



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Impact of Socio-Economic Changes on the Effectiveness of Programs and Diplomas at Community Colleges

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This study examines the influence of socioeconomic changes on the effectiveness of programs and diplomas offered by Arar Community College. The research within a community college involved 64 participants, including 43 students and 21 faculty members. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore program quality and market alignment perceptions. The findings revealed significant concerns about the college's reputation and the perceived inadequacy of its diplomas. Approximately 45% of students indicated that Arar Community College was not their first choice, and 21% rated the quality of diplomas as low. Interviews highlighted the challenges students face regarding academic readiness and labor market acceptance. Faculty members echoed these sentiments, with 81% believing many students enrolled due to limited options after high school. Furthermore, most faculty expressed the need for new programs that align with the evolving demands of the labor market, particularly considering Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. Recommendations include restructuring academic offerings, enhancing practical training, and rebranding the college to improve its image and attract students. This research underscores the necessity for community colleges to adapt their programs in response to socioeconomic changes, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in preparing graduates for the workforce.

**INTRODUCTION**

The common aim of Community Colleges is to provide broad access to higher education. Although nearly all these colleges have open access policies that permit students to enroll, regardless of their academic preparation, not all students can study all programs and courses. Most community colleges offer a wide range of programs and degrees. They prepare students for both four-year institutes and the labor market. Changing community demands and priorities necessitate the creation of specific programs. Some colleges dedicate significant resources to programs that appeal to community members who are passionate about education.

Many of these programs are categorized as noncredit programs. While some community colleges mainly grant degrees dedicated to obtaining a bachelor's degree, others offer diplomas for students

to fit into the labor market. According to Baime & Baum (2016), “These differences in community colleges’ missions and programs complicate the measurement of student success.” Many students leave community colleges without earning or completing a bachelor's degree after being transferred. The Higher Education Data System defined these students as “noncompleters” (Baime & Baum, 2016). This idea is perfectly sustained in the study by (Bahr & Booth, 2012) in California community colleges, where the percentage of dropouts who took some courses and left ranged from 8 to 84% (Bahr & Booth, 2012).

The unstable student situation in community colleges has recently caused dire problems, especially in measuring institutional and student success. Students’ unclear aim of having a job or continuing their education led to an equivocal situation since they can neither have a diploma nor be transferred to a four-year institution. As Scott-Clayton puts it in Baime & Baum (2016), the “shapeless river” of many community colleges with their many offerings can quickly end up derailing students. In order to overcome these problems, community colleges worldwide should implement well-established programs, proper objectives, and appropriate academic counseling (Baime & Baum, 2016).

In Saudi Arabia, in response to the National Transformation Program and inspired by the ambitious goals of “Vision 2030”, the deanship of Arar Community College, led by its honorable dean, decided to conduct a study on the efficiency and future of Community College in the region of Northern Border. It is worth noting that the ever-changing society, the growing economy, and the mega projects that will be introduced to the region have made Community College and its university counterparts face many challenges. These challenges resulted in serious repercussions, including low student enrolment, inability to respond to the labor market needs, and fierce competition from other faculties aiming at increasing their share of workforce development.

### **Research Problematic**

The society and economy of the region where Arar Community College is located are in flux. This situation has deeply affected the quality of programs and diplomas offered by this college. Some students went even further to claim that the diploma obtained from Community College is no longer beneficial and inadequately demanded in the labor market. Consequently, the college's reputation and image have been seriously smeared.

### **Research Questions**

1. How have socio-economic changes influenced the efficiency of programs and diplomas offered by Arar Community College?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Community colleges are integral to higher education globally, with nearly half (46%) of all undergraduate students in the US enrolled in these institutions (Fabes, 2007). Often referred to as “junior colleges,” they offer affordable two-year diplomas and provide flexible schedules and part-time programs essential for working students or those with familial obligations (Fabes, 2007). Their primary objective is to address the needs of local communities and respond to demographic and economic trends. As stated by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago (2007), community colleges facilitate workforce training, contract training for industry, academic remediation, and enrichment courses for adults, highlighting their diverse roles in education and labor force preparation.

