



New Report Shows Community Colleges Can Rapidly Increase Student Enrollment in Programs That Lead to Good Jobs

10 Unlocking Opportunity colleges moved over 20,000 students to high-value pathways in just three years

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (July 14, 2026) — A new report from the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) finds that community colleges can, in a short time, substantially increase the number of students enrolled in high-value programs that lead to good jobs, either directly in the workforce or through transfer and bachelor's degrees.

The report *Unlocking Opportunity: Progress on Moving More Students Toward Good Jobs* highlights results from 10 community colleges participating in the Unlocking Opportunity network, a research and development initiative launched in 2023 to improve post-completion outcomes for community college students. The participating colleges collectively serve more than 170,000 students and vary considerably from one another. They include large urban colleges and small rural-serving institutions, as well as workforce-oriented colleges and those where most students are in transfer-oriented liberal arts programs.

Between 2022 and 2025, the 10 colleges:

- Increased the number of students enrolled in high-value pathways by 20,104, including more than 17,000 students from low-income backgrounds and/or students of color
- Decreased the number of students enrolled in low-opportunity programs by 7,648

The colleges accomplished these goals over three years, beginning their work by assessing which programs they would classify as “low-opportunity,” meaning those workforce programs likely to lead to jobs earning below a college-defined low-wage threshold and those transfer programs unlikely to result in bachelor’s attainment, as well as “high-value” programs which were likely to lead to jobs that pay at least a living wage or transfer and attainment of a bachelor’s degree. The colleges then worked to increase enrollments in high-value programs and either reduce enrollments in low-opportunity programs or improve those programs to create more value for students.



Individual colleges achieved those goals in different ways. Southwest Wisconsin Technical College launched a radiologic technology program to address regional workforce shortages. San Antonio College partnered with employers to expand clinical placements in nursing, increasing enrollment in its selective nursing programs by 71 percent in three years. Odessa College eliminated general studies associate degrees from its offerings because those degrees offered inadequate post-graduation opportunities, while concurrently strengthening career and academic planning to steer students into stronger pathways.

The project was designed by Aspen and CCRC to respond to weaknesses in outcomes for some community college graduates. Specifically, while community colleges offer affordable, accessible pathways to higher education, more than one-third of community college credentials do not lead to good jobs or the bachelor's degrees that open the door to them.

"Given the large number of low- and middle-income students they serve, community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide Americans a path to economic mobility," said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. "These Unlocking Opportunity colleges demonstrate that meaningful change is possible in just a few years. By redesigning programs, strengthening advising, and aligning pathways with labor market demand and transfer success, they are helping thousands more students access good jobs and the bachelor's degrees that are needed for economic security."

The report highlights how colleges implemented institution-wide reforms to strengthen both workforce programs and bachelor's degree pathways. Participating colleges adopted evidence-based strategies that included:

- Developing and expanding high-value programs aligned with employer demand
- Strengthening low-opportunity workforce programs so they lead to better jobs
- Accelerating bachelor's degree attainment through strengthened transfer pathways while reducing the number of students in general studies programs that lack clear transfer or career outcomes
- Redesigning advising and onboarding processes to connect students with high-value pathways from the start
- Aligning dual enrollment programs with college and career pathways

"While completing a credential is important, community colleges can no longer measure their success simply by how many students graduate; they also need to ask where those credentials lead," said Davis Jenkins, CCRC Senior Research Scholar. "By doing the hard work of redesigning programs and student onboarding, the Unlocking Opportunity colleges offer



important lessons to all 970 community colleges across the country about how to help many more students enter pathways that lead to college and career success.”

The report also underscores the importance of community college presidents and other institutional leaders in driving change. Many of the reforms required substantial shifts in institutional policies, procedures, data systems, and external partnerships. College leaders played a critical role in ensuring that these changes were implemented at scale and remained focused on improving students’ post-graduation outcomes.

Aspen expanded the Unlocking Opportunity network to an additional 54 colleges in 2025, and will report on their progress over the coming years, as well as continuing research on the 10 original network colleges.

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The **Aspen Institute College Excellence Program** aims to strengthen higher education leadership and practice to improve student outcomes—with the ultimate goal of advancing economic mobility and developing talent for the good of each individual and society as a whole. For more information, visit www.highered.aspeninstitute.org.

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The **Community College Research Center (CCRC)**, Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for 30 years. CCRC’s work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success. For more information, visit ccrc.tc.columbia.edu.