Essex County College

Supplemental Information Report

ESSEX
COUNTY COLLEGE
STUDENTS FIRST

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to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Introduction

Current Accreditation Status

Essex County College (ECC) completed its last Self-Study in 2023, resulting in its accreditation status being fully reaffirmed by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) on June 22, 2023.

While the Commission determined that ECC was in compliance with all seven Standards of Accreditation and 15 Requirements of Affiliation, the Commission action letter included a request for a Supplemental Information Report (due September 5, 2024), to show continued progress and maturation of processes related to Standards IV, V, and VI.

On November 6, 2023, MSCHE requested an additional Supplemental Information Report in regard to student achievement metrics which were submitted in the 2023 Annual Institutional Update (AIU). This report was requested under new MSCHE policies whereby two-year institutions with three-year graduation rates below 23% are required to submit a supplemental information report. The action reads as follows:

> *"Staff acted on behalf of the Commission to request a supplemental information report, due December 13, 2023, providing information on key data indicators (student achievement) as reported on the 2023 Annual Institutional Update in accordance with federal regulation 34 CFR § 602.19 (d). The next evaluation date is scheduled for 2030-2031."*

This Supplemental Information Report is being submitted to the Commission to satisfy this request.

Institutional Overview

Founded in 1966 (and first admitting students in 1968), Essex County College is one of New Jersey's 18 public, two-year colleges. Serving the County of Essex with campuses in Newark and West Caldwell, NJ, the College enrolls approximately 9,000 students annually seeking to earn an associate's degree or academic certificate. An additional 2,000 students also enroll in non-credit, continuing education programs. Roughly half of the students who are pursuing a degree or academic certificate attend full-time, yielding an annual full-time equivalency of nearly 5,000 degree-seeking students each fall semester. The College offers 45 associate degree programs, 22 academic certificate programs, an array of non-credit, continuing education and workforce development programs, as well as a high school dual enrollment program.

ECC is comprised of two campuses, with the main campus located in Newark, NJ, and the West Essex branch campus located in West Caldwell, NJ. Roughly 90% of student credit hours are taken at the main campus, with most of the remaining balance taken at the West

Essex Campus (WEC). In 2021, the College broke ground to transform the WEC into a modern, state-of-the art facility that reopened to students in fall of 2023.

The College's student body has a median age of 21 years and is comprised of nearly 60% female. ECC is the only community college in the State of New Jersey bearing designations as both a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI) and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Using the Federal Title III and Title V definitions, over 90% of the College's students are minorities. The largest racial and ethnic populations among students are African American (47%) and Hispanic (27%). Adding to the College's rich diversity, it annually serves nearly 100 international students, representing over 30 countries.

The College also boasts a strong tradition in athletics. Known as the Wolverines, ECC athletes play in NJCAA Division I and Division II sports. To date, at least 32 athletes have participated in the Summer Olympic Games.

The College predominantly serves students who reside in the County of Essex (92%), with a large portion of those residing in the city of Newark (47%). Newark is Essex County's largest municipality, both in terms of land area (24.2 square miles) and population (307,220) and accounts for roughly a third of the County's total population (854,917). Newark has a median household income of just $41,335 and a per capita income of $22,194 while also having the highest cost of living to income gap among the 18 municipalities that are home to New Jersey's community colleges. Roughly 76% of financial aid applicants receive need-based aid in the form of a Pell Grant and those financial aid applicants have a median household income of only $24,443.

These economic disparities dramatically impact the student learning experience. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Essex County College participated in the #RealCollege Survey administered by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, at Temple University. According to this study administered prior to the pandemic, 59% of students at ECC experienced food insecurity in the previous 30-day period. This figure is 20% higher than both the State and National averages for the community college sector. In alignment with its mission, the College is actively engaged in addressing these social inequities.

In addition to food insecurity, the majority of ECC students experience unstable living conditions, with 61% reporting housing insecurity in the previous year, a figure 16% higher than both the State and National averages for the sector, with 16% experiencing homelessness in the prior year. An analysis of these three metrics shows that 75% of students are affected by at least one of these economic barriers (food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness).

