Plenary Session III:  
The Enhanced Focus on Community Colleges as “The Solution”

Community colleges have become all the rage for many politicians and others. President Obama has encouraged all adults to pursue at least one year of postsecondary education and has created a competitive grant program that will funnel an additional $10 billion into community colleges over the next five years. It is hoped that these new funds will help community colleges to attract an increasing share of both recent high school grads and adults returning to college and to serve them more effectively than has historically been the case. Major foundations, including Carnegie, Gates, Hewlett, and Lumina, are investing substantial resources in improving the performance of community colleges. Community colleges even have their own television show – “Community” – this season. (For more information on community colleges and educational reform, see article in this tab.)

Truth be told, however, community colleges have been the rage for quite some time. Today, more than one-third of all students enrolled in postsecondary education in the U.S. attend a community college – and in many Western states, that number is higher. Many state strategic plans call for an even larger share of students to be served by community colleges in the future, for a couple of reasons. First, the lower cost of attendance – both for states, in terms of subsidies, and for students, in terms of tuition – make this an attractive option, given the current fiscal constraints that both states and individuals face. Second, workforce projections suggest that the greatest gaps in future employment demand in many of the Western states will be for graduates at the certificate and associate-degree level, rather than those with a baccalaureate degree or higher.

Some policymakers are concerned with this recent policy thrust, however, because community colleges currently graduate only a small portion of those students who attend. Community college advocates often argue that this occurs because many community college students never intend to complete a degree or certificate. They also argue, with good cause, that the metrics used to measure the success of community college students fail to count many truly successful students. Yet even when measuring the success of just those community college students who express the intent of graduating – and measuring it more accurately – the completion rates remain unacceptably low.

Are community colleges the answer to a future in which almost all adults will need to succeed in college to succeed in life and the world of work? No one is better able to help the WICHE Commission address this question than Tom Bailey, director of the Community
College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, which also serves as the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Postsecondary Research. Bailey will discuss the major federal and national community college efforts and share the results of research from his center that shed light on which policy strategies are most likely to be successful in improving the effectiveness of community colleges in responding to these various initiatives.

Biographical Information on the Speaker

Thomas R. Bailey is the George and Abby O’Neill Professor of Economics and Education in the Department of International and Transcultural Studies at Teachers College, Columbia University. Bailey holds a Ph.D. in labor economics from MIT. He is an economist, with specialties in education, labor economics, and econometrics. In 1996 with support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Bailey established the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, which conducts a large portfolio of qualitative and quantitative research based on fieldwork at community colleges and analysis of national- and state-level datasets. The research focuses particularly on access and student success at community colleges, with a particular focus on the experiences of low-income and minority students. In 2006 Bailey became the director of the National Center for Postsecondary Research, funded by a five-year grant from the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. Since 1992 he has also been the director of the Institute on Education and the Economy at Teachers College. His articles have appeared in a wide variety of education, policy-oriented, and academic journals, and he authored or coauthored several books on the employment and training of immigrants and the extent and effects of on-the-job training. His most recent book, edited with Vanessa Morest, is Defending the Community College Equity Agenda (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). Other books include Working Knowledge: Work-Based Learning and Education Reform (Routledge, 2004), coauthored with Katherine Hughes and David Moore; Manufacturing Advantage (Cornell University Press, 2000), written with Eileen Appelbaum, Peter Berg, and Arne Kalleberg; and The Double Helix of Education and the Economy (IEE, 1992), coauthored with Sue Berryman.
Community Colleges Can Reach Obama's Goals

October 13, 2009
By Davis Jenkins and Thomas Bailey

Americans have long prided ourselves on our higher education system, but lately a much more negative image has emerged. The U.S. has fallen behind other developed countries in postsecondary attainment, and large gaps in college access and completion remain for low-income and minority students.

In July, President Obama announced a plan to close these gaps and to reverse the slide in overall postsecondary achievement. His plan recognizes the central role community colleges can and must play in getting more students to attend and complete college. This is particularly important for the growing number of non-traditional students – those who balance work and family obligations with their studies and who represent the majority on 2- and 4-year college campuses today.

To ensure that the country can maintain its competitive footing and close gaps in attainment among traditionally underrepresented groups, President Obama called for an additional five million community college graduates by 2020. The administration proposed to spend $12 billion over the next 10 years to support reform efforts by colleges and states. The legislation is now moving through Congress.

Can community colleges deliver the additional graduates to meet the ambitious goal? In 2007, the latest year for which data are available, community colleges awarded about 855,000 associate degrees and occupational certificates. To meet the president’s target, we estimate that community colleges will have to increase the number of associate degree and certificate graduates by at least 280,000 per year on average over the next 10 years, an annual increase of 33 percent over the current rate.

One thing is clear: enrollment increases alone will not be enough to reach the goal. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that undergraduate enrollment will increase by 12 percent by 2018. Even if 2-year college enrollment increases substantially outpace those of higher education institutions generally, that alone would not get enough students to the goal. In addition to continuing to expand the number of students who enroll in college, community colleges will have to increase the rate at which students complete their programs. And there is substantial room for improvement. The latest available data suggest that only about 35 percent of community college entrants complete a certificate or an associate or bachelor’s degree within six years.

So colleges won’t be able to reach the goal by continuing business as usual. And while many community colleges have tried to improve, these efforts typically involve “boutique” innovations that serve small numbers of students, but leave the basic functioning of the institution unchanged. Community colleges will only be able to produce the needed increases in productivity by making broad systemic changes in the way they operate. And since community colleges are primarily funded and regulated by state governments, those systemic changes will only occur if states put in place policies that promote and support needed college reforms.

