

***Transfer and the Part-Time Student—
Reflections on the Gulf that Separates
Community Colleges and Selective
Universities****

**Working Paper 5—*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 Committee (CCAP) and the National Office of Community College Initiatives, is a project examining the strengths and challenges characterizing today’s community colleges. Through conferences, seminars, public forums, as well as 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 a working document design to evoke a conversation among all educators about the place of community colleges in 21st Century America.

The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the official views of the College Board or CCAP member institutions.

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***Transfer and the Part-Time Student—
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Selective Universities***

At a gathering of community college counselors several years ago hosted by the University of California, the mood turned testy when I led a discussion about how the University of California could recruit more transfer students to apply to its campuses. “If you would allow our students to attend your campuses part-time, you wouldn’t *need* special recruitment programs,” said one counselor, with evident disdain. The vigorous applause from her colleagues made clear their collective feelings.

The counselor’s annoyance and the audience’s support did not surprise me. When representatives from community colleges and selective four-year institutions gather, there is no greater flashpoint than the topic of part-time enrollment. This issue—that students coming from an institution comprising mostly part-time students should be enabled to transfer to selective four-year institutions in which full-time enrollment is the norm—reflects a fundamental difference between the academic cultures of these two institutional types. While community colleges and selective institutions differ on a variety of other dimensions such as mission, funding, and facilities, this subject generates the most heat.[†]

Of course, there are other matters that are important to the well-being of transfer students, such as the availability of financial aid, the quality of academic preparation, and the articulation of course work. However, the part-time/full-time schism encompasses a myriad of concerns lying just below the polite, careful conversation that occurs among community college and university professionals. Indeed, it serves as a proxy for the many reasons transfer policies have failed students.

[†] Throughout this essay, the focus is on the debate between community colleges and *highly selective* four-year colleges and universities—institutions whose admissions policies admit less than a quarter of the students who apply. It is possible that these observations apply to moderately selective institutions as well, but given that the author’s experience has largely been with highly selective institutions, it seems appropriate to make this disclaimer.

First, the Facts

Let’s map the field of conflict based on available research:

- *Most community college students attend college part-time, while most students attending four-year institutions are enrolled full time.*

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, over 62 percent of students attend public community colleges on a part-time basis—that is, they enroll in fewer than 12 credits or 3 classes per term. At four-year institutions, the percentage of part-time students is far lower—just 21 percent at public institutions and 18 percent at private institutions.¹

- *Part-time enrollment allows people to attend college who might otherwise not be able to enroll in a postsecondary institution.*

The US Department of Education reports that over 46 percent of all students in higher education enroll in community colleges. Students’ access to community colleges is fueled at least in part by these institutions’ liberal policies regarding enrollment.²

- *Students attending college part time are less likely to earn a degree of any kind.*

A slew of studies show that students attending college part time are less likely to earn a degree than those attending full time.³ This is true even when researchers account for a variety of other influences, such as students’ demographic backgrounds, family characteristics, and prior academic performance.⁴ Enrolling part-time stretches out the period needed to earn a degree—time that is often interrupted by family or work commitments. Moreover, the US Department of Education reports that enrolling part-time hampers students’ ability to earn at least 20 credits in the first year of college, an especially important predictor of college completion.⁵

- *Few community college students transfer to selective institutions.*

A recent series of studies commissioned by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation revealed that nationally, only a small proportion of students entering selective four-year institutions were transfers (6 percent for elite privates and 19 percent for publics), reflecting a steady decline since the early 1980s.⁶ Even more startling, the Cooke research indicates that only about one student in a thousand at selective private institutions starts at a community college.⁷

Difference and Diversity

Whether a college offers part-time enrollment is only one of many features distinguishing colleges and universities in the United States. With institutions as diverse as Duke and Daytona, it should come as no particular shock that community colleges and selective institutions vary a great deal: they were established in different centuries, built for the needs of different groups of students, and possess fundamentally different missions.

