

Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer

A Report for the Initiative on
Transfer Policy and Practice

Stephen J. Handel

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About the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice

In partnership with the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives and the Advocacy & Policy Center, the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice highlights the pivotal role of the transfer pathway for students — especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds — seeking a baccalaureate degree; convenes two- and four-year institution leaders to identify policies and practices that enhance this century-old pathway; and promotes a national dialogue about the viability and potential of transfer to address the nation's need for an educated citizenry that encompasses all sectors of American society.

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Executive Summary

As part of the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice and as a complement to *The Promise of the Transfer Pathway*,* a recently released analysis of the current transfer process in the U.S., this report addresses the historical antecedents of the academic pathway between community colleges and four-year institutions.

Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer describes the transfer pathway as an outgrowth of the community college movement, but also links its origin and subsequent development with that of four-year colleges and universities, as well as powerful cultural and economic trends in American higher education at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The report goes on to describe the creation and expansion of the transfer pathway from its initial incarnation in the mid-1800s to its current function as a major avenue of access to a baccalaureate degree for thousands of students, especially those from underserved groups.

This historical analysis reveals three long-term trends that continue to influence the effectiveness of the transfer pathway as it is conceptualized and practiced today:

- *Transfer has been and continues to be the central and preeminent mission of the community college, although the expanding mission of these two-year institutions placed transfer in greater competition for attention and resources.*
- *Transfer has been and continues to be a shared responsibility of two- and four-year institutions, although the wide-ranging indifference of four-year colleges and universities toward the students that travel this pathway undermines its effectiveness.*
- *Transfer has been and continues to be the most popular educational goal of new, first-time community college students, despite sustained effort on the part of two- and four-year leaders to divert students toward sub-baccalaureate goals.*

* Access this report at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.

Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer

A Note to the Reader

This paper is one of three supplemental reports commissioned for the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice, a College Board project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, focusing on the effectiveness of the transfer pathway for community college students seeking the baccalaureate degree. For a comprehensive description of this initiative's methodology, empirical and policy analyses, findings, and recommendations, please see the full report, The Promise of the Transfer Pathway — Opportunity and Challenge for Community College Students Seeking the Baccalaureate Degree, and several supplemental reports, available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.

The transfer pathway was created as an outgrowth of the community college movement. However, its origin and subsequent development is not only inextricably linked with the history of these two-year institutions, but also to powerful trends in American higher education at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. A repeated theme throughout this report will be that the transfer pathway, despite the dominant view that it is primarily a community college responsibility, is an *inter-institutional* enterprise, the success of which depends on the active and cooperative participation of two- and four-year institutions. The underpinnings of this view are plain to see if we consult the historical record. There we find a portrait that now stretches into three centuries and reveals several persistent trends that continue to affect transfer today.

Beginnings

Historians agree that the first community college was established in 1901 in Joliet, Illinois, largely as a two-year annex to Joliet High School (Dougherty, 1994).¹ The forces that led to the creation of this unique institution, however, began decades before, emanating from the intersection of two widely divergent educational and political movements: the democratic or progressive and the elitist (Witt, Wattenberger, Gollatscheck, & Suppiger, 1995, pp. 4–5). The progressives were committed to a strong, rational, and free national education

infrastructure that included grammar or common schools, junior high schools, and, in the latter half of the 19th century, high schools. With increasing numbers of students graduating from high school, progressives called for greater access to colleges and universities.²

Elitists also understood the importance of education, especially as a means of providing individuals with an opportunity to advance themselves economically. Yet in the late 19th century, the gap between rich and poor was growing, not unlike today. Without some means to improve their lives, societal stability was challenged:

“The emergence of a hierarchically differentiated educational system closely linked to the labor market provided an alternate pathway to success in an era when the traditional image of the self-made man who rose to riches through success in the competitive marketplace was becoming less and less plausible. The creation of ‘ladders of ascent’ through education thus gave new life to the American ideology of equality of opportunity at the very moment when fundamental changes in the economy threatened to destroy it” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 5).

The elitist position had a second strand, however, resulting not from concerns around workforce development or economics, but from higher education leaders who ran the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. Understanding that the coming decades would bring greater numbers of high school graduates to their doors, they sought ways of diverting these students to other educational or vocational pathways. Their belief was that higher education was a benefit to be bestowed on only the most qualified students and they were concerned that accommodating an increasingly larger number of them was not in their best interest.

Henry P. Tappan, president of the University of Michigan, is credited with first advocating for the diversion of high school graduates to a collegiate-like institution separate from the university (or, alternatively, keeping them in secondary school for two additional years). In 1852, he offered a plan that would require students to complete a general education curriculum in a separate college before being admitted to a senior institution. Students who completed this curriculum would then be admitted to the university, where they would devote themselves to advanced scholarship and research. Modeled on German universities, Tappan's

plan was to provide only the best students with access to a university education, which would be reserved for specialized professional study and disciplinary research (Witt et al., 1995, p. 9; Beach, 2011, p. 6).³ Although Tappan's plan was never implemented, his idea had its adherents at universities in Georgia, Minnesota, and New York, each seeing great value in creating for their institutions a far more selective class of students (Witt et al., 1995, p. 9).