Mission, Vision, and Values

As a two-year college serving students interested in beginning their undergraduate studies and subsequently transferring to four-year institutions, as well as students interested in moving directly into the workforce, Essex County College is organized to execute its mission within the framework of its vision and values, and in accordance with its institutional goals.

Mission

Essex County College is an open access community college that serves the diverse needs of students through comprehensive educational programs, training, and continuing education. Essex County College is dedicated to academic excellence and the success of its students.

Vision

A Beacon for Education and Knowledge, Essex County College attracts people who seek a better life through education. We transform lives, broaden learning, and empower students to achieve their full potential. Our college community and graduates are change agents and leaders who contribute to the health, vitality, and advancement of society.

Values

TEACHING AND LEARNING: We affirm teaching and learning as our primary purpose. The College seeks to instill in students general and specialized knowledge, the ability to think critically, and a commitment to civic responsibility. We value academic freedom and support the open exchange of ideas and experiences.

EXCELLENCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY: We believe in creating a learning environment that fosters high expectations for achievement. The College is committed to rigorous academic standards, faculty excellence, and responsive support services that enable students to reach their full academic, professional, and personal potential. We provide excellent programs that utilize technology, demonstrate innovation, and undergo evaluation to ensure consistent and outstanding performance.

COMMUNITY AND ENGAGEMENT: We support programs that enhance the economic and social development of Essex County. We value our role as a vital community resource and are dedicated to forging effective partnerships with our many constituencies.

LEGACY AND TRANSFORMATION: We honor our history and valued traditions of Essex County College, the City of Newark, and the County of Essex. We also welcome the transformative power of education to change lives. Building upon our past achievements, we eagerly embrace the future by pursuing innovations in teaching, administration, and student services.

DIVERSITY AND ACCESS: We support programs that enhance the economic and social development of Essex County. We value our role as a vital community resource and are dedicated to forging effective partnerships with our many constituencies.

Strategic Plan

In 2019, Essex County College unveiled STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024. The Plan is the vision and blueprint for where the College wants to go over the next several years and defines the strategies which will be employed to get there. The Plan's goals and objectives encompass all aspects of teaching, learning, and student support for our multiple missions – award completion, transfer, and workforce development. Additionally, the Plan acknowledges the full range of challenges that students face, including their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and takes a holistic approach towards addressing those needs. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Essex County College updated the Strategic Plan (STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024 Version 2.0) with the intent to update it annually by outlining the strategic activities planned for the upcoming fiscal year. Following this model, STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024 Version 2.1 was released in July 2022 and STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024 Version 2.2 was released in July of 2023. The STUDENTS FIRST Strategic Plan identifies four institutional goals:

- Re-establish financial stability to ensure a sustainable future for Essex County College
- Maximize the impact of our academic and non-credit workforce development programs on the local community and labor market by increasing the number of students served
- Continue to innovate our academic and student support programs to improve student persistence and on-time completion
- Continue to improve the physical infrastructure of Essex County College to better meet the needs of our students and enhance the student learning experience
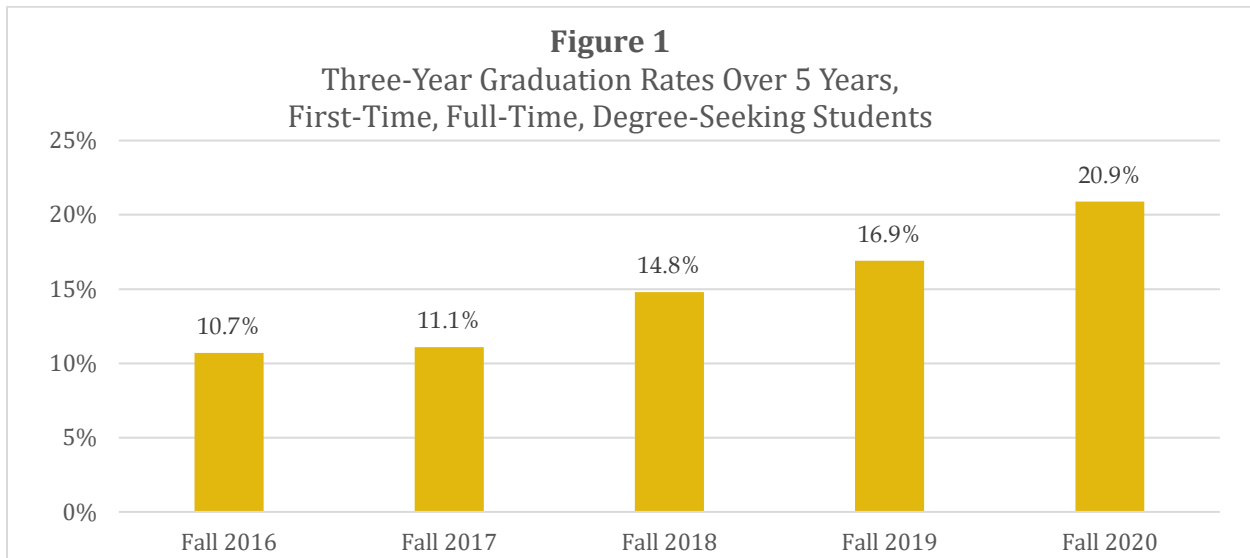
At the time of this report, ECC is undergoing a comprehensive process for the development of its next five-year strategic plan. A committee structure comprised of a Steering Committee (chaired by the president) and six Working Groups, with membership representing all areas of the College, are currently conducting exploratory research, and crafting the language of the Plan. Adopting the inclusive and collaborative approach that was used in its recent Self-Study, the ECC is actively conducting College-wide Town Hall meetings, engaging its Board and external stakeholders, and extensively conducting focus groups with students, staff, and faculty. The next strategic plan is scheduled to take effect in July 2024.

Substantive Narrative and Analysis

Three-Year Graduation Rate

Essex County College last submitted its Annual Institutional Update (AIU) in June 2023. In this update, ECC reported that its three-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking (FTFTDS) students was 14.8%. This data point was also reported in ECC's IPEDS reporting for the fall 2018 FTFTDS cohort.

While 14.8% falls below the 23% threshold for the Student Achievement section of the AIU, it also represents the mid-point in a five-year upward trajectory. Figure 1 below shows the five-year trend for the three-year graduation rate of FTFTDS students over the past 5 years.

Figure 1
Three-Year Graduation Rates Over 5 Years,
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students

| Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
10.7%	11.1%	14.8%	16.9%	20.9%

As Table 1 indicates below, three-year graduation rates have increased by 6.1% at Essex County College since the time of the figure reported in the last AIU. Over the past five years, ECC's three-year graduation rate has improved by 10.2% and 6.2% in just the last two years.

Table 1
Three-Year Graduation Rates Over 5 Years,
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students

Year Cohort Entered:	FTFTDS Students:	Graduated in 3 Years:	Year-Over-Year % Change
Fall 2016	1,457	10.7%	-1.7%
Fall 2017	1,249	11.1%	+0.4%
Fall 2018	1,119	14.8%[1]	+3.7%
Fall 2019	1,248	16.9%	+2.10%
Fall 2020	679	20.9%	+4.0%

[1] Figure reported in ECC's 2023 AIU.

