding is still controversial; many see this as a strategy to avoid adequately funding institutions, especially since outcomes-based funding has only recently been implemented and little evidence-based research is available on results of this approach. Others consider outcomes-based funding an acknowledgement of the additional costs of serving a highly diverse and often underprepared and lower-income student population.

In *Bridging the Higher Education Divide*, The Century Foundation speaks to more equitable funding for community colleges and recommends tying new accountability plans to greater funding in higher education for institutions that serve students with the greatest needs. The report says that “to promote equity and avoid incentives for ‘creaming’ the most well-prepared students, funding should be tied to distance traveled and progress made — that is to say, consideration of where students start as well as where they end up. In addition, the number of nontraditional, minority and low-income students who achieve each of these outcomes should be monitored. Accountability, coupled with adequate funding, should encourage a necessary redesign of the way in which community colleges deliver education.”

If new or additional funding is not likely in the near term for community colleges, the primary question to resolve is: *How can states best support community colleges, with current state appropriations, to both reach educational attainment goals and help students?* Additional questions are:

- Can states afford community colleges and systems as they are currently designed and structured?
- What is the best role for outcomes- or performance-based funding for community colleges?

- Are there other revenue streams that need to be developed or revised to supplement state funding and provide more stable fiscal conditions for community colleges?
- To what extent can or should tuition be used to fund state needs?
- If students must bear a great share of the responsibility for their certificates or degrees, what more do they get in return? Or are they paying more and getting less?
- Does channeling less state support to institutions that serve large percentages of low-income students make sense?

Financing of public community colleges is a critical issue that needs to be addressed immediately if community colleges are to continue providing the level and quality of services that states will require to achieve their workforce and educational attainment goals.

Student Support Services

A set of essential services that community colleges offer to students — but usually the one most overlooked and first to be reduced during budget cuts — is student support services. As state economies improve and new dollars flow to higher education, investments in student support services may provide the largest return on investment through higher persistence and completion rates. The value of services, such as advising and counseling in contributing to student success — from access to completion — has been widely researched and documented for decades. Comprehensive and timely advising and orientation programs that guide students toward immediate selection of a major and entry to a meta major or program of study is essential for all students, particularly critical for those who are first-generation, underprepared or returning students. Technology that supports planning, monitoring, auditing and early warning systems for all students should be the standard, not the exception, in community college operations.

Technology that supports planning, monitoring, auditing and early warning systems for all students should be the standard, not the exception.

Advising and related services are a cornerstone of structurally guided pathways, touching on nearly every aspect of a student’s educational experience. The wide range of community college students’ backgrounds — high percentages of students academically underprepared, from medium-to-low income levels, first generation in college, and employed part- or full-time off campus — means that demand for support services is unusually high. That demand increases as retention increases, because students who persist cost more than those who drop out. Yet, community colleges rarely have adequate fiscal resources or trained personnel to meet the demand. Additionally, according to the Economic Mobility Project, “The experience of community colleges that have invested in improving orientation programs and student services shows that major improvements in student persistence, course selection and credential attainment can be made at modest cost.”¹¹ Shifting resources from academics and instruction to student services may be easier as students’ academic preparation improves — especially among recent high school graduates who move through middle and high schools with more rigorous standards.

The absence of adequate advising services from K-12 into postsecondary education often has harmful consequences for students. Some evidence exists that financial impediments to two- or four-year college attendance mainly stem from a lack of knowledge about the availability of financial aid programs, the rules that govern

eligibility, the complexity of the application process, and unwarranted aversion to taking out loans.¹² Clearly, continued study of the relationship between financial aid, information about aid and access, retention and completion is needed. Additionally, the impact of these factors on students in different programs — degree programs versus certificate programs — is also not well documented or understood.

Are additional funds the only way to provide the kinds of services needed to increase persistence and completion? Or can colleges use existing resources combined with program redesign to increase access to support services? Can outcomes-based funding be an effective strategy to reward institutions and make more resources available to those that increase persistence, completion and attainment rates? To maximize the funding available, how can institutions encourage students to use pathways, minimize course taking to essential courses, and implement other strategies to reduce costs?

Leadership

To affect the kinds of changes suggested in this report, it is imperative that strong leaders be in place who focus on student success and invest institutional human and fiscal resources in efforts that may not be proven or that may challenge the traditional processes. Those who hire presidents — boards of trustees and state agencies — must have confidence in identifying and selecting leaders who will employ bold, often experimental, approaches. As Joshua Wyner points out in *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*, “What it’s taken to achieve good student outcomes in the past is not the same as what it will take to achieve good outcomes — much less great ones — in the future. Likewise, what it took for yesterday’s community college president to be effective may not be enough for tomorrow’s.”¹³ Policy-makers at all levels must provide support for institutional leaders to flex their imaginations and create new visions of how community colleges can use resources to best serve their students, businesses and communities. Finally, leaders must be accountable for student success.

It is not clear that the future leaders of community colleges are in place or in the pipeline. As noted in the American Association of Community College’s seminal report *Reclaiming the American Dream*, “Community colleges have been developing leaders to maintain the inherited design. They need now to develop leaders to transform the design. Reshaping the community college of today to meet the needs of tomorrow means that community college leaders need to see change as their friend, embrace it, and then, indeed, lead it.”¹⁴ What we know of current leaders indicates that change at the highest levels will be inevitable as the graying of the presidency becomes a reality. More than two-fifths of community college CEOs surveyed in 2012 indicated they plan to retire within five years. About 75 percent plan to retire within 10 years.¹⁵

What it took for yesterday's community college president to be effective may not be enough for tomorrow's.

America’s community colleges are truly remarkable places, and they face remarkable times. Perhaps to an extent unlike other postsecondary institutions, community colleges are asked to answer for so many needs. As we move through the second and third decades of the 21st century, the landscape of need will likely become less clear, and the “ask” of two-year institutions will get harder to fill. The national emphasis on completion is driving much of the conversation in postsecondary education, and it is a very real challenge for institutions where the goal is not always to get students out with a certificate or degree, but to put them on the path toward jobs. These are the public needs for the nation’s public two-year institutions. The Commission identified an overarching goal and several recommendations for institutions and state policy to improve affordability and accountability.

GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Meeting the Postsecondary Readiness Challenge

College and career readiness is an issue of growing importance. On average, across the nation, community colleges experience over 50 percent of first-year students testing into at least one developmental education course.

In some states in the South, community colleges see remedial rates above 70 percent. While most would assume that properly preparing students for postsecondary endeavors is the responsibility of the nation's high schools, it is equally important for higher education to take its fair share of responsibility. Our nation's community colleges are especially positioned to assist in properly preparing America's youth before high school graduation. The benefits of long-established relationships with the high schools in their geographical area, as well as most of them offering open enrollment and free or inexpensive college placement testing, allow them to be primary partners with K-12. In addition, as the majority provider for developmental education, community colleges must take the necessary steps to ensure that developmental education prepares students for success in credit-bearing courses and is no longer a major stopping or dropping-out point for college students.

