

Community College Success

► Is it a path to opportunity?

In his remarks before the graduating class at Harvard University this spring, Federal Reserve Bank Chairman Ben Bernanke said the primary vehicle for decreasing income inequality and increasing the productivity of America's workers is to provide greater access and success in postsecondary education. While he was talking to the nation's best and brightest at one of its most prestigious institutions, he made the case that community colleges will play a central role in accomplishing this goal.¹

A recent report from the College Board's National Commission on Community Colleges makes the case that community colleges are overburdened and underappreciated at a time when their mission to provide greater access to postsecondary education for underserved populations

and respond to community needs is more important than ever.²

According to the report, 46% of all undergraduates in the United States attend community colleges, including 47% of African American undergraduates, 47% of Asian American undergraduates, 55% of Hispanic undergraduates and 57% of American Indian undergraduates.

As a growing percentage of future high school graduates come from communities that have been traditionally underserved by higher education, and more jobs will require some level of postsecondary education, community colleges will be an increasingly important asset for communities that are struggling to meet the demands of a rapidly changing, global economy.

This issue of *Progress of Education Reform* looks at the latest research on student success in community colleges and offers insights on the strategies that show the most promise in promoting greater educational attainment for community college students.

What's Inside

- Are community colleges a good route to a bachelor's degree?
- Which students succeed at community colleges?
- Strategies that promote community college success



2008
SEPTEMBER
Vol. 9, No. 5

THE PROGRESS OF
Education Reform



Education Commission
of the States

Do Community Colleges Provide a Viable Pathway to a Baccalaureate Degree?

Bridget Terry Long and Michal Kurlaender, National Bureau of Economic Research, May, 2008.

While there has been a great deal of research on how effectively community colleges transfer students into bachelor's degree programs, much of the research has used older data sets and has had methodological challenges. Long and Kurlaender use rich longitudinal data that was gathered by the state of Ohio over a nine-year period (1998-2007) to address limitations that have prevented earlier research from getting a clear picture of the impact of community colleges on student success.

The study examined whether students who begin their quest for a bachelor's degree at a community college experience a penalty or additional cost that students who start at a four-year institution do not experience. The costs to community college students included whether they were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree, have fewer credits earned and an increased likelihood of stopping-out without a degree.

Is There a Cost to Starting at a Community College?

The results show that community college students are 14.5% less likely than students who initially enroll at a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree within nine years. In addition, community college students complete fewer credits and consequently are more likely to "stop-out" without earning any kind of a degree.

