

## EDITORS' NOTES

Community colleges serve an essential access function, enrolling 39 percent of American undergraduates, 48 percent of all public postsecondary students, and 52 percent of public college freshmen, including disproportionately numbers of students who work, raise families, or arrive academically underprepared for college-level courses (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). For many seeking to enroll in college, “the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing” (Cohen and Brawer, 2003, p. 53). Therefore, the quality of access provided by community colleges is critical to private and public well being.

According to Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2003), 85 percent of freshmen enrolling in community colleges in 1995–1996 intended to earn a credential, 11 percent sought a vocational certificate, 49 percent sought an associate's degree, and 24 percent sought transfer to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree. However, six years after first enrolling, nearly half had left higher education without earning a credential of any kind. Other research suggests that as many as another quarter of entering students apply, enroll, complete assessment testing, and attend classes, but leave *before* the first official enrollment census is conducted (Birdsall, 1994). These disappearing students are considered not to have enrolled at all, indicating that the actual rate of beginning student departure is even higher than commonly cited (Bers and Nyden, 2000–2001). These high rates of attrition have remained essentially constant despite decades of research.

Why do so many beginning students leave community colleges before achieving important educational objectives, often before it is even technically possible to fail? Are these students unmotivated or incapable of succeeding in a college environment? Are there ways in which community colleges are organized or operated that do not meet the needs of students who leave early?

The quick answer suggested by most college studies is that attrition, academic underachievement, and other negative student outcomes are a function of students' lack of academic preparation, lack of commitment to educational objectives, or excessive work and family responsibilities, factors considered largely beyond the control of the college. On the other hand, Tinto (1993) estimates that less than 25 percent of all students drop out because of academic failure and more than 75 percent drop out voluntarily because of difficulties related to incongruence and isolation from the daily life of the institution. Incongruence is a lack of fit arising from a

mismatch between the skills and interests of students and the programs or environment of the institution. Theoretically, this lack of fit could be reduced if the student adapted to the institution or if the institution adapted to the student or both.

However, few empirical studies exist that assess influences of campus environment on student outcomes. As Astin (1993) observes:

Environmental assessment presents by far the most difficult and complex challenge in the field of assessment. It is also the most neglected topic. In its broadest sense, the environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an educational program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration. Thus environment includes not only the programs, personnel, curricula, teaching practices, and facilities that we consider to be part of any educational program but also the social and institutional climate in which the program operates [p. 81].

For example, contact with faculty outside of the classroom is positively associated with student engagement, retention, and success (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Because community college students consistently report spending less time with faculty than their four-year college counterparts, many researchers and practitioners conclude that community college students are less interested or less able to improve their chances of success in this way. However, approximately two-thirds of community college faculty are employed part-time, are rarely paid for office hours, and may have to leave campus immediately after class to teach at another institution (Grubb and others, 1999). Furthermore, part-time faculty report less teaching experience and less familiarity with availability of campus services (such as tutoring and counseling) than their full-time counterparts (Schuetz, 2002). These kinds of hidden structural obstacles make it harder for community college students to connect with faculty outside of class or to experience the kinds of student–faculty interaction that has been linked to enhanced student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Although we know relatively little about campus-student fit dynamics and their influences on student outcomes, we do know that retention rates and other outcomes can vary significantly even among community colleges with similar student characteristics and course offerings (Bailey, Jacobs, Jenkins, and Leinbach, 2003). Thus, campus environment can make a difference in student outcomes—and particularly for underprepared students. As Maxwell (1997) reminds us, a motivated and prepared student will generally succeed at college-level work despite the variations in instructor skills, grading standards, or the appropriateness of the material covered where as an underprepared student generally will not. Arguably then, assessing influences of campus influences on student outcomes are most salient at community colleges where students are disproportionately authentic beginners, “without the sorts of early preparation, prealignment in terms of

cultural values, and sociocultural resources that more advantaged learners at those sites have” (Gee, 1999, p. 1). This volume seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring ways in which community college campus environments help or hinder student success.

In Chapter One, coeditors Jim Barr and Pam Schuetz describe a shift in perspective from student-deficit to one that includes institutional influences on student engagement and success. Pam Schuetz describes a theory-seeking methodology in Chapter Two that identifies and tests a flexible conceptual model of college student engagement suitable for adaptation by college researchers and practitioners seeking to improve institutional leverage over student outcomes. In Chapter Three, Sanford C. Shugart and Joyce Romano describe the front door of Valencia Community College in Florida, a new Atlas online learning community and portal. Atlas connects students to tools needed to succeed including LifeMap, Valencia’s interactive student guide to figuring out “what to do when” to complete their career and education goals.

Dennis McGrath and Susan Tobia examine campus culture as a resource that can be developed to support student success in Chapter Four. In particular, the authors offer recommendations for the development of culturally sensitive institutions through professional development for faculty, staff, and senior managers. In Chapter Five, Faisal Jaswal and Teresa McClane Jaswal present an overview of a tiered mentoring program (TMP) operating at Bellevue Community College in Washington. The TMP leverages the supervised expertise of veteran students to meet the basic mentoring needs of beginning students via a tiered structure conceptually similar but larger in scope than supplemental instruction programs used to support student success in at-risk classes.

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study Restricted Use File, Lisbeth J. Goble, James E. Rosenbaum, and Jennifer L. Stephan examine institutional predictors of college degree completion in Chapter Six. In particular, the authors assess whether institutional graduation rate is a good predictor of completion for students with different levels of academic preparation. Melinda Mechur Karp and Katherine L. Hughes in Chapter Seven conduct interviews with first-time community college students, exploring how institutional structures encourage or inadvertently hinder information networks that foster students’ sense of campus belonging and success.

This volume also seeks to identify new perspectives and practices that foster the success of underprepared community college students. In Chapter Eight, Barbara Illowsky describes the evolution and implementation of the California Basic Skills Initiative, an unprecedented statewide collaborative effort to better serve basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) needs of community college students. In Chapter Nine, John S. Levin reports on a large field study conducted in thirteen community colleges across nine states highlighting the behaviors of college and government officials in the context of institutional practices and social justice.

Chapter Ten by Pam Schuetz and Jim Barr discusses the need for transmutation of internal power struggles in favor of shared creation and execution of a vision of college goals that transcends bureaucratic boundaries. The interest expressed in this volume in influences of campus environment on success of underprepared students is not intended to imply that the phenomenon is purely structurally determined. Rather, in tune with Mills's observation (2000):

We study the structural limits of human decision in an attempt to find points of effective intervention, in order to know what can and what must be structurally changed if the role of explicit decision in history-making is to be enlarged. . . . We study historical social structures, in brief, in order to find within them the way in which they are and can be controlled. For only in this way can we come to know the limits of human freedom [p. 174].

Accordingly, this volume seeks effective points of intervention, to support underprepared students seeking to develop to their full potential as human beings within the context of a community college campus.

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