Declining Enrollments and the Community College Value Proposition

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Community colleges have perhaps never been more in the spotlight than in the last several years. A prevailing focus on the career and technical training, affordability, and flexible delivery models that community colleges offer would presume their assured success in enrolling increasing numbers of students from all demographics.

Yet, as community college leaders are well aware, enrollment in public two-year institutions has declined in recent years, dropping 16 percent overall from 2010 to 2015 (Education Advisory Board [EAB]). Statistics from the National Student Clearinghouse show that enrollments, while stabilizing slightly, continue to fall among community colleges nationally with enrollments down 2.8% in Fall 2016 over the prior year. Meanwhile, enrollments remained level for four-year institutions. Locally, the majority of Michigan community colleges reported enrollment decreases every Fall term since 2011 (Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers). While it is widely understood among college leaders that enrollments often increase during an economic downturn and ebb upon recovery, in the current educational and economic landscape, the issue is somewhat more complex and involves multiple underlying factors. Identifying the drivers behind this trend and viewing these through the lens of today’s student is key to addressing enrollments on our campuses.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS:
Particularly in Michigan, the decline in high school graduates will continue to have an impact on community colleges. Michigan is predicted to have the third largest percentage decline in high school graduates in the United States between 2016 and 2030, dropping almost 14% in that time (Michigan Association of State Universities). This shift—which will spur competition among not only community colleges, but also four-year institutions—demands a focus on programs that ensure college and career-readiness to attract and promote success for this population.
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PERCEIVED RETURN ON INVESTMENT: Despite the decrease in numbers, more high school students than ever – over 82% of seniors in 2013-14 – graduated. This begs the question: why don’t more graduates attend community college? A study from the Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce noted that institutions seeing the most enrollment declines often offer degrees that provide the least return on investment in job opportunity. Thus, some high school graduates, viewing the value of college as not worth much more than an entry-level job, may forgo college to enter the workforce.

VALUE PROPOSITION: According to the EAB, community colleges generally have a lower market share than four-year colleges, which often have more resources for career services, experiential learning, internships, and employment services. The Georgetown study also showed that working adults with low-wage jobs considered college more time-consuming or expensive, and thus less valuable, than staying in a current job. The value proposition of the community college, then, must be to offer curriculum and services leading to a high-paying job upon completion.

At Washtenaw Community College (WCC), several initiatives to meet student needs and promote the college’s value in today’s economic, social, and educational environment have contributed to stable enrollments over the last five years, including:

OUTREACH: WCC has dramatically increased outreach to K-12 since 2011, developing new partnerships with school districts, instituting college and career readiness programming beginning at middle school, and increasing dual enrollment by 28% last year.

FLEXIBILITY: Flexible late-start sections and online offerings are integral to adding value, especially for working students. Since 2011-12, online offerings have increased 94% with distance learning courses generating 23% of enrollments in 2015-2016.

AFFORDABILITY: In addition to keeping tuition flat in 2016-17, a major initiative spurred by the demand for affordability has been faculty development of open education resources to create free textbooks in many course sections.

FUTURE-FOCUSED PROGRAMMING: Curriculum aligned with future-oriented jobs offer pathways for skill attainment or upskilling. New programs tied to intelligent transportation, for example in cybersecurity and data science, deliver entry to high-wage, high-relevance jobs, supported by centralized career services.

As external factors impacting higher education continue to evolve, astute college leaders will view enrollment shifts from multiple angles and in light of constantly changing student needs. Embracing and promoting the unique value proposition of the community college as a quality, affordable pathway to forward-looking, good-paying careers will position institutions to better attract and serve students well into the future.

Sources:
Enrollment Trends: Current and Future Diversity in Dynamic Community Colleges

By Kriesta Watson, Ed.D., Achieving the Dream Data Coach

Community colleges are dynamic environments where students participate in comprehensive and holistic learning and support. Futuristic enrollment trends indicate that student success will be dependent on how well community colleges address their internal/external diversity in areas of students, learning, and technology.

STUDENT DIVERSITY
The complexity of student characteristics includes different types of student demographics. Therefore, the changing student profile is of dire importance as community colleges service their constituents’ needs. Particularly, the emphasis on the rise of single parents is a critical student characteristic requiring specific intervention. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2017), “the number of single mothers in college more than doubled in the school years between 1999 and 2012” (p. 1). This enrollment trend impacts the success rate of women students. For example, “nearly 2.1 million students (11 percent of all undergraduates) are raising children without a partner” (p. 1). Additionally, these students require different types of student services that comprise child care needs, “peer support, child-friendly spaces on campuses, and tailored scholarships,” to name a few (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2017, p. 6).

