

Few Remaining Dreams: Community Colleges Since 1985

By
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In recent years, three schools of thought—human capital economics, sociological contradictions theory, and the new structuralism—have contributed to discussions of the role of community colleges in American postsecondary education. An evaluation of this work suggests that the circumstances of community colleges have, in several respects, changed for the worse in the years since publication of the author's book, *The Diverted Dream* (with Jerome Karabel). The community college student population has become more homogeneous in social class background and test scores, faculty work conditions have deteriorated, and dropout rates remain very high. One solution to the persisting performance problems of community colleges would be to split the colleges into three parts: one modeled on private-sector vocational training, another organized as two-year branches of four-year institutions, and a third as a community center for courses of avocational interest.

Keywords: community colleges; human capital economics; sociological contradictions theory; new structuralism

In 1989, Jerome Karabel and I published a book, *The Diverted Dream* (Brint and Karabel 1989), which proved to be a considerable provocation to community college leaders and researchers. Ours was a revisionist history; it argued that community colleges were initially promoted by leaders of elite universities to redirect students who might otherwise demand access to four-year colleges and universities,

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NOTE: I would like to thank David Bills for initial encouragement. I would like to thank Charles S. Levy for research assistance and comments that greatly improved the quality of this article. I would also like to thank Kathleen M. Shaw and Jerry A. Jacobs for their very helpful comments.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716202250208

thereby diminishing the status of these institutions. This contrasted with then-current views of the two-year colleges as a great democratic experiment, the people's colleges. We argued further that neither student consumers nor businesspeople were at first very much interested in the vocational programs that became the center of the community colleges' mission. Instead, leaders of the colleges themselves saw vocational curricula as the best avenue for their students and for their own institutional survival. We developed an institutional argument to explain this choice, focusing both on the structural constraints on community colleges (notably, the lower status of their students and the monopolization of professional labor markets by four-year colleges and universities) and the open opportunity fields in which they operated (notably, the existence of potential training markets for many semiprofessional and technical occupations).

In addition to our doubts about historical studies based on the responsiveness of community colleges to consumer and employer demand, we raised a number of critical questions about community colleges. We characterized them as the lowest rung in postsecondary education, both in terms of student composition and student life chances, and we raised concerns about the effects of community college entrance on the life chances of students. We saw community colleges as one means by which student ambitions were softly lowered to fit with the opportunities actually available in the labor market. We speculated whether the colleges led to democratization of higher education—by bringing in students who would not otherwise have attended a postsecondary institution—or whether their primary function was to divert students who would otherwise have attended a four-year college. We presented evidence that otherwise comparable students had a better chance of completing their baccalaureate if they started at a four-year college than if they started at a two-year college. We also raised questions about the economic payoffs to vocational programs. We anticipated important differences by field, but we also argued that many vocational students did not obtain jobs in the fields in which they prepared. We found no evidence for a common argument of the time—that rates of return for vocational students were notably higher than for liberal arts transfer students who went on to complete a baccalaureate. Karabel and I did not argue that liberal arts programs in community colleges were economically superior to vocational programs, only that the B.A. was economically superior to the vocational A.A.

As a contributor to this volume, I feel a bit like the man who comes home after a fifteen-year seafaring absence. The neighborhood is still recognizable, but considerable building has been going on. In this article, I will try to take stock of what we have learned about community colleges in the fifteen years that I have been away and whether the neighborhood as a whole—that is to say, the community college sector—is better or worse off or about the same as when I left.

The succeeding cohort of scholars has greatly deepened our understanding of community colleges by providing more definitive answers to issues for which evidence at the time we wrote was fragmentary. It has also developed theoretical approaches to understanding the role of community colleges, which help to explain some of the dilemmas faced by community colleges. But it has not, in my view, greatly changed the portrait of community colleges presented in our book—and

indeed certain developments in the community colleges since the publication of *The Diverted Dream* are cause for heightened concern.

New Schools of Thought

The scholarly literature on community colleges post-*Diverted Dream* can be divided into three major schools: the human capital economists, sociological contradictions analysis, and the "new structural critics." Considerable overlap exists between the latter two of these schools, and the distinction between the two is subtle. It is based on both attitude (the contradictions analysts are more ambivalent than critical) and theoretical stance (the contradictions analysts adopt a systems theory perspective, while the new structural critics are more eclectic). I will use the work of Thomas Kane and Cecilia Rouse as exemplary of the human capital school, the work of Kevin Dougherty as exemplary of the contradictions analysts, and the work of Regina Deil-Amen and James Rosenbaum as exemplary of the new structural critics. The educational economist Norton Grubb has contributed significantly to the first two of these schools, and I will discuss his work as well. I will focus on how this new work has contributed to an understanding of community colleges—and where it does and does not go beyond the conclusions Karabel and I reached in *The Diverted Dream*.