Several decades later, Tappan's idea was realized at the University of Chicago. Its president, William Rainey Harper, created two divisions at his institution: the junior college and the senior college. Harper also persuaded his faculty to award an associate degree to students who completed their lower division requirements and left the institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 25). Harper's vision was that only the most accomplished students would survive to the senior college and go on to do graduate work. Indeed, Harper was convinced that the University of Chicago would function best by refraining from offering lower-division instruction and ceding these responsibilities to high schools offering college courses or separate colleges that offered programs of study leading to an associate degree. Harper pitched his plan to the leaders of Chicago area high schools and eventually convinced J. Stanley Brown, principal of Joliet High School, to expand the curriculum to offer college courses — essentially creating a six-year high school curriculum. Students who completed the entire curriculum were offered advanced standing at the University of Chicago. The University of Illinois and Northwestern also agreed to accept the high school course work (Witt et al., 1995, p. 21). Eventually, separate facilities were built as a result of a bond passage and the first "junior college" was established.

Harper's plan to separate the University's upper-division from the lower-division — and in doing so, place the burden of lower-division instruction onto extended high schools or junior colleges — proved appealing to other higher education leaders, especially in California. President Ide Wheeler at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, adopted the University of Chicago model in 1902, separating the undergraduate curriculum into lower- and upper-divisions (Witt, et. al, 1995, p. 33). President Jordan Starr of Stanford University also was an enthusiastic supporter who dreamed that his institution would one day offer only upper-division courses and graduate training. These leaders received a boost from the California Legislature, which passed what came to be known as the "Upward Extension Law" in 1907. This statute allowed supporters of the junior college/extended high school model to begin developing such institutions in several regions of the state that lacked immediate access to a college curriculum. Civic and education

leaders in the San Joaquin Valley took advantage of this legislative opportunity, and, in 1910, Fresno High School began offering college courses. Faculty at Stanford and Berkeley helped select the principal and instructors for this new institution. Moreover, UC Berkeley agreed to accept course work completed at Fresno "as if the work had been done at the University of California and without the necessity of any further examinations" (Witt et al., 1995, p. 37).

The establishment of extended high schools and junior colleges in Illinois and California spread to other states, such as Michigan and Missouri. In each instance, state university presidents and chancellors either led these initiatives or joined with local civic leaders, who were committed to bringing the benefits of a college to their region (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 28).

Four-Year College and University Support for Transfer

From the beginning, community colleges benefited from the support of four-year colleges and universities, if not as equal partners, then certainly as important sponsors of this national movement. Although historians of this era emphasize the essential role of progressive civic leaders in establishing local junior colleges in their communities (Dougherty, 1994, p. 127), they also stress that the community college movement:

"could not have taken place without the support and encouragement of powerful sponsors ... [which included] the nation's great universities — among them, Chicago, Stanford, Michigan, and Berkeley — which, far from opposing the rise of the junior college as a potential competitor for students and resources, enthusiastically supported its growth" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 23).

Dougherty (1994, p. 142) indicates that state universities also used their influence and resources to help establish 42 percent of local junior colleges. State universities accredited the two-year colleges and awarded credit for courses completed at the junior college, allowing students to begin their baccalaureate degree there.⁴

The support of the nation's most prestigious universities in the development of junior colleges can be interpreted as both a progressive response to the need for a more rationalized system of education in the United States and, simultaneously, as a maneuver to advance their institutions in ways that would bring greater productivity — and prestige. University leaders believed that their institutions would better serve the national interest if they were allowed to replicate themselves as "pure" universities, unencumbered

with the responsibility of offering general education and focusing on the education of an intellectual elite. The German university model was viewed as one of the driving forces in establishing Germany as a leading economic power. To compete in this new environment, the United States should do the same, or so university leaders believed (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 24).

Despite this appeal to a nationalistic rationale, support of the junior college model by four-year institutions was also self-serving. By establishing a higher education (i.e., junior colleges) outlet that could, in theory, accommodate students from *all* backgrounds, elite four-year institutions could move forward in establishing more restrictive admission requirements for their institutions. Moreover, by creating institutions that could only award sub-baccalaureate degrees and credentials, competition for students among two- and four-year institutions would be minimized.⁵

Although the creation of these two-year institutions was seen, properly, as “democratizing” higher education, it also created an emergent higher education hierarchy in the U.S. with the Ivy League and a few flagship institutions at the top, junior colleges at the bottom, and private liberal arts institutions and state colleges somewhere in between. This hierarchy fueled more selective admission policies. Junior colleges from the beginning were given a kind of sorting function for the universities. This role continues today (see, for example, Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).⁶

The Centrality of Transfer

Some historians claim that the transfer mission was the only reason junior colleges were developed, referencing Harper’s plan to develop Joliet College as the lower-division arm of the University of Chicago (Beach, 2011). But Harper’s idea of the associate degree, which was to be awarded at the end of a student’s sophomore year, was clearly intended as a terminal degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 25). From the beginning, then, junior colleges had both a transfer mission and a terminal-degree function, which included vocational and technical studies in such areas as agriculture and mechanics (Eaton, 1994, p. 24). What is not disputed, however, is the fact that the transfer function was a predominate characteristic of *all* early community colleges. Although vocational programs were present on junior college campuses from the beginning of this movement, such programs were seldom important features of the institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Research indicates that only 4 percent of private junior colleges and 17 percent of public ones devoted their curriculum to vocational studies (Brint & Karabel, 1989 p. 31; Witt et al., 1995, p. 45).⁷

