

A Focus on Success

Q&A With WestEd's Pamela Burdman on Community Colleges and Postsecondary Readiness

Q: Much of your work has focused on community colleges. How do community colleges fit into the larger picture of postsecondary education?

A: These colleges have opened opportunity for more students to attend college than can be accommodated by the nation's four-year universities. Community colleges enroll almost half of the students in higher education in the United States, and in California it's close to 70 percent. Among underserved students, the proportion is even higher. These institutions deserve far greater attention than they often receive because the majority of their students don't ultimately attain a degree or credential that will allow them to better their lives or increase their economic well-being. That needs to change.

Q: What are the reasons for the stalled progress of these students?


A: There are several reasons. One relates very closely to the issue of their transition from high school and readiness for higher education. These students generally come to college with insufficient preparation, often through no fault of their own. They may have graduated from high school but not acquired the skills that are expected of a college student, so ended up in remedial classes. In some cases, this is not because they didn't do well in high school, but because their high schools teach different material than colleges expect them to learn.

Or they may have delayed attending college and therefore gotten rusty in their skills, especially math. They may be English language learners who never fully mastered academic English, even though they graduated from high school in the United States.

But there are other barriers these students face after they get to a community college. If they are at a remedial level — the current term is "developmental education" — they are often required to take classes that may not be taught well or may not be structured to meet their needs. Traditional remedial classes are known as "drill and kill." Such classes are not designed to inspire and excite the mind. These may be similar to the classes the students had in high school, so they're repeating an experience in which they were unsuccessful.

Students typically do not earn college credit for remedial coursework, so they may feel they're spinning their wheels taking classes that don't interest them. Secondly, because these students are ill-prepared and many, I would say most, come from families without a history of college success, they have a greater need for counseling and other supports.

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Q: Research has found that the high school students who most need counseling about getting into and succeeding in college often are the least likely to receive such assistance because of overburdened staff and conflicting priorities. Is there a similar situation at community colleges as well?

A: Exactly. The students who most need extra guidance are least likely to receive it because of how community colleges are funded and organized. Many community colleges are organized in silos. For example, academic instruction and counseling are separated. But the students' needs aren't so neatly separated or defined. Community colleges also receive less funding per student than do four-year universities. Financial incentives in most states focus on getting students to enroll, not necessarily helping them succeed once there. And policy analysts increasingly are questioning the appropriateness of this funding structure.

Q: Are there alternatives? Finding funding to support successful transitions, rather than just enrollment?

A: Washington State is experimenting with a model where a portion of the community college's funding is based on how many students achieve certain milestones, such as completing one year of college. Oklahoma has tried a similar approach for all of higher education. The research is still unclear, but there's a growing recognition that the current system is not fulfilling what states want and need.

In addition, the Obama administration has proposed the American Graduation Initiative, which would provide funding to colleges and states that are tracking success rates of students and using that information to develop innovations. For federal or state governments to set this as a priority sends a very loud signal.

Q: If the focus is to shift more toward supporting completion, what does that mean for K-12 schools and for colleges concerned about postsecondary readiness?

A: Great question. Often the transition from high school to community college is the weakest link in the chain of upward mobility. As a result, large numbers of disadvantaged students have no idea what their options are or how to prepare for college. Many think that if they just graduate from high school, they can make it in college, so they're stunned to find themselves in remedial classes. I think the fact that this affects so many students is a failure of both our high schools and our colleges. Policymakers also bear responsibility. But it's not helpful for any of these to blame the others.

To do better, colleges need an accurate picture of how many students are coming to college adequately prepared. They then need to know what is happening to those students who are not prepared. Community colleges need to have good relationships with high schools, so that they can work on increasing the percentage of students who graduate high school prepared for college. They must work also with four-year universities, and with local employers, and have strong relationships with social service agencies that help disconnected youth and immigrants. None of this is easy. Community colleges have been referred to as "the systems integrator." This role is much broader than the standard conception of what a school or college is.



Q: Can you give any more specific suggestions for what colleges can do so that students who aren't academically prepared for college-level classes have a better chance of succeeding?

A: Here's one example: Classes that explicitly help students develop good study skills, rather than focusing solely on the academic content, have been shown to increase course completion rates by 8-25 percent. Other examples are programs that combine remedial coursework with academic or vocational courses, such as remedial math and physiology for nursing students; and creating learning communities where a cohort of students take classes together and develop peer support systems. In an ideal world, these strategies would be published and every college would implement them immediately, but in practice, it is a challenge for colleges to adopt even proven strategies.

Q: Would it be fair to say we are at a transition stage nationally in terms of understanding the importance of community colleges?

A: Yes, that's true. We are moving from a period in which community colleges are overlooked and ignored and treated as second-class institutions to a period in which there's a more intense focus on how critical these institutions are to improving the lives of large numbers of students in the country. The increased scrutiny is somewhat difficult for community colleges. I think there's an appreciation of the attention and additional investment, but there's also some discomfort among community college leaders that their success rates are under a microscope.

From a policy standpoint, community colleges and their students traditionally have not had much clout. But they are part of our economy and our social fabric. We cannot remain an economically advanced nation if the students in these colleges are left behind. Consider this: The majority of healthcare workers, firefighters, and law enforcement officers in this country are educated at community colleges. Can we afford not to focus more on ensuring their success?