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ABSTRACT

Community colleges account for over half of the ethnic minority enrollments in America, and a controversy has developed over how well these students are being served. On one hand, community colleges are praised for providing open access to higher education. Critics, however, claim that community colleges track minority students into low level studies and reduce their chances of obtaining baccalaureate degrees. Indeed, this question of quality of service permeates the literature. Several ERIC documents, for example, explore the causes of minority attrition and the special services, including remedial instruction and academic counseling, that are provided to reduce this attrition. Other efforts to improve service include the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services in California and the formation of community colleges especially for minority students. Yet the resolution of the basic controversy rests on the individual's interpretation of the community college mission. If the mission is to provide educational alternatives to high risk, non-traditional students, then community colleges have been a success. If their main goal is to provide traditional instruction leading to transfer to a four-year college, the community colleges are a failure by design. Thus, the question of what is done to assist minority students is intertwined with the definition of the community college's place in higher education. (JP)

ERIC JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

THE MINORITY STUDENT CONTROVERSY

by Arthur M. Cohen

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES
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ERIC

JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

February 1980

THE MINORITY STUDENT CONTROVERSY

The community colleges are the point of first entry to higher education for well over half the ethnic minority-group students who begin college in America. Even taking the numbers of students at all levels of collegiate studies, the two-year colleges enroll 40 percent of the Blacks, 50 percent of the Hispanics. In states where publicly supported systems of higher education are not fully developed, the minorities are more highly represented in the community colleges than they are in proportion to their numbers in the total population of the state. In large cities where the minorities are concentrated in certain neighborhoods, de facto segregated two-year colleges have resulted.

What do the community colleges do for the minorities? The critics claim that the colleges ill serve the minorities, tracking them into less than collegiate level studies, and reducing their chances to obtain baccalaureate and higher degrees. The defendants point to the special efforts being made on behalf of the minorities and note that as long as students who are ill prepared academically or who have limited financial resources at their disposal are effectively barred from senior institutions, the community colleges serve well by maintaining an open door: It is impossible to resolve the question since, as the adage about the neighbors disputing over the back fence has it, they are arguing from different premises. In this paper some of the ERIC documents that provide fuel for the proponents of both positions are reviewed.

Minority Attrition

How many minority students complete community college programs and/or subsequently obtain bachelor's degrees? Studies of completion and attrition ratios are inconclusive because the denominator, the number of students enrolled, may be variously derived. Which students are counted: Full-time? Full-time and part-time? Full-time equivalents? Degree aspirants only? When are they counted: At registration? At census week? At the end of the term? In a recent study of fourteen community colleges in California, more than half the students who had originally registered for courses were not enrolled at the end of the term (Hunter and Sheldon, 1979). Depending on which students are counted, and when, the total enrollment figures vary greatly.

Although some studies reveal no difference between minority attrition and attrition for other students, a number of researchers have found that non-returning Blacks and Hispanics exceed their proportion of the population. Gorter (1978) reported that the proportion of minorities who failed to return for the Spring 1978 semester at Mercer County Community College (New Jersey) was greater than the percentage of non-returning majorities. Knoell and Others (1976) found slightly higher withdrawal for minorities during the term in California colleges. Tschechtelin (1979) found that three-and-one-half years after entry to community colleges in Maryland, Black students had completed twenty-seven units on average compared with the thirty-three units completed by white students.

Alexander Astin provided useful comments on a draft of this paper.

The reasons for minority student drop-out are sometimes compared with the reasons given by majority students who withdraw. DeVault and Lee (1978) suggest that Blacks are slightly more likely to drop out because of academic reasons while Hispanics drop out because of financial problems. In a Los Angeles City College study (Stine, 1976) different reasons for dropping out were given by Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans: the Blacks were much more likely to withdraw because of financial problems and work responsibilities; the Hispanic students tended to drop out because they transferred to another school or because they had scheduling conflicts; and the Asians also indicated transferring to another school as a major consideration in their abandonment of studies at the college.

Special Programs

Community colleges have attempted to reduce attrition for all their students by offering special forms of assistance. Since the influx of sizeable percents of minority students, many of whom are not well prepared for collegiate studies, these forms of aid have increased. Kinnebrew (1975) reports on a Sacramento City College (California) project to strengthen minority students' abilities in mathematics, science, and technologies. Nearly all the colleges surveyed by Morrison (1973) offered remedial studies, reduced course loads, and an emphasis on writing and listening skills in special courses for members of those groups. Special guidance and counseling services for academically disadvantaged minorities were offered in most institutions with regular faculty members doing extra tutoring and additional tutors and counselors being employed to serve that group.