Despite the prominence of a college-preparatory curriculum, neither progressives nor elites believed that most or even a majority of junior college students would transfer to a four-year college or university. Community college leaders wanted to expand the mission of the junior college to accommodate students with different needs and skills who might not have the desire — or the qualifications — to earn a four-year degree. One community college president noted the importance of junior colleges to be something more than merely preparatory schools for the nation’s four-year colleges and universities:

“I wonder if the junior colleges are going to take over this program of fitting people to live, or are just preparatory institutions to the four-year colleges and universities; whether we are going to assert our right to a ‘place in the sun’ to serve men and women, fitting them for life at that level, or whether we are just going to be a tail for the universities to wag” (quoted in Eells, 1941, p. 17).

Yet the debate regarding the proper mission of junior colleges and the connection of these institutions to four-year colleges and universities via the transfer process continues to this day. On one hand, early supporters of the community college movement believed that their link to senior institutions was the best way for their fledging institutions to gain legitimacy both politically and academically. They also predicted, however, that most of their students would not transfer to a four-year college or university and wanted to expand their curriculum to address the needs of students who terminated their education at the end of their sophomore year.

From the start of the community college movement, however, students and parents who took advantage of the presence of two-year institutions in their community viewed them as vehicles of social mobility, stressing the transfer function as the most important avenue of advancement:

*“[S]tudents — many of them of modest origins — came to the junior college in search of upward mobility. The best route for this mobility seemed obvious to them: a college-parallel transfer program that would gain them access to a senior college and to the occupations which such colleges had traditionally prepared their students. **But their aspirations clashed directly with the preferences of both the university and community college administrators, who wished to divert students away from four-year colleges and universities”*** (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 66, emphasis added).

Despite students' preference for transfer, junior college leaders pressed for a broader institutional mission and eventually achieved this goal.

Expanding the Mission: Legitimizing Terminal Education

In the first 30 years of the community college movement the transfer function remained the central mission of these institutions. Throughout this period, however, two-year college leaders worked to expand the mission of their institutions, believing that the majority of students would not transfer:

"It would be unwise and unfortunate if all of these [junior college students] tried to enter a university and prepare for professions which in most cases are already overcrowded and for which their talents and abilities in many cases do not fit them" (quoted in Beach, 2011, p. 14).

Still, junior college leaders were disappointed at the slow progress that such programs were making on community college campuses. Although most members of the American Association of Junior Colleges believed that their campuses should be enrolling upward of 75 percent of their students in vocational programs, only about one-third of students were enrolled in terminal programs in 1938-39 (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 62). Two influential reports, however, helped to legitimize terminal education in the eyes of policymakers and educators.

Carnegie Report on Public Higher Education in California ("Commission of Seven Report"):

Despite the steady growth of junior colleges in the first three decades of the 20th century (by the end of the 1930s, one student in ten would be attending these institutions), the movement was not completely embraced nationally. In 1932, the California Legislature threatened to abolish junior colleges and turn them into four-year institutions. Instead, the governor of California convened a commission to make recommendations regarding the structure of California education (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 47; Witt et al., 1995, p. 101). The commission's report, *State Higher Education in California* (June 1932), influenced junior colleges in California, but also nationally. "The Commission's report vigorously endorsed the view that the primary function of the junior college was not the preparation of students for transfer to four-year institutions but, rather, the provision of terminal education for the vast majority of its students" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 47). The report also concluded that the transfer function was "the largest single functional failure of the junior-college system in California" (quoted in Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 52). To improve the productivity of

community colleges, the commission recommended that 85 percent of all junior college entrants be enrolled in terminal education despite the fact that nearly 80 percent of students entering a community college wanted to transfer to a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 50; Witt et al., 1995, p. 101).

While the commission's recommendation, if fully implemented, "... obviously called for a vast lowering of student aspirations" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 50), some argue that this plan represented one of the first large-scale attempts to "track" students into occupations for which they had no interest. Still, the commission's findings were undoubtedly influenced by the effects of the Depression and lowered demand for college graduates in an economy that could not generate work at any level for millions of Americans.

President's Commission on Higher Education ("The Truman Report"):

Following World War II community college leaders and other policymakers continued to push junior colleges toward a greater emphasis on terminal education. In 1948, President Truman convened a 28-member committee to review American higher education in the post-war age. Although the charge of this commission was to review all of higher education, "[t]he junior college was central to the commission's plans for expanding educational opportunity" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 69). Indeed, the commission proposed that the name of these institutions be changed from junior college to "community college" to better represent the expansion of mission and curricula that the commission proposed (Eaton, 1994, p. 30). "Community colleges," the commissioners recommended, should also offer a variety of "terminal, semiprofessional, public service, and recreational programs to fulfill local needs and to serve citizens of every age, race, and social class" (quoted in Witt et al., 1995, p. 131). Calling for a vast expansion of higher education in the U.S., the commission believed that almost 50 percent of new students could benefit from additional years of schooling and that 32 percent might benefit from a liberal arts or professional education. This represented a tripling of college participation in America, where in 1940, only 16 percent of youth had gone to college (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 69).

