

1 *This chapter addresses transfer from a community college to a four-year institution, an important pathway for students seeking the bachelor's degree, especially students from underserved groups. The transfer pathway will be an increasingly important source of bachelor's degree holders as colleges and universities strive to meet President Obama's college completion agenda.*

The Transfer Moment: The Pivotal Partnership Between Community Colleges and Four-Year Institutions in Securing the Nation's College Completion Agenda

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For nearly a decade, a chorus of higher education pundits, policy makers, and politicians has been sounding the alarm regarding the relatively low productivity of U.S. colleges and universities in producing students with certificates and degrees. The repeated reference to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008) about the United States' relatively lackluster rank of sixth among developed nations in the percentage of 25- to 64-year-old adults with an associate degree or higher has galvanized the business, policy making, and philanthropic communities in a sustained examination of the productivity of U.S. colleges and universities. The most ambitious challenge has come from the federal government. During his 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama challenged every U.S. citizen "to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training" and urged this nation to attain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (White House, 2009). With his reelection in 2012, it is likely that this pressure will continue.

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Whether one is convinced that the OECD findings justify the relentless hand-wringing among policy makers over the state of U.S. higher education—and a number of people are not (e.g., Adelman, 2009; Hauptman, 2012)—most will agree that there is room for improvement in the proportion of students who complete a postsecondary certificate or degree. The OECD analyses revealed that the United States ranked near the bottom of developed nations in the percentage of students entering college who completed a degree program. Although the United States ranked fourth among developed countries in the postsecondary degree achievements of 55- to 64-year-old adults (39.0%), the position rank slips to 12th when looking at the academic productivity of 25- to 34-year-old adults (39.2%; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008).

The uneven productivity of college degrees and credentials comes at a time when the need for highly skilled workers is growing. According to *Jobs for the Future*, by 2025 the United States must produce 25.1% more associate degree holders and 19.6% more bachelor's degree holders over and above current production levels to meet the nation's workforce needs (Reindl, 2007). Moreover, addressing this degree gap will require the nation to boost the number of degrees and certificates earned by individuals who represent groups traditionally underserved in higher education, including American Indian, African American, Latino, low-income, and first-generation students (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and *Jobs for the Future*, 2007). This is because these groups, especially the Latino population, will increase significantly in the coming decades.

The Community College and the Completion Agenda

Given the number of undergraduates that these institutions educate each year, and the fact that community colleges are especially welcoming to students from underserved backgrounds, community colleges must be a significant part of any national strategy to increase college completion. In responding to a question about the ability of the United States to meet President Obama's college completion goals, Thomas Bailey, Director of the Community College Research Center, commented:

[C]ommunity colleges must play a disproportionate role in any significant increase in postsecondary attainment. . . . According to data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), which tracked students for eight years after their scheduled entry into a community college, about 15% of community college entrants left with between 30 and 59 credits. . . . [L]ow-income students, first-generation college students, immigrants, and minorities, especially Latinos, are over-represented in community colleges, and any increase in college attainment will have to involve these groups. (Bailey, 2012, p. 76)

Although community colleges are seen as part of the solution in creating a better-educated workforce in the United States, the historic nexus of these colleges with public four-year institutions well over 100 years ago is rarely discussed in any systematic way. Since the early decades of the 20th century, community colleges and four-year institutions, mostly public entities, have worked collectively to develop a pathway to help students earn bachelor's degrees. In the traditional transfer pathway, students begin postsecondary education at a local community college, usually completing lower-division, general education courses, along with introductory courses in whatever major they have selected. They next transfer as juniors to a four-year institution, where they complete upper-division, major-level courses in fulfillment of a bachelor's degree. Today, although community college students rarely follow this pathway in such a lockstep way, the pathway remains an important one, not only for the diversity of students who only have access to a community college and still seek something more than a two-year degree (a rather large proportion of students), but also for the United States as it searches for ways to boost the number of individuals with postsecondary degrees and credentials.

