MAPPING COMMUNITY COLLEGES AROUND THE WORLD

Comparative Perspectives and Collaborative Pathways

Global Snapshots: Models, Missions, and Challenges

ISSUE 1

ACCT ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

STAR SCHOLARS NETWORK

About ACCT

The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) is a non-profit educational organization of governing boards, representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees who serve on over 500 governing boards of community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond.

ACCT's mission is to foster the principles and practices of exemplary governance while promoting high quality and affordable higher education, cutting-edge workforce and development training, student success, and the opportunity for all individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency and security.

In accordance with this mission, ACCT seeks to facilitate global learning and engagement by its member institutions in order to prepare students to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world and globalized workforce. With staff expertise in international education and a network of institutional leaders and practitioners, ACCT's global education programs are designed to broaden access to international education for an underserved sector and student population; provide needed technical and capacity building assistance; and identify and disseminate innovative solutions and good practices.

About STAR Scholars Network

The STAR Scholars Network is a global consortium of researchers, scholars, and academic leaders committed to advancing transnational research, academic mobility, and international collaboration. With over 33, 000 members across more than 100 countries, the network supports scholarly exchange through publications, conferences, and mentoring programs. Our mission is to promote inclusive global scholarship and foster equitable partnerships that uplift historically underrepresented voices in academia.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Mapping Community Colleges Around the World: Comparative Perspectives and Collaborative Pathways reflects a strategic collaboration between the Association of Community College Trustees and the STAR Scholars Network. This series of briefs:

- Highlights effective regional, national, local, and institutional policies and programs that support, fund, evaluate, and strengthen community colleges and similar institutions, and enable them to fulfill their missions and goals.
- Identifies structural, operational, programmatic, and curricular frameworks and good practices around the world that can serve as models for the development of institutions and educational systems in other geographic contexts.
- Investigates the challenges facing community colleges and their global counterparts, as a means toward developing shared solutions as well as contextually specific approaches.
- Explores synergies that can serve as the basis for mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborations that engage institutions, industry, and government to promote student success and socioeconomic development.
- Celebrates the successes and contributions of this unique educational sector, amplifies its visibility, adds to the body of scholarly literature and knowledge, and identifies areas for additional research.

In designing this publication, we have adopted a true community college ethos. Like our institutions, we've emphasized access, proactively tapping our collective networks to invite a wide array of contributions and voices and enabling wide distribution. Throughout the series, you'll find articles written by trustees, institution presidents and leaders, scholars, practitioners, and industry partners, which collectively provide a rich and nuanced array of insights and represent a unique contribution to scholarship and our collective understanding of community colleges and their impact worldwide.

We encourage you to share the publication widely, and hope it inspires continued dialogue and innovation that benefit our students, institutions, local economies, and ultimately, our shared global community.

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Editors' Introduction

Welcome to the inaugural installment of *Mapping Community Colleges Around the World: Comparative Perspectives and Collaborative Pathways*. As indicated by its title, this installment features "global snapshots" of community colleges and counterpart institutions, programs, and initiatives in an array of country and regional contexts.

First, Raby and Valeau's article sets forth definitions and a framework for understanding the "college sector" worldwide, and it highlights common characteristics and challenges. Representing Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, country-specific articles bring this framework to life, illustrating the evolution of institutions and systems over time, and how they have adapted to the changing economic and social needs of their unique contexts.

Looking across articles and examples, we can see that community colleges and related institutions and programs are successfully broadening access to educational opportunities to populations that historically have been underserved by universities and other higher education modalities. Responding to the demographics of their particular contexts, different populations have been the focus of efforts to expand access over time. Ansari, Ahmad, and Bhutta's article, for example, highlights efforts to expand access to rural populations in Pakistan, while Khorsheed's article describes initiatives to engage adult learners and Syrian citizens living outside the country.

Overall, as reflected in the title of Milligan's article on Colombia, "respected and growing," the reputations and statures of community college and technical education have steadily improved; however, articulating the value proposition and attracting students remains a challenge in many contexts. Demographic trends play a role; as highlighted in Lee's article, declining birth rates in South Korea present significant enrollment challenges for the nation's junior colleges, whereas a burgeoning youth population in South Africa, as noted in Schrieber's article, has led to significant expansion of the technical and vocational education sector but concerns about quality.

There has been substantial investment in the college sector globally—at the national level, as indicated in a number of the country snapshot articles, as well as regionally, as illustrated by the European Union's Centers of Vocational Excellence described by Brajkovic, and initiatives by the South African Development Community. International entities come into play as well, including, as described by Dzimbiri, NGOs and industry. Nonetheless, ensuring adequate funding to support infrastructure development and quality education provision remains a nearly universal challenge.

Another critical challenge cutting across contexts is a lack of available data—on student learning outcomes, overall impact, and the extent to which community colleges and related institutions further socioeconomic development. A number of articles make specific recommendations for the kinds of data that are needed; Fleschner and Lansford, for example, highlight the need for student success metrics that accurately reflect U.S. community colleges' missions.

Our hope is that this publication contributes to the existing research base and catalyzes further research to support the sector. To this end, building on the foundation laid by this initial installment, subsequent briefs will explore innovative curricular approaches for workforce development, examples of global partnerships, and the broader socioeconomic ecosystems of which these institutions are a part. Thank you for reading and stay tuned!

The Global "College Sector": Definitions, Characteristics, and Challenges

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Worldwide, there is a distinct postsecondary education sector, referred to here as the "college sector," that provides access for nontraditional and marginalized students, flexible paths for learning, retooling for future jobs, and opportunities for lifelong learning." Academic literature has recognized commonalities across this sector since the 1970s, including the level of education offered, broad missions and goals, curricular focus, and student body composition. While they share many common characteristics, there is substantial variation globally in terms of the names of institutions in this sector and their specific focus areas and programs. Today, over 170 distinct institutional types comprise the sector worldwide. Table 1 displays the 24 types that appear most often in the academic literature to date, although as societal and economic needs change, institutional names and types undoubtedly will continue to evolve as well.

Top 24 names of institutions in the colleges sector

1) Community Colleges	13) Apprenticeship Education Institutes
2) Further Education Colleges	14) Dual Apprenticeship Institutes
3) Technical and Further Education (TAF) Institutes/Colleges	15) Técnico Profesional
4) Vocational Education Training (VET) Institutions/Colleges	16) Technical Universities
5) Vocational Education Institutes (VE)	17) Vocational Universities
6) Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Centers/ Institutions/Colleges	18) Universities of Applied Sciences
7) Colleges	19) Vocational Colleges
8) Polytechnics	20) Higher Colleges of Technology
9) Technical-Vocational Education (TVE) Colleges	21) Further Education & Training Colleges
10) Technical Education Institutes (TE)	22) University Colleges
11) Adult Education Institutes	23) Higher Vocational Colleges
12) TVET Colleges – Vocational Higher Education	24) Dual VET Colleges

This article presents a framework for understanding the commonalities that define the college sector and the challenges it currently faces. Our analysis is based on a review of 2,113 academic articles and 365 book chapters for a total of 2,478 sources. We note the absence of scholarship from some parts of the world and, thus, the absence of voices and perspectives that could impact the analysis. As scholars who have conducted research on higher education for 42 years, we also acknowledge that we are embedded in colonial systems and thus endeavor to use our research to counter systemic inequities.

Commonalities

Our analysis indicates that colleges share five key commonalities: flexibility, accessibility, nontraditional student populations, local industry connections, and accreditation frameworks. While universities and other higher education institutions share some of these characteristics, the composite whole remains unique to the college sector.

Flexibility

Mission statements of colleges around the world focus on the need to meet local industry and community needs. As needs change, colleges must maintain flexibility to edit or change programming and curricula and to refocus their offerings on the next-level skills needed for emerging and future industries at the local and global levels. One area in which this flexibility is especially evident over time is the adoption of international education programs that aim to bring the world to a local context and prepare students to succeed in a global economy. In 1947, the Truman Commission Report (USA) validated U.S. community college internationalization. It encouraged program and curriculum changes, which have been undertaken by an increasing number of U.S. community colleges over the last few decades. Across the Atlantic, the European University Alliance includes 74 Centers for Vocational Excellence, housed at Universities of Applied Sciences throughout the region, which advance mobility, international development, and cross-national partnerships.

Accessibility

Colleges' mission statements emphasize enabling access for marginalized students. Particular populations of focus vary by country and context. U.S. community colleges, Australian Technical and Further Education, and Israeli Academic Regional Colleges, for example, aim to provide educational opportunities to students who have traditionally been excluded from higher education in their contexts, including students from low-income backgrounds, adults, and immigrants. In many countries, colleges are strategically located geographically to maximize accessibility; Portugal's Cursos Técnicos Superiores Profissionais, for instance, operate in rural locations, and Kenya's TVET Colleges for blind and deaf students are located throughout the country.

In a number of countries, colleges also serve as a gateway for access to universities and for further study via articulation agreements and pathway programs; this is the case for Hong Kong Community Colleges, some United Kingdom Colleges of Further Education, Japanese KOSEN Colleges of Technology, and Singapore Polytechnics. The EU Qualifications for Transfer Pathways and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa Pathway Programs also enable continued study upon completion of a college degree or other qualification.

