

APPENDIX

# TWELVE FACTS ABOUT TCNJ THAT MIGHT SURPRISE YOU

<p><b>1. TCNJ was New Jersey's first public college.</b></p>	<p>Founded in 1855 as the New Jersey State Normal School, TCNJ is the Garden State's first public college. (While Rutgers was founded in 1766, it didn't become a state institution until the mid-1900s.) Its original campus was on Clinton Avenue, but the need for space prompted a move to neighboring Ewing in the early 1930s.</p>
<p><b>2. TCNJ maintains strong ties to its original home, Trenton.</b></p>	<p>Despite its suburban location, the college has remained committed to the capital city's success and to its residents' well-being. For example, TCNJ's School of Education has more than a dozen partnership programs with Trenton public schools that focus on areas including urban education, dual enrollment, and leadership.</p>
<p><b>3. TCNJ serves Garden State residents.</b></p>	<p>TCNJ is truly The College of New Jersey, boasting a 94% in-state enrollment rate, with all 21 counties represented in each entering class.</p>
<p><b>4. TCNJ graduates maintain their Jersey ties.</b></p>	<p>TCNJ graduates typically remain in the state after graduation, contributing to the Garden State economy. For example, of the college's Class of 2017, 86% are still living in New Jersey today.</p>
<p><b>5. TCNJ has the 9th highest four-year graduation rate among U.S. public colleges and universities.</b></p>	<p>According to data published by the U.S. Department of Education, more TCNJ students graduate on time than do students at all but eight other public universities. The college also has the highest four-year graduation rate among New Jersey's public institutions.</p>
<p><b>6. TCNJ's EOF students succeed at roughly the same rate as do other students.</b></p>	<p>Underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students who come to TCNJ receive an unparalleled level of support that allows them to succeed at rates similar to those of our overall cohort. At 74%, the four-year graduation rate for TCNJ's Educational Opportunity Fund Class of 2021 is almost on par with that of the full graduating class.</p>
<p><b>7. TCNJ students pay less, on average, for their education because they graduate on time.</b></p>	<p>Sticker price does not accurately reflect the true cost of a college degree; it takes into consideration neither the amount of institutional aid provided nor the length of time taken to earn the degree. TCNJ invests over \$20 million in financial aid annually to help ensure access. In addition, the college's success in graduating students on time translates into fewer students paying additional semesters of tuition.</p>

tcnj.edu  
 2000 Pennington Road  
 Ewing, NJ 08628



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<p>8. TCNJ has made significant strides in diversifying its student body, which will soon mirror the state's population.</p>	<p>TCNJ continues to attract diverse students from around the state and the nation, with the number of students identifying as African American, Latino, or Asian American growing steadily over the years to reach more than 40% in 2022. Furthermore, the college has committed through its new strategic plan to ensure its campus community mirrors the diversity of the state's population by 2027.</p>
<p>9. TCNJ's science majors excel.</p>	<p>A. TCNJ's chemistry department is a top producer of ACS-accredited bachelor's recipients — and of future chemistry PhDs. TCNJ is one of the top producers of American Chemical Society-accredited bachelor's degrees in chemistry, ranking in the top 5% of all ACS degree-granting institutions in the country. Historically, many of these graduates have gone on to earn PhDs in chemistry. One snapshot, using data from the National Science Foundation and the American Chemical Society, indicated that TCNJ's chemistry department has ranked among the top U.S. institutions for PhD productivity.</p> <p>B. TCNJ is one of the country's top producers of physics teachers. PhysTEC, a flagship education program of the American Physical Society and the American Association of Physics Teachers, has named TCNJ to its "5+ Club" in three of the past four years. This honor recognizes the college for graduating at least five trained physics teachers in each of those years. (Most colleges and universities graduate fewer than two per year, and the most common number of graduates is zero.) TCNJ also ranks as New Jersey's top producer: It graduated six such teachers in 2021, compared to five at Rutgers–New Brunswick.</p>
<p>10. TCNJ nursing students have a 100% job-placement rate six months after graduation.</p>	<p>The college's Department of Nursing has earned the National League for Nursing's Center of Excellence designation for enhancing student learning and professional development. TCNJ nursing students have achieved an impressive 93% first-time NCLEX pass rate over the past eight years, and 100% of undergraduate nursing students who seek full-time employment are placed within six months of graduation.</p>
<p>11. TCNJ accounting majors are in demand.</p>	<p>The accounting program at TCNJ has a longstanding reputation for preparing exceptional accountants, which is why 98% of accounting majors in the college's Class of 2022 had at least one job offer prior to graduation. Two-thirds were hired by the Big Four — Deloitte, EY, KPMG, and PwC.</p>
<p>12. TCNJ students are civically engaged.</p>	<p>TCNJ has one of the highest student-voter participation rates in the nation and was recently recognized by <i>Washington Monthly</i> as one of the best colleges for student voting based on an impressive 83% of registered students who voted in the 2020 general election (compared to an average rate of 66% at colleges and universities nationwide). TCNJ's engagement goes well beyond voting: Students are challenged to participate in community engagement experiences that provide opportunities to think critically and inclusively about society and to develop a hands-on understanding of the effects of class, power, and privilege. Students can also take advantage of service-learning seminar classes or issue-based Community-Engaged Learning Days throughout the year.</p>

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Testimony  
before the  
Senate Higher Education Committee  
on the  
Impact of the Pandemic on Academic Outcomes, Instructional Delivery & the Student Experience

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts related to the impact of the pandemic on academic outcomes, the delivery of instruction and the student experience.

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) has long been hailed as one of New Jersey's premiere undergraduate focused institutions, providing exceptional instruction to students who consistently graduate within four (4) years of entry (our current graduation rate is 76% of all students in four years, with 74% of underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students also successfully graduating; our six (6) year graduation rate is 86%). We include a few surprising facts about TCNJ you may not be aware of, in order to better acclimate you to the school.

As a higher education institution, TCNJ, like other higher education institutions have realized significant changes in academic outcomes, the delivery of remote instruction, and the student experience in light of the pandemic. In response to the challenges raised by the pandemic, the college, and I am sure all New Jersey colleges, implemented various support measures, including increased access to technology, mental health services, financial aid, and academic advising. However, the long-term effects of the pandemic on academic outcomes and the student experience may continue to unfold as colleges navigate ongoing challenges and adapt to the post-pandemic landscape. Here are some specific impacts by area:

1. **Academic Outcomes:**

- **Disruption to learning:** Colleges in New Jersey transitioned to remote learning formats, disrupting traditional in-person instruction. This shift affected the academic performance of some students, especially those who struggled with remote learning environments. Others frankly thrived. For those struggling, it was incumbent upon us to provide support.
  - TCNJ's Tutoring Center has realized a sharp increase in need for support for students navigating challenging academic content and forming important learning skills. In FY21, there were 5,439 appointments versus 8,862 appointments in FY23. **We expect this need to continue and we have an obligation to ensure we are meeting students' needs.**
- **Learning challenges:** Remote instruction also presented challenges such as limited access to resources, difficulties in maintaining focus and motivation, and the absence of face-to-face interactions with professors and peers. These challenges impact academic outcomes. We need to ensure we are seeing the whole student, ensuring the personal touch and getting a true gauge of their struggles and challenges so that they are workforce or graduate school ready when they leave us.

