



National Office of Community  
College Initiatives

***Second Chances Are Good, But  
First Chances Are Better***

**Working Paper 2—Destinations of Choice  
Initiative: A Reexamination of America's  
Community Colleges**

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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.

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***Second Chances Are Good, But First Chances Are Better***

We are a nation of second chances. In sports, we admire the baseball pitcher who returns to the mound after a potentially career-ending injury. In business, the entrepreneur is celebrated, especially after being counted out. We love the stories of a love lost and then regained. And of course redemption and renewal are part of our country’s founding.

Second chances work in education too. How many of us would have graduated from high school if our teachers did not offer us a second chance—a makeup exam, some extra credit, or just a kick in the butt?

But it is American higher education that must be seen as the institution for which the generosity of spirit embodied in second chances is most evident. All of us are either the product of a second chance or are currently in the business of providing a second chance—as a teacher, counselor, dean, or president.

In the United States today, nearly 50 percent of all undergraduates attend an open-access community college. Not all students attend these institutions because they need a second chance. But many are getting a new lease on their educational life at these institutions.

What other society allows the degree of higher education access that we have here in the United States? What other culture allows its citizens the opportunity to retool, rejuvenate, and rejoin our society at large with new skills and new knowledge—whenever they want? Among all of the criticisms of American higher education, especially in light of the increasing competitive global economy, there is hardly a mention of the democratic spirit of our institutions and their essential role in

providing all of us with opportunities to improve ourselves and the lives of our families.

### **What About First Chances?**

But we have a problem. In our efforts to provide second chances, we may have forgotten about first chances. The result is that in the world of the community college, many prospective students see our work in providing second chances *not as exceptional, but as expected*.

Surveys reveal that many high school students who plan to enroll in college do not prepare themselves well academically. Many high school students expect to attend college, but many, if not most, have no clear idea how to get there.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many students, both college-bound and non-college-bound, see almost no link between working hard in high school and college success.<sup>2</sup>

The source of this research is James Rosenbaum and his colleagues at Northwestern University. Some of their results indicate that:

1. Only 28 percent of college-bound students agreed with the following statement: “[High] school teaches me valuable skills.”
2. Nearly half (44 percent) concurred with this statement: “Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true.”
3. Forty-one percent (41 percent) agreed with this statement: “People can do OK even if they drop out of high school.”<sup>3</sup>

Rosenbaum goes on to point out that the most discouraging aspect of these data is that in exerting little effort in high school, students believe that their minimal efforts will result in few penalties. Only later, of course, will they realize their mistake, enrolling in college without the requisite skills to match their ambitions.

Any experienced instructor will testify that weak efforts as represented by low high school grades are not a barrier to enrolling in community colleges. That is the second chance miracle of our higher education system.

But poor high school grades puts students in a perilous position academically. For example, the Education Trust reports that the dropout rate at nonselective and community colleges is 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, anywhere from one-third to one-half of students entering all colleges and universities are placed into remedial courses, which may reduce the chances of students’ completing a postsecondary degree. And students beginning college without the skills they need to do college work—even if they manage to stay in college for more than a year—are far less likely to earn any kind of degree. Rosenbaum reports that more than 83 percent of students who earned low grades in high school and who planned to go to college and earn a B.A. degree fail to do so; and that more than 92 percent of students with low grades who planned to go college and earn an A.A. degree similarly fail.<sup>5</sup>

The students most likely to suffer the consequences of a poor high school education are those least able to overcome the effects. Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to come from college-going families and to possess the related resources that sustain student academic efforts. As a result, many of these students are disproportionately unsuccessful in earning educational credentials.

Why don’t some students appreciate the importance of a strong high school foundation for future academic success? One of the reasons is that they view access to higher education as relatively easy because of the existence of community colleges. They perceive these institutions as an extension of high school and not as a substantive leap from one type of schooling to another. In a survey of students in six states, Michael Kirst and his colleagues at Stanford University discovered that over 80 percent of prospective college students did not understand preparation requirements for college, and they believed that community

colleges had no academic standards.<sup>6</sup> The researchers also emphasized that most community college-bound students did not understand that they would be unable to do college-level work if their performance in high school had been low.<sup>7</sup>

Open access institutions such as community colleges, with their emphasis on serving the needs of students shut out from other higher education choices, offer a welcoming environment for even the most disenfranchised students. But does the emphasis on open admissions send a message, however inadvertent, that hard work in high school is unnecessary for success in a community college?