Student Populations

Overall, the college sector serves a tremendous diversity of student populations. Colleges are the primary—and often most qualified—providers of postsecondary education for part-time, older, differently abled, first-generation, Indigenous, low-income, refugee, international, second-career, single parent, and adult students and those from other (dis)empowered groups. Given their flexible educational pathways and emphasis on career preparation, colleges are especially well suited to serve adult learners, which is reflected in enrollment data; the average age of TVET students in Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland, for example, is thirty-five.

Industry Connections

Around the world, colleges work closely with local industries to determine the skills and competencies needed by employers. The curricular flexibility noted previously, combined with holistic, learner-centered teaching approaches, helps colleges prepare graduates both to fill current jobs and to adapt to new and emerging labor market demands over time. Industry collaboration is multifaceted and takes a variety of forms. For example, European TVET and Universities of Applied Sciences industry collaborations create microcredentials and service-learning options. Dual education models from Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland merge formal academics with internships, and colleges offer apprenticeships throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe. Although direct correlations are often difficult to document, research confirms that colleges contribute to increased human capacity, higher incomes, and overall socioeconomic growth in many countries and contexts.

Accreditation

Two primary types of accreditation frameworks guide the development of curricula, competency requirements, and learning outcomes for colleges worldwide:

- National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) apply to all postsecondary education institutions, including colleges. For example, TAFE institutions are included in Australia's Qualification Framework, Polytechnics in Korea's Academic Bank Credit System, TVET Colleges in the Malaysian Qualification Framework, New Vocational Colleges in the China 2019 project, and TVET institutions in the New Chile Law.
- Regional qualification frameworks (RQFs) set standards for degrees and qualifications across geographic regions. The ASEAN Qualification Framework includes VET institutes and postsecondary polytechnics and colleges; Africa's Agenda 2063 includes high-quality TVET centers; and the Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE) includes tertiary TVET institutes and community colleges.

Trends and Challenges

Our review of the literature on the college sector highlights several key challenges facing systems and institutions worldwide:

- Despite reputational gains, a "deficit narrative" still persists around colleges in many countries. Labels such as sub-degree, third category, non-university, and second tier are ascribed to the sector, and minoritized students are stereotyped as having expectations of failure.
- The colleges sector is in need of stronger leadership, better national planning, and more accountability to achieve sustainability and growth and to counter the persistent deficit narrative. In many countries, a lack of funding remains an ongoing problem and will require the reprioritization of resources at the national, regional and local levels.
- In an era of globalization, international partnerships and collaboration within the colleges sector are expanding, which has many positive impacts on institutions and student learning. However, international cooperation must respect and preserve all local cultures and should be careful not to promote only or preferentially, for example, English or any other single language, and Westernized pedagogy. A primary value of international collaboration is benefiting drawing from and appealing to varied cultures.
- Prestige-seeking and pressure for colleges to compete with other postsecondary education sectors for enrollment can result in shifts from short-cycle certificates to two-year associate degrees to Baccalaureate and Master's degrees. In some cases, these shifts may lead to more selective enrollment, potentially undermining colleges' access mission.

Conclusion

The college sector has seen significant innovation and evolution over the last 150 years in terms of structure (types of institution), academic levels (secondary, sub-tertiary, and tertiary levels), mission (what is taught), access (who has it) and curricular focus (academic and vocational focus). However, colleges have yet to be sufficiently recognized for their contributions to global knowledge production and innovations that serve local communities. As highlighted in the articles throughout this brief, much more research on the sector is needed, starting with systematic collection of data on student outcomes. Of particular interest to the authors is the story of change resulting from educational borrowing, the social role of colleges in decolonization, and social equalization, whereby new opportunities define new possibilities for social change.

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Pioneering Skills for Tomorrow: Croatia's Regional Centers of Competence

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In today's rapidly evolving labor market, aligning educational systems with industry needs has become a top priority. The European Union (EU) has been at the forefront of this endeavor through initiatives promoting vocational education and training (VET). A cornerstone of this effort is the development of the Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), which are designed to bridge the gap between education, skills, and employment. This article explores the concept of CoVEs, their implementation in Croatia, and their potential impact on regional development.

Centers of Vocational Excellence: A European Framework

The EU's Centers of Vocational Excellence initiative responds to the growing need for tailored, high-quality vocational training. Unlike traditional vocational schools, CoVEs function as dynamic ecosystems that bring together education providers, businesses, research institutions, and other stakeholders to create comprehensive training programs addressing both regional and sectoral demands.

CoVEs aim to provide high-quality vocational skills to young people and adults, contributing to regional development, innovation, industrial clusters, smart specialization strategies, and social inclusion. They operate by developing local "skills ecosystems" and are expected to go beyond merely providing vocational qualifications. Their success is attributed to being integrated into frameworks of regional development and maintaining strong, enduring relationships between stakeholders.

The concept of vocational excellence promoted by the EU is characterized by a holistic, learner-centered approach in which VET:

- Is an integrated part of skills ecosystems, contributing to regional development, innovation, smart specialization, and cluster strategies, as well as to specific industrial ecosystems.
- Is part of knowledge triangles, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community, and business.
- Enables learners to acquire both job-specific and key competences through high-quality provision underpinned by quality assurance. As defined by the European Commission, key competences include knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for personal fulfillment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship. Examples include literacy and numeric skills, digital skills, entrepreneurship, interpersonal skills, the ability to adopt new competences, and cultural awareness and expression, among others.
- Builds innovative forms of partnerships with the world of work, supported by the professional development of training staff, innovative pedagogies, learner and staff mobility, and VET internationalization strategies.

By focusing on inclusive excellence, this model ensures access to top-notch education for all learners, equipping them with essential vocational skills and preparing individuals for quality employment, thereby contributing to a dynamic, inclusive economy.

Transposing CoVEs to Croatia: Regional Centers of Competence in VET

Croatia has embraced the CoVE model by establishing Regional Centers of Competence (RCCs) in vocational education and training. In July 2018, 25 VET schools were chosen among 42 applicants to become the first centers of competence in Croatia. The selection criteria included the quality of VET provision, number of students in particular sectors, regional distribution of schools, and balanced geographical representation. These centers focus on priority areas such as tourism and hospitality, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and ICT, health care, and agriculture.

The Croatian Ministry of Science and Education oversees the RCC initiative, ensuring that these centers address specific regional labor market needs. By focusing on sectors critical to the national economy, RCCs aim to equip the workforce with the skills necessary for economic growth and innovation.

Aligning Education with Regional Labor Market Needs

The primary objective of RCCs is to align vocational education with labor market demands. This alignment is achieved through:

- *Engaging industry leaders:* Collaborating with businesses to identify skill gaps and design curricula that meet current and future industry demands.
- *Implementing modern infrastructure:* Investing in state-of-the-art facilities and equipment to simulate real-world work environments, ensuring that students gain practical experience alongside theoretical knowledge.
- *Offering lifelong learning opportunities:* Providing upskilling and reskilling programs for adults, making RCCs valuable resources for the entire community.

For example, tourism-focused RCCs work closely with hotels, travel agencies, and culinary experts to ensure graduates are well-prepared for the sector's challenges. Similarly, engineering centers partner with manufacturing companies to integrate advanced robotics and 3D printing technologies into their training programs.

Building Partnerships between Education and Industry

Partnerships are at the heart of RCCs. These collaborations extend beyond curriculum design to include:

- *Apprenticeship programs:* Integrating on-the-job training opportunities, allowing students to gain practical experience while earning qualifications.
- *Research and development (R&D):* Partnering with businesses and research institutions to drive innovation.
- *Sector-specific events:* Hosting regular industry workshops, conferences, and networking events to ensure continuous dialogue between educators and employers.

By working closely with businesses, RCCs ensure that training programs remain relevant and impactful, directly addressing the labor market's needs.

Case Studies: Success Stories from Croatian RCCs

The impact of RCCs in Croatia is already evident through several success stories:

- *Tourism and hospitality:* The Regional Center of Competence in Tourism and Hospitality in Zabok has established a modern facility equipped with new classrooms, practice rooms, and an academic hospitality facility with accommodation units of various categories. This center provides practical training through real-life operational segments, enabling students to acquire hands-on experience in the tourism and hospitality sector. The facility also highlights green architecture and functionality, aligning with sustainable development goals.
- *Mechanical engineering:* The RCC in Karlovac has partnered with manufacturing companies to introduce cutting-edge technologies such as robotics and 3D printing, enhancing the competitiveness of local industries. By integrating these advanced technologies into their training programs, the center ensures that students are well prepared for the evolving demands of the engineering sector.
- *Electrical engineering and ICT:* The Technical School in Čakovec has been designated as an RCC that focuses on electrical engineering and information communication technology. The school collaborates with local IT companies to provide students with practical experience in software development, network administration, and cybersecurity.

Broader Implications for Regional Development

The benefits of RCCs extend beyond education. These centers contribute to economic growth, social inclusion, and sustainable development by aligning vocational training with regional economic priorities. A well-trained workforce attracts investment and supports high-value industries while providing opportunities for disadvantaged groups and emphasizing green skills.

