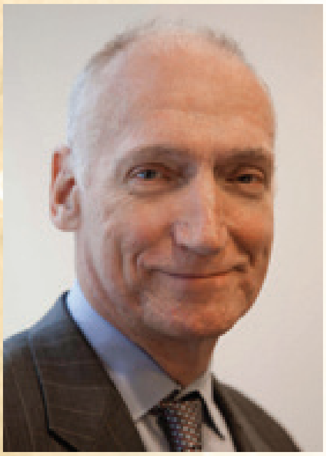
Responding to Divergent Trends: Vocational and Transfer Education at Community Colleges

By Thomas Bailey

Community colleges have long had multiple missions. The first community college was designed to relieve elite colleges of the burden of educating 18- and 19-year-olds. Thus, it was initially conceived of as a transfer institution—students would go on to upper division courses at a four-year college once they had matured and were ready for more advanced studies. Growth of the community college sector took off after World War II when the colleges also adopted the important function of educating students to go directly to work after completing a certificate (requiring less than two years) or an associate degree.

Many nurses, medical technicians, police officers, firefighters, skilled manufacturing workers, and office workers did then and still do earn community college credentials. The colleges also educate millions of workers every year in extension or non-credit programs. Moreover, the colleges' admissions policies open the doors to college for millions



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of low-income and first-generation students and students of color who would have much less chance of gaining access to higher education without community colleges. Overall, these are numerically important institutions, enrolling almost 40 percent of undergraduates.

Community college roles have shifted over time. For a variety of reasons, in the last two decades, the transfer mission has grown. Eighty percent of entering community college students say that they want a bachelor's degree, and trends in earnings data indicate that the desire for a BA makes sense. Research suggests that while there are strong economic benefits to earning an associate degree in comparison to a high school diploma, over time the earnings gains for associate degrees have been static. In contrast, earnings for BAs have grown, increasing the income gap between BA holders and associate degree holders.

Growth of the Transfer Function

Because of these trends, community colleges and their students are focusing more on transfer. Community colleges are positioning themselves as academic stepping stones to four-year colleges and the middle-class wages that come with them. Transfer allows students to start their college careers at community colleges, where tuition is lower and classes are generally smaller, but still end up with the more valuable bachelor's degree. Colleges have responded to the growing demand by adding transfer-oriented liberal arts or general studies programs and working to improve the success of students who want to transfer. Between 1987 and 2015, the share of liberal arts and sciences degrees (which are primarily designed for transfer) among all associate degrees grew from 30 to almost 45 percent.

Yet this increasing focus on the transfer function at community colleges is occurring alongside another divergent trend. While the earnings and enrollment data point to an increasing emphasis on transfer and BAs, politicians and others have decried the notion of "bachelor's degrees for all." While the large majority of community college students state that they want bachelor's degrees, fewer than 15 percent of entering community college students actually complete a bachelor's degree within six years.

Advantages of Short-Term Occupational Credentials

Some commentators point out that there are many "middle level jobs" requiring less than a four-year degree and emphasize the importance of short-term and sub-baccalaureate awards. President Trump has argued that community colleges should focus much more on short-term technical or vocational programs (although community college representatives argue that they already offer many such programs). Similarly, some governors and state legislatures have called for a stronger emphasis on specific workforce preparation. And foundations and others have called for the greater use of alternative credentials such as certificates, work-based certifications, competency-based awards, and apprenticeships.

Although we do not have a good overall measure of the prevalence of all of these alternative credentials, we do know that one type of occupationally oriented short-term award, the certificate, now accounts for 40 percent of all community college awards, and short-term certificates (usually requiring one year or less) in particular have grown from 14 percent in 2000 to 25 percent of community college awards in 2015.

One apparent advantage of short-term occupational credentials is that students in these programs are more likely to complete them. This is easy to understand in that these programs take less time to complete than others; there is thus less time for life problems to interfere with a student's studies. Although it is difficult to get completion rates by program (there is little reliable data on students' programs of study until they graduate), completion rates are higher at technical colleges, where there are relatively more certificates awarded than at comprehensive community colleges.

What do we know about the economic value of shorter term or alternative credentials? Unfortunately, while there has been extensive research on the value of college degrees, we know much less about the returns to these alternatives. Data on occupational certifications or competency-based degrees are not linked to earnings data. The research so far on certificates shows that short-term certificates, the ones that are growing the most, on average have little labor market value. Longer term certificates tend to raise earnings in the short term, but the earnings growth tends to level off while the returns to degrees continue to rise for longer periods after earning the award. Degree holders are much more likely to end up with middle-class, family-supporting earnings.

The Tradeoff Between Degrees and Short-Term Credentials

Thus, the tension between the short-term, vocationally oriented certificate and the longer-term associate or bachelor's degree involves a trade-off: accepting a modest, short-term, and even uncertain increase in earnings in exchange for a somewhat higher probability of completion. But there are some uncertainties and moral pitfalls in this calculus.

