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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

Excused Absence: U.S. Community Colleges and the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement from 2006–2024

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Abstract

In the United States, community colleges enrol roughly 40 per cent of all undergraduates and operate under an open-access, locally bounded mission widely described as 'democracy's colleges'. They are, by mission and demographic reality, among the most community-embedded institutions in U.S. higher education. Yet, they are nearly absent from the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (CECCE), the higher education recognition system designed to honour such work: only 5.4 per cent of currently classified institutions are community colleges. This article examines this absence as a structural condition rather than an institutional failure. A qualitative descriptive thematic analysis of the 26 community colleges achieving CECCE recognition across the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2020 and 2024 application cycles maps successful applications onto the framework's five evidentiary categories: institutional definition of community engagement, infrastructure, campus-wide assessment, student roles, and curricular engagement.

The analysis identifies points of convergence, particularly in student roles and service-learning, alongside persistent gaps in infrastructure expectations, longitudinal assessment requirements, and a definitional ordering placing scholarship and research above teaching and citizenship. The pattern across cycles shows the pace of new community college classifications falling by roughly 80 per cent between the 2008 and 2024 cycles. The 2026 redesign of the CECCE framework broadens the language of recognition through partnership reciprocity, asset-based engagement, and epistemic inclusion, and introduces fee-based technical assistance for applicants. Each is a meaningful step. None addresses the underlying resource asymmetry making

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documentation of engagement structurally more costly at a community college than at a well-resourced 4-year institution. The article argues this asymmetry constitutes an excused absence: not an institutional choice to step away from recognition, but the predictable outcome of an evidentiary architecture continuing to assume the resources, mission, and scholarly orientation of the 4-year research university. Broadening the framing is necessary but not sufficient.

Keywords

Community Colleges; Carnegie Elective Classification For Community Engagement; Community Engagement; Service-Learning; Higher Education Policy; Institutional Resources

Introduction

In the United States, 2-year public community colleges enrol roughly 40 per cent of all undergraduates and operate under an open-access, locally bounded mission (Boggs 2011b; Kisker, Cohen & Brawer 2023). They are, by mission and demographic reality, among the most community-embedded institutions in U.S. higher education and are often referred to as democracy's colleges. Yet, they are nearly absent from the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (CECCE) (Carnegie Classifications 2026), the higher education recognition designed to honour community engagement work. Of the 277 institutions currently holding the CECCE, only a small minority, approximately 5.4 per cent, are 2-year community colleges. The remainder are 4-year universities and colleges, including private liberal arts institutions, large public research universities and members of the Ivy League (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2026).

This article examines the absence of community colleges in the CECCE. The title of the article implies that community colleges are excused for being absent from the CECCE. This article details the structural conditions of the 2006–2024 application, which saw community colleges attempting to fit within a national recognition system whose evidentiary requirements were built around the resources and missions of 4-year (and mainly) research universities. An excused absence does not label community colleges as failing in engagement work. The application data examined in this article show the opposite: community colleges earning the CECCE describe substantial, mission-aligned engagement with their local communities. An excused absence is, instead, the predictable outcome of a national recognition system asking institutions to document engagement using categories, infrastructure and language built for the 4-year higher education sector.

This article uses the term 'mismatch' in a specific sense when referring to the 2006–2024 CECCE application. A mismatch occurs when a documentation requirement can be satisfied only through institutional structures, personnel or scholarly functions the community college sector is not chartered, funded or staffed to maintain. Institutions may describe engagement in different vocabularies without penalty, but a mismatch arises when the difference itself reduces the probability of recognition. Used this way, 'mismatch' names a structural relationship between the framework's evidentiary template and the community college sector's legislated mission and finance conditions. Because the CECCE shapes how higher education defines community engagement (Fear & Sandmann 2016, 2019), the mismatch reaches beyond mere recognition. For community colleges, national CECCE recognition supports institutional advocacy, peer learning and resource conversations within and beyond the sector. For the field, community colleges may be the first or only postsecondary site of service-learning, civic education and democratic engagement (Cutler White & King 2024; Newell 2014), serving as incubators of opportunity for many low-income, minoritised and first-generation students (American Association of Community Colleges 2024). A system concentrating community engagement recognition in selective 4-year institutions is biased towards institutions where advantaged students enrol, leaving unrecognised the institutions preparing a large and diverse share of the population.

The purpose of this study was to examine community college applications from the 2006 to 2024 cycles, documenting how colleges earned the CECCE within a system of evidentiary criteria historically biased towards 4-year institutions. The study's research question was: 'How do community colleges achieving the CECCE report community engagement activities within the 2006–2024 CECCE framework?' The analysis maps the colleges' successful applications onto the CECCE framework, identifying both points of convergence with the framework's evidentiary expectations and structural gaps where its categories do not capture how community colleges engage with their communities. This study offers the first systematic examination of community colleges' participation in the CECCE across the 2006 to 2024 period. No prior research has documented the persistent underrepresentation of these institutions within the CECCE framework. By naming and analysing this absence, the study establishes an empirical foundation for future inquiry into how community engagement is defined, measured and rewarded in higher education.

This article is addressed to three audiences. The first is community engagement scholars researching inclusion and social justice. Although the CECCE is a U.S. framework, the condition it illustrates is not specific to the United States or to 2-year institutions only. Wherever national recognitions apply a single evidentiary template across institutions holding differing missions, there is potential for exclusion. The U.S. community college case offers one detailed account of how the exclusionary mismatch operates. The second is community college leaders and faculty weighing whether to pursue the CECCE. The exemplar colleges provide models for colleges to learn from and replicate. Third, the article provides insights for the community engagement field and the CECCE gatekeepers of the recognition framework.

