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Community College a Research Puzzle



Brian Hughes, center, instructs students in the automotive-technology program at South Seattle Community College.

—Courtesy of Glenn Gauthier/South Seattle Community College

Few Studies Can Inform Obama's \$12 Billion Initiative

By **Debra Viadero**

When President Barack Obama unveiled his plans this summer for a \$12 billion federal investment in the nation's community colleges, he said he wanted the initiative to yield an additional 5 million community college graduates by 2020.

Research suggests that reaching that goal may be a tall order.

Community colleges have abysmal graduation rates: Only one in 10 students who started community college in 2002 had earned an associate's degree three years later, according to a [recent paper](#) from the Washington-based Brookings Institution. Six years after they start

school, other studies show, half of community college students have earned an associate's degree or a certificate or transferred to a four-year college.

Further, studies have only just begun to shed light on where the barriers are for students and how colleges can help students overcome them.

"In the K-12 space, people are often frustrated by the state of data, the caliber of scholarship, and the weak presence of reform agents," said Frederick M. Hess, the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. "They're actually living in nirvana compared to the higher education spaces."

While Mr. Hess suggests that the Obama administration may be throwing money down a black hole with its American Graduation Initiative, other scholars say that assessment only points out the urgent need for more attention to community colleges.

First-Year Remediation Rates

What data do exist on community colleges show large proportions of their students must brush up on academic skills.

Founded 50 years ago in response to President Harry Truman's call for a national network of community colleges to expand learning opportunities for veterans returning from World War II, community colleges now represent the largest part of the nation's higher education system, collectively enrolling 11 million students, or 40 percent to 45 percent of all college undergraduates.

The publicly funded institutions serve different purposes. They can be stepping stones to four-year degrees for first-time college students looking to transfer to a four-year college or a source of occupational and technical training for older adults seeking associate's degrees or certificates. They also offer noncredit courses in areas ranging from computer skills to English-language instruction.

Because of their low tuition rates and open-enrollment policies, community colleges offer the only chance of earning a college degree for many low-income students, first-generation immigrants, minority students, and laid-off workers. That's important in the larger economic scheme, experts say, because studies show that students, especially women, with even one

year of postsecondary study earn 15 percent to 20 percent more than students whose educational careers ended at high school.

Long Neglected?

But researchers and federal policymakers have long neglected community colleges, focusing instead on improving K-12 education, said Thomas Bailey, the director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

“Up until 10 years ago, people thought our higher education system was the best in the world,” he said. But as recent studies have begun to show the United States falling behind some other developed nations in producing college graduates, he added, “people have begun to realize that, yes, while we have a lot of students coming from around the world to attend our Ivy League and flagship schools, our typical institutions don’t seem to be doing so well.”

That realization has prompted a number of national foundations, including the Lumina Foundation of Indianapolis, the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in Stanford, Calif., to invest millions of dollars over the past five years in new initiatives and new research aimed at improving community colleges.

Those studies show that a major hurdle to a college degree for many students are the remedial—now called developmental—classes that students take to bring their academic skills up to the college level. Mr. Bailey said 60 percent of community college students enroll in at least one such class. The percentage of students who are actually referred to developmental classes is even higher, Mr. Bailey said.

According to his calculations, 44 percent of students took one to three such classes, and 14 percent took three or more.

Yet just a small fraction of those students pass the developmental courses, for which they do not receive credit, and go on to take the classes that count toward a degree or certificate. In a recent paper published by his center, Mr. Bailey estimates that only 44 percent of students referred to developmental reading classes, and 31 percent of those who tested into remedial math, complete their recommended developmental-course sequence within three years.

“When you’re told that you’re not reading and writing at college level, it’s a really difficult first start at college,” said Rachel Singer, the director of academic affairs at the 16,000-student Kingsborough Community College in the Brooklyn borough of New York City, which has been working hard to boost its student-retention rates.

