

The new enrollment playbook: Why workforce alignment is winning students

Leadership



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Students are increasingly opting for shorter, cheaper programs that are career-aligned, setting a new identity for American higher education since its recovery from the pandemic. Postsecondary enrollment, which has grown for four consecutive years, climbed back to pre-pandemic levels last fall, [according to a new analysis](#) by National University.

The story behind the numbers reveals exactly where campus leaders need to focus next. Community colleges and other two-year institutions saw the highest enrollment growth this past fall. Gains at four-year institutions were comparatively lower, while private four-year enrollment declined.

Career-aligned undergraduate certificate programs at community colleges grew by 28.3% since fall 2021 and surpassed 750,000 enrollments.

In California, for example, undergraduate two-year pathways in health professions, business and mechanics have posted the highest enrollment gains since 2021, surpassing the four-year engineering track. Eight of the 10 fastest-growing fields are concentrated at the state's community colleges.

California's high school students are flocking to community colleges. Dual enrollment has grown 76% in six years, with 65,620 students participating this year.

What's driving this change?

Changing student preferences and new industry demands have shattered the status quo. Confidence in higher education [has plummeted](#), with bachelor's degree holders and Americans with no college diploma now sharing similar levels of doubt.

Today's students prioritize affordability, program flexibility and career outcomes over institutional reputation and the traditional four-year, on-campus experience. Meanwhile, the Northeast and Midwest will be hit hardest by population shifts that will reduce the pool of prospective 18-year-old, residential students—a market on which higher ed has long relied.

"I think the current group of students is way more outcome-focused," Kevin Krebs, founder and managing director at HelloCollege, [previously told University Business](#). "Parents and students are nervous about a large investment not paying off."

The [rise of skills-based hiring](#) has made employers less likely to evaluate graduates on credentials alone, a shift fueled in part by widening talent shortages across the workforce. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of employers say they can't find qualified applicants, [according to Manpower Group](#), and [over a third](#) of recent four-year college graduates have worked a job below their level of education.

Curriculum may be contributing to this trend. Career-aligned, applied learning opportunities [are rare across many institutions](#), and [fewer than half](#) of graduating four-year students have completed a paid internship or apprenticeship.

Artificial intelligence has accelerated these trends. New technology is changing the skills [future graduates are expected to have](#) and [threatening to erase](#) the lower rungs of the job ladder.

“The workforce is changing faster than the traditional academic cycles can keep up with,” Erika Liodice, executive director of the Alliance for Innovation and Transformation, [told University Business](#). “Skills are quickly becoming obsolete, roles are evolving and employers are increasingly valuing adaptability over static credentials.”

How colleges can strengthen career alignment

Higher education leaders are creating more nimble academic pathways to better onramp K12 students and adults into college.

Across the country, colleges [are building workforce pipelines](#) that connect high school, college and employment through dual-enrollment programs, apprenticeships and industry-recognized credentials. Some institutions allow high school students to accumulate significant college credit before graduation, easing their journey toward a degree.

[Shorter course terms](#) and [reduced-credit degrees](#) provide more flexible schedules for working learners to balance their busy lives.

State leaders are actively supporting these trends. Missouri and Colorado, [for instance, are blending](#) their education and workforce systems to help colleges respond more quickly to labor market demand and create clearer routes from learning to employment.

Some [employers and students](#) believe industry-recognized credentials, certificates, and related non-degree credentials can modernize curriculum. Wichita State University Campus of Applied Sciences and Technology has grown enrollment [by over 200% in two decades](#), in part by offering short-term programs that respond to regional economic needs.

“When you see that there are not enough adults with a credential of value, it’s a win for them to pursue micro-pathways that are relevant to what they need in their life right now,” said Lisa Larson, CEO of the Education Design Lab.

Four-year institutions are responding by [embedding microcredentials into traditional degree programs](#), allowing students to demonstrate workforce-ready skills along the way. Other ways colleges can strengthen students’ career alignment include:

- Build employer advisory boards to inform curriculum with relevant job market insight
- Partner with regional industries and nonprofits to spur work-based learning opportunities
- Embed career services into classes or student life