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REMOVING OUR BA BLINDERS: RECONCEIVING COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROCEDURES TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS

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Based on "Shaping College Success and Career Trajectories:

Reconceiving College Procedures," a paper presented at

"Mapping Broad-Access Higher Education,"

a conference at Stanford University on Dec. 1-2, 2011

Even as community colleges have opened higher education opportunities to more diverse groups of students, they have retained traditional college procedures that create barriers to success—particularly for their least advantaged students. If community colleges can change their procedures to remove these barriers, completion rates may increase substantially.



The United States has made a serious and vital commitment to “college for all,” and community colleges are a primary vehicle for expanding college access. Yet as colleges have succeeded in opening access to broad populations, degree completion rates at community colleges are very low overall (about 37% within eight years of enrolling) and abysmal for African-Americans (18% within eight years).

Administrators and policymakers often blame these low rates on the gap between student achievement and colleges’ academic demands. But it is equally important to consider organizational factors. Community colleges have retained many traditional procedures that are counter-productive for disadvantaged students and inappropriate for new labor market demands. Some colleges, however, have devised alternative procedures that are better adapted to the needs of their students and have achieved impressive rates of student completion. Our research seeks to understand the massive failures and to examine alternative procedures that enable students to succeed.

BA Blinders and Traditional College Procedures

Based on their own experiences, most graduates of four-year colleges have a set of assumptions about “college.” This set of assumptions, which we call “BA blinders,” makes it difficult for them to recognize many

norms associated with college but not intrinsic to college success—namely, that all students should pursue a BA degree, take four years of full-time courses, expect no interim credentials or payoffs, explore only academic fields (labeled “general education”), and require minimal formal guidance.

These norms pose serious barriers to nontraditional students. In our interviews, community college students report a wide variety of mistakes in college. They take many courses without credits, they receive many credits that do not count toward credentials, they face predictable delays without receiving warning about them, and they receive credentials that have no job payoffs.

Many reformers have BA blinders. They devote great energy to transforming low-achieving students into traditional students by imposing massive amounts of remedial coursework. This BA-centric approach has failed consistently—sometimes with failure rates as high as 83% in national studies, for students placed in the lowest level of remedial coursework. This failure leads some observers to believe these students lack the ability to succeed in college. Such mistakes are not the result of low academic skills, yet they threaten student persistence in and completion of college.

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An Alternative: Seven Nontraditional Procedures

We learned about alternative procedures by conducting detailed analyses of six community colleges

Key Finding: Occupational Colleges Have Better Completion Rates

Using the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), we found that the distribution of student attributes at private occupational colleges is nearly identical to public two-year colleges in terms of prior test scores, grades, and socioeconomic status. Using propensity matching on degree completion, we find that private occupational colleges have substantially better completion rates than public two-year colleges.

Degree completion rates	Whites	African Americans	All
Public community colleges	47%	19%	37%
Private occupational colleges	9%	64%	57%

and two private occupational colleges in Illinois and California. Because our aim was to discover effective college procedures, we purposely chose occupational colleges that we expected to be better than most; we cannot claim that these colleges are typical. All of the colleges that we studied offered certificates in health care, computers, and business. Unlike the vast majority of private postsecondary career schools, they also offered accredited associate degrees (and some bachelor's degrees). Our findings are based on close observations and interviews with college staff and students, and over 2,000 surveys of students.

Additionally, analyzing the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), we found that students at private occupational colleges are nearly identical to public community college students in terms of prior test scores, grades, and socioeconomic status, yet the completion rates at occupational colleges are much higher (see “Key Finding”). Even though occupational colleges graduate a higher proportion of their students, the graduates from occupational colleges have similar earnings to community college graduates, which suggests that employers believe they are of comparable value.

The private higher education sector has problems and risks, and our goal is not to recommend that students attend private occupational colleges. Rather, our aim is to highlight alternative procedures that public community colleges might consider to improve completion rates. Through our study, we identified seven nontraditional

procedures that may reduce some common problems that students experience in community colleges

Seven Nontraditional College Procedures to Improve Student Completion

1. Offer opportunities for quick successes
2. Offer opportunities for quick payoffs
3. Avoid or delay obstacles that prevent success
4. Develop degree ladders
5. Provide structured program pathways with courses in predictable time slots
6. Provide “guardrails” that help guide student progress
7. Emphasize Job Placement

1. Offer opportunities for quick successes

Traditional college procedures assume that the only worthwhile goal is a BA; nontraditional procedures offer quick credentials on the way to the BA.

Our interviews found that community college students were encouraged by counselors to pursue BA degrees, but were not informed about how to earn credentials along the way. They also were not warned that the BA often takes more than six years to complete, or that most students do not even finish within eight years.