- TCNJ's Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) is responsible for reviewing and implementing accommodation requests for students. As noted in the College's *We Are TCNJ: A Strategy for Inclusive Excellence 2022-2027*, while the department has seen a growing number of students year-over-year, the COVID-19 pandemic was the backdrop for the most significant increase in accommodation requests to date.
- **Retention & Graduation rates:** The pandemic also influenced retention and graduation rates due to disruptions in academic schedules and financial hardships affecting students' ability to continue their education uninterrupted. While still among the highest in the state and country, our one year retention rate went from 94% in 2019 to 90% in 2022. Many students delayed entering college or prolonged their time in school. Thanks to the supports TCNJ put in place we were able to stem much of this tide but our work is far from done. Know that we continue to support students so that we can maintain their ability to graduate on time. This is critical to ensuring our students' success.

## 2. Delivery of Remote Instruction:

- **Technological adaptation:** Colleges had to rapidly adapt their instructional methods to remote formats, which involved deploying online learning platforms, training faculty in online teaching strategies, and ensuring students had access to necessary technology and internet connectivity.
  - TCNJ rose to the challenge, providing critical classroom technology upgrades to support remote instructions plus faculty training to ensure instruction was delivered well in a new environment. Implementing these changes cost over \$800,000 just in the first year of implementation, with continued costs associated with subscriptions for the foreseeable future.
- **Quality of instruction:** TCNJ also strived to ensure we maintained the same level of instructional quality in remote formats compared to in-person classes. That required tremendous resource allocation which will likely continue as individuals seek remote learning opportunities, having grown more accustomed to the format. TCNJ continues to explore opportunities with a keen eye toward ensuring consistency in instruction.
- **Student engagement:** Remote instruction posed challenges for student engagement, as some students struggled with feelings of isolation, difficulty in forming connections with peers and professors, and distractions in their home environments.
  - At TCNJ, Counseling and Prevention Services (CAPS) offers free counseling and related services to both full and part-time TCNJ students who are currently enrolled in classes. In FY 23, CAPS had over 900 unique clients with students being seen through urgent appointments, support consultations, case management sessions, outreach programs, as well as referrals to the community counseling collaborative. The number one presenting issue amongst students prior to the pandemic was anxiety. Post-pandemic anxiety continues to challenge our students. We expect this trend to continue which poses current and ongoing challenges for students to engage in the classroom and take advantage of co-curricular opportunities.

## 3. The Student Experience:

- **Social and extracurricular activities:** The pandemic also disrupted campus life, resulting in the cancellation or modification of social and extracurricular activities. This impacted students' overall

college experience and sense of community. In response TCNJ worked to provide opportunities to bring students together and continue to work with students to make this a reality.

- In an area that focuses so much on bringing people together, the pandemic necessitated physical distancing. TCNJ, Student Affairs created opportunities to build communities in smaller formats and virtual settings. And, coming out of the physical distancing restrictions, TCNJ also created orientation and social development activities for those students that were under so many restrictions during their last year of high school and first year of college.
- **Mental health concerns:** The stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, along with the isolation of remote learning, may have exacerbated mental health issues among college students. Institutions had to respond by offering virtual counseling services and other support resources.
  - At TCNJ, Counseling and Prevention Services (CAPS) significant attention was turned to helping students re-establish connections, wellness, and belonging in addition to helping students cope with new challenges facing them inside and outside the classroom including an increased focus on inclusion efforts that respect and create conditions for students to thrive with respect to their multiple identities. Your help with funding for mental health and food insecurity is making a world of difference. Our students have benefitted from the state supported mental health partner by taking 1200 appointments this academic year and providing irreplaceable support in managing the off-hour crisis cases.
- **Financial strain:** Many students and their families experienced financial difficulties due to job losses or reduced income during the pandemic. This financial strain could have impacted students' ability to afford tuition, housing, and other college-related expenses.
  - The TCNJ Cares program out of the Dean of Students office supports students in navigating challenging experiences by connecting them to critical resources from health services to housing and food security. The Cares team saw an increase of student cases in Academic Year 23 (33% increase from AY 21). There were over 1400 referrals in AY 23, with the majority of referrals being shared for mental health services
  - In addition, TCNJ is a predominantly residential program with a majority of students choosing to live in student housing, particularly in their first two years. This allows students to better engage and interact with fellow students from varied backgrounds, while fully integrating into the college community Post pandemic more students are considering alternative housing options, limiting their immersion into the college experience. As a campus, we continue to look for ways to ensure our students, regardless of where they live, realize as full as college experience as possible.

As previously stated, your help with funding for mental health and food insecurity is not going unnoticed – thank you, your support made a big difference in the life and well-being of our students.

Our work is far from done, however, and we need your help as we continue to navigate this new world. Fundamentally we need to ensure our students continue to receive the exceptional education they deserve and that will likely require additional academic, instructional and experiential supports. We welcome an open and engaged dialogue in the coming days, weeks and years as we navigate this 'new normal.'

Thank you for the opportunity to speak and we welcome any questions you may have.

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Division of Student Affairs  
Office of the Vice President  
P: 609.652.4225 • F: 609.652.4958



101 Vera King Farris Drive  
Galloway NJ 08205  
stockton.edu

**Stockton University**  
**March 4, 2024**  
**Senate Higher Education Committee**  
**Testimony on the effects of COVID 19 on student success**  
**Presented by Dr. Christopher Catching, Vice President for Student Affairs**

Good morning, Chairman Cryan and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, I am Dr. Christopher Catching, Vice President for Student Affairs at Stockton University. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak with you today about the post COVID-19 challenges and our strategies to support student success at Stockton.

Stockton University, located in the southeastern region of the state, proudly provides educational and social mobility opportunities for New Jersey residents. Ninety-six (96%) percent of our approximately 8,800 students are New Jersey residents. Nearly 50% of our student body are first-generation students, 40% are classified as low-income and 40% are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). Like learners throughout our state, Stockton students have experienced significant challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic preparedness and mental health are among the most serious barriers for Stockton students as they pursue a degree.

Students' academic preparedness, exacerbated by the learning loss that occurred during the pandemic, is among the greatest barriers to their success. The percentage of first-time students who need significant academic support upon admission to the university has grown from **53.6%** in Fall 2019, the last cohort prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, to **60.9%** in the Fall 2022 first-time cohort.

The university's third semester retention rate was **85%** for the Fall 2019 first-time cohort. However, the third semester retention rate declined to **77%** for the Fall 2022 first-time cohort. Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino and Pell-eligible students have experienced a disproportionate decline in third semester retention rates when comparing the Fall 2019 and Fall 2022 first-time cohorts. Students in those communities collectively persisted to a third semester at a rate of **83%** compared to **85%** for the overall Fall 2019 first-time cohort. However, the equity gap between the third-semester retention rate for the overall cohort and Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino and Pell-eligible students grew from **2%** in the Fall 2019 cohort to **7.5%** in the Fall 2022 cohort. Put simply, **69.5%** of Black/African

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American, Hispanic/Latino and Pell-eligible students in the Fall 2022 first-time cohort, persisted to a third semester compared to **77%** in the overall Fall 2022 cohort.

Students' mental health directly impacts their ability to persist to a degree. Students at Stockton participated in the national Healthy Minds Study Annual Student Survey, a national assessment of student mental health during the Spring 2021 semester. A total of 1,946 students, representing 21% of the student enrollment, responded to the survey. **Forty-one percent (41%)** of student respondents indicated they had been diagnosed with depression, while approximately **37%** of respondents indicated they had been diagnosed with anxiety. Twenty-four percent (**24%**) of respondents indicated they had used mental health/therapy, while **19%** indicated they had been prescribed psychiatric medication in the previous year.

