

What Is a Community College?

By David Radwin and Laura Horn

As colleges evolve to serve new missions, the very definition of community college is changing.

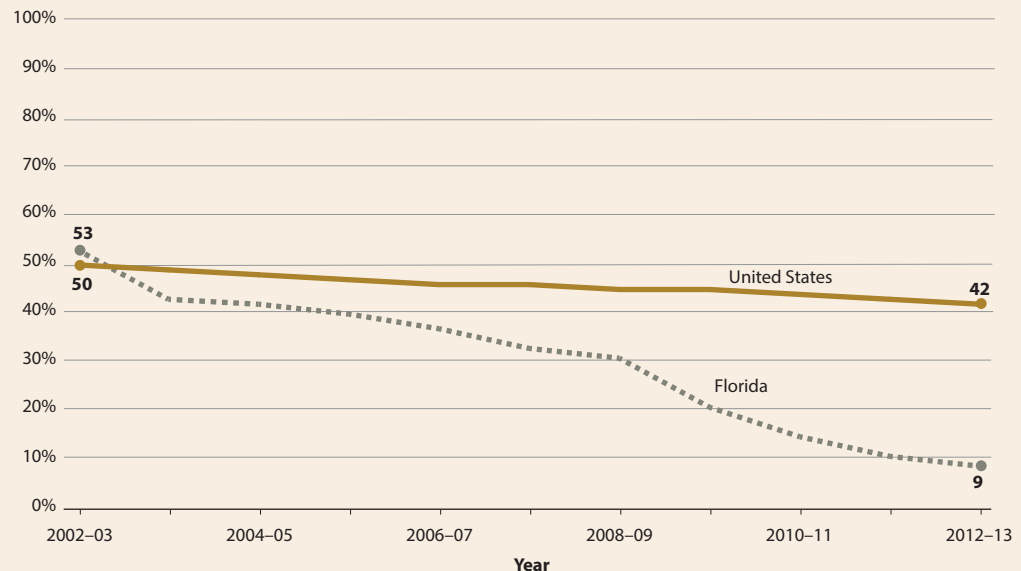
The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. Department of Education defines community colleges as public postsecondary institutions in which the highest degree awarded is a two-year or associate degree (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). This definition is used in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study indicators across all five areas of *The Completion Arch*[™] that make up all the national indicators and all the state indicators for all 50 states. Currently, there are no indicators for Washington, D.C. because its community college is formally part of the University of the District of Columbia, but it will be included in future updates if plans proceed to establish the community college as an independently governed institution (Hill, Kern, Rivlin, Smith, & Thornhill, 2012).

Other data sources in *The Completion Arch*[™], most notably Achieving the Dream and Com-

plete College America, include public colleges that award bachelor's degrees if they make up a small fraction of the total awards. In the last two decades, a growing number of community colleges have started to award bachelor's degrees and have been reclassified as four-year institutions by NCES. By 2012, some 21 states had authorized their community colleges to confer four-year degrees, primarily in occupational fields such as nursing and business, without necessarily altering their focus on open access and their primary orientation toward awarding certificates and associate degrees (Baccalaureate Degree Study Group, 2014; Bradley, 2012; Evelyn, 2003; Gonzalez, 2011). And in September 2014, California enacted legislation to make it the 22nd state to allow community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees (Koseff, 2014).

Although the decision of whether to include community colleges awarding bachelor's degrees may make little difference for national

Figure 1 Percentage of undergraduates enrolled in community colleges, United States and Florida, 2002–03 to 2012–13



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics Survey and 12-Month Enrollment Survey.

and regional indicators of student success, it can have an appreciable effect in states such as Florida with a large population of students who are not seeking bachelor's degrees. By way of illustration, the percentage of Florida undergraduates enrolled in community colleges dropped precipitously from 53 percent in 2002–03 to 9 percent in 2012–13 (figure 1), which almost

certainly reflects a reclassification of community colleges to four-year colleges rather than a massive shift in enrollment across institutions. Variation in enrollment depends on other factors, too, as was the case in Nevada, where a drop in the proportion of undergraduates in four-year institutions followed the 2002 opening of Nevada State College.

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