

Backgrounder *Embargoed until April 21, 2012, at 5pmEDT.*

**RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM:
A REPORT FROM THE 21ST CENTURY COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

Summary

The premise of the Commission can be summarized in three sentences: The American dream is at risk. Because a highly educated population is fundamental to economic growth and a vibrant democracy, community colleges can help reclaim that dream. But stepping up to this challenge will require dramatic redesign of these institutions, their mission, and most critically, their students' educational experiences.

Background Information

- American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) launched a 21st-Century Initiative in 2011 with the goal to educate an additional five million students with degrees, certificates, or other credentials by 2020.
- Phase I involved a listening tour during which the AACC President and staff heard from more than 1,300 stakeholders (students, college faculty and staff, administrators, trustees, state policymakers, college presidents and chancellors) in ten regions of the country.
- Phase II was the creation of the Commission with a two-fold mandate: to safeguard the fundamental mission of community colleges; and to challenge community colleges to imagine a new future for themselves, while ensuring the success of community college students, institutions and our nation.
- Thirty-eight members from higher education, education policy and business make up the Commission. http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Pages/21st-century_commission_members.aspx
- Funding was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, ACT, and Educational Testing Service.

Why this report at this time?

- Community colleges have served as a gateway to higher education and thus the middle class. By 2010, community colleges annually enrolled 13.3 million diverse students in credit and non-credit courses.
- Student success rates, however, are unacceptably low, employment preparation is too often inadequately connected to job market needs, and hand-offs between high schools, community colleges, and baccalaureate institutions are frequently dropped.
- The U.S., which for generations led the world in college degree completion, now ranks 16th in the world in college completion rates for 25-34-year-olds.

- By 2018, nearly two-thirds of all American jobs will require a postsecondary certificate or an associate or baccalaureate degree.
- If the U.S. can add 20 million postsecondary-educated workers to our workforce over the next 15 years, income inequality will decline substantially, reversing the decline of the middle class.

Commission Recommendations

- The Commission calls for a new vision for community colleges grounded in the “Three Rs”: *redesign* students’ educational experiences; *reinvent* institutional roles; and *reset* the system to create incentives for student and institutional success.
- There are seven recommendations around the Three Rs, each with detailed implementation guidance in the report.
- *Redesign* students’ educational experiences:
 - 1) Increase completion rates of community college credentials (certificates and associate degrees) by 50% by 2020, while preserving access, enhancing quality, and eradicating attainment gaps associated with income, race, ethnicity, and gender.
 - 2) Dramatically improve college readiness: by 2020, reduce by half the number of students entering college unprepared for rigorous college-level work, and double the rate of students who complete developmental education programs and progress to successful completion of related freshmen-level courses.
 - 3) Close the American skills gap by sharply focusing career and technical education on preparing students with the knowledge and skills required for existing and future jobs in regional and global economies.
- *Reinvest* institutional roles:
 - 4) Refocus the community college mission and redefine institutional roles to meet 21st-century education and employment needs.
 - 5) Invest in support structures to serve multiple community colleges through collaboration among institutions and with partners in philanthropy, government, and the private sector.
- *Reset* the system:
 - 6) Target public and private investments strategically to create new incentives for institutions of education and their students and to support community college efforts to reclaim the American Dream.
 - 7) Implement policies and practices that promote rigor, transparency, and accountability for results in community colleges.