Respondents to the **2023 Student Success Survey**, which assessed the challenges and barriers faced by students who persisted to a third semester, indicated that "mental health" (**40%**) and "doubting their ability" (**37%**) were the greatest challenges that they faced in the classroom respectively. Only eleven (**11%**) of respondents to the 2023 Student Success Survey indicated that they were completely prepared for college.

Collectively, these data points illustrate the co-occurring academic and mental health challenges Stockton students have faced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and areas that the university has worked diligently to address.

Stockton University has strategically invested existing resources to close equity gaps in academic achievement to meet students' growing mental health needs. The university introduces first-year students to comprehensive academic support through New Student Orientation, Freshman Seminars and the First-Year Studies (FRST) Program. Students are intentionally connected to resources that support their identification of majors and experiential learning opportunities (e.g. internships, research study abroad, etc.) that assist their academic success and career readiness through programs supported by Academic Advising and Career Education and Development.

Additionally, Stockton strengthened its strategies to enhance the success of its first-generation, Pell-eligible and BIPOC student communities. The university, through its long-standing partnership with the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE), provides access and support to New Jersey residents who experience educational and economic disadvantage through its Educational Opportunity Fund Programs and support for first-generation, BIPOC students through several of the initiatives sponsored by Academic Achievement Programs, and its new Multicultural Center. Student participation in the aforementioned programs supports their academic and post-graduate success and promotes their social mobility.

Regarding mental health, Stockton University provides students with licensed mental health clinicians including clinical social workers, professional counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists and psychoeducational programming to support students' mental and

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emotional health, including alcohol and other drug education, technology based educational resources and scheduling systems. The university increased its investment of existing fiscal and staffing resources dedicated to students' mental and emotional wellness to support the increasing mental and emotional health needs of its' students through a strategic alignment and integration of Counseling and Psychological Services \*CAPS), Health Outreach, Promotion and Education (HOPE) and Student Health Services.

The university nearly doubled its investment in students' mental and emotional health resources from approximately \$102 per student in Fall 2018, to \$201 per student in Fall 2023, an aggregate annual additional cost of \$783,000 per year. Our students have self-reported that they are very satisfied with these counseling services and the vast majority would recommend the use of these resources to their peers. Notably, post-pandemic, the Stockton CARES program, established in September 2022, has assisted a total of 4,300 by connecting students with resources on- and off-campus to address various challenges including academics, food insecurity, mental health, and finances.

In terms of on-campus housing, COVID-19 had a significant impact on residential students. In Fall 2019, 3,393 students occupied on-campus housing, an occupancy rate of 97%, representing the most Stockton had ever housed. By March 2020, nearly all residential students departed campus except for 151 students who remained at Stockton due to housing insecurity. Since that time, Stockton has not attained pre-pandemic housing occupancy. In the Fall 2023 semester, Stockton housed 2,934 students at an occupancy rate of 86%, reflecting the post-pandemic challenges with enrollment, retention and the declining number of transfer students from county colleges where declining enrollment also persists.

Another recent obstacle faced by our students relates to the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Although the FAFSA launched on December 31, the application has been unavailable for some, and many students are encountering difficulties while logging in or attempting to complete the form. Moreover, the Federal Student Aid (FSA) advised two weeks ago that colleges will not receive applicants' federal aid information until mid-March or thereafter. This is a significant delay compared to prior years when the U.S. Department of Education started sending this data in late January. This delay impacts our ability to provide timely award offers to our admitted new students for Fall 2024, exacerbating the financial uncertainty our students face affording college and discouraging many potential students. To mitigate this impact, Stockton has increased outreach and communication to newly admitted students and offering support to students who need assistance. Stockton has also extended its enrollment deposit deadline beyond May 1.

Through strategic investment of resources, Stockton University has taken meaningful steps to address the emergent needs of our students. However, as reflected in declines in third semester retention rates (currently at 77% compared with 85% in 2019), as well as declines in four-year and six-year graduation rates (currently 51% / 72% compared with 60%/77% in

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2019), a more comprehensive approach with increased State support will most likely be needed.

Again, thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee members for this opportunity to share with you Stockton University's experiences surrounding student success post the COVID-19 pandemic. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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Testimony  
before the  
Senate Higher Education Committee  
Monday, March 4, 2024

Rory McElwee, PhD  
Vice President for Student Affairs and Professor of Psychology  
Rowan University

Four years after the onset of the pandemic, higher education institutions and the students they serve have changed in significant ways. The challenges that students, families, communities, and institutions faced during this time cannot be overstated; however, we can build upon lessons learned and how the pandemic era's adaptation of policies, services, and modes of delivery serve as models for additional positive transformation in the future. Since 2011, President Houshmand has led Rowan University with a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in pursuit of four strategic pillars: Access, Affordability, Quality, and Serving as an Economic Engine for the region. Post-pandemic, Rowan University continues to innovate and challenge the status quo in higher education in light of these continuing core values.

This document addresses five arenas of the higher education landscape and the college student experience showing notable changes due to the pandemic: Academic Preparedness; Mental Health, Resilience, and Social Connection; Affordability; Supporting Students in the "New Majority;" and Career Readiness and ROI. Overarching is a key theme: Higher education cannot function in a "business as usual" manner and expect to achieve better and more equitable outcomes for students. The pandemic exacerbated social, economic, and racial inequalities in many domains of life, college among them, further worsening institutional gaps in equity outcomes that have been long observed.

At Rowan we are moving to make the University more "student-ready," as championed by Dr. Tia Brown McNair and others in their book, "Becoming a Student-Ready College" (2022). This changes the question typically asked about student success from "Is the student ready for college?" to "Is the college ready for the student?" Our obligation and privilege is to ensure institutional change to meet students' needs, to make our institutions welcoming and supportive places where students can reach their potential, particularly for those who may need a stronger onramp to succeed in college. Our institutions must demonstrate equitable outcomes for students regardless of demographics, and we cannot do that if we continue to do business the same way that has produced these inequitable outcomes in the past. This

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includes too many students who start college and stop out prior to graduating, often with significant debt, frankly making them worse off than if they had never attended college at all. Furthermore, the chances of such a negative outcome are not equally distributed across the population - it is far too often students of color, particularly men of color, and those from low-income families in under-resourced communities, and those who are the first in the family to attend college.

*Most recent retention and graduation indicators, Rowan University, fall 2023*

	Overall	Black	Hispanic	White	Women	Men	Pell eligible	First-Gen
1st year retention	81.4%	74.6%	77.4%	83.6%	82.7%	80.2%	80.5%	80.5%
4 year graduation	52.6%	34.8%	39.2%	57.2%	56.8%	49.5%	41.5%	44.2%
6 year graduation	68.0%	46.3%	55.2%	72.7%	73.6%	64.0%	60.8%	64.0%

*From University dashboards 02.28.24. First-year retention from 2022 cohort; four-year graduation rate from 2019 cohort; six-year graduation rate from 2017 cohort.*

#### A. Academic Preparedness

Remote instruction and other upheavals led to learning loss (NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics; Fewer High School Seniors Ready for College as ACT Scores Continue to Decline). Recent statewide data show that elementary and secondary students' academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores has started to improve after the decline during the pandemic, but remains below 2019 levels (School Year 2022-23 Assessment Reports). Colleges have a responsibility and opportunity to understand and address any academic preparedness challenges in their students (WICHE INSIGHTS).