In contrast, the private occupational colleges

offered credentials along the way to a BA—a one-year certificate and a two-year associate degree conferred automatically along the way to the BA. Since many students had low performance in high school, these quick successes in college may improve their confidence and chances of completion, and students gain valuable credentials even if they do not complete a BA.

2. Offer opportunities for quick payoffs

Traditional college procedures assume that only BAs lead to good jobs; nontraditional credentials have quick and valuable labor market payoffs.

Many people are aware of the “\$1 million payoff” of a BA over the course of a lifetime, but few know the value of associate degrees or occupational certificates in the labor market. About 43% of those with a certificate have higher earnings than the median person with an associate degree, and 27% have higher earnings than the median person with a BA degree. Associate degree earnings have even greater overlap with BA earnings.

The nonmonetary payoffs of certificates and associate degrees can also be substantial. These credentials lead to significantly better jobs than high school degrees in terms of psychological rewards (such as job status, job satisfaction, and autonomy). In addition, associate degrees (but not certificates) lead to better material rewards (such as benefits and stable work hours). Notably, although youth typically have difficulty gaining access to careers and primary labor market jobs, certificates and associate degrees lead to significant gains in career access and career preparation. Moreover, these job rewards account for some health disparities and mediate part of the relationship between education and health outcomes. These findings suggest that associate degrees and certificates can substantially improve students’ careers and quality of life even before students get BAs.

3. Avoid or delay obstacles that prevent success

Traditional college procedures frontload remedial

courses, general education, and other obstacles; nontraditional procedures delay these obstacles until they are needed.

Contrary to common assumptions that students need “college-level academic skills” to benefit from college, they actually need only tenth-grade (or even lower) academic skills in order to attain certificates or associate degrees in many occupational programs, including high-demand fields in computers, health, and business. In our interviews with 48 occupational faculty, most reported that computer networking technicians, medical technicians, and accounting staff only need eighth- to tenth-grade math skills. Yet college advisors do not usually provide this information to students who are placed in remedial courses.

Most students are required to take a placement exam that determines their need for remedial courses and their level of remediation. Colleges frontload remedial courses in the hope of making later courses easier for students—but this is only the case for those who pass the remedial courses, and most students do not pass them. Many remedial placements have predictable failures: For students referred to the lowest level of remediation, completion rates are 29% in reading and 17% in math. Few students are warned about the odds of success.

“Community colleges frontload remedial courses in the hopes of making later courses easier for students—but this is only the case for those who pass the courses, and most students do not.”

Young students are also encouraged to take general education courses during their first year, with the assumption that these courses can help students explore potential interests. However students reported that these courses do not, in practice, help them figure out their desired career trajectories. Such courses also often do not

count toward the requirements of occupational programs.

Remedial and general education courses may be useful for BA degrees, but many low-achieving students do not get that far. These courses add unnecessary time to a first credential, and they pose high risks of preventing students from completing any credential.

4. Develop degree ladders

Traditional college procedures encourage a “fail-first” sequence; nontraditional degree ladders offer a series of increasingly demanding credentials on the way to a BA.

In traditional community colleges, students go through a “fail-first” process in which 42% drop out in the first year, 50% of them return, and 53% of them drop out again. In interviews, counselors report that they do not mention their occupational programs to young students (ages 18 to 24). Students are only told about these options if they are returning dropouts or older than age 24. Advisors also rarely inform students about the trade-offs of the BA—the required remedial courses, the noncredit status of remedial courses, the low success rates, the high dropout rates, the repeated dropouts, the long time to degree, and the low odds of completing. Nor are students routinely provided with information about credential programs that might require less remedial or general education coursework.

“Private occupational colleges place all students onto degree ladders that give quick successes on the way to associate or bachelor’s degrees.”

In contrast, the private occupational colleges place all students onto degree ladders that give quick successes on the way to associate or bachelor’s degrees. The first courses are practical, engaging, and career-relevant. These colleges backload remedial courses until after initial successes. Within 12 months, students can complete a certificate and get good jobs in high-demand fields, such as computer networking, medical coding, and

computer-aided design, even if life events subsequently interrupt their college careers.

5. Provide structured program pathways with courses in predictable time slots

Traditional college procedures are confusing and complex; nontraditional procedures offer dependable progress within predictable time slots.

Traditional college norms encourage students to “explore” by taking electives in several fields of study. Classes are offered over a patchwork of time slots during the week, and students are encouraged to select those that “fit their schedule.” While this arrangement appears to have the virtue of flexibility, it may require almost daily commutes to campus and course times that change each semester. Such apparently small scheduling details can make progress to degree considerably more difficult for students with obligations to paid work and families. Moreover, required classes are not always available when students need them for their particular course of study, further extending completion time.

