

Strengthening the Nation by Narrowing the Gap

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES KEY TO AMERICA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH

A 2007 report by Jobs for the Future—sobering reading for anyone interested in the challenges facing our nation—concluded that the United States “has miles to go to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in degree production, strengthen the domestic workforce to meet demand for higher skills and knowledge, and remain internationally competitive.” The report goes on to note that closing gaps in postsecondary achievement among various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, while meeting this country’s workforce needs, will require the United States to increase its production of bachelor’s and associate degrees by nearly 37 percent. Most of these degrees will be earned by groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, specifically African-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic-Americans—and at rates similar to that of whites, Asian-Americans, and wealthier Americans.

That the United States must educate more of its citizens for an increasingly complex and competitive world is a view with few critics in higher education. But *how* we educate these individuals is a conversation that cannot be limited—as it often is—to the needs of selective four-year colleges and universities. To accelerate the number of students who earn postsecondary credentials requires an unprecedented partnership among K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions—especially community colleges.



If community colleges are to serve a broader national education agenda, they must be supported more vigorously. Although community colleges are the largest educational segment in the United States—enrolling nearly half of all undergraduates—these institutions receive only about 30 percent of all resources allocated to higher education, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. Moreover, the American Association of Community Colleges reports that community colleges are charged with serving far more students labeled “at risk” for academic failure than four-year public and private institutions. In spite of this demanding mission, however, a recent report by the National Commission on Community Colleges, sponsored by the College Board, concluded that as a policy concern in Washington, D.C., these institutions are largely “invisible.”

Meeting the Challenge

Narrowing the achievement gap and addressing the need for an educated and skilled citizenry requires us to leverage the capacity, accessibility, and low cost of America’s community colleges by: (1) preparing students for community college success in the same way that we prepare students enrolling in four-year institutions; (2) inoculating students against failure by providing academic “checkups” in high school; and (3) creating “transfer-going cultures” that serve the unique needs of two-year institutions and strengthen partnerships among community colleges and four-year schools.

1. *Second Chances Are Good; First Chances Are Better*

Though community colleges provide students with a “second chance” to meet their academic goals, the perverse consequence of an open-door policy is that many students view community colleges merely as extensions of high school. In surveys of low-achieving high school students conducted by sociologist James Rosenbaum, many believe that working hard in school is

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unnecessary for them to reach their goals; and that their weak efforts extract no penalty. Nearly half of the college-bound students in Rosenbaum’s survey agreed with the following question (and others like it): “Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true.” Moreover, in a survey of students in six states, Michael Kirst and his colleagues at Stanford University discovered that more than 80 percent of prospective college students did not understand preparation requirements for college and believed that community colleges had no academic standards.

The students most likely to suffer the consequences of a poor high school education are those least able to overcome the effects. Entering college without appropriate preparation is especially devastating for community college students, because many did not have access to (or did poorly in) a rigorous high school curriculum. Rosenbaum estimates that nine out of 10 low-achieving high school students who enroll in community college never earn an associate degree.

To improve completion rates, community colleges should stress access *and* academic standards in their outreach to students. Too often, community colleges fail to stress academic rigor as much as they focus on access. While community colleges should revel in their standing as open-door institutions, they should also emphasize the standards by which students are evaluated. Community colleges should better identify how courses required in high school help students develop the skills for college-level work. Researchers in this area recommend that K–12 standards and assessments be closely linked with the standards and assessments of

postsecondary education institutions. Such explicit connections will serve as incentives for students to increase their academic efforts in high school and provide high school teachers with the curricular guidance to prepare students for college.

2. *Inoculating Against Failure Through Academic Checkups*

Placement examinations are almost universally administered to incoming community college students to assess their readiness for college-level work. To combat student underpreparation and reduce the degree to which students are required to complete remedial courses, community college leaders are using these assessments proactively by providing high school students with “academic checkups.” By administering placement exams to high school juniors and seniors, and combining this with appropriate advising, students are provided with early warning about their level of preparation for college. Not only does this reinforce the importance of doing well in high school for college success, but it also recasts the traditional view of assessment exams as barriers to college access. Moreover, it helps prepare students for success in the first two college terms, which has been shown to be an especially critical period for community college students.

Community colleges in several states have taken the lead in administering college placement examinations, especially in mathematics and English, to high school juniors and seniors. One of the early pioneers in this effort is Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in North Carolina, which established a partnership with its local feeder high schools to administer college placement examinations to 11th- and 12th-graders. The results show less reliance on remedial courses by students who received early warnings in high school. The success of this approach has been noted by state policymakers, many of whom already are using such assessments (or, in some cases, developing new ones) to prepare high school students for college.

3. *Creating Transfer-Going Cultures*

Student academic success is more than a simple conversation between K-12 schools and community colleges. Meeting this country's needs for baccalaureate-trained workers will require an efficient transfer pipeline. Yet strategies for improving transfer are uneven at best. According to a report by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement in 2006, only a small proportion of students successfully transfer to a four-year institution, even though transfer is the educational objective of 70 percent of students surveyed.

To help students advance through the transfer pipeline, community colleges and four-year institutions must build environments that address the specific needs of these students. Building such an environment is the goal of an emerging model called a "transfer-going culture." Extending the research of Patricia McDonough at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

and others who have documented the importance of the high school milieu in advancing student success in college, the transfer-going culture emphasizes how the unique community college and four-year institutional cultures can be organized in service to transfer students. Unlike traditional freshmen, community college students are often older, support families, attend school part time, and come from low-income backgrounds. Developing support services such as orientation programs, tutorial programs, mentoring opportunities, and other interventions requires consideration of these important background characteristics. For example, a "coaching" model in which students are guided through their first year of college may be as valuable as a traditional academic advising model.

The goal of a transfer-going culture is to help students who might not otherwise earn a college degree adapt to the norms of academia. But the model places different demands on commu-

nity colleges and four-year institutions. The role of the community college is to prepare students academically for the work they will face when they enter the upper division at a four-year institution. Advice about course taking, study habits, and academic planning are central in any successful effort to prepare students effectively.

In turn, four-year institutions must work more closely with their community college faculty colleagues to align curricula and assure that students have completed appropriate coursework to prepare for their major. Faculty also must create welcoming institutions that see transfer students as a distinct and important student constituency—in effect, to view transfer and the transfer student as a core component of their larger enrollment management strategy. The Center for Community College Partnerships at UCLA is an example of a highly selective four-year institution that recognizes the value of reaching out to students in community colleges and in creating a climate that welcomes these students to a place that might otherwise be out of reach.

Community colleges are a unique and bold American institution—no other country provides almost complete and universal access to postsecondary education. The establishment of these institutions has helped the United States achieve its strong international standing in higher education. Nevertheless, as that standing is now threatened by a world more economically competitive, community colleges can again help the nation reach new goals in the education of its population. But community colleges can do so only if they are inextricably linked with K-12 schools and four-year colleges and universities in ways that narrow the achievement gap while addressing the nation's workforce and economic priorities.

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