



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WOMEN IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Access to Success



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Higher education is essential to the productivity and innovation of the U.S. workforce, and ongoing economic challenges have only underscored this imperative. In 2009, President Barack Obama launched the American Graduation Initiative, a plan to dramatically increase the number of U.S. college graduates by targeting an often overlooked part of our national higher education system: community colleges. The president called on these institutions to produce an additional

5 million graduates by 2020, effectively requiring community colleges to double their graduation rates.

A college education opens the door to economic opportunity and social mobility in the United States. College-educated workers earn higher wages and experience lower levels of unemployment than workers with less education do. At the same time, well-paying jobs that don't require a college degree are becoming increas-

ingly scarce. Analysts predict that soon nearly 2 out of every 3 jobs will require some postsecondary education. Despite some notable examples of people without a college degree who have found fame and fortune, individuals without a college education run the risk of being left behind in today's economy.

Women have responded to changes in the workforce and the economy by enrolling in large numbers in colleges and universities, where they now make up the majority of students. Community colleges have played an important role in this surge. In 2010, women made up 57 percent of the students at these institutions. Currently, more than 4 million women attend the nation's two-year public colleges, which is more than the number of undergraduate women attending either public or private four-year colleges and universities. Who are these women? About a quarter of them are mothers, and many have significant work, family, and caregiving responsibilities. Many of these women have limited financial resources and/or are academically underprepared. For these reasons, they are attracted to the flexible schedules, low cost, and open-door admissions of community colleges.

This report, *Women in Community Colleges: Access to Success*, is based on a review of the literature on community colleges, interviews with community college leaders, a review of program materials, and data from two federal sources: the Integrated Postsecondary Education

Data System (IPEDS) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study. Drawing on these resources, the report looks at two areas of particular importance to women: the challenges facing student parents and the opportunities available in nontraditional career fields, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Finally, this study considers how community colleges can provide more women with a reliable path to opportunity and economic security.

Student parents need child care to succeed in community colleges.

Community colleges present an attractive option for mothers of young children, in part because they offer flexible schedules and low tuition. Unfortunately, limited access to child care disrupts the educational path of many mothers. Although more mothers enroll at community colleges than at four-year institutions, fewer than half of all community colleges offer on-campus child care, and available slots do not typically meet student demand. Student parents consistently cite child care responsibilities as a chief reason for dropping out of community college before completing a degree or certificate. Supporting the educational and professional success of mothers must include increasing the availability of affordable child care. Fortunately, some community colleges are already developing support systems for student parents (see chapter 4).

Women need better information and support to enroll and earn degrees in nontraditional STEM fields.

Community colleges offer a wide range of programs, including employment-focused occupational programs, academic programs in the liberal arts, and both occupational and academic programs in STEM fields. Despite this scope, women tend to pursue traditionally female occupations such as nursing, education, and cosmetology and are underrepresented in STEM fields. For example, women make up the vast majority of registered nurses but just a fraction of engineering technicians, automotive service technicians and mechanics, carpenters, and electricians. With the exception of nursing and other health-related fields, jobs in traditionally female occupations typically offer lower wages and fewer opportunities for career advancement than math and science fields requiring a comparable level of education.

Gender stereotypes and a lack of information and support are some of the barriers to women's participation in STEM and other nontraditional fields in community colleges. These challenges are not insurmountable, but institutions must actively intervene to help close the gender gap in these fields. Women are actually more likely than men to attend community college at some point on their way to earning a bachelor's degree in STEM, so increasing women's participation in STEM at community colleges could also help address

the gender gap in STEM among bachelor's degree recipients. Some educational programs are already taking on this challenge to recruit and support women in math and science career paths (see chapter 5).

Conclusion

More than ever before, women are relying on community colleges for higher education and workforce preparation. This report recommends policies and practices to help women succeed in community colleges. In particular, we find that child care is a critical issue for student mothers. Women also need more support for pursuing opportunities in STEM and other male-dominated fields. But our ability to measure the extent to which these efforts can help improve outcomes for women is limited. The major federal data source on higher education students currently does not report outcomes for part-time students, who make up a majority of community college students and who are primarily women. To provide better support for these students, we must address the limitations of our current data collection and reporting systems.

With increased attention and improved outreach to women students, the nation's community colleges can build on their legacy of providing educational opportunity to all. The issues this report addresses are of particular concern to women at community colleges, but improving outcomes for women will benefit everyone.

Moreover, many of the interventions that support female students will help male students as well. When women have the resources they need to be successful, they can better contribute to the well-being of their families, their communities, and society as a whole.