TECHNICAL DIVERSITY
The increasing use of mobile devices within the classroom presents new opportunities and challenges for instruction. This technology allows for learning to be completed in different ways with the use of applications, websites, and Open Educational Resources (OER) (Ally & Tsinakos, 2014; William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2013). Using mobile devices, students have entry into other educational avenues that were not previously available. For example, “smartphones become a conduit for immediately connecting with advisors,...faculty, administrators, and/or peers, ...paying college bills, making appointments, checking financial aid status, finding careers, connecting with alumni mentors....” (Blackboard.com, 2017, p. 6), completing assignments, and learning critical course information. Content will no longer be restricted to textbooks and blackboards; but will be available in more dynamic formats, opening new learning avenues for students to be successful in higher education with their completion goals.

LEARNING DIVERSITY
As learning deliveries and modalities change, students will be expected to learn in more meaningful ways, becoming increasingly engaged learners. Thus, faculty roles evolve progressively into facilitators of learning, providing critical feedback using technology to improve student learning and success. Consequently, sustainability of the “sage on the stage” approach emerges as impractical given these enrollment trends and the rising usage of mobile learning and online platforms.

Consequently, developmental education continues to be a major hurdle for some students to overcome. However, strategies for strengthening developmental education must concentrate on: “...1) using multiple measures to assess post-secondary readiness and placement; 2) compressing or mainstreaming developmental education with course redesign; and 3) implementing comprehensive, integrated, and long-lasting ...student support programs (Schafer, Metzger, Bass, McCann, & English, 2017, p. 14).”

Given this dynamic time in community colleges, institutions must rethink academic and student support services while re-engineering their human resources to more effectively address student success and completion goals and preparing and responding to relevant institutional enrollment trends.

References:
WCCCD: Changing Gears to Drive Student Enrollment and Stimulate Regional Economics

By Kristen Barnes-Holiday, Ph.D., Dean, WCCCD Regional Training Center

The declining student enrollment in community colleges across the country is a nation-wide challenge and educational institutions are examining the imperative. What is it that can and must be done to ensure the recruitment and retention of students and a continued commitment to the Completion Agenda?

Undoubtedly, we are living in exponential times. For a couple of decades now, it has been impossible for any country to isolate itself from the evolving political and economic landscape of the world. America is no different. But our challenges as a nation are unique. With a declining manufacturing base on the one side, rising costs of a university education and a turbulent economic climate, the nation must prepare its young adults for careers of the future.

I use the term exponential since that is exactly what the rate of change is. For example, the top 10 careers of 2010 did not even exist in 2006. In fact, most of the technology taught to students in the first year of college is outdated by their third year. Add to that some South Asian and Scandinavian countries are constantly ranked number one in the world for quality of K-12 education. A telling statistic is that India has more honor roll students in K-12 than America has children.

A new dimension that compels educators to adopt a new line of thought is the significantly different psychological profiles of the new millennial generation. Their career goals are vastly different and their methods for pursuing these goals, the ways they learn and unlearn, and their definition of professional success also varies greatly.

All these bring back the question of the role that community colleges play in ensuring that the pipeline for qualified well-trained professionals into corporate America is well fed and for this, Wayne County Community College District has implemented effective strategies.

WCCCD serves as a resource for learning, civic and community engagement, providing opportunities that individuals might not have otherwise received and serves a diverse community in the seventh largest county in the nation. The community college played a pivotal role in shaping the regional economic landscape, giving residents access to training and preparing such individuals for job opportunities and career placement. WCCCD is a pathway toward long-term systemic change—an economic revival that only a strong, community-based institution could spearhead.

Education at WCCCD is affordable and accessible. Yet, Michigan faces a decline in total student enrollment. Below, is a snapshot of this trend nationally and within the state of Michigan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR/REGION</th>
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<td>-5.6%</td>
<td>-4.6%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-3.3%</td>
<td>-4.4%</td>
<td>-2.9%</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
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*Source: [https://nscresearchcenter.org/currenttermenrollmentestimate-spring2017/](https://nscresearchcenter.org/currenttermenrollmentestimate-spring2017/)

A recent study by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce found that 65 percent of jobs in America will require a postsecondary degree or credential. As a community college that has expanded to a comprehensive
While I hold a management position in the corporate sector, my father serves as community college CEO. We have often discussed aspects of business and resource management in the community college sector as compared to the corporate sector. In these discussions, I have sometimes shared what I think the community college can learn from the business and resource management practices of corporations.

There are, of course, obvious differences between corporations and community colleges that influence business and resource management practices. A corporation is accountable primarily to its stockholders and customers, whereas a community college is accountable to a number of constituencies—students, faculty and staff, governmental agencies, and the public. A corporation receives revenue primarily from its customers through the sale of products and services, whereas the community college receives revenue from a number of sources—student tuition, local tax receipts, state aid, federal funding, and private gifts. Those who support a community college financially are not, with the exception of students, those who directly receive educational services. Corporations are by nature entrepreneurial, whereas community colleges tend to be conservative and risk-averse. However, community college faculty and staff do not like to be referred to as a “business” and they do not like to hear their students referred to as “customers.” I will share these suggestions for the business and resource management of the community college based on what I have learned in the corporate sector.

