

# **Colorado Community College System 2015-2025 Strategic Plan**

*An Overview and Summary of Progress*



Prepared by Inta Morris  
Confluence Strategies, LLC  
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## Introduction

The 2015-2025 Strategic Plan, entitled “Bold Solutions,” identified the following four goals along with key strategies and 18 key performance measures (KPMs) for each:

- Transform the student experience;
- Transform our own workforce experience;
- Create education without barriers through transformational partnerships; and
- Redefine our value proposition through accessibility, affordability, quality, accountability, resource development and operational excellence.

While instrumental to planning, this document was not envisioned as a static guide. Rather, it was regularly reviewed and modified to best fit circumstances and projected needs. In October 2018, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS, or System) Board identified three key priorities—student success, equity, and concurrent enrollment—and revised some of the 2015 performance measures associated with the four goals to reflect these priorities. The Board also elevated “creating a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable CCCS workforce” as a priority. In October 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board added a strategic priority focused on strengthening workforce development.

Over the 10 years of the Bold Solutions strategic plan, in addition to revising the priorities and KPMs, the System evolved its data tools and increased its research capacity. Whereas in 2015, KPMs were reported on an excel spreadsheet, by 2024 the System had an advanced dashboard that allows users to drill down into individual goals and measures. With the improvements in data and research tools, CCCS and the Board can track progress much more effectively and make data-driven decisions regarding new policies and approaches aimed at improving student outcomes. (See further discussion about greater analytics capacity under Goal 4.)

This report assesses progress made toward meeting each of the initial four goals and the revised strategic priorities. The report is not an in-depth analysis of each KPM for each priority/goal, rather it is an overall assessment of where progress was made and where there are opportunities for continued improvement. See Appendix A for a list of the original 18 KPMs and their status.

## Summary of Progress

- Success toward meeting KPMs during the initial years covered by the 2015-2025 plan in key student success areas was largely erased by the impacts of COVID on higher education and on community colleges in particular; many KPMs are only now (in 2023-24) showing recovery and improvement.
- CCCS had some important accomplishments regarding its own workforce; however, as with student measures, recruiting and retaining a workforce that reflects the Colorado state-wide and student demographics proved challenging in large part due to COVID.
- Participation in, and credit earned through, concurrent enrollment have seen significant increases, though matriculation of concurrent enrollment students has not met the associated KMP.
- CCCS made important progress in areas related to redefining its value proposition by increasing social media presence and improving system-wide analytics. Very successful

fundraising efforts far exceeded the goal and enabled the colleges to support students through scholarships, support services, and other emerging initiatives. CCCS met its goal regarding calibrating tuition to other Colorado institutions and ensuring affordability for students.

## Impacts of COVID-19

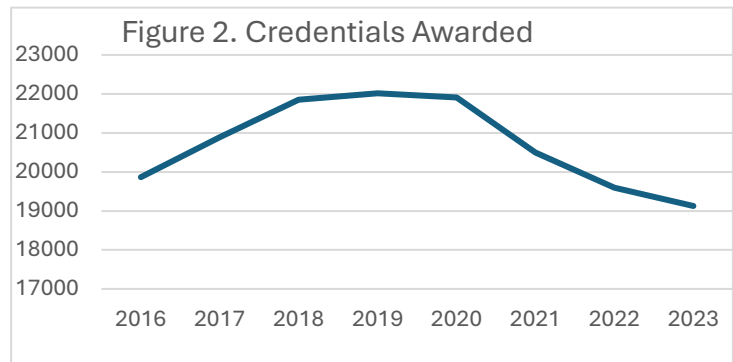
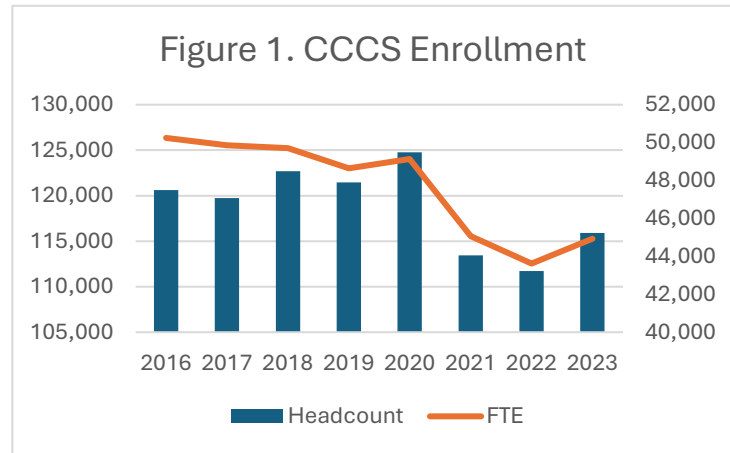
This short section is intended to illustrate the high-level impacts of COVID on enrollment and completion so that the subsequent discussions about student success measures and other KPMs can be viewed in this context.