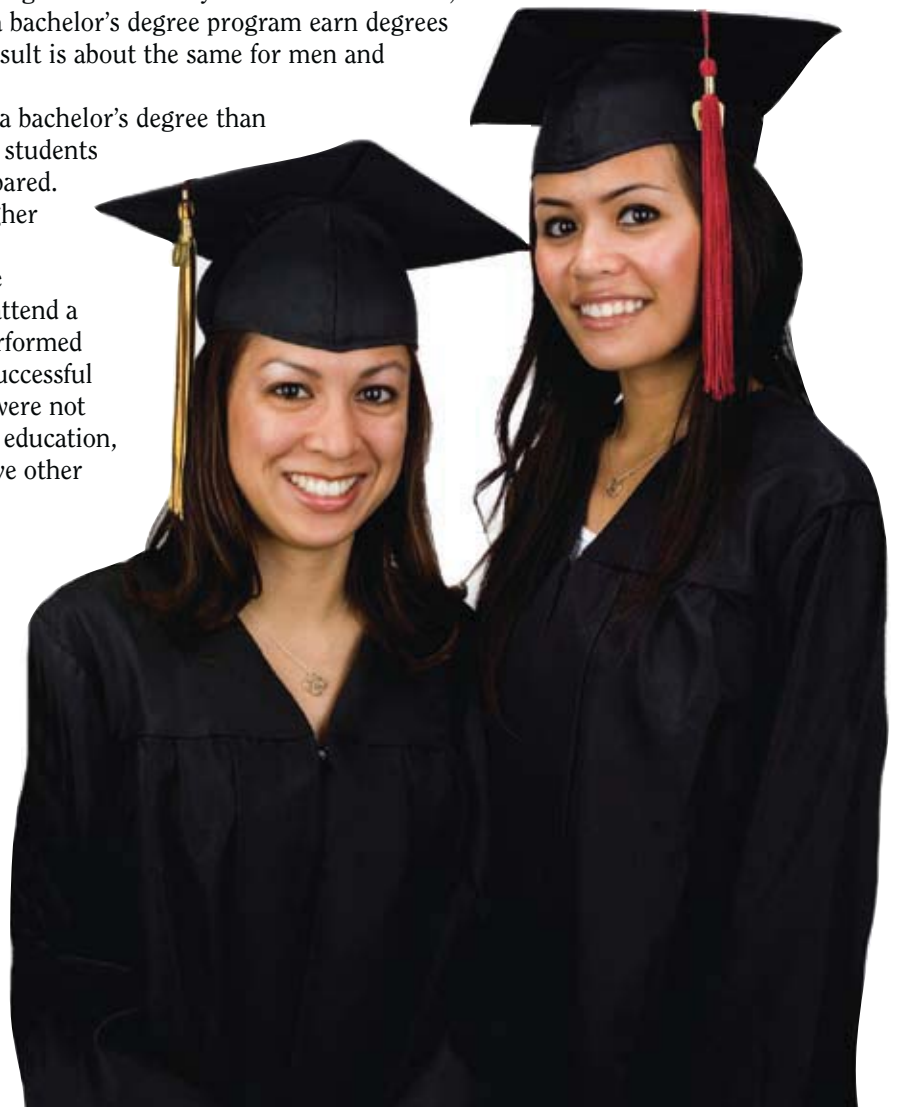
Because the demographic backgrounds of students who attend community colleges differ from students at four-year institutions, the study examined the results by student demographic characteristics and their level of academic preparation. The findings offer some important insights:

- ▶ Women who enroll at community colleges are less likely to transfer than men, but because women who transfer to a bachelor's degree program earn degrees at a higher rate than men, the end result is about the same for men and women.
- ▶ Black students are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than white students, largely because black students are less likely to be academically prepared.
- ▶ Community college students with higher academic ability, as assessed through the ACT, are at a greater disadvantage than students of average ability who attend a community college. Students who performed well on the ACT may not have been successful at community colleges because they were not otherwise prepared for postsecondary education, are not academically motivated or have other demands on their time.

