DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 920 JC 890 357

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TITLE The Case for the Community Colleges.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 89
CONTRACT RI-88-062002
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Associate Degrees; College Role; College Transfer Students; *Community Colleges; *Educational Benefits; Educational History; Educational Mobility; Job Training; *Minority Groups; *Outcomes of Education; *Transfer Programs; Two Year Colleges; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development of community colleges, analyzes their curricular functions, and discusses their contributions to the American educational system. First, several hypotheses accounting for the rise of the community college in America are summarized, including those pointing to a conspiracy of the elite, a populist alliance, and a clique of professional educators. A profile is then provided of community colleges, their students, and the forces forming the unique character of two-year colleges. The next section looks at occupational studies in the community college curriculum, focusing on two-year college students' job-related educational goals, trends in enrollments and degree awards, charges of ethnic bias in tracking students into occupational programs, high dropout rates, vocational education programs as a stepping stone to the baccalaureate, and the organization of career education as a separate curricular track. The transfer function is discussed in the next section in terms of the lack of reliable data on transfer rates, reasons for the low rates, factors influencing student progress toward the baccalaureate, aids to transfer, and statewide efforts to promote articulation. In the next section, the contributions of the community colleges are reviewed. The final sections look at the rate of return on students' investment in a community college education, college contributions to individual mobility, and the special effects of community colleges on minorities. Includes 46 references. (ALB)

THE CASE FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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August 1989

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The American public community colleges were established to accommodate the 20th Century drive for more years of education. Located in every state, they enroll 5 million students, two-thirds of whom attend part time. Their occupational programs lead both toward immediate employment, as in clerical work, and toward higher-status careers, such as the health and engineering technologies that may require additional schooling. Their transfer function is indistinct because the data and definitions are not stable and because their students have variant goals. Forty-seven percent of the minorities in postsecondary education are in community colleges; their program completion rate is comparable with their rate of progress in other school sectors. The colleges could be strengthened if the states developed fiscal incentives to be awarded to institutions that increased their proportion of students who gained associate degrees, entered employment in the field for which they were prepared, and/or matriculated at a four-year college or university.

The Case for the Community Colleges*

Arthur M. Cohen

One of the major outcomes of schooling is the desire for more schooling; one of the major benefits is a ticket of admission to the next school grade. Throughout most of the 20th Century ever-higher percentages of the expanding American population have spent ever-more years in school. As Rubinson (1986) put it, "The proportional change in enrollments at any given level of schooling is a simple function of the numbers of people in the relevant age group and in the previous level of schooling" (p. 521). But why did community colleges flourish when students' desires for higher education opportunity could have been met by expanding the state universities? This article traces the development of community colleges, analyzes their major curricular functions, and discusses their contributions to schooling in America.

Why Community Colleges?

Many interpretations have been offered to account for the rise of community colleges. One contention is that the colleges were sponsored by the upper classes who wanted to maintain their social position by supporting an institution that would "reproduce existing social relations" (Karabel, 1986, p. 18). The proponents of that position point to the differential rates of progress made by upper-class and lower-class youth and conclude

*The points cited in this article have been elaborated in the second edition of The American Community College, by Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, published by Jossey-Bass, 1989.

therefore that the colleges were designed to serve as "one more barrier put between the poor and the disenfranchised and the decent and respectable stake in the social system which they seek" (Zwerling, 1976, p. xvii). This thesis is especially appealing to those who seek institutional and political villains to account for a class-based society and for the inequitable distribution of attainments among different ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

A thesis that attributes the rise of the colleges to a combination of social and political forces was advanced by Rubinson (1986). He contended that an alliance between working class-groups, professional educators, and middle class reformers was able to fend off the desire of the business classes to limit and stratify education. The working class has always supported publicly funded education forms that allow for progression to higher levels of schooling and that have a common curriculum, not just a vocational orientation. Therefore the community colleges have emphasized both occupational studies and a collegiate curriculum that is modeled on the lower division of universities, complete with academic discipline-dominated courses and faculty members.