Enrollment at community college across the nation had been on a slow decline after 2015 for several years due to its counter-cyclical nature relative to the economy: a strong economy entices students back to work. Total enrollment saw an uptick in 2019/20 before the pandemic hit. As Figure 1 to the right illustrates, enrollment at CCCS over the past decade followed these national trends.

COVID led to a steep decline in enrollment at CCCS and at community colleges across the United States beginning in 2020. Fall 2020 saw a 20.7% decline overall in the United States in students enrolling directly from high school to community colleges. The decline was particularly acute nationally among students of color and part-time students—populations disproportionately served by community colleges.<sup>1</sup> According to the Community College Review, Colorado was among the five hardest hit states in terms of prospective students canceling their enrollment when COVID hit.<sup>2</sup>

Understandably, with a decline in enrollment, the number of students completing and obtaining a credential (a trailing indicator) similarly took a steep dive from 2020 on. Nationally, one in four students enrolled in 2019 did not return the following fall, sending retention rates downward. At CCCS, credentials topped out at over 22,000 in 2018-19 and dropped to just over 19,000 in 2022-23.

Nationally and in Colorado, enrollment has begun to recover; total undergraduate enrollment increased in 2023 for the first time since the pandemic and growth was strongest at community colleges. As enrollment recovers, persistence and completion are expected to follow. Sometimes forgotten amidst the many challenging COVID statistics is the fact that the colleges transitioned to online and hybrid learning almost overnight (see below under Goal 1)—an enormous



Source: CCCS FactBook 2017-18 and 2022-23 Data Book

<sup>1</sup> Inside Higher Ed and other sources

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-community-colleges>

accomplishment in and of itself and one that continues to positively impact many aspects of education today.

### **Goal 1: Transform the Student Experience**

Goal 1 of the 2015 Bold Solutions Plan focuses directly on students persisting in their academic path and obtaining a degree or other credential; the goal also encompasses the System designing programs that best serve student needs. Of the original KPMs under this goal, four were partially met and three were not met.

In the pre-COVID years, it is noteworthy that CCCS was meeting (and exceeding) its goal of increasing total credentials by one percent annually despite the gradual decline in enrollment, as shown in Figure 2 in the previous section. However, from 2020 on, CCCS fell short in increasing credentials awarded. Whereas the performance measure sought a one percent increase in credentials awarded annually, the number awarded declined each year from 2019 to 2023 for a total five-year decline of 13 percent. Over that same period, enrollment declined by seven to nine percent (depending on whether FTE or headcount is used), suggesting that the decline in credentials awarded was a result both of lower enrollment and lower completion rates. Both of these trends can be attributed to COVID. The decline in overall degree completion slowed in 2022 and 2023, suggesting that completions along with retention and transfer numbers will begin to recover and increase by 2025.

With regard to retention, the identified KPM was exceeding the national fall-to-fall and fall-to-spring rates for full-time and part-time students by 2025. While fall-to-fall, full time retention rates improved from 48.6 percent in 2015 to 57.6 percent in 2022 (Fall 2022 retained in 2023), the KPMs had not yet been met as of that year. The most recent national data available shows a retention rate of 62.8 percent for Fall 2021 students retained in 2022.