The article first describes the CECCE, including its historical formation by 4-year research universities and its evidentiary architecture from 2006–2024. It then introduces the U.S. community college 2-year sector of U.S. higher education, focusing on its mission, finance, students and the resource conditions shaping documentation capacity. The Methods and Findings sections describe the analytic approach and report patterns across the 26 successful community college applications. The Discussion is organised around the framework's own evidentiary categories and asks where the 2026 redesign may broaden recognition for community colleges. The Conclusion asserts that broadening the framing is necessary but not sufficient for inclusive recognition.

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement

The CECCE is a voluntary, peer-reviewed designation awarded to U.S. higher education institutions demonstrating a substantial and sustained commitment to community engagement (American Council on Education, n.d.). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching established the Elective Classification in 2006. Administrative responsibility first resided at the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, then at the Swearer Center for Public Engagement at Brown University from 2017 to 2020, and at the American Council on Education (ACE) from 2020 onwards (Brown University, 2020). In early 2026, the Carnegie Foundation announced the University of San Diego would assume the administrative role beginning with the 2029 cycle (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2026). Across these transitions, the CECCE has remained the most prestigious recognition system for engaged practice in U.S. higher education. Reclassification is obligatory currently every 6 years to maintain the designation, requiring institutions to resubmit a full application cycle after cycle. The CECCE defines community engagement as follows:

> *Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare*

educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (Carnegie Classifications, 2026).

Historical Formation and 4-Year Origins

The CECCE's evidentiary framework reflects its institutional origin, developed primarily by and for research-focused 4-year institutions. It draws on the scholarship of engagement tradition associated with Ernest Boyer and was shaped through pilot work at major research universities (Driscoll 2008; Saltmarsh & Hartley 2011). The application's expectations regarding dedicated infrastructure, named centres, faculty rewards in promotion and tenure systems, longitudinal partnership tracking and the integration of engaged research into scholarly production reflect the resource and mission profile of 4-year research universities. The framework shapes the kinds of engagement work the recognition is biased towards. This bias led to ACE and the Carnegie Foundation launching a 2026 redesign of the application in an effort to broaden the framework to better reflect the diverse public purposes of higher education and to reposition the CECCE as a tool for systems change rather than a static benchmark (American Council on Education 2025; Carnegie Classifications 2024).

Evidentiary Structure of the Application

The CECCE application requires a rigorous self-study. Institutions must demonstrate engagement is reflected in their mission and strategic plans, supported by dedicated infrastructure and funding, integrated across curricular and co-curricular activities and assessed for outcomes related to student learning and community impact. The application has been organised into two main sections across most application cycles. The Foundational Indicators section asks institutions to document institutional identity and culture, infrastructure, campus-wide assessment, faculty and staff engagement and student roles. The Categories of Community Engagement section asks for evidence on curricular engagement, including service-learning courses, community-based learning, capstone projects, outreach and partnerships, including community-academic partnerships and capacity-building initiatives (Carnegie Classifications 2024). Each section asks for narrative evidence supported by data, with strict word limits and specific evidentiary expectations. The 2024 cycle introduced a peer review process in which trained reviewers evaluate applications against rubrics developed by the field, a change designed to make the CECCE of and by the field (Jones 2024).

Five evidentiary categories organise the analysis presented later in this article: institutional definition of community engagement, infrastructure, campus-wide assessment and documentation, student roles and recognition and curricular engagement, particularly service-learning. Each category corresponds to a section of the CECCE application, and each carries specific evidentiary expectations: institutions are asked to provide evidence of dedicated centres or coordinated structures, paid staff supporting engagement, formal assessment systems with measurable outcomes, faculty rewards integrated into promotion and tenure (where applicable) and longitudinal data infrastructure for tracking partnership outcomes.

The 2026 Application Redesign

The 2026 application cycle marked a substantial redesign of the application framework. Prompted by the broader Carnegie reimagining initiative and feedback from the field, the redesigned framework attempted to better reflect, in contemporary terms, the broad public purpose, mission, focus and impact of U.S. colleges and universities (Carnegie Classifications 2024). Among other changes, the 2026 framework introduced more clearly themed sections, dedicated questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic and other large-scale disruptions affected engagement, and a stronger emphasis on partnership, asset-based and epistemic engagement practice. Partnership reciprocity refers to the expectation of mutual benefit and shared

decision-making between college and community, in contrast to a one-directional service or extension model. Asset-based engagement positions community members as holders of knowledge and capacity rather than as deficits requiring institutional intervention. Epistemic inclusion refers to the recognition that valid knowledge for engaged work is produced inside communities as well as inside the academy. The framework also signalled a shift towards seeing the CECCE as a people-centred systems change tool rather than a static benchmark (American Council on Education 2025). These changes reflect the ongoing attention to recognising community engagement across diverse institutional missions.

The 2026 cohort included 237 institutions earning the CECCE, with 37 first-time classifications. The 37 joined prior cycle colleges for a total of 277 currently classified institutions across the United States. Of those 237, 157 were public and 80 were private. Of the full 237-institution cohort, 81 were also designated Minority Serving Institutions, a category overlapping with public and private status. Three new community colleges were classified in the 237-institution cohort: Oxnard College (California), Portland Community College (Oregon) and the Community College of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) (Carnegie Foundation 2026), bringing total representation to 29 (12 per cent of the current total).

U.S. Community Colleges: Mission, Students and Resource Conditions

Community colleges in the United States are a structurally distinct sector of higher education, and several of their distinguishing characteristics interact directly with the CECCE's evidentiary expectations described above. The sections below summarise the sector's origin, mission, students and resource constraints.

