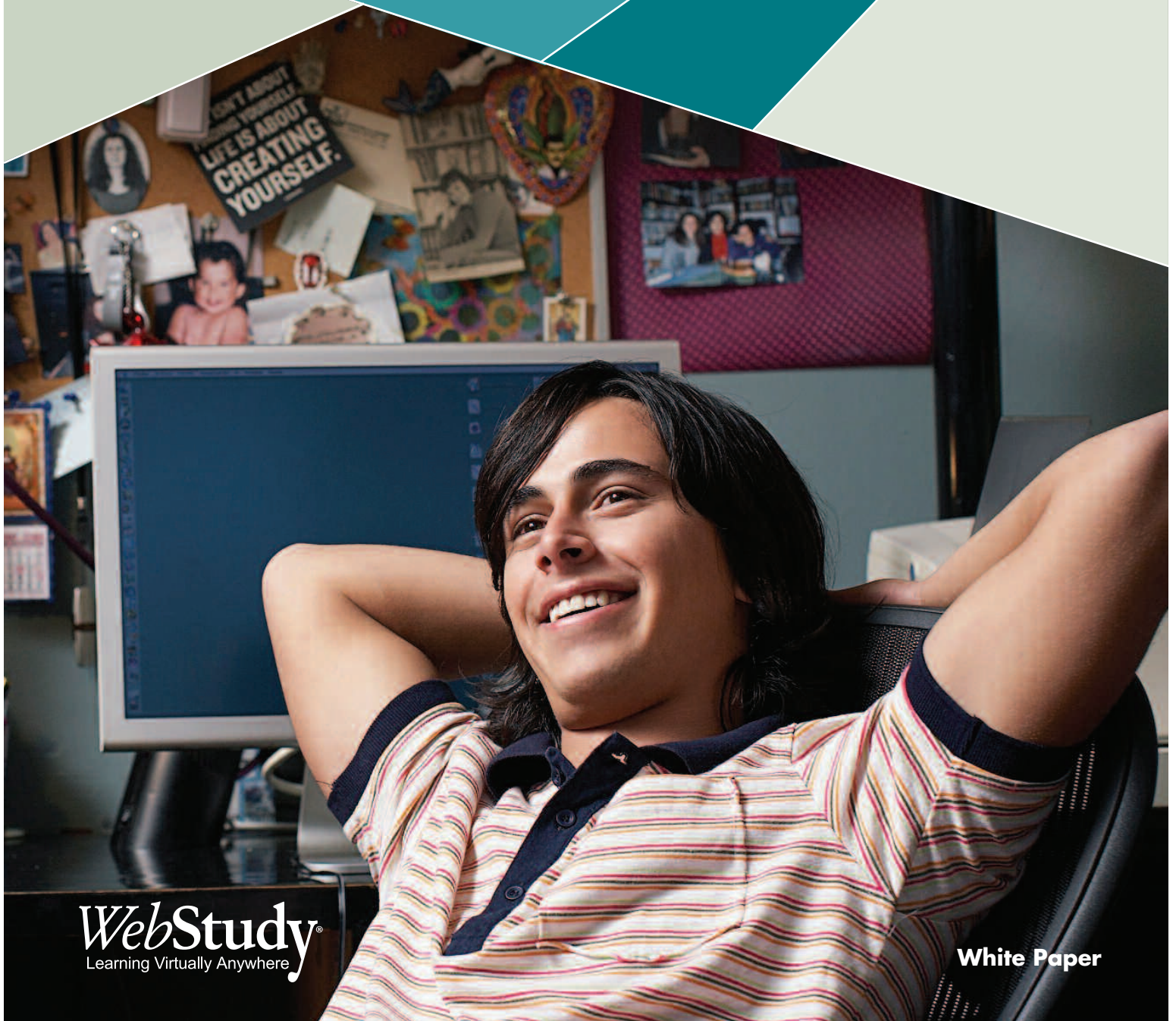


Student Retention at Community Colleges:

Engaging a New Generation with Technology is Key to America's Future



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White Paper

Executive Summary

America's higher education system was once recognized as one of the best in the world, yet recent studies show American colleges today have poor retention rates compared with other countries. Most experts concur that central to the problem is student engagement. When it comes to engaging students, community colleges in particular face a challenging demographic – many students with inadequate college preparation, financial disadvantages or hectic work schedules.