Although the commission supported the transfer mission of junior colleges, it recommended that the curriculum of these institutions be far more varied; that two-year colleges were the logical trainers for a variety of "semi-professional" occupations such as dental hygienist, electrical technician, and medical secretary, occupations that the commission argued did not need a four-year degree. Moreover, they estimated that in the postwar economy there would be five jobs requiring a

terminal degree for every one job requiring a four-year degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 70).⁸

The Carnegie report and the Truman Report, along with other efforts initiated by community college leaders, such as the Terminal Education Project (Brint & Karabel, 1989, pp. 61–66), helped increase the presence of vocational programs on junior college campuses. In 1940, 70 percent of junior colleges offered vocational programs. By 1957–58, this proportion had grown to 86 percent (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 77).

With more programs came increased student enrollment. During the 1960s and 1970s, the number of students enrolled in vocational programs grew faster than enrollment in the liberal arts. This trend continued for 20 years:

“Just as the media had predicted [less demand for college graduates] and as many policymakers had hoped, students began to look with increasing favor on vocational training programs. Between 1970 and 1977 the proportion of full-time students enrolled in occupational programs rose from no more than one-third to well over 50 percent — the largest and most rapid shift in the history of the community college” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 116).

Historians argue over the reasons for this significant rise in vocational enrollments. Certainly there was greater unemployment and significant fear that the nation was producing too many four-year college graduates. Community colleges during this time were also reaching out to new and emerging college-going populations that were (allegedly) more receptive or susceptible to vocational training programs, such as part-time students, women, reentry students, older students, and students with disabilities (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 119). Others argue that the continuing growth of vocational and occupational programs was far more complex and multifaceted:

“Vocational education enrollments began growing at a rate greater than liberal arts enrollments in the 1960s and continued to do so for twenty years. The rise is attributable to many causes: the legacy left by early leaders of the junior college movement and the importunities, goading, and sometimes barbs of later leaders; the Vocational Education Act of 1963 and later amendments; the increase in size of the public two-year colleges; the increase in part-time, women, disadvantaged, disabled, and older students; the community colleges’ absorption of adult education programs and postsecondary occupational programs formerly operated by secondary schools; and the changing shape of the labor market”⁹ (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 253).

The support of occupational and job training from the federal government, along with increased student enrollment in these courses, took its toll on the transfer function of community colleges. By 1994, Judith Eaton concluded that “the liberal arts and transfer purpose [of community colleges had] contracted” (1994, p. 34). And in the last decade and a half, the community college mission has expanded further, leading a variety of observers to warn of “mission creep:”

“... [I]n the 1990s the mission of the community college had less emphasis on education and more on training, less emphasis on community social needs and more on economic needs of business and industry, less upon individual development and more upon workforce preparation and retraining” (Levin, 2000, p. 2).

As the “collegiate function” of community colleges has had to compete with a wider array of programs, the potential of the transfer pathway has not been fully exploited. (See Eaton, 1994.)

Whither Transfer?

Despite the increased availability of vocational and workforce programs at community colleges, first-time community college students continue to say that transfer is their first choice educational objective. This preference has held steady throughout the history of the community college.

“The majority of resisting students simply voted with their feet against efforts to ‘cool them out’ of college parallel transfer courses and into terminal vocation programs, with many of them dropping out of community college altogether” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 100).

Even today, current estimates indicate that at least 50 percent and as many as 75 percent of community college entrants indicate transfer as their educational objective. In addition, the empirical research commissioned for this project found that at least 60 percent of incoming community college students intended to transfer to a four-year institution.

While there is a sustained interest in transfer as an educational objective, there has also been a sustained failure on the part of most students to make a successful transition to a four-year institution. The number of community college students who transfer is small compared to the number who indicate a desire to earn a four-year degree (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009). While transfer rate definitions vary widely (see Handel, 2007; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004), most experts believe about one in four community college students

actually transfer (Cohen & Sanchez, 1997). These data are consistent with the findings from earlier research. Studies completed in the 1920s through the 1950s, for example, indicate that anywhere from 25 to 35 percent of community college students successfully transfer to a four-year institution.¹⁰ Medsker (1960) examined a number of studies from the 1930s to the 1950s and estimated that the transfer rate was likely between 15 to 33 percent. However, he noted that there was considerable variability in transfer rates among community colleges, with some as low as 11 percent and others as high as 67 percent. In addition, Medsker discovered that students who completed an associate degree were more likely to transfer, a finding that has been consistently replicated to this day (Beach, 2011, p. 18, quoting Medsker, pp. 23–24).

Transfer rates declined somewhat in the 1960s and 1970s, according to some researchers, although it is hard to assess the magnitude of the decline:

“Although the absolute number of students transferring declined relatively little (owing to the vast expansion of the community college system as a whole), the rates of transfer plummeted from approximately 25 percent at the beginning of the 1970s to perhaps 15 percent by the end of the decade” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 129).¹¹

Dougherty (1994), quoting research by Grubb and others, indicates that the transfer rate of students transferring from a community college to a four-year institution within four years declined from 28.7 percent in 1972 to 20.2 percent by 1980 (Dougherty, 1994, p. 5). Cohen and Brawer report in 2008, however, that “the decline in . . . student transfer rates that was manifest in the 1970s and 1980s has been stemmed. Although the transfer rate had been stable up to the mid-1990s, it began to increase by the end of the decade.”¹²

Community college supporters take some solace in these low transfer rates by arguing, correctly, that those students who are successful in making the transition from a community college to a four-year institution have been shown to do as well as, if not better than, students who began their studies at a senior institution. This result has been generally supported throughout the history of the community college. Brint and Karabel combed the early research literature and concluded that:

“Comparisons of the academic performance of junior college transfers and ‘native’ students at nine universities in the 1920s showed only one case . . . in which junior college students performed significantly less well than native students. Transfer students performed at roughly the same level as native students at the University of Minnesota

and the University of Chicago. At the other schools — Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, UCLA, the University of Southern California, the University of Colorado, and the University of Iowa and the University of Michigan’s engineering school — the grades of transfer students were on the average higher than those of native students” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, pp. 44–45).