Traditional college scheduling routines may work well for students whose college-educated parents can offer advice and pay for extra semesters to graduate, but they do not work well for many first-generation and low-income students who face information deficits and financial limits on their time in college.

In contrast, many private occupational colleges offer structured series of courses on preset schedules. Like package-deal vacations, such programs allow students to choose overall pathways while colleges manage the details, set the rules, and smooth the overall experience. Also as with many vacation packages, individuals are grouped into cohorts that progress together on the same timetables. These cohorts can serve as learning communities, providing peer support over students’ entire time in college. Such arrangements allow colleges to plan which courses cohorts need each term. Many students express satisfaction with such plans, reporting that they do not need to worry about such tasks as rearranging daycare or work schedules each term.

6. Provide guardrails that help guide student progress

Traditional college procedures rely on students' choices; nontraditional procedures use mandatory advising and monitor students' progress.

Community college students make a variety of mistakes, many with serious consequences, including prolonged time to completion and dropout. Students choose courses that are too easy, courses that are too difficult, courses that do not fit the requirements of their program or degree, courses that do not transfer, and courses that do not lead to their desired jobs or careers. They miss deadlines, misread course schedules, and underestimate degree timetables. They find out too late that some early credits expire or that their financial aid has limits. In part, these mistakes arise because community colleges and their programs have requirements that are complex and confusing. Although the colleges offer advisors, students must initiate their own advising appointments, and many students do not realize they have problems until those problems are serious. Moreover, with caseloads per advisor commonly over 1,000 students, meetings can be difficult to schedule and often cursory.

In contrast, occupational colleges offer “guardrails” that help direct and support student progress. Students must attend mandatory advising meetings several times each term. Meetings often are in small groups with members of the same program, so one student’s question can address other students’ concerns. These colleges also monitor student progress regularly. Based on monitoring of absences, grades, and teacher concerns, advisors will quickly contact students who exhibit warning signs so that they can intervene before problems become serious. The occupational colleges also offer social services that help students handle common life challenges involving transportation, housing, work, and childcare. Although they care about their bottom line, private colleges see these efforts at retaining students as worthwhile investments.

Community college students make a variety of mistakes, many with serious consequences, including wasted time and dropout... In part, these mistakes arise because community colleges have requirements that are complex and confusing.

7. Provide job placement

Traditional college procedures place the burden on students to search for jobs; nontraditional procedures provide job placement advice and assistance.

Many colleges operate as if college degrees guarantee good jobs. At the community colleges we studied, career services offices offered optional workshops in interviewing and resume preparation. These workshops were not well marketed and few students attended. Career offices at many community colleges do not have strong connections with employers. Often, the only specific job information they offer is a bulletin board or website that lists miscellaneous job openings with little, if any, relation to credential programs at the college.

Some private occupational colleges provide mandatory and comprehensive job placement assistance for all students. Job placement staff help students translate their educational experience into lists of work-relevant skills that employers recognize and value. Instead of assuming that students know how to search for and get good jobs, placement offices assume the opposite. Students are taught how to locate areas where their skills are in demand (including hard and soft skills) and they are told how to identify good jobs. Some of the advice they give surprised us. Placement staff said that they warn students to be skeptical of the highest-paying jobs because they often have unfavorable working conditions.

Instead, placement staff urge students to seek jobs that are relevant to a student's skill set and that have desirable conditions—both of which are likely to lead to advancement. In addition, job placement staff spend a lot of time building relationships with local employers, so they can give students trusted recommendations for specific jobs. To be sure, some community college personnel have strong links with employers, though even in these cases they may have insufficient time to exploit them.

Conclusion

Contrary to the common assumption that college dropout is caused primarily by students' limited abilities, our findings indicate that dropout is associated with multiple factors that can be reduced by nontraditional procedures.

Consider the vast number of attributes that traditional college procedures require of students, including the ability to persist six to eight years or more, complete massive remediation, persist despite repeated failures, sort among many course offerings and complicated degree requirements, know when counseling advice is needed and get it quickly, and understand and implement a complex job search. Occupational colleges provide alternative procedures that reduce these barriers to completion. Policy makers have much to learn from these procedures.

Community colleges are diverse and dispersed, their missions highly varied. The exclusive adoption of any single model would not serve all of them well. Nevertheless it is time for community colleges and their champions to remove their BA blinders and actively design procedures that minimize completion barriers and improve incentives for student success.

Citation:

Rosenbaum, James E., Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann E. Person. 2006. *After Admission: From College Access to Student Success*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

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