### **I. History and Challenges Facing Community Colleges**

The inception of community colleges in the United States dates to 1901. They aim to deliver localized training and education to develop a skilled workforce while also preparing students for transfer to four-year institutions. Initially designed for students not academically prepared for university studies, these colleges have evolved but still struggle with the perception of serving primarily low-income, academically underprepared students (Miles et al., 2018). A significant challenge is maintaining high standards for entry into degree programs, which is crucial for degree attainment.

Only a few countries in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Jordan, have adopted the community college model, which is mainly influenced by the American system. Other Arab nations have instead developed two-year college systems modeled on technical and polytechnic institutions

from Europe. Al-Tal et al. (1992) identified five key issues facing Jordan's community colleges: articulation, exit examinations, remediation, community service, and graduate unemployment, issues that resonate with those in North American institutions.

The trend of dropping the term "community" from college names has emerged in the US, particularly in states that allow two-year colleges to confer bachelor's degrees. This rebranding seeks to enhance the perception of community colleges and align them with employer expectations, as noted by Tim Westerbeck in Marklein (2014). A survey indicated that high school students often perceive "community college" negatively, prompting institutions to shift their branding to attract a broader student base while maintaining their commitment to local community needs.

In Saudi Arabia, significant job opportunities in sales and marketing emphasize the necessity for community colleges to address the skills gap identified by Abu Khashabah (2019), who criticized business schools for not providing practical training. Community colleges can fulfill this role if adequately resourced, focusing on integrating graduates into the labor market by equipping them with essential communication and sales skills.

## II. Suggested Solutions for Community Colleges

The development of applied studies colleges in Saudi Arabia has a rich history, with institutions like Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (founded in 1975), King Saud University (1981), King Faisal University (2000), and Jazan University serving local educational needs while adapting their curricula to address environmental challenges. There is a growing trend among European students towards pursuing a professionally oriented education, marked by significant differences in enrollment rates among various countries (Stanković et al., 2011). This reflects a rising acknowledgment of applied studies to fulfill market demands for skilled workers.

Applied studies colleges play a crucial role in labor markets by fostering a skilled workforce essential for economic growth. These institutions align their educational programs with national economic objectives, particularly considering Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which underscores the significance of education in achieving a more diversified economy (Adam, 2019). Strategic initiatives for professional education development focus on enhancing the quality of applied education, increasing student mobility, and establishing partnerships between educational institutions and the labor market (Stanković et al., 2011).

To elevate educational quality, applied studies colleges are encouraged to collaborate with local industries and pursue international partnerships, thereby enriching students' professional training opportunities (Stanković et al., 2011). Community colleges are reassessing their educational strategies to improve teaching quality and meet economic demands. Organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges have established ambitious goals for student completion, demonstrating a commitment to enhancing educational outcomes that align with labor market needs (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016).

Current labor market trends now prioritize soft skills in addition to hard skills, highlighting the importance of personal traits, emotional intelligence, and effective communication in student training (Aba Khalil, 2019). A comprehensive review of global applied studies colleges indicates that while "community college" may be less frequently used, many institutions operate under similar frameworks, emphasizing the necessity of programs that effectively link education with labor market requirements.

### Conceptual Framework

Recently, there has been an ongoing tendency for educational institutions to opt for change. This tendency to change, which is also known as striving, has been variably referred to as *academic drift* (Clark, 1978; Morphew, 2009), *upward drift* (Aldersley, 1995), and *mission creep* (Gonzales, 2012; Longanecker, 2008). Faculties and Universities around the world have gone through different forms of drift. The latter could result from various reasons, such as radical changes in institutions' policy, beliefs, or academic objectives, missions, and aspirations.

In general, the change implemented by education institutions could affect five crucial areas of operation: (a) student recruitment and admissions; (b) faculty recruitment, roles, and reward

systems; (c) curriculum and programs; (d) external relations and shaping of institutional identity; and (e) resource allocation (O'Meara, 2007). Although the concept of striving was not derived from community college studies, O'Meara (2007) asserted, "no institutional type is immune to striving" (p. 157). In this respect, striving at Arar Community College is associated with the desire to update the existing programs and introduce new ones to meet the needs of the ever-changing community in which it exists. It also aims at reshaping its identity by choosing a new designation for the college. By doing so, the college hopes to free itself from the reputation acquired during the past few years that looms large.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### - Setting