Human capital economics. It is exceptionally useful to have economists involved in a contested literature—as long as their perspective does not thoroughly dominate discussion. However blinkered they may be at times to forces of history, culture, and social structure, economists bring a high level of logical rigor to their studies. Human capital economists, led by Kane, Rouse, and Grubb, have greatly expanded our understanding of the economic returns to forms of two-year college education.

Both Kane and Rouse (1995) and Grubb (1996) argued that the comparison between two-year and four-year college students, which Karabel and I emphasized, is but a subset of the relevant comparisons. Community college students should be compared, they argue, also to those who obtain less education. Moreover, entrants, dropouts, and graduates should be systematically compared to one another, both in general and by field. Thus, they propose a series of comparisons—between high school dropouts and high school graduates, between high school graduates and those with some college, between those with some college who start at community colleges and those with some college who start at four-year colleges, between those with some college and associate's degree holders, between associate's degree holders and bachelor's degree holders.

Those who are familiar with this work, which thus far is based largely on analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 and the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, know that human capital economists have found that rates of return to the B.A. are nearly twice that of the A.A. for men, and

nearly 60 percent higher for women sixteen years out of high school; that holders of associate's degrees do better on average than four-year college dropouts; and that two- and four-year college dropouts do not differ much from one another, if one holds constant the number of credits obtained. Family background and ability measures explain no more than one-fifth of the differences in rates of return (for representative work, see Grubb 1993, 1997; Kane and Rouse 1995, 1999).

This work can certainly be read as a story of human capital investments rewarded. The data can also be read in another way: in relation to what students say they want and what actually happens to them. From this perspective, our emphasis on differences between two- and four-year college students is understandable. The least restrictive (and I think most accurate) indicator of student aspirations shows that approximately 70 percent of two-year college entrants, and an even higher proportion of four-year college entrants, say their educational goal is to obtain a bachelor's degree (Kane and Rouse 1999, 70).¹ No wonder: the earnings differential between college and high school graduates climbed steadily between 1975 and 1995, and it has continued to grow since that time for women while leveling off for men. About half of four-year college entrants achieve this stated goal, but only about 15 percent of two-year college entrants do. Even when background and test scores are controlled, a significant differential between two- and four-year college entrants in B.A. completion rates—10 to 20 percent—remains.

I would raise questions also about the *ceteris paribus* assumption in comparisons of two- and four-year college dropouts. The vast majority of community college students do not take as many college credits as four-year college students. In fact, about 35 percent of community college entrants who say they are working toward a degree last a semester or less at a community college before dropping out. Labor market returns are negligible for students who accumulate only a small number of credits in a community college. Is it reasonable to hold credit hours constant in comparisons of two- and four-year dropouts when credit hours completed are far from comparable between the two groups in real life?

Kane and Rouse (1995) have recently acknowledged that factors related to weak social integration and limited academic support may help to explain high two-year college dropout rates. But their initial reflection on this problem remains closer in spirit to the human capital approach:

A simple cost-benefit analysis shows that, over 30 years, the community college student who completes even one semester will earn more than enough to compensate him for the cost of the schooling. . . . Second, there is an "option value" to college entry if students are able to gain more information about the costs and benefits of further investments. When one is uncertain about the prospects of completing college before entry, there will be a value attached to enrolling in order to discover whether one is "college material." (Kane and Rouse 1995, 611)

In other words, when costs in terms of forgone earnings will not support a human capital argument, the tendency is to support the status quo by offering a self-scaling psychology of costs. In this view, community college students are in reality, if

not in aspiration, latent terminal students—just as an early leader of the junior college movement. Walter Crosby Eells, asserted seventy years ago.

Because of these difficulties in properly interpreting the meaning of rates of return to different amounts of postsecondary education, economists' findings on relative returns to vocational and academic fields may be more valuable than their findings on returns to different amounts of education. These latter findings indicate that vocational degrees are now worth more than academic degrees, and that within the vocational domain, some fields perform very well and others not very well. Again using National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 follow-ups, Grubb (1996) found much higher rates of return to vocational two-year degrees than academic two-year degrees, and indeed he found a small, though insignificant, earnings differential when comparing academic associate's degree holders and high school graduates. Moreover, "some fields of study, especially business and health occupations for women, and business and technical subjects

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for men, have high returns" (Grubb 1996, 106).² This is close to what Karabel and I surmised based on fragmentary evidence, but it is very useful to have detailed empirical confirmation—and also to have the additional finding that those who take courses closely related to their fields of employment often gain especially high returns. Given the reigning assumptions of fifteen years ago, it is particularly interesting to contemplate that the more highly motivated community college students may now be studying vocational rather than academic subjects. If true, this would be a striking example of the motivational consequences of structural change.