This first goal also considers distance and hybrid courses, which were still relatively few in 2015 but became mainstream under COVID. The initial 2015 KPM sought to increase the share of online/hybrid enrollment by one percent annually. That KPM was subsequently revised and improved to look at pass rates rather than enrollment. As of 2023, the goal of matching on-campus pass rates has not yet been met, with an on campus-rate of 86.1 percent and the distance/hybrid pass rate of 75.2 percent.

#### *Equity*

The key priority of equity was primarily addressed within this first goal, with the initial strategic plan calling for equity in outcomes for students of color, Pell-eligible students, and first-generation students compared to the overall student population. In order to identify equity gaps and track progress toward closing them, CCCS made significant strides in its approach to disaggregating and segmenting data. With the elevation of equity as a strategic priority in 2018, CCCS added other measures and metrics (e.g., course pass rates, credit accumulation, GPA and others) to gauge progress of equity groups compared to the overall student population.

CCCS made only moderate gains with equity outcomes and equity gaps have remained stubbornly persistent over the past decade. Looking at the past five years, overall student success—measured by graduation, transfer, and Skills Builder outcomes—has increased from 34.6 percent in 2019 to

38.8 percent in 2023, an increase of 4.2 percentage points. Over the same period, students of color saw an increase of 3.9 percentage points to 33.5 percent; first generation saw an increase of 2.2 percentage points to 33.1 percent; and Pell-eligible students by 3.2 percentage points to 32.5 percent. As noted above, the gap between these groups and all students has not decreased and in some cases has increased. Other measures, such as course pass rates, have been consistently lower for the three equity groups.

As discussed briefly above, much has been written about the impacts of the pandemic on all learners, and in particular on students of color, first-generation, and low-income students. They were more likely to drop out and/or seek employment due to family and financial obligations. For CCCS and its colleges, while enrollment and other equity measures began to recover in 2023 and 2024, the impacts of COVID are long-lasting.

There are some bright spots on the equity front:

- Whereas the number of degrees and credentials awarded overall has declined since 2020, the percentage awarded to students of color has increased each year (except one) since 2015.
- Overall student success (Retention rates (fall-to-fall) increased slightly in the first years of the plan, then fell overall by one percentage point over the past five years; the rate fell by only .2 percentage points for students of color and increased slightly for Pell-eligible students.
- The number of students participating, and credits earned through, concurrent enrollment has increased consistently each year since 2015 (except 2019/20 to 2020/21 due to COVID) with students of color seeing greater increases than students overall in most years.
  - Over the past five years, whereas credits earned increased 41 percent overall, for students of color the increase was 50 percent. However, note that the five-year change for Pell-eligible and first generation was less than that of students overall.
  - While matriculation rates of concurrent enrollment students have been falling consistently since 2019 (again, more below under Goal 3), Pell-eligible students saw a slight increase from 60.9 percent to 61.7 percent.

While not a specific KPM in the Strategic Plan, three years ago, CCCS was one of only six grantees nationally to be awarded funding to innovate new approaches to closing equity gaps among adult learners of color. CCCS set a goal to close equity gaps by 2% over two years. CCCS met the goal and as one of the strongest performing grantees, Lumina awarded additional grant funding to continue the innovative work. This work and other improvements among individual equity groups or over certain years suggests progress can be, and is being made; the challenge remains consistent progress among all equity groups.

## **Goal 2: Transform our own Workforce Experience**

Four KPMs under this goal were met, including devising a pilot evaluation system that rewards innovation, team accomplishments, measurable outcomes; completing a succession planning process; and setting a goal that 25% of employees will engage in professional development. (See full list of KPMs in Appendix A.)

A key measure under this goal is implementing inclusive hiring practices and employee retention efforts to achieve a workforce that reflects student and community demographics. In the first years under the plan, CCCS closed the gap between its workforce and the Colorado workforce for employees identifying as Black and reduced the gap for employees identifying as Hispanic. The successes were attributed to specific initiatives that CCCS undertook, including revising selections processes, participating in diversity recruitment fairs, and conducting diversity and inclusion training for employees. The early gains in diversifying its workforce were subsequently erased in the middle years of the plan, and by 2021, CCCS had gaps greater than 20 percent in its share of Black and Hispanic employee compared to the available Colorado workforce and CCCS student body.