This research was carried out at Arar Community College. The latter was established during the academic year 1423/1424 H. It started with the Department of Computer Science, which offered a two-year diploma program. Initially, it was only for females. Then, the college was affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Later, by the Royal Decree numbered (3030 / mb) dated 23/3/1428 H, the College was brought under the direct control of the Ministry of Higher Education and continued to remain so until the colleges of the Northern Border Region were affiliated to King Abdul Aziz University. Those colleges were known as the Northern Border College Consortium. After establishing Northern Border University through a Royal Decree, the region's community colleges were affiliated with the newly established university. In the years 1437-1438 H, the Males' Section of the college was established. At the beginning of the academic year 1435/1436 H, under the supervision of the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, the college programs were unified, and the study plans were developed in coordination with the Community Colleges in Rafha and Turaif. A student must complete 74 credit units to obtain a diploma in the abovementioned programs. The students who obtain this diploma can pursue bachelor's degrees in different disciplines.

### - Participants

64 participants, 43 students, and 21 faculty members have contributed to this study. To be more specific, 33 students responded to a questionnaire, among them 27 females and 6 males (see Table 1). However, 10 other students were randomly selected to participate in a face-to-face interview. It should be highlighted that these students were mostly aged between 17 and 22. On the other hand, 21 faculty members participated by responding to a questionnaire (see Table 2).

**Table 1. Students Participants**

<b>Gender</b>	-Males:	<b>16</b>
	-Females:	<b>27</b>
<b>Age groups</b>	-17 – 22:	<b>20</b>
	-23 – 25:	<b>11</b>
	-More than 25:	<b>2</b>
<b>Academic level</b>	-Preparatory Year:	<b>5</b>
	-Computer Science:	<b>12</b>
	-Accounting:	<b>16</b>

**Table 2. Faculty Members Participants**

<b>Years of teaching experience</b>	Less than 2 years:	<b>10</b>
	2 to 5 years:	<b>4</b>
	More than 5 years:	<b>7</b>
<b>Work experience at other colleges in KSA</b>	Yes:	<b>9</b>
	No:	<b>12</b>

### - Method of Data Collection

The data used in this study is collected from both students and teachers. Two main data collection tools are used. First, a questionnaire was distributed to male and female students at Arar Community College. The questionnaire was designed using *Google Forms* and included fifteen questions. The questionnaire link was sent to students via *WhatsApp*. Second, semi-structured interviews with ten

randomly selected students have been conducted. These semi-structured interviews lasted around five minutes and were audio recorded and later transcribed. Another questionnaire was given to faculty members in Arar Community College. Questionnaires sent to faculty were important, mainly to capitalize on their experience and elicit their impression and attitude toward Community Colleges' programs and diplomas. Student questionnaires (number of respondents 33) Faculty (21 respondents) Student interview (number of respondents 10) University Structure Questionnaires. Questionnaire on reconsideration of college structure. Addressed to the Dean 14 Question/18 Respondent Questionnaire on developing new programs. Directed to society and university graduates 20 questions/448 respondents Questionnaire for faculty members Questions/94 Respondents.

## METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The striving framework of O'Meara (2007) is used to analyze the collected data. The indicators of striving, especially those related to points (c) curriculum and programs and (d) external relations and shaping of institutional identity, guided the data analysis. Moreover, data from students' and teachers' questionnaires were deductively and inductively coded.

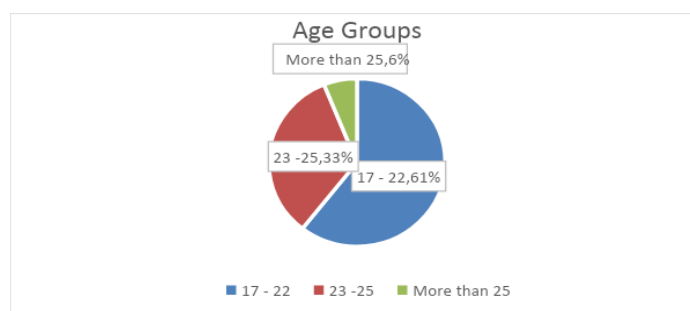
Various strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness, such as triangulation (Tracy, 2010), critical friend (Gordon, 2006), and audit trail (Glesne, 2016). Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used to validate the study's questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At this stage, results from quantitative analysis will be presented. The results obtained from the students' questionnaire will be listed first, followed by the results of the Faculty Members' questionnaire. It should be emphasized that the study question guided our data analysis.