Lessons for Non-EU Countries

While the CoVE model is a product of EU policy, its principles are universally applicable. Non-EU countries can draw valuable lessons from this approach. Tailoring education programs to meet regional needs, fostering public-private partnerships, and investing in lifelong learning are critical strategies for addressing skill shortages and economic disparities.

Conclusion

The Regional Centers of Competence in Croatia exemplify how vocational education can be transformed to meet the demands of a modern labor market. By fostering partnerships, embracing innovation, and focusing on regional needs, these centers prepare individuals for employment and drive broader economic and social development.

As global economies face increasing challenges, the CoVE model offers a blueprint for building resilient, inclusive, and future-ready education systems. Whether in Europe or beyond, the integration of vocational training, industry collaboration, and regional development holds immense promise for creating a more equitable and prosperous future.

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"Respected and Growing": Technical Education in Colombia

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With a population of over 52 million, Colombia is South America's second most populous (and largest Spanish-speaking) country and boasts a literacy rate of 95% (Indexmundi, 2021). To increase the employability and adaptability of the citizenry in a rapidly changing world, current president Gustavo Petro, upon his election in 2022, declared the advent of a higher education revolution in Colombia buttressed by a government support system that would add as many as 500,000 new students to the higher education rolls (Amat, 2022). A key component of Colombia's higher education system—and an area of focus for this ambitious enrollment goal—is the technical education sector, the equivalent of community college education in the United States and other parts of the world.

Institutions and Credentials

The primary technical education providers in Colombia are the *institutos tecnicos*, or technical institutes, defined by Carol, Reyes and Trines (2020) as "postsecondary institutions that offer applied academic programs below the bachelor's degree level. Programs usually last two, two and a half, or three years. Graduates obtain a formal academic title in a specific discipline…Some of these programs articulate with programs at [the bachelor's degree level]." In 2018, there were 48 technological institutions, 37 of them private.

In addition to the stand-alone institutes, many universities have technical degree pathways as part of their offerings. A program of the Federal Government, SENA (National Learning Service), also offers postsecondary technical professional training, some administered through universities and some as stand-alone programs.

The technical institutes and other providers offer two primary credentials:

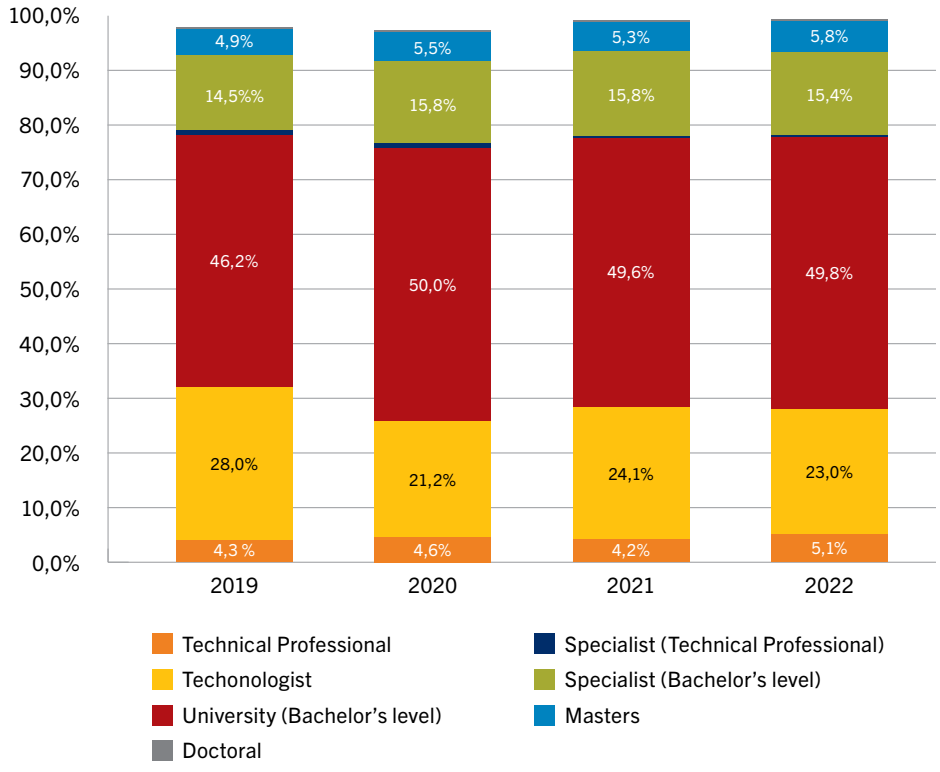
- The *Técnico Profesional* (technical professional) degree pathway: Applied study, similar to many certificate programs at U.S. community colleges. For example, a student pursuing qualification as a *Técnico Profesional en Diseño Textil* (professional technician in textile design) would generally receive applied training in the production of textiles.
- The *Tecnólogo* (technologist): A more academic qualification than the technical professional degree, which is similar to the Associate's degree in the U.S., prepares students for mid-level technician and managerial positions in fields such as business administration, engineering, or information technology. To ensure competency, graduating students are required to take the TyT (Tecnico y Tecnologo) test, which includes subject-specific assessments of applied learning and skills needed for employment. (Carol et al., 2020).

"Respected and Growing"

In an interview, Dr. Francisco Cardona, a former vice minister in the higher education area of Colombia's Ministry of Education and current head of the Colegio Americano in Bogota, stated that "the technical professional and technologist degrees are respected degrees and are growing." Expansion of the technical education sector reflects an overall trend of increasing higher education enrollment in recent years, even prior to the current president's aggressive goals; data from the Colombian government think tank, Observatorio Laboral para la Education (OLE),

indicate that the number of postsecondary graduates in Colombia grew from 513,104 in 2019 to 535,963 in 2022 (with a significant dip in between in 2020 due to pandemic related disruptions).

While bachelor's and master's degree attainment still outpaces technical professional degree and technologist degree attainment by a wide margin, as indicated in the chart below, the greatest increase in higher education graduates between 2021 and 2022 in Colombia was in the technical professional area, which saw a 22.5% increase during that time period. In terms of fields of study, Dr. Cardona indicated that the most in-demand programs include database management, information systems support, industrial maintenance support, and telecommunications installation technology, similar to some of the in-demand pathways in the United States and other countries.



(Source: OLE, Labor Observatory for Education)

Labor Market Alignment

A key component of the technical education value proposition in Colombia, like elsewhere in the world, is the engagement of the sector with employers and industry to ensure that graduates are well prepared to meet labor market needs. Experiential learning features prominently in technical programs; Dr. Cardona noted, "It is common for professional technical and technologist students to engage in internships as part of their educational journey, and in some cases, these experiences are required for degree completion." Indeed, Asleth Ortega, the Dean of the Engineering Faculty at the Corporacion Universitaria Reformada (CUR) in Barranquilla noted that his professional technical and technologist students regularly work as interns during their course of study. For example, several industrial engineering technology students are interning at Triple AA Corp., a municipal water provider in the city of Barranquilla. Two biomedical engineering technology students are interning at biomedical research organizations, and a systems engineering technology student is working at Sempertex, an 87-year-old world-leading balloon-making company.

In regard to postgraduate employment, Ortega indicated that technical professional education attainment carries significant weight for employers and demonstrates competencies that are attractive in the labor market. Overall, Colombia wrestles with a persistently high unemployment rate, which, as of October 2024, stood at 9.2% (Trading Economics, 2024). While postgraduation employment rates vary by field, data indicate that graduates of technical education programs fare relatively well—particularly in light of the broader national employment picture—suggesting that the internships and industry-aligned curricula available in such programs provide an advantage. Referencing OLE data, Cardona noted, "98.2% of technical professionals in database analysis and design find employment soon after graduation, as do 89.2% of those in information systems support, 96.2% in industrial maintenance technology, and 93.8% in telecommunication network installation technologies." All of these pay 2 to 2.5 times the minimum wage, whereas a person without a degree would typically earn the minimum wage.

Exchanges

Dean Ortega weighed in on the importance of exchanges with institutions outside Colombia. "Exchanges of students and professors in the higher education arena are very important and allow us to compare and try out new techniques, methods and technologies among our institutions." An area of particular need for many Colombian institutions is better English language instruction, as students in many fields require English language competency for successful completion of their training, and strong English skills are highly valued by many employers.

As a case example, a visit by Margarita Barraza, Dean of Economic Sciences at the CUR, to two community colleges in Ohio during the summer of 2024 revealed both opportunities and challenges for establishing partnerships between Colombian institutions and U.S. community colleges. Both the U.S. institutions she visited were eager to explore opportunities for Colombian students and for their own students at the Colombian institution. Because of improvements in online delivery in both contexts, course-level collaborations that are completely online—or largely online with a short-duration travel component—could be a promising starting point for introducing a cross-cultural educational experience that still takes into account the work-school-life situations of many of the students in each context. This is particularly important today, as U.S. visa processing for Colombians in all categories can take up to two years. Language differences (in this case English and Spanish) potentially pose some level of challenge, but again, new technologies are now available to bridge such gaps. While disparities in cost could also potentially be problematic, at first glance, it was found that in-state tuition levels at the community colleges included in this visit were in line with the tuition rates for Colombian students at their home institution. Depending upon legal limitations within a given state or community college district, cost may well not be a prohibitive barrier.