One way to improve upon student engagement is to weave teaching and learning best practices with course management system (CMS) technology; in fact, some experts say that “blended learning” will shift student engagement in a powerful way. But the right CMS is a crucial part of the equation. Before integrating technology, community colleges should carefully consider these questions:

- *Is your current CMS welcomed and intuitive, such that campus-wide blended learning will become the norm?*
- *Does the CMS technology go beyond information storage to enrich the educational experience for students of all levels?*
- *Does the CMS company provide the kind of service and support the school requires?*
- *Will the pricing work within budget realities to support this growth?*
- *Will your blended learning program and your distance learning program give students the just-in-time access, service, individualized direction and personalization they deserve?*

As technology is embraced by all faculty for blended learning, there is evidence that it can enhance student performance, provide equal opportunity for students of all learning styles, connect all students with the institution and potentially reduce dropout/withdrawal rates. In other words, welcomed, intuitive technology may engage students and improve retention.

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Lagging Behind: American Retention Rates Falling

America's higher education system was once recognized as one of the preeminent educational systems in the world.

Yet, some studies show American colleges today have poor retention rates compared to other countries such as India and Japan, and American students lag behind international competition. Retention rates are the barometer for the modern college's success or failure, an indicator of whether their students are engaged enough in learning to stay the course and receive a college degree. What is happening to our institutions of higher education?

According to a 2008 study from the Center for the Study of College Student Retention, nearly 50 percent of American students entering higher education will not earn a degree. Plus, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reports that though the U.S. ranks fifth internationally for college enrollment in the 18 to 24 age category, the rating drops dramatically when it comes to completion numbers. The U.S. earns 17 degrees for every 100 students enrolled while Japan earns 26 degrees for every 100 enrollees—more than a 50 percent advantage over the U.S.

A 2007 *USA Today* article revealed how far American students are lagging internationally using math and science exams administered by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). The data showed middle school students in even the highest-scoring states of Massachusetts and Minnesota are significantly below top-scoring nations such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan. In terms of these top-scoring states, the U.S. is still internationally competitive. But when looking at other states, such as Mississippi, New Mexico and Washington, D.C., the U.S. is comparable to some of the worst scoring nations such as Bulgaria and Macedonia. How could such a discrepancy exist between states?

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Students' Goals

Indicate which of the following are your reasons/goals for attending this college.

	Primary Goal	Secondary Goal	Not a Goal
Complete a certificate program	29%	19%	52%
Obtain an associate degree	59%	21%	20%
Transfer to a four-year college or university	52%	21%	27%
Obtain or update job-related skills	41%	27%	32%
Self-improvement / personal enjoyment	39%	35%	26%
Change careers	29%	16%	55%

Source: Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE),
Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, 2009, The University of Texas at Austin

Lagging Behind: American Retention Rates Falling (Cont.)

Some of the blame for the drop in retention falls on high schools that fail to prepare American students for the rigors of college. The 2007 documentary *2 Million Minutes*, for instance, illustrates how Chinese and Indian high school students spend more than twice as much time studying as their U.S. counterparts in preparation for college, and addresses what many are calling a crisis for U.S. schools regarding chronically low scores in math and science indicators. Another target is the lack of an agreed-upon universal measurement standard for U.S. colleges.

Though the blame for falling retention rates has many targets, most experts concur that central to the retention problem is a lack of *student engagement*. Research from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) shows that the more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter — the more likely they are to learn and achieve their academic goals.

When it comes to student engagement, community colleges in particular face a demographic with challenges. According to a May 2006 issue of *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education*, many students who choose community college face inadequate college preparation, limited support systems, financial disadvantages, hectic work schedules or learning disabilities. In 2008, the College Board's Center for Innovative Thought convened a National Commission on Community Colleges to explore the role of community colleges in helping American students succeed. The Commission's report found that now more than ever, community colleges must be given top priority if the U.S. hopes to respond effectively to significant trends reshaping national and international life including the economic vulnerability of the U.S.

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The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges are now the largest single sector of higher education in the U.S., according to the 2009 Report of the National Commission on Community Colleges, “Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America’s Middle Class.” With nearly 1,200 regionally accredited two-year colleges enrolling 6.5 million students annually for credit and another 5 million for non-credit courses, community colleges account for nearly half of all American undergraduates.

