

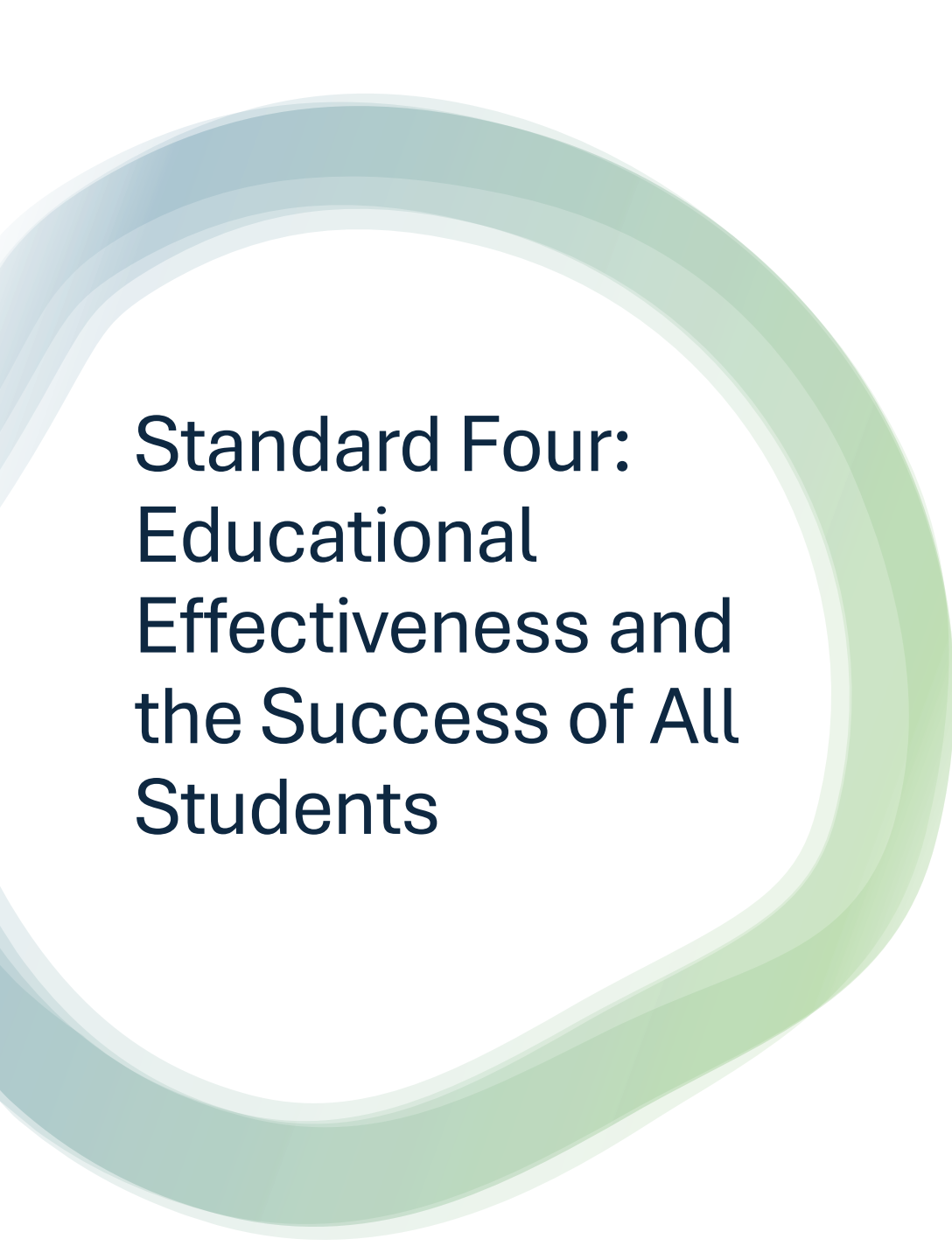


Defining *Return on Investment* for Community Colleges

AMCOA Annual Conference

April 17, 2026

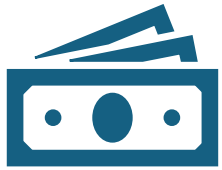
Facilitated by Kirsten Kortz, Northern Essex Community College



Standard Four: Educational Effectiveness and the Success of All Students

4.5: The institution defines and demonstrates the post-enrollment/post-graduation success of its students using mission-appropriate metrics, e.g., transfer and further education, return on investment, employment, service, loan repayment, social mobility.

How is ROI already being defined?



ROI tends to be defined as the financial balance between what a student pays for a college education and what they earn, in terms of salary, after graduation.



"I define ROI as the increase in lifetime earnings that a student can expect when they enroll in a certain degree program, minus the costs of tuition and fees, books and supplies, and lost earnings while enrolled. My preferred measure of ROI accounts for the risk that some students will not finish their programs."

FROPP White paper, Preston Cooper



The economic benefits of a college degree...

When College Might Not be Worth It, Abel & Deitz (2025)

But Higher Ed knows that money is not the only metric....

Revealing a deeper disconnect

This underscores a broader reality: the traditional college pathway—built around four-year residential programs, full-time enrollment, and degree completion—only delivers value to a small share of the American population. Yet it remains central to how higher education, as a sector, defines and communicates its ROI and overall value. Programs that serve adult learners, working professionals, or career changers have often been treated as secondary to the “core” mission—and value—of the institution.

If only a small share of Americans reach the traditional payoff, it’s perhaps not surprising that confidence is waning among those who don’t see themselves in the system or in its results. Especially in 2025—amid shrinking high school cohorts, [growing pressure on federal funding](#), and heightened political debate over higher ed’s role—**institutions need to re-center both their mission and their messaging around the needs of the many, not just the few.**

That means:

- Expanding offerings and pathways that [extend beyond the four-year residential model](#).
- Investing in [market-responsive, low-cost, flexible offerings](#) that are practitioner-focused, competency-based, and outcomes-centric.
- Better tracking and communicating career and [earnings outcomes](#) so students can navigate choices with greater confidence and clarity.

Beyond ROI: what the New Fed Data Misses About Higher Ed's Value Crisis. EAB Blog, May 20, 2025

Shared Thinking and Writing Activity

- Every table is going to get a paper with 4 guiding questions on it.
- Everyone will start with question one – talk, jot notes, ask questions (try to capture as much as you can on a single copy of the questions).
- After about 5 minutes, you are going to hand your paper to the table to your right.
- You will then tackle question 2 for 5 minutes.
- We will shuffle papers until every table has had time to work on all four questions, and everyone gets a full paper delivered to them.





Four guiding questions:

What are "mission-appropriate metrics" for Community Colleges?

What (other than money) is being "invested" when students come to college? By students? By the college? By families? By the state and feds?

What are we promising as a "return" on that investment, based on our institutional mission?

What is the relationship between ROI, economic mobility, and social mobility?

Drafting a Definition of ROI

Look at what is in front of you on your table....

- Based on what you see, how would you draft a definition for return on investment?
- What data would you want to include in your Standard 4 narrative to demonstrate ROI? (dream big)
- What might still be missing even if you had all this data?
- How do we tell our story of educational success in a way that is both concrete and uses specific examples, but also broad enough to include multiple versions of success?