Similar to the impacts of COVID on students, much has been written about the disparate impacts of COVID on workers of color, with retention rates lower and unemployment rates higher than among White employees nationally. At CCCS, employees of color left at higher rates than white employees and the percentage of employees of color dropped from 21.3 percent to 19.8 percent from 2020 to 2021. By 2023 the percentage had rebounded to 23.5 percent demonstrating continued focus and effort. Significant progress has been made in diversifying administrative positions across the system, including 7 of the 13 college presidents representing diverse communities.

### **Goal 3: Create Education Without Barriers Through Educational Partnerships**

The KPMs under this goal focus on concurrent enrollment and transfer. The 2015 plan called for an increase in high school students enrolled in concurrent enrollment compared to the overall increase in high school enrollment. This KMP was met and exceeded for the first three years of the Plan.

Within the 2018 revisions, CCCS elevated concurrent enrollment as a priority area and added additional KPMs. Since then, credits earned, and college credentials awarded to concurrent enrollment students have increased far more than the one percent annually called for in the KPM. Credit earned through concurrent enrollment has seen a five-year increase of 40.8 percent. However, matriculation of concurrent enrollment students has not kept pace with these trends. In fact, over the past five years, matriculation of concurrent enrollment students has fallen consistently for a total decline of 6.2 percentage points. As noted above under equity, only Pell-eligible students have seen a slight percentage increase in matriculation over the past five years.

Preparing students for transfer to a four-year institution is a core part of CCCS's mission. The Strategic Plan calls for a two percent increase annually in successful transfer by students with at least 15 credit hours. This KPM was not met, rates declined most years covered by the Plan. It should be noted that transfer increased in 2023; while not at the percentage that successful transfer would have been had it increased by two percent annually, the 4.7 percentage points increase in 2023 is encouraging.

### **Goal 4: Redefine our value proposition**

This goal focuses on accessibility, affordability, quality, accountability, resource development, and operational excellence. CCCS met and in some cases exceeded all KPMs under this goal.

CCCS's social media platforms were in the early stages of being used for external communications in 2015. While targets for impressions and click-through rates were not met in the first few years, over the 10 years of the plan, CCCS and the colleges developed and refined KPMs that have reflected social media's increased role in communicating with target audiences, raising brand awareness, driving enrollment, and many other purposes that today are relatively commonplace.

CCCS also met the KPM to develop greater analytics capacity. In addition to the dashboard that provides data on the strategic plan goals and KPMs, CCCS and the colleges have automated certain reports; carried out or contributed to multiple research studies on student progress and outcomes; and partnered with other organizations to add value to CCCS data.

CCCS met and far exceeded its goal of raising \$234 million from public sources and \$94 million from private sources over 10 years. This support has allowed CCCS and its colleges to provide scholarships, improve facilities, increase student support services, and carry out many targeted initiatives and programs.

With affordability as a hallmark of community colleges, the final KPM seeks to ensure that CCCS maintains affordability for students compared to other Colorado institutions (60% or less than 4-year institution resident tuition, and 45% or less of research institution resident tuition). CCCS met and exceeded this KPM.

### **Priority: Strengthening Workforce Development**

As noted in the introduction, in October 2020, the Board elevated workforce development as a strategic priority and emphasized the importance of reaching and serving adult learners. CCCS has implemented new programs and embarked on initiatives that respond directly to this charge, including establishing the Colorado Skills Institute, which will deliver online and on-demand noncredit courses, thereby providing workforce development training for in-demand occupations. CCCS also rebranded and strengthened a statutory program, now called Skill Advance, to provide grants to existing businesses and those locating or expanding to Colorado. The programs reimburse costs associated with job training and thereby increase transferable job skills to support businesses and employees. In addition, the Chancellor's Summit on Adult Education, held annually since 2022, provides a forum to highlight successful strategies, innovative ideas, and lessons learned in working with adult populations.