In today’s challenging economy, community colleges are the accessible, affordable way for students from middle-class families to complete an associate degree or the first two years of a baccalaureate degree before moving on to a four-year university. Community colleges serve the widest demographic, from teenagers to octogenarians, and fulfill a number of crucial community needs. For example, these institutions:

- *Certify nearly 80 percent of first responders in the U.S. (police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians);*
- *Produce more than 50 percent of new nurses and other health-care workers;*
- *Account for nearly 40 percent of all foreign undergraduates on American campuses;*
- *Enroll 46 percent of all U.S. undergraduates, including 47 percent of undergraduates who are African American, 47 percent of those who are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 55 percent and 57 percent, respectively, of Hispanic and Native American undergraduates; and*
- *Award more than 800,000 associate degrees and certificates annually; and*

Recent reports show community college enrollment is increasing at more than three times the rate of four-year colleges. Yet, while enrollment numbers paint an optimistic picture, retention at community colleges is slipping fast. A number of sources report that only 30 percent of students entering community college graduate in six years, compared with 58 percent of students at four-year colleges and universities. A September 2008 “Achieving the Dream” newsletter reports nearly one quarter of these students are lost within the first year of enrollment, a time that is critical for advising students who need additional preparation to succeed, such as study skills, English as a second language or remedial work.

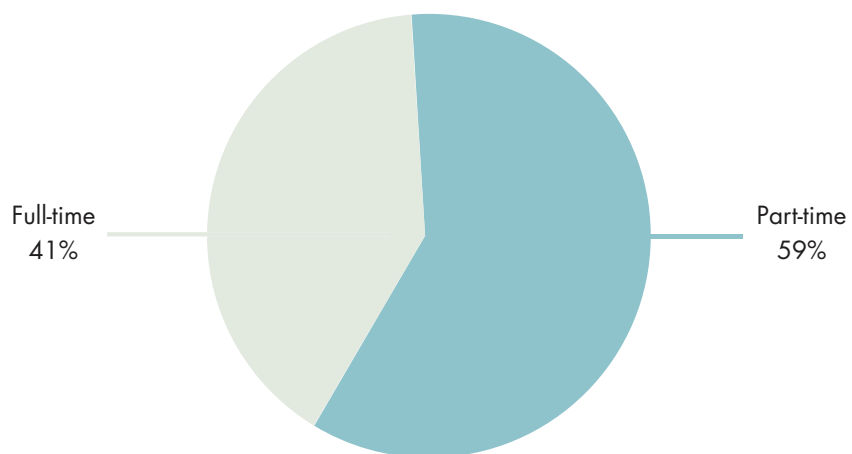
Some of the reasons experts cite for these falling retention rates are 1) the demographics of community college students, 2) their lack of pre-collegiate preparation in high school, 3) limited support systems 4) their part-time enrollment status, and 5) lack of student engagement in learning.

A growing number of community college students are coming from financially disadvantaged families, some students have disabilities such as attention-deficit disorder and some are adult returning students trying to balance busy family schedules. Research shows that this demographic is often inadequately prepared for college and shows less success in college completion.

In general, community colleges report the number of students who arrive at their door under-prepared for the rigors of college is growing at huge rates, according to *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education*. The under-prepared community college student may arrive with uncertain goals (certificate, trade skill, basic literacy, general enrichment or degree) or very limited support systems (no childcare, time is competing with working, insufficient language, deficient study skills).

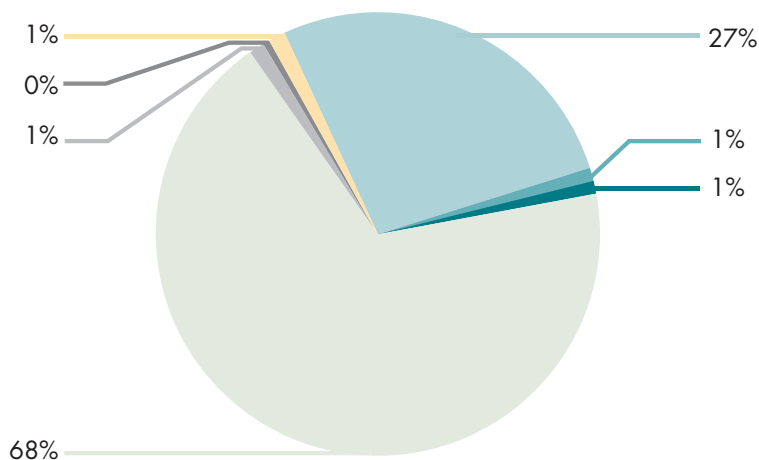
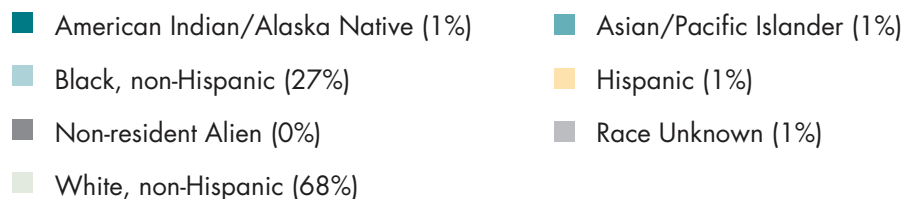
Another roadblock community colleges face is a high percentage of students with part-time enrollment status. A 2007 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that students enrolled part-time lagged significantly behind full-time peers and have much lower persistence in postsecondary degree completion. According to American Association of Community Colleges, 59 percent of the community college population attends school part-time. About 85 percent of community college students hold full-time or part-time jobs, and 54 percent work full-time, according to the League for Innovation in the Community College. All of these characteristics are associated with low rates of degree completion.