For many first-year college students, remedial courses will continue to be a reality. Adult students who are returning to school after years in the workforce regularly need refresher courses, and many students are not exposed to the proper teaching or curriculum before high school graduation to be able to test into credit-bearing courses. Our nation's community colleges provide the bulk of developmental education, with several states requiring students who need remedial course work to attend community college to complete this requirement before advancing or being accepted into a four-year institution. However, the majority of students who need to take more than one developmental education course will not advance into higher level classes, and on average, less than 10 percent of those students will complete a credential. Experts agree there are two major reasons for this: many students are not being challenged in remedial education or are not being taught successfully, and many are burdened by the long, expensive road of remedial course work before achieving any credit toward a credential. Therefore, community colleges must better and more quickly prepare these students for credit-bearing courses, while also working to keep them enrolled.

For many first-year college students, remedial courses will continue to be a reality.

Below is an outline of the need for and a process for reconsidering the nature of postsecondary readiness, including which skills, how to assess the skills, and how to develop further the readiness skills. Specific steps follow for states to use to implement a revised approach to increasing postsecondary readiness.

Fix the Placement Process

Postsecondary education, led by community colleges, urgently needs to rebuild the process through which students' readiness to succeed is determined. Moreover, this placement process must be connected to ways that more effectively help at-risk students succeed.

The idea that past procedures to determine readiness do not work well is a growing consensus — leading both to over- and under-estimates in placing students in developmental education. As well, most admit we have not been effective in helping unready students develop the skills and traits for success.

The urgency to redesign both placement and developmental education is fueled recently by the impending, new college- and career-readiness standards and associated assessments being implemented by most states. These nationwide standards and assessments are more rigorous, especially with respect to reading and writing, and the more demanding assessments most likely will publicly reveal a much more severe readiness problem. To these points, the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 12th grade achievement-level results for literacy and math — which apply performance expectations empirically linked to college success and to the new common readiness standards — show that only 38 percent of students perform at or above the Proficient level in reading, and 26 percent perform at the Proficient level in math.

Hence, these placement and remedial challenges must be addressed so that colleges and students come closer to meeting the postsecondary completion goals set by most states — aspirations that require, on average, 4-5 percent annual increases in degrees and certificates awarded. The success of community colleges in raising its completion rates and credentials awarded depends greatly on increasing the readiness of students, along with ensuring affordability.

Paralleling the importance and urgency of redoing placement and developmental education are two movements that promise to affect significantly how we recast these processes. First, a growing number of state community college systems are reconsidering what math skills actually are needed to succeed in postsecondary education. Several systems already are moving, or have moved, toward a math readiness model that emphasizes skills other than those related to college algebra or precalculus. It is unclear how successful these initiatives will be in recognizing other math skills.

Second, in part due to the emphases in the emerging new common college readiness standards, there is a growing call to address the fundamental and logical importance of students being able to read with comprehension moderately complex texts across a variety of content areas. Many believe these literacy skills will turn out to be the larger readiness challenge — especially once the placement process is revised to focus on reading and writing skills. The following sections address these two trends in detail.

Finally, and perhaps most critical, danger looms over this need to recraft placement and support. The danger lies in the inclination of some who place postsecondary completion above all else to conclude, erroneously, that because we have not done placement and developmental education effectively, we should circumvent or eliminate these readiness steps. Already some states have acted to eliminate, in effect, required placement and developmental education. The danger, of course, is that states will ignore the facts that many students still are not ready to succeed.

Reconsider the Readiness Skills Needed for Postsecondary Success

Examination of the postsecondary readiness process needs to include consideration of the nature of the literacy and math standards to be ready to succeed in postsecondary work. Central to this consideration is gaining agreement on what the readiness skills should prepare a student to do in postsecondary education. The common assumption has held that the reading and writing standards should predict learning efficacy in the gateway English literature, composition and rhetoric course. The math readiness standards should equip students to succeed in the college algebra or other rigorous gateway math course.

The growing importance of postsecondary completion is causing a deeper look at postsecondary degree and program requirements and the learning skills needed to meet them.

Math Readiness Standards

The growing debate over math readiness skills hinges on the resolution of two basic issues:

- What specific math course(s) should be required to earn a postsecondary degree?
- What math skills should be required as prerequisites to succeed in nonmath-based degree programs?

The first issue raises the question: Should all students earning a postsecondary education degree be expected to know a certain type and level of math? For example, should all degree earners show that they have mastered college algebra? Should college algebra continue to be deemed an essential element in postsecondary general education no matter the major?

In fact, numerous examples in postsecondary education (public and independent) have resolved this issue by requiring math other than college algebra (or precalculus) as a free-standing degree requirement. For non-STEM majors, many institutions accept, for degree credit, math courses such as finite math, introductory statistics, contemporary math and quantitative reasoning. It is thought that the logical and critical reasoning and thinking skills required for a degree — for future careers and perhaps for successful study in other areas of the curriculum — can be nurtured through rigorous engagement in these courses. The four major math associations (American Mathematical Society, American Statistical Association, Mathematical Association of America, and Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics) will issue recommendations this year that college algebra no longer be a general education course requirement.

Recent reports also suggest the skills and knowledge associated with the more advanced levels of Algebra II and college algebra are not expected to be applied in subsequent degree course work. Of course, for STEM majors, college algebra and precalculus remain common curriculum requirements.

The broader legitimization of these quantitative literacy and statistics courses as equally rigorous and valuable degree requirements and curricular prerequisites for non-STEM majors will require a rethinking of the content and level of the readiness skills needed to succeed in these gateway courses. Postsecondary and K-12 math faculty need to identify and unpack the background prerequisite skills and knowledge that strongly predict success in the quantitative reasoning and statistics gateway courses. Assessments need to be constructed to measure the performance of entering students on these specific skills. Qualifying levels need to be set and adjusted empirically based on subsequent student postsecondary performance.

Postsecondary and K-12 math faculty need to identify and unpack the skills and knowledge that strongly predict success in quantitative reasoning and statistics gateway courses.

The acceptance of different math gateway courses also has implications for the kind of developmental education offered to students who do not meet the readiness standards for the nonalgebra-based gateway courses. The construction and implementation of these new approaches to developmental education centering on these courses is proceeding through the work of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Quantway and Statway projects and the New Mathways Project from the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas.

Literacy Readiness Skills

Reading and writing skills also are essential elements of readiness to learn effectively in postsecondary education degree programs. While the math readiness skills have been related to specific postsecondary gateway course(s) (usually college algebra), the literacy readiness standards potentially have a broader curricular impact. However, it is generally true that literacy readiness skills have been focused on gateway English literature or composition general education course work and not so much on the reading and writing skills needed for success in other disciplinary course work.

In addition, placement and readiness evaluation tend to identify and assess literacy skills based on students' abilities to read texts of moderate- to lower-level complexity, within a narrow range of academic disciplines. Too often, these evaluations do not challenge students' abilities to read and understand academic or technical texts, or to analyze and explain their meaning in writing. This ability to read more complex text in many subjects is critical to students' abilities to succeed in postsecondary education. For example, the most commonly used placement tests, Accuplacer and Compass, use relatively simple texts and writing prompts. The lack of challenging literacy readiness standards and assessments explain why math skills have been viewed as the area which most contributes to the readiness problem. In other words, students do more poorly on the math placement tests compared to the literacy assessments, owing to the latter's lack of higher, and more appropriate, skill standards expected. However, there is good reason to believe that literacy will be the larger readiness challenge if more relevant and predictive standards are applied. Moreover, many state K-12 systems have adopted new literacy standards, such as the Common Core State Standards and others, that are based on the deep and effective reading of complex information texts across different disciplines and the ability to engage in expository writing that parallels the higher text complexity.