First, the evidence for the higher completion rates for alternative credentials is not definitive. Technical colleges that emphasize certificates have higher completion rates than comprehensive community colleges, but those data are descriptive, and the student populations are far from equivalent. And we still have more to learn about the value of many short-term and alternative credentials. Second, it is low-income students, students of color, and other disadvantaged students who disproportionately face challenges in college and might benefit from the higher probability of completion. So, the tradeoff between completion and low earnings systematically pushes students who are already disadvantaged onto paths that lead to lower earnings, thus reinforcing the initial inequity.

What can community colleges do to break this cycle? First, we must acknowledge that the fundamental reality of the community college sector is that while it disproportionately enrolls students who face the greatest academic, social, and economic barriers to their success, it is also the higher education sector that spends the least money per student. Moreover, states have been disinvesting in higher education for decades, and community colleges are the sector that is most dependent on state subsidies. Thus, any solutions are constrained by the availability of resources.

Resolving the Conflict

Despite these constraints, reformers have developed some promising approaches. One strategy has been to encourage students who earn short-term credentials such as certificates and industry certifications to "stack" them—to earn the short-term award but subsequently build on those credits to complete a longer term and more remunerative degree. Developing a system of stackable credentials has been a goal of analysts and policymakers for two or three decades, but research has shown that very few students succeed in stringing awards together in this progressive way.

It may be the case that students need more information and much more structural support to leverage the advantage of stacking, and it should perhaps not be surprising that few students on their own are able to find and successfully complete subsequent programs that actually use previously earned credits. This is likely especially true for students who face significant barriers and who would presumably benefit from this type of stacking. Yet there may be ways to realize the promise of stackable credentials which I will discuss below.

A second strategy is to increase the probability of completing degree programs and thereby reduce the need to trade off low earnings for higher completion probabilities. Indeed, there is a widespread "completion" movement in community colleges in which colleges are adopting promising approaches to developmental education, improving transfer, and refocusing their institutions on helping students succeed through comprehensive "guided pathways" reforms. Hundreds of colleges are participating in national initiatives that are attempting to go beyond the limited reforms of the past and to transform community colleges, so they are squarely focused on student success.

In a book written with my colleagues Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (2015), we argue that the guided pathways model provides a framework to coordinate and integrate a number of related reforms. Guided pathways involves a thorough rethinking of the student experience and a redesign of institutions to allow students to complete degree (and certificate) programs with the fewest possible obstacles.

Colleges that undertake the approach map out default course sequences in all their programs of study and then help students create individual plans that allow them to see each step to graduation. To help students explore programs, colleges cluster them into eight or ten meta-majors—such as health, business, information technology, arts and humanities, and science and math—each of which includes a set of related programs that tend to share introductory and lower level courses.

Program mapping in turn requires a redesign of the initial entrance, advising, and registration processes so students are exposed to viable options and understand what it takes to reach their goals, instead of trying to figure it out on their own with little information. For undecided students, the creation of meta-majors allows them to explore within a broad area such as social sciences or health to determine if it is a good fit. Then they can narrow in on a program without wasting large numbers of credits and exhausting their financial aid.

In a guided pathways college, advisors monitor students to help keep them on the path to completion and work with them to explore potential careers or to figure out efficient transfer plans. Colleges are addressing transfer problems by working with four-year partners to ensure that community college courses satisfy requirements for a major, so students aren't losing large numbers of credits when they transfer and having to retake required courses.

The guided pathways model also has the potential to improve upon the so far mostly disappointing experience students have had with stacking short-term credentials. Certificates can be built into longer programs so that students who cannot take two or four years away from work to earn a degree can earn a credential, join the workforce, and return again later to college. If the courses that make up the certificate program are built into a longer degree pathway, the credits earned should apply seamlessly to the associate or bachelor's degree. That can allow community colleges to fulfill their educational mission and respond to the demand for shorter workforce-oriented programs that meet the needs of the local labor market, without tracking students into pathways with limited opportunity for earnings growth.

Institutional Effectiveness

Community colleges have long been called upon to be flexible and to undertake multiple missions in the service of their local populations, employers, and civic institutions. And today more than ever there are expectations that community colleges should offer effective short-term, vocationally oriented education programs and at the same time provide a high-quality foundation for baccalaureate programs at four-year colleges.

This is a lot to ask of these underfunded higher education institutions whose open-access mandate means that they admit virtually any student who wants to enroll, including those who are poor, academically underprepared, and who have other substantial family and work responsibilities and can thus only attend part-time.

Colleges cannot address these economic and social barriers to student success alone. They must work with the public sector, employers, and local organizations to help students who face employment discrimination, food and housing insecurity, child and elder care responsibilities, transportation difficulties, and scarcity of good jobs. But colleges can make sure that students have the information that they need, understand their choices, get effective advising, and have access to well-designed programs that allow them to achieve their goals without wasting scarce time and money.

These features are particularly important for students who face economic and social stresses that can disrupt an educational path without warning. Guided pathways reforms, which are still relatively new, can provide a framework that can help the colleges carry out their missions within a landscape of broader social and economic policy, thus helping to increase success among students who choose to follow both vocational and transfer pathways. C