Enrollment by Attendance Status at Community Colleges



Source: Department of Education

Enrollment by Ethnicity at Community Colleges



Source: Department of Education

Indispensable to America's Future

Before we discuss how community colleges can improve slipping retention rates, we must first examine the critical role that community colleges play in the development and implementation of national educational solutions.

According to the 2009 National Commission on Community Colleges' report, now more than ever, community colleges must be given top priority if the U.S. hopes to respond effectively to significant trends reshaping national and international life including: the economic vulnerability of the U.S., challenges to the stability of the middle class, shifting demographics and the imperative to rebuild the vigor of our nation's schools and communities. Education beyond high school is now essential to earn a middle class income, and community colleges play a crucial role in preparing individuals for careers and baccalaureate programs.

The Commission's analyses indicate that half of the new jobs created in the U.S. in the next 10 years will require at least some postsecondary education. Even in high-demand science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, the role of community colleges is critical. *The New York Times* recently reported that community colleges have already begun offering four-year bachelors degrees in science and technology fields. To meet the nation's needs in these fields, the U.S. should plan on a 25.1 percent increase in the number of associate degrees awarded and a 19.7 percent increase in bachelor's degrees awarded. An associate degree permits the community college graduate to almost double the average annual earnings of high school dropouts (\$37,990 compared to \$19,915).

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Despite community colleges' past record of success and productivity in reaching the underserved, the report names four challenges that are undermining their ability to retain students: rising costs, a mismatch between demands and resources, the challenge of monitoring outcomes and a culture that has emphasized access more than success. The history of higher education in recent decades has shown that when state budgets have tightened, higher education inevitably suffered. And community colleges have suffered disproportionately. A column in a July edition of *The New York Times* indicates four-year colleges receive three times as much federal money per student as community colleges.

The National Commission on Community Colleges in 2008 called for a three-way agreement involving national leaders, state officials and community colleges. The Community College Competitiveness Act is a new social contract designed to put community colleges at the forefront of the effort to enhance American communities and ensure national competitiveness. As part of this call, the Commission asked federal officials to provide a portion of the financial support required to make universal access to two years of education beyond high school a reality.

The U.S. government has responded to the call. In July 2009, President Obama announced a \$12 billion, 10-year initiative to improve the nation's community college success and graduation rate. This initiative is part of the President's focus on the importance of community colleges, which he says are key in the recovery from the recession. According to reports, his proposed American Graduation Initiative would add 5 million new graduates by 2020, to reclaim the world's number one ranking in college completion. The House Committee on Education and Labor responded by passing the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009, which authorizes and funds the major parts of this initiative.

No One Rises to Low Expectations

While the Department of Education does its part, community colleges can tackle falling retention rates on their own—starting with student engagement. Findings from CCSSE's 2008 survey of more than 343,000 students on 585 community college campuses found that classroom expectations are too low in community college classes, as reported by *USA Today*. Students said they are not being challenged enough--in other words--they are not engaged in learning. In fact the CCSSE survey revealed that there is a significant, positive relationship between academic challenge and the likelihood of students getting good grades and graduating.

Engaging students is the most effective way to make them feel more emotionally connected to their professors and school, says Vincent Tinto, Professor at Syracuse University and advisory board member of CCSSE. And this type of emotional connection is key to their persistence in completing a college degree.