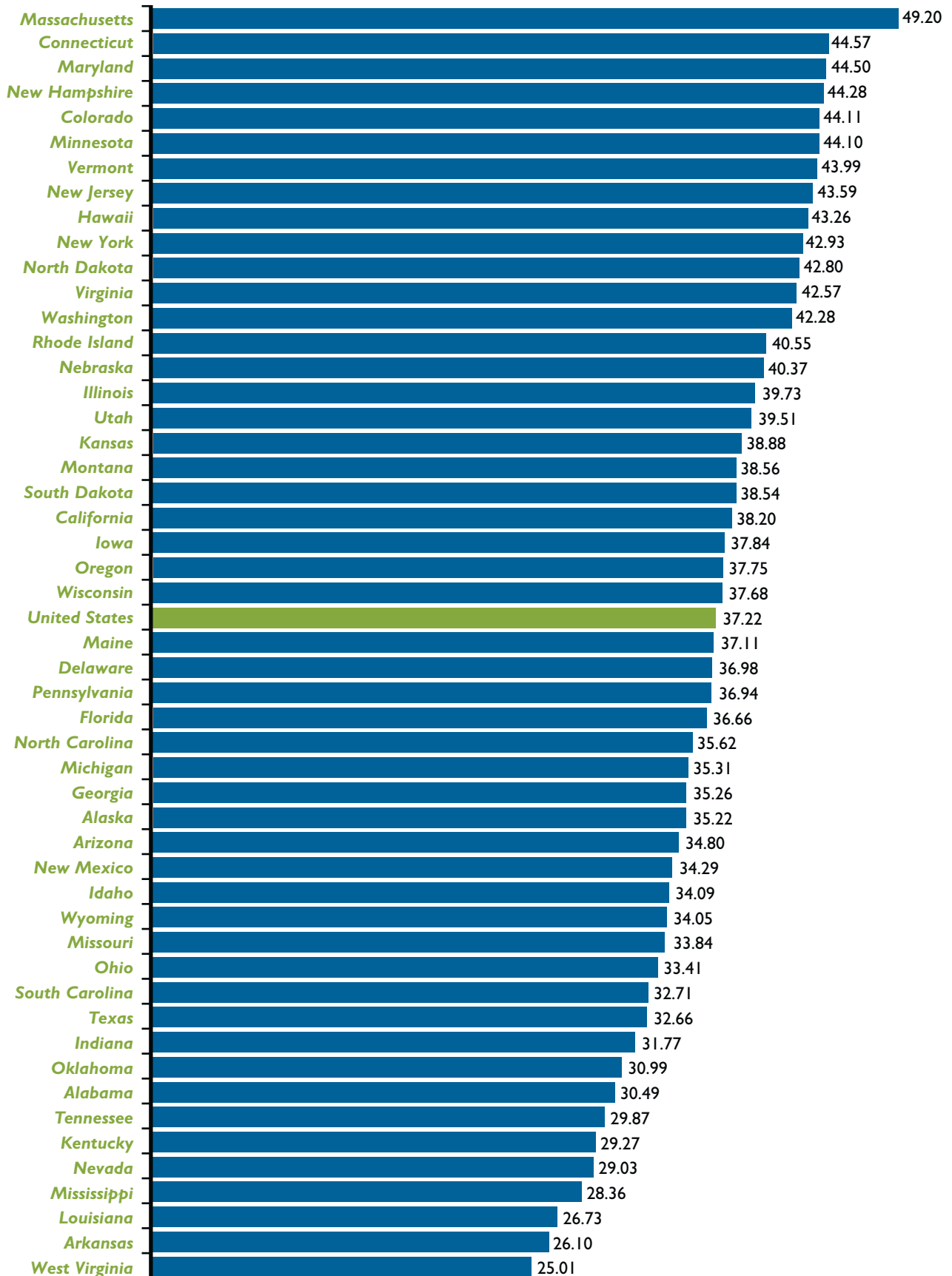
Policy Implications

Long and Kurlaender offer the following insights for policymakers:

- ▶ Strategies to assist low-income and minority students, a primary market for community colleges, should be considered by states and institutions.
- ▶ Policies to shift more students away from four-year institutions and into community colleges should be examined carefully to ensure students are able to effectively achieve their educational objectives.



Percent of Adults 25-64 with an Associates Degree or Higher (American Community Survey)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample File

Making the Transition to Four-Year Institutions: Academic Preparation and Transfer

Josipa Roksa and Juan Carlos Calcagno, *Community College Research Center Working Paper No. 13*, June, 2008.

Roksa and Calcagno's study sought to understand whether students can compensate for inadequate academic preparation for college by reaching intermediate outcomes such as:

- ▶ Passing college-level math and reading
- ▶ Reaching specific credit thresholds
- ▶ Earning an associate degree.

The study examines the experiences of a sample of first-time, degree-seeking Florida community college students over a five-year period to assess the probability of their success as they reach specific academic milestones.

Achieving Intermediate Academic Outcomes Helps Underprepared Students

The study found that academically underprepared students were less likely to complete college-level reading and writing courses, reach specific credit thresholds or earn an associate degree than academically prepared students. Overall, 20% of underprepared students transferred to a four-year institution within five years, compared with 34% of academically prepared students.