Most recently, Bowen and his colleagues (2009) report that students who transfer to a four-year institution are, in fact, likely to do better than “home-grown” students attending four-year institutions (see also Melguizo & Dowd, 2009). These results are not confined to non- or moderately selective four-year institutions, but have been documented at highly selective institutions as well (University of California, 2002). Moreover, Adelman (2006), using a relatively strict definition of a transfer student and a longer time horizon for earning a baccalaureate degree, concludes:

“The bachelor’s degree completion rates for traditional-age community college transfer students who enter a four-year college any time after [completion of] 10 community college credits and earn more than 10 credits from the four year institution are very high. For the high school classes of 1972 and 1982, with 11- and 12-year histories, the bachelor’s degree completion rate for these ‘classic transfers’ was 72 percent, and for the 8.5 year history [of the high school class] of 1992, it was 62 percent” (p. 112).

Adelman emphasizes that the very act of transfer remains one of the most powerful behaviors predicting completion of the baccalaureate degree, perhaps because it may involve a constellation of other “good academic behaviors,” like completing a collegiate mathematics course, earning at least 20 credits in the first year of college, and staying continuously enrolled. Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini note that the degree completion gap described earlier becomes a relatively trivial matter if community college students are able to transfer to a four-year college. Their conclusion, like Adelman’s, is that the “deciding event” for a community college student is successful transfer. They also indicate that community college students are more likely to attend a highly selective college or university than they would have directly out of high school, and their probability of graduating is comparable to native students (2005).

Tempering this positive finding, however, is the disquieting realization that most of the individuals who transfer from a community college to a four-year institution are likely to be traditional-age students from middle- or upper-class families who possess

strong academic preparation and who hold determined aspirations to earn a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004; Wellman, 2002). At issue is not that well-prepared students excel at community colleges — indeed, their success supports the viability of the community college transfer mission. Rather, these students do not represent the demographic profile of individuals that community colleges pride themselves in serving, namely students from low-income backgrounds and/or underserved groups.

So, we are left with a student populace that is keenly interested in transferring and earning the bachelor's degree, but whose success in doing so falls considerably short of expectations:

“Despite the mixed nature of these findings, it is important to underscore the finding that community college students — even if we restrict our focus to baccalaureate aspirants — secure significantly fewer baccalaureate degrees than four-year college entrants. This result is so cruel given the fact that so many students (particularly among working-class and minority youth) enter the community college in the belief that it will greatly assist their pursuit of the baccalaureate degree” (Dougherty, 1994, pp. 67–68).

Has the community college model raised student expectations regarding transfer and access to the baccalaureate degree that it cannot fulfill?¹³ Is the supposed failure of transfer a policy problem, a community college problem, a four-year institution problem, a student problem? *Is it a problem at all?* Perhaps a one-in-four transfer rate is the best we will ever get, owing to a combination of policy- and institution-specific variables that suppress students' access and opportunity. If so, the result will fall most heavily on students from underserved groups, as the next section demonstrates.

Access, Diversity, and the Specter of “Tracking”

The access that community colleges provide to students from underserved groups is often and correctly highlighted as one of the primary attributes of the community college model. This is surely true if one examines the diversity of students enrolled at these institutions today. Yet the historical record is not as compelling. Community colleges have sometimes been at the center of broader societal tensions about higher education access and equity. Most prominently, the extent to which community colleges provide authentic access to the baccalaureate degree for students from underserved groups or, instead, diverts them to

sub-baccalaureate goals, has been and continues to be a controversial point of contention among careful observers of community colleges.

Data relating to the student diversity of community colleges from the beginnings of those institutions through 1960 are relatively sketchy (Beach, 2011, p. 24), owing to the lack of systematic data collection until the passage of the Higher Education Act in 1964 allowed the federal government to begin keeping statistics on higher education enrollments nationally.¹⁴ Still, historians have made good use of state-level data and other documentation to piece together a history that, although fragmented, appears to parallel the ebb and flow of minority enrollments in four-year colleges and universities nationally.

Increasing American affluence, especially after World War II, coupled with a significant rise in the number of public colleges, fueled substantial increases in college enrollment. The total population of undergraduates rose from 5 to 8 percent between 1940 and 1960, and it is estimated that the proportion of nonwhite students grew from 1 to 3 percent. (Beach, 2011, p. 27). Yet American higher education was part and parcel of a segregated America in the first half of the 20th century. The Truman Commission called for an end to discrimination in higher education in 1948, and the Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education* made this the law of the land in 1954. However, in many parts of the country *de facto* segregation continued on some community college campuses well into the 1960s and early 1970s (Beach, 2011, p. 28). Still, while progress was slow, the federal government and American higher education leaders pushed for a more diverse student body, especially in the mid-1960s. And community colleges led the way.

