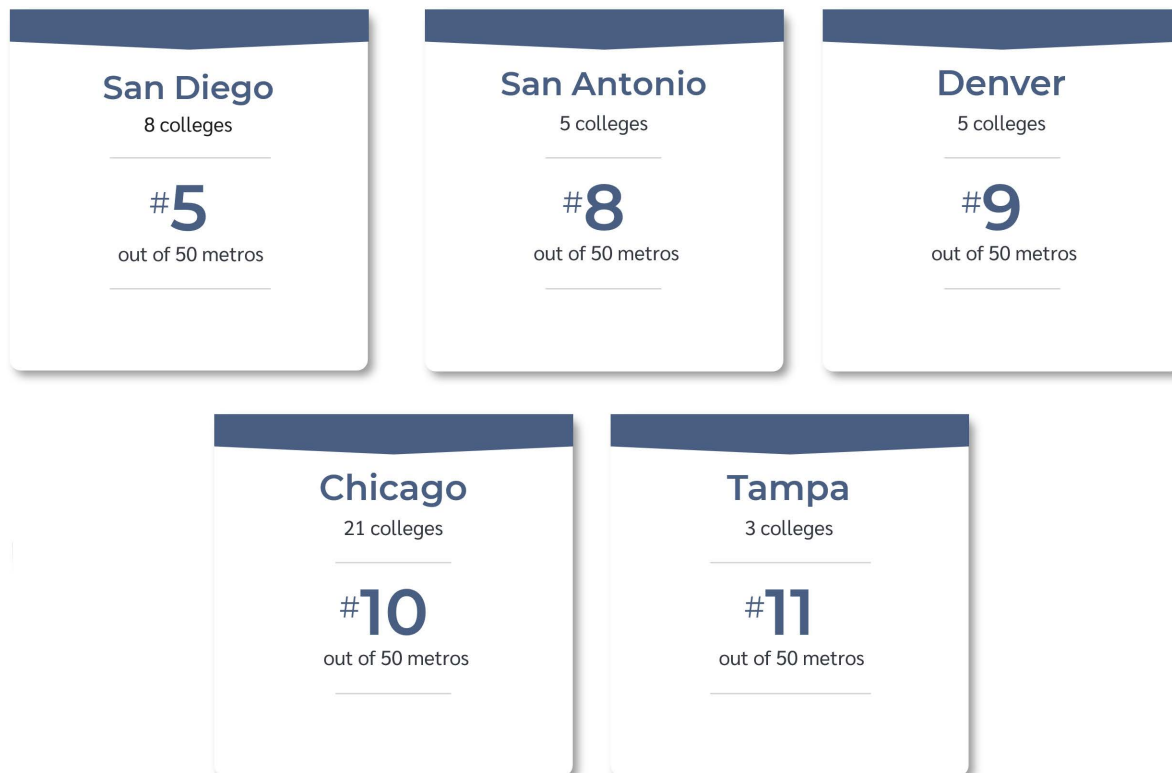


FROM BENCHMARKS TO BEST PRACTICES BRIEF

Cross-Metro Insights for Advancing Community College Success in Greater Houston

Houston Endowment has set an ambitious goal: to make Greater Houston the leading metropolitan statistical area (metro) in the nation for community college credential attainment and postsecondary success. To understand what drives strong outcomes, Marzano Research profiled five high-performing metros to examine the policies and practices behind their results. This brief highlights cross-cutting strategies and key takeaways most relevant for Houston and its community college partners.

The Five Metros at a Glance



MSAs were ranked out of the 50 most populous U.S. metropolitan statistical areas based on combined completion outcomes (students finishing degrees or transferring within 150% of expected time) and earnings outcomes (median earnings post-completion and share of completers earning more than a high school graduate).

Five Strategies that Drive Student Success

National research consistently identifies five areas where community college investment most improves student outcomes. Below, each area is grounded in that research base alongside examples of how community colleges in these high-performing metros have put it into practice.



Proactive Advising and Wraparound Support

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Frequent, proactive advising is associated with higher credit accumulation and term-to-term persistence. Shifting from a self-service model to comprehensive advising that addresses both academic and non-academic barriers helps students navigate complexities and maintain enrollment. Pairing low-caseload advising with wraparound student services can substantially accelerate completion.^{3,5,10}

WHAT TOP METROS ARE DOING

- Assigning students a dedicated advisor from day one, with required check-ins tied to credit milestones
- Using early alert systems to identify students who are at risk of academic disengagement or delayed progress
- Operating campus-based basic needs centers providing food, emergency aid, housing referrals, and mental health services alongside academic advising
- Embedding nonprofit coaching and mentoring partnerships directly into college operations, in some cases as opt-out programs so all eligible students receive support automatically



