

THE 2016 INSIDE HIGHER ED SURVEY OF  
**Community College  
Presidents**

A study by Gallup® and *Inside Higher Ed*

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# THE 2016 INSIDE HIGHER ED SURVEY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

A study by Gallup and *Inside Higher Ed*



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# FOREWORD

*Inside Higher Ed's* second annual survey of community college presidents aims to understand how these leaders perceive and address the challenges facing two-year institutions of higher education in the U.S.

Some of the questions addressed in the study are:

- Do community college presidents support the politically popular idea of free community college?
- Will future presidents of the United States be as supportive of community college education as President Obama has been?
- Are most community colleges experiencing enrollment declines?
- What factors do presidents believe are behind enrollment declines at their institution?
- What is a reasonable expectation for community college graduation rates?
- What do community college presidents set as a goal for their own institution's graduation rate?

# SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

- Most community college presidents support the idea of free community college education and believe the debate over the proposal has helped raise awareness of the financial needs of community colleges and their students.
- At the same time, community college presidents are largely divided on whether they believe free community college education will be adopted in at least one-third of states in the next five years.
- Although half are neutral, more community college presidents are optimistic than pessimistic that the next U.S. president will be as supportive of community colleges as President Obama has been.
- The majority of community college presidents, 58 percent, say their enrollment has declined in the current academic year. The main reason they give for the decline is a better job market.
- On average, community college presidents say a 41 percent graduation rate is a reasonable expectation for community colleges nationwide. Their average reported goal for their own institution is slightly higher, at 47 percent.

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# METHODOLOGY

The following report presents findings from a quantitative survey research study that Gallup conducted on behalf of *Inside Higher Ed*. The objective was to examine how presidents of associate-degree granting institutions perceive pressing issues they face in higher education.

To achieve these objectives, Gallup sent email invitations to 933 college presidents of associate degree-granting institutions, with regular reminders sent throughout the Jan. 7-Feb. 2, 2016, field period. Gallup collected 220 completed Web surveys, yielding a 24 percent response rate. As an incentive for participation, *Inside Higher Ed* offered respondents a chance to win one of 10 \$100 gift card prizes.

The results reported here are derived from a larger survey of 727 college and university presidents using the most comprehensive sample information available. Gallup statistically weighted data to correct for nonresponse, matching the obtained sample to targets for all U.S. colleges and universities from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System database. Gallup weighted the sample based on institutional control (public or private/nonprofit), four-year or two-year degree offerings, student enrollment and geographical region. Therefore, the weighted sample results for community college presidents represent the views of presidents at community colleges nationwide.

Gallup education consultants developed the questionnaire in collaboration with Scott Jaschik and Doug Lederman from *Inside Higher Ed*.

The following sections present the findings of the survey. In some cases, reported frequencies may not add up to 100 percent as a result of rounding. The results do not include “don’t know” and “refused” responses.

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## DETAILED FINDINGS

# FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND DEBT-FREE COLLEGE

Community college presidents generally endorse the idea of free community college for high school graduates, one of President Obama's key education proposals. Sixty-two percent strongly agree or agree they support the idea of free community college education, while 24 percent strongly disagree or disagree.

Regardless of whether they personally support free community college, presidents widely agree the debate over the proposal has helped raise awareness about their colleges. Eighty-two percent strongly agree or agree the debate has focused welcome attention on the needs of community colleges and their students.

But community college presidents are not expecting free community college to become the norm anytime soon. They are divided in their views of whether free community college programs will be adopted in at least one-third of states within the next five years. Thirty-five percent strongly agree or agree this will happen, and 37 percent strongly disagree or disagree.

Several presidential candidates, particularly those running in the 2016 Democratic primaries, have recently discussed college affordability as a campaign issue. Some candidates have offered proposals to make college free or debt-free for students at two-year and four-year institutions. Sixty-one percent of community college presidents strongly agree or agree they support the proposals made by Democratic candidates to make college free or debt-free.

However, community college presidents have some concerns that focusing attention on four-year college affordability diverts attention from policies that may benefit community colleges. Fifty-three percent strongly agree or agree that political candidates' emphasis on four-year college costs may shift attention away from the idea of free community college.

**As you may know, President Obama proposed a federal-state partnership to make community college tuition free for in-state, recent high school graduates. Two states have such systems in place, as do a number of individual community colleges.**

**Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.**

I support the idea of free community college.	
%5 Strongly agree	37
%4	25
%3	14
%2	15
%1 Strongly disagree	9
The debate over free community college has focused welcome attention on the financial needs of community colleges and their students.	
%5 Strongly agree	39
%4	43
%3	10
%2	5
%1 Strongly disagree	3

## FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND DEBT-FREE COLLEGE (cont.)

I believe that within five years, free community college programs will be adopted in at least one-third of states.	
%5 Strongly agree	11
%4	24
%3	29
%2	26
%1 Strongly disagree	11
I generally support the proposals of Democratic presidential candidates to make public higher education either free or debt-free.	
%5 Strongly agree	30
%4	31
%3	16
%2	13
%1 Strongly disagree	10
I am concerned that the emphasis of political candidates on four-year college costs may shift attention away from the idea of free community college.	
%5 Strongly agree	19
%4	34
%3	25
%2	16
%1 Strongly disagree	6

# PRESIDENT OBAMA'S SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

President Obama has made community college education a centerpiece of his higher education proposals, and community college presidents appear to have noticed. According to the recently released 2016 *Inside Higher Ed* survey of college presidents, community college presidents give President Obama higher marks for his handling of higher education than do presidents at four-year colleges.

