The Road Ahead: A Look at Trends in the Educational Attainment of Community College Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few years, as the nation has attempted to emerge from a recession, people are increasingly turning to education as a means to return to work in an economy that demands new skills and a larger number of knowledge-based workers. The demand for more education has resulted in increased enrollments in postsecondary institutions, especially in community colleges, which have experienced substantial increases in enrollment since fall 2007.

The demand felt on college campuses aligns with projections indicating a strong need for a more educated workforce. In response to the demands of students, as well as of business and industry, community colleges are rebalancing institutional missions and practices to focus more directly on ensuring student success.

This brief presents data on educational attainment at community colleges, with an eye to what the data portend. One extremely positive conclusion can be reached: Educational attainment for all key populations is increasing at community colleges. The investments made in a community college education, by individuals and by society as a whole, are paying off.

Over the past 20 years, the percent increase in credentials awarded has been double the percent increase in enrollment. These findings are even more pronounced for students of color. Consistent with other research, actual rates of transfer for students are much higher than commonly reported as well.

These gains are the result of students, schools, families, and communities working in concert. They are also the result of innumerable partnerships and initiatives in which community colleges have been or continue to be engaged. Much more work has yet to be done by these stakeholders and their supporting partners, but the path to increasing student success is not untraveled.