Ethnic studies never bloomed as a major curriculum emphasis in the community college. Morrison found few such programs and Lombardi (1971) had noted that even at the height of the move for ethnic studies in the late 1960s not more than 25 percent of the colleges had established such courses. Nationwide curriculum studies conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (Brawer, 1978) found ethnic studies in a decided decline with only 15 percent of the colleges offering any such courses at all.

Several reports point to the importance of ethnic minority counselors who can relate to minority students. Greco and McDavis (1978) discussed the issue in relation to Cuban American students; Gilsdorf (1978) refers to the counselor preference of Mexican American, Black, and white community college students; Hernandez ([1977]) discusses group counseling for Chicanas; and Saucedo ([1977]) describes a project designed to lead to personal development for Chicanos.

Broad-scale Efforts

No discussion of the community colleges' attempts to assist the minorities would be complete without a mention of the many institutions that have been created or modified especially for members of minority groups. Hostos Community College in New York is seen by the Puerto Rican community as their

institution. Malcolm X College in Illinois and Los Angeles Southwest College in California for the Blacks, and El Paso Community College in Texas and East Los Angeles College in California for the Chicanos are other examples of institutions that because of their high minority enrollments have been taken on by members of the minority community as their own. And several community colleges have been organized recently especially for American Indians with Oglala Sioux Community College in North Dakota, Haskell Indian Junior College in Kansas, and Navajo Community College in Arizona the best known examples of that type. In these institutions the counseling, student recruitment, instruction, and curriculum are all designed to assist members of the special community to stay in school and obtain useful job certificates or transferable courses.

Several state-level efforts to assist the minorities have been made. One of the more successful programs is the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) which provides funds for tutoring, counseling, recruiting, special instructional programs, and student financial aid. Although anyone is eligible to apply to the program, three-fourths of the students served by EOPS in the California community colleges in the early 1970s were ethnic minorities. According to Lee and West (1974), those EOPS students who receive full support services, including tutoring and counseling as well as financial aid, tend to perform better in their studies. An interest in helping minority students led to the formation of a twelve college consortium in Washington (Brock, 1976) and the Washington State master plans and recommendations (Washington State Board for Community College Education, [1970]; Washington State Council on Higher Education, 1975) also point to numerous other ways that the community colleges in that state attempt to serve the minorities.

Single college districts frequently collect data about student ethnicity as compared to the ethnic pattern in the entire district and, with some success, attempt to recruit students from neighborhoods with high ethnic minority concentrations. Charles and Perkins (1978) report such a study in a Northern California District and Garay and Others (1976) and Hepburn (1977) report similar studies in Los Angeles. Robinson and Shearon (1978) discuss efforts made to recruit Black students in North Carolina.

Two studies currently underway will provide additional information on what happens to the minorities in community colleges. The Ford Foundation has funded a major effort to determine progress made by minority group members at all levels of higher education in the past fifteen years. Conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute in Los Angeles, the three-year project will generate extensive sets of data and numerous recommendations about all aspects of the minority experience in colleges and universities. Of particular interest to the project are the figures pertaining to the numbers of minority students who succeed at various levels and in various types of programs. The researchers will present highly detailed information of a scope not usually available in a national study, and the project will yield significant recommendations.

The National Science Foundation is sponsoring a study of science education for women, minority, and handicapped students in the Los Angeles Community College District, the largest community college district in the nation. The Center for the Study of Community Colleges, the grantee, will obtain information on students' course-taking patterns and the reasons why students enroll and stay in various types of courses. Curriculums and types of faculty and counselor assistance will also be explored.

The Bottom Line

What does the community college do for the minorities? Answers to that question will never satisfy everyone because the question's many components are embedded in the broader question of the place of the community colleges in the fabric of higher education. On the positive side the colleges make more likely the entry of minority students to postsecondary education. If the open access, low tuition colleges were not readily available, fewer minority group members would enroll in any college. The presence of a community college certainly increases the matriculation rate. Further, the colleges' policies of allowing part-time attendance and of offering courses on the nights and weekends encourages students to work while attending, and their allowing students to enroll, drop out, and enroll again without penalty encourage successive attendance over time. Minority students as well as others may live at home, work, attend school at their own convenience, and thus participate in postsecondary education. If the experience of taking some college classes is at all beneficial, the community college helps the minorities.