Recent reports indicate the application of these new and different readiness expectations not only will be better predictors of success across postsecondary degree curriculum, but will also initially reveal a significant drop in the percentage of students deemed postsecondary ready in literacy.

Recommendations to Meet the Readiness Challenge

Possessing important reading, writing and math skills is a critical element in students' completing postsecondary credentials. Being able to make sense of, evaluate and write about the complex information texts found in college is a prerequisite skill needed for success across the postsecondary curriculum for all majors. And, students need the math skills and knowledge to pass general education math courses required to earn a postsecondary degree or to succeed in subsequent degree math or nonmath courses.

The increased priority on postsecondary completion, coupled with the onset of the new, more rigorous state standards and a growing national reconsideration of postsecondary degree math requirements, underline the need to ensure that postsecondary education has an effective process for ensuring the readiness of entering students. An overarching caution and recommendation concerns the need for placement and readiness policies and procedures. The Commission strongly believes that effective placement practices are required more than ever. We must be careful not to confuse the need to improve substantially placement and readiness practices with simply jettisoning placement, because it has not worked well to date.

It is true that postsecondary education has not done placement well, nor subsequent remediation. However, the fact is that a majority of students probably are not ready and will not be ready even under the new readiness standards noted above. Most illustrative, entering students who cannot read, comprehend and write expository about moderately complex text are not ready for postsecondary education.

Eliminating the placement and associated student supports only will lose these entering students in the system — and these lost students will not succeed.

So, let us work to improve placement and developmental support to identify, monitor and help students when needed. The Commission offers the following broad goal and recommendations that will strengthen student placement, readiness and developmental support.

GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Community Colleges, Readiness and Public Schools

Community colleges by their history and mission are the postsecondary institutions that are, and should be, closest to K-12 public schools. Both their local proximity and the likelihood that the readiness challenge mostly resides in high school students who will enter community colleges point to these colleges as having the heaviest responsibility to work with K-12 on readiness issues.

Public schools need the direct support of community colleges to meet the immense readiness challenge. Community colleges need to lead in making more students ready for postsecondary education, especially in supporting systematic high school efforts to raise achievement in literacy and math skills. Community colleges need to engage in the following activities jointly with local public schools:

- Send specific, concrete messages about the literacy and math readiness skills needed.
- Support the need for junior-year readiness assessments based on specific readiness skills and standards.
- Support the provision and required enrollment of students in 12th grade bridge or transition courses based on the literacy and math readiness skills. These courses should be taken by students assessed as not ready by the junior-year assessments and provide a way to move developmental education from the community colleges to K-12.
- Provide concrete, actual examples of first-year community college course work to high schools.

SREB will use its convening and advocacy capacity to bring together groups of states to address these recommendations; in light of the controversial nature of the recommendations, states will benefit from the mutual support of states addressing their ideas together.

Optimizing Structurally Guided Pathways

One of the most underutilized strategies to support student degree completion is the emphasis on a well-defined, rather narrow pathway that students should adhere to in order to complete an associate or bachelor's degree in a timely manner.

While many certificate programs have been designed around limited courses or a very specific number of hours for completion, degree programs have not. The increasingly widespread use of terms such as structured pathway and guided pathway signal a growing concern that postsecondary institutions provide a clear and limited path toward a degree and that students stay on that path, creating a framework for student and institutional success.

A structured guided pathway is an academic program map where faculty have sequenced the courses and identified well-defined learning outcomes. Pathways imply structure and guidance toward timely completion and next steps along the path. Structure and guidance are both important and costly. They include adequate and appropriate advising that focuses on careers and programs, rather than courses, and

Pathways help students build credit toward a certificate or skill base, if they leave the institution before completing a certificate or degree.

keeps students on track, requiring them to have a plan and declare a major early. Pathways help students build credit toward a certificate or skill base, should they leave the institution before completing a certificate or degree. They provide the opportunity to take accelerated courses such as dual enrollment and Advanced Placement. For students who intend to pursue a four-year degree, structure and guidance mean strong state-wide transfer systems and programmatic agreements that protect students' credits when they move among institutions. These systems and policies discourage, or perhaps prevent, students from accruing excess credit hours.

Clearly, there are many variations of structured pathways, and more will emerge as the economy and labor force needs evolve. Recognizing that multiple options are always needed for students, it is also important that these pathways include common characteristics. Essential elements of a structured or guided postsecondary pathway may include:

- Identification of a major upon enrollment
- Advising appropriate to student needs
- Frequent monitoring of student progress with early alert systems for students who are not on track or showing other signs of potential difficulty
- Transparency for both students and faculty in program requirements and expectations
- Full-time or part-time enrollment
- Need-based financial aid, especially for low-income students
- Opportunities for acceleration through dual or concurrent credit, Advanced Placement, recognition of prior learning and competency-based learning for credit, and merging high school and college through programs, such as Early Colleges, so students earn an associate degree while finishing high school

Pathways are a fitting concept for community colleges — the term denotes a narrow, yet defined way to move from one position or point to another. Pathways can be long or short, and they can have branches that open new opportunities and distinct points to mark progress and achievement along the way. This section considers different kinds of pathways — those that lead from high school to the community college generally, pathways that lead to certificates and degrees, and pathways that put a student on course to transfer to a four-year institution. No matter where these pathways lead, they begin in a community college.

“On-ramps,” characteristic of well-structured pathways, allow students to easily enter postsecondary study. For pathways to work best for students, appropriate on-ramps or access points are clearly defined and facilitate smooth movement for the student from one point to another. Examples of effective on-ramps include dual enrollment programs, early colleges, bridge programs, meta majors and early advising. Recognition of prior learning and awarding college credit, when appropriate, for what a student has learned outside of the college classroom is another form of on-ramp that is particularly important for students entering community colleges. Also essential are “off-ramps” that allow college students to leave with a certificate or a set of skills that will increase their job opportunities. Closing potentially detrimental off-ramps, such as ineffective remedial courses, is also important.

Recent research suggests that structured or guided pathways include three major features:

- 1. Clear roadmaps to student end goals.** Academic programs should be clearly mapped out by faculty to create educationally coherent pathways with clearly defined learning outcomes that are aligned with requirements for further education, and in occupational programs, for career advancement.
- 2. On-ramps to programs of study.** Creating highly effective on-ramps encompasses a range of activities, including student intake procedures, advising, remediation, selection of a field of interest with a default curriculum that will give students a sense of the field they want to pursue.
- 3. Embedded advising, progress tracking, feedback and support.** Each area focuses on the student’s academic plan, with progression measures, early alert mechanisms, feedback and transparency.¹⁶

The structured pathways issue area is broad and, in this report, encompasses workforce needs, guided pathways, the GED certificate for adult learners, effective transfer mechanisms and credentials other than degrees. Each of these topics is presented in the following pages as an important component of effective community college pathways.

