

# The Future of Community Colleges:

How to Boost Enrollment  
and Improve Student Outcomes  
With Online Learning

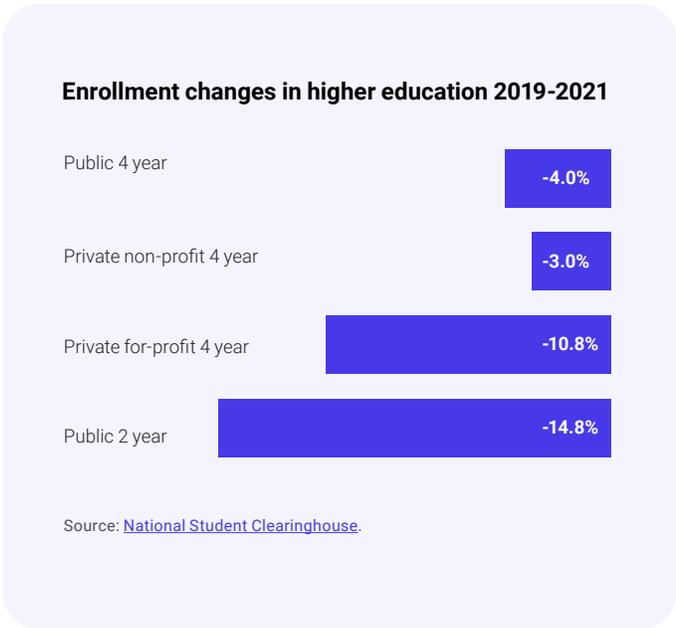




In times of recession, college enrollment typically goes up—a trend that is particularly true for community colleges. When work is scarce, individuals facing a tough job market turn to education, equipping themselves for the changing economy with new skills, degrees, and certifications. In the pandemic era, however, this hasn't been the case.

Since the fall of 2020, [college enrollment has significantly declined](#), and community colleges have been hit especially hard. Nationwide, community colleges experienced a [14.8% drop in enrollment since fall 2019](#)—representing more than half a million students. Even now, with the threat of Covid-19 fading, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is [predicting further decline](#).

Because enrollment and attendance are drivers of community colleges' state and local funding, many institutions have found themselves in a precarious position. To attract more students and ensure funding, community colleges should consider expanding their virtual learning programs. Distance learning caters not only to pandemic-driven sensibilities, but also to their student population's need for flexibility.



**In this guide, we'll show how expanding and improving online learning programs can help community colleges grow their addressable market, encourage enrollment and retention, improve student outcomes, and more. But before we discuss these and other benefits of a well-designed virtual classroom, we'll unpack some of the challenges facing community colleges in the post-pandemic era.**

## I. Recruitment and Retention at Community Colleges

Across the higher ed landscape, there's increasing urgency around enrollment. While numbers have been in steady decline for nearly a decade, 2020's sudden dip nearly doubled 2019's drop and marked the [largest two-year decline in 50 years](#). And among all higher ed institutions, community colleges have suffered the biggest losses. While this decline is no doubt a shocking wakeup call for community colleges, it also presents an opportunity for change and growth. In this chapter, we'll explore why.

### The unique needs of community college learners

Community colleges are mission-driven to address community needs, ensure access to education, and serve unique, often-non-traditional student populations. For example, students may carry full-time (or multiple part-time) jobs, be parents, or have limited means of transportation. And [nearly 3 in 10 community college students](#) are the first in their families to seek post-secondary education. New to the world of higher education, they often need more individual support—and more intuitive learning systems—than existing programs have provided.

When the pandemic arrived, populations served by community colleges were among the hardest hit. Economic hardships and the complications of quarantine forced [many students to delay—or cancel—their education plans](#).

This situation is a lose-lose for both colleges and would-be students. Historically, only [13% of students](#) who delay or drop out end up completing their degree, making it hard for community colleges to woo these students back once they're gone. Meanwhile, postponing education carries real financial consequences for students, with an earnings gap of at [least \\$41,000 between those who delay and those who enroll on-time](#) in the first 13 years after high school. The combination of pandemic-driven education delays and the difficulty of regaining students who delay means that community colleges need to work harder to reach prospective students with guidance, financial help, and flexible learning options.