### **Correcting a Misperception**

Community college *is* college, requiring foundational skills from students that are best gained in high school. Confusing open admissions with classroom academic standards is a little like confusing the job interview with the job.

But how can we redress this misperception? In what ways should we communicate to high school students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, the knowledge, skills, and motivation they will need to take full advantage of what our community colleges can offer?

One way would be to tighten admissions requirements at community colleges so that students would be better prepared for the work they would face. Another option would be for community colleges to drop remedial and developmental classes from their course schedules. But of course these options are neither attractive nor likely to gain much traction. The fundamental rationale for the presence of community colleges is access to higher education that is unfettered and unapologetic. To change *that* would simply doom the community college model.

Yet reducing access appears to be the strategy of many moderately selective and highly selective four-year colleges and universities. Faced with mounting numbers

of students who enroll without having mastered basic skills in high school, their response has been simply to eliminate remedial programs.

We need a more sophisticated approach.

### **A More Effective Transition**

If the doors to our community colleges are to remain open—and they must—we should continue to meet students on their own terms. But it does not follow that community colleges should ignore the importance of a high-quality high school education. Indeed, community colleges may be the institutions that are most influential in demonstrating to students who might not otherwise consider college that working hard in high school has a tangible payoff.

With this in mind, several recommendations are offered. Many of these are the product of research and analysis being conducted by the individuals mentioned earlier, as well as by other education professionals.

#### **1. Community colleges and local high schools should align their curricula.**

One of the best ways community colleges can encourage greater student effort in high school is to show how courses required in high school develop skills for college-level work.

Kirst and his colleagues reveal in their research that high schools and colleges rarely engage in activities that bridge the curricular divide. This incoherence frustrates students, families, teachers, and counselors. Kirst and his colleagues recommend that K–12 standards and assessments be closely linked with the standards and assessments of postsecondary education institutions.<sup>8</sup> Such explicit connections will serve as powerful incentives for students to increase their academic efforts in

high school. Moreover, it will serve teachers by providing them with a curricular road map to help their students prepare for college.

**2. Community college outreach should stress both access and standards.**

A policy of open admissions requires community colleges to manage, on a daily basis, a critical balancing act. On the one hand, they must be true to their legacy of open access while also maintaining academic standards that prepare students to earn a college degree.

But too often, community colleges fail to stress academic rigor as much as they advertise access. Perhaps this results from a concern that talking about high standards and essential skills will discourage students from attending. Yet excessive concern about enrollment targets only detracts institutions from their central academic mission. While community colleges should revel in their standing as open-door institutions, they should also emphasize the standards by which students will be evaluated.

**3. Community colleges should communicate the success of their graduates.**

In emphasizing the academic rigor of their programs, as suggested above, community colleges also need to relay the academic success of their students to a wider audience. But community colleges have not been especially successful in communicating this to legislators, policymakers, and constituents. More often than not, community college leaders are drawn into debates about the success of their institutions in relation to four-year colleges and universities. As the least-funded postsecondary education institution and the one that opens its doors to many of the least-academically-accomplished students, it is no wonder that community colleges rarely win such a pitched battle. This reflects badly on community colleges,



resulting in an image that is seen by prospective students as the institution of last resort.

But there is plenty of good news to combat this image. For example, research from various sources demonstrates that community college students perform well following transfer to a four-year institution. Of course, transfer success is only one measure of a community college’s effectiveness. The number of students earning the A.A. degree, placed in jobs, and earning vocational certificates also represent important measures of an institution’s success, as tangible and indispensable as the number of B.A.s generated by four-year institutions.

For community college educators, the success of these institutions is hardly news. But it has been difficult sometimes to translate the effectiveness of community colleges to families, high school counselors, teachers, and, of course, students.