The astonishing growth of community colleges in the 1960s and early 1970s created opportunities for students from underserved groups never seen before in the history of American higher education. “By the fall of 1970 there were 1,091 junior colleges nationwide, an increase of 413 colleges in ten years ... America had built nearly one community or junior college *per week* for a decade” (Witt et al., 1995, p. 185).¹⁵ Although the construction of community colleges slowed considerably through the rest of the 20th century, the geographic convenience of these institutions, the emergence of new college-going populations, and federal policy continued to spur growth:

“The Civil Rights Act and especially Executive Order 11246 (dealing with affirmative action), combined with the changing demographics of the school-age population, resulted in a significant expansion of minority enrollments in community colleges. Minority enrollments grew from

759,800 (out of 3,879,100 total students) in 1976 to 1,106,900 (out of 4,868,100) in 1988 ... This outstripped minority enrollment growth in the four-year sector" (Eaton, 1994, p. 32).

The integration of students from traditionally underrepresented populations into America's community colleges provided unparalleled access to higher education. But this access came with costs:

"... [S]imply gaining access to desegregated predominantly white institutions of higher education by the 1960s did not mean that nonwhite students experienced a welcoming, non-discriminatory environment. Black students in particular faced social segregation, exclusion, and racial hatred on many integrated college campuses throughout the country" (Beach, 2011, p. 28).

Moreover, the rapid rise in enrollments among minority students paralleled a similar rise in vocational and occupational programs at community colleges, as noted in the previous section. Minority leaders became concerned that few of their students were successful in making the transition from a community college to a four-year institution. Some speculated that high dropout rates among students from underserved groups were the result of their unwillingness to participate in this "vocationalization" of the community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 92). Critics argued that community colleges' expansion of their vocational mission, coupled with a publicly stated commitment to redirect students from transfer goals to terminal degree goals, amounted to "tracking."

The specter of tracking plagued community colleges, especially those that served large numbers of students from underserved groups, throughout the latter three decades of the 20th century. It did not help that early (but modest) empirical research supported critics' contentions that two-year college faculty and staff were "cooling out," or undermining student ambitions away from transfer and toward vocational certificates and degrees.¹⁶ The success of the community college model had also brought some problems. Not only did these institutions advertise access to the baccalaureate degree, even for individuals who did not have access to, or did poorly in, a rigorous high school curriculum, but many of these colleges had subsumed adult education and workforce training programs that had been previously housed within high schools. Thus, in the 1960s, community college campuses had become hubs of an entire range of certificate and degree programs unrivaled by any other educational entity in the country — or perhaps the world (Norton, 2003). Yet the education leaders who had encouraged this academic smorgasbord were on the defensive. The

stinging criticism of an apparent conspiracy to track students into degrees and programs contrary to their will was a bitter pill for educational progressives whose only mission was to expand access, not restrict it — leading one community college leader to lament:

"For most of the community college students, the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the local college and nothing" (Cohen, quoted in Beach, 2011, p. 47).

In the decades to follow, concerns about student tracking have receded, while the national debate — given titanic shifts in the global marketplace — has focused more on the employability of students with all kinds of credentials: certificates, associate and bachelor's degrees. This is not to imply, however, that the word "tracking" has achieved a positive connotation even today or that its implications, applied indiscriminately, are unknown to a new generation of counselors and advisers. In a recent newspaper article addressing whether a local community college was concerned about directing students to workforce programs that they did not desire, a counselor was quoted as saying:

"Quite frankly, we have always thought if someone comes in here, we ought to try to get them to a four-year degree, [But] that is not realistic for everybody ... Many students don't know the range of options, they just know they want to improve their lives ... Advisers ought to be looking at an individual student's test results, interests and goals, and recommending programs that are a good fit ... Not all tracking is bad. Tracking ... based on a solid evaluation of the student's academic performance and interests can be good" (quoted in Ludwig, 2011).

Criticism also has been leveled at community colleges (and, to be fair, four-year institutions) regarding the low completion rates of their students. Although critics have acknowledged the unparalleled access that two-year institutions provide for students from underserved groups, there is a need for — indeed a national focus on — the extent to which community colleges help their students earn credentials and degrees that provide them with opportunities to earn a family-sustaining wage. In 2008, the National Commission on Community Colleges concluded that "the most significant challenge facing community colleges is a changing world in which their most attractive asset — the commitment to student access — must now be matched with a commitment to student success" (College Board, 2008, p. 29).

Summing Up: An Unsettled Future for Transfer

Following his appointment as president of the American Association of Community Colleges, and during a national “listening tour” of community colleges, Walter Bumphus concluded:

“Believe it or not, even with the spotlight on community colleges [and the college completion agenda], there are still states ... where students are not able to transfer at the junior level even after completing two years at a community college ... This is a ridiculous conversation at this point ... We’ve got to take that barrier down” (Walter Bumphus quoted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2010, December 5).

Bumphus’ lament is only the latest in a long list of complaints about a transfer process that frustrates the educational objectives of too many community college students.

