AACC 21st-Century recommendation narratives

One: Increase completion rates by 50% by 2020

Currently, only 46% of students who enter community colleges with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have attained that goal. Community colleges have the potential to instruct a new generation of educated professionals primed to strengthen and grow the middle class.
In the coming months and years, community colleges will work to increase that percentage, enhance the quality of the education they provide and eradicate attainment gaps associated with income, ethnicity and gender. By 2020, the number of students earning their degrees through community colleges will increase by 50%.

To achieve this goal, community colleges are fundamentally redesigning the student experience. Using all of the resources that we have at our disposal – technology, research and faculty support – we're developing "pathways" that guide students along their community college journey. These pathways begin well before the first day of class. Enrollment programs in high schools and easily accessible information about financial aid ensure that students understand their options. The pathway leads students through their education, with regular guidance and support from faculty, key established milestones to measure success and hands-on learning experiences. Schools that have implemented pathways of this nature have already seen early success and higher retention rates.

Two: Dramatically improve college readiness

The majority of students enter college unprepared for the workload and the challenging nature of college-level work. If we don't fix college readiness on a national scale, this will continue to be a significant barrier to achieving degree completion goals. One key way to ensure students complete college is to ensure they're ready when they arrive. Colleges can reduce the number of underprepared students entering college by focusing on key actions long before students enter college.
Colleges need to develop metrics and assessments that help define college readiness in order to establish baseline data for counselors to track the progress of students. These data systems should be implemented early in the educational process and colleges need to work with high schools to identify and measure students' college readiness and improve student outcomes.

Colleges should establish community partnerships with local organizations that are working at educating the community, specifically K-12 partners. Collaboration should focus on engaging students and ensuring high school curriculum aligns with college expectations. These actions should include expanding early college counseling to help students understand financial aid opportunities and to promote dual and concurrent enrollment programs. Engaging high school and middle school students should be aimed at creating a college-going culture and should communicate specific expectations for college and career readiness. Collaboration should also focus on evaluating K-12 program effectiveness,

including helping to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or their equivalent in non-CCSS states.

Three: Close the American skills gap

Colleges must act to mind the gaps and make college-to-career seamless for students. Colleges should focus on preparing students with the knowledge and skills required for jobs in the competitive 21st-century labor market.

Colleges should engage with local employers to understand the unfilled labor market needs and should guide advising sessions with students based on the demands for certain skills. Counselors need to match students' interests and aptitudes to potential educational pathways. Coherent career pathways in those high-need areas will ensure students' opportunities for career advancement. Pathway programs need to incorporate stackable credentials that allow individuals to move along a career pathway. Successful pathway programs will require expanding internship, apprenticeship, and clinical placement opportunities for students.

Colleges need to deepen relationships with local, regional, and national businesses and industry leaders to help match college education and training with jobs. This collaboration will also help promote the associate degree as a desired employment credential. These relationships will also help build a pipeline for new workers in key sectors.

Four: Refocus the community college mission and redefine institutional roles

Community colleges need to move toward a more open learning environment in which students can access services from a network of colleges, customize their learning, and choose from multiple modes of delivery. In this sense, community colleges should evolve into brokers of educational opportunities helping meet students' varied educational needs and empowering students to take an active role in achieving their educational goals.

The creation of a college consortium or a network of colleges will allow students to take advantage of the best programs and courses to further their career aspirations and provide access to advanced education.

Faculty members need to diversify their expertise. While mastery of the content will remain essential, faculty should be versed in effective teaching practices, curriculum pathway design, instructional technologies, learning assessment, and student development in order to make staff members a dynamic addition to students' learning experiences.

Colleges need to embrace new forms of technology that assist in advising, academic planning, learning assessment and other student services. Technology-enriched approaches such as social media, texting, and QR codes can promote students' connections to important information about their studies and support services available to them.

Five: Invest in collaborative support structures

Community colleges need to collaborate with other educational institutions along with governmental organizations and private sector partners. The goal of these relationships will be to increase institutional efficiency and strengthen service to students. Through these partnerships, community colleges need to develop shared systems for managing student data, institutional research, professional development and other efforts that support student learning.

The resulting partnerships should serve multiple community colleges. To provide easy-to-access student data, partnerships should create statewide and border-crossing data systems. This will track students through the K-12 system, community colleges, baccalaureate and graduate education, and into the workforce to properly manage student progress.

Partnerships also allow colleges to offer students higher quality resources at lower costs. Colleges will also have access to large quantities of data for analytics at a cheaper cost.

Six: Target public and private investments strategically

Ensuring community college is affordable is a top priority for all colleges and AACC. This requires colleges make the most of every available funding stream at the local, state and national levels. Advocacy efforts should focus on (1) generating renewed public and private investment in community colleges to support the public good; and (2) promoting policies that will both push and support community colleges in their work to improve college completion.

While AACC and other organizations advocate on the federal level, these actions need to be complemented with informed and active college CEOs who prioritize advocacy efforts on the local and state level. Community college advocates should support policies that expand funding for Pell Grants and reinstatement of the Pell Grant Ability to Benefit option; funding models that promote and reward college completion; recognizing the VFA as a set of accepted metrics for college performance and improvement; and public investment in data systems that track students' progress.

Advocacy efforts should also focus on promoting the value of community colleges. Policies need to build a seamless transition across education sectors to give students clear pathways to further their education and careers. Actions should focus on fixing the community college to university transfer process including reducing students' loss of transfer credits and providing incentives for students to complete associate degrees before transferring. State officials should take steps to officially designate community colleges as the state's primary providers of workforce education and training.

Seven: Implement policies and practices that promote rigor and accountability

Colleges need to embrace appropriate metrics that measure their progress and make their institutions increasingly accountable to students and society. Knowing and sharing transparently how many students are earning degrees, prepared for the workforce, and achieving their goals is necessary to improve student learning and employment-related outcomes.

States should implement statewide data systems so colleges can track students on their educational and career pathways. Statewide data systems also will help education leaders demonstrate the employment- and wage-related results of a community college education.

Community colleges nationwide should implement the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) rather than using measurements developed for baccalaureate institutions, like being pegged to the number of full-time students, who represent less than half of the community college student population. By 2020, 100% of AACC member colleges should be using the tool. The VFA's workforce metrics need to incorporate labor and wage data that can be used nationally to reflect outcomes of community college education. The VFA should be positioned as the standard for measuring community college performance and should drive state performance funding and the design of state data systems.