



The smart choice for higher ed

By Dr. Lynn Tincher-Ladner

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America believes in a few things about community colleges. Most people know they are less expensive. This year, the average annual cost of tuition and required fees at a community college is \$3,860, a full 60% less than a four-year public university which averages \$10,940. People also know community colleges are accessible. They are around when you need them and have flexible offerings for the first two years of a four-year degree. They also provide workforce programs and training designed to help students get good jobs as quickly as possible. What the public doesn't know as much about is the quality of community colleges. That is what [CCsmart](#), or Community College Smart, is all about.

CCsmart is an anti-stigma advocacy campaign devoted to changing the conversation about the work of community colleges. The campaign promotes student-led advocacy for community colleges and provides robust and reliable information through its online communications hub [CCsmart.org](#).

Community College Stigma and Why it Matters

The stigma surrounding community colleges is hard to wrap your head around. Year after year, in surveys of Americans'

perceptions of higher education, community colleges receive high praise and high marks. Americans view the quality of community colleges similarly to four-year schools. However, more recent studies find that while the public's general opinion of community colleges is high, attending a community college isn't a choice students want for themselves or parents want for their children. Community college is good for everyone else, just not my child or me.

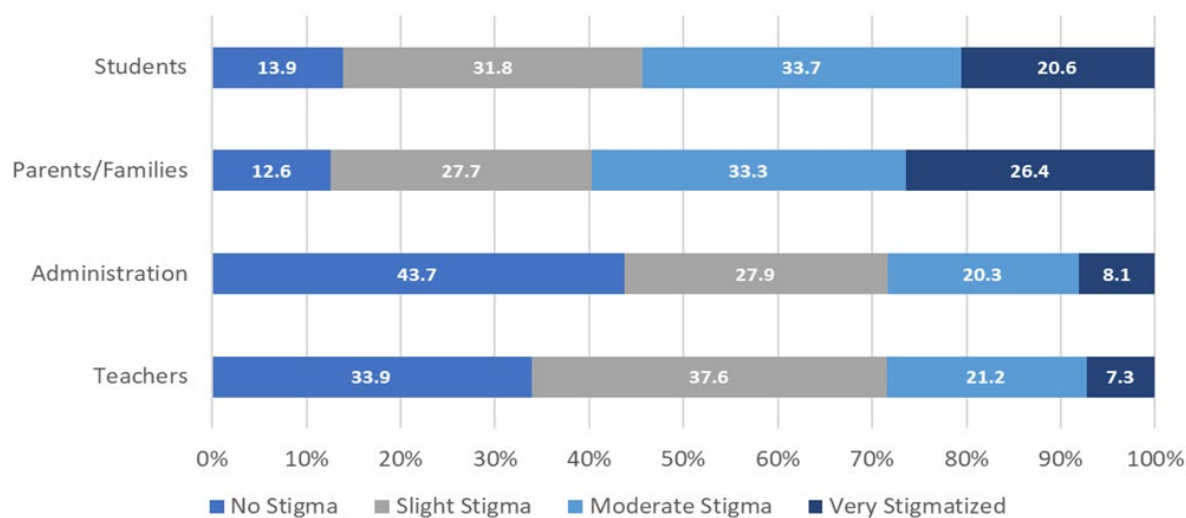
In 2021, a state-wide study of community college stigma in Illinois worked with high school students who were in the process of making their college decisions. This study found community college stigma to be a top factor in a student's college decision. In fact, community college stigma was as significant as other factors, such as college cost, types of degree programs, academic achievements, personal aspirations, and the influence of parents and family. The finding held true across all socioeconomic groups, races, and among those who were and were not familiar with community colleges. This mixed methods study concluded that many high school graduates and their parents were ignoring community college due to stigma.

According to these studies, reducing community college stigma should be top of mind for community leaders, teachers, colleges, and counselors. At Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), we understand first-hand how pervasive community college stigma is. Earlier this year, we awarded the PTK Founders Medal for the best essay on the importance of a community college education. From more than 1,200 essays submitted by students across the nation, over 85% mentioned overcoming community college stigma as part of their college journey.

In 2019, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) published the results of a national survey of over 2,200 high school guidance counselors on the perceptions of community college stigma as reported by secondary school

counselors for the groups shown in Figure 1.0. The survey found that in the opinion of high school guidance counselors, students and their parents had a high stigma against community colleges. Counselors rated 60% of parents and 54% of students against attending a community college as a pathway to a bachelor’s degree.

Figure 1.0 *Level of Perceived Community College Stigma as Reported by Secondary School Counselors*



The research on community college stigma is alarming—especially when you consider that, as a nation, our demand for a skilled, trained workforce is outpacing our supply. At the same time, we are experiencing decreased student participation in America’s public, open-access community colleges, ultimately resulting in fewer underrepresented students entering the education pipeline widening an already wide economic race gap and lessening the chances of economic mobility for all low-income students.