The transfer pathway is now well over 100 years old. During this time, higher education has grown to become the most important arbiter of economic and cultural life in America. Who you are and what you do in this country has become increasingly dependent on whether or not you receive a postsecondary education. An important reason for this is the astonishing rise of the American community college, which has allowed individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds to earn a college degree or certificate. But this expansion has not always enhanced the transfer pathway, although its importance in making the baccalaureate degree accessible to more individuals is unquestioned. The problem is that this pathway suffers from a set of sustained ills that hamper students’ progress toward a four-year degree.

This review of the historical record reveals three long-term trends — present almost at the beginning of the community college movement — that continue to influence the transfer pathway:

- ***Transfer has been and continues to be the central and preeminent mission of the community college, although the expanding mission of these two-year institutions placed transfer in greater competition for attention and resources.*** Although community college leaders have stressed the necessity of expanding the mission of the community college to include a variety of other programs that are vocationally or occupationally focused, community colleges continue to see transfer as a defining characteristic of their institutions. What is not clear, however, is the extent to which transfer will flourish — even

survive — in an environment in which workforce and other vocational initiatives garner greater political capital and financial resources from state and federal sources.

- ***Transfer has been and continues to be a shared responsibility of two- and four-year institutions, although the wide-ranging indifference of four-year colleges and universities toward the students that travel this pathway undermines its effectiveness.*** Four-year colleges and universities were essential in the establishment of the community college, although the motives for doing so were sometimes self-serving. Despite an uneven record of commitment, the historical record shows that transfer works most effectively in those instances in which four-year institutions are fully engaged partners with community colleges. To date, however, such a sustained commitment is not universal among public four-year colleges and universities and is almost nonexistent among private four-year institutions.
- ***Transfer has been and continues to be the most popular educational goal of new, first-time community college students, despite sustained effort on the part of two- and four-year leaders to divert students toward sub-baccalaureate goals.*** From the start of the community college movement, surveys of new, first-time community college students have revealed that their primary educational goal is transfer and a four-year degree. Nevertheless, both two- and four-year leaders have worked to divert students toward sub-baccalaureate goals, believing that such credentials would prepare them more effectively for employment after college.

Each of these trends, however, does not operate in isolation; nor are they in complete congruence with other two- and four-year institutional priorities. For example, despite the professed primacy of transfer on the part of community college leaders, the historical record shows a significant expansion of the community college mission into vocational and workforce programs and certificates. It is hard to predict with certainty that transfer will remain an important part of the two-year college mission, given that most federal resources are now allocated specifically toward vocational goals, and declining state resources are often linked to institutional performance outcomes emphasizing specific job skills.

Should the transfer mission decline in the eyes of community college leaders — the only authentic and long-term champions of transfer — the entire enterprise might simply collapse for lack of interest, given the capricious commitment of four-year

institutions toward community college students. Despite their historical role in establishing community colleges, most four-year institutions have never demonstrated a long-term and strategic commitment to community college transfer, preferring, instead, to offer only a short-term pledge based almost always on transient and parochial enrollment needs. Yet the success of transfer depends entirely on the cooperation of two- and four-year institutions that see both value and obligation in addressing the needs of students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college.

Finally, the sustained interest of new, first-time community college students in the possibility of transfer and a four-year degree has often run counter to those who believe such goals are not in the national interest. Throughout the last century, two- and four-year institutional leaders, as well as policymakers and higher education planners, have insisted that the American economy cannot accommodate an ever-increasing number of students who wish to earn the

baccalaureate degree. As a result, they argue, student aspirations — especially those of students who attend community colleges — must be tempered. But the establishment of community colleges was a powerful stroke in favor of upward mobility; indeed, the mission of community colleges rests fundamentally on the provision of opportunity for individuals who might never have a chance to better themselves and their families. This is not to devalue sub-baccalaureate credentials, but rather to remind education leaders that there is no failure in students whose goals exceed their grasp, and that economic motivation is only one of myriad reasons why students seek to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree. To believe otherwise is to misunderstand community colleges and the transfer pathway as an avenue of intellectual and cultural advancement, as well as individual economic prosperity. Worse, it is to abandon the historic commitment of two-year institutions to the social mobility of individuals from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

