Carnegie Mellon University is expanding its open online-learning efforts with a new project focused on community colleges.

The Community College Open Learning Initiative is the second wave of an educational experiment that gained attention recently from the Obama administration. Carnegie Mellon’s work has given about 300 classrooms around the world access to software-enhanced, college-level online-course material in subjects like biology and statistics. These digital environments track students’ progress, give them feedback, and tip off professors about where students are struggling so the instructors can make better use of class time.

Now Carnegie Mellon plans to work with a consortium of community colleges to set up four "high gatekeeper" courses, defined as classes that have poor success rates but are important to getting degrees. The goal is to raise completion rates by 25 percent in those courses. The courses will be team-designed by community-college faculty experts, scientists who study how people learn, human-computer-interaction specialists, and software engineers.

Carnegie Mellon says its approach is efficient, but the tracking-intensive model has also raised questions about student privacy.

Candace Thille, director of the Open Learning Initiative, said the community-college project had secured $4.5-million. Multiple foundations are backing the effort, but Ms. Thille declined to identify all of them. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has supported Carnegie Mellon’s Open Learning Initiative since 2002.

When the Open Learning Initiative began, the idea was to offer students outside Carnegie Mellon online courses that gave them a shot at learning the same information a traditional course would convey, but without an instructor. Researchers have also studied a hybrid mode, meaning online teaching combined with some classroom time, though less than in a traditional course. Results showed that students in the hybrid course "successfully learned as much material in half the time," according to an overview of the Community College Open Learning Initiative proposal that was provided to The Chronicle.

The community-college project intends to use the hybrid style.

Because of work and family responsibilities, community-college students' schedules are often less flexible than those of students in residential four-year colleges, Ms. Thille said. Blended learning gives community-college students more flexibility, she said, and it has the potential to keep them in classes they might otherwise have to drop "because life got in the way."
The new project involves partnerships with a variety of associations and state systems in North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Washington. The proposal calls for reaching 40 community-college partners within three years.