At Rowan, we have seen several manifestations of learning loss. The number of students enrolling in basic skills and developmental credit-bearing courses increased significantly since 2019, in fact, doubling or tripling 2019 numbers. This is in part due likely due to learning loss but also to a sixfold increase in the number of students applying test optional. This counterintuitive finding is due to such students having one less data point in their portfolio that could exempt them from placement testing or completing such courses. Rowan is examining alternate methods of course placement to best meet students' needs.

**It is essential to provide more supported on-ramps to college, including**

- **Early College programs** in which high school students are enrolled in college courses, with additional supplemental support such as mentoring or coaching for college readiness. Rowan has several such programs, such as partnerships with the Camden City School District and the LEAP Academy at our Camden campus.

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- **Summer bridge programs**, in which students participate in college courses and support services prior to their first fall semester, can help prepare more students for a successful first fall term. In NJ we see a long history of excellence in Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) programs; there is a need to expand summer bridge offerings to more students and in various modalities to meet their needs (such as remote instruction for a preparatory math course for entering STEM students not yet prepared for calculus, which is under discussion now at Rowan).
- **Enhanced orientation and welcome week programs:** Orientation to college is a process, not a one-time event. In summer 2024, Rowan is significantly expanding its welcome week programming to help ensure students receive just-in-time, actionable support to facilitate a positive transition to academics as well as to promote community engagement and well-being.
- **First-Year Seminars** which explicitly address the academic, personal, and navigational skills that students need to succeed in college. A task force at Rowan is re-examining our program to ensure we are meeting the needs of students today.

**Holistic Academic Support Services:** To become more student-ready, Rowan is expanding and promoting holistic academic support services, to engage more students during and beyond the first semester of college. This year we see a 40% increase in student use of tutoring and success coaching compared to just last year. Additionally, because adjusting to college can be even more challenging today than previously, Rowan recently revised its undergraduate academic standing policy to ensure that students receive intrusive, individualized support when they have shown signs of academic risk, such as a low GPA in their first term. Further, faculty provide early progress alerts when students are not attending or succeeding in courses, so that advisors and success coaches can intervene while their trajectory can be improved.

#### B. Mental Health, Resilience, and Social Connection:

The return to in-person learning found many students demonstrating challenges in mental health, often shown as a lack of resilience under challenging circumstances. Students reported seeking more social connectedness while simultaneously expressing anxiety and lack of confidence in navigating what had been typical college social situations pre-pandemic.

As has been the case nationally, Rowan has seen a notable increase in use of mental health services. As compared to pre-pandemic, our students last year had almost 40% higher use of Counseling & Psychological Services. This year the addition of the Uwill platform ([OSHE Press Release](#)) has been highly used, with almost 800 students having over 2000 appointments to date. In addition, Rowan has partnered with numerous community providers to be able to expand services, particularly for the individual counseling that many students seek.

In addition to formal mental health services, Rowan has numerous initiatives providing well-being support to all students, in addition to hundreds of club events, campus activities, and other opportunities for positive engagement and growth.

- **Rowan Thrive:** Rowan Thrive is Rowan's well-being framework, focused on six dimensions of well-being (financial, social, emotional, community, physical, and purpose). It underpins many campus initiatives in the academic and student life realms to promote engagement with services and mindfulness for life-long well-being.
- **Peer support programs:** Students often learn best from other students, and a wide variety of peer support programs can bring the power of social connection to enhancing student adjustment, sense of belonging, and engagement academically and socially in the community. Rowan has many peer support programs focused on a variety of domains in academic, social, and well-being realms.
- **Cares Team:** The Cares Team is a cross-functional team of professionals with expertise in mental health, student life, and student success who collaborate on complex individual student issues. This year over 1000 students have been referred to the Cares Team for triage and long-term follow-up to ensure that issues such as financial, family, health, stress, or adjustment concerns do not derail their well-being and success at Rowan.
- **Substance use:** In collaboration with the Wellness Center and the Rowan-Virtua School of Osteopathic Medicine, SOAR, a division of Academic Support Programs, provides substance use screenings, referrals, campus education and programming to support students who are seeking to learn more about alcohol and other drug use or to learn ways to live substance-free. The SOAR initiative offers one-on-one meetings with a SOAR Navigator, a community of like-minded individuals, success coaches with a focus on substance use concerns, as well as a caring, supportive environment. During the 2023-24 academic year, SOAR has hosted a substance-free tailgate, Wellness Wednesday, and multiple substance free holiday gatherings, attended by many hundreds of students. SOAR has also provided substance use education to over 600 first-year students and 150 Community Assistants.

Colleges and universities cannot assume that the increased demand for support for mental health, social connection, and building resilience will return to pre-pandemic levels. Instead, this is a perfect example of how the institution needs to change to meet students' needs. To achieve academically and develop professionally, our students must be well, and our institutions are likely to continue to play a larger role in that well-being. In response, Rowan is now developing our first University-wide Wellness Strategic Plan, which will aim to boost well-being for all members of the Rowan community.

### C. Affordability

Affordability is one of President Houshmand's four strategic pillars and is foundational for much University decision-making. Rowan launched the Affordability Task Force in 2016 to study students' needs and opportunities for institutional change, which resulted in The SHOP food pantry and resource center and other initiatives like our Textbook Alternative Program which has saved students an estimated \$6,000,000 in course materials costs in the past 6 years. Post-pandemic, high school students across the country are indicating that cost of college is a significant barrier and leads some to rethink what type of institution to attend or even whether to attend at all

<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/secured/documents/Covid-Influence-on-College-and-Career-Choices.pdf>).

- a. **Affordable Tuition:** The Garden State Guarantee and Rowan's complementary Rowan Opportunity Grant (for first and second year students) benefit many of Rowan's full-time students, ensuring affordable tuition and fees for students from lower-income families. We continue to examine affordability as it relates to housing and other costs of attendance. Unmet financial need is one of the greatest predictors of students stopping out of college, and when they also have an outstanding balance to address at the time of departure, the challenges to ever completing college are compounded, particularly when they are unable to obtain a transcript of completed credits.
- b. **Financial Aid Process Assistance:** At Rowan we closely monitor and intervene with students for timely completion of required financial aid processes such as completing the FAFSA by April 15 to qualify for the TAG program. Regarding affordability and every other facet of the student experience, one of the major challenges is effective communication, as the students can easily get overwhelmed by emails for complex processes such as federal aid verifications. We have established cross-functional teams with proactive communication strategies including texting and even residence hall check-ins to help more students keep their aid eligibility.
- c. **Micro-Grant Programs:** In recent years Rowan has implemented numerous programs to provide grants to students. Post-pandemic, our professionals continue to see social and economic inequities exacerbated in students and their families, resulting in additional need for these programs.
  - i. **Emergency funds:** Rowan has issued \$70,000 this academic year so far to students with unexpected emergency expenses, in addition to over 1300 emergency meal swipes on campus.
  - ii. **Completion grants** are micro-grants for students who are close to graduating but encounter a financial obstacle, whether that is an outstanding balance or the need for a summer course, for example. These total \$120,000 for this academic year.
  - iii. **The "Some College, No Degree" grant** from OSHE this semester ([OSHE Press Release](#)) is enabling us to issue financial grants to students who have re-enrolled at Rowan to assist with costs such as course materials, transportation, and basic needs. The student-supporting funds total \$133,000 this semester. This grant is key to assisting many students who are returning after a period of stop out during the pandemic years. OSHE's "Some College, No Degree" program with ReUp ([OSHE Press Release](#)) is enabling Rowan to bring more such students back, and the grant is helping to ensure that they stay enrolled to ultimately graduate.

