

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES & 3 OTHERS

SUNY optimistic about community colleges despite enrollment dip

BY NICK NIEDZWIADK | 09/26/2019 05:01 AM EDT



More than 16 percent of first-time students enrolled in community college full time graduated in two years, according to the most recent data. | SUNY press office

ALBANY — There are more than 5,000 fewer students attending the state's community colleges this year compared with last year. But State University of New York officials believe the two-year schools are on the right track, never mind the decline in numbers.

They note that the graduation rate has been ticking up in recent years as the system has invested in a host of initiatives to retain, help advance, and ultimately, graduate students.

More than 16 percent of first-time students enrolled in community college full time graduated in two years, according to the most recent data. That figure was 11 percent for students who began in 2010, and figures such as the three-year (28.6 percent versus 23.1 percent) and four-year (32.8 versus 28.1 percent) graduations rates have shown similar improvements.

Officials say the figures show that they're doing something right.

"I think it's a really interesting story," SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson said at Wednesday's SUNY Board of Trustees meeting. "I think this is a great success story."

"A lot of initiatives are about capturing students when they first walk in the door and keeping them on that pathway toward completion," Johanna Duncan-Poitier, the vice chancellor for community colleges, told POLITICO.

Community college students also have benefited from the enactment of SUNY's Seamless Transfer policy in 2015, which aligned general education and other courses across the system to ensure that those credits are accepted when a student switches from one SUNY school to another. Community college students made up 56 percent of the roughly 27,000 intra-SUNY transfers in the 2017-2018 school year, up 7 percentage points since the policy began, and the percentage of students transferring with an associate degree has inched up as well.

"That's really important because many students do see community college as the first step to a higher degree," Duncan-Poitier said. "When a student comes in, we work with them immediately about what are their goals and vision for their educational future."

Enrollment in community colleges typically increases when the economy is stagnant, as students elect to earn a degree that can give them a leg up when the economy rebounds. Fewer people tend to enroll when jobs abound and the cost-benefit equation changes.

That holds true not just in New York, but nationally, where community college enrollment in the [spring 2019 semester](#) [shrank 3.4](#) percent compared to 2018, according to data from the National Student Clearing House. And that trend has persisted for the better part of a decade, as the memory and effects of the Great Recession fade.

There are more than 194,000 students enrolled across SUNY's 30 community colleges, according to the data, the fewest in more than a decade. But SUNY officials believe the figure could be leveling off after enrollment declines every year since 2010.

This year's community college drop off is the smallest since 2013, when 3,216 fewer students enrolled compared with the prior fall, and Duncan-Poitier said there are about 200 more full-time first-time community college students than last year, although a final count won't be available until later this fall.

Those students can be eligible for the state's Excelsior Scholarship, which is in its third year of existence. Earlier this month the Cuomo administration announced that Excelsior recipients in SUNY's community colleges have a two-year graduation rate nearly three times that of non-recipients, and community colleges operated by the City University of New York system had similar results.

But they did not say how many of the 24,000 SUNY and CUNY students who received the scholarship last year attended community colleges. The scholarship is not available to part-time students who make up a large portion of the community college population.

SUNY is also in the midst of expanding a pilot program called Guided Pathways that focuses on improving student retention and graduation rates by helping students devise an academic plan that will guide them their studies.

“It helps students clarify what they want to do earlier in their college careers, and if they change their mind it will have less of an impact on their college completion,” said SUNY’s Jennifer Miller, who leads the initiative.

The effort is rolling out across 18 community colleges — up from 10 — according to Duncan-Poitier, with hopes of taking it across the board if it bears fruit.

She said the idea is appealing because it doesn’t just target one type of student, so if successfully implemented, it can have a much larger effect on student outcomes.

“When you talk about programs, it’s usually just a couple of hundred or maybe thousands of students,” she said. “So, if we want to do something that’s going to really move the dial in terms of increasing completion ... we have to do something that we know is evidence based, and there’s research that shows it’s something that’s going to really work before we invest time and resources.”

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