

# Community Colleges as Engines of Economic Opportunity

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Community colleges can be a springboard to a better life. They serve underrepresented, low-income, and nontraditional students; have a wide range of practical offerings; and offer lower tuition. They are uniquely situated to change the economic trajectory of millions of adults and their families.

## The Problem

As important as community colleges are, right now many of their students are not achieving the educational and economic outcomes necessary for mobility from poverty.

- **Graduation rates are low.** With open admissions policies, community colleges serve many students who are less academically prepared. Some students are juggling the demands of work and family. Others, including first-generation or older students, may need more help navigating college.

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### Only 2 in every 10 community college students graduate in three years

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- **The economic returns to completing a community college credential vary greatly.** While receipt of a two-year credential increases employment and earnings on average, some degrees and certificates show low or no returns.
- **Too many “catch-up” courses can cause delays and lead to students dropping out.** Over a third of community college students take developmental

classes to address basic skills. But these courses significantly lengthen the time to complete a credential and do not always match students’ program goals.

- **Too many choices can lead to detours.** Community colleges have flexible class offerings, but the choices can be confusing. As a result, students can take unnecessary classes or choose a career path with limited prospects. Advisors can help, but they are vastly outnumbered.

## The Solution

Today higher education is imperative to get and stay ahead. To improve academic and economic outcomes for community college students, we recommend *comprehensive* community college reform.

1. **Offer high-quality in-demand programs.** Community colleges should align program offerings with labor market demand, using input from employers and labor market information.
2. **Streamline developmental courses.** Community colleges should offer more targeted and accelerated basic skills education, allowing students to improve without derailing progress toward a degree.

3. **Support working students and those who are parents.** Community colleges should make it easier for students to combine work, caregiving, and education, with such resources as block scheduling and child care assistance.
4. **Create clearer pathways.** Community colleges should help students identify and complete an academic path that leads to a good job.

### WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Philanthropy can support initiatives that educate community colleges on evidenced-based reforms, facilitate peer sharing among colleges undergoing reform, provide technical assistance on system changes, and fund innovations.

Philanthropy can also develop and fund efforts to build a talent pipeline of community college leaders capable of managing change at scale.

### WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

The federal government can support the development of performance measures and assure open access to needed data.

State governments can create funding incentives for change. Many states have adopted performance-based funding schemes for colleges. Designed properly, these systems could improve educational outcomes and align community college offerings with labor market needs.

Everyone deserves a chance to get a good education, one that provides the skills critical to successfully navigating daily life and finding a good job. With the right reforms, community colleges can be that bridge for many more people.

### WHAT DOES “MOBILITY” FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

Comprehensive community college reform is part of the jobs strategy.

### HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** More students will earn in-demand credentials, quality jobs, and higher incomes.
- **Power and autonomy:** Community college graduates will increase the sense of their own ability and agency.
- **Being valued in community:** Students will expand their social networks and report greater social inclusion.

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This brief summarizes the paper *Stepping on the Gas: Community Colleges as Engines of Economic Mobility*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.