The decrease in ECC's Fall 2020 FTFTDS cohort size to just 679 FTFTDS students was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and indicative of national trends across all sectors of higher education. However, it is worth noting that since the initial pandemic-induced decline in the FTFTDS cohort size, ECC has made large strides in bouncing back in its enrollment efforts, despite serving a population which experienced discrepant health outcomes and economic impact throughout the pandemic (See Figure 2 below).
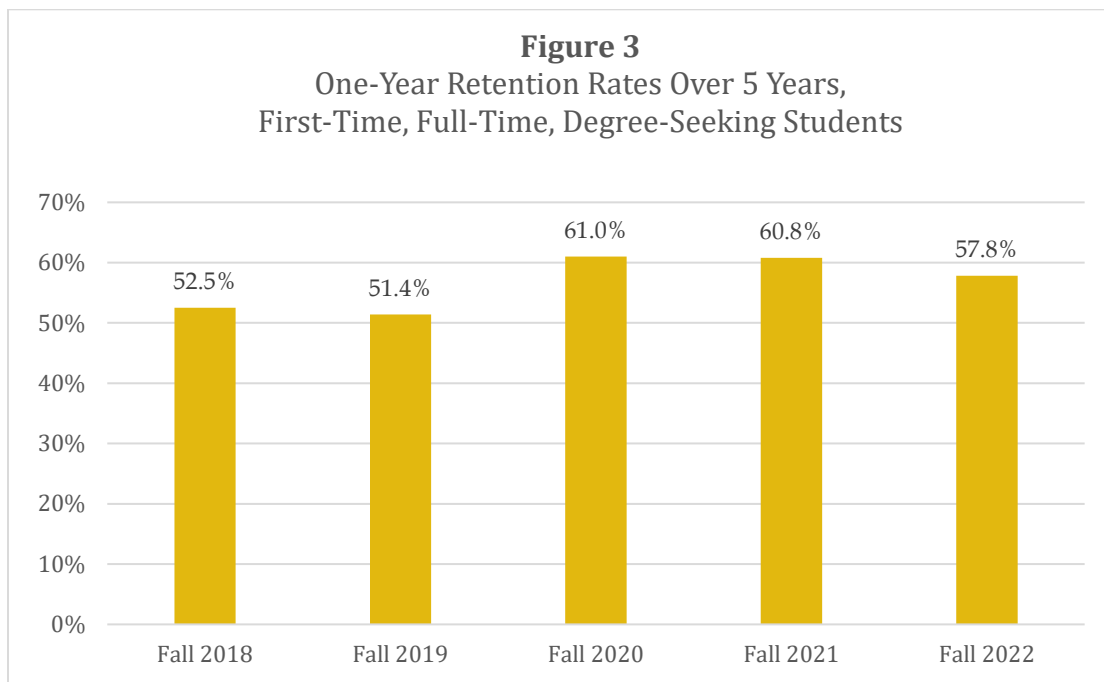

Figure 2
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Cohort Size
Since the Onset of the Pandemic
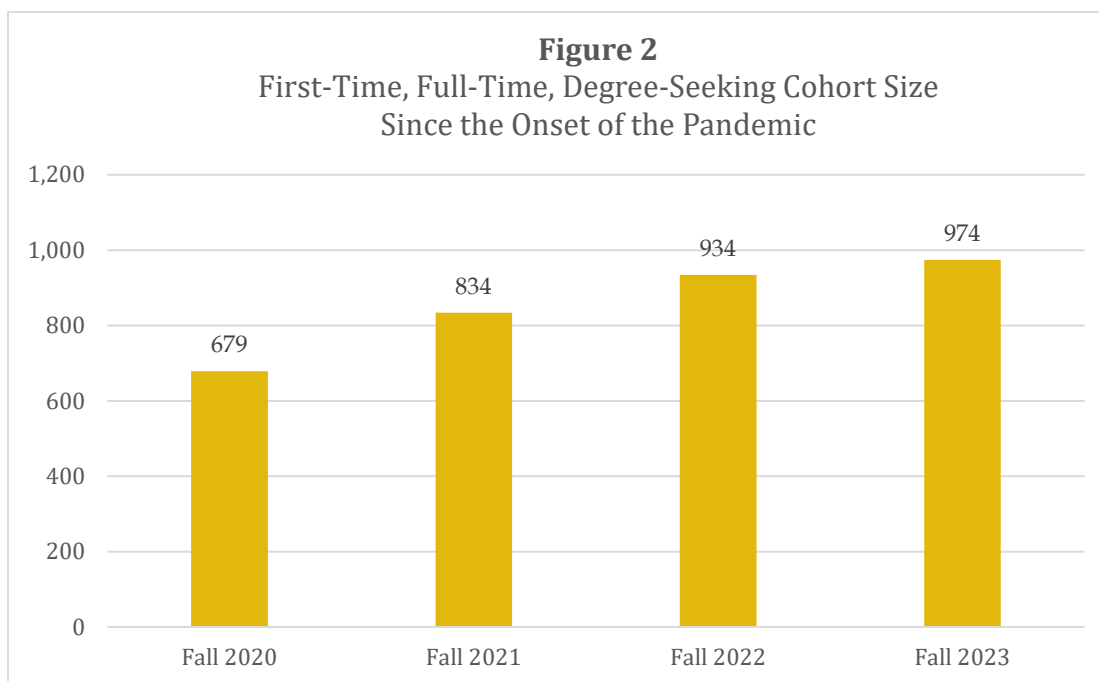
Graduation Rates are Supported by Retention