#### D. Supporting "New Majority" Students

Sometimes known as nontraditional students, "new majority" students are those who come from backgrounds or have life circumstances that differ from the "traditional" student for whom higher education institutions were typically founded ([Who are new majority learners? - Education Design Lab](#)). Higher education institutions, systems, and cultures were built to serve a population of students which



is no longer the majority. Instead, college students today are more likely to be from minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds, have higher levels of financial need, have family responsibilities, be working extensive hours or full-time, are English Language Learners, or have disabilities.

At Rowan, we see numerous manifestations of these changes to our student body, as shown in these changes from fall 2019 to fall 2023:

- a. **Students with disabilities:** The number of students registered with Accessibility Services has almost doubled, even though overall enrollment has been stable during this time.
- b. **Racial and ethnic diversity:** Rowan has grown the number of undergraduates from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups by 16%
- c. **Flexible degree needs:** Enrollment in Rowan's Bachelor of General Studies Program increased from 33 students to 79 students. The BGS program is Rowan's most flexible degree program and often meets the needs of "new majority" students, including many who were previously "Some College, No Degree."

To better meet the needs of new majority students, Rowan has expanded two key elements:

- a. **Innovative community college partnerships:**
  - i. Since fall 2019, enrollment in Rowan's 3+1 programs have more than doubled to over 600 students, with 75% graduating in just one year.
  - ii. Fall 2024 marks the 10th anniversary of the Rowan Choice program, in which students are matriculated at Rowan College of South Jersey, but reside on Rowan's campus and can participate in almost all aspects of University life. This is one example of partnership with a community college that can help students with a supported on-ramp to a four year college degree while welcoming them into an engaging University community for those seeking that environment.
- d. **Online coursework and services:** Student demand for online course offerings has been steadily increasing for many years. Pre-pandemic, Rowan was already growing online offerings due to students "voting with their feet" to this modality, often because of the flexibility it enables them to stay enrolled in college, or to take an additional course in a semester, while balancing other responsibilities and work schedules. Post-pandemic, this trend has accelerated: in fall 2019, 11% of all undergraduate seats in courses were in online sections, and in fall 2023, this increased to 26%. Most of the students who take online courses are not in exclusively online programs; they need and appreciate the flexibility in their schedule that these courses afford. Online courses are important for access and affordability, in part by reducing transportation costs for students. A post-pandemic trend observed at Rowan is numerous students who routinely take a ride-share service (such as Uber) to get to class. Not surprisingly, this is exceedingly expensive and often results in students missing class due to inability to afford to get there. Although Rowan is not typically offering synchronous remote course options, we continue to examine this for the future in appropriate programs.

**Virtual services:** Post-pandemic, adeptness at virtual meeting technology has greatly boosted accessibility of student services. While this year we see a trend toward many students shifting

back to in-person service preferences, for many of the new majority students, a virtual option for appointments and events continues to be in need.

**Digital Divide:** Any discussion of online and virtual courses and services for students must acknowledge the digital divide, in which student access to essential technology such as Wi-Fi, computers, etc. varies by socioeconomic status (Understanding the Digital Equity Gap and Bridging the Digital Divide in Higher Ed). This impacts student success as many required course materials even in face-to-face courses require students to regularly use proprietary online platforms to complete assignments and exams. Students who do not have appropriate technology or cannot afford the platforms are unable to participate, potentially leading to high rates of failure.

#### E. Career Readiness and ROI:

The primary reason students identify for going to college is to prepare for a career in which they can earn a good living. Attending college is a very future-oriented activity, and is typically an expensive undertaking requiring sacrifice by the student and family. Higher education institutions can help to attract and retain more students by making excellent career preparation a visible outcome for their graduates. More importantly, increasing the social mobility for graduates is a foundational responsibility of public institutions. A recent national report, College Graduates, Underemployment, and the Way Forward, documented that many college graduates are underemployed. The first job out of college is particularly predictive of their career trajectory, and ultimately is a major determinant of whether obtaining the Bachelor's degree was "worth it" from a financial and career mobility perspective.

- a. **High-quality experiential education opportunities:** Internships, co-ops, research experience, and student work are all excellent opportunities for deep learning as well as for the development of professional competencies that can boost students' academic engagement and career readiness. Robust opportunities must be available throughout the students' college years, not just as they approach graduation, so that their learning can be cumulative and developmental.

To increase equitable access, it is important to feature opportunities available on campus, in addition to those with employers and organizations in the community. Project-based learning models can achieve excellent experiential outcomes for students within their existing courses, infusing such opportunities into their academic programs, without requiring transportation or significant additional time in busy schedules. Student work programs can use the campus jobs that many students already have to infuse professional development of skills and competencies, and importantly, help students learn to articulate the value that these experiences will bring to future employers. A challenge in higher education is equitable access for students to paid internships, which are more strongly associated with securing post-graduation jobs in the intended career field, and can enable a student who would otherwise have to work in order to fund their education and living expenses to participate in this important professional development opportunity.

- b. **Delivery Model for Career Services:** Career preparation is most accessible when it is brought to where the students are - in their courses, club activities, residence halls, and other campus spaces and events. Many students never use a career services office at their institution, and especially post-pandemic, methods to build it into their college experience are key (The Value of Career Services; Survey: What college students want from career services). At Rowan, we recently blended the career counseling and academic advising teams to build more knowledge in our advisors about career resources and readiness, for infusing a more blended approach throughout students' years. Making our institutions student-ready means meeting students where they are, literally and figuratively.
- c. **Strengthen workforce development pipelines:** Of benefit to students, institutions, employers, and the region are collaborations which create pathways between work and academic programs for industry-valued certifications and credentials. With the strengthened focus on ROI for post-pandemic students and families, partnerships for the creation of academic program complements to growing industry can thrive. Two- and four-year institutions working closely with county and state workforce development boards can create high-quality career opportunities for students while meeting regional needs for economic growth.

To illustrate an innovative model of how these trends can be brought together in a program for students, Rowan's Office of Pre-Health Programs has partnered with Virtua Health to provide paid training to students to become phlebotomists employed at Virtua. This is meeting a need for such employees in the Virtua system while providing aspiring medical students with essential clinical hours required for their applications, while earning a good wage. In fact, some of the training happens on Rowan's own campus.