Reflecting the broader need for English language instruction in Colombia noted previously, opportunities in this area are a particular priority for CUR's global partnerships. The willingness of the U.S. institution to offer predominantly online instruction was considered important. As was found at one of the U.S. institutions visited, this request does not always meet the delivery approach available, as some English language programs do not offer an all or mostly online course of study. Overall, however, establishing partnerships between U.S. colleges and their Colombian counterparts centered on high-quality online English language study could allow institutions in both countries to expand their English course offerings and lay the groundwork for additional activities such as virtual exchanges and even subsequent in-person exchanges.

Summary and Future Opportunities

Colombia has a robust technical professional higher education system. While the employment landscape in Colombia is more daunting than in the U.S., evidence suggests that students graduating from these programs are finding success. While language barriers and travel requirements between the U.S. and Colombia present challenges, student and faculty collaborations and exchanges between and among Colombian and U.S. institutions can benefit systems in both countries.

Will Colombia achieve President Petro's goal of increasing postsecondary student enrollment by 500,000? In 2022, Education Minister Gaviria alluded to an "all hands on deck" approach, including capacity expansion in both private and public universities and the expansion of lending for student tuition (Amat, 2022). More recently, the President and new Minister of Education, Jose Daniel Rojas Medellin, announced a sweeping change to the higher education statute to provide more robust financing to public universities and technical and technological institutions of higher education. The President declared that this would "guarantee sustainable and adequate resources to public [higher education institutions]" for infrastructure improvement and to support increased enrollment (Largo, 2025). Exchanges such as those contemplated herein could also be one of the mechanisms to reach the country's enrollment goal.

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South African Community Colleges: The Impact of South Africa's TVET Sector on the Development of South Africa

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Introduction

South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector addresses skills shortages and promotes inclusive socio-economic growth. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the sector, including its historical context, current state, national strategies, funding mechanisms, and relationship with higher education. TVET's contributions to social mobility, employment, and national and regional socioeconomic development are highlighted.

While both TVET colleges, as we know them in South Africa, and community colleges, as they are prevalent in the USA, provide accessible postschool education, TVET colleges focus primarily on practical skills and vocational training for immediate entry into specific professions and industries, versus the broader range of academic programs and transfer pathways offered by many community colleges.

Historical and Political Intersections

The history of TVET in South Africa is intertwined with the country's sociopolitical past. The transition to democracy in 1994 was a critical turning point that brought to the fore an urgent need to address deep-seated race and gender inequalities, and a focus on avenues to enable and promote social mobility – including access to postschool education and skills development.

Before 1994, vocational training was largely racially segregated and geared toward specific population groups, perpetuating inequalities. The post-apartheid era, however, witnessed a concerted effort to transform the sector, integrating previously disparate institutions and developing an integrated and articulated national qualifications framework. Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges, which were later renamed TVET colleges, became central to this transformation. Key legislation, such as the Skills Development Act (1998) and the Further Education and Training Colleges Act (2006), provided the policy framework for restructuring and expanding the sector (Xaba, 2023).

Current Landscape: Institutions and Enrollment

South Africa's TVET sector comprises public TVET colleges, private training providers, and industry-led initiatives. Approximately 50 public TVET colleges are spread across the country, operating across numerous campuses. Accreditation of additional TVET providers (both public and private) by the South African government is currently underway, spurring growth in the sector nationwide. TVET programs offer a range of qualifications, from National Certificates and Diplomas to occupational qualifications aligned with social, economic, and industry needs.

The profile of TVET students is diverse, encompassing individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds, although access for disadvantaged communities remains a priority. Enrollment has increased by approximately 25% over the past decade, from 400,000 students in 2011 to 508,000 in 2022, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of vocational skills (Powell et al. 2024).

Although challenges remain in attracting and retaining students, particularly in technical fields, several factors indicate the potential for continued enrollment growth. In contrast to other countries around the world that are seeing an aging population, persons under the age of 35 currently constitute two-thirds of the South African population (SAStats, 2024). Initiatives to provide educational opportunities to this segment of the population are emerging; for example, the South African government aims to train 30,000 technicians and mechanics by 2030 to spur socio-economic growth and meet industrial needs while combatting unemployment (SAIIA, 2024, n.p.; Schrader-King, 2023). The TVET sector plays a key role in such efforts, equipping individuals with practical skills and bridging the gap between access to education and employment (Schrader-King, 2023).

Policies and Funding

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) describes TVET colleges as "the cornerstone of the postschool education and training system for South Africa" (DHET, 2019). The South African National Development Plan (NDP) emphasizes the importance of skills development and the role of TVET in achieving national development goals. Key policy documents, such as the National Skills Development Strategy, aim to "create a differentiated institutional type that caters to the varied needs of communities, individuals and society" (DHET, 2019, p. 14) and provide a framework for collaboration among government, industry, and training providers. Recent initiatives have focused on strengthening the quality of TVET provision, improving lecturer training, and fostering closer links between colleges and industry.

Furthermore, identifying skills shortages and aligning TVET programs with industry needs is essential for maximizing the employability of graduates and addressing the skills gap.

The national government's network of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) contributes to this alignment by facilitating industry-specific training, promoting collaboration between employers and training providers, developing sector skills plans, supporting the national qualifications framework, and accrediting programs and institutions, among other roles.

Funding for TVET colleges comes from various sources, including government subsidies, student fees, and industry levies. The National Skills Fund (NSF) plays a significant role in funding skills development initiatives. However, sustainable funding remains a challenge, and there are ongoing efforts to diversify funding sources for TVET institutions via private-public partnerships (Powell et al., 2024). Private TVET service providers are increasing and can meet growing demand, but the reliance on student fees poses funding challenges.

TVET and Higher Education

The relationship between TVET and higher education in South Africa is evolving. While traditionally seen as separate pathways, there is a growing recognition of the need for greater articulation and pathways between the two sectors. Efforts are underway to create opportunities for TVET graduates to access higher education institutions and vice versa. Comparing enrollment figures, funding models, and graduate outcomes between TVET and higher education universities provides valuable insights into the relative strengths and weaknesses of each sector. Furthermore, improving public perceptions (Powel et al., 2024) and the social value attached to different educational pathways is essential for promoting TVET as a viable and respected career option (Viljoen & Cilliers, 2022).

Outcomes and Impact

Student satisfaction with South Africa's TVET colleges is generally high across many areas, including lecturers, facilities, and support services, but lower ratings for academic support, communication, resources, and technology access, particularly for online learning, suggest areas for improvement (Viljoen & Cilliers, 2022).

In terms of outcomes, the primary objective of TVET is to equip individuals with skills relevant for employment and the labor market (Schrader-King, 2023). Analyzing graduate tracer studies is crucial for understanding the employment outcomes of TVET graduates; existing data on employment rates, earnings, and career progression indeed provide evidence of the positive impact of TVET on individual livelihoods, social mobility, and national socioeconomic growth (Powel et al., 2024). While positive impacts are evident, Powel et al. (2024) noted insufficient TVET spaces to accommodate students seeking enrollment; currently, applications outnumber available spaces by a ratio of four to one.

More broadly, a well-functioning and well-funded TVET sector contributes to national economic growth by providing a pipeline of skilled and engaged employees, entrepreneurs, and private and public workers. By addressing skills shortages, TVET enables businesses to become more competitive and promote investment, which is a focus of the South African government. Furthermore, TVET promotes inclusive growth by providing access and opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged contexts and histories to participate in the economy. The contribution of TVET to broad goals such as overall GDP growth, employment creation, poverty reduction, gender equality, and national progress measured in the attainment of the SDGs, while hard to map quantitatively, is widely recognized and virtually undisputed (Magadza & Mampane, 2024; Powel et al., 2024).

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite significant progress, the TVET sector in South Africa faces numerous challenges. These include:

- Quality of education: Ensuring consistently high-quality teaching and learning across all TVET colleges is crucial. This will require investing in new technologies, promoting entrepreneurship and opportunity mapping, and developing competencies in emerging sectors.
- Attracting and retaining students: Negative perceptions of TVET persist, and continued efforts are needed to promote it as a career pathway of choice.
- Industry collaboration: Stronger links between TVET colleges and industry are needed to assure curriculum relevance, provide work-based learning opportunities, and ensure that students entering the labor market are equipped to address contextual factors that might inhibit socioeconomic growth (Magadza & Mampane, 2024);
- Funding constraints: Securing sustainable funding for the sector and ensuring efficient resource allocation remain key challenges.
- Articulation across the postschool education sector: Improved articulation across the TVET and university sectors is needed to maximize social mobility.
- Data and monitoring: Improving data collection and analysis to track progress and inform policy decisions will ensure that the national policy context enables and promotes the growth of TVETs.

Conclusion

South Africa's TVET sector has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades, playing a vital role in skills development and economic growth. While challenges remain, the TVET sector has made substantial progress in expanding access, improving quality, and aligning training with industry needs and national socioeconomic development goals. Continued investment, innovation, and collaboration are essential for realizing the full potential of TVET and ensuring that it contributes to a more inclusive and prosperous future for South Africa.