The increase in graduation rates that Essex County College has experienced are intimately tied to a multitude of persistence and completion efforts developed and implemented as part of its strategic planning process. As such, ECC has seen a sustained increase in retention since Version 2 of its strategic plan – STUDENTS FIRST – was first implemented in 2020.

Following the implementation of STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024 Ver 2.0, ECC saw a 9.6% increase in its one-year retention rate from 51.4% for the fall 2019 cohort to 61.0% for the fall 2020 cohort. ECC was able to sustain this large increase the following year by achieving a 60.8% retention rate for the Fall 2021 cohort. The College saw a mild decline to a 57.8% retention rate for the Fall 2022 cohort; however, its one-year retention rate is still up 5.5% over the past five years overall (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3
One-Year Retention Rates Over 5 Years,
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students

	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2022
Retention Rate	52.5%	51.4%	61.0%	60.8%	57.8%

Revision of ECC's Strategic Plan

In 2020, amid the global pandemic and under the leadership of a new president, ECC revised its Strategic Plan to better face the new realities associated with COVID-19 and the unprecedented challenges faced by its students. Version 2.0 of STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024 was a major revision in the framing of the Plan's goals and objectives. From this revision, a new emphasis was placed on guiding its existing students to success. As such, Goal III emerged as the following:

> "Continue to innovate our academic and student support programs to improve student persistence and on-time completion."

Additionally, the revised strategic plan included annual strategic activities that the College set out to accomplish within the current fiscal year. To track the progress of these activities, a new monthly reporting process was implemented to hold the College accountable. With increases in both retention and graduation seen during this time (see Figures 1 and 3), ECC made the decision to annually update the STUDENTS FIRST in this manner each fiscal year.

The objectives for Goal III focused around developing and implementing retention initiatives, expanding student support services, expanding professional development opportunities, leveraging software platforms to better support student success, and developing processes to better promote student transfer and articulation. While it would be too lengthy to discuss all the strategic activities which were acted upon in the past three years, this report will focus on a few key activities:

- Revision of English Developmental Education
- Commitment to professional development
- Enhancement of student support services
- Commitment to the assessment of student learning

Revision of English Developmental Education

In late 2019, the English faculty, led by the First Year Literacy Committee, created the corequisite model of ENG 099/101, a 4.5-credit version of the standalone three-credit ENG 101 (College Composition I), to take the place of the various developmental-level reading and writing courses. A pilot rollout was done in spring 2020 and yielded positive results.

Academic Year 2020-2021 saw more ENG 099/101s placed on the schedule and the resulting data convinced the administration to implement a full rollout of the new corequisite course in fall 2021. After two academic years under this new model, ECC has seen the new model outperform the old model in pass rates, progression rates (defined as the percentage of students who are able to successfully complete their developmental-level requirements and earn college-level credits without failing any courses), the time it takes for students to earn college-level ENG credits, and retention of students with ENG developmental education requirements.

An analysis on the efficacy of the English 099/101 corequisite model conducted in fall 2023 revealed that the new model enables more students to earn college-level credits in English than the prior model. Over two-thirds of students are earning college-level credits without failing any English courses (68.2% in Spring 2023). By comparison, under the old model, slightly more than half of students earned college-level credits without failing any English courses. Additionally, the mean number of semesters it took for students to earn college-level ENG credits went from 1.81 semesters under the old model to 1.0 semester under the new model.

In fall 2023, the new model had been in place long enough where the impact on retention rates could be added into the ongoing program evaluation. As can be seen in Table 2 below, under the new model, 58.3% of students requiring ENG remediation were retained after one year. This is a 7% increase compared to the old model where only 51.3% of students requiring ENG remediation were retained after one year.