With enrollments of credit and non-credit students topping out at 12 million, community colleges are the largest educational enterprise in the United States, with an open-access mission that represents perhaps the greatest educational experiment of the last century. For their part, American selective colleges and universities lead the world's higher education enterprise. In the recent bestseller *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria notes that despite the relentless bashing of American education in the past decade, the United States possesses as many as 34 of the world's top 50 universities, far outpacing any other country.⁸

Nevertheless, this educational stratification, for all its strengths, has costs—certainly for students who try to cross the academic divide between community colleges and selective colleges and universities, but also for the institutions themselves. What leaders of these uniquely American colleges and universities may ponder in private is something they rarely admit in public: they need each other.

Selective institutions represent the clearest pathway for students to the nation’s very best graduate and professional schools and, by extension, to the boardrooms of the political and cultural elites. Community college boosters may bristle, but to deny this fact only squanders vital opportunities for their students. William Bowen and Derek Bok documented in their book, *The Shape of the River*, that students attending selective institutions have a far better chance of gaining entrance to top-level graduate and professional programs.⁹ They also reveal that the “more selective the school, the more the student achieved subsequently” in their graduate studies and career.¹⁰ Bowen reports (with his colleagues Martin Kurzeil and Eugene Tobin) that students from families of modest means who attended selective institutions earned an average of \$12,000 a year more than college graduates overall. They note that these students “earned far more, on average, than high-ability college graduates, including those from high-income families who attended other schools.”¹¹

As the gateway to higher education for low-income students and students from underrepresented groups, community colleges are an ever-increasing reservoir of emerging talent that represents the broad diversity of the United States better than most four-year institutions. Nevertheless, selective institutions largely ignore these fishing grounds, despite an almost universal chorus of support for greater student diversity on their campuses. As affirmative action continues to be assailed and selective institutions are increasingly criticized for pricing even upper-middle-class students out of their market, the need for closer collaboration with community college is obvious.

Thus, a healthy transfer system, which involves committed partnerships between community colleges and selective institutions, creates opportunities for community college students to attend the nation’s best undergraduate and graduate institutions—gaining access to the enclaves of the intelligentsia and the halls of power. In turn, elite institutions build an educational pipeline that provides a steady flow of well-educated students from a variety of racial, ethnic, and income groups, a goal that is central to their core mission.

Will Part-Time Students Strengthen Transfer?

The transfer process, however, is far from healthy. Depending on which study you want to believe, as few as 5 percent or as many as 50 percent of students who desire to transfer from two- to four-year institutions are successful in doing so.¹² Losing, at best, half of the students whose goal is a baccalaureate degree is an astonishing waste of talent. Even the most enthusiastic boosters for the transfer function admit that we can and must do better.

Yet improvement will not come easily. That’s because partisans of both types of institutions believe transfer will perk up when: a) selective institutions resemble community colleges; *or* b) community colleges act more like selective four-year institutions. And how each treats part-time students illustrates their divergent worldviews.

Community college officials argue that allowing part-time enrollment at four-year institutions will increase the attractiveness of transfer and encourage many more students, especially those from underrepresented groups, to make this important transition. Allowing students to attend part-time, they argue, reflects an institution’s willingness to meet the needs of students who enter higher education with increasingly varied cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, and educational preparation. For example, part-time enrollment helps the low-income student who cannot afford to attend college full-time and who must work toward the degree in a slower but still deliberate fashion.

Confronted with four-year institutions’ reluctance to allow students to enroll part-time, community college officials contend that selective universities are elitist enclaves, catering mainly to the needs of the rich at the expense of the working class. They see restrictions on part-time enrollment as reinforcing this divide, effectively disenfranchising the people from the lower socioeconomic ranks who must work, care for a family, or make accommodations for a disability or chronic health-related problem that prevents them from enrolling in college full-time.

For their part, many faculty at selective institutions criticize community colleges’ commitment to part-time enrollment as a misguided approach to baccalaureate education

that has more to do with marketing, consumerism, and convenience than with intellectual enlightenment. They believe that full-time enrollment is an essential element of the college experience.

