



# Understanding the Community College Marketing Context

Insights from The Million Dollar  
Community College Challenge



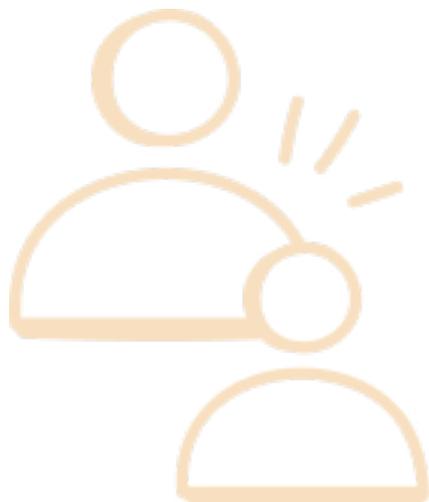
Executive Summary Prepared by  
StrategyForward Advisors with Zaback Solutions

# About The Authors

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## Context

When Lumina Foundation launched its Million Dollar Community College Challenge (the Challenge), it received hundreds of responses from community colleges across the country, which generated more than 1,000 pages of data. With such a robust response and wealth of information, Lumina recognized a unique opportunity to learn more about:

- The identities of these community colleges
- Their understanding of their adult students
- The challenges they faced
- Their approach to marketing
- The messages they used to reach these learners
- Their vision for better outreach to adult students and the resources required to realize that vision



Analysis of the applications provided new insights into how community colleges market to adult students and highlighted new opportunities for reaching and serving this target population.



# Findings

Analysis focused on the following areas: participating institutions, understanding adult students, enrollment challenges, community needs, marketing approach and strategies, messages and promises to adult students, and vision and resources needed.

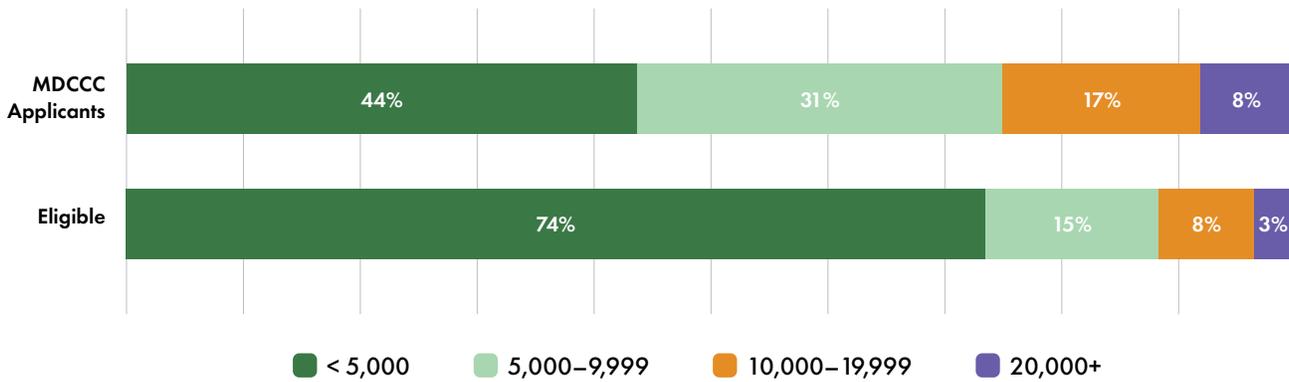
## Participation Institution

Colleges that applied for the Challenge represented a broad cross section of eligible institutions from 46 states. Approximately 15 percent of all eligible

institutions applied, and six states had more than 10 applicants. There was good **geographic representation** among rural and non-rural sites. Cities were slightly over-represented, while suburban institutions were slightly under-represented, but overall these differences were small. In terms of **institutional size**, a higher proportion of larger institutions applied compared to smaller institutions (Figure 1). This suggests that smaller institutions may have lacked sufficient resources, capacity, or awareness to apply.



