



THE LATEST WAVE: COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by Larry Van Dyne

Community colleges, which now enroll about one-third of the country's 11 million undergraduates, crowd the very bottom of higher education's pecking order. Ranking below even the least prestigious of the four-year colleges and universities, these two-year schools struggle along without the assets that make for high intellectual status.

First of all, they are completely nonexclusive, admitting virtually anyone who walks through their doors. Their students usually have average academic preparation—or less. Their instructors, few of whom have Ph.D.'s, exist on the margins of the prestige-conscious professoriat. And they offer remedial and vocational courses that prepare graduates for modest jobs in business, industry, and paraprofessional occupations.

In short, community colleges are places where many upwardly mobile parents hope their children will not have to go.

Yet this plebian status also gives these same community colleges a certain cachet, at least in some liberal circles. They are often portrayed as the true vehicles of "equal opportunity." They are the "open-door" colleges, offering poor whites, blacks, Hispanics, and others a first chance to move up, to share in the American dream. About 1,000 of these publicly financed commuter colleges have been sprinkled throughout our inner cities, suburbs, and county seats over the last 20 years—more or less in the name of open access. Now, as they begin to reach maturity, it is time to ask how closely their performance matches their rhetoric.

The origins of the contemporary community college can be traced to the turn of the century. William Rainey Harper, first president of the University of Chicago, was one of the earliest to promote the idea of separate "junior colleges" that would offer two years of college education and allow the big universities to concentrate on more advanced work. More important, however, was the movement toward free public high schools, a national development beginning in the late 19th century that some

communities pushed to its logical extension by creating local junior colleges to offer a 13th and 14th year. California's first junior college, for instance, was an outgrowth of the Fresno high school in 1911. From such beginnings, the community-college movement expanded—but only a little, remaining a minor part of the country's educational system until the early 1960s.

In that decade, the community colleges took off. It was a golden era at nearly every level of higher education.* Most trends pointed upward—enrollments, payrolls, state appropriations, federal research money, new construction, salary levels, consulting fees, even professorial prestige. Seven states—California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Texas, and Washington—quickly jumped into the forefront of community-college expansion. By 1968 these states accounted for one-third of all community-college campuses and two-thirds of all two-year-college students.

Other states were not far behind. Their educators saw the community college as an ideal device for meeting the mushrooming demand for higher learning. It was far cheaper, certainly, than the creation *ex nihilo* of new four-year colleges and universities. The existing schools, already overcrowded, often encouraged this movement: The new community colleges would absorb those students the established public universities did not want.

Community colleges thus acquired enormous support in the 1960s, exemplified by the frequent boast of their boosters that a new one was opening somewhere in the country every fortnight. Community-college enrollments grew from 600,000 in 1960 to more than 2 million in 1970. By 1976, the figure had jumped to 4.1 million. California alone now has over 100 of the nation's 1,000 community-college campuses.

It was during the 1960s boom that administrators and teachers at the community colleges began to think of themselves as a special "movement," as keepers of an egalitarian ideology

*Only Catholic women's colleges and private two-year colleges did not experience dramatic increases in enrollment.

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at a time when the civil-rights movement was pushing the politicians and the courts toward a broad redefinition of equal educational opportunity.

The community colleges, it was said, were far better suited than four-year schools to provide such opportunity. As demand grew, traditional colleges were raising their admissions standards. Their tuitions were creeping higher. Many had always been outside the cities and thus were geographically inconvenient. The community colleges, by contrast, had few admissions standards. They kept tuition low or eliminated it altogether. (The national average even now is only \$387 per year, compared to \$621 per year plus room and board at public four-year colleges, and \$2,330 plus room and board at private four-year colleges.) And the community colleges were within reach of their students' homes.