“No one rises to low expectations,” Tinto says in the 2008 *USA Today* article. He notes the frequency and quality of engagement with faculty, staff and other students—one of the key independent predictors of student persistence—is what seems to be missing in community colleges.

Candace Thille, director of Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative, agrees (In an August 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article), noting that student engagement suffered when community colleges opened up increasing access to education in the 1960s. That's when the ever-changing balancing act between access and quality began.

Today, technology can help. By blending teaching and learning best practices with course management system (CMS) technology in an interactively meaningful learning environment, community colleges will find opportunities to make learning more independent, useful and sustainable.

Thille and many others believe that hybrid online and in-class technology can shift this engagement issue in a powerful way, by creating individualized learning tracks online. Learners should have easy access to different learning resources in order to apply the knowledge and skills they learn under the supervision and support of the teacher inside and outside the classroom. This blended learning approach will combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction.

The next generation of course management systems (CMS) will enable educators to target individual performance within diverse demographics—allowing learners and teachers to work together to improve the quality of learning and teaching. If one student needs additional support in a certain subject, the educator needs to be able to provide a customized learning track for him/her via online course material that is invisible to the student's peers. If another student learns in a different way, the educator can adapt their teaching for that learner's needs. By personalizing learning in this way, educators can focus class time on clearing up misconceptions, applying the materials to real life, and working in small groups, rather than reviewing textbook material.

“Even though we've provided access, we haven't provided access to the same kind of education,” Thille says, “because we didn't really have the tools and technology to scale. I think what the information technology now, finally, is affording us the opportunity to do, is to really provide that kind of personalized instruction—high-quality rigorous instruction—to everybody.”

With automation in the 21st century, all too often society wants to shorten the educational process; yet learning is not amenable to cookie-cutter algorithms. One size teaching approaches do not fit all.

No One Rises to Low Expectations (Continued)

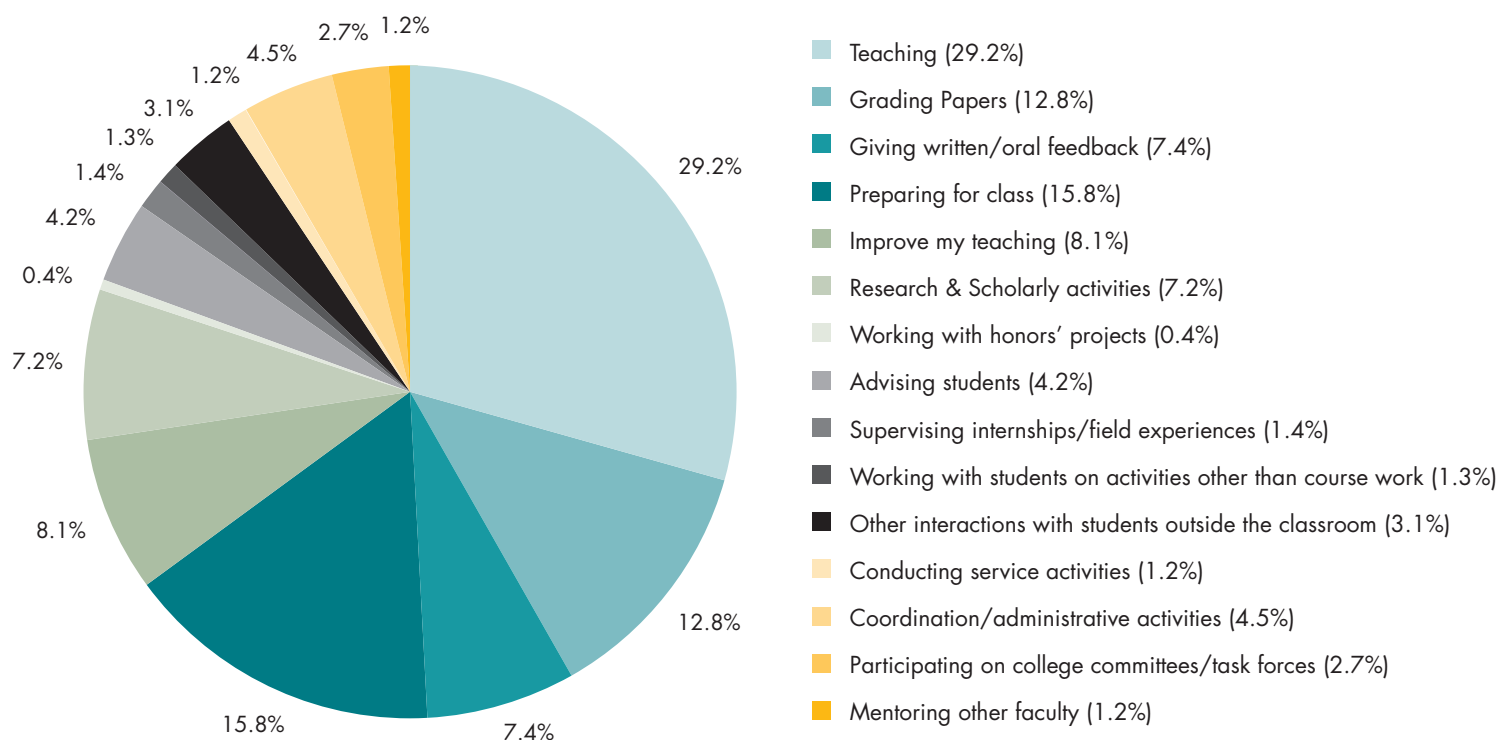
With automation in the 21st century, all too often society wants to shorten the educational process; yet learning is not amenable to cookie-cutter algorithms. One-size teaching approaches do not fit all. Learning can become more efficient and effective by taking advantage of how technology can fill the gaps, regardless of time and place. Technology provides us with the ability to deliver a multitude of materials in a personal environment anywhere, anytime. The learner takes a journey, his/her journey that becomes individualized based on his/her performance without making his/her individual progression public information. Educators say this works, for a new generation of students who tend to prefer the Web-based course or hybrid, a mix of online and in-class learning.