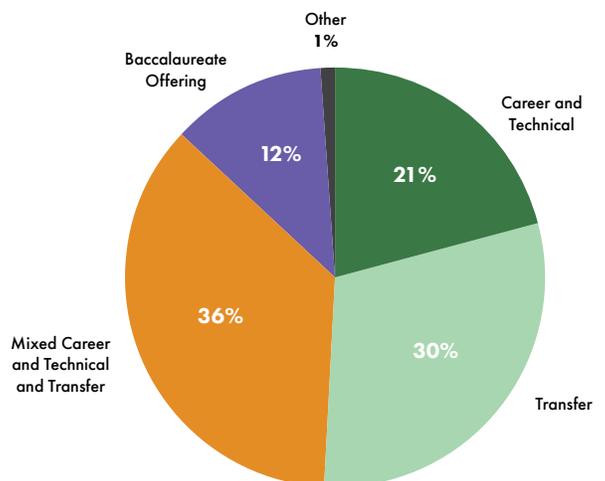
**Figure 1:** Distribution of Challenge Applicants vs. Comparable Institutions by Size



There was also good representation among **Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)**. Eighty-five MSIs applied, as did about 25 percent of eligible Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Predominantly Black Institutions. There was good representation in the **types of programs offered** by applicants and in the **types of students** they serve. One-fifth of applicants primarily award vocational or technical education credentials. About one-third of applicants focus predominantly on transfer to four-year institutions, and another third offer a mix of the two. The remaining institutions offer bachelor’s degrees in addition to primarily two-year credentials (Figure 2). About half of applicants enroll a higher number of part-time students compared to just 4 percent that enroll a high number of full-time students.



**Figure 2:** Program Groupings Among Applicants, Based on 2018 Carnegie Basic Categories



## Understanding Students

Applications for the Challenge revealed opportunities for institutions to improve how they use data, center equity, and perceive student assets. While almost all applicants could provide general data about the number of students enrolled and the types of in-demand careers in their service areas, **only a handful of institutions used leading indicators to set goals and inform programs.**

Institutions frequently referenced the racial and socioeconomic diversity of their students. However, beyond that most institutions seemed to view adult learners as one generalized group. Institutions recognized the importance of meeting the needs of students who have been underserved, **yet only a handful addressed the systemic issues that lead to inequities.** Finally, **few colleges spoke about their students as an asset** to the institution and instead focused on how best to address students' needs.



## Enrollment Challenges

Community colleges across the nation face many challenges, including [declining enrollments](#), [perceived loss in the value of postsecondary education](#), [changing student demographics](#), and [multiple missions](#). These concerns came through in the applications. Institutions identified other challenges as well. Among them: the need to reform internal systems and structures to better serve adult students, misalignment with employers, competition with other education/training providers, lack of student awareness about economic benefits of post-high school education, disconnection to parts of the service area, and difficulty in gaining the trust of underserved populations. Interestingly, very few applicants cited cost or affordability as a barrier to overcoming enrollment challenges.

Institutions recognized their responsibility to change their systems to better serve new populations. Institutions also have a good, data-informed understanding of the communities they serve. However, Challenge applications showed that institutions continue to struggle to adapt their structures to meet community needs. Community colleges must continue to focus on improving their outcomes and communicating their successes to the communities they serve. They can do this by focusing on understanding and meeting industry needs, ensuring



that their offerings meet the needs of adult students, and tailoring their programs and services to the unique sub-populations they serve.

## Marketing

Applications for the Challenge contained significant information about community college marketing capacity and plans, efforts and challenges. They also revealed much about colleges' collective vision for what they could accomplish with more resources. The data showed a broad range of colleges' capacity, maturity, and marketing approaches. It also showed broad variation in how colleges integrated these approaches into their overall strategies. This section focuses on broad marketing trends and messages; later sections focus specifically on how applicants messaged to adult student populations.

## Capacity

Community colleges were aware of the importance of marketing, and in recent years many have increased capacity in this area, by adding resources and staff to boost branding and marketing efforts. Capacity resources, which encompasses both staffing and monetary resources, were highly correlated with institution size. Larger institutions had the most resources, while institutions with 1,000-5,000 students faced the biggest capacity constraints. When compared to community colleges of similar size, about 40 percent of institutions actually had relatively high capacity in marketing and/or branding; about 20 percent had low capacity. Small and large institutions were most likely to indicate that the staff responsible for marketing and outreach had influence through senior-level or cabinet-level marketing leaders. Finally, the data showed opportunities for institutions to better track the impact of marketing and branding efforts.