*Dr. Rory McElwee serves as the Vice President for Student Affairs in the Office of the Provost and is Professor of Psychology at Rowan University. Rory holds a BA in Psychology from Drew University and a PhD in Personality & Social Psychology from Cornell University, and has also served as a faculty member in Psychology at Randolph- Macon Woman's College (now Randolph College) and Philadelphia University (now Thomas Jefferson University). Her scholarly work has addressed topics in the self and social cognition, particularly as related to the future and to the impostor phenomenon, and in student success, yielding 18 publications and more than 50 conference or invited presentations.*

*Since entering Rowan's administration in 2012, Rory has developed and led student success offices, services, and programs at the University. These include a centralized professional advising organization, career services and experiential education, transfer services, pre-health programs, accessibility services, military services, and a variety of academic courses and programs aimed at student success. On behalf of the Provost, she also provides leadership for student-facing academic policies and processes. She can be contacted at [mcelwee@rowan.edu](mailto:mcelwee@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5187.*

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New Jersey  
Council of  
County Colleges

## TESTIMONY

Submitted by  
New Jersey Council of County Colleges  
Aaron R. Fichtner, Ph.D., President  
for the Senate Higher Education Committee's Public Hearing on  
Post-Pandemic Trends in Higher Education  
March 4, 2024

On behalf of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC), I want to thank Chairman Cryan, Vice-Chairman Zwicker, and Members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, Senator Amato, Senator Moriarty, and Senator Singer, for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the critical topic of Post-Pandemic Trends in Higher Education.

From the Council's perspective, this public hearing is perfectly timed. Our 18 community college presidents have devoted enormous effort, individually and jointly through the Council, to assessing trends that are impacting higher education in the aftermath of the pandemic. To tackle these challenges, we have just released a new collective blueprint—**New Jersey's Opportunity Agenda: Building Pathways to Equity and Economic Prosperity**.

As two of our community college presidents and two student services leaders will testify before you today, the Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects of the student experience for those who were in community college in 2020 and beyond, with deep academic, social, and economic consequences for our students, and profound impacts on our overall operations. Community college students tend to be the most economically vulnerable college students in the state, often part-time students with complex lives and challenges that make college completion difficult under the best circumstances, let alone while weathering a global pandemic. In addition, our colleges know that middle and high school students likewise faced turmoil in their educational experience as a result of Covid-19, and the evidence of pandemic learning loss is significant and likely to be a factor impacting community college students, faculty, and staff over the next decade.

The pandemic also accelerated technological, economic, and social trends that were already underway. Facing rapid changes in digital technology and a tight pandemic-recovery labor market, New Jersey's employers increasingly turned to their local community colleges for workforce development assistance. And, as the pandemic made academic, economic, health care, housing, and other inequities more visible, our community colleges, which serve higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students than four-year institutions, have increased their focus on eliminating equity gaps.

In short, in the aftermath of the pandemic, our state's community colleges have made extraordinary progress, implementing:

- new modes and fields of instruction;
- new partnerships with high schools, four-year colleges and universities, nonprofits, unions, and businesses; and
- new models to support student progress and completion in earning credentials and degrees;
- a performance-based funding formula that rewards postsecondary access, equity, and student success;
- better data strategies to inform decisions and investments at all level, and
- an increased level of coordination and collaboration among the 18 community colleges.

Our Opportunity Agenda highlights innovative practices underway at each of our 18 institutions, demonstrating how community colleges are transforming our state's future. Our scale is substantial: **Each year, more than 230,000 New Jerseyans turn to their local community colleges, including more than 4 in 10 of all undergraduate students and over half of public undergraduates. Our community college graduates power the state's key industries, including health care, information technology, infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, and supply chain management.** Being both nimble and responsive to state and local workforce needs, our colleges have launched new academic and career pathways in AI, film, aseptic manufacturing, drone technology, renewable energy, and other emerging fields.

We have made considerable progress, but there is far more work to do—work that takes increased foundational and strategic investment in community colleges. Governor Murphy has been a champion for community colleges, launching the Community College Opportunity Grant that has helped tens of thousands of low-income students. Many of our recent initiatives to better serve our students, employers, and communities are a direct result of the \$20 million increase in operating aid included in the FY 2024 state budget. Given the post-pandemic challenges our state faces and the role our community colleges play as a solution to many of those challenges, we must not backslide in our state investment in community college operating aid.

#### **OPPORTUNITY AGENDA ACTION PILLARS**

In the aftermath of the pandemic, New Jersey's community colleges together believe implementing the following is the best route to equitable academic, social, and economic mobility for all New Jerseyans and economic prosperity for our communities.

#### **PILLAR 1: PUTTING ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON A PATH TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS**

New Jersey's community colleges are building on their deep local roots and extensive collaborations with area high schools to ensure all high school students have equitable and expanded access to dual enrollment, college and career guidance, and financial aid. As New Jersey's Dual Enrollment Study Commission noted, dual enrollment improves "college and credential access, affordability, and completion." Yet the report also notes that access to dual enrollment is profoundly unequal in New Jersey. An expanded, statewide dual enrollment commitment tied to community colleges is needed to help rectify pandemic learning loss especially for low-income and students who are historically underrepresented in higher education.

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**PILLAR 2: FOSTERING STUDENT SUCCESS AND COMPLETION IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

New Jersey's community colleges serve an incredibly diverse population of students, many from low-income and marginalized communities, including high school students, older and working learners, student parents, refugees, immigrants, justice-impacted individuals, unemployed and underemployed individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans. To help this diverse array of learners succeed in their postsecondary journeys, community colleges across the state are helping them address their academic, financial, and basic needs, including mental health, child care, transportation, food, and housing. Our colleges know the evidence-based strategies that could be implemented with adequate resources to further help community college students succeed. For example, rigorous research has found that having one advisor for every 150 students contributes to better student outcomes, but this level of effort requires additional resources. We need state support to expand programs like EOF and Student Success initiatives.

**PILLAR 3: BUILDING TRANSPARENT, SEAMLESS, AND STACKABLE PATHWAYS THAT RESPOND TO THE CHANGING ECONOMY**

Technological, social, climate, and economic changes are impacting the skills and lifelong learning that New Jerseyans need to thrive in a diverse society and global economy. Community colleges, in partnership with other stakeholders and with state budget and legislative support, are committed to reimagining general education, smoothing transfer from two- to four-year institutions, providing access to applied baccalaureate degrees in high demand occupations, embedding industry credentials in more community college programs, expanding access to internships and credit for prior learning, and continuing to build out New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities.

Through the NJ Pathways Initiative, funded in the three past state budgets, community colleges, in partnership with the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, have built strong and enduring partnerships with hundreds of businesses, labor unions, high schools, universities, and community organizations with a focus on aligning programs with the needs of the state's key industries including health care, renewable energy, manufacturing, and data science.

**PILLAR 4: HELPING ADULTS ATTAIN THE CREDENTIALS THEY NEED FOR CAREER MOBILITY AND LABOR MARKET SUCCESS**

Community colleges play a critical role in assisting adults to obtain skills, credentials, and degrees throughout their lives and careers to help them thrive in a changing economy. New Jersey must develop strategies to provide financial support for workforce and short-term credential programs that have value in the labor market, either because they are recognized by employers and/or because they lead to wage premiums and opportunities for economic mobility, especially for underserved populations. New Jersey must also rethink strategic coordination of the community college and public workforce systems.

At this critical time for higher education in our state, NJCCC serves as a powerful catalyst for innovation and collaboration between the state's 18 community colleges. We now seek the help and leadership of the Senate Higher Education Committee and your colleagues in the State Legislature to advance legislation and a Fiscal Year 2025 state budget tied to our agenda, including support for operating aid, equitable access to dual enrollment; robust supports for student success; and funding for high quality workforce credentials for low-income individuals.

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Thank you to the members of this Senate Higher Education Committee for holding today's hearing. NJCCC is ready to partner with you on helping our 18 community colleges provide the essential robust academic, economic, social, and basic needs supports our students need to succeed.

