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*Two-year schools rate high*  
*By Valerie Wells*

Officials have a simple explanation behind Mississippi being ranked near the top of the nation's community college systems.

"Because we do a good job," said Eric Clark, executive director of Mississippi State Board for Community and Junior Colleges.

"It's all statistics-based. It's where we ranked."

**Mississippi ranked alongside Iowa, New Mexico and North Carolina in the report from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government. The study was published this week in the Chronicle of Higher Education.**

All four states are ahead of the national average in categories such as the five-year growth rate in enrollment, and the rate in which community college enrollment is outpacing that of public four-year universities.

In 2005, 53,618 students were enrolled full-time in public two-year community colleges in Mississippi. That was 41 percent of all enrollments in the state that year.

In Mississippi, about 73 percent of community college students are in academic programs, according to Clark's figures. Counting all programs, including technical, career, GED and workforce training, about 10 percent of Mississippians will take a community college course each year.

Officials at Pearl River Community College and Jones County Junior College say Mississippi has one of the oldest community college systems in the nation and other states are just catching up.

"We've had a system of community colleges for long time, longer than any other state, and we have a long tradition of community colleges being part of higher education," said John Grant, vice president for instruction at PRCC.

"We have always placed emphasis on quality instruction in courses that apply to a bachelor's degree. We hire well-qualified instructors," Grant said. "We charge less. We have small classes."

Job skills training is the traditional focus of community colleges.

"In many states, that's primarily what community colleges do. In Mississippi, it's not. We have a long tradition of providing the first two years for bachelor degrees," he said.

The academic side of community colleges is often overlooked, Grant said.

"Students come to us. They plan to be teachers and lawyers and do quite well," he said.

Community colleges have a history of meeting the need of the local community, said Ed Smith, vice president of student affairs at JCJC.

"We've tried to not stray very far from that mission," Smith said. "Student welfare is our main objective, helping our students meet their individual needs."

The convenience of location adds to the appeal and success of community colleges. Most Mississippians are within 30 minutes of a community college class.

"It's part of trying to give the student what they need when they need it and where they need it," Smith said.