A Second Chance

In addition to their emphasis on equal opportunity, the two-year colleges played up their localism—which is why they began changing their names during the 1960s from “junior” to “community” colleges.* A two-year college, its proponents argued, could contribute to a community's welfare in many important ways—supplying trained labor for new industry, turning out practical nurses for county hospitals, bringing occasional bits of culture to the community, or whatever else seemed appropriate. Chambers of commerce and local legislators were impressed; they came to regard establishment of a community college as a mark of civic progress, as important as an airport or an industrial park. Even the names of these schools have a ring of localism: Henry Ford, Wilbur Wright, and Carl Sandburg all have two-year schools named after them, as do Carl Albert, Richard J. Daley, and George Wallace.

An open-door admissions policy has brought an astonishingly diverse student body, not just the poor, into the community colleges. (They are missing only the most affluent of students.) Some of these are “traditional students”—middle-class youths in their late teens, directly out of high school, with average ability, who are studying full-time and will eventually move on to a job or transfer to a four-year school. To these students, the community college is a convenient way to satisfy parents'

* While four-year colleges get virtually all their tax subsidies from federal and state governments, community colleges get about 23 percent from local taxes. The states put in about 44 percent, 15 percent comes from tuition, and federal contributions are only about 2 percent.

pressure for college. It is near home, and it is an inexpensive way to sample a variety of subjects and possible career choices. Above all, it offers a second chance for those who drifted through high school.

“Cooling Out”

The community colleges also attract large numbers of so-called nontraditional students. Here are the housewives preparing for a return to the job market at middle age; senior citizens learning all those things neglected or postponed during their working lives; blue-collar workers trying to improve their chances for promotion or to move into entirely new careers; recent high-school graduates whose academic skills are too meager for them to get into college anywhere else; highly motivated Vietnam veterans. Since the 1960s, these students have changed the complexion of the community colleges: More than half of all two-year-college students are studying part-time; their average age is now about 30.

The diversity of community college students is mirrored in the endless variety of courses and programs these schools offer. Most of their full-time students are either in “transfer” tracks (which parallel the offerings of the lower divisions of four-year colleges) or in occupational programs (to prepare them for mid- or low-level jobs in health care, engineering, computers, and scores of other fields). Historically, the transfer track has accounted for about two-thirds of the enrollment in a typical community college, but that proportion has been declining in favor of occupational training as the job market tightens in the 1970s. (Ironically, the leveling off and projected decline of enrollments in four-year colleges has prompted some of these traditional institutions to offer occupational training, which they once disdained as fit only for two-year colleges.)

Two other types of specialized courses are also common on the community-college menu. “Community-service” programs—education lingo for such courses as macramé, dieting, and how to quit smoking—attract large numbers of part-time, noncredit students. And many other enrollees, often those hampered by past disadvantages, spend at least some of their time in “developmental” programs—a nice euphemism for remedial training intended to help bring their English, math, and other basic skills up to par.

All this describes the community colleges accurately. Yet it does not go far enough. Almost hidden from view is what may well be their most important social function: sorting people.

REMEDIAL EDUCATION: A GROWTH INDUSTRY

Only five years ago, the need for "remedial" undergraduate education was the elite universities' dirty secret. Rare were the school administrators who admitted that they had students with deficiencies in such basic skills as reading, writing, and math. And those who did usually argued that the problem was nothing a year of "bonehead" math and a copy of *The Elements of Style* wouldn't solve. But as Scholastic Aptitude Test scores continued to decline—and professors continued to complain—such colleges were forced to take action. Remedial courses were no longer confined to community colleges and underprepared minority students.

Today, few universities lack a compensatory reading and writing program, not to mention a "math anxiety" clinic. Swarthmore's English 1A—reading and composition—now enrolls 10 percent of the freshman class. Wellesley and Wesleyan conduct a joint math project for the poorly prepared, and Cornell's six-week writing workshop hones the skills of 100 students every summer—many of them already in graduate school. Some 20 percent of Berkeley's freshmen enroll in no-credit reading and writing tutorials; at Stanford, half the freshman class routinely signs up at the "Learning Assistance Center." The story is the same across the country.

University deans are divided on the causes of the 1970s decline in basic skills (they blame everything from television to lazy high-school teachers). But few are oblivious to the situation's little ironies. The most obvious: Universities such as Brown, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia have looked to the community colleges for guidance in setting up their remedial programs.