Though there are still opponents of online instruction who believe that traditional, face-to-face teaching is always better, a 2009 report conducted by SRI International for the Department of Education revealed that students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. The comparative studies, done mostly in colleges and adult continuing-education programs from 1996 to 2008, found that, on average, students doing some or all of the course online would rank in the 59th percentile in tested performance, compared with the average classroom student scoring in the 50th percentile.

When you think of how integral technology is to our lives, it makes sense that students are lining up for online courses, says Tim Cook in a May 2009 issue of *The Chronicle*. Making technology an integral part of the learning process seems to be a pivotal factor in engaging the Millennial Generation, an instant-information Internet generation who never knew life without computers. Born anywhere from 1977 to 1982, the Millennial Generation is a force that will shape the social and economic dynamics of the next decade, according to William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Millennials Rising*.

The SRI International study suggests that blended learning and online education could be set to expand sharply over the next few years, and community colleges have begun to invest in CMS technology in hopes of better engaging their student population in learning. However, community colleges should “look before they leap” when CMS shopping and first carefully consider some of the issues faced by early adopters of CMS technology. At the top of the list is the technology’s ability to go beyond just information storage and retrieval to enrich the educational experience for students of all levels and strengths. But close behind are important factors such as flexibility and continuous innovation, service and support that meets your college’s needs, and affordable pricing that works in today’s budget realities.

Percentage of Time Spent on Tasks: All Faculty



Source: Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE),
Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, 2009, The University of Texas at Austin

Technology as a Solution

Technology was originally brought into higher education institutions to provide access—to reach the distant learner—and it succeeded in boosting enrollments of working students and adult learners. However, years later, the technology proved to have limitations when it came to quality—engaging students with interactive course material, says Florence Kizza in a 2007 issue of *The Greentree Gazette*. The classroom has been focused on lecture, yet students tend to learn better through experiential learning rather than being told.

It's obvious today; technology must offer more than just access—it must become part of the fabric of learning. And, the past 10 to 15 years have witnessed the emergence of course management systems (CMS) that set out to fulfill the needs of learners who see technology as integral to their lives. CMS technology evolved from homegrown tools (used only by computer-literate faculty) to fully online educational systems that integrate whiteboards, synchronized chat, individualized instruction, online testing, and display of PowerPoints with voice accompaniment.

“Millennials develop hypertext minds, they leap around,” said Marc Prensky in a 2001 article titled “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II: Do They Really *Think* Differently? Classroom teaching has historically been linear, yet most students learn better through discovery, indifferent to time and place. In this knowledge-driven era, the online classroom must give students the ability to multitask, access support services online, create individualized learning tracks and chat in real time with professors. Rather than a “sage on the stage,” the educator is becoming more of a guide who poses questions to each student and guides them through their learning process.