Align Pathways With State Workforce Needs

While the definition of a structured or guided pathway may vary somewhat, policy-makers, educators and business leaders agree that postsecondary programs of study that lead to certificates and associate degrees must be better aligned with local, regional, and state workforce needs. Additionally, the programs and courses should be regularly evaluated against workforce needs.

The negative economic impact of the shortage of talent in manufacturing is current and projected to continue. A survey of manufacturers found that over two-thirds of respondents believe that access to a highly skilled, flexible workforce is the most important factor in their effectiveness over the next three to five years. Shortages in skilled production jobs, such as machinists, operators, craft workers, distributors and technicians, impact manufacturers’ ability to expand operations, drive innovation and improve productivity. Deloitte suggests that

education's role is in "creating a clear path for students to receive the right skills and training to prepare them for a career in manufacturing."¹⁷

Economists project a significant gap in the educational attainment of the overall workforce and the nation's ability to fill the jobs by 2020:

- At the current production rate in higher education, the nation will fall short by five million — the number of workers with postsecondary credentials needed.
- 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.
- Among the 55 million job openings through 2020, 35 percent will require at least a bachelor's degree, and 30 percent will require some college or an associate degree. Approximately one-third of the job openings will not require education beyond high school.
- Three of the fastest-growing fields — STEM, health care professional and community services — also have the highest demand for postsecondary education and training.¹⁸

In a targeted examination of SREB states and the District of Columbia, the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University identified specific concerns in the SREB region. A key finding was that "many areas in the South appear to be caught in a low-wage/low-skill equilibrium... a vicious cycle in which low demand for skill in the real economy discourages individuals and employers from developing skill from education, training and on-the-job skill enhancement." The report notes that a "low-skill equilibrium is undesirable, because both educators and industries become dependent on an economic and technological pathway that discourages human capital development and suppresses wages."¹⁹

SREB looked at a specific part of the job market — middle-skill jobs in the Southern states — jobs that require some level of postsecondary education. Among the many challenges related to middle-skill jobs, SREB found that matching industry needs for these jobs and related skills is difficult. Other challenges included communicating the value of middle-skill jobs to students and parents, keeping students in school, credentialing and stacking credentials appropriately and identifying data for decision-making. Several states reported difficulty producing the numbers of students needed for two-year and certificate-specific careers for STEM positions; some states reported that business and industry have difficulty indicating what they need from technical and community colleges.²⁰

SREB found that matching industry needs for middle-skill jobs and related skills is difficult.

The mission of most community colleges involves serving their local communities through access to quality educational opportunity for residents and through quality programs for employers. These are not always easy goals to reconcile, and the disconnect between what two-year institutions produce and what the economy needs has no simple answer. Oftentimes, the only answer means redirecting limited resources to open new programs and hiring faculty by closing other programs and services. States and systems face this dilemma constantly, and experience has shown that timely and appropriate information, reinforced with strong collaboration across agencies and with business and industry leaders, can make those decisions more palatable.

Identify Multiple Structurally Guided Pathways

The recent recession brought to light the critical need to provide students with a dependable and meaningful pathway that prepares them quickly and inexpensively for entry-level positions in a constricted job market, where skills make the difference between a weekly paycheck and unemployment. Structured pathways from K-12 to postsecondary have shown mixed success. Too often, the path is not clear to students and parents, and coordination between the high schools and the two-year institutions is not strong — but there are promising practices.

The Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) is redesigning programs to help low-skilled individuals transition into higher-skilled positions, resulting in both living wages for participants and the opportunity for them to gain access to broader career pathways. For example, Project OnRamp helps move certified nursing aides — a high-demand skill area with average salaries below the minimum living wage for a Dallas County resident—into a patient-care technical certificate program and higher-skilled positions that are high demand and provide a living wage. Students can then elect to complete a certificate in medical assisting or medical insurance coding and billing in three semesters or less, or they can move into a licensed vocational nursing program, which may lead to an Associate of Nursing. This project will serve as a springboard for DCCCD to develop a turnkey mechanism that grants college credit for professional experience and noncredit course work.

Project OnRamp helps move certified nursing aides into a patient-care technical certificate program and higher-skilled positions that are in high demand and provide a living wage.

A 2011 report, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, makes the case for broadening the range of high-quality pathways for young people and calls for clearly delineating pathways to all major occupations from the beginning of high school.²¹ Harvard Graduate School of Education joined with Jobs for the Future and several states to form the Pathways to Prosperity Network, an initiative to develop career pathways integrating high school and college-level work, with the goal of providing students with a program that includes all requirements for completion of a high school diploma and a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market.²² Resources online include a Structured Pathways and Completion Policy Self-Assessment Tool, which expands the idea of structured pathways to include a policy component.²³

SREB's Advanced Careers (AC) initiative is an innovative example of how to prepare all students — especially at-risk students — for the highest levels of education by creating multiple paths to college and careers that keep academic and upper-level job options open. AC combines college-readiness core academic content with hands-on, project-based assignments centered on a defined career focus such as aerospace engineering and infomatics. Each AC consists of sequences of academically rigorous and standards-based career and technical education courses in high-demand, high-skill, high-wage career areas targeted to the economic needs and opportunities of each participating state.²⁴

Early Colleges have gained widespread success over the past decade for providing a unique pathway, particularly for students from underrepresented groups. Currently, 280 Early Colleges in 32 states serve more than 80,000 students from underserved backgrounds — low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color — helping them graduate from high school and earn postsecondary degrees —

tuition-free. Approximately 90 percent of Early College students graduate high school; 94 percent earn college credit in high school; and 30 percent earn an associate degree or other postsecondary credential with their diploma.²⁵ Launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2002 and coordinated nationally by Jobs for the Future, each Early College partners with a postsecondary institution to blend high school and college work into a four- or five-year curriculum. Students receive both a high school diploma and an associate degree from the partner institution, or up to two years of transferrable credit toward a bachelor's degree. Most SREB states have at least one Early College, and Georgia, North Carolina and Texas each have 10 or more.

Considerable progress also has been made in creating other pathways from high school into postsecondary for the STEM fields, and more needs to be done. Project Lead the Way (PLTW) is recognized as a leading provider of STEM programs. PLTW delivers programs to more than 5,000 elementary, middle and high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. More than 150 colleges and universities — known as affiliates — recruit PLTW students and provide recognition opportunities, including admissions preference, scholarships and course credit. Additionally, affiliates hold PLTW professional development training programs, host annual conferences for school administrators and counselors and provide ongoing support to PLTW schools.²⁶

At the postsecondary level, structured pathways share some characteristics of the K-12 and K-14 programs, but there are notable differences. There is not a single or universal definition or understanding of a structured pathway across postsecondary institutions, but the idea of a guided pathway is emerging. In *Reclaiming the American Dream*, the American Association of Community Colleges refers to a pathway as “a highly structured, coherent educational experience that is built around and through an area of study.” Completion by Design, an initiative that involves several states and their community colleges, defines a structured pathway as “an integrated set of institutional policies, practices and programs intended to maximize students’ likelihood of completing a credential.”²⁷ Complete College America (CCA) takes a broader view with its Guided Pathways approach; while not defining Guided Pathways, CCA describes several characteristics of a Guided Pathways System and implies that a GPS gives students “coherent programs, not random, individual courses,” guaranteed access to courses when students need them, a step-by-step roadmap and intrusive guidance to on-time completion.²⁸

Meta-majors are gaining interest as an academic pathway for students to complete college-level work that leads to a postsecondary credential.