Intentionally or not, they are one of the higher education system's main devices for picking early winners and losers in the great American chase after higher income and social status.

One aspect of this sorting function has been dubbed "cooling out." This is an old function that used to be performed at many state universities, where high-school graduates were admitted in droves, huge numbers flunked out quickly, and many more shifted from liberal arts colleges into the less demanding schools of education or agriculture. The community colleges now do the same thing. They convince students with excessively high expectations of education or career to settle for something less. Young people who want to be engineers are convinced they are better off as *aides* to engineers; computer scientists *manqué* absorb instead the routine techniques of programming.

It is revealing that two-thirds of community college students enter the transfer track aimed toward four-year colleges,

but only *half* of them actually stay in this track. The others find easier paths. Some move into occupational programs; a few are simply cooled-out altogether—students for whom the “open” door becomes a “revolving” one that deposits them back where they started.

In the view of such educators as Burton Clark and Jerome Karabel, the community colleges also serve, in effect, as a kind of moat designed to protect the universities higher up the line from underprepared students. The most explicit expression of this idea has occurred in California. In the early 1960s, when popular demand for mass higher education was soaring, California set up a rigid, three-tiered system of public colleges with different admissions standards for each level. Students ranking in the upper one-eighth of their high-school classes are allowed into branches of the University of California, including prestigious Berkeley. Those in the upper one-third to one-eighth go to four-year state colleges—Long Beach State, for instance, or San Diego State. Everyone else has to be content with a community college.

The California system, which is employed to varying degrees in other states, is defended as “meritocratic” because a student’s academic ability alone determines his place in the educational structure. The trouble is that the system ends up reflecting—and perpetuating—existing social-class arrangements. The upper-tier campuses tend to get more students from affluent families; the middle tier gets the somewhat less affluent; and the bottom tier gets the least affluent. Across the country, only one-fourth of the freshmen entering major universities in 1977 came from families earning less than \$15,000 annually, but almost half of the community-college freshmen came from such circumstances.

Unanswered Questions

The racial makeup of inner-city community colleges provides another illustration of how faithfully these institutions reflect the local patterns. The three-campus, 28,000-student Cuyahoga Community College district in Cleveland, for example, has a downtown campus that is 65 percent black and two suburban campuses that are 80 percent white. (The same arrangement applies in Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis.) This situation has prompted one writer to wonder if these colleges are becoming “the slums of higher education.”

Community-college administrators respond by citing their

institutions' mandate to serve the community. Should they be held accountable for local segregated housing patterns? Moreover, the evidence in Cleveland reveals little variation in educational quality between the inner-city and suburban campuses.

Critics note, however, that housing patterns were not a sufficient legal justification to maintain segregated public elementary and secondary school systems. They add that blacks and other minorities are in "disproportionate representation" in community colleges nationally, accounting for 20 percent of enrollments, compared to only 14 percent in four-year schools. And the NAACP, which brought suit three years ago to end de facto segregation in Cleveland's lower schools, is considering bringing suit against the city's community colleges. They have the precedent of a 1972 Memphis ruling to back them up.

Many basic questions about how well community colleges serve their students remain unanswered, partly because they are relatively new institutions and partly because of the primitive state of educational analysis. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, which in 1973 ended a massive five-year, 100-volume study of higher education, raised a number of questions that it could not answer: Amid the welter of different courses, how many community-college students are essentially enrolled in "terminal" occupational programs, and how many are really heading toward four-year schools? What happens to the many students derailed off the transfer track? How do community-college students fare in the job market compared to people who only graduate from high school, or those who complete four-year degrees? How good are the remedial programs?

We still do not know. Even assuming favorable answers, the community colleges ultimately raise a philosophical question: Can a system of higher education that is so hierarchical and that consigns two-year students to the lowest status ever hope to be fair to all? Probably not. But, for all their faults, the community colleges, the latest wave in American education, *do* represent a considerable advance over the prewar days when higher education of any sort reached only the fortunate few.