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Yet, opponents to online instruction still believe that traditional, face-to-face teaching is always better. How can we bridge the gap between those who welcome online instruction and those who resist it? When it comes to adoption of CMS technology, there are several issues that community colleges can address before making the leap.

One problem community colleges have faced with CMS adoption is that there has been a tendency for faculty to adopt technology before they plan how to leverage it and blend it with teaching and learning. For a field whose methods are steeped in tradition, this is understandable because the transition to educational technology has occurred incredibly quickly. Before adopting a CMS solution, educators and administrators need to come to consensus on the strategic role technology can play in academic excellence. Then a roll-out plan should be implemented for faculty, including CMS instructional-design help and online teaching methodology.

Others have been frustrated by the extensive training requirements they must fulfill before using the technology in class, or the lack of prompt IT service and support when something goes wrong. Some of these common adoption challenges can be addressed with a dedicated support team that has live experts to troubleshoot issues and provide on-demand training via phone. A software as a service (SaaS) model enables the benefits of commercially licensed use without the associated IT complexity and potential high initial cost. SaaS allows educators to focus on doing what they do best; educating students and doing research, rather than running complex IT configurations and software systems.

Technology as a Solution (Cont.)

Another issue community colleges are faced with is a huge demand for technology but a dearth of resources available to purchase CMS. Users of older, increasingly expensive course management systems are discovering that costs can sometimes rise faster than usability rates among their faculties. For colleges trying to do more with less resources, a progressive adoption and pricing plan can help to ease technology adoption. By basing pricing on actual deployment and use rather than on campus size, colleges have the chance to incorporate online learning without a major upfront investment. Educators can develop online learning at their own pace *and* at an affordable cost to improve student engagement and retention.

To help educators understand how to leverage technology to engage students, colleges should look for CMS vendors that understand the complex needs of higher education institutions in today's global economy, those that are focused on learning first, organizational growth second. To be truly effective, CMS must be designed with pedagogy in mind. Then it can meet the needs of community colleges with features and functionality based on a solid understanding of how students, faculty and administrators operate. Experts expressed concern early in 2009 when the nation's largest CMS provider bought its closest competitor. The question remains, is there enough competition in the industry to satisfy students' and educators' needs for an innovative, reliable and affordable CMS product?

According to the 2003 Educause report "Course Management Systems in the History and Future of Higher Education" there is evidence that as course management systems become more integrated with learning, they can enhance student performance, reduce dropout/withdrawal rates and provide more equal opportunity for students of all learning styles. We will no longer have to trade quality for access. For example, retaining disadvantaged or minority students often is seen as an insurmountable challenge, but that is not the case when technology is combined with pedagogy. A next-generation 'Learning' course management system will target individual performance within diverse demographics in ways that cannot be duplicated in a classroom. Most of all, the right kind of technology can connect all students with the institution and help them develop a sense of achievement and belonging within the student body. These connections, according to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, are the key to improving retention.

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Conclusion

As the U.S. confronts the challenges of globalization, the retention rates of community colleges will play a key role.

We have been in the top ranking in college completion, and we will do what it takes to rise to the challenge again. Now more than ever, student retention and engagement at community colleges must be given top priority if the U.S. hopes to respond effectively to significant trends reshaping national and international life including: the economic vulnerability of the U.S., challenges to the stability of the middle class, shifting demographics and the imperative to rebuild the vigor of our nation's schools and communities.

Despite community colleges' past record of success and productivity in reaching disadvantaged populations, they face challenges that are undermining their ability to retain students and transfer students to four-year institutions. Among those challenges, including rising costs and a mismatch between demands and resources, there is an urgent need to engage students in learning. Engaging students with technology is imperative if retention is to be improved in American community colleges, and a college's choice of CMS provider/technology partner could turn the tide, in their rates of completion and the success of future generations.

About the Author

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Gisele Larose is President of WebStudy, Inc., a leader in next-generation 'Learning' Course Management Systems (CMS) created by educators for educators. A self-described philapreneur—a cross between a philanthropist and an entrepreneur—Larose commits her talent and resources to fulfill the dual purpose of balancing WebStudy's customer loyalty with growing a fiscally sound organization. Larose's background in corporate education and training at NovaCare, Inc., along with her success in building growing businesses at TheraKinetics, has helped fuel WebStudy's expansion nationwide.

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