Meta-majors are gaining interest as an academic pathway to “ensure that all students are ready for and can successfully complete college-level work that leads to a postsecondary credential of value.” Meta-majors are defined as a set of broad content areas that students choose upon enrollment at a postsecondary institution. A meta-major includes a set of courses that meets academic requirements that are common across several disciplines and specific programs of study. Enrollment and completion of meta-major courses guide students through initial academic requirements and into programs of study.²⁹ Legislation in Florida (SB 1720) requires institutions in the state’s college system to develop meta-major academic pathways as a component of each institution’s approved comprehensive advising plan.³⁰ The Florida bill defines meta-major as “a collection of academic programs that have common or related content as a method to advise students of the gateway courses aligned with their intended academic and career goals.”³¹

While new pathways are emerging, traditional pathways are changing. States are taking different approaches to the Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree. Florida community colleges are focusing on stackable certificates and revisiting AAS degrees — mostly due to difficulty of transferability into bachelor programs and the low demand as a result, as well as unclear distinctions between the Associate of Science (AS) and AAS degrees. The AS in North Carolina has also faced this problem, and the community college system recently redesigned AAS degrees and connected them more closely to baccalaureate programs. Ill-structured AAS degrees that do not provide a pathway may not be cost-effective for the college, the state or the student.

Whether in career and technical education or the more traditional academic-oriented programs, structured pathways require the same steps:

1. Early Choice of Major Program

It is critical that students select a major program as soon as possible — certainly no later than the end of their first term in college.

Students need support and advising to plan their future careers and then back-map to their post-secondary purposes. This requires close professional advising in the forms of:

- Early orientation to career possibilities and student interests and aptitudes
- Individual advising leading up to initial registration that recognizes the need to make effective course decisions, even if the ultimate major is not yet known (For example, the first term needs to include course work that will be creditable to the student’s major, even if the final selection is not made.)
- The meta-major, which is helpful as a way to help students efficiently select courses in the early terms before a specific major is chosen. However, a more detailed major selection is needed as soon as possible to enable students to take the specific major-related courses by the second year.

2. Student Graduation Plan

For each major program, the college and its advisors need to define a specific roadmap of all the courses required to achieve the degree or certificate as well as a schedule for taking them. Degree plans should be standardized (which means in most cases less student choice of courses).

To support the student program planning as well as to ensure that students will be able to access the courses in the future at the times planned, institutions need to construct master course schedules at least for the length of the programs and hold to them.

3. Mentoring Student Progress

The college needs to monitor each term (preregistration and end of term) each student’s progress according to the individual graduation plan. Trained advisors and the effective use of technology are key.

4. Student Interventions

If student performance or errant course decisions warrant, students need to be immediately engaged and brought back on plan, given appropriate academic or other support, or advised on changing majors.³²

Recognizing and constructing guided pathways is an essential strategy in strengthening today's community colleges. The link between pathways and the workforce must be strong, and programs that are specifically designed to meet workforce demands need constant updating and review to remain viable. Louisiana recently eliminated 500 programs after extensive review and consultation with local and state workforce representatives. A widespread challenge is refining, and perhaps eliminating, pathways and degree programs as workforce needs change. As state funding levels have declined in most states, institutions have made tough choices on which pathways to keep, expand or close. Sustainability of key or essential pathways is an ongoing challenge. Students, faculty and employers benefit when they share a common understanding of how a program of study will work for them. And state policy-makers gain confidence in supporting programs that lead to specific outcomes in the least amount of time possible.

Maximize Transfer Strategies

Transfer can be one of the most important strategic pathways to help students move efficiently and smoothly between high school and college and from one postsecondary institution and program to another. Well-articulated pathways between K-12 and community colleges, between community colleges and four-year institutions, and from secondary or postsecondary education to the workforce are essential to keep higher education as affordable as possible and to provide a coherent framework of study for students.

Multidirectional transfer patterns reflect students' mobility and tendency to move among and between institutions frequently. The traditional transfer model involves students completing their first two years of general education requirements at a two-year institution and then transferring to a four-year institution to finish the upper-division requirements in their final two years. While still the prevalent model, transfer is a dynamic environment, and transfer patterns show increasing instances of vertical transfer from universities to community colleges. The prevalence of the 2+2 model (two years at a community college followed by two years at a baccalaureate-degree granting institution) is also changing as students and institutions are more open to new arrangements: 3+1 (three years at a community college followed by one year at a baccalaureate-degree granting institution), 2+1 (two years at a community college followed by one year at a baccalaureate-degree granting institution) and 1+3 (one year at a community college followed by three years at a baccalaureate-degree granting institution).

These new models are often grounded in local agreements between community colleges and their local four-year institutions and may not be held to the same requirements and standards of a statewide articulation or transfer agreement. A statewide agreement, however, provides a safety net for students. For example, the Virginia Community College System, in partnership with Western Governors University (WGU), created a faster and more affordable pathway to a baccalaureate degree for nursing students. Under a guaranteed admission agreement, students may earn a bachelor's degree in three years at an estimated total cost of \$17,000 in tuition and fees. Students first earn an Associate of Nursing from a Virginia community college and a registered nurse license. They then complete nine additional courses, or 26 credit hours, through WGU online classes to earn a Bachelor of Nursing. Students must be working as registered nurses to be accepted into WGU.

Transfer can be one of the most important strategic pathways to help students move between high school and college and from one postsecondary institution and program to another.

Transfer policies are also influenced by state, system and institutional policies that dictate the number of credits that must be completed at the institution that awards the degree and other conditions. A policy that requires students to take a specified number of final credits at the institution that will award the degree is not uncommon. Programs with limited access often develop customized articulation agreements with specific institutions. The quality of the course and the educational experience are significant factors that influence the student's success in transferring credits; if faculty at the receiving institution have questions or concerns about the quality of a course or the instructor, the receiving institution may not accept the credits.

The sheer number of students moving among institutions is significant and demands both policies and practices that support student success. Analyses from the National Student Clearinghouse looked at enrollment data and the transfer behaviors over five years of nearly all students who began postsecondary education in the U.S. in fall 2006, including both full- and part-time students in all institutional types — nearly 28.8 million students — for up to five years. Major findings include:

- 1/3 of all students change institutions at some time before earning a degree.
- Of those who transferred, 37 percent transferred in their second year.
- 25 percent transferred more than once.
- 27 percent transferred across state lines.
- 43 percent transferred into public two-year colleges.³³

Follow-up analyses revealed that approximately 62 percent of students who transferred from two-year schools in 2005-06, obtained a bachelor's degree or higher within six years after transfer to a four-year institution.³⁴ The impact of two-year institutions, and transfer policies and practices that facilitate smooth articulation are all essential components of an effective pathway for students.