The more interesting set of findings examined whether academically underprepared students who did achieve intermediate outcomes transferred at rates similar to academically prepared students. The analysis of the data yielded the following results:

- ▶ The gap in the rate of transfer between academically underprepared and prepared students decreased when underprepared students reached specific intermediate outcomes, but did not disappear.
- ▶ Underprepared students who earned an associate degree were 41% less likely than prepared students to transfer to a four-year institution.
- ▶ The gap in transfer rates was greatest in the first or second year of enrollment (19% and 17%), but decreased to 5% by year five.
- ▶ Underprepared students were more dependent than prepared students on achieving the intermediate outcomes to gain transfer to a four-year institution.
- ▶ Underprepared students who completed a college-level math course were over two times more likely to transfer than similar students who did not complete the college-level course.

Policy Implications

Roksa and Calcagno outlined the following policy insights:

- ▶ Successful transfer to a four-year institution is not just a "community college issue."
- ▶ Academic preparation in high school and better coordination with four-year institutions are important.
- ▶ The slow rate of transfer for academically underprepared students suggests the need for focused academic support for students in the first two years of their academic careers.

Other Resources

Achieving the Dream

This initiative is the Lumina Foundation's effort to build the capacity of community colleges to gather and analyze data for the purpose of improving institutional practice that increases the success of a diverse population of students. This effort involves strategies to evaluate and improve developmental education programs. For more information visit: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/default.tp>

ECS Research Studies Database

More in-depth summaries of the studies in this publication and other studies related to developmental education programs are available in the ECS research studies database. Please visit: <http://www.ecs.org/rs/>

Community College Research Center (CCRC)

CCRC, located at the Teachers College at Columbia University, conducts research on the major issues affecting community colleges in the United States and contributes to the development of policy and practice that expands access to higher education and promotes success for all students. For more information about the resources available, visit: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>

The ECS Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development Institute

The Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development Institute works closely with policymakers, institution leaders and business and community leaders to drive innovation and change within higher education to meet the challenges of preparing the workforce of the 21st century. For more information, visit us at: www.ecs.org or contact the institute director, Bruce Vandal at bvandal@ecs.org.

The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence: Are Community Colleges More Meritocratic?

Ryan Wells, *Community College Review*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, July, 2008, p. 25-46.

Wells examines the impact of student social and cultural capital on student success at community colleges using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (1988-1994) data. He defines social capital as “the social and personal connections or networks that people capitalize on for personal gain.” Cultural capital is defined as “culture-based factors and indicators of symbolic wealth that help define a person’s class.” Cultural capital is inherited from the family and typically sustains social stratification. Wells hypothesizes that social and cultural capital is less important to student success at the community college level than at the four-year institution level, suggesting that community colleges are democratizing institutions that provide opportunities for students to improve their socio-economic position.

The study measured social and cultural capital by examining the following student characteristics: parental education, parental educational expectations, student educational expectations, the importance of college attendance to the people around the student during high school, whether or not most of a student’s high school friends planned to attend college, the quality of high school attended, the extent to which the family had academic resources available at home and the extent to which test-preparation tools were used for the college transition and parental involvement.

Community Colleges Do Well With First-Generation Students

Overall, the study found distinct differences in student persistence between low- and high-capital students at community colleges and four-year institutions.

- ▶ Community colleges show higher average rates of persistence for students with “low” capital than similar students at four-year institutions.
- ▶ Having parents who attended postsecondary education and high school friends who attended college are less important to success for students at community colleges than for students at four-year institutions.
- ▶ “High” capital students have higher persistence rates at four-year institutions than at community colleges.
- ▶ The difference in persistence between high- and low-capital students is larger at four-year institutions than at two-year institutions. For example, persistence rates for full-time, high-capital students at four-year institutions are 45 percentage points higher than for low-capital students. At two-year institutions the gap is only 13 percentage points.

Policy Implications

The implications for policy and practice at community colleges are:

- ▶ Community colleges may be a better choice for “first-generation” college students than four-year institutions.
- ▶ Policymakers should invest in strategies that support students with low social and cultural capital. Academic preparation is most important, but supporting students through the social transition to postsecondary education is also effective.