But the opposite view may be taken. If the idea of college-going is to complete a program and obtain a degree or an occupational certificate, the community college may not serve the minorities well. Astin (1978) presents evidence that students who begin at two-year colleges with the intention to complete the bachelor's degree are more likely than senior college matriculants to drop out before completing any program. The minorities drop out at an even greater rate. It is important to note that Astin's studies take into account initial differences in the entering students' abilities, aspirations, and prior achievements. For the commuter students, staying in school requires juggling work schedules and family responsibilities; dropping out brings no penalty. Thus the students in institutions where casual attendance is the norm tend not to gain an occupational certificate or transfer to a senior institution.

Astin (1975) has also documented the reasons why students leave college before obtaining the baccalaureate. The poorest risks are those individuals with poor high school records, low aspirations, and low academic ability who are commuters with off-campus employment and who are older than the norm of entering freshmen. Those who enroll in public institutions with low selectivity, and especially in institutions that do not themselves award the baccalaureate but require students to transfer before obtaining it, are even poorer risks. Take out the words, "low aspirations," and the description fits the community colleges and their student body more closely than it does any other type of institution. The fact that minority students tend to be clustered in two-year institutions thus means they are overrepresented in the group that does not complete a college-degree program.

Two questions are intertwined: what is the community colleges' place in higher education and what does the community college do to assist the minorities? Many community college spokespersons, Craig and McIntyre (1978) for instance, insist that the colleges should not be judged by the number of students who go through and transfer. Although theirs is a popular view, Cosand insists that "Community colleges were, are, and will be largely evaluated based upon the success of their transfer students to the four-year colleges and universities" (1979, p. 4). The question then is one of institutional mission.

Many changes will have to be made if the community colleges are to become more successful in assisting all their students, minority and otherwise, to complete programs and obtain degrees. Within the colleges a turn could be made toward creating, at least in part, the type of environment that Astin demonstrates is best for enhancing performance and reducing attrition. The colleges could encourage full-time attendance by making more work opportunities available on campus, mandating orientation sessions, establishing buddy systems whereby students tutor and assist each other, and developing telephone networks to determine why students are absent from classes—actions that have been proved highly successful in small-scale programs. These need to be extended. Bureaucratic changes can be helpful as well. Miami-Dade Commu-

nity College has recently tightened its record-keeping so that students who fail to complete a certain number of courses in which they enroll within a certain period of time are dropped (McCabe, 1979). And certain pedagogical changes, such as fewer non-credit courses and fewer courses offered on weekends and at night, might have the further effect of encouraging full-time attendance, a necessary step in reducing attrition.

Two decades ago most community colleges operated with policies that had the intent of assuring that students stayed in school and made satisfactory progress. Some of those policies sound quaint now, but at that time academic probation, F grades, entrance tests, midterm grades, penalty drop after the eighth week, mandatory exit interviews, required class attendance, and mandatory orientation courses were prevalent. During the 1970s there was a distinct erosion of those requirements and, although some colleges are taking steps to reinstate them, the norm is still in the direction of attracting students with only a casual commitment to the institution.

Do the community colleges well-serve the minorities? It depends on one's definition of success. The critics say that as long as the community colleges accept students who aspire to the baccalaureate, they have a responsibility to provide the extra, specially tailored tutoring, counseling, and instructional aids that lead to success. After all, they say, the colleges still enroll forty percent of the first-time, full-time freshmen in America and nearly three-fourths of that group aspire to obtain at least a bachelor's degree. But the defendants counter with the argument that the colleges offer open admissions, job training, and a receptive environment to people who would not otherwise be in any postsecondary institution. Thus, they say, the two-year colleges are at least attempting to provide something of value.

In fine, if the institution's purpose is to assist students in completing programs and obtaining baccalaureate degrees, the community college is a failure by design, the design being that for the past two decades the colleges have been attending particularly to a different clientele. However, if the purpose is to maintain a readily accessible institution where people may benefit even from single courses or from the knowledge that an institution is readily available to serve them through counseling, financial aids, single courses, and short-term experiences then the community colleges have been a success. It is all a matter of definition.

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