

Center for American Progress



# Re-imagining Community Colleges in the 21st Century

A Student-Centered Approach to Higher Education

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-EXCERPTS-

# Executive summary

Contemporary community colleges are on the brink of crisis, facing both praise and criticism on so many dimensions that it is difficult to make an overall assessment of their legitimacy. Each of the primary missions of community colleges faces a broad spectrum of challenges, made more complex by misapprehensions about the various roles of community colleges, lack of clear and consistent data on outcomes, and the relative weakness of the institutions and their students in state and federal political and policymaking processes. And the diversity of inputs and outputs in community colleges defies easy categorization. Their identity in the media, in the policy community, and in the institutions themselves is problematic, contingent upon perspectives and contexts.

Community colleges provide benefits to an array of constituents, but we argue that their primary responsibility is to students. There is an essential need for community colleges to re-imagine several critical areas in order to serve these students and improve institutional and student performance on a number of fronts: in curricula, including vocational and occupational education, developmental education, and university transfer education; in the structural and procedural norms that shape everyday activities; and in the political life of these institutions.

The transformation and recovery of the institutions begins with a more nuanced understanding of the needs and potential of the diverse student body that community colleges serve and leads to re-envisioning the institution. A student-centered approach to each of the colleges' primary missions will enable institutional leaders and constituents, in collaboration with policymakers, to improve outcomes for all students and achieve synergies between and among the three fundamental areas of community college activity: developmental education, vocational-occupational education, and university transfer.

Re-imagining community colleges necessitates recognizing the connection between students who attend these institutions and the advanced learning and working environments beyond the community college. We try to bridge a gap between the two conditions with a direct approach that fits form to function: one that enables institutions to better understand a function and then to construct appropriate forms—or structures—for those functions. To do this, we think of community colleges as institutions with multiple missions and also imagine community colleges with organizational and governance structures that are aligned with multiple functions.

These functions must focus on students. Placing students at the center of the institution requires re-imagining community colleges as sites of equitable opportunity and outcomes. Political leaders and policymakers will need to move past normative understandings of community colleges and their students and expect no less of these institutions and no less for their students than the best that is offered to students at any level of postsecondary education. To accomplish this, we offer a number of recommendations for transformation in vocational and occupational education and training, developmental education, and the transfer function. We also suggest specific institutional, state, and federal policies that will facilitate that transformative change:

- **New approaches to training and credentialing.** Rapidly shifting demand for skills in state and national labor markets calls for new approaches to sub-baccalaureate training and credentialing. States and federal legislation should support innovative, credit-based training programs that respond to student and industry needs, while allowing students to build credit-based platforms for future training and degree attainment. Legislation should also support data collection and assessment of student credit and noncredit course-taking patterns to assist institutional adaptations in this area.
- **Funding for colleges and financial support for students.** Community colleges suffer from a lack of the financial resources needed to serve their students and other constituents. This problem is brought into focus when comparing community colleges' per student allocations to similar programs in four-year institutions. The increase in the maximum Pell grant available under Section 101 of H.R. 3221 is a welcome addition to the pool of financial aid available to eligible community college students. But students in community colleges need new and more comprehensive forms of aid if national goals for degree attainment are to be realized. This section of the bill could be strengthened through the creation of an additional financial support program modeled after the "Post 9/11 G.I. Bill." The additional aid would include student stipends for full-time or part-time community college attendance and allowances for books and supplies. This form of aid would be a bold step for legislators, but in order to improve our position in global rankings of degree production, we will need to do more to approach the amount and forms of aid offered by those nations we are measured against.
- **Policies to promote developmental education.** States have for too long failed to develop clear policies on responsibility for developmental education. States must institute clear policies that support innovative uses of data, as they require collaboration between their elementary-secondary and postsecondary systems to improve K-12 preparation and to align standards for high school graduation with college readiness. The goal should be to significantly reduce the need for postsecondary remediation through early assessment, intervention, and continuous accountability at all levels of state educational systems.
- **Higher transfer rates to four-year colleges.** Despite considerable effort already generated in legislatures, the policy community, and institutions, levels of transfer from com-

munity colleges to four-year institutions can be improved. Legislation that has focused on articulation, outreach, and finance should be augmented with policies covering more sophisticated data collection, common course numbering, institutional policy alignment across segments, joint-baccalaureate programming and technology-mediated information systems for students seeking transfer and baccalaureate attainment.

