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# Community colleges

## 'Turning point' arrives as U.S. community colleges' purview grows

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**COMMUNITY EFFORT**

By **Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY**

By Betty Young's count, it's been nearly three years since Jay Leno has made any cracks at the expense of community colleges. She should know: In the fall of 2005, after he had taken what she thought was a string of cheap shots, Young rode her Harley-Davidson more than halfway across the country to his *Tonight Show* studios and asked him to lay off.

He made no promises, but Young, a graduate and longtime president of community colleges, considers Leno's silence on the subject these days a victory. Perhaps more important, her public relations trek served as a sort of rallying cry for community college leaders nationwide. Tired of their image as the Rodney Dangerfields of higher education, they have become increasingly vocal in their demand for respect. Nothing less than the nation's economic future is at stake, they argue.

They might be right. Community colleges train 80% of the country's police officers, firefighters and emergency medical technicians and more than half of its new nurses and health care workers. They are the go-to destinations for displaced workers and immigrants seeking language and cultural skills. Community colleges are where people most often go when they need to brush up on math or English before pursuing a college degree. And they have become increasingly attractive to families who can't afford to send their kids to a four-year school.

**BLOG:** [A question and answer about community colleges](#)  
**PEOPLE:** [Faces of community college](#)

Now, community college leaders insist that their institutions, created to serve their local communities, have grown even more important on a larger stage. If the USA wants to keep pace with other industrialized nations, studies show, more of its workforce will need to be educated, including those who have traditionally been left behind by higher education: low-income students, working adults, underserved minorities and those who need remedial help before college. Community colleges, which were founded on the very notion that anybody who wants an education ought to be able to get one, are positioned to serve those populations, advocates say.

"This is really a turning point," says Travis Reindl of Jobs for the Future, a Boston non-profit focused on education and the workforce. "Some kind of education beyond high school is becoming a universal expectation."

Even so, as a policy concern, community colleges "are often

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Enlarge By Amy Sussman, Getty Images for Tribeca Film Festival

Amy Tan, who wrote such popular novels as *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, says community college put her on a path to be a best-selling author.

**FOR AMY TAN, IT ALL BEGAN AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Author Amy Tan, 56, whose best-selling novels include *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, attended San Jose City College in California before transferring to San Jose State University.

Going to a community college "was a wonderful decision," she said at a meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges in April. "Perhaps it was the only decision I could have made. I didn't have a lot of money, and I was putting myself through college. I earned a little money working in a pizza parlor. Tuition back then was \$10 per semester. I could afford that.

"We were like the \$1.99 family where you went to the restaurant, and you took all you could, and you ate all you took. When I was in college, you could take as many courses as you wanted for the same price. I took so many classes, I couldn't finish the homework.

"Today, I am a writer. And it astonishes me because nothing in my life looking back, in those early days ever would have led me to believe that I would become a writer. All things are possible. When your hopes are huge, all things are possible."

By Angela Haupt and Mary Beth Marklein

invisible," says a report released in February by a national commission of community college leaders. Collectively, they survive on budgets that average about one-fifth of those of their four-year public counterparts.

In 2000-2001, the latest year for which Education Department data are available, the nation spent \$140 billion on four-year public universities and just under \$30 billion for public two-year colleges. That ratio has remained relatively stable over the years.

Yet for the last decade, enrollments have been increasing faster at two-year schools than four-year schools. Today, community colleges enroll 6.5 million degree-seeking students, or nearly half (47%) of all college undergraduates. And no one documents the expanding demand nationwide for non-credit courses such as English as a Second Language and workforce training. An estimated 5 million students are enrolled in those kinds of programs, says the American Association of Community Colleges, a Washington non-profit that gets data from its 1,200 member schools.

A wider audience appears to be acknowledging the role two-year colleges play in today's economy. The association has lobbied members of Congress — 205 in the House and 31 in the Senate — who are crafting legislation to help two-year colleges compete for more federal funds.

The Bush administration was the first to have a deputy assistant Education secretary for community colleges. And presidential hopefuls Barack Obama and John McCain have discussed plans to help community colleges.

Businesses also are examining ways to better tap into community colleges. "The skills and capabilities we need in our workforce have changed dramatically," says William Green, CEO of Accenture, a consulting firm. A community college graduate himself, Green says they are "overlooked and underappreciated."

**Some needs unmet**

Heartwarming stories abound of how community colleges can transform lives.

In 2001, Bruce Haupt was a high school dropout making \$13 an hour. Today, at 26, he is enrolled at the Harvard Kennedy School and plans a career in community college administration. Without the support of "a couple of very key professors" and others while a student at Brevard Community College in Florida, he says, "I certainly would not be where I am today."