A different explanation connects the basic support for the colleges more directly to the professional educators. Since the colleges provide the less-qualified students with the less-prestigious curriculums, they have allowed the universities to dis-

tance themselves from the students who they did not wish to serve and the programs they did not wish to offer; thus the universities sponsored community college development in their own interest. A complementary position is that public school officials and local community leaders advocated community colleges for the prestige and higher-status professional positions they yielded (See Dougherty, 1988). According to these theses, the education community itself created the colleges and built the political coalitions necessary to sustain their support.

Brint and Karabel (1989) have extended the thesis that the professional educators determined community college directions. They argue that the transformation of the colleges from pre-baccalaureate to occupational-training institutions in the 1970s was occasioned less by student demands for job-relevant education than it was by college leaders seeking a secure niche in the structure of higher education. Accordingly, the leaders lobbied for funds for occupational programs, built corporate training connections, and sought the part-time, older, less highly motivated students to fit those curriculums.

It is difficult to reject any thesis because few serious scholars have studied community colleges, and little information is available on the mechanisms by which any of these forces have been able to effect college development. A conspiracy of the elite, a populist alliance, or a clique of professional educators -- all are plausible. But regardless of their ontogeny, the colleges have become part of the formal education structure in

America, thriving on the educative tasks that the other postsecondary institutions had not undertaken. Within each state, when the universities have been cooperative, not competitive, the colleges have done well. When college and business leaders have made the case for programs that would stimulate employment in a region, fiscal support has been forthcoming. Three-fourths of the colleges' income derives from public appropriations. The colleges live in a political arena.

The community college in America is any institution accredited to award the associate degree as its highest degree. Although the private junior colleges and the two-year proprietary schools are included in that definition, the 1050 publicly supported comprehensive institutions are the dominant form, hence this discussion concentrates on them. Located in every state, these colleges provide nearly 5 million students with occupational programs, the first two years of baccalaureate studies, basic skills development, and a variety of special-interest courses. Their services to the community include cultural, recreational, and educative opportunities for a broad segment of the populace.

The students enrolled in college-credit classes in community colleges exhibit a variety of goals and characteristics. Around 36 percent enroll to gain transferable credits, and slightly fewer want job-entry skills. The other primary reasons for attending include upgrading in a job the student already holds (15 percent), personal interest (14 percent), and gaining basic skills (4 percent). The students' median age is 25; the modal

age is 19. Women outnumber men by 56 to 44 percent.

In general, the students differ in several ways from their counterparts in universities. They are less academically able: only 9 percent of the 1980 high school seniors with an "A" average entered community colleges compared with 44 percent who entered public four-year colleges; in 1988, 24 percent of the freshmen entering all colleges and universities had "A" averages in high school whereas 12 percent of the community college matriculants were "A" students. Community college students tend to come from lower-income families and they are more likely to be ethnic minorities. With 37 percent of the total enrollment in American higher education, the colleges enroll over 47 percent of the minorities: 43 percent of the Blacks, 55 percent of the Hispanics; 56 percent of the American Indians, and 42 percent of the Asians.

The community colleges occupy a singular site in American education. Because they are open-access institutions, enrolling anyone for virtually any purpose, relatively few of their students complete programs; the colleges award associate degrees to around nine percent of their total student body each year. Because they provide occupational courses in both highly structured career programs and in general skills areas, their contribution to labor force development is varied. Because they encourage students to attend part-time (67 percent do), their matriculants take longer to attain their goals. Because few of the colleges have residence halls, their students commute from

the local neighborhoods, dropping in or out as work schedules and family responsibilities dictate; 70 percent of their students hold off-campus jobs. Accordingly, when the students' degree-completion or high-status job entry rates are compared with those of other types of colleges and universities, the community colleges fall short.

WHY OCCUPATIONAL STUDIES?

The role of community colleges can best be understood by analyzing their two major curricular functions: occupational and transfer-related studies. The vocationalization of higher education dates to the rise of the universities and their attendant professional schools in the late-19th century. The small academies of the pre-Civil War era grew into universities with student bodies numbering in the tens of thousands only when they incorporated schools of law, medicine, engineering, architecture, and numerous other professions. The latter-day state colleges developed curriculums in the professions of lesser status: accountancy, teaching, agriculture. The community colleges of the second half of the 20th century built programs in nursing, office skills, computer applications, and in the trades that had not yet attained even semi-professional status. This three-tiered structure of higher education, matching the status order of the workplace, was reflected also in the socioeconomic status of the students attending each type of institution and in the magnitude of the resources that each group was able to command.