### 1. Results from the Students' questionnaire

Thirty-three students responded to the questionnaire; most (61%) were between 17 and 22 years old (see Figure 1). Data from the questionnaire, specifically from question 5, show that 45% of the respondents claimed that Arar Community College is not their first choice. Moreover, when asked about the quality and usefulness of the diplomas offered by Community Colleges, 21% of the students noted that these diplomas are of low quality. However, only 45% of the respondents asserted that the diplomas obtained from Community College could help graduates get jobs.



**Figure 1. Students' Age Groups**

In question 6 of the questionnaire, respondents were asked how much Arar Community College has contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in several areas, such as general knowledge, work-related knowledge and skills, computer skills, writing and speaking skills, and critical thinking. Most of the students' answers (76%) were positive. Like question 6, students were asked in question 7 to specify whether or not Community College provides exceptional services in favor of its students. 85% of the respondents asserted that the college emphasizes the importance of spending significant time studying and doing academic work. 88% also believe that Community College always provides the support students need to help them succeed academically. However, when asked about Community College's support to help students thrive socially, only 56% indicated the affordance of such service. Question 8 of the students' questionnaire is intended to glean data about the quality of relationships students have with different people at the college. Data show that 77% of the students maintain a friendly and supportive relationship with other students and faculty

members. However, only 48% of the respondents asserted they have a flexible and helpful relationship with the administrative personnel. Students were also asked to give their views about the quality of the academic advising at Arar Community College. Results indicated that 91% of the students are very satisfied with the quality of the academic advising provided at the college. These findings demonstrate that Arar Community College's deanship and faculty members are working very hard to provide high-quality teaching and establish a healthy and positive learning environment that empowers students and helps them succeed and realize their dreams.

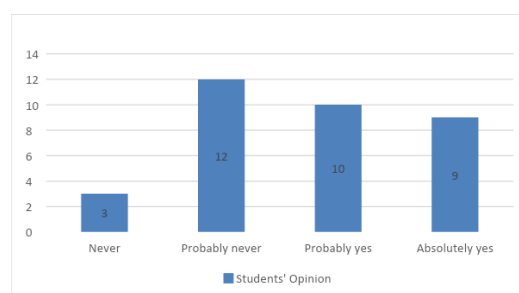
## Social and economic changes and their impact on programs and diplomas

### College.

#### 5. Weak (low) academic background and insufficient education

The thriving economy and the increasing requirements and need of the labor market.

The last questionnaire question asked the students about possibly choosing Community College again if they return in time. Data showed that 42% of the students responded by "never" (see Figure 6).



**Figure 2. Student's opinion about the possibility of choosing Community College yet again**

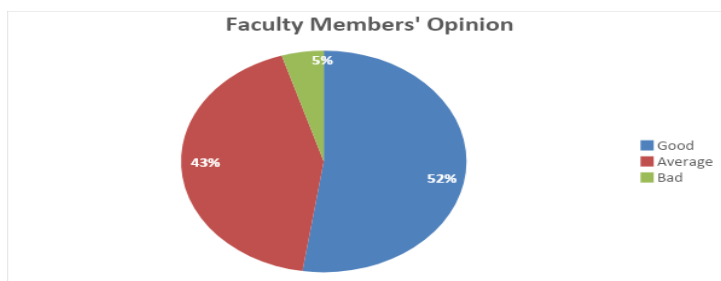
This result shows that despite its best endeavors, Arar Community College still has a reputation for having many low-achiever students.