### **Conclusion**

CCCS made notable progress over the past decade in many areas of its Bold Solutions Strategic Plan. Among many other accomplishments, CCCS has maintained access and affordability for Colorado students relative to four-year institutions. Today, concurrent enrollment is providing more and more high school students with opportunities to earn credits and even credentials prior to enrolling in postsecondary education. At the same time, distance and hybrid education have increased significantly, offering students more flexibility in pursuing their academic goals.

As the landscape shifted, CCCS adjusted its measures and metrics, placing increased emphasis on certain measures and adding new metrics under some goals. Reflecting the statewide need to promote an economic recovery from the pandemic, CCCS has taken steps to increase alignment between what employers need and how the colleges equip and prepare students for the workplace.

While progress on many key student success and equity KPMs did not meet initial expectations, any assessment of student progress and outcomes over the past decade must consider broader (economic and other) factors and—most notably—viewed within the context of COVID’s impact on higher education. Through that lens, CCCS has performed well and is on a positive trajectory.



## APPENDIX A: 2015 Strategic Goals and KPMs

The following chart lists the original 18 KPMs under the Bold Solutions Strategic Plan and each KPM's status as of Spring 2024 (except in the case of retention, where data lags and the most recent national data is 2022). The status is noted as "MET" (or "MET AND EXCEEDED") where the KPM was fully met; "NOT MET" where the KPM was not met in any year; or "PARTIALLY MET" in cases where the KPM was met in some years and not in others.

2015 Strategic Plan Goal	2019 KPM	KPM Description	STATUS
1.1 Transform the student experience	1	Increase the number of certificates & degrees awarded 1% annually (NEW leading indicators of student success and equity)	PARTIALLY MET
1.2 Transform the student experience	2	Exceed the national full-time fall-to-fall retention rate; Exceed the national part-time fall to fall retention rate (NEW leading indicators of student success and equity)	NOT MET
1.3 Transform the student experience	3	Assure equity for students from underrepresented groups, as compared to overall student outcomes. (NEW leading indicators of equity)	NOT MET
1.4 Transform the student experience	4	Review and, as appropriate, redesign programs of study in five state-wide disciplines per year to better serve student needs	PARTIALLY MET
1.5 Transform the student experience	5	Beginning in Fiscal Year 2017, develop 10 competency-based courses per year	PARTIALLY MET
1.6 Transform the student experience	6	Design three accelerated and competency based strategic pathways per year in statewide disciplines with high student demand beginning in FY2020	PARTIALLY MET
1.7 Transform the student experience	7	Increase online, hybrid, and interactive video course success rates to match on-campus course success rates (NEW leading indicators of student success and equity)	NOT MET
2.1 Transform our own workforce experience	8	Implement inclusive hiring practices and employee retention efforts to achieve a workforce that reflects student and community demographics	NOT MET
2.2 Transform our own workforce experience	9	Increase the use of Learning Object Repositories per year	MET

2.3 Transform our own workforce experience	10	Devise a pilot evaluation system that rewards innovation, team accomplishments, and measurable outcomes by 2018	MET
2.4 Transform our own workforce experience	11	Achieve the goal that 25 percent of employees annually will engage in professional development	MET & EXCEEDED
2.5 Transform our own workforce experience	12	Complete a succession planning process for the System and college leadership by 2020	MET
3.1 Create Education without barriers through educational partnerships	13	Increase matriculation of concurrent enrollment students to a CCCS institution within 4 years of high school graduation (and NEW leading indicators for Concurrent Enrollment success)	NOT MET
3.2 Create Education without barriers through educational partnerships	14	Increase percentage of successful transfers to 4-year institutions for all students (and NEW leading indicators of student success and equity)	NOT MET
4.1 Redefine our value proposition	15	Increase social media presence	MET
4.2 Redefine our value proposition	16	Develop greater capacity in predictive and summative analytics by FY2020	MET
4.3 Redefine our value proposition	17	Increase outside resources from public and private sources by securing total commitments of \$233,929,926 from public sources and \$93,814,930 from private sources over fiscal years 2016-2025, the equivalent of a 5% annual increase from the 2015 fiscal year baseline.	MET & EXCEEDED
4.4 Redefine our value proposition	18	Calibrate tuition levels to other Colorado institutions of higher education, maintaining greater affordability	MET