Finding What Works

But only a handful of studies—a “meager harvest,” in the words of one researcher—point to promising strategies for helping students past that crucial hurdle.

“We truly don’t know how to improve students’ success right now,” said Sara Y. Goldrick-Rab, an assistant professor of educational policy studies and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She was one of four co-authors of the Brookings white paper that helped lay the groundwork for President Obama’s initiative. Both the paper and the president’s program call for more research on effective strategies for student remediation.

Kingsborough College, however, has had some success by creating integrated “learning communities,” groups of 25 students who take three classes together: a remedial course, a college-level course, and a study-skills class. The instructors also work together to create integrated assignments, and one doubles as a case manager or mentor for the students.

A two-year, random-assignment study of the program by MDRC, a research group in New York, found that learning-community students were more likely than peers in traditional classes to persist in school, take more courses, and pass the developmental English tests they needed to graduate.

In Washington state, community college educators also seem to be making headway with a program known as I-BEST, for Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, in which a basic-skills instructor and a college-level vocational instructor team up to teach the same class.

“They try to literally bring the developmental instruction right into the subject area that students want to learn, whether that’s nursing or some other career,” said Tom Brock, the director of the young-adults and postsecondary education policy area at MDRC. “So you’ll learn about anatomy and you’ll learn about writing in the context of what’s needed in a medical office.”

In an analysis of two years of data on 31,000 basic-skills students in Washington state's public vocational and community colleges, Teachers College researchers found that I-BEST students were 23 percentage points more likely to earn at least one college credit than counterparts who were not in the program, and 40 percentage points likelier to earn a vocational certificate.

'Limited' Successes

Experts say other schools are experimenting with "summer bridge" programs to help community college students get up to speed before they set foot on campus, dual-enrollment programs that allow high school students to get a leg up on college-level study, drop-in "academic success" centers where students can get individual tutoring, and early-warning systems that allow high school students to take college-placement exams so that they can be alerted to weaker skill areas.

Some states, such as Florida, are also working to better align community college and four-year college systems to make it easier for students to transfer credits toward a four-year degree.

"My impression has been that work on remedial education has had some successes—but also somewhat limited successes—and has been particularly less effective with younger students," said James E. Rosenbaum, a professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill.

His research suggests that community colleges might be better off taking a cue from private two-year colleges, such as DeVry University or ITT Technical Institute, which on average have graduation rates that are 20 percentage points higher than those for community colleges.

"Community colleges are big on choice exploration, delaying decisions about your major, and getting a lot of diversity in your first studies," Mr. Rosenbaum said. "Private two-year colleges help students make a decision quickly at the outset and then have a very set curriculum. You don't make mistakes. You don't waste time, and it doesn't take you longer to get a degree."

The best private postsecondary schools, he said, also cut out vacation time, schedule classes in ways that are more compatible with maintaining a regular work or child-care schedule, and mandate student-counseling sessions.

Carol Lincoln, the national director of Achieving the Dream, an improvement initiative involving 102 colleges and universities, said another lesson some of the community colleges have learned is that they can retain more students by providing emergency financial aid.

“Even though many students have Pell Grants, when the car breaks down or they have child-care problems, money becomes an issue,” she said.

A major focus of the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based Achieving the Dream, which was launched with seed money from the Lumina Foundation in 2003, has been to encourage community colleges to collect and analyze data on their students so that they can craft improvement strategies tailored to their own communities.

Gathering better data—a first step for any kind of research effort—is a key plank in the Obama initiative. The president’s proposal also calls for establishing a new research center, providing grants for innovation, setting aside \$2.5 billion to spur facility-modernization efforts, and creating an online skills laboratory for students.

“This is not a sector that needs to be motivated,” said the University of Wisconsin’s Ms. Goldrick-Rab. “Community colleges are so understaffed and under-resourced that I think the major fear is that they are going to be asked to do more and not given the resources to do it.”

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