Close, Easy, and Cheap: Perceptions and Misperceptions of America's Community Colleges

Working Paper 1—Destinations of Choice Initiative: A Reexamination of America's Community Colleges

Principal Author: Stephen J. Handel

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Destinations of Choice Initiative

The Destinations of Choice Initiative, sponsored by the College Board's Community College Advisory Panel (CCAP) and the National Office of Community College Initiatives, is a project examining the strengths and challenges characterizing today's community colleges. Through public forums and working papers such as this one, the College Board has launched a wide-ranging discussion about the pivotal role of community colleges in American education.

This working paper is not meant to be a definitive statement about the topic it addresses but is rather a work-in-progress designed to invoke a conversation among all educators about the place of community colleges in the twenty-first century United States.

The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily represent the official views or policies of the College Board or CCAP member institutions. The author is also responsible for any errors.

- Principal Author: **Stephen J. Handel**, Senior Director, National Office of Community College Initiatives and Student Academic Advancement, The College Board. Direct all comments and inquiries to shandel@collegeboard.org.

Close, Easy, and Cheap: Perceptions and Misperceptions of America's Community Colleges

> *At their best, community colleges open doors to educational opportunities for those who might otherwise be shut out…At their worst, these…institutions shut doors by offering outdated, underfunded programs out of step with the demands of four-year colleges or the job market. But rarely are community colleges scrutinized when they fail to fulfill their many missions. Nor are they praised when they carry out their many competing roles successfully.*
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> The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media (2007)[1]

In a recent article describing an initiative to increase the number of students that transfer from a community college to the University of Wisconsin (UW), a UW student was quoted as saying "I think it's a kind of a slap in the face. I would like to think the GPA I receive here is different from the one received at [a community college]." A variety of prominent individuals came out in defense of the community college, including the UW chancellor, members of the faculty, and the president of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which is devoting $27 million to enhance transfer practices in the United States.[2]

The student's perception was, of course, misinformed, and it was heartening to hear voices of support for community colleges from four-year university and foundation leaders. It is important to note, however, that the UW program will admit only about 50 or so more community college students per year in the next three years. And the chancellor felt compelled to add that "they won't be competing for freshman spot openings."[3]

When it comes to community colleges, public rhetoric does not often jibe with personal bias and institutional parochialism. Despite the polite conversation among education leaders about the importance of community colleges, there is, at best, ambivalence concerning the degree to which community colleges can address

adequately their multiple missions, especially the education of the wide variety of students who enroll at these institutions. At worst, there is antagonism on the part of four-year institution officials who sometimes throw up road blocks in accepting course credits from community colleges, and from high school teachers and counselors who discourage their students from considering a community college, even if it would be a good match for some students.

If you believe this position to be overstated or that the situation is different in your region, ask yourself this question: Are you preparing your son and daughter for admission to a community college? The honest answer lies at the heart of the dilemma.

Since their inception, it has been far easier to praise the idea of a community colleges than support their success. While touted as "democracy's colleges"[4] and "intellectual hubs of [their] communities,"[5] they remain the least-funded institutions in higher education. Yet community colleges enroll more students than any other public postsecondary segment, provide higher education access to even the most underprepared students, train people for a variety of vocational careers, respond to the training demands of local businesses, and address the social and cultural needs of their surrounding communities. They do all this while garnering only about 30 percent of state and local funding available for higher education.[6] Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center, concludes that "[w]e are asking community colleges to succeed under extremely challenging circumstances and giving them scarce resources to do so."[7]

Our ambivalence toward the mission of community colleges is expressed especially well by Manuel Gomez, vice chancellor of a highly selective four-year university:

> *Sitting at the crossroads of democratic idealism and the realities of a free market economy, community colleges inhabit an essential yet problematic position in American higher education. Essential because they ensure equal educational access, offer students an academic "second chance," and*

> *provide vocational and community education in a collegiate environment. The problems, of course, stem from the same components of their very purpose.*[8]

This ambivalence is becoming more public. In conversations with counselors and teachers at the 2007 and 2008 regional meetings of the College Board, many candidly revealed that they almost never refer their students to a community college. During a College Board meeting in Boston, several high school counselors said that their students "aimed higher" and did not feel that a community college would challenge them academically. Others noted that on the few occasions when they did recommend a community college to one of their students, they got a call from an angry and insulted parent. And a community college educator in San Diego described a high school graduation ceremony she attended in which college destinations were announced for all graduates except those planning to attend a community college.

Yet, as if to balance the scales (or avoid the impression that they were bashing community colleges), almost everyone agreed at these meetings that the work of these institutions was essential and that many students would benefit from attending these colleges. Indeed, more than one counselor indicated that their son or daughter would have been more successful in college had they first attended a local community college.