ORIGIN AND MISSION

The U.S. community college sector emerged in the early twentieth century to extend the first 2 years of undergraduate education beyond the existing 4-year college and university system, opening higher education opportunities (Boggs 2011a,b). The current form dates to the 1947 Truman Commission, calling on states to establish publicly funded, locally controlled, open-access lower-level undergraduate institutions to meet post-war workforce and education demand (Zook 1947a, 1947b, 1948). The Commission recommended the institutions focus on teaching and training rather than on research, with research and knowledge generation reserved for the 4-year university sector (Zook 1948). States adopted the recommendation across diverse governance arrangements. Some assigned community colleges to the K–12 system for oversight, others aligned them with public universities, and still others created independent governance structures. Most states legislatively assigned community colleges to bounded service areas, ensuring each college's mission would tie to the workforce and civic needs of a specific local geography (Cutler White 2019; McGuinness 2022).

Community colleges across the United States generally take two forms: technical colleges offering vocational training leading to employment, and comprehensive colleges offering credit-bearing (vocational and transfer) degrees as well as noncredit workforce credentials (Kisker et al. 2023; Xu & Ran 2020). Within comprehensive community colleges, degree-seeking students represent the majority of enrolment. In addition to credit-bearing degree credentials, the U.S. federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, originally enacted in 1998 and now part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, formalised a substantial role for community colleges in delivering noncredit programs for adult basic education (literacy and numeracy), high school equivalency (General Educational Development, or GED) preparation, and English as a second language instruction (U.S. Department of Education 2024). The GED Testing Service (n.d.) reports approximately 150,000 GED credentials awarded by states annually, and Long and Mullin (2014) frame community colleges as the dominant postsecondary destination for GED credentials. Although noncredit programming has long been a defining feature of the comprehensive community

college, it remains comparatively understudied and unevenly funded relative to credit instruction (Van Noy et al. 2008; Xu & Ran 2020).

STUDENTS AT U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES

In 2024, U.S. community colleges enrolled about 6.1 million degree-seeking students and an additional 4.1 million students seeking workforce credentials (American Association of Community Colleges 2024), representing 38 per cent of all U.S. undergraduates, 53 per cent of Native American undergraduates, 48 per cent of Hispanic undergraduates, 39 per cent of Black undergraduates, and 34 per cent of Asian American and Pacific Islander undergraduates. The sector's students are older than the 4-year sector on average, with a median student age of 23. Approximately 32 per cent of community college students are the first in their families to attend college, and most work part time or full time while studying (American Association of Community Colleges 2024). Community colleges educate large shares of Pell-eligible students – the U.S. Department of Education federal need-based grant aid program for low family income (Dortch 2024). The sector also enrols substantial populations of English Language Learners, high school equivalency completers, and students in need of developmental (remedial) education sequences (American Association of Community Colleges 2024).

Community college degrees are also a substantial pathway to the bachelor's degree. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports 49 per cent of U.S. bachelor's degree recipients in 2020–2021 had earned community college credit at some point in their education (Shapiro et al. 2018). The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics reports that about 52 per cent of bachelor's degree recipients between 2008 and 2017 attended a community college, with 25 per cent earning an associate's degree (Foley, Milan & Hamric 2021). The implications for community engagement and civic learning are substantial. For a large share of U.S. undergraduates, the community college is the first place where they encounter formal opportunities for service-learning, civic education, and democratic engagement (Kisker et al. 2025; Newell 2014).

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Despite their deep reach into the communities they serve, U.S. community colleges operate under tight resource constraints. These directly impact their capacity to institutionalise the kind of community engagement infrastructure that the CECCE asks institutions to document. State funding for higher education is discretionary in most state budgets (Cutler White 2019; Hearn & Griswold 1994), with 2-year and 4-year institutions competing for the same limited appropriation. Four-year public institutions typically have endowments, alumni-giving infrastructure and grant-funded research portfolios, which supplement state appropriations and enable them to fund optional initiatives such as a centre for community engagement, a service-learning office or a tenured director of engaged scholarship Weerts, Cabrera & Sanford 2010). Community colleges rarely have these supplementary funding streams. Most operate close to their core instructional mission, with modest discretionary budgets and small administrative complements. The sector's financial resource environment is constrained by the dual demands of serving a high-need student population and operating within a state funding model that prioritises workforce development and degree credentialing instruction over co-curricular and engagement programming (Mullin & Honeyman 2007; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association et al. 2024). The colleges must balance the needs of meeting workforce and local economy demands with prioritising state performance requirements that dictate future year funding.

The Community College and CECCE Mismatch

The CECCE framework's definitional emphasis on enriching scholarship, research and creative activity is incongruent with the mission of community colleges. The Truman Commission reserved research for 4-year institutions, leaving community colleges to operate with no research mandate (Zook 1947a). Faculty are responsible for teaching undergraduates, not for producing knowledge. Noncredit and adult basic education programs, which are central to community college engagement with local communities, do not map cleanly onto the CECCE's credit-bearing service-learning and curricular engagement categories. This mismatch is not a failure of community college engagement; rather, it is a mismatch between the sector's authentic mission and the framework's evidentiary template. Community colleges differ from 4-year research colleges and universities in seven interrelated operational ways, each carrying implications for how community colleges can document and achieve CECCE recognition. The comparison here is between publicly funded community colleges and highly resourced 4-year research universities. The comparison does not include regional comprehensive universities, small liberal arts and private colleges, and other teaching-focused 4-year institutions which may have similar resource and mission constraints. Table A1 in Appendix A presents the full comparison; the interpretation below focuses on how each feature shapes recognition under the framework.

OPEN ADMISSIONS

Community colleges admit any degree- or non-degree-seeking student holding a high school diploma or its equivalent through open admissions. This open-door policy defines the community college sector and its claim to the title *democracy's colleges* (Boggs 2011b). For CECCE purposes, the open-access mission supports broad community partnerships by the colleges without the affluence, elite alumni networks or named donor pipelines that a selective student population generates to fund engagement infrastructure.