What specific changes are needed in community college operations to enable them to help meet the president’s goal? Recent research provides some guidance on this question.
**Strengthen the pipeline to college.** Too many students arrive at community colleges academically unprepared for college-level work. Nearly 60 percent of recent high school graduates who enter higher education through community colleges take at least one remedial course. Clearly, college preparation for secondary students needs to be strengthened. What can colleges do to help make this happen? Increasingly 2- and 4-year institutions are administering college placement tests to high school sophomores and juniors. Many high school students do not realize that they are not making adequate progress toward college. “Early testing” reveals this problem and gives them a chance to strengthen their skills before they graduate. This promising strategy is the focus of several ongoing studies. A recent study using data on students entering the California State University found that participating in early testing reduces the probability that students will require remediation in math and English once they enroll in college.

Another approach being tried by a growing number of colleges and schools across the country is to offer college courses to students while they are still in high school. This can help students learn what is expected of them in college. A study we conducted in Florida indicated that students who take such “dual enrollment” courses are more likely to graduate from high school and to enroll in college, and they earn more college credits three years after graduation.

Efforts to improve college preparation cannot be confined to high school students, however. Each year around 2.5 million adults who lack a high school credential or basic English literacy enroll in adult basic skills programs through community colleges, schools, and community centers. Many of these students can benefit from programs that seek to accelerate their progression to college-level career-technical programs by integrating the teaching of basic skills with instruction in occupational skills and knowledge. When we studied one such model in Washington State, we found that students in the program were almost four times as likely to earn a college-level occupational credential within two years as were similar students not in the program.

**Provide clearer guidance and pathways for students.** Many students arrive at community colleges not only academically unprepared but also lacking in skills and knowledge that are essential for college success. A study we conducted found that students who took a “college success” course, which helps students learn how to study and take tests, manage their time, and develop college and career plans, were nearly 10 percent more likely than other students to earn a degree or transfer to a public university within six years. A study at Chaffey College in California by the nonprofit research organization MDRC found positive benefits for probationary students of a program that included a college success course and required visits to the college’s "success centers."

Recent research by James Rosenbaum of Northwestern University and colleagues comparing community colleges with private, for-profit career colleges suggests that the more structured programs and guidance provided by the career colleges may lead to substantially better educational outcomes for students whose demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds are similar to those who enroll in community colleges. Additional studies are underway to test these findings further.

**Explore ways to accelerate college attainment, particularly by students needing remediation.** Studies indicate that students whose college placement exam scores are close to the cutoff point that is used to assess whether a student is ready for college-level coursework do as well in college-level courses whether or not they first take remedial courses. This finding has led a growing number of community colleges to “mainstream” students who are not far below college level directly into college-level courses with added supports, thus accelerating their progress toward a credential. Preliminary analyses by the Community College of Baltimore County and other colleges that were early adopters of acceleration strategies for remedial students show promising results. More rigorous studies of acceleration strategies are currently being conducted by CCRC and other researchers.

**Align resources to support student success.** A study we completed in Florida in 2006 found that colleges with the greatest success in graduating disadvantaged students do more to align their academic programs and student support services toward the goal of helping students complete.
To better promote success, it appears that not only do particular student support services need to be in place — including in-depth orientations, proactive advising, early warning systems, and well-organized tutoring and other academic supports — but those services must be well coordinated among themselves and with academic programs. Seamless integration of programs and services from the student’s perspective and collaboration among faculty, staff, and administration are what seem to contribute most to student success. This finding is reinforced by research on organizational effectiveness in other sectors outside of education. A growing movement among community colleges nationally, led by initiatives such as Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, emphasizes the importance of using data on student progression to continuously align and improve programs and services to support student success. In addition to aligning programs and services within the institution, research indicates that students benefit when colleges build strong connections with employers and baccalaureate programs and other outside partners.

Each of these reforms appears promising, but they will not be adequate to meet the president’s ambitious goals if they are carried out in isolation. They must become part of a comprehensive strategy for improving student outcomes that will only succeed if colleges have strong incentives to pursue them. On its own, the $1.2 billion per year proposed by the Obama administration would provide important seed funding, but that figure represents less than 3 percent of national expenditures by community colleges. These dollars alone won’t yield the needed improvements. More than half of community college funding comes from states and localities (only 15 percent comes from federal sources), and those resources also need to be directed toward comprehensive strategy. That is why the administration has proposed a strong role for state policy.

There is wide variation across states in the rates at which community college students complete credentials. Indeed our research suggests that, after controlling for student demographics and institutional characteristics, the factor with the largest effect on community college graduation rates is the state in which a college is located. So state policy has a substantial bearing on college performance. As we observed when we studied the Ford Foundation’s Bridges to Opportunity Initiative, an effort to strengthen community college state policy, changes in state policy can support efforts by community colleges to increase success by students, particularly those from underrepresented populations.

The bill recently passed by the House provides support for states to use performance measures and strengthen data systems to promote evidence-based improvements in practice and policy. It also provides a key role for states in promoting sharing of effective approaches to ensure that innovations that have strong empirical support are adopted by colleges broadly, not just by the lucky few that receive federal grants. We hope that these aspects of the legislation will be adopted and even strengthened in the Senate version.

Research suggests that community colleges can help meet the President’s goal for increasing postsecondary attainment. To do this, colleges will have to change the way they do business, and states will need to motivate and support colleges in making these changes. Both will have to rely more on evidence of what works to improve student success on a wide scale. The legislation making its way through Congress provides a sound framework for the needed reforms and a real chance for five million more Americans to have the benefits of a college credential.

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