## 2. Results from the Faculty Members' Questionnaire.

The striving framework of O'Meara (2007) was adopted to guide our analysis of the data gathered from the Faculty members' questionnaire. Responses were obtained from 21 faculty members working at Arar Community College. 54% of the respondents have more than 3 years of teaching experience and taught at other colleges in Saudi Arabia. Results indicated that 85.7% of faculty members perceived that the main differences between the other colleges and the community college mainly lie in the students' level. However, 42.9% of the respondents considered that there are big differences in terms of resources and facilities. In terms of differences in reputation, 8 faculty members out of 21 affirmed that the community college's reputation has been harmed by the level of its students' level. Empirical results from the Faculty Members' questionnaire revealed that 47% of respondents supported a positive perception and impressions about Arar Community College before starting work. On the other hand, only 9.5% held a negative perception before joining the college. However, these positive impressions will not thrive unless adequately promoted and rewarded by the college deanship. It is worth noting that 57% of the respondents do not still have the same perceptions now, and 14.3 % are likely to change their positive ideas about the college.

Particular importance attaches to the programs and diplomas offered by Arar Community College. Data showed that 52% of respondents consider the current programs and diplomas 'good'; however, 43% believe they are 'average.' This high percentage of teachers believe that the programs and diplomas offered by Arar Community College could be explained by the tendency towards introducing new programs, diplomas, and degrees that can respond to the needs of the Saudi labor market. Following the previous findings, half of the respondents do not think or are not sure that these programs and diplomas serve the needs of the local community and the labor market ('No' 14.3%, 'Maybe' 33.3%, 'Yes' 52%) (see Figure 1). Another major problem requiring considerable attention is the students' choice to join the community college. Findings revealed that 81% of teachers believe students must enroll at Community College. Most of these students obtained low

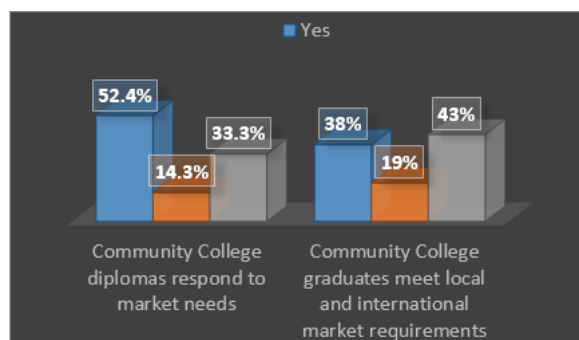
scores in high school and could not subscribe to other colleges offering bachelor's or engineering degrees. Data from the Academic Staff questionnaire illustrate this point better, where only 9.5% of them think that the academic level of community college students is good. The rest consider their students 'average' (66.7%) and 'bad' (23%). These results are further supported by the findings stating that 19% of the respondents (plus 42.9% 'not sure') do not think that the graduates of Arar Community College can meet the demands of the labor market at the local and national levels.



**Figure 3. Faculty Members' Opinions about the College's Programs and Diplomas**

At this level, it is no accident that Arar Community College teachers, in the open-ended question, suggested establishing new programs that keep pace with the labor market, such as tourism, hospitality, and preschool education, as well as areas related to technology with a particular focus on Vision 2030. The college should convert its focus from paper-based tests and learning-by-heart methods to actual application and practical courses. Over and above that, some argue that the computer department should change its programs because it is above the level of students' understanding, primarily when taught through the English language medium. This makes the students leave this section because of the need for more proficiency. Other teachers propose further studies to investigate labor market needs, which can help to implement more suitable programs. One distinguishable finding was gleaned from a teacher who stated that the college stakeholders are required "to communicate with the other community colleges in the Kingdom and learn about where we are." Others suggested diversifying programs, like other community colleges, and introducing new innovative programs that consider the students' different levels in the college and meet the needs of the labor market. Following the previous data about the bad reputation that community college has acquired, some of the community college's teachers proposed to change the name of the college.

The Arar Community College's diplomas and graduates' ability to meet market requirements were surveyed by faculty members. Most respondents (52.4%) agreed that the diplomas meet market needs, while 14.3% disagreed. However, 33.3% needed clarification about the effectiveness of the diplomas. The remaining 38% agreed that the graduates meet local and international market requirements. However, 19% disagreed, suggesting that graduates need to prepare for these demands. A significant portion (43%) needed clarification, indicating uncertainty about the graduates' market readiness. Most faculty members believe that the diplomas are aligned with market needs, but only 38% believe graduates meet local and international market requirements. A smaller percentage (14.3% and 19%) felt that the diplomas and graduate outcomes needed to align with market needs. This suggests that while there is some confidence in the Community College's programs, there is also significant uncertainty and room for improvement see Figure 8.



