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How States Make Use (or Not) of Community Colleges

By Scott Jaschik

The various roles of community colleges in state higher education systems — educating students who will transfer to four-year institutions, providing job training and so forth — may seem similar from state to state. But a study being released today by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government — a research arm of the State University of New York — highlights vast differences in the way states make use of and support their community colleges.

The report looks at a series of measures of how community college education fits in. States vary by as much as five to one in the portion of their population attending community colleges, and the share of states' college enrollment cohort enrolled at two-year institutions was found to be four times greater in some states than others. Significant gaps were also found in tuition rates, as compared to median income in states.

The differences examined can have major effects on political support for community colleges. For instance, in California, Wyoming, Arizona and New Mexico, more than 4 percent of the adult population is currently enrolled in a community college either full- or part-time. But in another 18 states, that percentage is less than 2 percent.

Nationally, the study found that 44 states experienced growth in full-time equivalent enrollments from 2000-5, while 4 states experienced declines and two states did not have information available. Twelve states experienced growth greater than 20 percent during that period: West Virginia (66.7 percent), Maine (40.5 percent), Montana (37.4 percent), Kentucky (36.7 percent), Arkansas (30.2 percent), Georgia (28.6 percent), New Hampshire (25.9 percent), Vermont (25.9 percent), Pennsylvania (22.5 percent), New Jersey (20.7 percent), Connecticut (20.7 percent) and Utah (20.0 percent).

David F. Shaffer, a senior fellow at Rockefeller and author of the report, said that the analysis isn't supposed to suggest a magic line for the categories that states should be above or below. Rather, he said, "what I'm trying to do is alert people to the differences," to suggest that state officials may want to reconsider their policies based on the wide range of approaches in use.

The following table shows two of the variables studied. The states are ranked in order of their percentage of FTE in all public and private higher education that is enrolled at community colleges. The "tuition burden" figure represents the tuition for full-time enrollment as a share of median family income in the state. Figures were not available for Alaska. The data represent students enrolled for credit — which for many community college excludes a significant portion of enrollments.

Community College Share of State Enrollments and 'Tuition Burden,' 2005

Rank in Share	State	2-Year Share of Enrollment	Tuition Burden
1	Wyoming	47.3%	2.7%
2	California	46.4%	1.1%
3	Washington	46.1%	3.4%
4	Mississippi	41.9%	3.0%
5	New Mexico	39.9%	2.3%
6	New Jersey	35.4%	2.9%
7	Texas	35.3%	2.2%
8	Illinois	33.2%	2.8%
9	North Carolina	32.6%	2.3%
10	Oregon	32.0%	4.3%
11	Kansas	31.3%	3.2%
12	Maryland	31.0%	3.3%
13	Iowa	30.6%	4.6%
14	South Carolina	30.3%	4.7%
15	Georgia	27.8%	2.5%
16	Arkansas	27.6%	3.4%
17	Kentucky	27.4%	4.7%
18	Alabama	26.8%	5.0%
19	Michigan	26.8%	2.8%
20	Hawaii	26.8%	1.5%
21	Minnesota	26.4%	5.2%
22	Nebraska	26.2%	3.0%
23	Virginia	25.7%	2.7%
24	Florida	25.4%	2.9%
25	Wisconsin	25.3%	4.1%
26	Oklahoma	25.1%	3.4%
27	Arizona	24.1%	2.1%
28	Ohio	22.0%	4.8%
29	Tennessee	21.3%	4.0%
30	New York	20.6%	4.5%
31	Delaware	20.5%	2.9%
32	Connecticut	19.7%	2.7%
33	Missouri	19.6%	3.4%
34	Colorado	19.6%	2.8%
35	North Dakota	16.2%	4.9%
36	Maine	16.1%	4.4%
37	Montana	15.5%	5.0%
38	Massachusetts	14.5%	3.3%
39	West Virginia	14.3%	6.0%
40	Louisiana	14.0%	2.8%
41	Rhode Island	13.7%	3.3%
42	Utah	13.5%	3.6%
43	Pennsylvania	13.3%	4.1%
44	New Hampshire	13.2%	6.5%
45	Idaho	12.6%	3.2%
46	South Dakota	12.5%	4.8%
47	Indiana	11.9%	4.1%
48	Nevada	10.7%	2.8%
49	Vermont	7.6%	5.8%