What Community College Management Practices Are Effective in Promoting Student Success? A Study of High- and Low-Impact Institutions

Davis Jenkins, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, Vol. 31, No. 12, 2007, p. 945-962.

Davis Jenkins examined community colleges in Florida to identify the practices that increase student success. He used transcript-level data for 150,000 students to rank the state's 28 community colleges. The rankings were based on the probability that entering students would complete, transfer or persist within three years. The study then examined three institutions that were highly ranked and three institutions that received a lower rank. Jenkins looked at each institution to see if it employed any of seven different practices that research has found are positively related to student success.

Targeted Support for "At-Risk" Students is Important to Success

- ▶ Targeted support for minority students that creates a minority-inclusive campus environment were present at the high-impact institutions.
- ▶ Specialized retention services for minority students also were present at high-impact institutions.
- ▶ Federally funded Student Support Services TRIO programs, which serve first-generation college students had a positive impact, but the program did not translate into better services for all students on campus.
- ▶ Low-impact institutions often did not provide targeted services to minority students because they believed the institution should not provide preferential treatment to a specific group.
- ▶ High-impact institutions were generally successful at serving all students on campus, not just minority students.
- ▶ All institutions, when presented with the research findings, adopted many of the successful strategies outlined in the study.

Policy Implications

- ▶ Services and programs directed at the most at-risk students can have a significant impact on student success.
- ▶ Alignment of services and programs, not just the mere existence of programs on campus, translate into positive outcomes for all students.
- ▶ A standing committee to monitor institutional impact on student success, regular review of institutional programs and a strategic online planning tool to ensure expenditures are aligned with institutional objectives and state accountability standards are important to improving student success.

Conclusion: Creating Aligned Programs and Practices Support Student Success

While these studies suggest that students entering community colleges face greater challenges, particularly as it relates to earning a bachelor's degree, the research is also clear that community colleges can effectively serve students who are academically underprepared, are the first in their family to attend postsecondary education or come from a minority or low-income household. Investments in improved and aligned student services, particularly for students during their first year of enrollment, can have a significant impact on student persistence, transfer and completion.

Endnotes

¹ Benjamin Bernanke, Remarks at Class Day 2008 at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 4, 2008.

² Stephen Handel, "Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America's Middle Class: An Action Agenda for Community Colleges," *National Commission on Community Colleges*, The College Board, January, 2008.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. It was written by Bruce Vandal, director, ECS Postsecondary and Workforce Institute. If you have any questions regarding this or other issues, please contact Bruce at bvandal@ecs.org or 303.299.3611.



GE Foundation

Subscribe to six issues of *The Progress of Education Reform* for \$30, plus postage and handling.

Please order from the ECS Distribution Center, 700 Broadway, Suite 810, Denver, CO 80203-3442; 303.299.3692; fax: 303.296.8332; or ecs@ecs.org. ECS accepts prepaid orders, Visa, MasterCard and American Express. All sales are final. Pricing subject to change.

© 2008 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All rights reserved.

ECS encourages its readers to share our information with others. To reprint or excerpt some of our material, please contact the ECS Communications Department at 303.299.3698 or e-mail ecs@ecs.org.

The Education Commission of the States is a nationwide nonprofit organization formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education. ECS is the only nationwide, nonpartisan interstate compact devoted to education.

Postage and handling charges apply if your order totals:

Up to \$10.00 — \$3.50
\$10.01-25.00 — \$5.00
\$25.01-50.00 — \$6.50
\$50.01-75.00 — \$9.25
\$75.01-100.00 — \$10.75
Over \$100.01 — \$12.00

Single copies of this issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* are available from the Education Commission of the States for \$7 plus postage and handling. Ask for publication No. SI-08-05.

Discounts are available for bulk orders of this publication. They are:
10-49 copies — 10% discount
50-99 copies — 20% discount
100+ copies — 30% discount.

Equipping
Education Leaders,
Advancing Ideas