TEACHING AND TRAINING MISSION

The Truman Commission (1948) reserved research and knowledge generation for the 4-year sector, tasking community colleges with teaching and training. Most offer the 2-year associate degree as their highest credential, though a growing number of states authorise applied bachelor's degrees in fields with workforce shortages, such as nursing and information technology (Community College Baccalaureate Association, n.d.). The CECCE's definitional emphasis on engaged scholarship and research-as-engagement is therefore structurally mismatched with the community college mission.

MAJORITY COMMUTER STUDENT POPULATION

Only about 28 per cent of community colleges offer student housing (American Association of Community Colleges, 2024); the rest are commuter institutions whose students live in the surrounding service area. Community college engagement is therefore often engagement with students' own neighbourhoods, an authenticity not captured by the framework's residential-campus assumptions.

FACULTY COMPOSITION, PROMOTION AND TENURE

The AAUP (2025) reports that 2-year associate's colleges employ 17 per cent full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty and 65 per cent contingent faculty, compared with 49 per cent and 27 per cent at Research 1 universities. Contingent faculty have little incentive or reward for building community engagement into their courses, a core CECCE evidentiary expectation.

STATE FINANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Community colleges are financed through a distinctive combination of state appropriations, local taxation, federal aid and tuition, with the local-taxation component tying them to the local economy (Cutler White, 2019, 2022; Mullin & Honeyman, 2007; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association et al. 2024). They receive substantially less per-student state funding than 4-year public institutions despite similar instructional costs (Mullin & Honeyman, 2007), constraining the discretionary infrastructure the CECCE asks institutions to document, including dedicated centres, named staff lines, longitudinal data systems and faculty release time.

BOUNDED SERVICE AREAS

The colleges operate within state-authorised geographic service areas, confining recruitment and mission to a designated locale (McGuinness, 2022), unlike selective institutions recruiting nationally and globally. The bounded area aligns engagement directly with the local community, yet the CECCE recognises engagement across local, regional/state, national and global scales, an implicit hierarchy in which the locally bound community college mission registers as comparatively narrow.

NON-CREDIT AND WORKFORCE OFFERINGS

Community colleges are tasked by the U.S. federal government with providing Adult Basic Education, High School Equivalency/General Education Development and English as a Second Language (Van Noy et al., 2008), alongside industry-recognised workforce certifications and apprenticeships serving the local economy. This central form of community engagement has no clear recognition in the CECCE framework.

Method

This study examined how U.S. community colleges earning the CECCE document their community engagement work and what the pattern of community college participation reveals about the framework's responsiveness to mission-diverse engagement. The study employed qualitative descriptive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2022) to examine the applications of the 26 U.S. community colleges achieving the CECCE across the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2020 and 2024 application cycles. Thematic analysis is well suited to the systematic identification of patterns within qualitative data and to the interpretive work of relating those patterns to a theoretical frame (Saldaña 2013). Applications for the 2026 cycle are outside the scope of work associated with the project.

Data for the 2006–2024 application analysis were provided by the American Council on Education through the ACE Carnegie CECCE Research Labs project, making CECCE application data available to credentialled researchers under data use agreements (Pearl et al. 2025). The dataset includes only applications resulting in successful classification having permission from the college to share for research purposes. ACE does not release application data from institutions applying unsuccessfully, owing to anonymity protections for those institutions. This constraint shapes the boundaries of the study: the analysis can describe how successful community college applications mapped onto the framework but cannot address why community colleges did not apply in the first place, why classified colleges did not reapply, or why unsuccessful applicants were unsuccessful.

The analysis followed three stages. In the first stage, I familiarised myself with each of the 26 community college applications, reading first for context and a second time for emerging themes. The applications were organised into two analytic groups: First-Time Classified colleges and Reclassified colleges. Of the 26 community colleges with Lifetime Classification across 2006 to 2024, defined here as the cumulative set of community colleges classified at any point in the program's history, 13 (50 per cent) reclassified at

least once. The 2008 cohort produced the largest number of first-time classifications, with nine, while the 2020 cycle produced the smallest, with one.

In the second stage, I focused detailed analysis on the 2015 application cycle because it represented the largest single cohort across the 26 community college applications and offered the most consistent thematic comparison across colleges. I coded each 2015 application against the CECCE framework's two main sections, Foundational Indicators and Categories of Community Engagement, generating descriptive codes within each subsection (institutional identity and culture, infrastructure, assessment, student roles, curricular engagement, outreach and partnerships). After initial coding, I identified four cross-cutting themes characterising how community colleges defined community engagement in their applications: collaboration and reciprocity; student learning and development; civic responsibility; and addressing community needs. Exemplary colleges were named for each of the four themes to illustrate how community colleges conduct community engagement.

Findings

From 2006 to 2024, 26 unique U.S. community colleges received CECCE recognition, representing approximately 2.6 per cent of the roughly 1 000 U.S. public community colleges. Table 1 lists these 26 community colleges, the year or years of their classification and their U.S. state location. Half of these 26 colleges achieved the required reclassification after 5 years at least once, and one college – Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey – was classified across three application cycles (2008, 2015 and 2024). Regional distribution data, showing a concentration in the U.S. Northeast and an absence from 35 states, is presented in Appendix A1. As the dataset includes only successful applications, the patterns reported below do not establish whether the same conditions differentiate classified colleges from those that applied unsuccessfully.