**2020's sudden dip [in enrollment] nearly doubled 2019's drop and marked the largest two-year decline in 50 years**



### Poor implementation of online learning

Many community college students face logistical challenges making it difficult to attend classes on campus, especially during workday hours. This makes them, in some ways, ideal candidates for distance learning—a fact that led many community colleges to develop distance learning programs long before they became part of the new normal. In fact, [by 2007, 97% of community colleges](#) were already providing online courses to help meet the distance-learning needs of their students.

#### Community College Students at a Glance

[Average age: 28](#)

[Full-time students with jobs: 62%](#)

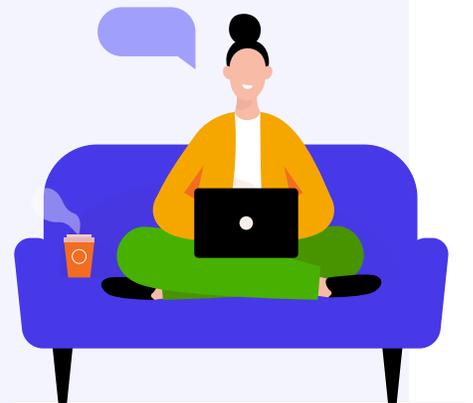
[Part-time students with jobs: 72%](#)

[Transferred to 4-year institutions: 31%](#)

[Number enrolled: \*\*More than 7.5 million\*\*](#)

[Percentage of all undergrads: 33%](#)

[Percentage whose families make less than \\$50k: 40%](#)



Unfortunately, despite community colleges being early adopters, many of these programs were not robust and tended towards high attrition rates. By some estimates, online courses have retention rates that are [10-20% lower](#) than traditional classes. In a community college setting, this may be exacerbated by the need for students with limited computer or internet access to travel to computer labs to complete assignments or take tests. Because community college campuses, especially in rural areas, are often geographically dispersed, this undermines the underlying intent of virtual learning—and significantly hurts student retention.



## Increased expectations for virtual classrooms

When Covid-19 disrupted face-to-face education, public school systems and colleges alike were forced to quickly throw together virtual learning programs for huge populations of learners. Technology became the glue that held teachers and students together.

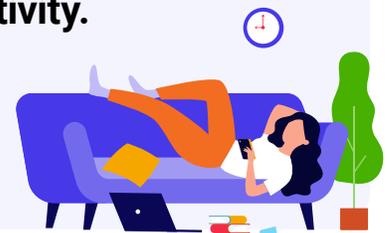
But students, many of whom had not been exposed previously to online learning, were not impressed with their institutions' technology. They expected consumer-grade experiences that mirrored the brands they interact with daily, like Netflix, FaceTime, and TikTok. Many virtual classrooms, learning management systems, and conferencing technology came up short.

Among students and educators alike, the [biggest complaints](#) about digital learning revolved around lack of engagement and interactivity. Community colleges determined to improve retention will take the pandemic's lessons to heart, adopting technology designed to deliver the interactive educational experience that learners expect and need.

While not all pandemic efforts were fully successful, however, many were. At [St. Joseph's College](#) in New York, for example, when the pandemic arrived, the school's e-learning team hosted more than 20 virtual "tech chats" in a single week, moving quickly to get their faculty up-to-speed with using technology. The college, which serves many non-traditional learners, knew they had to offer a more interactive experience to retain students, so in 2020 they invested in a virtual classroom platform that was designed to boost engagement and offer both instructors and students more freedom and flexibility.

For higher ed leaders, a key takeaway from Covid-19 was that it is possible to implement such systems at scale. More importantly, the pandemic gave institutions and their technology providers a roadmap for how to improve virtual learning. In the following sections, we'll discuss the ways technology can meet, and even exceed, these expectations and create greater engagement in virtual learning environments.