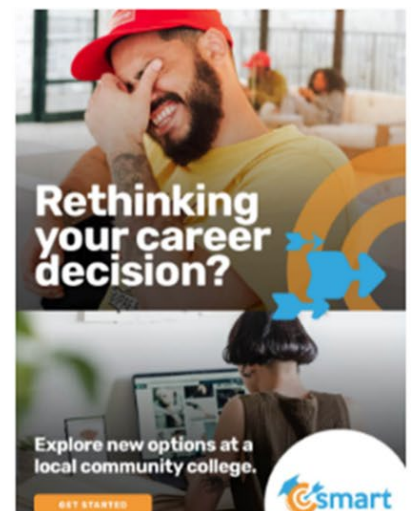
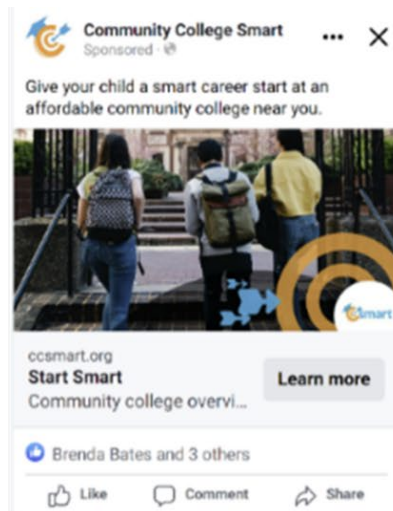
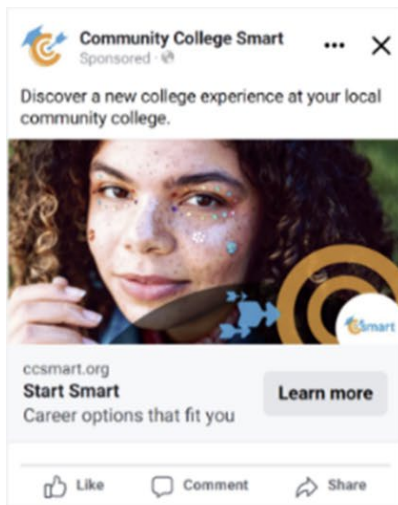
CCsmart in Action

In 2021, a small group of elected community college student leaders decided to take on the issue of community college stigma. Instead of approaching the issue from the standpoint of a deficit

model, these student leaders used an asset model—focusing on the positive aspects and benefits of enrolling in a community college. Under the leadership of Phi Theta Kappa’s 2020-2021 International Officer Team, “Community College Stigma” was transformed to “Community College Smart.”

Since that time, students at more than 350 community colleges have implemented CCsmart projects on their campuses and in their communities, connecting their college’s programs and opportunities to students attending local high schools and sometimes middle schools. These grassroots efforts have generated over 150,000 visits to the [CCsmart website](#).

In some states, the CCsmart initiative has become a mass social media campaign targeting high school students, their parents, and young adults with no college. These efforts have been phenomenally successful resulting in over 22 million interactions with the CCsmart materials.



Throughout this work, we learned that the public is more knowledgeable of the community college transfer function than they are their workforce development programs. The most visited page on CCsmart.org, other than the home page, is the [Workforce Resources](#) page, and in promoted social media, workforce media has more click-throughs and interactions.

On social media, the [Instagram Reel](#) comparing the syllabus of calculus at a community college and calculus at a selective four-year college was a big hit, generating numerous positive comments about the fact that nearly half of all bachelor's degrees were linked to community college credit.



CCsmart.org showcases how workforce and transfer pathways at community colleges connect to careers and helps students explore ways of paying for college. Students and their parents can explore [CC Insights](#) page to read about the amazing opportunities provided to everyday students—just like them. The [CC Finder](#) tool gives students quick access to the admissions, financial aid, and homepage of every community college in the nation. They can explore research-based community college success outcomes and gain better confidence in making the CCsmart choice.

Here's how community college students stack up

- **Students are super-prepared to transfer.** Studies show that community college transfer students do just as well as or better than native four-year college and university students. That's right – a student's probability of success toward a four-year degree is unchanged by going to a community college, and most of the time, it is even better.

- **Same standards of quality.** Think community colleges have lower standards of quality? Think again. Community colleges are accredited by the exact same regional accreditation agencies as four-year colleges and universities. This is how and why community college credits transfer to four-year colleges—the same quality.
- **Transfer scholarships are available.** The majority of four-year colleges and universities offer [merit-based scholarships](#) to high-achieving community college students, and students don't have to be fresh out of high school to get one—they just need good grades.

The Outcomes

The CCsmart initiative is equal parts advocacy and awareness. By leveraging both strategies, PTK hopes to expand perceptions about community colleges and increase interest in attending them. As a student counselor, you can play a vital role in helping us meet this goal.

I invite you to learn more about the value at community colleges and our mission by visiting ccsmart.org. Here, you will find access to CCsmart's campaign videos, social media posts, stickers, and other campaign collateral by clicking the [Take Action link](#) under the [About CC Smart](#) tab. We look forward to counting you as an ambassador of our message that community college is the smart choice!

About Phi Theta Kappa: Established in 1918, Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) is made up of more than 3.8 million members and nearly 1,300 chapters in 11 nations, with 225,000 active members and 3,000 advisors. PTK is recognized as the official honor society for associate degree-granting colleges by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC). Dr. Lynn Tincher-Ladner is

PTK's president and CEO. You can follow her @tincherladner on the X platform, formally known as Twitter.



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