This overly generalized description of the hierarchy of

institutions, the curriculums they provide, and the students they serve is useful in understanding the community colleges' emphasis on occupational education. They are deeply involved with career-related studies but they are not vocational schools, any more than the universities are dedicated to pure inquiry and the higher learning; all are engaged in preparing people for the workplace. The status of the jobs and the level of income that their graduates obtain is a function of the value that employers and the public place on the type of work that the graduates perform.

The conventional belief is that community college students (as compared with university matriculants) are less interested in academic studies and in learning for its own sake, more interested in the practical, which to them means earning more money. According to Cooperative Institutional Research Program data (Astin and others, 1988), 86 percent of the entering freshmen in two-year colleges noted "get a better job" as a very important reason in deciding to go to college; but 81 percent of matriculants in four-year colleges and universities gave the same reason. Similarly, although 77 percent of two-year college entrants gave as an important reason "make more money," 70 percent of the freshmen at four-year colleges and universities said the same thing. The perception that higher education is particularly to be used for occupational training is pervasive among students in all types of institutions.

Occupational studies in community colleges account for more

than one-third of enrollments. Most students in the occupational programs seem satisfied with the training they receive. Follow-up studies routinely find 80 to 90 percent of the program graduates saying that they were helped and that they would recommend the program to others. A sizable proportion of the students who have not graduated usually indicate that their reason for not returning is not that they have been dissatisfied with the program but that they received the training they needed in the courses they took.

The career programs account for more than two-thirds of the 450,000 associate degrees awarded each year. Nearly all the graduates continue their schooling or obtain employment in the field in which they had been prepared; many do both. In Florida, 73 percent of the 1983-1984 graduates gained employment (Florida State Board of Education, 1985). Eighty-one percent of the graduates from the New Hampshire Technical Institute and Vocational-Technical Colleges were employed, 96 percent of those in their college major or a related field (New Hampshire State Department, 1987). Seventy-one percent of the career program graduates in the North Carolina community colleges were working in the field for which they had been prepared (Hammond and Porter, 1984). Seventy-five percent of the Illinois career program graduates were employed, 83 percent of them in related fields (Illinois Community College Board, 1987). A survey of graduates of the Wisconsin system found 93 percent employed after three years, 78 percent in a field related to their training (Wisconsin

State Board, 1985). In recent years, between 53 and 58 percent of Maryland's career program graduates were employed full time in their area of training (Maryland State Board, 1988).

Single college studies show similar findings. A survey of the graduates of career programs at William Rainey Harper College (Illinois) found 87 percent of them working, 70 percent in a field related to their major (Lucas, 1988). And 70 percent of the graduates of the career programs in Los Rios Community College District (California) were working in a job related to their program (Lee, 1984). These figures suggest why community college leaders often single out the occupational programs when they make their case for institutional support.

Some critics are concerned that the career programs channel students untowardly. On the first page of their book on higher education in the cities, Richardson and Bender (1987) state, "There is growing evidence that the policy decision made by many states in the 1960s to rely on community colleges as the primary access point for urban minorities has produced side effects that now threaten some of the hoped-for outcomes ... . There has been little change in economic and social class mobility for minorities because their curriculum choices have been so concentrated in the career and vocational areas" (p. 1) (Emphasis added). It is obviously misleading to categorize career programs as a unitary group because there are high and low status programs, programs preparing people for areas of high demand such as health care and electronics technology and those such as office work or

data processing for which the market is not as distinct. But these are labor market, not educative phenomena.

The critics also view with alarm the high dropout rates in community colleges without acknowledging that program completion is an institutional artifact. To the student who seeks a job in the field, completing the program becomes irrelevant as soon as a job is available; the categories "graduate" and "dropout" lose much of their force when viewed in this light. Students who leave programs before graduation and enter employment in the field for which they are prepared must be considered as program successes. Students who graduate but do not obtain employment because they have entered related baccalaureate programs should not be counted among the failures.