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Foundations and Evolution of Community Technical Colleges in Malawi

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Reflecting trends in many African countries, community colleges have become a cornerstone of Malawi's educational landscape, addressing the skills gap and providing prospects for nurturing the academic and vocational skills and expertise critical for socioeconomic development. The evolution of community colleges in Malawi over the past decade has been triggered by the need to respond to emerging educational needs, socioeconomic factors, and policy shifts related to access to education. Understanding the foundations and evolution of community colleges in the Malawian context will help gauge their current impact; identify challenges and priorities to ensure that the sector can continue to meet the diverse needs of Malawian society; and highlight lessons learned that may be applicable in other countries and contexts around the world where such institutions are under development.

Context and Creation of Community Colleges

Malawi, like many nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, has been experiencing persistent social and economic crises for years, despite ongoing efforts to address its economic stagnation. Since postcolonial independence in 1964, the country has faced structural poverty, which has remained alarmingly high over the years and makes the country somewhat unlivable. Indeed, the Second Malawi Multidimensional Poverty Index report released in 2022 by the National Statistical Office (NSO) in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs revealed that more than half (58.9%) of the country's population was multidimensionally poor (NSO & MFEA, 2022).

At the core of Malawi's economic stagnation is its massive unemployment rate. Among the country's 17.2 million total population, 20.4% are unemployed; among unemployed individuals, a majority are from rural settings that predominantly rely on agricultural activities. Over the years, there has been a rise in rural-urban migration, as rural dwellers have moved to towns and cities in search of better employment opportunities. However, given the overall economic challenges facing the country as a whole, employment opportunities in urban settings are also limited, and the majority of rural Malawian migrants do not have basic employable skills that would allow them to obtain the positions that do exist (GoM, 2017).

To address this situation, the Government of Malawi has committed strongly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and identified education and skills development as essential priorities for national development (GoM, 2017). As a means of operationalizing these priorities, in 2014, the government initiated the establishment of community technical colleges in each district across the country to provide access to education and skills for all members of the community, including secondary school students, individuals seeking to advance their careers, those who never had access to formal schooling, and out-of-school youth and adults—populations that often do not have access to educational opportunities owing to the limited capacity and restrictive entry requirements of many of the country's government-sponsored and private technical training programs.

Current Landscape

In a 2014 Department of Labor report, the Government of Malawi outlined an initial plan to establish 28 community colleges nationwide: 13 in the southern region, 9 in the central region, and 6 in the northern region (GoM, 2014). However, the Ministry of Labor's website indicates that as of October 2024, 15 community colleges have been constructed and are fully operational, with another five colleges under construction (GoM, 2024). The colleges offer a diverse range of certificates; popular fields include automobile mechanics, bakery, bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, electrical installation, fabrication and welding, food production, plumbing, motorcycle mechanics, tailoring and fashion design, general fitting, and refrigeration and air conditioning mechanics, among others. Programs are designed to prepare graduates for employment or to continue their studies in higher education, although it is not clear from existing data and information whether or how easily students are able to transfer between institutions or transfer credits to other higher education institutions (Mabumbe, 2025).

Current demographic data concerning students served by community technical colleges across Malawi are scarce; however, the entry is limited to an age range of 16 – 36 years (GoM, 2024). In 2017, the local newspaper *Nyasa Times* reported that approximately 660 students graduated from 10 community technical colleges (Laidi, 2017). However, as of the time of writing this report, no online data are available on either the current enrollment or the number of students who have graduated from community colleges since 2017.

Funding and Governance

Malawi's community colleges are funded by several sources at the local, national, and international levels. A majority of funding comes from public sources; the Malawi government allocates a portion of its national budget to the education sector, including community colleges, to support operational costs, infrastructure development, salaries for instructors and staff, and other administrative expenses. At the international level, the government of China made a significant contribution in 2017, providing a $15 million grant to support the community college system (Times Group, 2017, March 27).

The operation and management of community colleges across Malawi is a similarly collaborative endeavor, anchored in strong local engagement. As public institutions, community colleges are overseen by the Malawi government, ensuring a cohesive and unified approach to their administration and success. At the operational level, however, governance is decentralized, as each college is owned by a District Management Committee (DMC) and managed by a College Management Committee (CMC) at the district level. These committees, in turn, work in close partnership with other key stakeholders, including government training authorities, civil society organizations, and local community members. Together, these entities play pivotal roles in providing educational resources, overseeing the monitoring and evaluation of course curricula, and securing funding for various programs (GoM, 2014).

Outcomes and Impact

Given their relatively recent establishment, empirical research on the socioeconomic impact of community colleges in Malawi is scarce. According to a 2024 report by the Government of Malawi, however, available evidence suggests that these institutions contribute to the country's socioeconomic development in key areas: (1) reducing youth unemployment by providing essential skills in agriculture, entrepreneurship, and construction; (2) increasing income generation, as graduates equipped with practical, marketable skills are better positioned to secure employment or create their own businesses, thereby increasing household income and alleviating poverty; and (3) advancing gender equality by empowering women with technical skills and opportunities that enable their active participation in the workforce.

Future Outlook

Malawi's journey in establishing its community colleges provides crucial insights that hold significant value for other nations in Africa and beyond as they seek to build, expand, and improve their own institutions. In particular, the Malawi case illustrates the need for:

- A curriculum focused on practical, market-driven skills—such as carpentry, motorcycle mechanics, and electrical installation—that aligns vocational programs with local economic demands and job market requirements.
- A robust national data management system to track student enrollment, academic progress, graduation rates, and postgraduation employment outcomes.
- Research to assess the curriculum, with a particular focus on how vocational training programs adapt to the rapidly evolving technological landscape. This will ensure that community colleges remain relevant, innovative, and aligned with current industry demands.

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Regional Approaches: TVET in the South African Development Community

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Released in 2015 by the African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, outlines goals for socioeconomic development across the African continent. The 16 member countries that constitute the South African Development Community (SADC) have embraced Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a primary means to achieve these goals and are working together to bolster the TVET sector. Reflecting the specific needs and context of the SADC region, the focus of these efforts is on equipping students with an entrepreneurial mindset, teaching the fundamental skills and knowledge needed for diverse job opportunities, and enabling access for marginalized populations such as women and people with disabilities.

Highlighting the power of regional collaboration and a shared agenda, notable initiatives and achievements across the SADC TVET sector in recent years include:

- The SADC TVET Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan (2018 - 2027) provides a cohesive vision and comprehensive roadmap for developing TVET in the SADC region, with a focus on policy harmonization, quality assurance, curriculum development, teacher training, and stakeholder engagement. The plan has served as a basis for the development of comprehensive national TVET policies and strategies, as well as robust institutional frameworks to guide the development and effective implementation of TVET programs.
- The SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF), included in the Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan, has promoted the harmonization of qualifications across the region. This makes it reasonably accessible for individuals to move and work within SADC and enables regional integration by ensuring that qualifications are recognized across borders.
- The Capacity Building for Labor Market Information and Employment Services (CLEF) Program aims to strengthen the link between TVET and the labor market. The program's emphasis on integrating digital learning tools and technology-based training has improved the quality and accessibility of TVET education. E-learning platforms and online vocational courses have expanded access to training for students in remote areas.
- The SADC has cultivated relationships with key development partners, such as UNESCO, the European Union, and the African Development Bank. These entities provide crucial financial and technical support to SADC member states to strengthen their TVET systems and build capacity. Significant investments have been made – by member states as well as external partners – to improve TVET infrastructure and provide institutions with modern, industry-standard equipment to enhance the overall quality of training.
- Increased training and professional development for TVET teachers has been introduced to familiarize instructors with the latest industry practices, research, development, and innovation.

Like many of the countries profiled in this brief, SADC member states continue to face challenges in promoting and sustaining TVET, particularly regarding funding and measuring impact on socioeconomic conditions. Nonetheless, while TVET providers, community colleges, and related institutions are deeply rooted at the local level, the SADC's success in bolstering the TVET sector across its member countries may serve as a model for similar regional efforts and collaborations around the world.

Life-Long and Open Learning Centers in the Syrian Arab Republic

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In the Syrian Arab Republic, years of conflict and displacement have disrupted the education of countless students, leaving many unable to meet traditional university admission requirements or continue their studies. To address these challenges, Syria's Ministry of Higher Education introduced innovative learning models—such as the Open Learning System, the Syrian Virtual University, and the Online Continuous Learning Center—providing flexible pathways for students to pursue higher education and vocational training. These initiatives aim to bridge gaps in access, accommodate working professionals, and equip learners with skills needed in a competitive job market. This article explores these transformative systems and their impact on expanding educational opportunities in Syria.

History and Context

Admission to the public post-secondary education system in Syria is centralized within the Ministry of Education, and until recently, was limited to immediate high school graduates. In the traditional system, students seeking admission to state universities identify their preferred fields of study via an electronic application, which automatically selects the students with the highest GPAs for available university seats. In order to increase access, in 2003, the state universities created a "parallel learning system," which admits students into their desired field of study with lower GPAs than would be required via the centralized system, but requires students to pay higher tuition rates. Still, though, only students holding a high school diploma issued the same year of their university application are eligible for admission.

Aside from the state institutions, in 2005, the first private universities were established, which offer additional opportunities for high school students to pursue their desired course of study. The private universities generally accept students with lower GPAs than the public institutions, but student fees are higher.

Overall, while more students gained access to postsecondary education via the introduction of the parallel learning system and private education, adult students and those without a high school diploma, as well as students without the financial means to pay elevated tuition and fees, largely remained excluded from Syrian post-secondary education.

