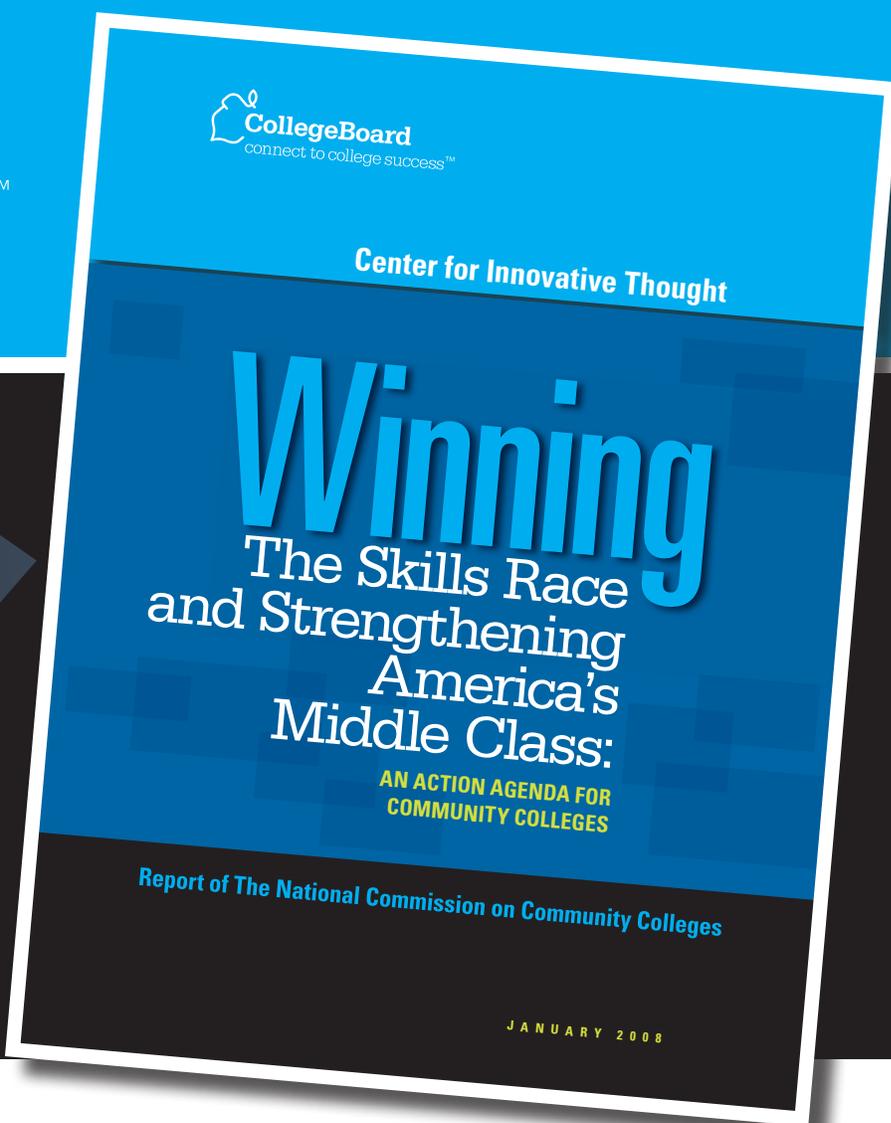




**A  
Community  
College  
Action Agenda**



## **The Charge:** Highlighting an Overlooked Educational Asset

*“Despite a 100-year record of success and productivity, community colleges are largely overlooked in national discussions about education.”*

—The National Commission on Community Colleges

**C**ommunity colleges are indispensable to the future of America. As this nation confronts international economic competition, threats to the stability of the middle class, dramatic demographic changes, and the need to reinvigorate our schools and communities, these colleges must play a central role in crafting national solutions.

Convinced that community colleges play an invaluable but overlooked role in American life, the College Board established the National Commission on Community Colleges to explore ways of building upon, improving, and expanding the role of two-year institutions in the decades ahead.

# The Colleges:

## A Promise of Universal Access and Excellence

*“If community colleges did not exist, Americans would have to find other ways to educate most of the men and women who put out fires, fight crime, expand small firms, and care for the sick and elderly.”*

In the century since they were founded, community colleges have become the largest single sector of higher education in the United States, with more than 1,200 regionally accredited two-year colleges enrolling nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates and providing higher education access for millions of students who would not otherwise attend college.

Students range in age from teenagers to octogenarians, taking courses in everything from English literature, biochemistry, and statistics to foreign languages, visual and performing arts, community development, emergency medical procedures, engine maintenance, and hazardous waste disposal.

These institutions:

- Certify nearly 80 percent of first responders in the United States (police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, etc.);
- Produce more than 50 percent of new nurses and other health-care workers;
- Account for nearly 40 percent of all foreign undergraduates on U.S. campuses;
- Award more than 800,000 associate degrees and certificates annually; and
- Prepare significant numbers of students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities where they complete bachelor’s degrees. Nationally, half of all baccalaureate degree recipients have attended community colleges prior to earning their degrees.

*“America as we know it is inconceivable without the contributions of these community colleges.”*

### Community College Fact Sheet

#### Number/Type of Community Colleges

Public	991
Independent	180
Tribal	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,202</b>

#### Enrollment

Students	11.6 million
Credit	6.6 million
Noncredit	5 million
Full-time	40%
Part-time	60%

#### Demographics

Average age	29
21 or younger	43%
22–39	42%
40 or older	16%
Women	59%
Men	41%
Minorities	34%
Non-U.S. citizens	8%

#### Community Colleges Enroll

All U.S. undergraduates	46%
First-time freshmen	45%
Native American	57%
Hispanic	55%
Asian/Pacific Islander	47%
Black	47%

Source: American Association of Community Colleges. All data available under “Community College Research” at [www.aacc.nche.edu/](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/).