Occupational education as a stepping stone to the baccalaureate is an important part of its value. In a California statewide study, 25 percent of students enrolled in career curricula said they intended to transfer (Hunter and Sheldon, 1980) and national data compiled by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in 1986 yielded similar figures (Palmer, 1987, p. 134). Regardless of their intentions when they enrolled, 40 percent of the Los Rios Community College District (California) career program graduates transferred (Lee, 1984); 36 percent of the William Rainey Harper College (Illinois) career alumni (Lucas, 1988); 11 percent of the graduates of the technical institute and the six vocational-technical colleges in New Hampshire (New Hampshire State Department, 1988); 14 percent of the career

program graduates in Illinois (Illinois Community College Board, 1987); and 27 percent of the career program graduates in Maryland (Maryland State Board, 1988). Many of the graduates were employed in their field of study and pursuing further education simultaneously.

Within the colleges, the organization of occupational programs reflects both the belief that separate curricular tracks are the best way to accommodate the varying educational objectives and characteristics of the students and the way that the programs are funded. However, Palmer (1987) concluded that the organization of career education as a separate curricular track stems from several viewpoints other than student intentions. First is a "political agenda" held by state legislators and college planners who assume that occupational programs serve students whose primary educational objective is to gain skills allowing them to enter the work force. Second is a "terminal education" agenda which sees occupational studies as a way of serving academically-less-able students who are not likely to obtain the baccalaureate. The third is an "economic agenda," which holds that occupational studies improve the economy through labor force development and thus serve society. These three agendas, embedded in the history of the community college, have been put forth by American Association of Community and Junior Colleges leaders from Eells (1941) to Parnell (1985). A fourth, the "hidden agenda," has been postulated by other commentators who charge that occupational programs channel low-income and

minority students away from academic studies and the upward social mobility attendant thereon.

The career programs in community colleges may have been furthered by leaders who subscribed to those beliefs but the "agendas" do not accurately reflect what the curriculums do. Occupational programs are not exclusively related to the work force or the economy; they actually serve people with a wide range of abilities and goals, including students who wish to obtain skills for their personal interest. Palmer rejected the charge that community college students are counseled into career programs on the basis of their academic ability, hence their socioeconomic status. His analysis showed that the enrollment patterns in high-status and low-status occupational classes deviate considerably from what would be expected if curricular tracking were efficiently carried out. He found low income students enrolling in high-status and low-status program areas in almost equal numbers. And he found highly self-confident students as likely to enroll in low-status program areas, as students with below-average self ratings of ability were to enroll in high-status programs.

In summation, an over-simplified view of career education as a track leading away from the baccalaureate gives ground to several errors. It neglects the extent that occupational classes serve avocational or community service functions. It enhances the confusion of curricular content with student intentions. It suggests that career education serves an ever-changing middle-

level portion of the job market that supposedly requires some college study but not the baccalaureate, thus ignoring the high transfer rates exhibited by career program graduates. And it perpetuates the myth that career studies are the exclusive domain of the low-ability or low-income students.

The separation between the career and the academic transfer functions in community colleges is more organizationally than conceptually inspired. Most institutional managers responsible for maintaining fiscal support know that legislators respond more positively to promises to reduce unemployment than they do to assertions that the colleges will produce better citizens; thus the special trades programs proliferate. But the separation maintained between the curriculums does not relate to student intentions, a reality illustrated by the pattern of student attendance which belies institutional efforts at curricular placement.

The artificiality of separating occupational and academic functions is also revealed in the commonality of instructional goals in both areas. Consider the statement, "Students will learn to: plan more efficient use of time; analyze written communications; understand interpersonal relations; respond appropriately to verbal directives; evolve alternative solutions; maintain involvement with tasks until resolution; communicate effectively verbally." Are those goals related to occupational or baccalaureate studies? In an industrial society such goals suggest liberal education, but in an information society, they

are central to occupational studies. Coupled with the power and perceptions of the liberal-arts faculty and the college leaders' desire to maintain their institutions' place in higher education, that is why all associate degree programs and most occupational certificate programs include requirements in general education It also helps to account for the distribution of course enrollments in community colleges: over 50 percent in the liberal arts, 35 percent in occupational courses, and the remainder in remedial studies or recreational pursuits.