Community Colleges, Transfer, and the Bachelor's Degree

Although the discussion around college completion focuses on increasing the number of people with certificates and degrees of all types, more recent analyses portend an especially urgent need to increase the number of bachelor's degree holders. In their 2011 report, *The Undereducated American*, Georgetown University researchers Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose conclude that the United States will need an additional 20 million postsecondary-educated workers by 2025. Of these 20 million individuals, at least 15 million must earn bachelor's degrees. Carnevale and Rose argue that such growth, 2% per year for the next decade and a half, is necessary not only to fill job requirements in the United States but also to stem the widening earnings gap between those individuals who possess a high school diploma and those who hold a four-year degree (2011).

Carnevale and Rose (2011) never mention community colleges or transfer students in their report. Nonetheless, they stress that increasing "the number of college graduates must be based . . . on removing barriers to degree completion for qualified students" (p. 32). Creating a smoother transfer pathway surely falls within this criterion. They also recommend improving the academic skills of graduating high school seniors. Better-prepared students entering college, whether a two- or four-year institution, are more likely to complete a certificate or degree. However, generating 15 million more bachelor's degree holders in a little over 10 years is so ambitious that, barring a historic turnaround of the K–12 system, it is unlikely that Carnevale and Rose's goal can be met without relying on the accessibility and capacity of community colleges and the transfer pathway.

The good news is that a large proportion of students currently enrolled in higher education use community colleges as at least one strategy in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. A recent analysis by the National Student Clearinghouse (Shapiro et al., 2012) reveals that 45% of the students who completed bachelor's degrees at the end of the 2011–2012 academic year had previously enrolled in a community college. The extensive use of community colleges as a springboard for the attainment of the four-year degree caught some higher education observers by surprise, but not practitioners who work with transfer students at two- and four-year institutions. Although National Student Clearinghouse findings provide one of the most complete national snapshots of the transfer process, data from other sources also signal that a large proportion of students completing certificates and degrees at U.S. postsecondary institutions do so at institutions different from the one in which they originally enrolled. What National Student Clearinghouse data reinforce is the importance of community colleges—and by implication the transfer pathway—in the production of four-year degree holders in the United States.

National Student Clearinghouse findings also highlight how important community colleges are in helping states meet the ambitious college completion agenda targets set by the Obama administration. Those states producing over 100,000 four-year degree completers in 2010–2011 were also generally the ones that relied significantly on community colleges to boost those degree completions. Of the seven states producing more than 100,000 bachelor-degree graduates, in five states (Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, and Texas) 50% or more of these graduates began at community colleges.

Students' reliance on community colleges to complete bachelor's degrees is more than casual. National Student Clearinghouse data also reveal that the ubiquitous presence of community colleges nationwide makes these institutions a convenient place for students to pick up summer or intersession credits that boost progress toward a four-year degree. The National Student Clearinghouse reports that even within a single academic year, 8% of all students in higher education attended more than one postsecondary education institution and over 50% of these students moved between two- and four-year institutions. Furthermore, a large proportion of students (24%) attended a community college for a single term. While this suggests a relatively incidental use of the community college, Adelman (2005, 2006) and Moore, Shulock, & Offenstein (2009) have noted that the strategic use of summer sessions to earn college credits plays an important role in helping students generate academic momentum toward a four-year degree.

More striking, however, was students' nonincidental use of community colleges. Rather than attending these institutions for a single course or a summer term, National Student Clearinghouse data show that many students attend a community college for a significant period. Data reveal that 41% of students who earned a bachelor's degree attended a community college for five terms or more, and 60% attended for at least three terms.

Clearly, the extent to which students are relying on community colleges to fuel their progress toward the bachelor's degree is substantial.

The Increasing Importance of the Transfer Pathway

Despite the historical popularity of community colleges and the willingness of students to use these institutions as an essential part of their strategy to earn a bachelor's degree, the process itself is exceedingly complex. Transfer admission requirements vary across four-year institutions, sometimes among institutions within the same higher education system. Moreover, students must cope with the seemingly arbitrary translation of their community college courses into bachelor's degree credit that will stand in lieu of specific four-year institution requirements. Some courses transfer and some do not; it all depends on academic policies of the four-year institution. Articulation agreements—formal arrangements that specify the type and number of courses a four-year institution will accept from a given community college—usually differ.