Their institutions, they argue, educate the nation’s leaders in business, education, and the community. To train for these roles and/or to become well-prepared entrants into the nation’s professional and graduate programs, students must make a considerable commitment, in and out of the classroom. These faculty point to research showing that students who remain on campus (either in university-run housing or in nearby neighborhoods) are more committed to their education, experience greater cognitive growth, and evaluate their college experience more positively than students who commute.¹³

Disconnected Academic Cultures

The inherent problem with this debate is not merely a failure to communicate but a mutual lack of appreciation for each other’s unique missions and the enormity of their respective responsibilities in serving our country’s higher education needs. If we think of community colleges and selective four-year institutions as different academic cultures driven by different motivators and measures of success, we can begin to build a bridge for students—full time and part time—to cross on their way to the baccalaureate degree.

Over twenty years ago, in a seminal study of the needs of urban community colleges and their relationship with more traditional higher education institutions, sociologists Richard Richardson and Louis Bender concluded that transfer students needed help adjusting to two distinctly different institutions, “each with its own set of values and assumptions.” Sadly, however, they discovered that neither institution was much help in assisting students with this transition, concluding that there is a “lack of understanding among community colleges and universities of the differences between their cultures . . . and an absence of respect for the differences in attitudes and behavior that these cultures produce. As a result, neither does as much as it could to help students understand or

adjust to the other’s culture.”¹⁴ Richardson and Bender’s perspective is as true today as it was in the 1980s.

Understanding that community colleges and selective institutions differ in their worldviews is important because academic culture influences institutional policies and practices. Knowing, for instance, that community colleges place a premium on student access helps explain the emphasis on part-time enrollment. Appreciating that selective institutions are interested in advancing knowledge helps explain the premium placed on academic commitment, as expressed by a policy of full-time enrollment.

Does this mean that community colleges are not interested in advancing knowledge? Try telling that to innovators of distance learning, who came largely from community colleges. Does this mean that selective institutions are uninterested in student access? Years of affirmative action policies would argue otherwise.

With this said, however, only the strictest partisan would argue that advancing knowledge is the community colleges’ stock in trade or that creating completely accessible campuses by changing its admissions requirements are the *raison de d’être* of Harvard. Both kinds of academic communities are legitimate. But both need to figure out how to serve transfer students better.

A Distinction Without a Difference

Keeping students in school is the key. Research by Clifford Adelman, formerly an analyst with the U.S. Department of Education, revealed that it is the *continuity* and *intensity* of enrollment, along with the *content* of the curriculum, that best predict student success. Adelman writes that in addition to earning credits in collegiate math during the first year of college and participating in summer sessions, continuous enrollment makes a student more likely to transfer.¹⁵

Thus, given a choice between staying enrolled part time or dropping out for a term, Adelman recommends that a student take a part-time load and stay in school.¹⁶ While his

study does not rule out the possibility that full-time enrollment is a more effective way to complete a degree (it is clearly a *quicker* pathway), enrolling part time will have a less harmful effect if it enables a student to stay in college continuously.

Recommendations for Community Colleges

Community colleges need not abandon their historic commitment to part-time students. Still, to prepare students effectively for transfer to four-year institutions, they will need to change institutional policies that discourage sustained educational progress. If the latest research from the Department of Education is correct, *some* markers of student academic progress are necessary, even if it is within a part-time context.

Here are a few suggestions:

- *Require part-time transfer students to complete at least 20 credits per academic year.*

Adelman’s research reveals that in addition to continuous enrollment, students who complete at least 20 credits in the first year of college stand a better chance of earning the baccalaureate than those who do not. It does not matter how students earn these credits (e.g., summer sessions, regular session, dual enrollment, AP®) or whether they enroll full-time or part-time.¹⁷ So a policy requiring completion of a minimum number of credits each year need not disadvantage students who must attend school part time.

There will be students who will not be able to meet this requirement. Since community colleges are in the business of taking all comers, they will need to make allowances for students with special needs, in the same way that four-year institutions now allow part-time enrollment under certain circumstances.