The Transfer Function

Preparing students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities has been a primary function of the two-year colleges since they began. But few colleges maintain data on the number of their students who transfer. Two major reasons account for this lack: the college leaders have always feared the untoward comparisons that are often made between the progress of their students and those who begin as freshmen in the selective four-year institutions; and the colleges receive funding based on the number of students who take classes, not on the number who complete programs or go on to further education, hence, there are no incentives to produce the data. Even the definitions of transfer are unclear. Is a high school graduate who takes a summer class at the community college before matriculating as a university freshman in the fall a transfer? Is a university underclassman who takes classes at the local community college from time to time a transfer? Must a community college student complete 12 or

24 or 60 units before matriculating at a university to be called a transfer. What about reverse transfer or out-of-state transfer?

If the universities accepted as transfers only those students who had completed associate degree requirements, the inconsistencies in data and definitions would be readily resolved. But the system is fluid, the definitions are variable; any estimates of transfer rates are just that -- estimates. In Maryland, one of the few states where reliable data are collected, three years after initial enrollment in a community college, 18 percent of the students had transferred to an in-state university, 10 percent had graduated but not transferred, 14 percent were still enrolled, and 57 were not participants in the state's higher education system (Clagett, 1986). McIntyre (1987) concluded that half the students who received bachelors degrees from the California State University and one-fifth from the University of California "did some of their work at a California community college" (p. 158). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey, Adelman (1988) reported that, "1 out of 5 individuals who attend two-year colleges eventually attends a four-year college ... This is the true 'defacto' transfer rate."

Merging data from the few states and colleges that collect them with the numbers of associate degrees awarded yields an estimate of transfer rates nationally. In 1986, around 350,000 associate in arts and sciences degrees were awarded by community colleges. Since around three-fourths of the students receiving

associate degrees eventually matriculate at senior institutions, a figure of 275,000 transfers with associate degrees seems a good estimate. Probably another 300,000 to 400,000 transfer without having received the degree. This suggests a transfer rate of around 12 to 13 percent of the total community college population.

If the purpose of the collegiate enterprise is to pass most students through to the baccalaureate degree, then the community college is a failure by design. It encourages part-time and commuter attendance patterns. Most of its students matriculate with no intention of transferring; many already have higher degrees, many more seek basic literacy training or rapidly attainable job entry or job upgrading skills. The students enrolling in community colleges are somewhat less likely to attain baccalaureate degrees within four or five years than those entering as freshmen in four-year colleges and institutions. The part-time attendance pattern certainly accounts for some of the difference. And since few community college students are resident on campus and few have on-campus jobs, they tend to be less involved with their collegiate studies.

The mere fact that community college matriculants must transfer from one institution to another before obtaining the baccalaureate accounts for some of the shortfall. It is somewhat analogous to the difference between a non-stop flight and one in which the passengers must change planes before reaching their destination. Many things might happen to cause the latter group

to miss their connecting flight. So it is with students who must move from one institution to another: they take jobs instead; they cannot readily leave their home town to go to the university; they find it convenient to stop out of formal education and get on with other aspects of their life.

Chance plays a role in progress toward the baccalaureate. In 1988, because of a sudden surge in applications, California turned away around 10,000 qualified candidates for its freshman class. Many of these young people had to begin their higher education careers in one of the state's community colleges. Undoubtedly, their baccalaureate attainment rate will be slightly lower because of the difficulties they will encounter when they eventually transfer: loss of credits, adjusting to different campuses, academic calendars, and faculty expectations, less opportunity for on-campus housing and jobs; and some of them may not transfer at all.

One of the widely held misconceptions about the reasons why fewer students who begin their college careers at community colleges obtain baccalaureate degrees is that the colleges emphasize occupational studies and courses that do not carry career transfer credit. However more students transfer from occupational programs than from the traditional baccalaureate-directed programs. The problem with transfer from community colleges is not with career education; it is with the policies supporting the idea that the institution is a passive resource available to all who would drop in at any time during their lifetime to take a

course in whatever interests them. This policy results in a lateral curriculum, one in which prerequisites to courses are not always enforced and in which student progress toward program completion is not a concern.