## Marketing Plan Maturity

Since institutions' capacity varied greatly, it was essential to understand how marketing plans' levels of maturity differed among applicants. Most institutions were able to articulate a formal marketing plan, and many of those plans were strategic, not merely tactical. Plans were classified as strategic if they included branding, marketing, a connection to a strategic plan and integration with student experience and outcomes beyond enrollment. Tactical plans were more limited, focused on marketing activities aimed primarily at recruiting and enrolling students.

## Data Driven Goals

Institutions still have much work to do to use data more intentionally to set goals and truly integrate equity into their marketing efforts. Most applicants cited a standard set of metrics, including overall completion and retention rates for different groups of students and their enrollment trends, especially since post-COVID. However, just under half of applicants reported a formal, quantitative goal as part of their strategic enrollment plans, and the types of goals they included varied greatly. Only a handful of institutions could articulate how they were embedding equity into their marketing and branding strategies.

## Current Strategies

Community colleges already employ many strategies to market themselves to potential students and the communities they serve. Branding was a primary strategy of more than half of the applicants, although for many it was a recent investment or a plan for the future. Marketing focused on traditional activities such as direct mail, email, website, TV and radio (both direct and streaming), and bus wrapping. Direct outreach included print materials, media/name recognition, tours, and campus events. A few themes emerged noticeably among institutions, including:

- Digital marketing and videography
- Direct outreach to students through apps, chatbots, and individual contact
- Investments in campus or extensions through signage, hubs, and mobile services
- Increased perception and word-of-mouth

As a whole, institutions displayed significant capacity and experience in running specific campaigns to promote the college or specific programs. Institutions also understand that community connections are critical in recruiting adult students. Many cited the importance of embedding navigators in workforce centers or



other community groups, creating connections and partnerships with employers, and recruiting students at community events.

### **Trend Toward Integration**

Marketing is no longer simply about enrolling students. Most applicants highlighted their role of supporting students from the time they enter the institution until they complete their programs. Marketing teams are critical partners as institutions seek to transform themselves in ways that better serve adult students. They're also vital to the success of initiatives related to advising

and navigation, guided pathways, meeting students' basic needs, competency-based education, connecting credit and non-credit courses, and improving partnerships with industry.

Unfortunately, the application process provided little information about student success activities. This made it difficult to gauge whether institutions could truly deliver on their promises. In some cases, where services were not sufficiently tailored to the needs of adults, this could mean that the very messages that drew learners in could become points of frustration.

## Messages to Adult Students

Institutions appeared to have a clear understanding of who their prospective adult students were and how to appeal to them. The prevalent messages community colleges used showed a

comprehensive understanding of the many dynamics at play for their adult learners. Messaging had four key components: who you are, what we offer, how we relate to you, and what it means for you.

Component	Description and Quote	Theme
<b>Who You Are</b>	Colleges wanted prospective adult students to know that they truly saw them and understood the complexity that they faced in their lives.  “We are prepared to meet you where you are in order to help take you to where you want and need to be.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wherever you are</li> <li>• The right time</li> <li>• Balancing family and work</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Amazing</li> </ul>
<b>What We Offer</b>	Colleges were very clear about the opportunity, types of support and offerings, and ease of the experience. In communicating what they offered, institutions also strove to explain who they are.  “The college is a door of opportunity for everybody.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An open door</li> <li>• Quality</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Affordability</li> <li>• Relevance</li> <li>• Basic needs</li> <li>• Accelerated, seamless (value)</li> <li>• Personalized support (proximity)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small class size (empowerment)</li> <li>• Wrap-around services</li> <li>• Transfer &amp; prior learning</li> <li>• Work-based learning</li> <li>• Culture &amp; place</li> <li>• Pathways</li> <li>• Innovative</li> </ul>
<b>How We Relate to You</b>	Colleges emphasized relational language to forge a connection with adult students.  “Here you will find helpful staff, caring faculty, and a relaxed and friendly environment.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Here for you</li> <li>• Appreciative</li> <li>• Committed</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Family</li> </ul>
<b>What It Means to You</b>	Institutions identified how attending a community college would affect learners. This was an important part of each message.  “[Our institution] is here to guide you on your educational journey every step of the way.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journey</li> <li>• Better</li> <li>• New skills</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Trajectory</li> </ul>

## Promises to Adult Students

Colleges made promises to prospective adult students about what they can achieve/become and what colleges will do to help. Promises had overlapping themes and fell into four broad categories: help, services, success, and a better future, as well as one outlier theme: warranty.