- *Tighten up grading policies that allow students to drop courses, take incompletes, or withdraw from the term with little penalty.*

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Many community colleges allow students to revise their course schedules well into the term with little penalty. While this reflects the colleges' desire to accommodate the needs of their students, the liberal practice of allowing of no-penalty withdrawals (no-credit course repeats) inadvertently stifles continuous academic progress and slows the momentum toward the degree. Thus, campus leaders should revise such policies and develop incentives for students to stay continuously enrolled.

While students must have the flexibility to adjust their course schedules, frequent use of these mechanisms (over 20 percent of all grades, according to Adelman's research) leads to poor educational attainment, reducing the likelihood of degree completion by more than a third.¹⁸ “Some might argue,” Adelman says, “that a lenient no-penalty withdrawal and repeat policy cushions the ‘shock’ of postsecondary entry for underprepared students. But the evidence clearly shows that excessive withdrawal and repeat behavior stalls academic momentum, leads to dropout, not completion, and hence does students no favors.”¹⁹

- *Create fee policies that encourage students to remain continuously enrolled.*

Reducing fees for every term completed without a break would signal to students the importance of steady academic progress. There is precedent for this kind of incentive. Some graduate and professional programs have had success in advancing students academically by granting fee reductions after the completion of significant milestones (e.g., passing qualifying examinations).

In the same way, community college students who reach certain unit milestones, say 30 or 45 credits, could have a certain proportion of their fees refunded or “banked” for use at a four-year transfer institution, assuming they completed the work continuously and within a specific time frame. True, community colleges that advance their students more quickly stand to lose a proportion of fee income, but the departure of more advanced students opens slots for new ones, who will be paying full freight.

Recommendations for Selective Institutions

Suggesting that selective institutions offer part-time enrollment as a serious option for all of its students would be as misguided as insisting that community colleges require all students to attend full time. However, requiring transfer students to enroll full time at a selective institution will fail if these institutions do not support these students in ways that enable full-time engagement.

If four-year institutions are genuinely interested in accommodating students from community colleges, they should continue to require full-time enrollment for all students, *but only* if they:

- *Provide the kinds and amount of financial aid to transfer students that enable them to attend full time.*

Calls for four-year institutions to permit part-time enrollment may inadvertently deprive low-income students. Why should they be relegated to a part-time higher educational experience, while higher-income students attend full-time? It seems a fair assumption that students interested in earning a baccalaureate degree would jump at a chance to pursue this goal full time, if they could afford it.

A recent *Los Angeles Times* article noted that Latino and Asian American students—ethnic groups especially prevalent on community college campuses—are much less likely than white students to take out loans, preferring instead to work their way through school.²⁰ A commitment to support them full-time means that four-year institutions need to provide these students with the kinds of financial aid that they are actually willing to accept—not simply higher loan limits but grants and work-study opportunities.

- *Divert a disproportionate amount of work-study funding to transfer students.*

Community college students are more likely to put themselves through college by working. Eighty percent of all students attending community colleges work full or part time. More remarkably, of those students attending community college full-time, 77 percent also hold down a full- or part-time job, according to the American Association of Community Colleges.²¹ So participation in work-study programs may be especially attractive to transfer students.

Moreover, research reveals that a moderate workload (less than 20 hours per week) actually helps student progress. On-campus work better integrates students into campus life—a significant factor in retention and an opportunity not often afforded to students who must commute. Thoughtfully conceived work-study opportunities can also be a substantive way for students to explore career interests.

- *Provide student services that allow transfer students to attend full time.*

Selective institutions need to develop the infrastructure to accommodate the diverse needs of transfer students so that they can attend full time. This often means adequate childcare and student housing for families. The kinds of accommodations that selective institutions make for their graduate students—who by definition are older and likely to have families—should also be provided for community college transfer students.²²

- *Expand traditional notions of what it means to be enrolled full time.*

Reports indicate that upon admission, community college students often suffer “transfer shock”—a significant drop in GPA from what they earned at the two-year institution. As a result, academic advisers often counsel students to take a light load in the first term. But such a recommendation may conflict with an institution’s minimum-progress requirements if the student does not make up the credits later in the school year. Given the importance of supporting continuous enrollment, selective institutions

should allow summer terms and other opportunities for credit accumulation to count toward the minimum-progress threshold, at least in the first year.