The data available on student transfer tell only part of the colleges' contributions to student progress. The Maricopa Community College District (Arizona) offers a case in point. Among its 60,000 students are 7,000 who were formerly enrolled in Arizona State University, and 8,700 of that university's students previously attended the local community colleges. An additional 3,900 students are taking classes at both institutions concurrently. Forty-five percent of the high-school graduates in the Phoenix metropolitan area enter one of the local community colleges (de los Santos, 1989). In sum, nearly 20,000 students in Phoenix are being, or have been assisted toward the baccalaureate by the Maricopa District. Whether they actually attain it depends on many factors, few of them within the colleges' control.

Elsewhere, some of the community colleges have attempted to increase their transfer rates by monitoring student progress, providing information on transfer opportunities, enforcing course prerequisites, holding special group meetings for prospective transfers, and similar interventions. One of the most powerful aids to transfer is a set of inter-institutional agreements erected program by program so that students who want to obtain bachelor's degrees in certain fields are encouraged to begin at the local community college, with the assurance that the curricu-

lums articulate and that a place in the university's junior class will be available to them. Another stimulant to student progress, pioneered by Miami-Dade Community College (Florida), is to not allow students to take more than four classes unless they have been tested, placed, and matriculated in an associate-degree program.

Since the 1960s the community colleges have been stimulated to develop occupational programs by an influx of state and federal funds. More recently, many states have begun encouraging the colleges to increase the flow of students toward the baccalaureate. In 1987, California set aside 3 million dollars for transfer centers in 20 colleges; Colorado and Michigan mandated articulation plans between community colleges and public universities; New Jersey awarded special funds to its colleges to recruit minority students who sought transfer; and Ohio awarded funds for colleges that would promote such activities (Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1987). Illinois has numerous special programs to enhance minority student progress through the community colleges, including recruiting and counseling high-school students, basic skills activities for adults, connecting the community colleges with elementary schools, and intramural support groups (Illinois Community College Board, 1989).

These types of transfer-directed activities, including many that the Ford Foundation has supported, have been summarized in many works including Cohen, Brawer, and Bensimon (1985), Donovan and others (1987), and Richardson and Bender (1987). They can be

encapsulated with the statement that the community college staff members must identify the potential transfers early on and monitor their progress, making frequent direct contact with them until they complete their studies and enter the universities. This takes a form of dedication to student achievement that stands in contradistinction to the more common laissez faire approach to program completion. But the colleges cannot have it both ways: they cannot sit by and allow students to take a random walk through the curriculum and at the same time further student progress toward the baccalaureate.

College Contributions

Various dilemmas plague the study of any college's contributions. First is the question of individual gain versus social value. Is it sufficient for an institution to provide an avenue of mobility for its matriculants? Or should it be held accountable for the influence it has on the broader society, such as the extent to which it tends to equalize incomes or enhance economic development in its region? A second concern relates to the inquirer's perspective. External critics filter information through their own preconceptions, often using data selectively to warrant their conclusions. And internal studies of college effects, conducted by the institutions' managers, tend to deny any finding that might be interpreted negatively. The limitations inherent in social science research also come into play: incomplete data, confounding variables, the impossibility of randomizing the population, and inadequate statistical techniques, to

name a few.

All these limitations are revealed in considering community college contributions. One line of study attempts to calculate the economic impact that is attributable to direct expenditures by the college itself, and by its students and employees. Findings are usually that the college returns around $2.50 to $3.00 for each dollar it receives. But the data used in such calculations are selected so that the outcome is assuredly positive: bank deposits, personal expenditures, institutional purchases in a community invariably grow when a college is established and they go up as the college's income increases. The same holds true for any establishment: prison, military base, hospital. Still, such studies appear from time to time (See, for example, Johnson County Community College [1985] and Winter [1988]) and are sometimes publicized as though they were reports of the college's contributions to economic development.