Structured, Credit-Protecting Transfer Pathways

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Credit loss and unclear transfer requirements are among the most significant barriers to bachelor's degree attainment. Degree program credit loss extends time-to-degree and increases costs, reducing students' overall likelihood of graduation. Effective transfer systems include aligned curricula, structured academic pathways with guaranteed junior standing, and strong cross-institutional partnerships.^{1,4,7}

WHAT TOP METROS ARE DOING

- Building statewide or regional "60+60" transfer degree structures that guarantee junior standing upon associate's degree completion
- Establishing guaranteed admission agreements with public universities tied to specific GPA and coursework requirements
- Using Transfer Advising Guides and degree maps that connect community college courses to specific major requirements at receiving universities
- Implementing co-enrollment and reverse transfer agreements so students can earn credentials even when they leave before completing a program



Workforce-Aligned Programs Tied to Local Demand

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Aligning community college programs with local labor market demands is positively associated with improved employment outcomes and economic mobility. Embedding employer partnerships in curriculum design, aligning programs with high-demand regional sectors, and incorporating work-based learning and applied experiences strengthen job placement and support sustained earnings gains.^{9,11}

WHAT TOP METROS ARE DOING

- Using regional labor market data to design, evaluate, and refine program offerings based on workforce demand and employment outcomes
- Designating specific college campuses as sector hubs (e.g., healthcare, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity) to concentrate employer relationships and capital investment
- Embedding colleges as primary training providers in municipal workforce initiatives, connecting residents to training for targeted high-demand industries
- Expanding apprenticeships, work-based learning, and stackable credentials that allow earlier labor market entry while maintaining routes to further education



Layered Affordability Beyond Tuition

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Reducing financial burden through need-based grants, stipends, and targeted scholarships is positively associated with higher persistence, credential completion, and successful transfer. Flexible financial aid that covers living expenses — not just tuition — helps students maintain continuous enrollment by mitigating unexpected financial emergencies and reducing the need to work excessive hours.^{2,6}

WHAT TOP METROS ARE DOING

- Implementing last-dollar promise scholarship programs that cover tuition and fees after other aid, paired with proactive advising to ensure students stay eligible
- Addressing non-tuition costs through Zero Textbook Cost degree pathways, transportation support, and holistic basic needs centers
- Re-engaging stopped-out students through debt forgiveness programs that let students “earn off” past balances by re-enrolling and succeeding
- Integrating safety net programs (food assistance, public health insurance navigation) into financial aid offices to reduce students’ total cost burden



Dual Enrollment as an On-Ramp

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Participation in dual enrollment is positively associated with higher rates of college matriculation, term-to-term persistence, and credential completion. Earning college credit in high school builds academic confidence while reducing the time and cost to earn a degree. Embedding dual enrollment into structured career and transfer pathways strengthens long-term employment prospects and earnings.^{4,8,12}

WHAT TOP METROS ARE DOING

- Aligning dual enrollment coursework with college degree pathways and workforce credentials so that credits count toward something rather than simply accumulating
- Offering college courses on high school campuses, free of charge, to expand access among students historically underrepresented in higher education
- Using data on financial aid completion and enrollment milestones to identify where students need additional navigation support to actually enroll
- Expanding early college and P-TECH models that allow students to graduate high school with substantial college credit or even a full associate's degree

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GREATER HOUSTON

Houston community colleges have substantial work underway in all five areas examined in this brief. The strategies from other metros offer a point of comparison, not a verdict; the research does not establish a direct connection between any specific practice and the rankings. Drawn from metros selected for their strong performance, the examples instead show how community colleges have organized their work across five areas that the broader research literature links to improved student outcomes.

These findings give Houston Endowment and its partners a framework for examining how well existing efforts are working, where they could be strengthened or expanded, and what the colleges could learn from one another. Within each area, Houston community colleges can consider the questions below:



Student advising and support

How consistently are emerging proactive and low caseload advising models reaching students throughout their programs? Which combinations of advising, academic support, and basic-needs assistance produce the strongest results?



Transfer agreements

Where do students continue to lose credits or encounter unclear requirements despite Houston Guided Pathways to Success, Texas Direct degrees, and existing transfer plans? Which programs or university partnerships might benefit from clearer, major-specific pathways?



Workforce-aligned programs

How well do current programs align with changing workforce demand? What do employment and earnings outcomes indicate about opportunities to expand work-based learning or refine program offerings?



Affordability and financial aid

How easily can students find and access the scholarships, emergency assistance, and basic-needs resources available across Houston community colleges? Where do gaps remain in addressing costs that may interrupt enrollment?



Dual enrollment

To what extent do dual enrollment courses apply toward certificates, degrees, transfer pathways, or industry credentials? Which college–school district partnerships offer approaches that other Houston community colleges may want to examine?

Because Houston community colleges operate independently, each can explore these questions within its own context. Sharing practices, tools, and results could also help the colleges learn from one another without requiring a regional governance structure.

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