The extent to which two- and four-year institutions align their curricula to address students' academic progression from lower division to upper division is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is safe to say that the variability is extensive and hardly ever works in favor of students who wish to apply to more than one transfer destination. Still, for the reasons outlined below, the need for a robust and efficient transfer process will become ever more important, and it will serve the nation well to focus on this academic pathway while attempting to increase the number of students with the bachelor's degree.

Community College Students Want to Transfer and Earn a Bachelor's Degree. Recent surveys indicate that at least 50% and perhaps as many as 80% of all incoming, first-time, community college students seek to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree (Horn, 2009; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). According to a report from the U.S. Department of Education, the proportion of students surveyed who intended to earn a four-year degree rose from 70.7 percent to 81.4 percent between 1989–90 and 2003–04 (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). Indeed, students' desire to earn a bachelor's degree has steadily increased since 1989–90 regardless of their racial/ethnic background, age, and income level. This educational goal is especially valued among students from underserved groups, including African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, as well as students from low-income groups.

Researchers and policy makers often dismiss community college students' intentions as unstable, sometimes even inauthentic. Although it is demonstrably true that not all students with transfer intentions go on to earn a four-year degree, the desire of most first-time community college students to earn a four-year degree has never wavered significantly in the published history of transfer (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Medsker, 1960). For example,

Brint and Karabel quote student survey results from the 1920s through the 1950s, all of which report student intentions as primarily directed toward transfer and a bachelor's degree (1989). Moreover, since 1966 the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI; 2013) at the University of California, Los Angeles, has documented the interests and concerns of freshmen entering U.S. higher education institutions, including their educational intentions. Up until 1999, HERI surveyed freshman students who began their postsecondary education at a community college. At no point in the 33-year history of this survey did the interest of these students in earning a bachelor's and a graduate degree ever dip below 70%. In 1984, the HERI added a survey question about student interest in vocational credentials. For community college students surveyed between 1984 and 1999, no more than 5% in any given year expressed an interest in this educational goal (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2013). Research has also established that many students who intend to earn sub-bachelor's degree credentials at a community college often increase their educational aspirations after starting at a two-year college (Rosenbaum, Deli-Amen, & Person, 2006).

This emphasis on the bachelor's degree is not intended to devalue the worth of certificates or associate degrees. Providing opportunities for students to obtain work-related credentials is an essential mission of community colleges, and many students have benefited significantly from this training and education (Dougherty, 1994). The point here, however, is that transfer is seen as a pathway to a four-year degree by millions of students, highlighting again the value of time and investment in the improvement of this academic gateway.

Community Colleges' Share of the Undergraduate Population Is Likely to Increase. The U.S. Department of Education predicts that postsecondary enrollments will grow 13% between now and 2020, despite the fact that the national high school graduation rate is predicted to decline 3% during the same period. Part of the projected growth in college going will be made up of Latino students, students 25 to 34 years old, and part-time students. These groups are far more likely to attend a community college than a four-year institution (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Community colleges already enroll more than seven million for-credit students, constituting nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012; "Who Are the Undergraduates?," 2010). Although community college enrollments, especially during the most recent recession, were far more volatile than four-year institution enrollments, two-year institution enrollment has increased 9% since 2006 (Dadashova et al., 2011).

The College-Going Population Is Changing. Four-year colleges and universities have historically preferred to enroll students directly from high school rather than from community colleges, believing that the supply of first-time students was inexhaustible. But the supply, if not drying up, is certainly slowing down. As noted above, the U.S. Department of Education

predicts that the high school graduation rate will be in decline between 2012 and 2020. In 27 states, the department predicts that high school graduation rates will level off or decline (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Thus, certainly in the near term, transfer students at four-year institutions will fill seats that would have otherwise been occupied by 18-year-olds.