Promises were of four types: aspirational student-facing, aspirational college-facing, relational, or practical and transactional. Most colleges used language that included multiple types of promises.

“The college is proud to offer a ‘Warranty Claim’ guarantee to all graduates; if students are missing skills to do the job, they can return for free within two years of graduation to learn the skill.”

Type of Promise	Description	Sample Quotes
<b>Aspirational student-facing</b>	These promises focused on the type of educational experience and outcomes related to jobs, family, and community.	“...promising more stability for the families in our community.”
<b>Aspirational college-facing</b>	These promises focused on support and what the colleges would do for the students. These promises often consisted of grand claims.	“...promise to our community is that we will work tirelessly to help all students find their purpose, passion, and strengths through a guided pathway approach ... coupled with wrap-around support services.”
<b>Relational</b>	Relational promises focused on connection and interaction between the adult learners and the college.	“...promises adult students that they will not be alone in their educational pursuits.”
<b>Practical and transactional</b>	These promises focused on the components of education institutions think are most resonant for students.	“...promises adult students the support services necessary for them to achieve their goals, whether it is to enter the workforce or transfer to a four-year university.”

## Vision and Resources Needed

The Challenge created a unique opportunity for colleges to step back, determine the full scope of their marketing needs, and consider what they would do if resources were less restrained. Below are some of the most popular themes in the visions they articulated and the resources they needed:

- Staffing
- Website and audio-visual capacity
- Signage
- Mobile apps and chatbots
- More representative content
- Improved information

Institutions were aware that adult students need more hands-on help through efforts such as: hiring navigators, connecting within the community, creating stronger connections with industry/workplaces, and creating student services specifically designed for adult students. Many colleges realized that marketing and branding only go so far, that they must be paired with institutional transformation to better serve adult students. Finally, some institutions embraced this opportunity with innovation, proposing to use this unexpected influx of resources to develop solutions that would otherwise be impossible.



# Recommendations

The Challenge revealed much about colleges' approaches and views about marketing to adult learners. This analysis points to opportunities for institutions to do more in four key areas.

## 1. Go next level with marketing at

**community colleges:** As institutions pivot to better reach and recruit adult students, institutions should increase their marketing operations and capabilities to demonstrate the growing importance of marketing and align it to the institution's strategic plan. Such steps include adding staff and resources to marketing departments, setting strategic goals for marketing, building data capacity, and integrating marketing into all strategic initiatives.

## 2. Address perception issues head on:

For marketing to be fully successful, institutions must directly address critical issues, including their internal views of adult students and external perceptions of community colleges. Adult students must be seen as assets—part of the solution for these schools. Institutions must also tackle the underlying causes of society's often-negative perceptions of community colleges.

## 3. Transform to meet student needs:

Marketing and branding can't focus solely on reaching learners. Promises to adult students must be followed by systems, structures, and supports that ensure adult students succeed at scale.

## 4. Work differently with community

**partners:** Recognize that community partners may be best positioned to understand, reach, serve, and recruit specific sub-populations of prospective adult students. To this end, institutions can learn from and defer to community partners and build on industry partnerships to reach these learners.





## Closing

Applications to the Million Dollar Community College Challenge provided a wealth of information about community colleges' brand identity, marketing capacity, community needs, and understanding of adult students. Though the field has made much progress in the last decade, there is still work to do. Colleges must not only distinguish themselves and demonstrate

the value they add to students and their community, they must also evolve in the way they recruit students, deliver services, and organize themselves to best serve students. We believe the recommendations can help to transform how community colleges reach students and serve traditionally resilient but underserved communities.



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