

Literature Overview

Community colleges are playing an increasingly important role in the United States' higher education system. Many students who do not qualify for or cannot afford attending a four-year university use community colleges to continue their educations after high school. Some aspire for an associate's degree or a certificate and some take a few classes in areas of interest. But almost 80% of students surveyed by the US Department of Education's *Beginning Postsecondary Students* (BPS) survey attended with the stated intention of eventually transferring and achieving a bachelor's degree, according to William Doyle's, "The Effect of Community College Enrollment on Bachelor's Degree Completion." Despite these lofty goals, attaining a bachelor's degree after community college is rare, only about 21% of those surveyed who said they wanted to achieve a bachelor's degree did so within 6 years, a rate much lower than students who attend four-year universities directly (Doyle, 199). If community colleges are successful at propelling students to earn a bachelor's degree, then they can help students save money and allow students to earn bachelor's degrees who otherwise would not have had the chance. But if community colleges are unsuccessful, then students can waste time and money trying to achieve unrealistic goals. This paper is an overview on the research of students starting in community college and finishing with bachelor's degrees; where it works, where it does not, and where it can improve.

Community Colleges can allow access into higher education for those who would lack it otherwise, but it can also sidetrack students who would have attended four-year universities. In her paper, "Democratization or Diversion? The Effect of Community Colleges on Educational Attainment," Cecilia Rouse names the former the democratization effect and the latter the diversion effect (Rouse, 217-218). She finds that the increased education of those who would not have had access outweighs the decreased education of those who settle for less, especially because diverted students likely would not have graduated anyway (223). But the assumption that students on the border between two-year and four-year institutions experience similar results no matter what school they attend is disputed by Joshua Goodman, et al. in their working paper, "College Access, Initial College Choice and Degree Completion." They examined the public higher education system of Georgia, which has a clearly defined and openly known dividing line on test scores for state schools, and found that those just above the threshold who were enrolled in public four-year schools obtained bachelor's degrees 41pp more than those below the line, and low income students saw a 46pp increase (1-4; 21). And while increased years of schooling overall may be desirable for society, if those otherwise access-less students are gaining more schooling but not more degrees and certificates, it may only be a small benefit for individual students. Since Thomas Hungerford and Gary Saloner's, "Sheepskin Effect in Returns to Education," researchers have known that graduating produces large boosts to earnings while more education shows much smaller returns (Hungerford, 177). Also, while it may give some opportunities they otherwise would have missed, it also sets unreasonable expectations, as shown in Burton Clark's "The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education." Community colleges often

have open door policies to allow everyone, but they also must set standards so students are prepared for future school and work. For those who cannot meet these standards, community colleges, consciously and unconsciously, start the process of 'cooling-out' students; lowering expectations and revealing lack of qualifications over time instead of outright rejection. Clark asks if society is better off projecting these illusions of hope given the time and resources needed, or whether it should be upfront about the reality of its expectations (574-576). Effective Community Colleges can have positive impacts, but ineffective ones may be worse than nothing.

Measuring the effectiveness of a community college is easier said than done. Many have open door policies and are designed to cater to everyone. Should colleges be blamed if they fail to graduate students who were underqualified to begin with, or who have no intention of earning a bachelor's degree? Even among those who say their goal is a bachelor's degree, it is unclear whether this is a solid plan, a general goal, or a societal-expectation-filing response. And when a student transfers out of a two year college it is not always a failure, but it is not always necessarily a success; students may not be prepared to succeed at their new schools. Juan Carlos Calcagno, et al. measured how institutional characteristics of community colleges affect student success, defined as attainment of any degree or transfer to a four-year university, in their paper, "Community College Student Success: What Institutional Characteristics Make a Difference?." They found that for students seeking an associate's degree (and perhaps more) a student body of less than 2,500 full time students, fewer part time instructors, fewer minority students, and less money spent on "academic [supporting]" features all correlated with more success (637-640). Smaller schools and more full time instructors seem desirable, although both would need increased spending which might slightly offset the coast advantages of community colleges. Academic support spending, which includes spending on extra items such as libraries and museums, shows a weak relationship, but it is useful to know that these extraneous items can be cut with little effect on institutional quality overall. But it is clear that lowering minority enrollment with the goal of increasing graduation and transfer rates should not be the goal of any institution, and further reflects how colleges are only as effective as the populations they serve.

Students who do manage to transfer to four-year institutions are considered successes for the community college, but students still need to graduate. The question then turns to whether community colleges have prepared students enough to graduate from four-year schools. The research on the success of transfer students is mixed. Some was neutral, such as the paper, "Academic Performance of Community College Transfer Students and 'Native' Students at a Large State University," by Conrad Glass Jr. and Anthony Harrington. They compared 200 juniors at a large, public university; half of them had started at the university, the other half were starting their first year at the university after beginning at a community college. While transfer students showed a grade point average (gpa) shock in their first semester after transfer and tended to graduate a semester or two later, their final gpa and graduation rate were not significantly different from native students. This suggest that while community colleges may not

help future prospects, there is no evidence that they hurt, and would still be beneficial if they successfully transfer many students and are cost effective.

On the most positive side, some researchers argue that community colleges allow students to graduate from better schools than they otherwise would have. The work of Michael Hilmer in his paper, "Does Community College Attendance Provide a Strategic Path to a Higher Quality Education?" shows that for lower income or lower performing students, transferring from a community college allows students to attend higher quality universities than if they had gone directly to a four-year institution (65-66). In, "Will this Community College Transfer Student Succeed? Factors Affecting Transfer Student Performance," Barbara Townsend, et al. compared the gpa of transfer students from one community college to one private, moderately selective university. They found community college gpa was the highest predictor of university gpa, and while high school performance was a factor, it could be overcome. Once transferred, the gpa difference between students who had borderline high school performance and students who had below borderline high school performance was insignificant, although high performing high school students performed significantly better (436-442). When he analyzed results of *the High School & Beyond/Sophomore* (HS&B/So) study, which followed students nationwide from 1980 to 1993, Clifford Adelman found that students who earn ten or more credits from a community college, then transfer to a four-year university and earn at least ten credits graduate at higher rates than those who attend four-year schools directly, as reported in "Answers in the Tool Box. Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment" (1; 52; 80-81). These studies suggest that community colleges can increase student's chances of success and perhaps even take previously unqualified students and raise them to qualified levels.

But not all studies are so optimistic. In Doyle's, "Effect," he compares students with similar test scores and parental incomes, and finds community college attendees who later transfer graduate at lower rates than direct attendees (203-205). Similarly, in, "Alternative Paths to College Completion: Effect of Attending a 2-year School on the Probability of Completing a 4-year Degree," Jonathan Sandy, et al. show that for multiple data sets, bachelor's degree earning rates are lower for students who start at community colleges than students who start at four-year universities (468). They estimate that the reason for this disparity is about 48% due to the differences between students at two-year and four-year schools and about 52% due to the differences between the two- and four-year schools themselves (469).

Those who are more pessimistic about the effectiveness of community colleges can point out that all of these studies fail to capture the diversion effect, the students who may have graduated if they initially attended a four-year university but never end up transferring. On the other hand, those who argue in favor of community colleges may counter with the democratization argument; some students may have no intention of obtaining a bachelor's degree. Some of these studies, namely Sandy et al., compare all community college students to all university students (467-470), but it is unclear how many of these students would have achieved a bachelor's degree even if they had originally attended a university. If students only

desire associate's degrees and certificates, why should community colleges be seen as failures if they do not obtain bachelor's degrees?

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