And yet, many of those who attend community college are far less successful. In the first six years after enrolling in a community college, only 36% of students earn a certificate or an associate's or bachelor's degree, according to an analysis of federal data by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. And just 51% of freshmen attending two-year institutions return for sophomore year, compared with a 69% national average for all public and private higher education institutions, says 2007 data from non-profit ACT Inc.

There are countless stories behind those figures. Courtney Bailey, 19, who pursued a criminal justice degree last year at a community college in El Cajon, Calif., quit because "a lot of it just seemed like a waste of my time." Plus, her history teacher "hated me. ... He told me I didn't appreciate history enough so he wasn't going to pass me." She hopes to join a police academy when she turns 21.

Phil Bertoni, who teaches math part time at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield, Ill., says students in developmental (sometimes called remedial) classes, particularly older students who work and support families, sometimes are surprised by the workload. "I would say, 'Look, I'm here to help. ... I want you to get through this with at least a C. But you have

to do your part by attending class, doing assignments, being prepared, performing on quizzes and tests, asking questions. ... Gradually, then, the drops would come, and finally I would end up with about half of what I started out with."

**COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A USA TODAY REPORT**

**AVAILABLE NOW:**

- **A global challenge:** Advocates say community colleges are crucial to ensuring the nation's workforce can compete in a global economy. Are they up to the challenge?
- **Bottom line:** Funding traditionally has favored the best and the brightest, but the status quo is being challenged.
- **How to measure success?** Graduation-rate data paint an unfair and inaccurate picture of community college results, advocates say.
- **Financial challenge:** Community colleges pride themselves on being the best bargains in education, yet affordability remains a barrier for many. Tuition isn't the main culprit.

**ONLY ONLINE:**

- **Higher education blog:** Join discussion led by USA TODAY reporter Mary Beth Marklein.
- **50-state chart:** Examining state-by-state public college funding by institution type.
- **Faces of community colleges:** Students and graduates share their experiences in their own words

**COMING SOON:**

- How state policies influence what happens at community colleges.
- Community colleges, an American invention, are catching on worldwide.

**The challenge ahead**

Some community college presidents and educators say it's unfair to expect higher success rates, considering their shoestring budgets and their multiple goals. Like their four-year counterparts, though, they are under growing pressure to ensure that more students succeed.

A report released in June by California's Legislative Analyst's Office, for example, concluded the state's 109 community colleges "fail to provide a substantial number of new students with required orientation and counseling services," and teaching approaches "are often not aligned with students' learning styles."

Surveys conducted at hundreds of community colleges suggest California's schools are not unusual. Last year, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, an initiative that helps schools assess whether students are engaged in practices that lead to learning, found that more than half of 310,000 students on more than 500 campuses reported they got little to no attention from advisers in their first four weeks. Nearly half (47%) said they had never talked with instructors outside of class about class, grades or assignments.

Such findings worry community college advocates. "If we're going to stake the future of our communities and our country on the ability of community colleges to educate more people, they are going to have to show us they're able to do it," says Kay McClenney, director of the survey at the University of Texas-Austin.

But the news is not all bad. In the last few years, a number of initiatives have been developed to help community colleges better track and understand student behavior. And a recent analysis found students at some community colleges reported notably higher levels of classroom participation in several categories than did freshmen at four-year research institutions.

While it's difficult to draw sweeping conclusions, "clearly some community colleges are providing a superior-quality undergrad education than a four-year" school, says researcher Kevin Carey, a policy analyst with Education Sector, a Washington think tank. He urges community college leaders to build on such data to ensure all students have a positive experience. If they did, he is willing to bet, community colleges could shed their junior status once and for all.

When it comes to educating undergraduates, four-year colleges are "afraid of being compared to you," he told community college leaders at a recent conference. The reason is simple, he says: "They have no way to go but down."

**COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACES**

Graduates and students share their experiences:

| Name, age | Graduate of: | Currently: | Why community college? |
|-----------|--------------|------------|------------------------|
|-----------|--------------|------------|------------------------|

Dee Polk, 21



Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Gautier, Miss.

Attending the Institute for International Public Policy

Polk chose community college so he could work full-time and support his family while taking classes. He plans on pursuing a bachelor's degree in international studies and German in the fall. "I learned so much more than I would have by immediately going to a four-year college. It was very diverse: so many different people from different backgrounds, with different mindsets and opinions. It's a perspective you can't get at a four-year school, where most of the students are traditional. I owe my academic development and my character development to community college. I owe my life to my community college. I have such a new outlook — I bettered myself during my time there."