For every story about the apparent inadequacies of community colleges, there are an equal number of narratives extolling the "life-changing" virtues of these institutions. Such testimonials are suffused with an unrepentant boosterism that is admirable but no more illuminating than those who indiscriminately criticize community colleges. Anecdotes, whether fair or unfair, positive or negative, are not refutable and, as a result, become ossified and apocryphal. Hard-hitting examination of both the advantages and challenges that community colleges face is rarely in evidence (and even when highlighted, as in a recent spread in the

education section of the *New York Times*[9], anecdotes and individual student histories dominate).

Except for such rare "special reports," community colleges are largely absent in the national media. Indeed, *Washington Post* columnist Jay Mathews admitted as much in a 2005 article entitled "Why I Ignore Community Colleges." Although the *Chronicle of Higher Education* devotes considerable space to its annual community college edition, one wonders if the community college story would be better represented as a day-to-day fact of educational life in America rather than as an editorial supplement published once a year.[10] It is true that four-year institutions might prefer less media glare (especially during the spring, when newspapers run a glut of articles about who gets into college and who does not), but a public debate about the effectiveness of education remains a vital concern for most Americans. This debate does not, but should, include community colleges.

At its 2005 Forum, the College Board sponsored a session focusing on the "invisible" community colleges and invited a panel of reporters from publications such as *US News and World Report* and *USA Today* to address their coverage of these institutions. The upshot of this discussion seemed to be that community colleges, given their uniquely local character and geography, lacked the necessary gravitas as national stories. One panelist warned, "Be careful what you wish for," flattering (or insulting—take your pick) the largely community college audience with a message that community colleges were not worth the time to cover by national publications. More recently, the Hechinger Institute offered a $7,500 fellowship to reporters in New York who agree to cover "stories of hope and effort…stories of disappointment and defeat" on America's community colleges.

Be careful what you wish for.

What explains this curious mixture of ambivalence and disinterest? Given the extraordinary popularity of the American community college system, it is difficult to explain. The demonstrated capacity of these institutions to advance innovations in

pedagogy, such as distance learning (often years ahead of their four-year counterparts) and their nimble response to the education of professionals perennially in short supply (community colleges train 60 percent of this country's nurses[11]) would appear as gold stars on any report card. So one has to wonder why the perceived value of community colleges is not higher. Here are some clues:

- Open admissions rarely elicit much respect. To paraphrase the Marx Brothers, in a country obsessed with rankings, it is difficult to take seriously a club that admits everybody as members. Community colleges receive no *US News and World Report* rankings, so the institutional posturing so often observed in the slick view books of four-year colleges and universities is absent among community colleges. Moreover, since the livelihood of community college faculty is not linked to research and publication, a common source of intellectual pride and promotion in American higher education is missing. And there are few other national touchstones, such as excellence in teaching or advances in pedagogy, to which community colleges might be expected to excel.

- Community colleges lack a national public constituency. While all politics are local, educational reputation requires national prominence—or so it would seem. Four-year institutions have alumni to court, sports fans to woo, and corporate donors to solicit. Community colleges are handicapped by the lack of clearly defined alumni, few institutional sideshows (sports), and fewer still prominent institutions (museums, research centers) that motivate rich people to write large checks. Community college transfer students remember where they earned their baccalaureate degree, not where they attended their first two years of college. And older adults, seeking community college degrees and certificates to address utilitarian or career goals, are thankful to community colleges but rarely devoted. In recent years, community college leaders have begun spending increasing amounts of time courting donors and hiring directors of institutional development. Time will tell whether these efforts will succeed. But as is true with four-year institutions, only the largest and best-positioned colleges will accrue anything other than modest returns. A more productive approach may

be the recent establishment of a congressional caucus, currently numbering over 175 members, focusing on the national needs of community colleges.

- The absence of a sustained revenue base. While politicians extol the virtues of community colleges in the aggregate, this lavish praise rarely results in large state appropriations. Most community colleges are funded by an uneasy mix of local taxes, state revenues, federal grants, and business contracts. All of these are sources whose amounts ebb and flow with the political machinations at almost every level of government. Indeed, similar to the funding of four-year institutions, the public revenue stream is drying up. A recent study verified that there has been a serious erosion of state and local support for community colleges in the past 20 years. In fiscal year 1981, state appropriations accounted for almost half of community college revenue. That contribution had shrunk to 34 percent by 2001. Local support has also declined, from 17.4 percent in 1981 to 14.1 percent in 2001.[12] In the current political environment, and given the escalating costs of corrections and medical care, states and localities are unlikely to raise taxes.[13] In response, community colleges have raised tuition and fees (averaging 4.5 percent per year over the last decade[14]) and have relied to a greater extent on contract education. While community college boards of trustees and their presidents have been extremely creative in paying the heating bills, raising prices on students—who are among the poorest in higher education—and relying on the largesse of business seems an unattractive long-term strategy for an academic institution that prides itself on access.