- **More modern infrastructure and technology.** Section 351 of H.R. 3221 the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act offers considerable federal assistance for construction, renovation, and modernization of community college facilities, including information technology facilities. The language in the bill that supports expansion of computer labs and instructional technology training facilities should be broadened to include building institutional information technology systems such as student record data management centers, information portals for student outreach, and course and credit articulation. Extending support to institutional information management systems would be consistent with Section 503 of the bill, which calls for increasing students' electronic access to information on transfer credit, and Section 505, which calls for developing improved data systems and data-sharing protocols as well as increasing states' abilities to collect and analyze institutional level data.
- **Better data collection.** Section 504 of H.R. 3221 includes language requiring states that seek eligibility for funding to have "a statewide longitudinal data system that includes data with respect to community colleges." Community college data collection could be significantly enhanced if the bill specifically called for data on student enrollments in credit and noncredit courses as well as developmental education programs. These data could be used for improved outcomes in community college developmental education programs, and would also have considerable utility for collaborative efforts with elementary-secondary systems designed to reduce the need for remediation at the postsecondary level.
- **Common standards for assessing student learning and institutional effectiveness.** Given the significance of developmental education in community colleges and the increasing mobility of students, federal legislation providing funding and guidelines for states to develop common standards for assessing students' developmental needs would enhance student progress and increase institutional effectiveness. Such legislation should also provide incentives for collaboration between elementary-secondary and postsecondary systems in the development of common assessment standards.

The rapid pace of change in the education arena requires innovative approaches to institutional practices at every level. New competition and new opportunities demand that community colleges re-imagine their goals and practices to better serve student needs. That process will require that policies specific to the various domains of the community college—transfer, occupational, and developmental activities—place students first. Institutional policies should also focus on new forms of collaboration with four-year institutions, community-based organizations, and business and industrial partners.

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## University transfer education

Community colleges have included transfer to four-year colleges and universities among their primary missions since the practice's formal emergence in the early 20th century.<sup>123</sup> According to B.K. Townsend, transfer education was the central mission in the early junior college concept, where students took the first two years or less of an undergraduate degree and transferred to a four-year institution to complete the baccalaureate degree.<sup>124</sup> This mission continues, but there has been considerable scholarly attention to a critique of the efficacy of community colleges' social democratic function in recent years.<sup>125</sup> There has also been growing concern in the policy community over transfer outcomes.<sup>126</sup>

Renewed interest in the transfer function is a result of several shifts in the political economy that shapes community colleges: the decline of need-based financial aid, rising tuition, and the reduction of remedial education at four-year colleges and universities.<sup>127</sup> Estimates suggest that 40 percent of all first-time freshmen in 2006 began their postsecondary education in community colleges, with the majority of this population expressing an intention to complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>128</sup> Yet these data are somewhat ambiguous as students' intentions at community colleges are often misreported or misinterpreted.<sup>129</sup> State governments have increasingly promoted the transfer function of community colleges as a cost-effective way to promote access to the baccalaureate degree.<sup>130</sup> Large numbers of students move from universities and four-year colleges to community colleges, but the common view is that transfer is from community colleges to four-year institutions only—a process defined as vertical transfer.<sup>131</sup>

There are large numbers of students who aspire to transfer from community colleges, but many do not take the steps needed to transition successfully to a four-year institution.<sup>132</sup> A report by the California Postsecondary Education Commission found that only 22 percent of community college students tracked over a five-year period transferred to one of California's public universities, and 52 percent of students left the community college

system without transferring or earning a degree. The community college transfer rate in California appeared relatively stable, but the transfer rate did not increase at the same rate as student enrollment.<sup>133</sup>

What's more, transfer rates were not consistent among socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. Low-income students and those of African-American, Native American, or Latino descent transferred to four-year colleges and universities at significantly lower rates than their White, Asian, or more affluent peers.<sup>134</sup> There is clearly a significant opportunity gap between outcomes for the population defined as White and Asian and those defined as Hispanic (Latino), Black, and Native.<sup>135</sup>

Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have acknowledged that community colleges “are not being fully utilized as gateways” for transfer to four-year institutions.<sup>136</sup> They are a major pathway, but community college outcomes—that is, actual transfer of students from community colleges to four-year institutions—do not measure up.<sup>137</sup> In response, community colleges have designed transfer programs to serve specific groups of students, often those from underrepresented backgrounds in various disciplines. These approaches have had some success in combination with student support services, but they have not altered overall institutional performance in transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities.