Zach Maysey, 18



Apollo High School, Owensboro, Ky.

Attending Owensboro Community and Technical College, Owensboro, Ky.

During his junior and senior years of high school, Maysey spent half of each day at OCTC, where he studied industrial maintenance. He will continue there for three more semesters. "High school had too much drama ... it was nice to get a break. Community college is a lot more laid-back, and I felt like I got more out of it. They treat you like you're an adult. They don't tell you, 'Hey, do this.' You have choices. It's a lot more hands-on than high school; you actually get to be put in the situation. And a lot of the people in my classes were older, so we could learn from them, too. It's prepared me for what I want to do, and for what I hope I can accomplish."

Nahiris Bahamon, 22



College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Ill.

Transferring to the University of Wisconsin at Madison to study biology and anthropology.

Bahamon and her family came to the United States from Colombia in 2005 as political refugees. She spent time at Texas A&M in Corpus Christi and was accepted to Loyola University in Chicago, but decided community college was most affordable. "I had heard that (people who) went to community colleges ... couldn't get into regular four-year schools. I thought it was going to be easy and the level of quality was not going to be as (high) as I wanted. So I had this bad view of community colleges. When I went there everything changed. The honors program was what changed everything. The classes are just great and the discussion that happens is just so enriching."

Shawn Payne, 33



Owensboro Community and Technical College, Owensboro

Mechatronics coordinator at Owensboro Community and

After graduating from high school in 1992, Payne began attending Owensboro, but dropped out after one semester to work at a manufacturing plant. He returned to Owensboro when he lost his job to foreign outsourcing. "I was 30 when I came back. The plant was all I knew. (At school) I realized there were more opportunities out there than that small corner of the world. The more education you have, it seems,



Owen Sobol, Ky.

Technical College.

the better. I was able to be retrained for up to two full years at no cost ... two years of quality education was something I couldn't pass up."

Kendall Ramsijewan, 21



Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale

Studying accounting and sports management at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale-Davie, Fla.

Ramsijewan relocated to Florida from the Caribbean island of Trinidad three years ago. He attended community college because it was more affordable than a four-year program. "I always fantasized about life in America. I relished leaving Trinidad for the first time and broadening my perspective in a different country. My ultimate goal is to become CPA certified and somehow tie that into a sports team. I think I made an excellent decision in attending Broward Community College. The facilities appealed to me and ... the administrative staff was very kind, modest and knowledgeable."

Horacio Velador, 32



Richland Community College, Dallas, Texas

Vice president, portfolio management officer at Bank of America, Dallas.

After completing an associate's degree at Richland, Velador transferred to Southern Methodist University, Dallas, where he studied finance and management information systems. He is now pursuing a master's degree at the University of Texas at Dallas and hopes to one day teach at a community college. "Attending Richland allowed me to mature in my studies and prepared me for the next step. I enjoyed the fact that the majority of classes were small, which allowed me to interact more with the professor and class. I met some great people there, (including) my wife and a best friend, who is currently finishing his MBA at Harvard. I hope that one day I can help mold community college students in the same manner that the faculty there has helped me."

Elizabeth Grzeszczyk, 52



Holyoke Community College, Holyoke, Mass.

Senior clinical research associate for Quintiles, in California.

After graduating from Holyoke's chemical technician program, Grzeszczyk went on to receive a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass., and a master's from the University of Massachusetts. "As a 27-year-old recently divorced mother of a 4-year-old son, I decided to return to college. At the time, I did not think I could survive financially as a student for four years. I was good in the sciences and wanted to enroll in a two-year program in which I could be fairly certain I would be hired upon graduation. I never would have made it this far without the outstanding teachers, academic program, support and encouragement at Holyoke Community College."

Laurie Ray, 51



Cape Cod Community College, West Barnstable, Mass.

Project assistant for the Housing Assistance Corporation in Hyannis, Mass.

Although she already had a bachelor's degree, Ray enrolled in community college to learn how to manage database programs for a non-profit organization. She plans to graduate with an associate's degree in information technology and software development in December. "I have been so grateful for the instructors at my community college. They are so knowledgeable, and my cost has been so economical. Although there are many students who do the minimum in class, there are also many students who have a thirst for knowledge and attend classes at night to get ahead, or to see what they might be able to accomplish. This establishment has been a godsend for me."

Troy Cox, 39



Blue Ridge Community College, Weyers Cave, Va.

Transferring to James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va.