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#### **About the New Jersey Council of County Colleges**

Governed by the presidents and trustees of the state's 18 community colleges and enshrined in state law, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) supports New Jersey's community colleges and the more than 230,000 students they serve annually across 49 locations by fostering collaboration and developing solutions that expand access to college, promote equity and student success, and create a skilled workforce to drive economic growth. NJCCC brings together the state's community colleges to build a world-class, flexible higher education and workforce development system that can respond to the needs of local communities and employers while having statewide reach and impact. NJCCC promotes innovation and policy changes to help New Jersey's community colleges in their efforts to achieve academic, social, and economic mobility for all residents. The Council's New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development builds statewide industry, education, and labor partnerships that align education and training with the needs of a changing economy.

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**NJ**  
**CCC**



New Jersey  
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County Colleges

**New Jersey's  
OPPORTUNITY AGENDA:  
Building Pathways  
to Equity and  
Economic Prosperity**

**A CALL TO ACTION AND PARTNERSHIP  
FROM NEW JERSEY'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are in a moment of complex and rapid economic, social, technological, demographic, and climate changes.

New Jersey's economy is evolving toward higher value-added industries that rely on new knowledge, technologies, and innovation to drive productivity, and entry to good jobs in these industries increasingly requires postsecondary education, either two- or four-year college degrees or other credentials. We must prepare all New Jerseyans for technologies that are changing how we live, work, and learn. Our workers also need analytical, creative thinking, and other "robot-proof" human skills. To meet these needs, New Jersey's community colleges are committed to reimagining curricula, creating new academic and career pathways, and partnering with employers and other stakeholders to build a strong economy with bridges for students to family-sustaining careers.

Each year, more than 230,000 New Jerseyans turn to their local community colleges, including more than 4 in 10 of all undergraduate students and over half of undergraduate students in public colleges and universities. These students form the core of New Jersey's skilled and educated workforce and are essential to the success of New Jersey's innovation economy. Community college graduates power the state's key industries, including health care, technology, infrastructure, renewable energy, manufacturing, and supply chain management. Many of the teachers, nurses, police officers, firefighters, and other first responders who live and work in our communities are community college graduates. Increasingly, more New Jersey residents will need to earn a postsecondary degree or credential that is aligned with the needs of employers in order to contribute to the rapidly evolving knowledge economy. Community colleges offer a unique value proposition to fill this need, based on access, quality, affordability, and innovation.



# ACTION PILLARS

To address urgent equity concerns and meet our core mission in a changing world, New Jersey's community colleges together are committed to the following action pillars. Some call for new legislation or funding, while others advocate for new partnerships between community colleges and with external stakeholders. Many can be undertaken by community colleges themselves, reinforcing and building on progress they are already making. These action pillars represent our collective priorities and will shape our focus in the years ahead. We believe implementing these strategies is the best route to equitable academic, social, and economic mobility for all New Jerseyans and economic prosperity for our communities.

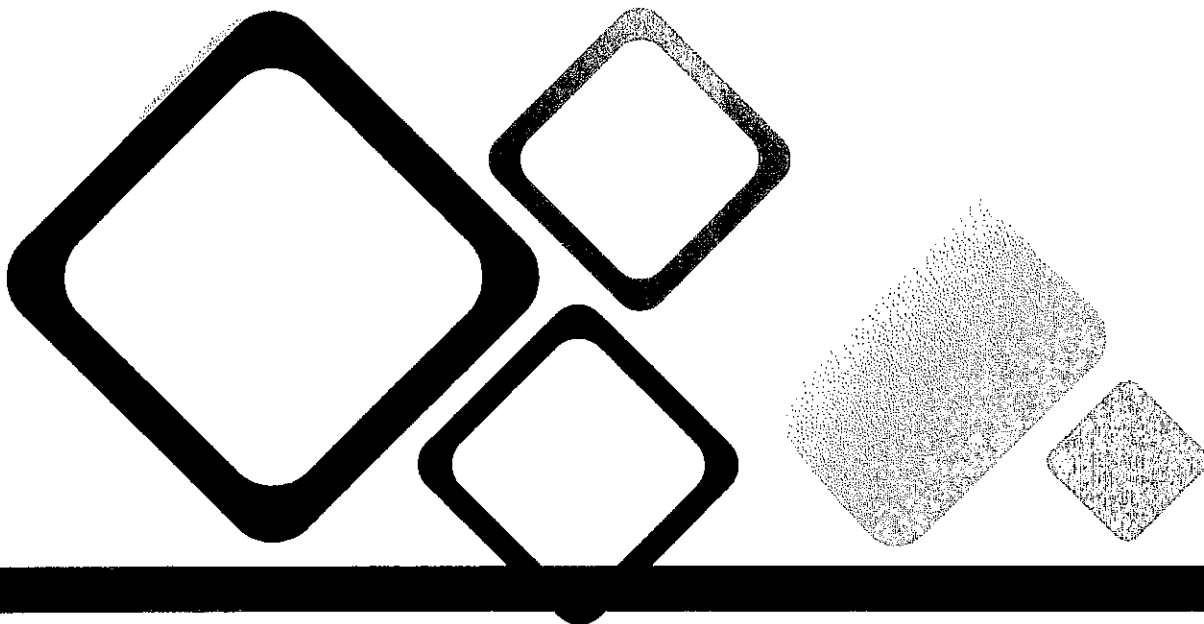
## PILLAR 1: Putting All High School Students on a Path to Postsecondary Success

- **Strategy 1: Ensure all high school students have the opportunity to earn at least six college credits while in high school**

*Solution: Create a consistent statewide dual enrollment program built around community colleges, providing all high school students an opportunity to achieve a minimum of six college credits, entirely free of charge for low-income and historically underserved populations.*

- **Strategy 2: Ensure all high school students know their options and have a plan for further education and a career**

*Solution: Support high school-community college partnerships, navigators, guidance, and college readiness.*



As New Jersey's community colleges lay the groundwork for our evolving economy, we must recognize that economic opportunity is not equally available to all New Jerseyans, with disparities persisting along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Currently, 60% of New Jersey adults have a postsecondary credential or degree, but stark disparities exist: only 37% of Black and 30% of Hispanic residents have an associate degree or higher, compared to 59% of white and 80% of Asian and Pacific Islander residents. While we know that education alone is not a guarantee of equitable economic success, postsecondary education—bolstered by efforts to reduce occupational, housing, health care, and other forms of segregation—is a critical component of broader strategies to achieve equity. New Jersey community colleges, which educate higher shares of Black and Hispanic students than four-year colleges, must lead the way forward.

Disproportionately from marginalized and low-income backgrounds, New Jersey community college students are often the first in their families to attend college. In addition to high school students, community colleges serve older and working learners, student parents, refugees, immigrants, justice-

impacted individuals, unemployed and underemployed individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans. Helping this incredibly diverse array of students achieve academic, social, and economic mobility is the core mission of New Jersey's community college system.

In recent years, New Jersey's community colleges have made extraordinary progress toward achieving this core mission, individually and collectively, undertaking new modes and fields of instruction; new partnerships with high schools, four-year colleges and universities, nonprofits, unions, and businesses; and new models to support student progress and completion in earning credentials and degrees. To strive toward continuous improvement, New Jersey's community colleges developed a performance-based funding formula that was accepted by the State of New Jersey in 2021. This formula is now used to distribute state investment to community colleges in a manner that rewards postsecondary access, equity, and student success. New Jersey's community colleges are also committed to using data to better inform decisions and investments at all levels.