Table 2
One-Year Retention Rates by Developmental English Sequence
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students

FTFTDS Cohort:	Students taking old model[1]		Students taking ENG 099/101[2]		Students taking ENG 101[3]	
	N	% Retained	N	% Retained	N	% Retained
Fall 2017	898	49.0%	0	N/A	188	62.2%
Fall 2018	691	50.4%	0	N/A	258	62.0%
Fall 2019	669	48.6%	87	58.6%	325	57.5%
Fall 2020	93	52.7%	261	62.5%	301	64.5%
Fall 2021	0	N/A	465	58.3%	280	65.7%
Fall 2022	0	N/A	488	56.1%	340	61.5%

Old Model	New Model	No Requirements
Weighted Mean of **51.3%**	Weighted Mean of **58.3%**	Weighted Mean of **62.1%**

Beginning in fall 2024, ECC will be able to begin adding three-year graduation rates into the ongoing program evaluation. Based on the current findings that more students are able to progress through the sequence to earn college credit in English, their ability to do so in significantly less time, and the positive impact on retention, we expect to see a positive impact on completion rates this coming year.

Commitment to Faculty Development

Under the STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024, Essex has recognized the need to invest time and resources into the development of faculty and is endeavoring to provide increased opportunities for them to engage in professional enrichment activities.

Essex partnered with the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) in a two-year arrangement to provide an online professional development program to both full- and part-time faculty. The Faculty Development Committee (FDC), along with Academic Affairs, recruited 25 faculty members, including adjuncts, to participate in a training course consisting of 25 interactive online modules in effective teaching practices, culminating in the awarding of the "Certificate in Effective Instruction." The recognition is awarded jointly by ACUE and the American Council on Education and is equivalent to three graduate level credits.

Academic Affairs acknowledged the success of fifteen great educators who completed the rigorous program during a recognition ceremony. These individuals are now better equipped to more effectively engage students, improve retention, and achieve more equitable outcomes through quality teaching.

In addition to the ACUE initiative, the College has increased the level of funding devoted to the strategy. FDC – one of the six college-wide shared governance committees – received $36,000 in funding for FY 2024 (a $20,000 increase). FDC is responsible for providing both

full- and part-time faculty with opportunities for scholarship, professional enrichment; and for developing programs and projects that enhance teacher effectiveness and faculty use of learning resource facilities and services. FDC demonstrates the accomplishments of faculty through brown bag lunch programs, presentations, workshops and seminars on innovation, technology, and best practices through the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence.

FDC is also responsible for arranging the annual Convocation event, which features a state-of-the-college keynote address by the president, breakout sessions on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI+B), students' mental health, student engagement, workshops on microaggressions, emotional intelligence, best practices for online education, and other emerging topics in higher education.

Expansion of Student Support

Through the implementation of the strategic activities outlined in Goal III of STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024, Essex County College actively reaches out to students to engage and encourage completion and provide comprehensive support services to address barriers to student success. Some of the key strategies which have contributed to ECC's rise in graduation rates are highlighted below.

Proactive Approach to Degree Auditing

The College has taken a more proactive approach to identifying students who are eligible for degree completion. Past practice would pull a population who have earned 45 credits (institutional and transfer) or more to determine progress for completion. Within the last two years, the number of credits was reduced to 36 credits of institutional and transfer credits to capture a larger pool and to reduce the possibility of missing a student within the term their degree should be awarded.

In addition, initiatives were taken to identify whether students in teach-out programs (minimum 65 credits to graduate) could complete sooner if transitioned to revised curricula (requiring 60 credits to graduate as per a 2019 State mandate). These efforts were supported by the use of the audit systems CAPP and Degree Works, and in collaboration with faculty and staff throughout the campus.

Advisor/Mentors

ECC employs full-time Advisor/Mentors to work with new and returning students throughout the year. Each of the six academic divisions have dedicated Advisor/Mentors who conduct one-on-one advisement, coordinate outreach initiatives such as follow-up calls to students after persistent absenteeism and regular contact with students regarding important registration dates and events.