The impact of two-year institutions and transfer policies and practices are essential components of an effective pathway for students.

Many states collect and report data on transfer students to better understand how to structure transfer policies and procedures to protect student credits and maximize their chances of completing certificates and degrees. These data reveal several concerns shared by states across the SREB region. One concern is the large number of students who transfer before completing an associate degree. In North Carolina, 87 percent of students transfer before they reach the articulation agreement or the 44-hour core. A related issue is the number of credits that transfer students take to the receiving institution that do not apply toward graduation. These problems underscore the essential role of transparent and enforceable transfer pathways that help students avoid accumulating excessive credits, using financial aid on credits that will not apply toward graduation requirements and increasing their time and credits to degree completion.

Data document the importance of completion of general education requirements before transfer. Tennessee reports annually on transfer and has found that pretransfer completion of the common general education requirements, in whole or in part, has a large statistically significant effect on the probability of graduation, time to a bachelor's degree, and college GPA. Completion of the entire general education core is predicted to increase the probability of graduation by about 22 percentage points, reduces time to a bachelor's degree and increases the cumulative college GPA by about .3 points.³⁵ A Florida study found that taking required lower-division courses after transferring to a university cost students approximately \$8.7 million in tuition and the state

\$13.8 million in support costs over a three-year period.³⁶ Subsequent reports noted that the state Department of Education worked with colleges to help ensure that students completed prerequisites for transferring to universities. A study using labor market returns from students in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) found that, “on economic grounds, more NCCCS students should complete their associate degree before transferring to a four-year institution to attempt a bachelor’s degree.”³⁷ Legislation in Maryland in 2013 directed the Commission on Higher Education and each public postsecondary institution to develop and implement incentives for students to obtain an associate degree before enrolling in a public senior institution.³⁸

While states vary considerably on transfer issues and the proportion of students who begin at one institution and move to another, a growing number of states are re-evaluating their transfer policies and practices for more efficient and effective alternatives. SREB has studied transfer program for several years and encourages state policy that creates a single, comprehensive, statewide transfer and articulation agreement that is transparent for students, faculty and administrators. Such an agreement clearly delineates which course will transfer and how credit will be applied toward the declared major, and it enables a student to transfer with full credit toward a bachelor’s degree with the maximum number of hours possible, including major-related as well as general education courses.

SREB encourages a single, comprehensive, statewide transfer and articulation agreement that is transparent for students, faculty and administrators.

Several Southern states have enacted legislation for comprehensive statewide transfer policy: **Arkansas** (House Bill 1772), **Florida** (Chapter 1007 Articulation and Access), **Kentucky** (House Bill 160), **Louisiana** (Senate Bill 285) and **Tennessee** (Complete College Tennessee Act 2010).³⁹ These states include essential criteria that support an equally efficient path for transfer students to the bachelor’s degree from a two-year college, as for students beginning at a four-year institution:

1. **Statewide application of the policy** to protect students moving among all public postsecondary institutions
2. **A common statewide lower-division core curriculum** of 60 credit hours for an associate transfer degree used by all two-year colleges and universities for each of the most popular majors at the bachelor’s degree level
3. **Guaranteed credit transfer** that ensures community college students who take the core 60 credit hour lower-division course will be able to complete a baccalaureate degree at any public university by taking only the number of hours remaining for a specific bachelor’s program.

Other key elements of a robust and solid transfer approach include a statewide transfer committee, a common course equivalency system, transfer guides, a transfer counselor network, an appeals procedure, and monitoring and auditing systems.

For many transfer students who started in a two-year institution but did not complete an associate degree before transferring, the opportunity to be awarded that degree after moving to a four-year institution is a significant bonus. States and institutions are beginning to see the value of *reverse transfer* — awarding an associate degree to a transfer student who completes the requirements for an associate degree while working

toward a bachelor's degree. State efforts to implement reverse transfer are growing; several are supported by "Credit When It's Due: Recognizing the Value of The Quality Associate Degree," a 12-state initiative funded by five private foundations.⁴⁰ Four SREB states participate in this project: **Arkansas, Florida, Maryland** and **North Carolina**.

In **Tennessee**, the Higher Education Commission, the Board of Regents, and the University of Tennessee are developing a comprehensive *reverse transfer policy*, which would allow students who transferred to a public university to also receive an associate degree from their originating community college if, after transferring, they have accrued the required number of credit hours. The reverse transfer policy will apply to all public and private institutions in Tennessee.⁴¹

A more traditional use of the term reverse transfer describes students who start at a four-year institution and transfer to a two-year institution. While data on this occurrence are not widely reported, some states are finding increasing numbers of students using this transfer pathway. Tennessee monitors different transfer pathways and has found that the share of transfers from universities into community colleges has been sizeable over time: at least 22 percent of public transfers are reverse from universities to community colleges.⁴²

An additional transfer issue is articulation between technical high schools and community colleges. While not well documented or tracked, the process of students moving from technical high school into community colleges has not been well designed. Pathways that should be well aligned and provide seamless articulation are too often not well connected between K-12 and community colleges.

Pathways should be well aligned, provide seamless articulation and be well connected between K-12 and community colleges.

Transfer policy is a lynchpin for structured pathways. Whether states adopt statewide transfer agreements or rely on individual institutional agreements, the importance of the value of a transparent and fair transfer policy cannot be overstated. The cost to students, institutions and states of poor articulation structures and policies is high. Community colleges sit at the center of this critical issue.

Capacity is a driving factor in states — those with significant enrollment space at four-year institutions may be eager to encourage students to transfer early. Universities and regional institutions with limited capacity to accept transfer students are more open to encouraging students to finish their associate degree before they leave the two-year institution. For example, in Florida, 65 percent of high school students who graduate start in the community college system. On the other hand, Louisiana has a very young community college system and unmet capacity at the senior institutions.

Contextualize the GED Pathway

The GED certificate has been a significant pathway for over 70 years to assist people of all ages in obtaining a general education high school diploma. The American Council on Education (ACE) launched the GED Testing Service after World War II, in part to serve military veterans who entered service before earning their high school diplomas. The GED provided the potential for veterans to become eligible for GI Bill postsecondary education benefits. Coupled with the emerging and growing community college sector, the GED has been a gateway for millions of people over decades to gain skills and knowledge to earn a living wage.

The value of a GED is enhanced when combined with occupational skills — an approach often referred to as a “contextualized GED.” In a contextualized GED program, academic skills through the GED curriculum are focused on a specific occupation, and instructors cover material needed to pass the GED exam in the context of a specific vocation, occupational field, or employment readiness certification. In a contextualized GED program, students achieve their GED and:

- a vocational certificate simultaneously; and/or
- a general career readiness certificate simultaneously; and/or
- begin occupational training which they continue in a postsecondary program.⁴³

ACE recently partnered with Pearson, an education company, to develop a new and more rigorous GED test that ensures test passers’ readiness for college or career. The revised GED is administered on a computer and is aligned with national educational standards, including the Common Core State Standards. The new GED has two passing points: the historical benchmark, which indicates high school equivalency; and a higher score, which signals college and career readiness. Release of the redesigned GED recently has led to speculation that more contextualized GED courses will be offered.