Cox attended the University of Oklahoma after high school, but dropped out after a year due to drug abuse. "I got clean and sober in 2005, only to discover I had Crohn's disease. After being hospitalized for a few days, life continued on. Since I had always wanted to go back to college, I did. The professors at Blue Ridge provided the necessary tools and great teaching for me to now be graduating with a 4.0. (I'm studying psychology so that) I can help people like me solve the riddles that make our lives. I also hope to one day teach at this level. These professors all do outstanding jobs and are the epitome of what teaching is all about."

Dallas Long, 31



St. Louis Community College

Librarian at the University of Illinois.

After receiving an associate's degree in liberal arts and sciences, Long went on to receive a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in library science and education. "I did see a lot of students who did not succeed at the community college. Often it was because they didn't feel like they belonged. They had no friends in their classes. They weren't involved in any school clubs. Maybe they worked full time, or they had friends who weren't attending the community college. I think success at a community college has less to do with academics and a lot to do with finding a sense of community as a student. I was involved in student clubs, and my part-time job was at the college library. I knew a lot of people, and I felt like I was supported and belonged there."

Mickey Todd, 50



Macomb Community College, Warren, Mich.

City clerk in Harper Woods, Mich.

Todd took remedial math and English classes at Macomb before transferring to Michigan State University in 1978. "Coming out of high school, I was totally unprepared to attend a four-year university. I didn't take school seriously, (but) I realized I didn't want to do manual labor. I buckled down academically and attended community college for two years. Community college itself was difficult for me at first, and I needed



Mich.

ivanti.

to take remedial classes. I took the whole gamut — all the way to precalc — and they helped tremendously. I stopped being a slacker and started studying."

Elisha McKinney, 34



Bevill State Community College, Fayette, Ala.

Transferring to the Mississippi University for Women, Columbus.

McKinney pursued an associate's degree in general studies and hopes one day to open her own business. She's the first in her family to go to college. "It's always been a goal of mine, going to college. (After high school), I went for one semester, and then I started my family. I put more focus on the family. (College) was just always something burning inside of me, and for me to tell my kids education is the way to go, how are they going to go if I don't have a degree? College is a goal that I had years ago and now an example for my kids."

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Pepper J wrote: <1m ago

ILBucki wrote: 2d 20h ago

Disgusting that my tax dollars help fund "immigrants" education, whether that means for learning English or any other subject. Let them foot the bill on their own

\*\*\*\*\*  
Oh my goodness whine, whine, whine. Just because your last name isn't Smith or Williams does not mean you can never be an American citizen. How do you know the details of their immigrant status ILBucki?

And if you're not an immigrant your ancestors were at one time (unless you're an American Indian). How soon people forget...

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ILBucki wrote: 2d 20h ago

Disgusting that my tax dollars help fund "immigrants" education, whether that means for learning English or any other subject. Let them foot the bill on their own. As to the quality of community colleges, I can state most quality colleges tend to fight you over the transfer of courses, particularly if they are from out-of-state. Can also say that the course offering booklet is chockfull of "fluff" courses, which seem to entail a lot of hobbies, not job skills. Moreover, they vary so much from state to state, county to county. I also see a lack of commitment by students. So many are clearly parked at these cc's, apparently in a move to avoid getting a job. I know this board is full of these lovely feel-good stories, but from what I have experienced over the decades, this hasn't been the case.

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ivansalas wrote: 3d ago

I know for a fact that the Valedictorian of Georgetown's Business School first went to Montgomery College (a community college in Montgomery County, MD) for two years.

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webqueen wrote: 3d 1h ago

I like to thank whomever created the open door policy for the community college system to where any adult with a serious ambition can go back to school when they are ready. Community college gives students (especially older students) the opportunity to make up for the mistake they make when they are young. Anyone who have graduated from high school for sometime would never go straight to a university and take their exam to enter a program (if there are some, if would be very few). Most of us would go to a community college then transfer out.

After graduating from high school for 10 years, I have to go back to school because the education I have is not enough (a certificate in word processing and data entry). I started at Western Piedmont Community College then transfer to Lenoir-Rhyne College to finished my BA in Computer Information System. I would never have the guts to go back to school if I didn't have a chance to try it out at the community college. Starting at the community college improve my self-esteem and my self-image. I would like to thank all the wonderful teachers who know me by my name and not just another students in the classroom; to the advisors, LAC assistance, and fellow classmates who help me make my two years at a community college a wonderful experience.

For students who have no clues as to what they wanted to become after high school or have a weak background in English should attend a community college first. Teachers at the community college still treat you like your high school teachers and still guide you until you're ready to let go.