New Models for Access

To address the limitations inherent in the existing higher education structure, beginning in 2003, Syria's Ministry of Higher Education created three new modalities to serve a broader base of students: 1) the "open learning system," 2) the Syrian Virtual University, and 3) the Online Continuous Learning Center.

The Open Learning System

The open learning system was established as a component of the Syrian state university system. Public higher education institutions throughout the country house the open learning programs and provide overall oversight, but the programs have their own administrative structure. Students enrolled in the programs attend in-person classes on campus; courses are taught by university faculty, but are separate from those offered to students in the traditional learning system. The academic fields offered in the open system were chosen by the Ministry

of Education based on the needs of the job market and community. Open learning programs at Damascus University and Aleppo University, for example, offer courses in fields such as English-Arabic translation, French-Arabic translation, law studies, auditing, business administration, and kindergarten teaching methods. Universities in Homs, Lattakia, Hama, and other governates (states) also house programs offering courses in various disciplines.

Unlike the traditional post-secondary options described above, the open learning system admits students holding older high school diplomas, rather than just recent graduates, and provides opportunities for upskilling and reskilling to students who may already hold a university degree in another field. Students are admitted based on their academic performance, but the required GPA is much lower than what is needed for admission to the state and private universities.

While students in the open learning system pay higher fees than those admitted to state universities via the traditional admission system, the fees are lower than those of the parallel learning system and the private universities. In addition, the program structure is flexible; like the traditional university system, the open learning system offers four-year bachelor's degrees, but does not require students to take a set number of courses at a time. Thus the programs are accessible to working students who wish to study part-time, and students can spread their enrollment and the financial burden across as many semesters as needed based on their ability to pay. To accommodate working students, the bulk of in-person course meetings take place on weekends.

While designed for non-traditional aged and working students, the open learning system is still intended as a pathway to a full bachelor's degree; short term credentials and professional certificates are not offered.

The Syrian Virtual University

The Syrian Virtual University (SVU), established in 2004 by a presidential decree as one of the Syrian state universities, offers learning opportunities in several fields, including business administration, law, communications, and telecommunication engineering. Overseen by the Ministry of Education, the SVU shares a number of characteristics with the in-person open learning system. The SVU is open to students holding older high school diplomas, and the GPA requirement for admission is lower than for traditional university programs. There is flexibility for students in terms of the number of courses they take at a given time, and like the open learning system, the credential offered is a bachelor's degree. The SVU, however, also provides a program for students who have already obtained a two-year technical diploma in select fields – telecommunication and technology engineering or auditing – to obtain a bachelor's degree in those fields after an additional two years of study.

In terms of course delivery, students participate in weekly or biweekly synchronous online classes with their professors and classmates. Course meetings are typically two hours, and take place in the evening to accommodate working students. All SVU course sessions are recorded and uploaded to the university website, and are made available to enrolled students as well as to the public. Students upload their assignments via the university website for review by their professors.

The SVU's exams take place online, but students are required to complete them on computers at designated exam centers, which are located in multiple Syrian governorates (states). In addition, in order to provide access for Syrian students living abroad, exam centers have been established in several Arab countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as some European countries (e.g. Turkey).

Online Continuous Learning Center

In an effort to further expand access and provide educational opportunities to students outside of the traditional bachelor's degree structure, in 2017 the SVU established the Online Continuous Learning Center. Complementing the SVU's bachelor's degree programs, the Center offers non-degree education, vocational programs, and workshops. Admission is open to anyone who would like to register for classes, and focuses on skill development for working professionals in a variety of fields. For example, the Center provides specialized courses for architects on using specific programs such as Revit and CAD, as well as focused courses for civil engineers, and more generally applicable courses in areas such as auditing, programming, data analysis, and foreign languages. Fees are structured on a course-by-course basis, and programs target students of all ages and education levels.

Similar to the format of SVU degree programs, continuous learning students attend short synchronous online sessions with instructors, and in some cases may have the opportunity for in-person meetings as well. Participants receive a certificate of attendance upon completion of each course.

Conclusion

The Syrian Ministry of Education has made great strides over the past 20 years towards increasing access to postsecondary education for a variety of student populations, including Syrian citizens living abroad. Alignment of the academic fields selected with economic and community needs has been intentional, and has amplified the positive impact of these programs on the careers and lives of participating students, as well as the country as a whole. Certainly, challenges remain – including poor infrastructure and equipment and a shortage of qualified staff – but with time and commitment by the government and other stakeholders, the Syrian education system has the potential to reach more students, in more disciplines. The creative approaches outlined in this article may serve as a model for post-secondary education systems around the world seeking to sustainably and systematically increase access, particularly for working students and those living outside national borders.

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Community Colleges in Pakistan: Promoting Access and Quality Education

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Inspired by the access-driven mission of U.S. community colleges and their success in reaching underserved student populations—especially in rural areas—a network of five institutions, Community Colleges (CCs), was recently established by a public sector university in Sindh, Pakistan, with provincial government support. While these institutions provide educational opportunities at the K-12 level rather than at the postsecondary level and thus differ from community colleges in the U.S. and other countries, Pakistan's CCs are similar to their global counterparts in that they address issues of access and quality education for marginalized communities, especially in rural contexts; aim to create pathways for students to further education and employment; and are grounded in deep connections and partnerships with the local community.

Notably, CCs are managed through university-school-government partnerships, a unique collaborative model that provides multilayered support and could inform similar structures in other country contexts. Using a case study of one of the CCs in Sindh, this article explores CCs' success in addressing issues of low-quality education and expanding access in rural contexts. We have drawn insightful lessons from the analysis that could be useful for stakeholders within and outside Pakistan.

An Innovative Model

Education is a cornerstone of any country's socioeconomic development. However, owing to longstanding issues related to access and quality, Pakistan is struggling to fully capitalize on its potential. Sindh, a province of Pakistan, faces multifaceted educational crises, including high dropout rates, many out-of-school children, and significant gender disparities—particularly among marginalized communities. These challenges stem from inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of teachers, and sociocultural barriers, among other factors.

To address these issues, several initiatives have been introduced at both the government and organizational levels in Sindh. Borrowing from the U.S. Community college model, in 2010, the founding Vice Chancellor of Sukkur IBA University introduced CCs with the support of the Government of Sindh's Community Development Board. In the first phase, five CCs were established through a partnership involving the government, the university, and the community. The government owns the buildings, while all aspects of the CCs' administration and operations are overseen by the university, which has created a separate wing for community colleges called the 'Directorate of Community Colleges.' This wing manages funding, management, and the curriculum. Strategic partnerships with local governments and educational bodies enhance colleges' credibility and sustainability.

Located in rural areas, each CC is equipped with modern facilities and resources to make education accessible to the community and prepare youth for higher education and employment. The CCs offer formal K-12 schooling in all subjects in alignment with national curriculum requirements. An entry test is required for admission. While students at the CCs are not currently automatically admitted to the university (e.g., through pathway agreements such as those in the U.S.), they are prepared to enter the admissions process for universities in or outside Pakistan.

Impact and Effectiveness

To explore the impact and effectiveness of Pakistan's CC model, our research team conducted an in-depth case study analysis focused on CC contributions to address quality and access issues in the rural context of Sindh. Among the five community colleges, one was randomly selected for in-depth exploration, as all share the same vision, mission, resources, and partnerships. The selected case was analyzed by considering trends in access (enrollment, attendance, and retention) and quality (teacher credentials, teaching practices, and graduate success stories). Data were collected from the school principal through a semistructured interview. The results illustrate both successes and challenges and highlight effective policies and practices that may be applicable both for other CCs in Pakistan and for similar institutions throughout the world.

Do CCs expand access for marginalized students?

The selected CC was established in 2011, with an initial enrollment of 100 students (80% boys). Over the past decade, overall enrollment has increased by 88%. Interestingly, girls' enrollment has increased from 20% in 2011 to 36%, indicating a positive shift toward greater gender inclusion in rural areas. The CC has set an ambitious target for 2030, aiming to increase total enrollment to 2,000, with girls making up approximately 60% of the student body. This goal suggests a strategic focus on further improving gender parity and expanding educational access.

Moreover, approximately 20% of CC students are from very low socioeconomic backgrounds, with most remaining students belonging to middle-income families. The Sindh government plays a critical role in supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds by offering 10 fully funded merit-based scholarships each year, which cover recipients' fees through the intermediate level.

One of the pressing issues in rural areas is the excessive absence of students from schools. The CC follows a strict attendance policy, which requires students to maintain a 95% attendance rate throughout the academic year. This policy has contributed to a high retention rate of 96%, indicating strong student commitment and institutional support.

Do CCs provide quality education for marginalized children?

In terms of the teaching force, the CC has been consistently increasing the number of teaching staff needed to meet students' needs. The current teacher-student ratio is 1:20, far better than the country's overall ratio in K-12 schools. The relatively low teacher-student ratio enables personalized attention, stronger teacher-student relationships, and effective classroom management, fostering higher academic performance and better engagement.

Furthermore, the criteria for teacher recruitment have evolved since the establishment of the CC. Initially, the CC required teachers to hold only an undergraduate-level degree; however, the recruitment policy has since been upgraded to require master's degrees. In addition, the CC seeks teachers with at least five years of experience prior to joining.