For individuals who left high school without a diploma or who have come to this country with less than a high school education, the GED has offered an inexpensive route for upward mobility — that may be changing. In many states, the cost of the GED has been covered at least in part by local, state or federal funding. The new GED appears to be about twice the cost of the older version. While most states are slowly rebounding from the economic recession, the additional cost may be passed on to the student. The GED is important for additional postsecondary study. It is a recognized equivalent of a high school diploma and thus meets the conditions for eligibility to receive Title IV student assistance — notably Pell Grants. In sum, the GED not only provides a pathway through a contextualized program directly into the workforce, it can provide a stepping stone to a postsecondary degree. The challenge: few GED recipients complete a degree.

A contextualized GED can provide a stepping stone to a postsecondary degree.

- Nationwide, each year, nearly 700,000 people take the full battery of GED tests.
- Nearly 70 percent of those who took all five GED tests in 2009 passed and received a GED.
- Nearly half of all GED holders eventually enroll in postsecondary education.
- Only 4 percent persist to earn a degree.⁴⁴

Research highlights community college initiatives that show strong potential to help GED recipients transition into postsecondary programs and succeed:⁴⁵

North Carolina — Basic Skills Plus is a statewide program that integrates GED with industry skills certification and developmental education at no charge for GED students. Central Piedmont Community College is among 45 North Carolina colleges in this program. In addition, Central Piedmont offers a Pathways to Employment program which allows students to enroll in college-level courses that apply to short-term occupational certificates in six possible fields, while they work toward a GED certificate. Integrating academic skill development, career advising, work-readiness training and occupation-specific training, the program offers up to 32 weeks of course work in an accelerated time frame of 12 to 14 weeks, with full-time instruction during this period.

Virginia — Intensive work on reforming the GED in Virginia began under former Governor Warner and expanded under former Governor McDonnell. PluggedInVA allows students to prepare for the GED, while also being enrolled in postsecondary courses along a specific occupational pathway in a regionally high-demand field. All programs must include a minimum of 12 credits at a partnering postsecondary institution. The program lasts for six months, and the time commitment varies by site, with students receiving instruction for between 12 and 24 hours per week. Students also receive ACT WorkKeys test preparation for the Virginia Career Readiness Certificate as well as instruction in digital literacy skills and professional soft skills.

Kentucky — Offering 13 programs in six counties, Skill Up Kentucky is a six-month program that helps students work toward a GED certificate while developing professional soft skills and earning general career-readiness certificates, Microsoft digital literacy certifications and college credits in an occupational field. The GED curriculum is contextualized in the occupational field, and adult education and community college instructors teach in teams to deliver the curriculum.

Washington — I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) programs pair workforce training in high-demand fields with adult basic education or English as a Second Language through team teaching. All programs include college-level professional-technical credits, and the programs are required to be part of a certificate or associate degree program designed to lead to further education and employment in high-demand occupations.

Arkansas — The Career Pathways Initiative includes sites at the state's two-year colleges and three technical centers affiliated with four-year institutions. The initiative offers educational pathways that include a series of degrees and credentials within high-demand career fields, ranging from GED certificates and vocational credentials to associate degrees, targeting low-income parents who are often eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. To tailor instruction to lower-skilled students, curricular enhancements have included contextualization as well as the use of self-paced instruction to address key areas of deficiency.

The GED is a widely known and generally accepted credential that signifies high school completion, but it had little currency in higher education as an indication that a student was prepared to do college-level work. The more rigorous and more expensive revised GED may open a more robust pathway into postsecondary education for many students. At the very least, a contextualized GED shows great promise to lead students directly into the workforce with stronger academic skills.

A contextualized GED shows great promise to lead students directly into the workforce with stronger academic skills.

A growing concern with the GED is financial support for students. As of July 2012, a high school credential is required for Pell eligibility, so these grants cannot be used to pay for the GED. Virginia, however, considers this an advantage. PluggedIn is supported by businesses, and participation gives students access to financial aid to complete the GED and save the Pell Grant for courses once the GED is awarded. The Commission offers several recommendations and a goal for pathways.

GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

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.

Build on Credentials Other Than Degrees

Community colleges are engaged in a wide range of offerings that may lead to credentials other than associate or bachelor's degrees. The most recognized credential is a certificate, which may range from skill development over a few weeks to programs that take months or a couple of years to complete.⁴⁶ Certificates hold important potential as pathways through community colleges to associate and bachelor's degrees.

But what qualifies as a certificate of value? Some researchers have suggested that certificates of less than one year are of questionable value. Some community college leaders on the Commission disagree, noting that several programs of less than a year lead to jobs and livable wages. Students in these programs often enroll, because they need a short path to a job and are less interested in a college degree. The Commission agrees that reliable and relevant data on certificates is important but is still limited. Some argue that only industry certificates should be counted.

Not to be confused with industry-based certifications, certificates are earned through seat time in a classroom, whereas industry-based certifications are awarded based on performance on a test, where the learning occurred is not a consideration.⁴⁷ Certificates comprise a high percentage of awards made by public institutions. In 2011-12, certificates below the associate level accounted for 23 percent of certificates, associate and bachelor's awards made by public institutions.⁴⁸

The number of certificates awarded in recent years has increased significantly. This growth began before the recession and has continued annually. In 2011-12, postsecondary institutions produced nearly 1 million certificates below the associate degree level, compared to approximately 650,000 a decade earlier. The proportion of certificates awarded in 2011-12 was almost evenly split between certificates of less than one year (47 percent) and certificates of one year to less than four years (53 percent). Of the 546,610 certificates of one year to less than four years, for-profit institutions accounted for 57 percent, while public institutions awarded 40 percent; nonprofit institutions awarded the remaining 3 percent.⁴⁹

Even though nearly one in four undergraduate awards made by public institutions are now certificates, this credential has largely been overlooked as the education community has focused heavily on the number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded, their place in the workforce and their contribution to upward mobility. The increasing attention in this century to educational attainment more broadly, however, has fueled more interest in certificates and their role in the marketplace. In *Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees*, researchers at the Georgetown University

Center on Education and the Workforce contend that certificates “have the capacity to raise the country’s global educational standing.”⁵⁰

Compared to a degree, a certificate is relatively inexpensive and can often be completed in a short period of time. Some have high value in the marketplace, especially when combined with a degree. The combination of a certificate and a degree results in a 6 percent premium at the associate degree level and 3 percent at the bachelor’s degree level.⁵¹ The key is to work in a field and hold a certificate that is tied to that field. Not surprising, nearly two out of three certificate holders earned their certificates immediately after high school and during the early years of their careers. What is surprising is that a significant proportion — one-third — of certificate holders earned those credentials after age 30. Clearly, the certificate is perceived as an advantage at any age.⁵²

Researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University studied the relative labor market gains for first-time college students who enrolled in the North Carolina Community College System in 2002-03. They compared medium-term returns (five to seven years after initial enrollment) to diplomas, certificates and degrees with returns for students who accumulated college credits but did not graduate. They found that returns to certificates and diplomas were weak, but associate and bachelor’s degrees yielded very strong returns. Even small accumulations of credits had labor market value; and the returns to health sector credentials were extremely high.⁵³

Key Terms

Certification: A credential awarded by a certification body based on an individual demonstrating through an examination process that he or she has acquired the designated knowledge, skills and abilities to perform a specific job. The examination can be written, oral or performance-based. Certification is a time-limited credential that is renewed through a recertification process.