# The Challenges:

## Four Threats to the Community College Promise

*“Serious challenges frame the response required to make real the Commission’s vision of a vibrant and healthy community college sector responding to national needs.”*

Despite the success of community colleges, four challenges undermine the ability of these institutions to fulfill their promise.

- **Rising costs.** When state budgets have tightened, higher education suffers. Given the students community colleges serve—many of them low-income, minority, first-generation, immigrant, as well as a significant number of the middle class—even modest increases in college costs impose potential obstacles to student participation and success.
- **The mismatch between demands and resources.** With the broadest mission of all education segments,

community colleges are allocated insufficient resources to do their many essential jobs well. Educating students for whom English is a second language, providing developmental instruction to students without college-ready skills, offering occupational training programs for local businesses, and permitting students to complete the first two years of a four-year degree are costly, but essential, services. If community colleges do not tackle them, who will?

- **A culture that has emphasized access more than success.** Community colleges’ most attractive asset—the commitment to student *access*—must now be matched with a commitment to student *success*. To compete globally, our nation needs a highly skilled middle class—one in which the majority of Americans have some college-level education and training,
- **The challenge of monitoring outcomes.** Community colleges are rarely judged on standards appropriate to their missions. Moreover, many institutions do not have the capacity to assess their own processes. In a new era of higher education accountability, community colleges must better document their outcomes.

### Matching Missions With Resources

*“Community colleges have done so much with so little for so long that legislators think we can do nearly anything with nothing!”*  
—National Commission Member

The National Commission on Community Colleges is especially concerned about a serious mismatch that exists between what community colleges are asked to do and the resources provided to get the job done. Ironically, community colleges’ unique characteristics—low cost and the broadest mission of all higher education institutions—have the potential to undermine the promise of these institutions. Offering a college education at modest cost to students regardless of academic background necessitates that institutions work relentlessly to manage costs. Fortunately, community colleges are well-regarded for their innovation and entrepreneurial spirit.

Still, the monetary lifeline between community colleges and their state and local constituents—who provide the primary support of these institutions—is fraying. The proportion of state and local support has dropped below 30 percent in the last two decades. While community college responses, such as collaborating with local businesses to provide industry-specific training, have been resourceful, these endeavors are approaching a point of diminishing returns. In their efforts to create efficiencies, for example, community colleges have hired more part-time instructors (more than 50 percent of all faculty, according to the Association of American Colleges and

## The Agenda:

### Three Recommendations for Education Leaders and Policymakers

*“The Commission calls for a new three-way social contract involving national leaders, state officials, and community college presidents—an agreement to put community colleges at the forefront of the effort to enhance American communities and ensure national competitiveness.”*

Implementing the Commission’s vision requires that community college leaders commit to an evidence-based culture designed around student success, while public leaders commit to making the investments required to secure that culture and America’s future.

- **For the Federal Government:** Pass the Community College Competitiveness Act of 2008, which calls for the expectation of universal public education for two years beyond high school and requests resources for enhanced workforce development, financial aid, guidance, and counseling.
- **For the States:** Revise inadequate funding formulas, reinvigorate the transfer function in areas of critical national needs, and create meaningful K–20 alignment.
- **For Community Colleges:** Develop accountability metrics that better assess the unique and varied missions of these institutions, respond to national goals for associate and bachelor’s degree production, and recommit to the expectation of universal student access and success.

Universities); deferred maintenance on buildings and infrastructure (in California alone the backlog comes to more than \$1 billion); reduced the number of counselors and advisors; and scaled back enrollment in spite of ever-increasing demand. All of these actions are necessary short-term responses in the face of budget shortfalls, but the steady, long-term effect will be disastrous for community colleges and for states.

If the nation cares about higher education access and equity and the need to remain globally competitive in the twenty-first century, the hobbling of community colleges is misguided—made worse by the very fact of these institutions’ extraordinary success over the past 100 years.





## The Future:

# Strengthening America with Re-Imagined Community Colleges

*“Our reach may exceed our grasp...but the long-term goal should be universal student success.”*

Within this new vision, community colleges will:

- Continue to provide open access, but give evidence of increased completion rates.
- Continue to offer multiple educational options.
- Establish new partnerships with the local business community.
- Commit to a “culture of evidence” that demonstrates success.
- Continually reflect on and improve their policies and practices.

Like beacons, American institutions of higher education throw off light in many directions. That light is reflected with special brilliance when it falls on America’s 1,200 community colleges and the students enrolled in these institutions—often the first in their families to complete secondary school or progress beyond it. Community colleges are the Ellis Island of American education—a safe harbor from which Americans from all backgrounds can reach their educational goals and the nation can sustain its leadership in the global marketplace of ideas and commerce.



## The National Commission on Community Colleges (2007)

**Augustine (Augie) P. Gallego** (Chair)  
Chancellor Emeritus,  
San Diego Community College District, CA

**Sharon Blackman**  
President,  
Brookhaven College, Texas

**Sunil Chand**  
President,  
College of DuPage, Illinois

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**Christine Johnson**  
Immediate Past President,  
Community College of Denver, Colorado

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North Carolina Community College System,  
North Carolina

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Queensboro Community College, New York

**Paul Sechrist**  
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Oklahoma City Community College, Oklahoma

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President,  
Northern Virginia Community College, Virginia

**Ronald A. Williams**  
Immediate Past President,  
Prince George's Community College, Maryland

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Building Engineering and Science Talent,  
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