



Attending a Community College Is Something to Cheer About
It's time to shed the outdated way we think about Ohio's two-year schools

By Jack Hershey, President and CEO of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges

Stand back! There's a rush to the mailbox this time of year in many Ohio homes. And it's not just for tax refunds, because this is the season when college-bound high school seniors receive letters saying where they've been accepted for the next big step in their lives. For many it's an occasion for celebration and pride for the whole family, perhaps even a bit of good-natured boasting with friends.

But some young Ohioans – including those with the greatest reasons to cheer – often choose to keep their college choice quiet and under wraps, fearing the stigma of selecting a lesser, second-tier option for earning their degree or credential. That's because these students are among more than 170,000 Ohioans attending a community college next year. Unreasonable, undeserved, and totally unsupported by the facts, this stigma has been stuck on community colleges for years. It's long past time for that perception to change.

In fact, it's difficult to understand how this misperception has lasted so long, given the fact that so many of today's college graduates started out their higher-education journey on a community college campus. And in light of our nation's current \$1.5 trillion student-loan crisis, which burdens so many four-year graduates with massive debts, it's persuasive to know that most students who get their degree at a community college leave debt free.

Steve Robinson, President of Owens Community College, sees the problem and is leading a campaign to turn around this undeserved and damaging misperception. "Intellectually a lot of people understand our value proposition, and we've made a lot of progress, but we need to break away from a bunch of outdated assumptions about community colleges," Robinson says. To back up his commitment, Robinson has started a social campaign ([#EndCCStigma](#)) with the support of other community college presidents in the state.

A recent report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling surveyed high school counselors across the United States and confirmed that this national stigma still exists, especially at private high schools. Most counselors reported less positive attitudes about the academic rigor of community college courses and the ease of transfer to four-year colleges. Counselors at more than half of private, non-parochial schools indicated that community college transfer was very stigmatized among parents, families and students.

But the reality couldn't be farther from the misperceptions this survey reveals. In fact, according to a recent national study by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, students who attended a community college before transferring to a four-year university were more likely to graduate than students who entered a four-year campus directly from high school.

To make this work, community college presidents – through the Ohio Association of Community Colleges – have been committed to providing a seamless transition between their schools and four-year universities, while increasing pathways to a degree, credential or certificate. For example, students in Ohio have the ability to complete two or three years of their coursework at a community college and then finish their degrees at a four-year university – providing a tremendous cost savings to students and their families. Today Ohio has a record number of two-year and four-year schools embracing these agreements with more than 10,000 Ohio students taking advantage of these options each year.

Students at Ohio's community colleges arrive to a supportive environment where faculty and staff are working harder than ever to make sure they find a pathway to success. This progress is driven by a performance-based funding formula for state support of higher education wisely put in place several years ago by the Ohio General Assembly. It's a system that rewards graduation and completion – meaning student success – not the sheer number of students enrolled. As a result, Ohio's community college system has seen an 8.5 percent increase in the number of students earning credentials, including a 22.5 percent increase in students earning one-year certificates.

As our state continues to grow jobs, attract cutting-edge industries, and diversify its economy, more and more Ohio businesses are relying on our outstanding system of community colleges to fuel their talent pipeline with skilled, enthusiastic workers. In his recent State of the State address, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine called for the creation of at least 10,000 new industry certificates within the next year to help more people pursue short-term, training programs on our campuses. This sends a powerful message to thousands of students, graduates, and their families – that believe the sad, outdated stigma that a community college education is a second-tier choice.

In today's changing world, it's a choice to celebrate, loud and clear. So clear a path to the mailbox. Someone you know may be accepted to an Ohio community college this spring, and you'll want to celebrate too.

#