The progress has been considerable, yet our community colleges recognize that there is more work to do.

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## PILLAR 2:

### Fostering Student Success and Completion in Postsecondary Education and Training

- **Strategy 1: Commit to making community college tuition-free for more New Jerseyans**

*Solution: Ensure individuals with adjusted gross household incomes of \$125,000 and lower can attend a New Jersey community college tuition free through an expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) program.*

- **Strategy 2: Launch an expanded, evidence-based Community College Student Success Initiative**

*Solution: Invest in a statewide student success initiative targeting low-income and underrepresented students, student parents, justice-impacted students, students with disabilities, veterans, and others.*

- **Strategy 3: Commit to broader, sustained partnerships to address the basic needs of students**

*Solution: Support collaborative efforts of community colleges, state agencies, local social service agencies, employers, and community-based organizations to address students' basic needs.*

## PILLAR 3:

### Building Transparent, Seamless, and Stackable Pathways That Respond to the Changing Economy

- **Strategy 1: Revitalize general education**

*Solution: New Jersey community colleges, in collaboration with four-year institutions, should refocus general education on contemporary essential skills such as innovation; design thinking; collaboration; creativity; analytical thinking; resilience; empathy; diversity, equity, and inclusion; social influence; digital, artificial intelligence (AI), and cyber skills.*

*Solution: New Jersey community colleges, in partnership with state leaders, technologists, and other stakeholders, must address the implications of AI for students, staff, and faculty.*

- **Strategy 2: Launch applied baccalaureate programs in high-demand occupations at community colleges**

*Solution: Allow community colleges to offer applied baccalaureates tied to local labor market demand.*

- **Strategy 3: Streamline transfer pathways**

*Solution: Ensure that all credits earned as part of an associate degree will transfer to a public four-year institution in New Jersey and that community college students have the transfer support they need.*

- **Strategy 4: Ensure all community college students can complete a high-quality, paid internship work experience**

*Solution: Expand and make more flexible the state's Career Accelerator Internship, guaranteeing all CCOG students access to funds for high-quality paid internships.*

- **Strategy 5: Embed industry-valued workforce credentials in community college programs**

*Solution: New Jersey community colleges should partner with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development to develop and maintain an Industry-Valued Credential List to guide community college efforts.*

*Solution: Identify funding for low-income students to cover non-tuition-related costs of embedded industry credentials and certification exams.*

- **Strategy 6: Build collaboratively designed statewide and regional pathways connecting students to credentials, degrees, and lifelong learning**

*Solution: Make a long-term commitment to the New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative.*

## PILLAR 4:

### Helping Adults Attain the Credentials They Need for Career Mobility and Labor Market Success

- **Strategy 1: Fund noncredit programs for low-income students**

*Solution: Amend CCOG to support low-income students pursuing high-quality, industry-valued credentials.*

*Solution: Modernize New Jersey's Workforce Development Partnership Fund and Supplemental Workforce Fund for Basic Skills to create a New Economy Opportunity Skills Fund for community college workforce and literacy programs and to address the impacts of AI in the workplace and prepare New Jerseyans for jobs of the future.*

- **Strategy 2: Develop a consistent, statewide approach to Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)/Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)**

*Solution: Develop a statewide CPL/PLA policy to boost awareness and usage of CPL/PLA, addressing transparency, affordability, access, and quality to help more adults complete postsecondary degrees and credentials.*

- **Strategy 3: Reenvision the state's workforce development system centered around community colleges**

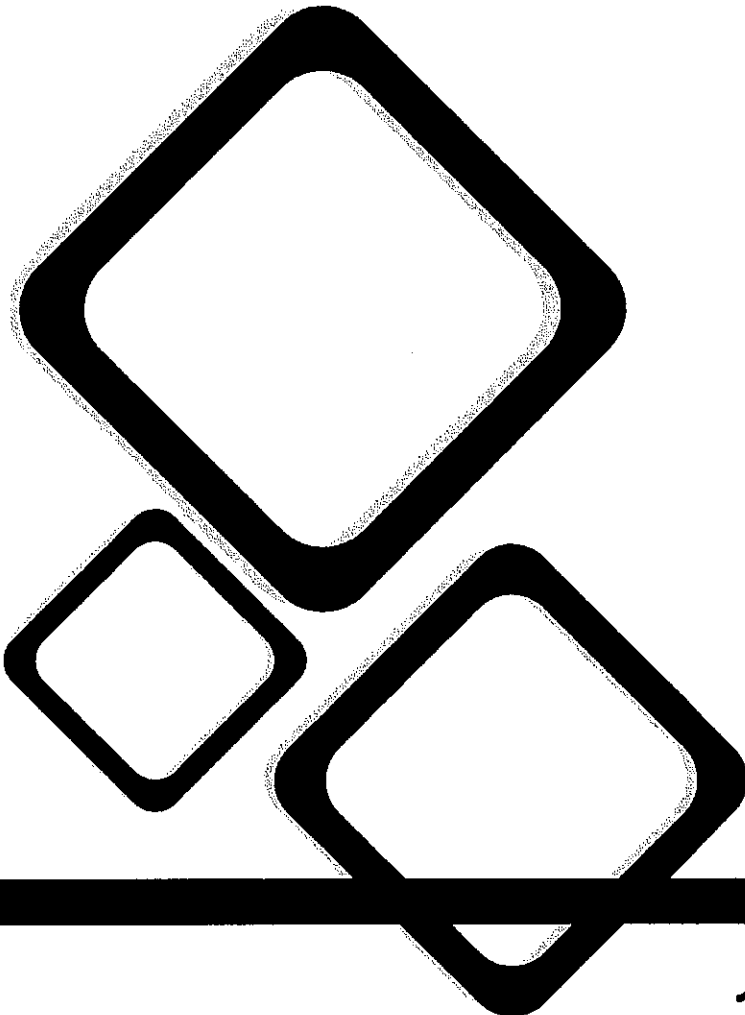
*Solution: Launch an intensive planning effort to build a new "opportunity system" that would:*

- *Integrate Workforce Development Boards into community colleges to increase strategic coordination on economic development and to better address local labor market needs; and*
- *Designate community colleges as the preferred provider of postsecondary education, workforce training, and adult literacy.*

Through the implementation of these bold policy initiatives, New Jersey community colleges are committed to leading the nation in creating a blueprint for a sustainable future grounded in equity, resilience, collaboration, and opportunity. We seek to build a reality where all New Jerseyans pursuing postsecondary education and workforce training at community colleges have equitable access to robust academic, career, and basic needs supports; state-of-the-art facilities and technology; dynamic, flexible curricula; and work-based learning opportunities that provide clear pathways to credentials of value and connections to family-sustaining careers.

We now seek input and partnership from all stakeholder communities—educational institutions, community and faith-based organizations, employers, unions, the philanthropic community, the Governor's Office, the State Legislature, state and local government agencies, researchers, and others—to join us in implementing this agenda, building pathways to equity and economic prosperity for all New Jerseyans.

We are eager to work with all who share this commitment to equity and opportunity.



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609-392-3434 | Mill One - Bldg A | 1 North Johnston Avenue | Hamilton Township, NJ 08609

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