Many community college presidents believe no future president will place as much emphasis on community colleges as President Obama has. Forty-three percent strongly agree or agree that they doubt they will see another president of the United States place as much emphasis on community colleges during their careers; 33 percent strongly disagree or disagree with that statement.

Still, more community college presidents are optimistic than pessimistic that the next U.S. president will continue to place a strong emphasis on community colleges. Thirty-eight percent strongly agree or agree this will happen, while 15 percent strongly disagree or disagree. However, the greatest percentage of community college presidents, 47 percent, are neutral on this matter.

**As you may know, President Obama has made numerous proposals during his administration focused on community colleges, and repeatedly stressed the importance of community college education.**

**Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.**

I expect the next president of the United States will continue this emphasis on community colleges.	
%5 Strongly agree	10
%4	28
%3	47
%2	13
%1 Strongly disagree	2
During my career, I doubt I will see another president of the United States place as much emphasis on community colleges.	
%5 Strongly agree	18
%4	25
%3	23
%2	24
%1 Strongly disagree	9

# DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Community colleges nationwide saw an increase in student enrollment during the economic downturn. Now, that trend is reversing.

The majority of community college presidents, 58 percent, report that their enrollment for the 2015-16 academic year is lower than that of the previous academic year. Twenty percent say their enrollment has been stable, while 21 percent report an increase.

As you may know, many community colleges are reporting enrollment declines this year. Is your college's enrollment for the 2015-2016 academic year --?	
% Higher than in the 2014-15 academic year	21
% The same as in the 2014-15 academic year	20
% Lower than in the 2014-15 academic year	58

The survey asked community college presidents who reported a drop in enrollment to rate how important each of six possible factors are in this year's decline.

The overwhelming factor, rated as "very" (79 percent) or "somewhat" (19 percent) important by 98 percent of presidents, is that more people are finding employment. A total of 93 percent also say a natural and expected decline after years of increased enrollment is a very (45 percent) or somewhat (48 percent) important factor.

At least half of community college presidents who have seen a decline in enrollment say competition from new models of education, competition from for-profit institutions and reports questioning the value of college are very or somewhat important factors in the decline.

Community college presidents largely dismiss the idea that a lack of alignment between their college's academic programs and student interests is an important factor in their institution's declining enrollment.

## DECLINING ENROLLMENT (cont.)

(Asked of those whose colleges have had an enrollment decline) How important are each of the following factors in your college's decline in enrollment this past year?	
More people are finding employment	
% Very important	79
% Somewhat important	19
% Not too important	1
% Not important at all	1
A natural and expected decline following years of enrollment increases	
% Very important	45
% Somewhat important	48
% Not too important	5
% Not important at all	2
Competition from new models of higher education, such as coding academies, online offerings and competency-based education	
% Very important	14
% Somewhat important	44
% Not too important	25
% Not important at all	17
Reports that question the value of a college education	
% Very important	11
% Somewhat important	42
% Not too important	26
% Not important at all	21
Competition from for-profit higher education	
% Very important	13
% Somewhat important	37
% Not too important	33
% Not important at all	17
My college's academic programs are not aligned with student interests.	
% Very important	12
% Somewhat important	24
% Not too important	35
% Not important at all	29

# GRADUATION RATES

Community colleges are often criticized for low student graduation rates. Although individual estimates of community college graduation rates vary, some suggest that less than 30 percent of those who enter community college will graduate with an associate degree within two to four years.

The survey asked community college presidents about their college's goal for a graduation rate. The majority, 52 percent, gave an estimate below 50 percent -- with the average at 47 percent.

Community college presidents were then asked to identify a reasonable graduation rate for community colleges nationally. A majority gave a figure below 50 percent, with the average being a 41 percent graduation rate.

**As you may know, community colleges are often criticized for low graduation rates. Community college leaders regularly respond that the federal rate is unfair to them, and that their institutions cannot be expected to have rates comparable to other types of colleges.**

What is your goal for the graduation rate at your community college?	
0%-24%	12
25%-49%	40
50%-74%	35
75%-100%	14
Mean	47.2
Median	45
And what do you think is a reasonable goal for community colleges nationwide for the federal rate?	
0%-24%	14
25%-49%	44
50%-74%	37
75%-100%	5
Mean	40.8
Median	40

# INSTITUTION AND PERSONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

What is your age?	%
Younger than 30	0
30 to 39	0
40 to 49	12
50 to 59	37
60 to 69	41
70 and older	9

What is your age?	%
Younger than 30	0
30 to 39	0

How many years have you served as the president at this institution?	%
Less than six months	1
Six months to less than three years	32
Three years to less than five years	21
Five years to less than 10 years	27
10 or more years	18

How many years have you served as the president at any institution?	%
Less than six months	2
Six months to less than three years	25
Three years to less than five years	15
Five years to less than 10 years	30
10 or more years	28

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