**Figure 4. Questionnaire for faculty members of Arar Community College**

## 1. Results from the interviews

Interviews with students yielded essential data to support the data collected from the questionnaires. An interviewee said, "Community college was my first choice because I wanted to specialize in computer sciences." An interview with graduate students revealed they were obliged to attend community College because they were denied at the Preparatory Year. They said, "We were not good at English, which was a mandatory subject to succeed." Another graduate student added, "Community College diplomas are not very accepted in the labor market compared to other Bachelor degrees obtained from other colleges." One student also talked about the bad reputation of the college and remarked that "Community College students are ridiculed and underestimated even by the university administration officials." An interviewee said, "Arar Community College staff are nice and friendly. Many activities hold us back from staying at the college." He added that:

"I am learning and improving academically. Community college is an opportunity for me to secure a future job. Community College has improved this year. I was downgraded from the Education College because of sickness, so I would prefer to go back because there are many choices of bachelor degrees which enable me to have a future job."

### Interpretation

The socio-economic changes and their impact on college programs and diplomas.

Poor background and insufficient education.

FMQ→ 81% of Faculty Members believe that students are obliged to enroll at Community College. Most of these students obtained low scores in high school and could not subscribe to other colleges offering bachelor's or engineering degrees.

The thriving economy and growing labor market needs.

SI→ "Community College diplomas are not very accepted in the labor market compared to other Bachelor's degrees obtained from other colleges."

### Recommendations

The findings mentioned above provide a clear answer to our research questions. They also proved the validity of the hypothesis that there are many challenges facing Arar Community College, such as the reputation of the name and the programs offered. Socio-economic changes like the 2030 vision of the kingdom necessitate introducing and restructuring the programs and diplomas granted by Arar Community College. This suggests taking some measures to restructure the College to withstand the rapidly changing and growing labor market needs.

The paper, thus, argues for a radical change regarding the name of the college. It suggests adopting a catchy name such as "The College of Applied Studies." The paper also proposes an urgent update or change related to the academic programs offered by the college. These programs should meet and respond to the needs of the labor market both locally and nationally. The third solution provided by this paper is enrolment incentives. Students should be encouraged to enroll by offering scholarships, grants, and prizes. This may instill into students a sense of love and belonging to the college and develop a favorable attitude towards its programs and diploma.

This study focused on one community college. Therefore, a larger scale study should be conducted to find out more about the challenges and future of Community Colleges in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, more participants should be interviewed to elicit their attitude toward Community Colleges and their programs and diplomas. Along with inquiring into challenges and problems facing Community Colleges, future studies should provide more workable, effective, and long-term solutions. Other research should also shed light on community colleges, which have already undergone radical changes, and assess how these colleges have managed to fulfill their objectives. In brief, all these future studies may help community colleges around the kingdom make the right and most informed decisions about the policy to be implemented to face the sweeping societal changes.



**Project recommendations:**

- Change the name of the College from "Community College" to "College of Applied Studies."
- Change the names of the sections.
- Propose the addition of 8 new programs. Digital Marketing, Information Technology and Technical Support, Sterilization, Graphic and Web Design, Libraries and Information Science, Media Production Technologies, Supply Chain Management, Event Management.

**CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the significant impact of socio-economic changes on the effectiveness of programs and diplomas offered by Arar Community College. Despite the college's efforts to provide quality education and support for its students, findings indicate persistent challenges related to its reputation, program relevance, and the preparedness of its graduates for the labor market. The data reveal that many students view the college as a second choice, and many believe the diplomas offered are low-quality. Faculty members echoed these concerns, emphasizing the need to re-evaluate existing programs to ensure they align with market demands and cater to the needs of a diverse student body. Given these challenges, Arar Community College must adopt a proactive approach to redefining its educational offerings. This includes introducing innovative programs directly linked to the region's evolving economic landscape, thereby enhancing the employability of its graduates. Additionally, addressing the academic preparation of incoming students and fostering stronger ties with local industries can significantly improve the college's standing and the perceived value of its diplomas. Ultimately, this research's findings serve as a call to action for Arar Community College and similar institutions to embrace change and adapt their educational strategies to better serve their students and the broader community. Doing so can enhance their educational effectiveness and contribute meaningfully to the region's socio-economic development.

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