Transfer education is the community college's most recognized function, yet these programs are not performing at an optimal level by the measures used in other postsecondary sectors. Some researchers and policymakers have underlined failed policy as the key contributor;<sup>138</sup> others have pointed to inadequate resources,<sup>139</sup> including a heavy reliance upon part-time faculty,<sup>140</sup> and still others have called for a greater integration of college practitioners and institutional research into the transfer process.<sup>141</sup>

### Lack of curricular alignment and articulation

Community colleges face transfer-related challenges at the institutional and policy levels,<sup>142</sup> and these ultimately affect students and student outcomes.<sup>143</sup> Cuseo argued that problems related to curricular alignment and articulation between community colleges and universities are among the major barriers to transfer.<sup>144</sup> Many academic courses offered in community colleges are not transferable, and some four-year institutions refuse to accept transfer courses that are not identical to their own.

Four-year institutions rarely consider the effects on community colleges and transfer students when they modify their curricula; these changes may affect a student's ability to transfer, but too often little or no information is provided to community colleges when such curricular decisions are made. College deans or department chairs at the senior institutions, especially those in high demand disciplines, do not always adhere to articula-

tion agreements among community colleges and four-year colleges. The lack of cohesion and communication between community colleges and four-year colleges in designing clear, easy-to-follow articulation agreements creates significant obstacles for students who intend to transfer from one institution to another.<sup>145</sup> But Gross and Goldhaber found that the strength of state policies on transfer does not correlate with rates of transfer.<sup>146</sup> The key predictors of transfer in their research were a student's family resources and levels of preparation, as well as the level of spending on student services and the percentage of tenured faculty at the community college.

Some four-year college and university policies do act as barriers to transfer. These policies include requiring transfer students to take standardized tests before entering the university, giving transfer students low priority in course registration, completing transcript analyses after transfer students have already enrolled in their first semester of classes at the four-year institution, and denying academic honors to community college transfer students. All of these policies can hinder students' transfer progress, and some may even discourage transfer students from applying or transferring to specific four-year institutions. Community colleges have little control over these practices and policies, but there is no doubt that they affect transfer rates, and many community colleges are working collaboratively with four-year institutions to address these policies and ease students' transitions from community colleges to four-year colleges.<sup>147</sup>

Providing students with clear and easy-to-understand information about the prerequisites and other necessary courses required for transfer can arguably reduce student confusion and minimize the incidence of enrolling in non-transferable courses.<sup>148</sup> Visible and vigorous transfer center staff, and high expectations for transfer students at community colleges can help to provide students with the information and skills they need to transfer.<sup>149</sup>

Colleges can also work to improve the accessibility of transfer information by making it available to students and their families over the Internet.<sup>150</sup> Kozeracki and Gerdeman found that requiring faculty to use e-mail and the Internet in their courses can facilitate student exposure to the types of computer programs and software that they will need to use regularly at four-year institutions.<sup>151</sup> Such practices within community colleges may serve to narrow the digital divide between students at community colleges and four-year institutions by providing community college students with the type of information technology skills that will be required in four-year and university classes.<sup>152</sup>

Improving institutional alignment between community colleges and four-year colleges has also been shown to improve transfer. The development of common course numbering systems and common expectations for lower-division curricula across state institutions can greatly ease the transfer of courses from one institution to another.<sup>153</sup> Joint admission and concurrent enrollment programs were also shown to help facilitate transfer, and stronger articulation agreements between institutions can help to reduce barriers.<sup>154</sup>

Developing pre-major articulation agreements in addition to institutional articulation agreements can help to reduce student confusion, as well as the possibility that students have to repeat courses already taken. The California Postsecondary Education Commission suggested creating “faculty curriculum committees by academic discipline to negotiate articulation agreements for academic majors.”<sup>155</sup> These articulation agreements may resolve issues students encounter when attempting to transfer into academic departments at four-year institutions, such as math and sciences programs, which traditionally have highly selective admissions requirements.

