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ECONOMY

The Promise and Failure of Community Colleges

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Eduardo Porter

ECONOMIC SCENE

There are two critical things to know about community colleges.

The first is that they could be the nation's most powerful tools to improve the opportunities of less privileged Americans, giving them a shot at harnessing a fast-changing job market and building a more equitable, inclusive society for all of us. The second is that, at this job, they have largely failed.

When President Obama stood at Pellissippi Community College in Knoxville, Tenn., last month and offered every committed student two years' worth of community college at the government's expense, he focused on the first point.

With open enrollment and an average price tag of \$3,800 a year for full-time students, community colleges are pretty much the only shot at a higher education for those who don't have the cash or the high school record to go to a four-year university. And that's a lot of people: 45 percent of the undergraduate students in the country.

They are "essential pathways to the middle class," Mr. Obama said. They work for parents and full-time workers, for veterans re-entering civilian life, and for those who "don't have the capacity to just suddenly go study for four years and not work."

What the president chose not to emphasize is that precious few of the

students at community colleges are likely to fulfill the promise and complete their education. Of all the students who enroll full time at Pellissippi, for example, only 22 percent graduate from a two-year program within three years. Just 8 percent transfer to a four-year college.

And that's hardly the bottom of the barrel. There are many community colleges with much worse records.

The president's offer of a free ride should increase enrollment: White House officials estimate that the program, if approved by Congress, would lift enrollment by 1.6 million by 2026, bringing the total to nine million students from about seven million today. But that's the easy bit.

Whether his plan ultimately delivers on its promise, however, will depend less on how many students enter than how many successfully navigate their way out. Today, only 35 percent of a given entry cohort attain a degree within six years, according to government statistics.

At public four-year colleges, 57 percent of the students graduate within six years.

And it's getting worse. Community college graduation rates have been declining over the last decade.

It's past time we paid attention. Community colleges have been consistently ignored by policy makers who equate higher education with a bachelor's degree — mostly ignoring the fact that a very large group of young Americans are not prepared, either financially, cognitively or socially for that kind of education.

Meanwhile, American higher education has become a preserve of the elite. Only one in 20 Americans ages 25 to 34 whose parents didn't finish high school has a college degree. The average across 20 advanced industrial nations assessed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is almost one in four.

“What choice do we have but to make these institutions work?” a White House official who has been working on the new proposal told me. “There is no real alternative out there for 40 percent of students.”

But Mr. Obama's plan risks falling well short of its ambitions.

Community college students may not be the poorest of the poor, but they mostly come from stressed backgrounds in the bottom half of the income distribution, and they often lack the money or social support networks to help them through school. Most are not truly prepared for college, requiring remedial courses in math or English before they receive their first higher education credit.

“Community colleges,” said Andrew Kelly, an expert on education at the American Enterprise Institute, “are not miracle workers.”

With little guidance to navigate a complex system not just of standard two-year associate degrees in dozens of subjects, but also a variety of one-year certificates, as well as transfer programs to four-year colleges, it is not surprising that students often spin their wheels.

The primary solution, if there is one, probably lies further up the pipeline, in high schools, where the Obama administration is running up against political flak and parental objections to its push to establish a common core of proficiency to ensure the vast majority of high school graduates are indeed equipped for college.

Or perhaps the true challenge is even earlier, from birth to age 3 or 4, as the Nobel laureate James Heckman from the University of Chicago has been urging for years, when investments in cognitive and emotional capabilities have an enormous impact on children’s future development.

Mr. Kelly doubts that the federal government can pull off a miracle. “We’ve seen school improvement grants to improve K-through-12 education; we’ve seen No Child Left Behind,” he noted. “Those policies have generally been disappointments.”

But giving up on community colleges would be even worse, because some promising experiments point the way to a more successful path.

Take New York. A few years ago, the City University of New York began Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, which covered any tuition not already provided by financial aid. It offered students free textbooks and MetroCards for the subway.

Crucially, it offered intense tutoring: The program’s advisers had a

caseload of 60 to 80 students, about one-tenth of that of a typical community college adviser. Students had to commit to a full-time program and sign up for early developmental courses needed to get up to speed. The college steered students into blocks of courses and pressed them to graduate with associates' degrees within three years.

The results were impressive. MDRC, a nonprofit organization that evaluates social policies, found that the accelerated study program roughly doubled the three-year graduation rate among the most disadvantaged students, those who initially needed remediation classes.

The program is not cheap; it costs 30 to 35 percent more a student. But because of the higher graduation rate, the cost per graduate was actually lower. And that, said Gordon Berlin, president of MDRC, is the metric that matters.

The White House knows about this accelerated program and plans to demand a similar commitment. It is structuring the federal aid in a way that, it hopes, will push states and colleges to invest in empirically tested strategies to improve retention and graduation rates. And it is encouraging them to create curriculums that prepare students either for a four-year college transfer or for an in-demand job.

Still, the federal government has limited leverage: While its incentives for innovation are laudable, \$60 billion over 10 years pales compared with what the government spends just on Pell grants for middle- and lower-income students attending college.

“Community colleges have the students with the greatest problems — yet they get the least resources,” said Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. “It's unrealistic to think we can have a better outcome without investing more money.”

Better outcomes are sorely needed. That is, if education is to recover its role as a motor of opportunity for those who need it most.

Email: eporter@nytimes.com; Twitter: [@portereduardo](https://twitter.com/portereduardo)

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