Community college partisans will argue that all of the foregoing may be true but beside the point. How community colleges are viewed by K–12 or four-year colleges is hardly an issue, so long as the students who need access to higher education are able to enroll at a community college. The lack of a *US News* ranking, they might stress, keeps the focus on students and their education rather than on institutional prestige. And variations in funding and the adequacy of facilities are an issue for almost every public entity. Community colleges are not unique in the complaint

that they are rarely funded at a level consistent with the esteem with which they hold themselves and their mission.

These are good rebuttals, but the harm is more pernicious and corrosive. Community colleges are the pivot point in American education. They stand between K–12 and four-year institutions in an education superstructure that is unrivaled anywhere in the world. But the concerns of the nation—the need for a more educated workforce, the increasing cost of an undergraduate education, and the demands of a democracy requiring the essential participation of a well-informed citizenry—will not be addressed without an education system that works in tandem. Consider:

- If we are a "knowledge economy," then we will need more knowledge factories. There is not enough room at four-year colleges and universities to accommodate all Americans who desire a college education for intellectual, professional, or personal growth or who need retraining to accommodate lightning-fast changes in a global economy. Moreover, community colleges have been traditionally more attractive to students from underrepresented groups and low-income backgrounds—constituencies predicted to grow significantly in the next decade.

- If we believe in second chances, community colleges are the only places where such gambles are wagered. There will always be those individuals who will have inadequate access to a quality secondary school education and will require remedial education. Many four-year institutions have abandoned this curriculum, leaving community colleges to fill the gap.

- If we are committed to individual prosperity and national economic and cultural advancement, then the baccalaureate degree will remain one of the currencies of exchange, minted by a partnership among community colleges and four-year institutions. While four-year institutions would like to believe that they alone forge the coin of this realm, the expansion of baccalaureate degree–holders has

been significantly increased by the opportunities afforded by community colleges. In California, for example, about 45 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded by that state's public four-year institutions are earned by students who began at community colleges.[15] This partnership will only gather momentum in the years to come as states and the federal government attempt to squeeze out of every last public dollar the efficiencies needed to educate a nation.

These imperatives will not be addressed unless the nation understands the role of community colleges, the strengths that these institutions bring, and the challenges they face in meeting their multiple responsibilities. A perception that community colleges, whatever their merits, are designed only for second-chance students, first-generation college-goers, and immigrants with little command of English—all essential, worthy, and critical constituencies—isolates community colleges, thereby undermining the effectiveness of these institutions as an essential part of the higher education infrastructure. It allows policymakers, grant makers, legislators, and others in positions of authority to treat these institutions as social service agencies; or worse, as educational sideshows that provide cover for highly selective institutions to maintain restrictive admissions policies, as recalled in 1978 by the late Clark Kerr, the architect of the California Master Plan for Higher Education and president of the University of California system:

> *When I was guiding the development of the Master Plan…I considered the vast expansion of the community colleges to be the first line of defense for the University of California as an institution of international academic renown.…Otherwise [UC] was either going to be overwhelmed by a large number of students with lower academic attainments or attacked as trying to hold on to a monopoly over entry into higher status [institutions].*[16]

Fighting institutional marginalization saps energy from more important efforts to advance the mission of community colleges. It is a rear-guard action that no general covets because it pulls forces away from the real goal, imperiling both the battle and the war. How many times do community college presidents have to reiterate to

their local school superintendents or four-year college colleagues about the "necessity" of community colleges, its "many missions," and the nobility of its "second-chance function," when the real issues are lack of resources for growth, distressingly low retention and completion rates, and politicians who see community colleges as a way to fix broken state budgets on the cheap?

Marginalization is also practiced by colleagues in the education business. As long as high school counselors, teachers, and four-year college officials view community colleges as places for "other people's kids," the notion of "educational fit" loses its meaning. As it now stands, community colleges are the default higher education choice, not a serious alternative in the college-going decision game in which students participate every fall. As one community college counselor said during a session at the 2007 League for Innovation in the Community College conference: "Students only pick us because we are close, easy, or cheap." Yet a community college may be the perfect choice for many students, regardless of their high school achievement level. This is not to argue that all community colleges should be in the mix. There are astonishingly good community colleges in this country, with facilities, curricula, and instructors that are a worthy competitor with any top-flight, better-funded four-year institution. There also are community colleges whose decaying facilities make sustained accreditation an unlikely prospect. But this variation is never discussed. Community colleges are always grouped as if all were cut from the same cloth. This is a disservice to students, parents, teachers, and counselors who operate under an assumption that anything less than students' admission to a highly selective four-year institution is a failure.