The rate of return to people who attend community colleges is occasionally studied, usually by deducting foregone earnings and other costs of college from anticipated lifetime personal income. Blair and Finn (1981) estimated the 20-year and 30-year earnings of associate degree technician program graduates nationally, compared them with those of college dropouts and concluded that the graduates enjoyed a 14 percent higher rate of return. Romano (1985) reviewed several studies and reported that the graduates of two-year programs seem to be headed toward higher earnings than those students who have attended college but not

completed a program, lower earnings than those who have completed the baccalaureate.

The higher education researchers more frequently address college contributions to individual mobility by correlating the type of college attended with student progress through the graded educational system or with subsequent income or job status. These linear-flow models yield few definitive statements, primarily because student demographics and predispositions interact with college location, regional employment opportunities, and other uncontrollable factors so that only a small portion of the variance can be attributed to the college's effects. As example, using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's survey of college freshman and subsequent follow-ups, Astin (1983) has calculated institutional effects by controlling for up to 100 variables. He concludes that "a baccalaureate-oriented freshman who enrolls initially at a community college has a 16 percent better chance of becoming a dropout than a comparable student who enrolls at a public four-year college (p. 125)." However he admits that most of the differential rate is due to the entering characteristics of the students, the fact that few community colleges have on-campus residents, and that community college students tend to work more hours per week outside school and take fewer classes. After equating for students who reside away from home and who work less than twenty hours per week, Astin finds that the discrepancy between expected and actual dropout rates among community college entrants drops to 7 per-

cent.

Several analysts have made similar calculations using data from the 1972 National Longitudinal Survey of high school seniors. Velez (1985) used the NLS 1976 follow-up, which showed 42 percent of the four-year college entrants and 12 percent of the two-year college entrants completing the baccalaureate, and concluded that where one began college had an important effect on attainment. He also noted that "Living quarters had the largest significant effect on the probability of finishing college" and that "students who had work-study jobs had a 23 percent higher probability of finishing college" (p. 197). Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986) used NLS data to calculate student progress after nine years. They found fourteen variables accounting for 17 percent of the variance in persistence and 24 percent of the variance in baccalaureate attainment. Anderson (1981) ran twenty-six variables and found that community college entrants were less likely to persist through the sophomore year. She acknowledged, "It is true that these variables explain only a small proportion of the variance in persistence ... . [T]he intervening variables included in the models mediated only a small proportion of the effects of college, work, and residence" (pp. 13-14). Crook and Lavin (1989), tracking students through the open-admissions City University of New York system, concluded that "the community college environment does not appear either to diminish or to magnify to any great extent the influence of characteristics that students possess as they begin their journey through

the educational pipeline -- gender, race/ethnicity, age, family income, and father's education" (p. 24).

What Happens to the Minorities?

The difficulty in disaggregating the effects of community colleges from the characteristics of the students who enter them is magnified in the attempts to describe the community colleges' special effects on minority students. Nationwide, minority students constitute 24 percent of all community college enrollments (as compared with around 15 percent in the senior institutions). These enrollments are close to parity with the student groups' proportion of the local population. In Illinois, for example, 15.2 percent of the high school graduation class of 1985 were black and 16.8 of the state's community college students were black (Illinois Community College Board, 1986). Minorities comprised 9.1 percent of the population of Kansas and 9.3 percent of that state's community college students (Kansas State Department of Education, 1986); the figures for California were 32.4 and 34.3 percent respectively (Field Research Corp., 1984). Single college data also reflect this pattern; in 1986, Laredo Junior College (Texas), in a city where 93 percent of the population was Hispanic, counted 88 percent of the students as Hispanic, and Southwestern College had 31 percent Hispanic student body in a California city where 32 percent of the population was Hispanic (Rendon, L.I., Justiz, M.J., and Resta, P., 1988). Community colleges in cities with high proportions of minorities -- Chicago, Cleveland, El Paso, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Phoenix --

enroll sizable numbers of minority students. The evidence of neighborhood attendance is revealed where the community college has several campuses in the same city: At East Los Angeles College in the mid-1980s, 65 percent of the students were Hispanic; at Los Angeles Southwest College, 87 percent were Black; and at Los Angeles Pierce College, 75 percent were White. This pattern is not confined to the cities; community colleges in rural areas with high minority populations, as in many areas of Mississippi, Texas, and California, similarly attract large numbers of minorities.