TEMPORAL CLASSIFICATION PATTERNS

Table 2 illustrates a temporal pattern of community college CECCE across the six application cycles. In 2006, five colleges achieved First-Time Classification, with four of the five achieving reclassification in 2015. The 2008 cycle produced the largest number of First-Time Classified community colleges, with nine institutions earning the designation. Eight of the nine colleges achieved reclassification in 2015. The 2010 cycle produced seven First-Time Classified colleges. After 2010, the pattern reverses sharply. The 2015 cycle produced two first-time classifications, the 2020 cycle produced one, and the 2024 cycle produced two, showing the pace of new community college classifications falling by roughly 80 per cent between the 2008 and 2024 cycles. Reclassification rates outside the early cohorts are also low. Of the seven 2010 First-Time Classified colleges, only two reclassified in subsequent cycles through the 2024 cycle. The dataset analysed did not include comparative trend data for other institution types, so the analysis here is limited to community colleges.

CECCE Application Evidence: Community Engagement Definition

A key component of the CECCE application is defining community engagement. The 26 classified community colleges clustered their definition around four cross-cutting themes. First, *collaboration and reciprocity* emphasise mutual benefit and shared work between college and community, with most colleges positioning themselves as serving the community rather than producing knowledge with the community. Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts, for example, adopted a definition closely aligned with the Carnegie Foundation language and emphasised diverse partnerships with community organisations, a clear strength of all community colleges. Second, *student learning and development* framed engagement as

Table 1. Community college representation in the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, 2006 to 2024

Community College	State	2006	2008	2010	2015	2020	2024
Allegany College of Maryland	MD					X	
Anne Arundel Community College	MD		X		X		
Bergen Community College	NJ			X			
Blinn College	TX			X			
Bristol Community College	MA	X			X		
Bunker Hill Community College	MA		X		X		
Chandler-Gilbert Community College	AZ	X			X		
City Colleges of Chicago–Wilbur Wright College	IL						X
College of the Canyons	CA						X
Collin College	TX			X		X	
Connecticut State Community College Norwalk	CT			X			
Hocking College	OH		X				
Jefferson Community College	NY			X			
Kapi'olani Community College	HI	X			X		
Mesa Community College	AZ				X		
Miami Dade College	FL		X		X		
Middlesex Community College, Bedford	MA	X			X		
Milwaukee Area Technical College	WI				X		
Mount Wachusett Community College	MA		X		X		
North Shore Community College	MA			X		X	
Northampton Community College	PA		X		X		
Owens Community College	OH		X		X		
Raritan Valley Community College	NJ		X		X		X
Richland Community College	IL	X					
Salt Lake Community College	UT				X		
Texas Southmost College	TX			X			

Note: X indicates a year in which the college achieved classification or reclassification. Data drawn from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2024) lifetime listings of campuses classified for community engagement.

Table 2. First-Time Classifications and Reclassifications of Community Colleges in the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, by Year, 2006 to 2024

Classification Year	First-Time Classification	Reclassification	Total
2006	5	0	5
2008	8	0	8
2010	7	0	7
2015	3	11	14
2020	1	2	3
2024	2	1	3
Total	26	14	40

Note: First-Time Classification counts each college only in the year of its initial Carnegie Classification. Reclassification counts each subsequent year a previously classified college achieved the classification again. Totals reflect 26 unique community colleges and 40 classification events across the six cycles from 2006 to 2024.

learning linking community interaction to academic understanding and personal growth. Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland defined engagement primarily through this lens. Third, *civic responsibility* emphasised the development of informed citizens prepared for democratic participation. Mount Wachusett Community College in Massachusetts adopted the Massachusetts Civic Learning and Engagement Assessment Framework as its definitional anchor. Fourth, *addressing community needs* positioned community engagement as the institution's responsive contribution to identified community priorities. Most classified colleges operationalised more than one theme simultaneously, often pairing student learning and civic responsibility or pairing collaboration with addressing community needs.

CECCE Application Evidence: Foundational Indicators

The CECCE application asks a series of questions organised as Foundational Indicators representing college commitments in support of community engagement efforts. The indicators are summarised below using the CECCE categories of infrastructure, campus-wide assessment and documentation, and student roles and recognition.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Classified community colleges demonstrated varied approaches to building and expanding the infrastructure necessary to support community engagement. Each college reported either establishing or improving community engagement initiatives, with some including dedicated staffing, facilities, collaborative structures and budgeting. Some colleges established or expanded centres or institutes, such as a Centre for Civic Learning and Engagement, a Centre for Service-Learning, or a Service-Learning Office. A small number of colleges noted the establishment or expansion of a dedicated community engagement budget and support from the college fund-development office in creating sustainable funding. Overall, infrastructure varied considerably across the 26 colleges, with no consistent model of staffing, facilities or budget allocation. Some colleges built centralised institutes; others distributed engagement work across departments without a single coordinating body.

Two exemplars illustrate the diversity of well-developed infrastructure. Miami Dade College in Florida, the largest single U.S. community college enrolling over 100,000 students, established an Institute for Civic

Engagement and Democracy to centralise community engagement efforts. The Institute offers resources for faculty designing service-learning courses, tracks the impact of those courses on local community development and produces regular reporting on partnerships with community organisations. In contrast to Miami Dade's centralised Institute, Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts established multiple programs and committees sustaining its civic engagement and service-learning initiatives, including the Lowell Civic Collaborative, serving as a framework to engage students, faculty and community partners in initiatives addressing local and national issues. Both Miami Dade and Middlesex illustrate well-developed local responses to local needs, built over many years.

CAMPUS-WIDE ASSESSMENT AND DOCUMENTATION

The classified community colleges reported systematic use of data to evaluate engagement, producing program effectiveness assessments, public reporting and annual performance reports. Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania conducted an internal survey garnering 800 responses from faculty, staff, students and community members, and used the results to identify community engagement, diversity and global engagement as strategic priorities. The college developed Key Performance Indicators tied to growth in community partnerships, increased participation in service-learning and increased diversity initiatives. City Colleges of Chicago - Wilbur Wright College revised its institutional learning outcomes to align with its mission and evolving student population, settling on five revised outcomes including Intercultural Competence, Critical Thinking, Communication, Information and Technology and Personal Accountability. The college proposed a Civic Action Plan to enhance data-driven assessment of community-engaged courses and programs. Both colleges illustrate the achievability of systematic assessment in the community college context, with each requiring substantial internal resourcing to develop and maintain.