A community college is, in fact, a business. Just as a corporation must continuously change its product line in response to changing customer needs, a community college must continuously update its “products”—the curriculum, student services, and continuing education offerings if it is to remain relevant to the needs of the students, businesses, and communities it serves. The “business” dimension of the community college also encompasses the annual and strategic planning, resource management, organizing, staffing, performance analysis, analytics and data management, and other operational aspects of the college.

The management of organizational capacity of the college, the deployment of its precious resources, is a critical dimension of the business management of a community college. The college must manage its human, financial, physical, technological, and information resources in such a way that there is maximum impact on the achievement of the mission, vision, and strategic goals of the college. In this way, a community college will be able to invest in its highest calling; to serve as a beacon of hope for those underprepared and underserved groups for whom the community college may be the only pathway to career and educational success.

Community colleges must become more entrepreneurial and innovative. Colleges should have a dedicated pool of funds for investment in the continuous improvement and redesign of their programs, services, structures, and processes. I would like to see faculty and staff as innovators and students as entrepreneurs.

The community continues to evolve and transform as it serves as a beacon for providing accessible and meaningful forms of education to underserved communities. Community colleges have proven to be a major player in higher education as it maintains a substantial share of the world’s most valuable investment and business—people. There are 1,108 community colleges in the U.S. serving approximately 6 million undergraduate students, down from 9.8 million students in 2013-2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). With the community colleges providing education to nearly 40% of all undergraduate students attending college, the national spotlight has been unforgiving due to the recent decline in enrollment for two-year community colleges.

There has been a steady decline reported for all sectors of education, but private colleges and community colleges have experienced the most dramatic decline compared to all college types. The states where community college enrollment decreased the most include, New York, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016). As a result, there are considerable discussions by national leaders in education and business related to these trends to determine if this is a bad sign for education in the U.S. or is it a job well done by community colleges due to stabilizing enrollment after a tumultuous downturn in its economy.

Many might say that the enrollment decline reported by community colleges nationwide is attributed to improvements in the economy. In 2010 when enrollment in community college was its highest, the unemployment rate was 9.8%. The current unemployment rate in the U.S. is 4.3%, with more than 65% of the job openings requiring a college degree by 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Consequently, many of the students that often chose community colleges are finding jobs or taking fewer credits to juggle career and education. This leads to the question of whether community colleges are responsible for training and retooling its graduates for future job openings in fast growing industries in the workforce. On the other hand, some may pose that the trend is due to changes in federal legislation that impede students’ access to federal funds to pay for the increasing tuition costs to attend college. Whether the drop in enrollment is the result of an improved economy, federal legislation changes, or drop in the number of high school graduates, community colleges continue to do what it does best; educate underserved communities with resourceful means to close the skills gap in the workforce and advanced education.

Like many community colleges across the nation, Wayne County Community College District seeks opportunities and initiatives of scale when faced with barriers within its environment. With approximately 42% of WCCCD students...
being the first in their families to attend college and nearly 80% receiving some form of need-based aid, the District is no stranger to right-sizing and doing more with less. Nevertheless, WCCCD focuses on data-driven strategies to address recruitment with the following: new program development and alignment with the workforce, transferability, marketing, and student success initiatives. Each of these strategies are designed with laser focus to target students for potential enrollment and life-changing success.

NEW PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT
According to the Inside Higher ED and Gallup (2017) survey, WCCCD is among 81% of community colleges that continue to find innovative ways to develop and modify programs to meet the future graduate needs with majors in high skill and high demand industries. As a result, the District has reviewed its curriculum in Computer Information Systems, health sciences, and STEM industries as those career areas will have the most job openings by 2020. Additionally, it looks forward to new programs that support its new Health and Wellness Center and Horticulture Education Center.

TRANSFERABILITY
With nearly 78% of students transferring from community college to four year colleges/universities without an associate’s degree, the District considers looking at recruiting students back for reverse transfer opportunities as potential completers of the associate’s degree.

Percent of students that complete bachelor's degree after attending community college

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MICHIGAN</td>
<td>43%</td>
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Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

According to Inside Higher Ed, 72% of community college presidents reported “adding options to make it easier for students to transfer to four-year institutions.”

MARKETING
WCCCD has increased its attention and resources to support marketing through all forms of media. Additionally, on each campus location, program informational materials are presented strategically in very visual ways as well as provided in specific courses to inform students of their full potential in high wage, skill, and demand career fields.

STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES
WCCCD developed its Student Success Center to align all of its support services and initiatives in one central location with an emphasis on the use of data and information to inform improvements in retention, completion, persistence, and resources that help student success both in and out of the classroom.

WCCCD continues to seek innovative and strategic initiatives to ensure targeted recruitment and student success. The District invests in its students to help them complete their educational goals and skills needed to further their education or pursue career paths that improve their quality of life.

Sources
National Student Clearinghouse Research Center: Term Enrollment Estimates Reports. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/currenttermenrollmentestimate-fall2016/
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Mission Statement

WCCCD’s mission is to empower individuals, businesses and communities to achieve their goals through excellent and accessible services, culturally diverse experiences, and globally competitive higher education and career advancement programs.

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