#### **4. Community colleges should offer academic “check-ups” to high school students.**

The saying “you can only manage what you measure” applies well to high school students. Unless students understand their skill levels relative to collegiate English and mathematics, they will be unable to reach their postsecondary education goals. The regular measurement of what students know and what they need to know for college success is essential.

But it is not productive to administer more tests. As we know far too well in this country, any test, however well designed, can be used to keep people out as easily as it can be used to get people in. The tests of the future must provide diagnostic information to allow students and teachers to pinpoint academic strengths and weaknesses. Fortunately, the tradition of community colleges is to address the needs of students at whatever level they bring to the institution.

Many community colleges have begun working with local high schools to administer placement exams to high school juniors and seniors. They are on the right track. By providing students with information early about their academic progress, these exams help students gain a critical opportunity to improve their college readiness skills *before* graduating from high school.

### **5. Community colleges should help counselors counsel.**

The introduction of diagnostic academic data will strengthen the role of high school counselors. Rosenbaum and others have reported that many high school counselors have turned away from their role as advisors to one of “information brokers.” Rather than provide students with an appraisal of academic skills and how this may translate to college success, many counselors prefer to help students with the mechanics of the application process (e.g., when to take the SAT<sup>®</sup>, completing the application, strategies in essay writing, etc.). Rosenbaum writes:

*...[C]ounselors do not want the responsibility of discouraging students' plans; it is an unpleasant task that they have no desire to perform. Counselors worry that the students will not be able to handle such rejection or that they themselves will appear mean in the eyes of the students.... Many counselors express the fear that if they try to bring students' aspirations into line, the students will feel bad.<sup>9</sup>*

Some counselors, instead of assessing students' educational goals, prefer to let them pursue educational dreams for which they may be unprepared. This is perhaps understandable—a perverse consequence of the criticism counselors received in the 1970s and 1980s, when they were accused of tracking students, especially those who were members of underrepresented groups. Ironically, this problem is compounded for students planning to attend community college because counselors interpret the open admissions policy as the ultimate fall-back position, even for young men and women who are clearly unprepared for college.

## **Destinations of Choice –Working Paper 2: “Second Chances are Good, But...”**

The mantra among some counselors is: “Just go to the community college and you will be fine.” But without specific academic skills, they will not be fine.

Of course, counselors have one of the toughest jobs of all and often have very little support. Moreover, there are many who work diligently and effectively to help their students realize their educational dreams via the community college. The larger point is to emphasize that a variety of groups, including parents, teachers, four-year faculty, and others, often assume that students planning to attend a community college need no grounding in basic academic skills.

We can strengthen the counselors’ hand, improve the image of the community college, and enhance the bond among community colleges and high schools by administering appropriate assessments in the high school.

### **Finally...First Things First**

The implementation of these recommendations will show how high school performance translates into college academic success. For marginal students who do not appreciate the efficacy of working hard in high school, recasting the American community college as *accessible but academically demanding* will signal the importance of the secondary school curriculum.

The recommendations presented here demand nothing more than to communicate effectively what has been manifest for the past 100 years: Community colleges are committed to the success of *all* students. We must simply remember that while community colleges stand for second chances and must continue to do so, first chances are almost always better. In the words of Damon Runyon: “The race may not always be to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that’s the way to bet.”

### **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<sup>®</sup>, the PSAT/NMSQT<sup>®</sup>, and the Advanced Placement Program<sup>®</sup> (AP<sup>®</sup>). 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.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kirst, M. W. and Venezia, A. (Eds.) (2004). *From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenbaum, J. (2001). *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> The percentages are greater for *non-college-bound* students. See Rosenbaum (2001), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Education Trust (2001). “Youth at the Crossroads—Facing High School and Beyond.” *Thinking K–16 Winter*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenbaum (2001), pp. 68, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Kirst and Venezia (2004), p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> Kirst and Venezia (2004), pp. 278–279.

<sup>8</sup> Kirst and Venezia (2004), pp.289–291.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenbaum (2001), p. 95.