For those of you who dedicate your lives to students as a counselor or teacher but have little firsthand knowledge of community colleges, it is time for you to assess their relative value—not simply because you will gain a more accurate perception about both the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions but also because doing so will allow you to see how community colleges may address the needs of your students. Helping them find a good educational match is too important to dismiss community colleges from the list of possible college destinations. These

institutions may not be right for many (maybe most) of your students, but, as with four-year colleges, the goal is to find the right school, not the most socially acceptable one.

For four-college educators and administrators, especially those from highly selective institutions, your role is to view the community college with the critical eye required of a higher education professional, not a prejudice bound up in a perception of who "should" transfer to your institutions. As the president of the University of Maryland recently remarked:

> …access to higher education means examining ourselves, our values, and our attitudes about students of all types, looking to see not so much what is missing in them, but what they can become. [17]

And community college leaders? Your enterprise sits on the precipice. Working to achieve so much with so little support creates an understandable defensiveness in all but the most confident leaders. The problems facing community colleges now cannot be overcome with references to "the people's colleges," to explain away low student retention and completion rates, or wearied shrugs that gloss over the difficulty of trying to do so much for so many. Your work and your institutions represent the best experiment in education. But the full promise is yet to be achieved. Perhaps with your K–12 and four-year institution partners—possessing a more accurate perception of who you are and what you do—a renewed commitment to the goals of the community colleges, now over 100 years old, can be achieved.

The College Board: Connecting Students to College Success

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the association is composed of more than 5,400 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves seven million students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through major programs and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning. Among its best-known programs are the SAT®, the PSAT/NMSQT®, and the Advanced Placement Program® (AP®). The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities, and concerns.

For further information, visit www.collegeboard.com.

NOTES

[1] Quote from a brochure advertising the Hechinger Institute's fellowship for reporters covering community colleges (www.hecingerinstitute.org).

[2] Capriccioso, R. (2006). "Facing Down the 'Snob Factor.'" *Inside Higher Ed*, May 5 (www.insidehighered.com), p. 1.

[3] Capriccioso, R. (2006), p. 1.

[4] Boggs, G. R. (2004). "Community Colleges in a Perfect Storm." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* p. 8.

[5] Vaughn, G. B. (2006). *The Community College Story* (Third Edition). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges, p. 1.

[6] Merrow, John (2007). "Dream Catchers." *New York Times* (Education Supplement), April 22, p. 1.

[7] Bailey, T. (2007). "A Cutting Edge Formula for Student Success." *Community College Week*, April 9. (www.ccweek.com), p.4.

[8] Gomez, M. (1999). *College for the Community: Academic Cultures and Institutional Change.* Paper presented at the AAHE National Conference on Higher Education.

[9] "The Two-Year Attraction," *New York Times* (Education Supplement), April 22. 2007.

[10] To be fair, the *Chronicle* sends a weekly electronic community college newsletter to subscribers who request it.

[11] Merrow, John (2007). "Midlife, Starting Over," *New York Times* (Education Supplement) April 22, p. 1. (Source quotes statistics from the American Association of Community Colleges.)

[12] Roessler, B. and Short, T. (2006). *Maintaining Access in Hard Fiscal Times*. Presentation at NASFAA National Conference, July 5–8, 2006, Seattle, WA. (PowerPoint presentation at: www.nasfaa.org/subhomes/Annualconference2006/Handouts2006/S035MaintainingAccessInHardFiscalTimes.pdf. See also: Jaschik, S. (2006) "The Abandonment of Community Colleges." *Inside Higher Ed*, January 16 (www.insidehighered.com*).*

[13] Bailey, T. and Morest, V. S. (2006). *Defending the Community College Equity Agenda*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 13.

[14] The College Board (2006). *Trends in College Pricing*, p. 10.

[15] California Community College Chancellor's Office (2007). *Focus on Results: Accountability Reporting for the California Community Colleges (A Report to the Legislature Pursuant to AB 1427)*, p. 4 (Figure 1). (www.cccco.edu)

[16] Dougherty, K. J. (1994). *The Contradictory College: The Conflicting Origins, Impacts, and Futures of the Community College* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 160.

[17] Quote attributed to Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Byne A. and Field, K. (2007). "Access to College and Bush's Budget Top Agenda at Meeting of Higher Education Leaders." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 23, p. A-20.