STUDENT ROLES AND RECOGNITION

Classified community colleges actively foster student leadership through a wide range of opportunities, training, recognition and collaboration with community partners. The colleges support student roles by offering leadership opportunities on advisory boards and committees, expanded roles in student government, leadership training programs aimed at developing civic engagement skills, leadership courses incorporated into curricula and encouragement for students to initiate and lead service projects based on identified community needs. Students engaging in service-learning are typically recognised through certificates of appreciation or honours during graduation ceremonies.

Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland exemplifies this approach. Students serve on advisory boards, including those for the Centre for the Study of Local Issues and Service-Learning, ensuring programs align with student needs. Student-led clubs, such as Phi Theta Kappa and the Student Education Association, design and implement service projects with guidance from the Centre for Learning through Service. The college's Leadership Challenge workshop series prepares students for civic engagement leadership. Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey takes a similarly student-centred approach, with a service-learning mission emphasising civic literacy and career resilience. Both colleges treat students as partners in community engagement rather than as recipients of programming.

CECCE Application Evidence: Curricular Engagement: Service-Learning

Service-learning was the primary curricular vehicle for community engagement reported across the 26 classified colleges. The colleges described student participation, faculty engagement to develop course offerings and integration of service-learning across departments. Some colleges diversified service-learning

offerings through models reflecting a move towards inclusivity and accessibility for different student populations and learning styles. The colleges' definitions of service-learning reflected a broad understanding of community engagement, accommodating various levels of student involvement while ensuring meaningful connections between academic learning and the community as a partner in addressing identified needs (Lizzul et al. 2015; Robinson 2007).

Owens Community College in Ohio operates a structured service-learning program. Through structured reflection, students enhance academic understanding, develop leadership and communication skills, and build civic responsibility. The community gains a reliable volunteer base addressing specific needs, and the college strengthens its community partnerships and enriches its curriculum. Kapi'olani Community College in Hawai'i has emphasised student learning outcomes assessment in service-learning since 2006, aligning course competencies with broader degree program goals. With guidance from the Faculty Senate Learning Outcomes Assessment Coordinator and Service-Learning faculty, the college revised its General Education Learning Outcomes in 2011–2012, focusing on Thinking and Inquiry, Communication, Diversity, Aesthetic Engagement, and Integrative Learning. Faculty incorporating service-learning engage in development workshops aligning assignments with these outcomes and require students to complete a capstone essay reflecting on their service experience. Both colleges illustrate the range of curricular embedding possible at community colleges.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to document how community college applications earned the prestigious CECCE recognition within a system of evidentiary criteria historically biased towards 4-year institutions. The article frames an excused absence not as an institutional choice to withdraw from CECCE recognition, but as the predictable outcome of an evidentiary and documentary framework that assumes the resources, mission, and scholarly orientation of the 4-year research university. A 4-year research university with large enrolment or an endowment can hire a vice provost for engagement, fund a dedicated centre with paid staff, support faculty release time for engaged research, and maintain longitudinal partnership tracking infrastructure as a routine institutional cost. A community college with little or no endowment, a lean administrative staff, and a state appropriation tied largely to enrolment-driven instructional formulas typically cannot. Fear and Sandmann (2016, 2019) argue the field of higher education community engagement needs a second-wave movement, one resisting institutional accommodation, which they describe as the absorption and digestion of alternative practices into existing systems without disturbing the systems themselves. They propose the second-wave movement will shift from '...what's best for the institution... to an emphasis on what's best for the public. Outreach and engagement is higher education's best chance for change that fundamentally serves the public good (p. 123)'. What's best for the public largely revolves around community colleges.

Perhaps the 2026 CECCE redesign represents real progress at the level of framing, language, and conceptual breadth, and is the beginning of a second-wave movement. Across the framework categories, the redesign's emphasis on partnership reciprocity, asset-based engagement and epistemic inclusion opens recognition pathways previously narrower in scope. The redesign does not, however, address the resource asymmetry making documentation of engagement structurally more costly at a community college than at a well-resourced 4-year institution. Nor does it revise the CECCE's definitional ordering, in which knowledge production is seemingly valued above teaching and citizenship development. Without recognising that the community college mission is structurally different from the 4-year mission, and without the structural and resource investments allowing community colleges to document engagement aligned with their mission, broadened framing is not likely to produce broadened participation from the 2-year college sector. The result is a recognition system in which the institutional types with the greatest community embeddedness, and

a focused mission on serving that community, are structurally underrepresented relative to those with the greatest discretionary capacity to document engagement. Fear and Sandmann (2016) encouraged making space for 'determining who qualifies as a scholar and what qualifies as scholarship' (p. 124). As the CECCE evolves with the outreach-engagement field, more space should be made for the knowledge of community college faculty and the populations they serve.

