

Why the Census matters for community colleges



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BY ED FINKEL SEPTEMBER 2, 2019 [PRINT](#)

The U.S. Census determines both political representation in Congress and state houses, as well as disbursement of \$675 billion in federal monies to state and local governments. The stakes are high for community colleges, their students, faculty and staff, which is why two-year colleges, their state associations and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) are preparing to encourage full participation.

Writer Courtney Brown, in a recent article on *Medium*, points out that “getting a fair and accurate count has never been easy,” noting that the 2010 Census undercounted African-Americans by at least 800,000, and that one-third of residents under age five who were undercounted were Latinx children.

And while the Trump administration’s attempt to include a citizenship question on the Census foundered in the Supreme Court, some immigrants still might not feel safe participating, she notes. Brown urges those in the nonprofit community to get involved, and AACC and its members have done so. AACC itself has worked with the U.S. Census Bureau’s National Partnership Program, according to Anna Owens, deputy chief of the program.

“We had a meeting at AACC where we looked at statistics they put together on their students,” she says. “When you looked at the demographics of the students, and whether they’re full-time or part-time, a lot of people have full-time jobs and squeeze in classes. Being able to provide information so they can respond is really important.”

A few suggestions to get started

Among the Census Bureau’s suggestions to community colleges:

- Join your local Complete Count Committee comprising leaders from fields like education, health care and business who will strive to get the word out.
- Open up computer facilities for students and others to apply for the many temporary, part-time Census-taker jobs coming online soon, or to fill out the Census itself, which will be available online for the first time in 2020.
- Place articles on school websites and listservs or e-newsletters about Census participation.
- Encourage professors to incorporate Census data into curricula, whether focusing on civics or data literacy.

Owens suggests that two-year schools make sure their students know there are three different options for filling out the Census — online, over the phone or postal mail — and that the Census Bureau does not share personal data with other federal agencies, which immigrants from countries that have used such information for nefarious purposes might fear.

“It’s important to talk about the confidentiality and security of the data,” she says.

Lastly, Owens encourages community colleges to establish a point person on campus to coordinate all Census-related activities.

“You have to take it seriously and think about how you can fold it into different activities,” she says. “If there’s a festival on campus, is there an opportunity to leverage that message? Community colleges know their particular communities. How can we get that message out?”

She adds that Census-related materials including handouts and posters are available for download at 2020census.gov/partners.

Forming a plan in California

The Community College League of California has been brainstorming and will hold either a face-to-face meeting or webinar to strategize with its member schools, says Larry Galizio, league president.

“We’re still trying to figure out what’s going to work best,” he says. “We’re going to try to provide them with a toolkit, which would have everything from the recommended means of communication, to facts about the Census, to resources they might want to tap, including financial resources.”

California community colleges receive about \$3 billion annually in federal student aid funding, which is connected to the larger picture of how much federal aid is available to states, contingent upon population, Galizio notes.

“Educational institutions are really reliant on the Census to better understand the communities they serve and to plan strategically,” he says. “It’s not the only means our districts use, but it’s an important one.”

Galizio expects many schools in California will create space in a computer lab for students and others to fill out Census forms line, and perhaps provide technical support.

“You’re going to see over these next months a lot more public discussion of it,” he says. “There will be courses, and professors will incorporate it. Student governments are always the most creative. I’m sure they will have events that are fun and also educational, and encourage people to fill out the Census.”

Underrepresented diversity

Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC), located in the Los Angeles County municipality of Walnut, is very conscious that community colleges serve the most diverse population in higher education, and one that is overrepresented with those who typically have low participation rates in the Census, says Bill Scroggins, president and CEO.

“Both from the standpoint of serving our students — we want to ensure their voices are heard — and because part of what we teach is citizenship and community involvement, voting and participation in the Census are two things we’re hitting very strongly,” he says. “It’s for our benefit, as well, since undercounts of the universe of students from whom we draw affects our funding, affects our performance numbers and limits our ability to make the case that there is a need for a cross-section of the population that is our target audience.”

Mt. SAC’s library has been designated a regional resource for the Census, which means both the school’s 60,000 students and the public at large will be able to fill out the Census online with help from library specialists, Scroggins says.

“This gives us the opportunity to have our students participate in the Census and, through the impact on their family, friends and neighborhoods, have an even broader level of participation,” he says.

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The college has five different committees working on various elements of majority-minority Los Angeles County’s initiative to bring about a higher completion rate, Scroggins says.

“We have some students already identified working in paid, short-term experiences with the county,” he says. “We’ve been very rigorous advocates for an inclusive Census.”

Mt. SAC often uses Census data in telling its stories, Scroggins says.

“As a CEO who’s a data-driven guy, if the data is corrupt, we won’t be making good decisions, and good decisions won’t be made about us,” he says. “The Census only comes along once every 10 years. It has a very long-range impact.”

Ensuring a complete count

Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, has been working on encouraging Census participation on a number of fronts, says President Anne Kress, who also serves on the AACCC board of directors.

“It’s very important for community colleges to be engaged in this process because we are in the community,” she says. “All of the decisions based on that data impact our college. It could impact the number of dollars that not only come to the college, but to the communities our students live in.”

Monroe plans to open its computer labs this fall to community members and students who don’t have access at home, Kress says.



Anne Kress (left), president of Monroe Community College, chats with students at her college. She notes that Census data can affect funding for colleges and the communities they serve. (Photo: MCC)

“We also want to be a source of information,” she says. “There are lots of questions. Folks want to know, ‘How is this information being used?’”

In the coming school year, Kress expects faculty to hold discussions about the history of the Census and its relevance in the present day.

“Upstate New York is not a growing part of the country,” she adds. “It is incredibly important for everybody to be counted.”

To that end, Kress serves on the Rochester-Monroe Complete Count Committee, a group of community leaders working to develop and implement strategies that the Census Bureau has set up regionally around the country. The committee includes stakeholders from higher education, business, health care, the African-American and Latinx communities, elected officials and the local media.

“It’s to get the word out about the Census, why it happens and why it’s important,” Kress says.

Monroe realizes that the Census also offers opportunities for temporary employment, Kress says, and the college plans to include that information in upcoming job fairs.

“Some of the folks who are Census-takers will need to speak languages most common in different neighborhoods,” she says. “And also the Census is an interesting partner in thinking about careers in statistics, and how to use data. There are so many ways for community colleges to become engaged.”