AMONG STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS ALIKE, **the biggest complaints about digital learning revolved around lack of engagement and interactivity.**



## II. Filling the Gaps With Quality Online Learning

As we've seen, to retain and recruit students in an atmosphere of falling enrollments, it's crucial that programs address community colleges' unique needs—both their student populations' educational and access needs, as well as their own budgetary constraints. A well-designed online learning program can make this possible by offering more flexibility for learners, improving virtual engagement, and giving institutions more data for state and local auditing requirements.

### Expanding the reach for prospective students

Smart use of remote learning technology can help community colleges expand their geographic and demographic footprint, helping them attract more students. This reach can take several forms:



**Flexibility and scalability.** For prospective students who are holding down jobs or live far from campus, the flexibility of remote learning can mean the difference between pursuing their education or not. For community colleges, online learning makes it possible to offer more specialized programming; for example, a unique class that struggles to find enough in-person students might easily draw enough remote learners from a wider geographic area.



**Recruitment from high schools.** High school students interested in dual-enrollment opportunities, where they attend high school and community college simultaneously, often lack the time or transportation to facilitate in-person attendance. For these students, virtual options present a significant opportunity. And a positive experience during high school can encourage them to continue their education at the same college—virtually or in-person—following graduation.



**Seamless testing requirements.** Online students have often been required to travel to campus or satellite offices to take in-person exams. Good technology makes it possible to virtually proctor these sessions, expanding the reach of the community college beyond the practical limits of travel, and reducing barriers to student success.



**Competition with other institutions.** Finally, higher quality virtual learning also puts community colleges in a better position to compete with other educational options, including four-year institutions and online-only learning platforms.

### Meeting auditing requirements

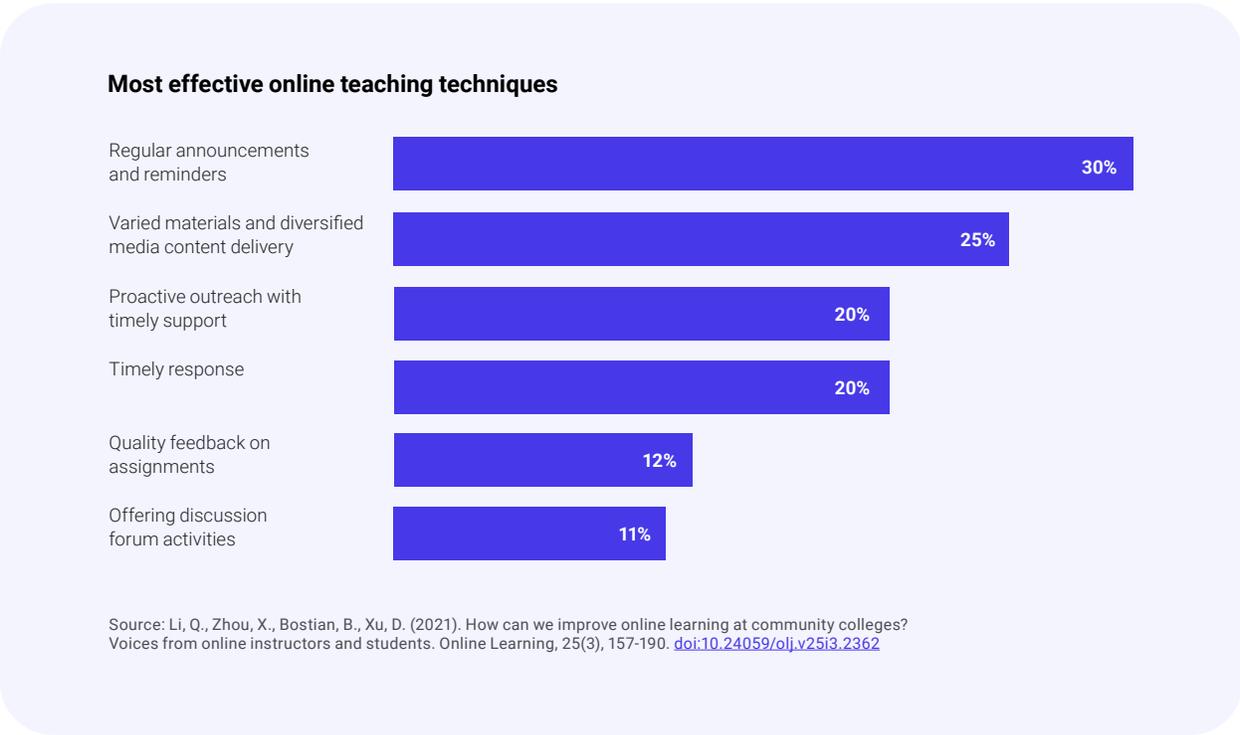
Community colleges' reliance on state and local funding makes them subject to frequent audits. Historically, these audits have focused on initial enrollment as a way of measuring institutions' success. Recently, though, auditors are putting more weight on student participation and retention—making it necessary to not only improve retention, but also to collect data that reflects student engagement.