Two examples of category mismatch and alignment from successful classified colleges deserve attention: Foundational Indicators–Infrastructure and Curricular Engagement–Service Learning. Infrastructure is the CECCE category where the gap between framework expectations and community college resourcing was most pronounced. The CECCE's evidentiary expectations assume resources comparable to a 4-year institution. Colleges able to demonstrate CECCE-quality systems are those able to dedicate institutional research staff, faculty governance time and administrative attention to the work, which is not the norm across the sector. The framework's expectation of campus-wide assessment is reasonable for a national recognition program but unreasonable to expect the 2-year college sector to achieve at scale. Curricular Engagement–Service Learning was the area of clearest convergence between the community college mission and the CECCE framework. As the Anne Arundel and Raritan Valley cases show, community colleges treat students as partners in engagement work, through advisory roles, student-led service initiatives and leadership development. Service-learning was the primary curricular vehicle across the 26 colleges, aligning well with the college's teaching mission, making the teaching mission the clearest near-term opportunity for expanded community college participation and inclusion. However, the structural limitation remains faculty capacity: colleges with large adjunct faculty populations and limited release time often cannot scale service-learning across the curriculum at the rate the framework recognises.

Limitations

The community college applications analysed were submitted under the 2006 to 2024 CECCE framework. The findings could not describe the much larger population of community colleges making different choices: choosing not to apply, applying without success, or achieving CECCE once and not reapplying. Access to data for colleges not earning the CECCE was not made available. Any statements about the 2026 redesign compare the redesigned criteria with the documented practices of classified community colleges rather than reporting findings from applications submitted under the new criteria. Therefore, statements about why community colleges are underrepresented are interpretive, grounded in the documented resource and mission conditions of the sector rather than in evidence from non-applicants. Claims about the 2026 redesign's potential for more inclusivity are therefore proposals for testing when 2026 and 2029 application data become available. This article also recognises that some 4-year institutions may also be excluded and underrepresented and have similar resource constraints as community colleges. Further, the future of higher education is evolving rapidly. The study could not predict state or federal actions impacting community-engaged scholarship and practice and issues of inclusion and social justice.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The study's findings are useful to three named audiences: scholars researching inclusion and social justice, community college practitioners and CECCE gatekeepers. Together, these three audiences can independently move the field forward or combine to achieve greater impact.

Inclusion and Social Justice Scholars

The study establishes an empirical foundation for future inquiry into how inclusion within community engagement is defined, measured and recognised across higher education. Four lines of expanded research

would address unanswered questions about how some institutions are broadly represented and some are not. Research gathered could be shared with the CECCE gatekeepers for consideration in future redesign discussions. The CECCE is a U.S. framework, but the inclusion and justice criteria it illustrates are not specific to the United States or to 2-year institutions only.

—Qualitative interviews with community college chief academic officers, staff leading community engagement and faculty senate leaders in unclassified colleges would yield insights into the institutional, resource and mission-fit considerations shaping the decision not to pursue the CECCE.
—Follow-up interviews with classified community colleges electing not to reapply would clarify whether the decision reflects shifting institutional priorities, the cost of the application process or other factors.
—Comparative analysis of reclassification rates across institutional types using the broader ACE Research Lab dataset would establish whether the decline observed for community colleges is a sector-specific pattern or part of a wider trend across the CECCE as a whole.
—Comparative analysis of the broader ACE Research Lab dataset assessing the practice of private institutions may yield insights into specific mission-focused institutions. Nearly 25 per cent of institutions currently classified have a religious affiliation, which may influence resource allocation even with budget constraints.

Each of these lines of inquiry would strengthen the field's understanding of the participation gap and could inform the design of subsequent application cycles.

Community College Practice

The 26 applications yield practical guidance for community college leaders considering the CECCE. Community college practitioners interested in the CECCE could learn from the classified colleges by reaching out to current staff and faculty. The colleges have much to share regarding both the application and the CECCE's impact on the college in terms of prestige and state and federal relations. The colleges may also have received grants, foundation funding, or other external resources to continue or expand community engagement. Connecting with these colleges could be well worth the small investment of time. Miami Dade College (FL) and Middlesex College (MA) show two replicable organisational forms: a centralised institute, and a distributed set of programs and committees. Colleges without a centralised effort can document coordination through standing committees, faculty governance structures, and partnership agreements already in place. Mount Wachusett anchored its definition in an external state framework, an approach available to any college in a state or system with civic learning language already adopted.

Student roles were the strongest area of evidence across the applications and require the least new investment, since advisory roles, student-led initiatives, and leadership development may already be embedded in the teaching mission. Assessment presented the steepest cost, and the Northampton (MA) and Wilbur Wright (IL) applications suggest a workable sequence: begin with one or two engagement measures inside an existing institutional effectiveness cycle rather than building a parallel system for the application. Colleges with a high proportion of adjunct-heavy faculty can concentrate service-learning evidence in a small number of courses taught by full-time faculty, documenting depth rather than breadth. Commuter enrolment can be described as a distinguishing strength, since engagement occurs in students' own neighbourhoods rather than in a service area surrounding a residential campus. Lastly, colleges can view the CECCE application as strengthening evidence for local stakeholders, showcasing the value of the college to the bounded service area.

CECCE Gatekeepers

The 2026 redesign is a welcome attempt to broaden participation, but work remains. For community colleges, the structurally mismatched language of engaged scholarship persists. The redesign therefore broadens the recognised expressions of engagement but leaves in place the definitions and structural evidentiary requirements, meaning community colleges are still less likely to achieve the CECCE. The 2026 redesign's attention to community-based learning, capstone projects, and partnership reciprocity is responsive to what successful community colleges describe in their applications. Despite the redesign and technical assistance, just three new community colleges achieved the CECCE in 2026, bringing the community college lifetime total to 29. Technical assistance, while welcome, presumes a level of discretionary resourcing community colleges generally lack. The coordination required to organise multiple institutions for shared technical assistance requires staff to do the work. Technical assistance should be subsidised rather than fee-based, whether through ACE, state systems, or consortium arrangements. Addressing the exclusivity of the resource conditions producing the participation gap puts the burden on CECCE gatekeepers to demonstrate inclusive commitment.