Community Colleges Attract Students From Underserved Groups in Significant Numbers. Community colleges enroll significant numbers of African American, Latino, and first-generation students, as well as students from the lowest-income level and single-parent families (AACC, 2012). Although White students constitute the majority of community college enrollments, as they do at four-year institutions, there is near universal agreement that the proportion of these students will decrease given the rise in the population of students from underrepresented ethnic groups. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE; 2008) estimates that virtually all the growth in the number of high school graduates between 2012–2013 and 2014–2015 will be among Latinos (54% growth), Asian American and Pacific Islanders (32%), American Indians (7%), and African Americans (3%). Moreover, students from underserved groups, especially Latino and American Indian students, have traditionally enrolled in community colleges in greater numbers than in public four-year institutions, regardless of their income level. For example, 53% of all Latino undergraduates and 55% of all American Indian undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges (AACC, 2012).

Increasing Stratification of Higher Education Makes Transfer the Most Important—and Perhaps the Only—Viable Avenue for Students From Underserved Groups. The fact that students from underserved groups enroll in community colleges in significant numbers may have more to do with economics than institutional preference. Between 1994 and 2006, the share of African American students enrolling in community colleges increased from 10% to 14%, and the share of Latino students enrolling in community colleges increased from 11% to 19%. During the same period, both populations did not increase their share of participation in competitive four-year colleges and universities, despite increases in their respective high school graduation rates (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). As noted in the above section using AACC (2012) data, this same pattern is seen in the enrollment of students from the lowest socioeconomic groups who now make up the majority of enrollments in community colleges. These institutions are the gateway for students from a variety of groups that have been—and continue to be—underrepresented in higher education. That community colleges welcome these nontraditional groups of students is well known. Yet the growing numbers of these students who begin at a community college, coupled with the nation's need to produce more degree holders, makes the transfer process critically important.

Community Colleges Will Prepare More Students for Transfer From Traditional Backgrounds. The College Board (Baum, Ma, & Payea,

2012) reports that students attending community colleges on a full-time basis increased almost 50% in the last decade, a startling statistic considering the fact that these institutions welcome far more students on a part-time basis than more traditional four-year colleges and universities. Moreover, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Dadashova et al., 2011) found that as a result of the most recent recession, “community colleges saw increases in full-time enrollments—suggesting the possibility that students who might otherwise have attended four-year institutions full-time were instead enrolling in greater numbers at community colleges” (p. 46). Other researchers have suggested a similar trend within community colleges (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Mullin & Phillippe, 2009; Rhoades, 2012). Such students attending full-time are far more likely than other students to have transfer and a bachelor’s degree as goals. In addition, in a recent survey focusing on how families pay for college, there was a significant shift in the number of high-income families (over \$100,000 per year) sending their children to community colleges, increasing from 12% in 2009–2010 to 22% in 2010–2011. A similar, though smaller, increase from 24% to 29% was noted among middle-income families (Sallie Mae, 2012).

Community Colleges Cost Less to Attend Than Four-Year Institutions. As the national debate about college costs intensifies, the relative affordability of community colleges makes these institutions an increasingly attractive option for many U.S. households. Although community college costs are also rising, these institutions remain the most affordable higher education option in the United States. According to data compiled by AACC (2009), tuition and fees at community colleges average only 36.2% of the average four-year public college tuition and fee bill. In eight of the last 10 years, tuition and fees at four-year institutions, public and private, have exceeded tuition and fee increases at community colleges. In two of those years (1999–2000, 2000–2001), community college tuition and fees declined (AACC, 2009). The relative affordability of community colleges is reflected in the number of students from lower socioeconomic levels who attend these institutions. In 2006, over 58% of all students attending community colleges came from the two lowest income quartiles and 28% came from the lowest income quartile (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010).

The Brookings Institution, in a recent analysis of the status of higher education in the United States, concluded: “Confronted with high tuition costs [at four-year institutions], a weak economy, and increased competition for admission to four-year colleges, students today are more likely than at any other point in history to choose to attend a community college” (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, & Kienzl, 2009, p. 10).

The need for a better-educated workforce, along with the centrality of community colleges as an avenue of higher education access for millions of students from underserved groups, and the untested potential of the transfer process as an expressway to the bachelor’s degree, make this an

especially opportune time to assess the strength and efficiency of the partnership between the community college and the four-year institution.

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