

OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



COLUMBIA-GREENE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Carnegie Foundation
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Columbia-Greene Community College

Intentional Hospitality in the Hudson Valley

The service area of Columbia-Greene Community College spans approximately the size of Rhode Island — from the historic city of Hudson, New York, to mountaintop communities where internet access remains spotty, across rural stretches where a flat tire can end a semester. For many students, simply showing up is an act of determination.

President Dr. Victoria Walsh understands this viscerally. A first-generation college graduate, she entered higher education without its native vocabulary: Bursars, registrars and office hours were an unfamiliar lexicon. That experience shapes how she thinks about the roughly 40,000 adults in Columbia-Greene's two sponsoring counties who have some college and no credential, or who have never enrolled at all. As traditional-age enrollment declines, these adults have become central to the institution's mission.



Columbia-Greene is one of 30 community colleges within the 64-campus SUNY system — with approximately 1,600 students, the college is small enough to know students by name but connected to a network that includes research universities, technical colleges and comprehensive institutions across New York. For students uncertain whether college is even possible, the door they walk through in the Hudson Valley opens to a much larger world.

Dr. Walsh has a phrase for what these students require — intentional hospitality. Not the generic welcome of orientation packets and open-door slogans, but a repeated, systematic question: What does the person in front of me need right now? That question has produced an integrated system: a proactive registration process, a reorganized administrative structure that eliminates handoffs, faculty development that engaged three-quarters of full-time instructors in their first year, and a digital equity effort designed for a rural population. The results include higher completion rates in gateway courses, particularly among historically underserved students.



The Carnegie Classifications — the nation’s gold standard for over 50 years — now determines institutional excellence based not on prestige or student selectivity but on how well schools set their students up for success. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification framework evaluates institutions on these two critical metrics, with unique geographic contextualization. With more than 470 institutions nationwide designated as Opportunity Colleges and Universities (OCUs) for providing high access and competitive earnings, it’s time to measure what matters most — student outcomes.

The OCU designation was designed to help ensure that higher education becomes an even more vital engine of economic mobility — particularly for students furthest from opportunity. Colleges and universities are reviewed every three years, and there is no limit to how many colleges can become OCUs.

Asking Before They Fall

Intentional hospitality begins with a question — literally. In 2022, Columbia-Greene launched the Student Intake Questionnaire, a tool administered at the start of each semester that collects self-reported data on students’ perceived financial health, housing and transportation stability, food security and academic needs. The questionnaire is not a passive form. It triggers proactive outreach, connecting students with counseling, tutoring, technology support and emergency aid before problems compound.

The questionnaire gave rise to the CARES team — Concern, Assessment, Response, Evaluation, Support — a cross-functional group of faculty and staff that serves as a central referral point throughout the year. When an instructor notices a student drifting, or a staff member flags housing instability, the CARES team coordinates the response. The team also analyzes aggregate data to identify service gaps and develop new supports, turning individual interventions into institutional learning.



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Getting students in the door and getting them to completion are, as Dr. Walsh puts it, “two completely different methods of engagement.” Hospitality at the front door means little if the institution loses students in the handoffs between enrollment, advising, support services and academics. The college’s response has been structural: A single Vice President for Student Success now coordinates functions that previously operated in silos — enrollment management, advising and academic support; retention initiatives, career and transfer services; and student affairs functions tied to the first-year experience.

Early indicators are promising — stronger coordination across the first-year experience, earlier identification of at-risk students, and positive movement in momentum metrics like credit accumulation and course completion. When a student’s trajectory is everyone’s responsibility, it can become no one’s. A single approach changes that calculus.

Two Adults in the Room

Intentional hospitality extends into the classroom, but there, it requires faculty to rethink the fundamental relationship between instructor and student. The traditional model assumes a power dynamic that doesn’t match who’s actually in the room. Adults arrive with professional experience, established identities and practiced self-advocacy. They are not empty vessels. As Biological Sciences professor Dr. Scott Homer put it, “When we’re working with the adult population, we bring into the classroom all that they bring in terms of their professional knowledge and experience, and our job is to add to that what they do not yet know.”

Not every instructor adapts easily to this reframing. In fall 2023, the college launched the Center for Innovation, Teaching and Learning, a faculty-led initiative designed to support the pedagogical evolution that modern learners require. In year one, more than 74 percent of full-time faculty regularly engaged with the Center. A flagship initiative, the Foundations New Faculty Onboarding Program, immerses new hires in a yearlong development experience. Participants are already launching programs, embedding industry credentials into coursework, and collaborating across continuing education and workforce development. The Center has also anchored the college's digital equity efforts, which have been developed through partnerships with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Achieving the Dream to deliver community-focused training, laptop loans and one-on-one support for students in areas where broadband remains unreliable.



Beyond Workforce

The degree mix at Columbia-Greene is a deliberate hedge against short-term thinking. Roughly one-third of degrees are in health-related fields, but half remain in the liberal arts, sciences and general studies — space for the critical thinking and broad exposure that Dr. Walsh believes enable long-term advancement, not just first jobs.

That said, the college is actively blending non-credit and credit pathways, particularly in fields like law enforcement and human services where students arrive with documented hands-on experience. Credit for prior learning creates additional on-ramps for students who might not otherwise see the value in attending. The Executive Director of Workforce Development now sits on the curriculum committee, a structural signal that credit and non-credit are integrated pathways, not separate domains.

Unfinished Business

In a recent campus roundtable sat the college's oldest enrolled student — a woman who spent 40 years as a licensed practical nurse and has now returned to complete her RN degree. To Dr. Walsh, she represents what Columbia-Greene stands for. "It doesn't matter her age. It matters that she comes to us because she has unfinished business in her life."

This year, the college celebrates 60 years since its founding. What the next 60 will require, Dr. Walsh believes, is nimbleness: an institution grounded in its values but able to adapt faster than higher education typically allows. For students crossing mountaintops and navigating unpredictable lives to reach a small campus in the Hudson Valley, that nimbleness — the willingness to ask what each person actually needs, and then to build systems that deliver it — is what turns aspiration into completion. It is, in Dr. Walsh's framing, what intentional hospitality looks like at scale.

INTENTIONAL HOSPITALITY



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LEARN MORE



Columbia-Greene Community College

Columbia-Greene Community College offers individualized guidance in a respectful learning environment, inspiring students to reach their academic goals and become engaged citizens. Situated in Hudson, NY, Columbia-Greene Community College is a public, two-year institution offering students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree before launching a career or continuing to a four-year college or university. Columbia-Greene Community College provides students with knowledge and skills that will serve as the basis for a productive and insightful life. As a democratizing force, the College empowers its students to become engaged citizens and lifelong learners.

Learn more at: <https://www.columbiagreene.edu>.



Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

The Carnegie Classification® is the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education developed the classification in 1973 to support its program of research and policy analysis. In 2022, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education partnered to re-envision the future of the Carnegie Classifications and better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education. The 2025 Carnegie Classifications were the first release through this partnership. The Carnegie Classifications will be updated next in 2028.

Learn more at: <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu>.



Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