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Notes

1. To attempt a short review of the history of transfer is to rely on a relatively small body of literature. This is a topic that has not marshaled the talents of a great many historians or other scholars; yet what is available, though at times controversial and not all in universal agreement, is powerful and well documented. In this paper, I have depended primarily on the following works: *The American Community College* (Cohen & Brawer 2008), *The Contradictory College* (Dougherty, 1994), *The Diverted Dream* (Brint & Karabel, 1989), *Gateway to Opportunity? A History of the Community College* (Beach, 2011), *America's Community Colleges: The First Century* (Witt et al., 1995), *Strengthening Collegiate Education in Community Colleges* (Eaton, 1994), and *The Junior College: Progress and Prospect* (Medsker, 1960).
2. "The national population of students enrolled in 1890 was around 202,963 pupils, but this number rapidly grew to 1,645,171 by 1918, a growth rate of 711 percent. Between 6 and 7 percent of the 14-to-17-year-old population was enrolled in high schools in 1890. In 1900 over 11 percent of this population was enrolled" (Beach, 2011, p. 6).
3. Tappan argued that these general education colleges would "guard the entrance to the universities" (Witt et al., 1995, p. 8).
4. Brint and Karabel (1989) note that not all four-year institutions were enthusiastic about the expansion of community colleges. Private, liberal arts four-year institutions viewed these less-expensive institutions as serious competitors for students (p. 64).
5. The question is often raised why the elite institutions did not simply sponsor an expansion of less selective four-year colleges rather than community colleges to address issues of capacity, access, and selectivity. Dougherty (1994) indicates that inter-institutional competition was the root cause: "[I]n California — and possibly in Illinois and Washington also — the flagship university was concerned that this would make the lesser state universities and colleges even more formidable competitors ... Moreover, the elite universities may have worried that this would potentially devalue the baccalaureate degree by enormously expanding its supply" (p. 160).
6. A different perspective, not articulated in any history of the community college movement, is that while the motive of public four-year colleges and universities was to divert students away from their institutions, the result *may* have been very different, even beneficial to community college students seeking access to a four-year institution. The critical element — never adopted — was for four-year institutions to drop entirely their lower division curriculum, leaving the teaching of general education to junior colleges. Enrollment at the senior institution would, thus, begin at the junior level. Presumably this junior class would be populated mainly by graduates from junior colleges who met the universities admission requirements (since the universities themselves would have no freshman class of their own to promote). In the first two decades of the 20th century, however, four-year institutional leaders abandoned this dream, realizing that the key to institutional survival was teaching freshman and sophomores in years in which enrollments dropped. As a result, transfer students from community colleges must compete for admission against native students and other four-year college transfer students.
7. Judith Eaton makes a stronger claim for the primacy of the transfer function: "Analysis of curricular offerings and student enrollments shows that the early junior college was, for the most part, a traditional academic institution offering primarily liberal arts courses that would be used for transfer to a four-year institution ... However committed to occupational education junior college leaders were, the views they articulated had little effect on curricula and enrollment, the spread of junior colleges, or the attitudes of the local community in which they were founded. The transfer function was obvious and dominant, and its relative popularity compared to that of terminal education did not wane" (Eaton, 1994, pp. 26–27).
8. Although the Truman Commission strongly supported terminal education, there was a clear populist focus within its recommendations. The commission stressed general liberal arts education for students in both terminal and transfer programs and argued that vocational and technical programs should not separate "workers from citizens." (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 70). In addition, the commission recommended that these community colleges seek out and serve economically diverse and underserved populations: "The American people should set as their ultimate goal an educational system in which at no level — high school, college, graduate school, or professional school — will a qualified individual in any part of the country encounter an insuperable economic barrier to the attainment of the kind of education suited to his aptitudes and interests" (quoted in Witt et al., 1995, p. 131).
9. The federal government's role cannot be understated. From the Kennedy administration to the current president, significant federal resources have

been allocated to support vocational and job-training programs at two-year public community colleges. These initiatives include the Federal Vocational Education Act of 1963 (reauthorized in 1968 and 1972), the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (1973), Job Training Partnership Act (1982), the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (1984), School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and the Advanced Technical Education Program (1994) (see Cohen et al., 2008). Most recently, President Obama proposed and Congress approved Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants (2012), worth \$500 million. And, in his 2012 State of the Union address, the president proposed an additional \$8 billion for a Community College to Career Fund, designed to train two million workers for high demand industries (Lewin, 2012).

10. There are dangers, of course, in culling research findings from studies conducted across such a significant amount of time in different regions of the country. It is remarkable, however, that regardless of the definition of a transfer student that is used, the research methodology that is applied, or the region in which students are sampled, the calculated transfer rates for all of these studies hover around 25 to 35 percent.

11. These rates of transfer are for the community college as a whole, not for new entrants to these colleges. The authors note that the transfer rate would be higher if the focus of analysis were on this population alone.

12. Cohen and Brawer (2008) offer no data in support of this, but the Transfer Assembly Project under the direction of these researchers, which attempted to create a standard national transfer rate calculation, records transfer rates around 25 percent.

13. Brint and Karabel (1989) are especially harsh: "Traditional college-parallel transfer programs [in contrast to vocational programs] enjoy wide popularity with politicians and the public at large. Yet as legislative reviews in many states have revealed, community college transfer programs — once the junior college's *raison d'être* — are frequently in a state of atrophy. If the community college is to address the crisis of legitimacy in which it now finds itself, it must strengthen its ties with four-year colleges and universities. For it is these ties that have historically distinguished junior colleges from trade schools and provided them with public legitimacy and support" (p. 137).

14. Some historical data are available, however, relating to the growth of two-year colleges for African Americans. In 1933, 19 junior colleges for African Americans were identified (in Texas and North Carolina); these institutions were both public and private (Witt et al., 1995, p. 197). By 1950, this number rose to 21 or 22 (Witt et al., 1995, p. 198; Beach, 2011, p. 26). However, only eight of these institutions were accredited. During the growth boom for community colleges from 1960 to 1970, several southern states established community colleges separately for African American students (Witt et al., 1995, p. 198).

15. Witt et al. (1995): "The experts had predicted that enrollments [in community colleges] would double during the 1960s. Instead it nearly quadrupled! By decade's end, junior colleges were operating in all fifty states with slightly fewer than 2.5 million students" (p. 185).

16. The empirical record is today far more nuanced as to whether community colleges "cool out" or "warm up" students' ambitions. For a more complete discussion, see Rosenbaum, J. E., Deil-Amen, R., & Person, A. E. (2006). *After admission: From college access to college success*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.



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