License: A credential awarded by a licensing agency based on predetermined criteria. The criteria may include some combination of degree attainment, certifications, certificates, assessment, apprenticeship programs or work experience. Licenses are time-limited and must be renewed periodically.

Educational certificate: A credential awarded by a training provider or educational institution based on completion of all requirements of a program of study, including course work and test or other performance evaluations. Certificates are typically awarded for life (like a degree). Certificates of attendance or participation in a short-term training (for example, one day) are not in the definitional scope for educational certificates.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Measuring Alternative Educational Credentials: 2012*. (See Endnote #46)

Many certificate holders have also earned a degree: one-third of individuals with a certificate report having an associate, bachelor's or master's degree. For many, however, that pathway to a degree is often not taken — for multiple reasons. One is the difficulty in transferring credits from certificate work to degree work. Another is need for many students to first enroll in remedial courses to strengthen their academic preparation. Other barriers to degree study are the scheduling of courses in periods when many adults are working and the increasing cost of tuition and related expenses.

Certificates are now seen as an essential pathway to economic and social mobility. Badges are also emerging in the marketplace — notably “open badges” or “digital badges.” As a project developed by the MacArthur Foundation and Mozilla, these badges have been described as “something you can put on your website that says that you’ve been credentialed in a certain skill.”⁵⁴ Digital badges provide a venue to documenting skills learned outside the educational arena. “Digital badges created on the Mozilla Foundation’s Open Badges platform are portable and verifiable.”⁵⁵ The Manufacturing Institute has developed a set of Military Manufacturing Badges and is creating National Manufacturing Badges to recognize and credential skills students have learned while competing in a specified curriculum for STEM programs. A new and untested credential, badges are gaining popularity among certain areas of the population, but are not yet widespread.

Stackable credentials, defined by the U.S. Department of Labor as “part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs,”⁵⁶ are a growing interest in the workforce as workers become more mobile and industry needs change more rapidly. Being able to build on initial certificates to aggregate credentials also rewards students on their progress and incentivizes them to continue building on their education in their fields. Educators and industry representatives are coming together to make the case for an education system that works for employers, education providers, students and workers. Credentials from such a system would be portable and trusted by employers and educational institutions throughout the country; stackable to allow for building on shorter-term credentials; and part of a Career Pathways System.⁵⁷

Being able to build on certificates rewards students and incentivizes them to continue their education.

In *Scaling ‘Stackable Credentials,’* Evelyn Ganzglass describes strategies to create stackable credentials, with multiple examples of state and institutional initiatives, including modularizing existing applied associate degree and technical diploma programs, embedding existing industry and professional certifications in career and technical education programs, streamlining and scaling processes for awarding credit for learning represented by noncollegiate credentials and creating “lattice” credentials. The author also identifies policy issues to be addressed in creating stackable credentials:⁵⁸

- Cross-walk the different standards and metrics underlying industry and educational credentials.
- Work within and around constraints created by state and institutional governance arrangements.
- Bridge silos within and across educational institutions.
- Overcome the disconnect between credit-bearing and noncredit educational offerings.
- Negotiate federal financial aid rules.
- Balance the need for local flexibility and the need for greater flexibility to promote portability of credentials.

- Provide the right mix of traditional classroom instruction, online options and experiential learning opportunities through internships and work experience for students with different needs and courses of study.

Financial aid is a factor for a large proportion of students in community colleges, and it has special limitations for students in certificate programs. Students taking courses less than one semester in length are not eligible for federal Pell aid, yet many courses in certificate programs are less than a semester. If financial aid is limited, then students usually need to work at least part time while enrolled in certificate courses. Additionally, many state need-based financial aid programs are not open to part-time students, and individuals enrolled in certificate programs cannot study full time.

Insufficient financial aid and financial stress in low- and middle-income families combine to make students highly susceptible to program drop-out, especially when employers recruit them as soon as they have the skills employers need. This is particularly problematic in short-term certificate programs with high numbers of students who rely on quick training opportunities to qualify them for jobs. An associated risk of these early hires is the reduced opportunity for students to develop the soft skills, such as strong communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving and attitude, that will help them continue advancing up the mobility ladder.

Insufficient financial aid and financial stress in low- and middle-income families make students highly susceptible to program dropout, especially when employers recruit them as soon as they have the skills.

Certificates are recognized and well-accepted credentials in the workplace and a growing credential on the higher education landscape. But to be of value to students, programs need to be of value to employers and aligned with students' lives, especially for those who cannot attend full time and those with very limited financial resources. High percentages of community college students in certificate programs are part time and returning adults — not recent high school graduates. Many are veterans, unemployed, or returning to update skills and increase their job opportunities. Among high school students and their families, as well as among high school teachers, counselors and administrators, a certificate is often perceived as a lower-quality option rather than an economic opportunity. The negative view of certificate courses has long plagued community colleges, and this perception is exacerbated if high school programs are not well aligned with community college programs — students are not well served and lose interest. Students are also poorly served with certificates that hold little value in the marketplace. The continuation of high school and community college programs that produce certificates without merit is a disservice to students and the business and industry community.

Community colleges are the primary source of credentials that require two years or less of study. An important strategy to raise the educational attainment level of a state's population is to increase the number of individuals who earn credentials that are less than a degree — including those studies that lead to a certificate and require less than one year, one to two years, or two or more years. Given the extensive type and number of credentials available, states and their community colleges are challenged to identify industry certificates and their corresponding examinations that are of value and eliminate those that are no longer needed. The result will mean adjusting and possibly dropping pathways that lead to credentials that no longer have value in the workforce.

For many, a certificate has not been considered an option; for others, it has been an endpoint, not a springboard to something else. It has been a pathway without good bridges to degrees for too many. As higher education has

become less affordable and beyond the reach of many, the imperative to create those bridges in community colleges is without question one of the most important challenges that two-year institutions must confront and remedy. The Commission offers the following goal and recommendations for credentials other than degrees.

GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Two Noble Paths

Reaching the goal of an effective postsecondary education system that allows for multiple credentials that meet personal and workforce needs is perhaps the most significant challenge facing our states.

As noted in *Portable, Stackable Credentials: A New Education Model for Industry-Specific Career Pathways*, “As a nation, we need to recognize and embrace that there are essentially ‘two noble paths’ to family sustaining income, and both involve postsecondary education: portable, stackable industry-recognized credentials and/or a traditional college degree. However, with the right stakeholders on board, we have the opportunity to make the kinds of changes that will benefit the economy and the population as a whole.”⁵⁹

GOAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission offers the following goals and recommendations on several critical issues with the expectation that SREB's member states will use this opportunity to continue strengthening the role of community colleges in the South and broaden the understanding of how these institutions serve our students, families and communities.

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

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

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

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.

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