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Aylwin\_Forbes wrote: 3d 19h ago

I am a professor at College of DuPage and was fortunate to have had one of the featured students Nahiris Bahamon in my class and been able in a small way to contribute to her success. Her story is a shining example of the vital role that the community college plays in the educational system of this country and illustrates that the community college does much more than provide job training for local businesses, which it certainly does; but, more importantly in my view, it provides educational avenues to 4-year universities and professional education for students who are not blessed with opportunity or money to buy their way in at the beginning.

As a graduate of an elite university with a previous career in research at prestigious corporations I have found myself beset with concerns about my self-image in the community college system: "What am I doing here among "these" people?" I harbour a palpable inferiority complex about being looked down upon by "real" universities. As time progresses these doubts are beginning to dissipate. I have had opportunity to compare our students against visitors from the 4-year schools: they are no different. I would put my standards and my classes up against any of the local universities. I hear countless times how well our students are prepared to compete in their 4-year experience. I am becoming a believer. Thus I respond with particular indignation when students relay disparaging comments from sneering 4-year professors such as referring to community college students as "botom feeders." Nahiris was correct in assigning this attitude to ignorance. I would also add arrogance.

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Diane Blanco wrote: 4d 1h ago

All of us who work in community colleges hear these wonderful life-changing stories every day. One of our most amazing ones is a young woman named Amanda Mitchell who enrolled in our dual credit classes, taking college courses while still in high school and earning credit at both institutions. She received her associate's degree from our college two weeks prior to her graduation from Splendor High School. She was raised by her grandparents, who lived primarily on social security. She says she wanted to be a "breaker", to break the cycle of poverty. In the fall after graduation, she entered Baylor University, on a full scholarship. She received enough money in scholarships from other sources that she was able to pay off the note on her grandmother's house ( at 17) and still have living expenses at college. She studied abroad, interned in Washington D.C. and upon graduation entered the Teacher Certification Program at our college, Lone Star College-Kingwood. She began teaching at Splendor High School, her alma mater, to give back what was given to her. This fall, she will begin law school, an evening program while continuing to teach fulltime. She will tell you that she is not smarter than other students, but that she just worked harder. I find that amazing. I love USA Today and how you have honored our community college students in the past. The recognition of these students is so deserved.

Diane Blanco  
 Director of College Relations  
 Lone Star College-Kingwood  
 Kingwood, Texas 77339

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mousebird wrote: 4d 17h ago

cws1981 said:

My experiences or more appropriately observations were:

1. Generally easier than high school courses.

- 2. Little respect for the degree.
- 3. You had to have very high grades to transfer to a 4-year and even then; transfer of credits was limited.
- 4. Low SAT scores overall so it kind of like the one-room school house teaching down & not up.

I don't know where you went to CCollege, but I can assure that where I taught in Florida, it was as tough as a 4 year college.

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Texas Reader wrote: 4d 18h ago

Teaser - Great post. Many of the general education teachers at a univ. are grad students working on a Ph.D. they may be very skilled in their field but often lack teaching experience. Courses taught by Ph. Ds in universities during the first or even second year of a student's career are often very large.

There is probably no doubt that the ed. credentials of students, for the most part, at a univ are better than those at ccs. Teaching 18 - 55 year olds at a cc is much more of a challenge than teaching a class of 18 year olds at a univ.

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Teaser wrote: 4d 18h ago

I've been a professor at the College of Southern Nevada (which is near to being the 3rd largest community college in the country) for 10 years. I used to teach at 4-year and research institutions, but I found that my love of teaching was the most important thing for me. I have loved teaching at the community college level, and I sometimes believe we are treated as nothing more than "high school with cigarettes." That's sad. Check the credentials of faculty at many community colleges, and you might be surprised by their high quality. I received my PhD from a program that - at the time - was ranked among the top-5 programs nationwide. Our students receive a quality education. One primary advantage we have over research institutions is that we are a "teaching" institution. At a research institution, obviously, conducting research is a higher priority than teaching. That does not mean the professors are bad at teaching or uncaring about it. But it is a reality of that kind of institution. At the community college, our primary charge is to be excellent teachers, so we can be in a position to help those students who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Everyone - everyone - deserves a chance at higher education.

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Texas Reader wrote: 4d 19h ago

Florida's Community Colleges are somewhat unique. They were originally set up as Junior Colleges with transfer as their main mission in the '60s and early '70s. They had an articulation agreement in the '60s put into place by the State Board of Education that basically mandated the transferability of the general education core from any state cc or university to any other cc or university. In the '90s the legislature mandated common prerequisites for university majors so that a cc transfer would not get have to take additional hours by going to one univ. instead of another univ. while still intending to have the same major. Florida has the most highly articulated cc to univ. structure in the country.

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