According to Kisker, information sharing and collaboration between community colleges and other institutions can improve transfer and sustain improved transfer rates over time. Partnerships can go beyond formal articulation agreements and help to raise students’ awareness of the opportunities available to them after attending a community college, and legitimize the community college as a “viable and important path to the baccalaureate.” Engaging high schools in partnerships also provides a useful way for identifying potential students and may help students start thinking about the requirements for transfer earlier on in the process.<sup>156</sup>

Greater information about student progress after transfer also allows for more effective assessment and analyses of articulation agreements, which can then be used to improve practices and processes. Creation of systems that track and assess students’ transfer and retention rates in different disciplines would provide community colleges and their faculty and administrators with information about how these students fare upon transfer. This information may also help colleges assess the progress they have made in their efforts to increase student transfer.<sup>157</sup>

University feedback on transfer students’ achievement, adjustment, and satisfaction compared to students who started at the university or those who transferred from a different institution could provide community colleges with information about how their transfer faculty and staff might work to bolster the transfer process as a whole. Cuseo proposed that assessments of the effectiveness of four-year college and university entrance tests and course placement procedures for transfer students be conducted to provide community colleges with useful feedback about how to prepare students for such procedures.<sup>158</sup>

There is little attention in the literature to the development of university and community college joint baccalaureate programming, co-location of university programs on a community college campus, or stand-alone baccalaureate programs offered by community colleges. Yet such programs are advancing in several states. These practices—particularly the community college as a baccalaureate degree-granting institution—provide alternate avenues to achieving goals similar to those reached by transferring to a university or four-year college.<sup>159</sup> Yet there is resistance to community colleges as baccalaureate degree-granting institutions. One reason is that transfer structures and institutional interests have deep roots and that universities rely upon community college transfer students to meet a number of aspects of their missions.

## Insufficient resources

The concerns about funding for community colleges and the effect of budgets on the transfer function have been raised for decades, but little has changed either to increase state support or to decrease the burden on students. State system coordinators as recently as 2008 noted the decline in their resources at a time when more resources were required.<sup>160</sup> Such a reduction in funding for community colleges comes when the proclaimed need for more baccalaureate degree recipients is dire and about to escalate.<sup>161</sup> This, of course, places the transfer function of community colleges in a state of peril; rates of baccalaureate attainment will not advance—or could even retreat—if four-year institutions don't have space to accommodate eligible transfer students or if the students themselves cannot afford to continue on at these institutions.

Students who plan to move to four-year institutions are often sidetracked by insufficient resources along the way, including the lack of available financial aid. Indeed, the well-documented shift “from need-based to merit-based financial aid makes it increasingly difficult for low-income students to qualify for financial aid... There is also limited or no portability of financial aid for students transferring from one institution to another.”<sup>162</sup> Few scholarships are designated specifically for transfer students, and the difference between tuition and fees at a community college and a four-year institution can be daunting for many students. Transfer students are also frequently notified of their acceptance to a university after the deadline to file for financial aid has passed, forcing these students to delay entering the university or pay tuition and fees out of pocket. And many transfer students must work while in college, which causes difficulties when four-year and university curricular requirements and course offerings are not aligned with student work patterns or demand full-time study.

## Inequitable transfer outcomes

Another challenge to re-imagining transfer stems from the disparities in transfer rates between various student cohorts.<sup>163</sup> The majority of students who transfer are not representative of the overall community college population: They are more likely to be from a higher socioeconomic class and have parents who attended college, and less likely to be African American, Native American, or Latino.<sup>164</sup> The role of gender in transfer has also changed over the past three decades. Male students were more likely than females to transfer in the 1970s and 1980s. But recent research indicates that more women than men now transfer to four-year institutions or earn community college degrees or credentials.<sup>165</sup> According to Hagedorn, this finding may be explained in part by the fact that more women than men complete the lower-division English requirements necessary to transfer.<sup>166</sup>

African-American, Latino, Native American, and low-income students are especially underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and math, also known as STEM disciplines.<sup>167</sup> Students from these groups—especially low-income students—have faced a

number of obstacles that hinder transfer and degree completion, including a need to work to support themselves or their families, which may make completion of STEM courses more difficult and slow their progress toward transfer or a community college degree.<sup>168</sup>

Likelihood of transferring to a university is also affected by how well a student integrates into the community college's academic and social environment.<sup>169</sup> Academic and social integration can include meeting with faculty outside of class; participating in study groups; becoming involved in learning communities; meeting with counselors, advisers, or tutors; and joining a student club or organization.<sup>170</sup> Flowers found that community college students were often much less involved in these types of activities than students at four-year institutions.<sup>171</sup> This is likely due to other responsibilities, particularly for commuter students who hold jobs outside of college and/or take care of families. The lack of out-of-class involvement is also due to the high percentage of part-time faculty on community college campuses who are not compensated or rewarded for holding extra office hours, leading student organizations, and so forth.