The question of whether the community colleges have enhanced or retarded progress for minority students has been debated at length; see, for example, Astin (1982), Cohen (1988), Orfield and Paul (1987-88), and Richardson and Bender (1987). Those who say that the community colleges have assisted minority students point to their ease of access, low tuition, and minimal entrance requirements. They note the numerous programs that provide special services to minority students and they applaud the efforts made to recruit them. Their most telling argument is that a sizable percentage of those students would not be in college at all were it not for the community colleges.

However, several analysts have charged that minority students who begin in community colleges will do less well than those of equal ability who begin in the senior institutions and that this differential is greater for them than it is for the majority students. These detractors have taken the position that

because students who begin at a community college are less likely to obtain baccalaureate degrees, minorities are actually harmed by the two-year institutions. What is the evidence? The best estimates suggest that white students, who comprise 75 percent of the community college enrollment, obtain 85 percent of the associate degrees; Black students, 13 percent of the enrollment, obtain 8 percent of the Associate Degrees; Hispanic students, 6 percent of enrollment, obtain 4 percent of the degrees (Asian and unclassified students account for the remainder). These figures suggest not only differential achievement but also the imprecision of the term "minority student."

The program completion rate of minority students in community colleges should be placed in the context of those group's progress in all sectors of education. A comparison between minority and majority students' progress for any two years of graded education, from kindergarten through graduate school, would show fewer minorities going through. The lower graduation rates for minorities should also be viewed in the light of the community colleges' effects on all their students. Anderson reported that the institutional characteristics most influential in reducing bachelors attainment at community colleges were "expenditures per student, percentage of lower SES, and percentage of part-time students, total enrollment, percentage of majors offered in vocational areas, and mean SAT score" (1981, p. 3). She, along with Astin and Velez, also acknowledged that the depressing effect that community colleges have on baccalaureate

attainment seems to affect white students at least as much, if not more than if affects black students of comparable ability and aspiration.

Whom do the community colleges best serve? Egalitarians would say that the institutions should maintain parity in the percentage of each ethnic group attaining each benchmark: entering college, enrolling in transfer-credit courses, completing the courses, gaining the associate degree, gaining admittance to a high-level technological program, graduating from such a program, and transferring to the university. In practice, however, this level of equivalence is impossible to attain, short of imposing strict quotas at every step. For the minorities as for any other identifiable student group the question should be put more broadly: "The community college or what?" If all colleges and universities drew their students at random from the nation's pool of potential college goers each year, the value imputed to attending high-status institutions would quickly shrink as Yale, Michigan, and Berkeley struggled to educate students with a wide range of ability and commitment to collegiate work. But realistically, college effects relate quite closely to their admissions criteria and the open-access community colleges suffer by comparison with the selective institutions.

The most important fact overriding any analysis of the community colleges is that, for most of their students, the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution, it is between the community college and

nothing. Therefore, comparisons of relative progress are useful only to the extent they guide changes in institutional policy.

Some major changes must be made, most of them at the state level, if the community colleges are to come anywhere near parity in the proportion of their entering students who go on to receive the baccalaureate. As a beginning, the states should: enforce compacts to the effect that any student who completes an associate degree program is guaranteed admission to the public universities with no loss of credit; set aside special funds to be awarded to community colleges that increase their percentage of transfers; develop common course numbering systems so that each student's transcript does not have to be reviewed separately; and maintain a common student data base so that progress can be monitored.

For the foreseeable future, any person seeking high-status career development is better advised to matriculate at Harvard than at Hostos Community College. But that is like noting that it is better to be healthy than ill, better to be rich than poor. To say that not all people are equally qualified or equally motivated is not the same as accusing them of slothfulness. To say that not all students in all colleges progress at equal rates is not tantamount to indicting the institutions for malfeasance. But whether the rationale centers on social justice or on the need for a better-educated work force, the community colleges should be supported to the extent they enhance student development. That suggests maintaining open access but at the same time effecting measures that encourage program completion.

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