To ensure continuous professional growth, teachers participate in biannual training, which is centrally organized at the university and facilitated by teacher educators. In-house sessions are also conducted to address specific school-related needs, and the examination board (a third-party organization charged with conducting centralized exams for high school students) organizes pedagogy-focused sessions for faculty. This comprehensive approach to teacher development reflects the CC's commitment to maintaining high educational standards. As a result of continuous professional development, the teaching methodologies employed in the CC vary and include interactive lectures, demonstrations, inquiry-based learning, and activity-based teaching. These methods are complemented by both formative and summative assessments, which ensure a holistic evaluation of student progress.

Beyond academic learning, students in the CC are encouraged to participate in a range of extracurricular activities. These include inter-campus competitions such as spelling bees, quizzes, speeches, and debates, as well as co-curricular activities such as STEM fairs, entrepreneurial projects, summer camps, and sports. These opportunities provide students with a well-rounded educational experience, fostering personal growth and skill development.

The impact of this comprehensive academic experience is evident in the success stories of CC graduates. Many have gone on to pursue higher education at prestigious institutions both in Pakistan and abroad. For example, two graduates are studying in Germany, one in Italy, and another in Australia. Many graduates continue their studies at reputed institutions in Pakistan. These success stories illustrate the effectiveness of the CC model in providing quality education and creating pathways for students to prosper.

What are the key challenges faced by CCs?

The CC faces several challenges that impact its operational effectiveness. Job security for teaching and non-teaching staff, coupled with limited benefits beyond take-home salaries, is the key challenge; whereas government officials, for example, serve in permanent positions, CC staff positions are contractual and do not provide a pension. Additionally, the extreme heat in rural Sindh creates a challenging work and learning environment, further exacerbated by the absence of family residence facilities for staff. These conditions hinder attracting and retaining qualified personnel in remote areas.

A more pressing challenge is the local community's need for greater collaboration and investment. A lower-than-desired level of engagement is primarily attributed to a lack of education and awareness regarding the CC's role in fostering community development. Without active community involvement, the sustainability and effectiveness of the CC model are somewhat compromised. The public sector university has taken on the critical role of guiding policy and practice to address this gap. Expert academicians from universities are heavily involved in decision-making, ensuring that CCs maintain their focus on delivering quality education.

The Power of Partnerships

In conclusion, the CC initiative in Sindh represents a promising model for addressing educational disparities in rural and marginalized communities. By providing accessible, high-quality education through strategic partnerships, modern facilities, and robust teacher development, these colleges have successfully expanded enrollment, improved retention, and contributed to gender parity. While challenges such as staff retention, extreme environmental conditions, and limited community engagement persist, the initiative's achievements in fostering academic excellence and creating pathways to higher education and employment are commendable. Insights from this model offer valuable lessons for policymakers and educators aiming to bridge educational gaps in similar contexts globally.

The success of this initiative highlights the power of collaboration among the government, universities, and local communities. This partnership model can be replicated in other regions facing similar educational challenges, demonstrating how multisector involvement is crucial for addressing access and quality issues. Furthermore, the CC model proves that access to education can be significantly expanded in rural and marginalized communities through affordable, flexible, and locally relevant educational offerings. This can guide other countries in similar socioeconomic contexts, emphasizing the importance of inclusive education for socio-economic development.

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Can We Fill the Seats Next Year? Challenges Facing Two-Year Colleges in South Korea

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The two-year postsecondary education sector in South Korea comprises 131 "junior colleges," which, as of 2024, enrolled 492,042 students (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2024). While junior colleges were established in 1979, their roots can be traced back to 1950, when "beginner colleges" were introduced as one of the first forms of postsecondary education in the country (KDOE, 2010). Beginner colleges were phased out with the establishment of "technical schools" in 1963, which had a more explicit focus on vocational education for midlevel technician jobs. Graduates from technical schools were allowed to transfer to four-year colleges; however, technical schools ultimately did not attract many incoming students and suffered from student attrition due to the lengthy duration of the programs they provided. In 1970, the technical schools gave way to "junior schools," which offered two-year degree programs, and the opportunity for students to transfer to a four-year college without taking an entrance exam if they earned a license in their field.

Finally, in 1979, drawing together all of the previous iterations and lessons learned, the national government introduced junior colleges as the primary provider of vocational education at the postsecondary level. Like community colleges in the United States and other countries, junior colleges offer two- and three-year associate degree programs in vocational and practical fields such as nursing, early childhood education, and dental hygiene, and have relatively lower admission criteria than four-year colleges.

Students who attend or graduate from junior colleges can transfer to four-year colleges or earn a bachelor's degree through a specialized program, but these pathways are not as common as in the United States; in 2023, for example, only 7.4% of graduates from junior colleges went on to attend another college, while 72.4% entered the labor market (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2024).). The junior college student population also differs from that of counterpart institutions in the U.S. and other countries in that most enrolled students are recent high school graduates of traditional college-going age; this difference is likely attributable to their evolution from the initial "beginner colleges," which were designed to serve this population.

While junior colleges have been relatively successful in achieving their intended purpose of preparing students for mid-level technician jobs, a combination of factors—particularly their placement within a hierarchical and centralized postsecondary education system and national demographic trends—have led to a number of challenges for the sector and even questions about its long-term viability.

Stratification and Centralization

The postsecondary education system in South Korea is highly stratified, both historically and by design. Four-year colleges, especially highly selective elite universities, are at the top of the hierarchy, followed by two-year colleges, which are generally less selective and less popular than four-year colleges. Within each type of institution, colleges in Seoul (the capital of the country) or nearby major cities are more selective than those in other areas.

This hierarchy matters for both institutions and students. Institutions at the top of the hierarchy enjoy more resources and prestige than those at the bottom. Students who graduate from more prestigious institutions have better job prospects and greater chances of being admitted to professional schools such as law or medical schools, which partially explains why students who initially are not accepted by elite universities often take another couple of years to prepare for admission to these selective institutions.

Although more than 85% of higher education institutions, including both two-year and four-year colleges, are private, the system is very centralized, with the national government exerting a strong influence on postsecondary education institutions in terms of admission, enrollment, and funding. The Korea Department of Education (KDOE) has maintained and amplified the hierarchy of the system by controlling the number of available seats (i.e., admission quota) for four-year institutions within the capital and nearby cities to prevent students from being too concentrated in these already crowded areas.

In this highly structured and interconnected system, enrollment at selective institutions notably impacts enrollment numbers at junior colleges. For example, as the government has allowed only a few highly selective colleges to offer new majors in STEM fields (e.g., semiconductor, artificial intelligence, robot science, etc.) and increased their admission quotas beginning in 2024, many students who might have enrolled in junior colleges and less selective four-year colleges are instead being accepted by and attending selective colleges that have increased capacity (Kim, 2023).

In South Korea, as in many parts of the world, government funding is a major source of institutional revenue throughout the postsecondary education system. Junior colleges are especially reliant upon these appropriations because they rarely have research grants or teaching hospitals that provide revenue to many of their four-year counterparts. However, government funding from both the national and local governments is disproportionately distributed between four-year and junior colleges; for example, in 2022, public and private junior colleges received only 10.7% of postsecondary education funding from the national government, whereas the remaining funds went to four-year colleges (87.4%) and technical colleges (1.7%) (Joo, 2024). The total amount of funding from local governments is less than one-tenth of national funding and ranges from under one percent to approximately 40% of local spending on postsecondary education, depending on location.

Enrollment Woes and Ripple Effects

Given that government funding is disproportionately distributed to four-year colleges, junior colleges must fill their seats and secure tuition revenue. Tuition revenue covers 54%–69% of total revenue for private junior colleges (Choi 2021). Unfortunately, most junior colleges—both public and private—have difficulty recruiting and retaining students. Owing to the hierarchy described above, students and parents perceive junior colleges and vocational education as less prestigious and still prefer to choose a four-year college over a junior college unless there are clear advantages for attending a particular two-year college (e.g., exceptional employment rates after graduation).

Compounding these structural and reputational issues are national demographic trends: South Korea is experiencing a rapid decrease in population. The number of 18-year-olds, who, as noted previously, are the primary student base for junior colleges, has substantially decreased since 2000 and is projected to continue to decrease due to the low birth rates of the past decade. This decrease in the young adult population is more difficult for junior colleges than for other institutions, especially those located far from Seoul. Since COVID-19, junior colleges have filled only about 85% of their available seats for incoming students, whereas the yield rate for four-year colleges has reached approximately 95%.

Concern about the rapid decrease in the young adult population has prompted KDOE to conduct an annual evaluation of postsecondary education institutions (both public and private) based on specific input measures (e.g., the share of tenure-track and tenured faculty members and the share of tuition revenue spent on education and related expenses) and output measures (e.g., yield rates of incoming students, retention rates, and employment rates of college graduates) (KDOE 2021). If a college is deemed not to provide quality education on the basis of these criteria, it is not eligible for national government funding, and its students are not eligible for need-based aid or student loans from the government. If an institution fails to improve over the next few years after a negative evaluation, it is required to reduce admissions quotas, merge with another institution, or even close down.