The remaining gap is the framework's implicit assumption of full-time faculty with research or teaching time and effort available to design and assess engaged courses. A redesign more responsive to the community college teaching environment would acknowledge and accommodate faculty configurations with a high proportion of adjuncts, modular service-learning structures suited to commuter students working full-time, and noncredit engagement partnerships as legitimately recognised curricular forms. A shorter application with fewer categories would ensure recognition of colleges doing the work while lacking the staff to narrate it at length. This change applies to community colleges, but it would also open the door to other resource-constrained 4-year institutions. The recommendations offered here are not intended as criticisms. The 2026 redesign is foundational for expanding inclusivity. For future application cycles, a shortened application for community colleges, and an expectation that 4-year research universities collaboratively share (Carnegie Classifications 2026) infrastructure, assessment and student-facing resources with community colleges to achieve their own CECCE recognition may spur system-level change while creating a new form of community engagement.

Conclusion

Closing the community college participation gap in the CECCE will require a conscious commitment and investment in supporting community college applications. U.S. community colleges have served their communities for over a century as democracy's colleges, providing an open access to higher education through non-selective admissions for place-bound students. This article argued that the gap between mission-level engagement and recognition-level engagement is a structural mismatch. Further, the article argued that the recognition framework's evidentiary requirements were built around 4-year research-intensive institutional templates. The 2026 redesign of the framework genuinely broadens its language and signals openness to diverse forms of engagement; however, the redesign cannot close the underlying resource asymmetry on its own. Fear and Sandmann's (2016, 2019) description of institutional accommodation could be applied to the redesign with alternative forms of engagement that should be 'acknowledged, pursued, accepted, and endorsed' (p. 124).

In many ways, U.S. community colleges have much to teach the field about the scholarship of engagement done as a core mission rather than as a designated function. They serve their communities directly, daily and at scale. Yet, they continue to be nearly absent from higher education's prestigious engagement recognition system. The challenge for the CECCE, and for the field of community engagement more broadly, is to build a recognition system able to see and reward that work as deeply as it currently sees and rewards the more concentrated forms of engagement characteristic of well-resourced 4-year institutions.

Doing so may require resource sharing from 4-year institutions as a form of collaboration in support of their local community college. The question for the next cycle of the CECCE, and for the field, is whether community colleges will value this recognition. The 2029 cycle, hosted at the University of San Diego, will be the first test. Colleges may have an interest in achieving prestigious recognition, but without a strong indication that their efforts fit within the evidentiary criteria, they may decide the effort is too great. As a result, the most community-engaged sector of higher education may choose to take an excused absence rather than participate.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Comparison of U.S. 2-Year Community Colleges and 4-Year Colleges and Universities

Comparison Feature	2-Year Community Colleges	4-Year Colleges and Universities
Admissions	Open-door; admits any degree-seeking student with a high school diploma or equivalent (Boggs 2011b)	Typically a selective admissions process; competitive entry requirements
Mission and Credentials	Teaching and training focus; associate degrees as highest credential, with applied bachelor's degrees emerging in workforce-shortage fields (Community College Baccalaureate Association n.d.)	Research and teaching mission; bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees
Student Housing	Approximately 28 per cent offer student housing; predominantly commuter institutions (American Association of Community Colleges 2024)	Predominantly residential; on-campus housing typically standard
Faculty Composition	17 per cent full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. 65 per cent contingent/ adjunct/part-time faculty.	49 per cent full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. 27 per cent contingent/adjunct/part-time faculty.
State Finance Structure	State appropriations, local taxation, federal aid, and tuition.	State appropriations (public institutions), endowments, federal aid, tuition, and research funding; higher per-student funding
Bounded Service Areas	State-authorised service areas confining recruitment and mission to a county, region, or metropolitan area (McGuinness 2022)	National and global recruitment; no geographic service-area restrictions
Non-Credit and Workforce Offerings	Adult Basic Education (literacy and numeracy), High School Equivalency/ General Education Development, English as a Second Language, industry-recognised certifications, apprenticeships.	

Some non-credit personal enrichment and industry-recognised certifications.

Note: Adapted from cited sources.

Appendix B

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF 2006–2024 CECCE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Across the 2006 through 2024 cycles, CECCE community colleges appeared in just 15 of the 50 U.S. states, with the largest concentration in the Northeast. Five states (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania) account for 10 of the 26 CECCE colleges, and Massachusetts alone accounts for five. Table B1 presents the full distribution by U.S. region. The regional clustering likely reflects the historical density of community engagement scholarship and capacity-building networks in those states, though the present study does not test that directly.

Table B1. Regional Representation of Community Colleges in the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement by U.S. Region, 2006 to 2024

U.S. Region	State	Number of Colleges	College Name(s)
Northeast	Connecticut	1	Connecticut State Community College Norwalk
	Massachusetts	5	Bristol Community College; Bunker Hill Community College; Middlesex Community College, Mount Wachusett Community College; North Shore Community College
	New Jersey	2	Bergen Community College; Raritan Valley Community College
	New York	1	Jefferson Community College
	Pennsylvania	1	Northampton Community College
Midwest	Illinois	2	City Colleges of Chicago–Wilbur Wright College; Richland Community College
	Ohio	2	Hocking College; Owens Community College
	Wisconsin	1	Milwaukee Area Technical College
South	Florida	1	Miami Dade College
	Maryland	2	Allegany College of Maryland; Anne Arundel Community College
	Texas	3	Blinn College; Collin College; Texas Southmost College
West	Arizona	2	Chandler-Gilbert Community College; Mesa Community College
	California	1	College of the Canyons
	Hawaii	1	Kapi'olani Community College
	Utah	1	Salt Lake Community College
Total		**26**	

Note: Regional groupings follow the U.S. Census Bureau classification of states. Counts reflect community colleges achieving CECCE or reclassification between 2006 and 2024.