Support Services (Mental Health, Center for Adult Transition, Food Pantry)
ECC continues to provide students with a comprehensive array of support services designed to address barriers to their success. These services include in-person and tele-mental health services, food pantry, on-campus childcare services, tutoring, and our Office of Student Care Services, which collaborates with internal and external community-based organizations to provide support services for students experiencing hardship. Additionally, ECC's Student Development and Counseling Center houses college counselors, career and transfer services, and a Center for Adult Transition for students with special needs.

Student Life and Activities (Clubs and Extracurricular Activities)
ECC offers students a robust range of student life events and activities designed to engage students and foster a sense of belonging on campus. Students can select from over 25 active clubs for their extracurricular activities aligned with their personal interests. In addition, special college-wide events and activities are offered by the Office of Student Life and Activities in collaboration with our Educational Opportunity Fund and ECC's Men and Women of Excellence Scholars programs. Together, these programs provide students with comprehensive support service from a student's first semester to completion.

Commitment to Assessment

Under STUDENTS FIRST: Strategic Plan 2019-2024, administration and faculty have worked together to design, implement, and establish meaningful and sustainable practices for the assessment of student learning. Processes include the assessment of institutional learning competencies (ECC Competencies), general education goals, and program goals.

Program Assessment
ECC rolled out a newly developed program assessment process in 2020. This process, coordinated jointly by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning, and Assessment (IEPA), Academic Affairs leadership, and the faculty-led Academic Assessment Advisory Committee (AAAC), provides a systematic and sustainable process to collect data for each program's learning outcomes. Data is analyzed annually by IEPA and provided back to program coordinators along with a guide on how to create their annual action plans. This process ensures faculty receive assessment data and a guided process to develop informed action-plans on an annual basis. Links to the Program Assessment Manual and Action-Planning Guide have been uploaded with this report.

Institutional and General Education Assessment
In 2021, Essex County College rolled out a newly developed process for assessing institutional learning goals (ECC Competencies) and general education goals. Also coordinated jointly by the Office of IEPA, Academic Affairs, and AAAC, this process includes systematic data collection from all general education courses on an annual basis. ECC Competencies and General Education Goals are evaluated within a biannual cycle that focuses on two distinct assessment themes each year. These themes are:

- Forms of Expression
- Reflecting on our Past and Present
- STEM
- The Individual and Society

Data is analyzed annually by the Office of IEPA and provided to a team of faculty assembled each year, referred to as the "Annual Assessment Team". This team of faculty develops an annual report for each of that year's respective assessment themes. This report containing best practices and recommendations for action is distributed to all faculty and discussed at the annual convocation, and in divisional academic meetings. The AAAC works with Division Chairs to lead the process to ensure action plans are implemented. This process enables faculty to receive assessment data and react with informed action-plans on an annual basis. A link to the ECC Competency and General Education Assessment Manual has been uploaded with this report.

As a result of these newly established assessment practices, the Self-Study Evaluation Team included the following "Recognition of Accomplishments, Progress, or Exemplary/Innovative Practices" in the team report following its March 2023 Self-Study site visit:

> "The Team commends the school for creating sound and comprehensive blueprints and guides for assessing student achievement, educational goals, and the integration of the institutional mission. Given the many changes the College has undergone, combined with the pandemic, and changing landscape in higher education, these plans should provide important data collection and sharing leading to meaningful action plans in the years to come."

Conclusion

Essex County College has made significant progress in its student achievement metrics since 2019, under the leadership and guidance of a new president and effective strategic planning process. ECC's commitment to developing and implementing new retention and completion initiatives has led to annual increases in three-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students in each of the past five years. The College saw an increase of 10.2% in its graduation rate over this time, and a 6.1% increase in just the last two years.

Some of the key initiatives undertaken over the past few years that led to the increase in completion that were discussed in this report include a redesign of English developmental education, an increased commitment to student learning outcomes assessment, increased support for professional development, and enhanced student support services.

As Essex County College continues the development of its next five-year strategic plan throughout this year, the core practices that led to these improvements will be carried over as the foundation for future progress and innovation. Under the stability of the current president and administration, Essex County College anticipates that student degree completion will continue to rise over the next several years.