This direct link between government funding eligibility and student enrollment and retention rates makes it critical for junior colleges to fill their seats. As a result, many junior colleges' staff, both faculty and administrators, try very hard to recruit and retain students. For example, it is common for junior college professors, department chairs, and even administrators—not just college recruiters—to visit nearby high schools to recruit students. A junior college president that I met shared how they "…go wherever there are students. It does not matter how many students there are. If I can talk with prospective students, I will be there."

In turn, competition for students has led to student consumerism. Students know which colleges are desperate for enrollment and act as opportunists, comparing institutions to see which offer the most, especially if the colleges they are considering offer similar majors and educational experiences. A junior college faculty member lamented that "We lose many students even in the middle of their first semester. When I asked the students why they planned to leave, they said they would attend another junior college that offered them slightly more scholarship money. These students hop from one college to another on the basis of the money they are offered."

Toward Sustainability

No one knows where these challenges will take us. Higher education scholars, practitioners, and administrators in South Korea are concerned that within a few decades there will be only a few junior colleges left, as most of them will close due to lack of students, funding, or both. However, this story may not be unique to South Korea. This can occur in any country where the number of high school graduates continually decreases, where the public does not value higher education as much as before, or where government funding for higher education does not keep pace with inflation or student enrollment.

In South Korea, as well as other countries facing similar challenges, some steps toward sustainability might include:

- Each junior college needs to provide students with unique skill sets and knowledge in areas that are attractive to both prospective students and employers. Examples include carpentry, interior design, recreation for elderly individuals, and K-pop choreography. What matters is that they should offer something *unique* that their four-year college counterparts do not, and programs should be sufficiently practical and hands-on so that their graduates are highly sought after in the labor market.
- Given the demographic changes described above, it is unrealistic for junior colleges to rely so heavily on traditional college students. Instead, they should offer programs that can attract an increasing number of adult students, especially senior citizens, international students, and even high school students who would like to have some college experience without making a long-term commitment. For example, colleges might develop short-term mini courses (e.g., a four-week workshop on the history and culture of Korea for international students).

- Government funding needs to be reviewed and restructured to allow junior colleges to be flexible and innovative. Instead of requiring a long report every year and applying the same set of evaluation criteria based on input measures, the government should 1) supply financial resources sufficient to provide quality education based on enrollment and 2) offer additional funding for colleges that generate innovative programs and initiatives and allow a few years for development and implementation.

Certainly, this is a challenging time for South Korea's junior colleges, but many of them, especially those that proactively adapt to changes in the environment, will find a way to survive, as institutions of this type have always done throughout history—in South Korea and around the world.

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Igniting Innovation: Lessons Learned from U.S. Community College Leadership

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Innovation in higher education is frequently associated with revenue-generating activities stimulated by the world's leading research universities, such as university-industry partnerships, business incubators, and technology parks. As a result, scholarship often overlooks the innovative activities of higher education institutions that focus primarily on teaching and service, such as community colleges. This lack of interrogation inhibits our understanding of community colleges, as they need to embrace innovative policies, programs, and initiatives to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Two defining characteristics of the community college sector and similar institutions are their concerted focus on 1) providing opportunities for underserved student populations and 2) meeting regional industry needs. Due to the rapid pace of contemporary economic and social change and the emergence of potentially disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence, community colleges must be innovative and agile to fulfill these key components of their mission. Hence, national case studies of the innovation challenges faced by community colleges, along with a discussion of institutional and leadership strategies that hold promise in overcoming these challenges, may be instructive for institutions grappling with similar issues around the world.

To contextualize the contemporary challenges the community college sector faces, this article presents findings from interviews with eleven U.S. community college presidents and chief executive officers (CEOs) recognized for their innovative approach to leadership. Although the interviews investigated a range of topics related to innovation, this article highlights data specifically focused on leaders' perceptions of systemic barriers to community college innovation.

Slow Institutional Responses to External Pressures

Many interview participants spoke of the necessity to respond more quickly to external pressures. From their perspective, slow responses to the needs of regional industries, local governments, and/or the community cause reputational harm to the U.S. community college sector. For example, one CEO with 40 years of experience in higher education and 13 years of leadership as the chief officer of a state community college system discussed how institutional governance processes, such as curriculum committees, hinder the ability of community colleges to create paths to well-paying jobs. They shared a story of a large Fortune 100 company that approached the leadership team during the COVID-19 pandemic, requesting 425 harness-trained workers in 10 weeks. Despite their efforts in prioritizing curriculum development, the leader told the company that it would take approximately 10 months to develop a program ready to serve students.

Moreover, participants contended that institutions must shift their temporal expectations concerning institutional plans to be more responsive. One president of a community college in the Midwest U.S. described how, instead of developing a five- or ten-year strategic plan, they engage in evergreen strategic planning with an 18-month projection. Every three or four months, the executive leadership team reviews the institution's progress on specific goals, strategies, and tactics to adjust the overall approach. They noted, "Some things drop off, some things get added on because of environmental changes, new opportunities, or an innovation that has presented itself.... I find that to be much more effective, responsive, adaptable, and more organic."

Political Interference that Impacts Funding and Autonomy

Several participants expressed deep concerns about the impact of political interference on U.S. community colleges and the students they serve. Some participants highlighted the actions of specific states, such as Florida and Texas, which have sought to eliminate curricula and cocurricular activities that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for traditionally marginalized student populations. One leader strongly asserted that DEI activities were designed to promote belongingness and are important because "the profile of our students has not changed in many years. As a matter of fact, it is probably getting more diverse." Despite research that has demonstrated a positive impact of culturally relevant curricula and DEI programs on student success, a growing number of state politicians, especially in the wake of Donald Trump's 2024 election as U.S. president, are threatening to reduce institutional funding and eliminate institutional independence if such activities are not cancelled.

The politicization of community college activities has not been limited to philosophical issues related to DEI. Remembering the experiences of COVID-19, one leader discussed how their institution was caught in the middle of the mask mandate debate. When they decided to institute a mask mandate on campus to promote public health, the institution was hit with a lawsuit, which resulted in "a threatening letter from the Attorney General stating that I [could] be held personally liable [for that decision]."

Misalignment of Student Success Metrics

Participants consistently argued that the student success metrics currently used to determine institutional funding are often misaligned with community college students' actual needs, wants, hopes, and dreams. One leader, for example, pointed to the need for community colleges to go beyond standard reporting, such as IPEDS, first-time/full-time progression, retention, or graduation rates based on 150% of time to completion, rhetorically arguing "how do you measure success, when in reality success is not just completion, but transfer plus completion or taking two courses instead of completing a degree?" Hence, leaders contend that community colleges need to identify and utilize more complex and nuanced measures of student success.

Some leaders have created internal matrices that better align with their institution's mission and vision statements. One leader noted that although much of their college's funding is based on student performance, their internal metrics determine whether the institution meets the needs of students and local businesses. Another leader mentioned that a primary measurement of success for their institution concerns student wage outcomes: "I do not want to have programming at this institution that does not lead to a family sustaining wage at 150% of the national criteria for a family of four."

Negative Effects of Institutional Competition

Despite their regional focus, community colleges are not immune to the pressures of the competitive higher education marketplace. Participants observed how various businesses are developing credential alternatives to the traditional college degree, offering a new educational path to students and a new competitor for community colleges. The leaders also spoke at length about direct competition from larger universities, especially with regard to international student recruitment:

How you go up against the behemoths—like your big state schools—will be a challenge for institutions such as ours. From what I understand, our local big [research university] has a waiting list of 1,000 students from China alone! How do you compete with behemoths like that… when you are struggling with just surviving on whatever you're receiving from the tax base?

Other leaders noted how a handful of large institutions, such as Arizona State University, are leveraging their size to "drive down the cost of education to $1,000 per year." One participant remarked that such tuition rates directly aligned with their price per year, and they "were the cheapest in the nation. I wondered why they decided to pick that number." Since community colleges are compelled to offer an array of in-person services, these pressures are forcing difficult conversations about which forms of essential student support might need to be cut in the future.

Conclusion

The leaders interviewed in this study identified several challenges facing U.S. community colleges that may resonate globally, including the need for more agile institutional governance, institutional autonomy from political forces, misalignment of student success metrics, and increasing competition from large universities offering online programs at scale.

To address these challenges, institutions worldwide could consider the following strategies. First, governance structures could be streamlined to enable faster curriculum development and more responsive strategic planning, ensuring alignment with regional workforce needs. Second, alternative funding sources and institutional safeguards should be established so that community colleges can maintain a certain degree of autonomy in politically charged environments. Third, nuanced student success metrics that account for students' previous educational experiences and current socioeconomic challenges should be developed to honor the varying educational goals of learners. Fourth, partnerships with industry and local governments could be expanded to reinforce the unique teaching and service roles of community colleges in stimulating regional economic development. Fifth, stable leadership and collaborative organizational cultures are crucial, as sustained innovation requires long-term vision rather than short-term shifts in policy.

This final point was emphasized continuously in interviews, as one participant noted, "The hardest thing is to make strategic strides when leadership is constantly changing." Ultimately, the ability of community colleges, both in the U.S. and globally, to adapt to shifting social, political, and economic landscapes may hinge on their capacity to innovate while remaining deeply engaged with their local communities.

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