Academic and social engagement can play a critical role in promoting student transfer. Laanan noted that workshops or orientation sessions that inform students on the transition to a four-year institution can be effective in facilitating academic transfer.<sup>172</sup> Such workshops may include descriptions of college life at four-year universities, and may include information about how administrative offices work on campus. Workshops that provide students with exposure to particular types of computer software were also effective in helping students because they exposed students to the types of technology they will need to be familiar with upon arrival at a university.<sup>173</sup> The need for student exposure to computer technology is evident, and organized workshops would promote student engagement and serve to better prepare community college students for technologically oriented classes at universities.

Student peer mentoring programs also demonstrated positive results in improving student engagement and transfer. Mentoring programs connect incoming community college students with more experienced peers who are available to answer questions and explain specific concepts that can help facilitate students' understanding of course material and assist in their transition to community college life.<sup>174</sup> Federal programs fund this practice at many community colleges, but community college practitioners note that these support programs accommodate fewer than 10 percent of students.<sup>175</sup>

Quality advising can play a key role in improving transfer. Zamani showed that the courses students take, and the sequence in which they take them, appear to affect transfer outcomes.<sup>176</sup> Students take courses that are not transferable, which prolongs the path to transfer, or do not take the appropriate English, mathematics, and science courses needed to transfer in a timely manner. Ineffective or unavailable academic advising or counseling leads to unproductive course taking. Research on students in California found that counseling helps students obtain the information they need about course modules, deadlines,

and prerequisites that can ultimately help them transfer, and that counseling programs targeting students from backgrounds that traditionally exhibit lower levels of transfer and degree completion may increase overall transfer rates among these groups.<sup>177</sup>

Student affairs practitioners, often overlooked in student academic outcomes, also affect student transfer. Culp specifically examined the role of student affairs practitioners in improving advising for community college students.<sup>178</sup> She noted the importance of partnerships between faculty and student affairs practitioners in encouraging students to remain enrolled and accomplishing their educational goals. She further posited that student affairs practitioners and faculty can work together to utilize technology in ways that can provide useful information to improve student retention and transfer. Santa Monica College's Adelante program for underrepresented populations—particularly Latino students—is an example of one long-term initiative that has contributed to Latino students' high transfer rates to four-year colleges and universities.<sup>179</sup>

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## A student-centered re-imagining of the transfer function

Perhaps no mission of the community college better embodies the tension between sociopolitical aspirations and institutional performance than the transfer function. On the one hand we honor incremental student progress in community colleges, as opposed to focusing on certificate and degree attainment. But we also need to recognize that the disparities in baccalaureate attainment between those students who begin at the community college and those students who attend selective four-year institutions threaten to undermine the legitimacy of community colleges and the state postsecondary systems in which they are nested. Simply put, the goal for the rate of community college transfer and subsequent baccalaureate completion should be equivalent to the rate of completion for those students who begin in four-year institutions.

A number of admirable state and national projects are currently devoted to increasing transfer and baccalaureate completion, but the normative political understanding of transfer from community college—that it is a function for a distinct subpopulation of the colleges—must change in order for major transformation to occur. Students who transfer to four-year institutions will continue to be those who are better prepared and better financed unless community colleges are organized and funded to support credit-course taking patterns that at least open pathways to the baccalaureate for every student who does not already hold the degree.

Policymakers and institutional leaders make a number of different assumptions about community college students' intentions. The default assumption at a four-year institution is that a student will complete a baccalaureate degree. The goal is clear, though often

unmet. There are many obstacles to instilling a similar ethos in community colleges and their students, but they are not insurmountable. Development and job training—as well as certificate and degree attainment—are essential parts of the community college missions, but all of those processes can be linked, through the attainment of college-level course credit, to pathways to transfer and baccalaureate attainment.

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