An LMS or virtual classroom that collects student data can make the audit reporting requirements painless. The right technology tracks attendance and participation, providing detailed data reports to ensure community colleges are meeting their attendance and engagement objectives. Even better, institutions can use the data from their platform to refine student experiences, improve engagement and retention, and secure their funding in the future.



### III. Best Practices for Creating Engagement in Online Learning

Investing in better technology is the first step to improving remote learning experiences and boosting retention, participation, attendance, and learning outcomes. But technology is only as good as the practices you put into place with it. Combine your virtual classroom with [these five best practices](#) to help improve engagement and retain students.



## 1 Use synchronous time to collaborate

Done right, remote learning helps instructors maximize synchronous time. Recorded lectures can be accessed on demand, for example, freeing virtual “together” time to be more interactive and collaborative. During online class time, give students opportunities to participate and collaborate in breakout rooms and group chats. A robust virtual classroom will let you monitor all the breakouts, pop in and out of the rooms, answer questions—even send specific content to each room—and help keep everyone engaged. Your technology should also let you track speaking time—at the class or individual student level—so you can get a sense of what content was engaging your learners.

## 2 Be present—even when you’re not

As we’ve discussed, community college learners frequently need extra support. Reach out early and often to students—especially if there’s a significant amount of time between synchronous classes. Stay active on chats and forums. Set up virtual office hours and remind students that you’re there to help. Your technology should help you manage communication with students, track assignments, and keep you connected to your learners.

## 3 Identify and elevate struggling students

If someone’s missing synchronous sessions, failing to participate in class, or not completing assignments, your technology should be able to alert you. Today’s faltering engagement becomes tomorrow’s attrition. If someone’s slipping, reach out—to either the student or their advisor. Sometimes all it takes is a nudge of support or a one-on-one conversation to get a struggling student back on track. And if there are bigger problems, like financial difficulties, it’s often possible to connect the student with resources or services.

## 4 Define expectations

Make sure students understand that succeeding in your course takes more than just logging in. Be clear and specific with requirements—how you and they will measure their success, what their goals and outcomes should be. If participation is graded, for example, students should be clear on what kind of online participation is required—and how often. Give them a finish line, then help them cross it.

## 5 Create ownership

No one is born knowing how to take initiative, and many community college students are the first in their families to attend college. Have students participate in setting some of their goals for the class or their larger degree program. Also, encourage them to share their goals with their classmates. This will create an extra layer of ownership and accountability and can help build connections between students.

## Learning Continuity—for the Long Haul

Community colleges serve a unique and diverse population, one that needs them more than ever during periods of economic upheaval. Flagging enrollment numbers speak to a new set of challenges—not a reduced demand. To stay relevant and solvent in this landscape, community colleges must find new ways to reach underserved populations, transforming to meet enrollment challenges and connect with learners in new ways.

By investing in the right kinds of technology and embracing new ways to engage learners across the screen, community colleges can attract students accustomed to virtual environments and eager to learn in them—and will be future-proofed for the turbulence of the next decade.



To learn how Class can help your community college enhance its virtual learning program and create new enrollment opportunities, go to [class.com](https://class.com) or call 202-964-7111