An Authentic Transfer Partnership

Contemplating the impact of part-time/full-time enrollment policies on transfer may be to traverse tedious terrain, yet it is the topography where the parochialism of community colleges and selective institutions is in plain view. While politicians and policymakers have been talking about the importance of the transfer process for decades, anemic transfer rates show the message has yet to be fully acted on by two- and four-year institutions.

If community colleges are interested in sending their best students to the best universities, and if those same universities are attracted to the student diversity at community colleges, then the institutions must work in tandem. The solution is not to create identical academic cultures but to acknowledge the unique strengths of community colleges and selective institutions, while insisting nonetheless that both collaborate in the preparation of students for the baccalaureate degree.

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 Phillippe K. A. and Sullivan, L. G. (2005). *National Profile of Community Colleges: Trends and Statistics*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges, p. 30. See also Cohen, A. M. and Brawer, F. B. (2003). *The American Community College* (4th Edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 40–41.

² Quoted from Phillippe and Sullivan, 2005, p. 30 (Table 2.3).

³ See Chen, X. and Carroll, C. D. (2007). *Part-time Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education: 2003-04* (NCES 2007-165). Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education Statistics. (p. 28). Also see: (1) Berkner, L., He, S., and Cataldi, E. F. (2002). *Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later* (NCES 2003-151). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. (2) Carroll, C. D. (1989). *College Persistence and Degree Attainment for 1980 High School Graduates: Hazards for Transfers, Stopouts, and Part-Timers* (NCES 89-302). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁴ See Chen, X. and Carroll, C. D., 2007.

⁵ See: 1) Adelman, C. (2005). *Moving Into Town —and Moving On: The Community College in the Lives of Traditional Age Students*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education; and 2) Adelman, C. (2006). *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁶ Melguizo, T. and Dowd, A. C. *The Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access at Selective Institutions (Section I): National Estimates of Transfer Access and Baccalaureate Degree Attainment at Four-Year Colleges and Universities*. Retrieved on July 7, 2008 from <http://jkcf.org/>.

⁷ Dowd, A. C. and Cheslock, J. *The Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access at Selective Institutions (Section II): Community College Transfer Students at Selective Colleges and Universities in the United States (Executive Summary)*, p. 3. Retrieved on July 7, 2008 from <http://jkcf.org/>.

⁸ Zakaria, F. (2008). *The Post-American World*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, p. 190.

⁹ Bowen, W. G. and Bok, D. (1998). *The Shape of the River: Long Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Bowen and Bok note that just over 50 percent of the students in their sample who attended a highly selective college entered a graduate or professional program after graduation, compared to about 25 percent of students attending less selective institutions. See p. 91 and 96-99.

¹⁰ Bowen and Bok, p. 281.

¹¹ Bowen, W. G., Kurzweil, M. A., and Robin, E. M. (2005). *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, p. 125.

¹² Handel, S. J. (2008). *It's Not a Math Problem: Why a Focus on Transfer Rates Diverts Us From Promoting Baccalaureate Completion for Community College Students*. (Working Paper). New York: The College Board, National Office of Community College Initiatives.

¹³ Lederman, D. (2006). “Engagement and the Under-prepared.” *Inside Higher Education*, August 1, p. 1. Retrieved March 23, 2008, from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/08/01/engage>.

¹⁴ Richardson, R. C. & Bender, L. W. (1987). *Fostering Minority Access and Achievement in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass., p. 21.

¹⁵ Adelman, 2005, p. xx.

¹⁶ Adelman, 2005, p. 88.

¹⁷ Adelman, 2006, p. xxi.

¹⁸ Adelman, 2005, p. 85.

¹⁹ Adelman 2005, p. 87–88.

²⁰ Vara-Orla, F. (2007). “Most Latino Students Spurn College Loans.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31.

²¹ Phillippe and Sullivan, 2005, p. 50 (Table 2.15).

²² The average age of students attending community colleges is 29 years according to the American Association of Community Colleges (2008). *Community College Research*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved on March 23, 2008 from, <http://www2.aacc.nche.edu/research/index.htm>.