The sociological contradictions analysts. Kevin Dougherty's (1994) *The Contradictory College* is a landmark work on community colleges. It contributes in a number of ways to our understanding of community colleges: it includes an interesting macro-level focus on state actors as agents of community college development and transformation. It includes a well-articulated, institutional-level critique of the colleges as overextended in goals and lacking the means by which to achieve many of their ends effectively. It deepens our

understanding of the problems of transfer students, in particular, and of why the community college is so often harmful to their aspirations. Finally, it offers provocative policy suggestions, addressing the issue, for example, of whether community colleges should focus exclusively on vocational training or attempt to improve their transfer function by becoming two-year branches of four-year institutions.

Dougherty agreed with the argument Karabel and I made about the key role played by university leaders and the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) in the early years but thought we underestimated the role of the state. Dougherty showed that local high school officials who became active in community college advocacy frequently wanted to provide themselves with new and higher-status jobs. He showed that local government officials thought of community colleges as a potential boon for their communities, that state government officials found community colleges appealing on opportunity and efficiency grounds, and that the state, in general, has an economic interest in providing trained manpower for private business. Drawing on theories of "the relative autonomy of the state," he showed that state actors have motives that both reflect and are autonomous from the motives of business leaders. Continuing this theme, Dougherty greatly improved on our rather cursory discussion of variation in state policies toward community colleges, emphasizing the potential influence of such variations as explicit articulation agreements and location of community colleges as branches of four-year institutions.

State officials do provide legislative authorization, organizational frames, and funding for community colleges. Their motives and interests are therefore very much worthy of close study, as are the variations in state provisioning and organization of community college systems. At the same time, I will defend our approach this far: I think that Dougherty (1994) underemphasized the role of cultural innovation, national-level promotional activities, and the borrowing by states of successful educational innovations (Brint and Karabel 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). States and localities do not act entirely independently of one another, and they certainly do not develop new forms out of whole cloth. From this perspective, it makes sense to focus, as we did, on early sponsors of the junior college movement, such as the University of Chicago and the University of California; the work of conceptualizers such as Leonard Koos and Walter Crosby Fells; and the energetic advocacy of the AAJC.

Dougherty's emphasis on organizational dysfunctions (or contradictions) is indebted to Robert Merton's revision of structural-functionalism. Like Merton, Dougherty is more sensitive to the structured tensions that arise in complex organizations than to their smooth workings. For Dougherty, the major contradiction of the contradictory college is for goal diffusion combined with inadequate means to meet multiple goals. The community college tries to be all things to all people. It succeeds well at some of its purposes but not at others. Because transfer is a particularly complex task, given the greater interest of the colleges in vocational training and the weak academic preparation of most students, the transfer function is the

most seriously affected by these problems. "The community college's desire to provide educational opportunity has been undercut by its other purposes of providing vocational education and saving state governments money" (Dougherty 1994, 8).

Dougherty's book brings a crisp logic and strong evidence to bear on a variety of questions concerning the opportunities provided by community colleges. Karabel and I raised several of these questions, but Dougherty has found the evidence to settle them in a more definitive way. He has, for example, provided a definitive review of studies concerned with the differing rate of degree completion of two-year and four-year students, controlling for family background and test scores (see also Dougherty 1987). Dougherty went beyond the numbers to consider in detail the mechanisms through which high dropout rates are produced in community colleges. Here he focused on students' difficulties in obtaining financial aid, low levels of socially integrative activities, discouragement of academic work by fellow students, and the low expectations of teachers. He broke down the problem of transfer students into three distinct phases—problems at the community college, problems entering a four-year institution, and problems at four-year institutions—showing how each step involves a distinct set of obstacles. Although his treatment of vocational education was less definitive, he did raise questions about the vaunted responsiveness of community colleges to changing labor market conditions. Programs once established tend to perpetuate themselves, he found, and adjustment to new conditions is usually relatively slow.

Grubb's work adopts a similar form of analysis. Indeed, Grubb (1996, xvi) noted that like Dougherty, he sees both "positive and negative consequences" of community colleges, and that the reasons for these "contradictory effects" are "largely structural." In particular, "the position of two-year colleges in the middle of the education system, between mass institutions of secondary education and the selective four-year colleges with their different traditions, causes various problems." These "structural effects" are presented as paradoxes. They involve noble impulses thwarted by scarce resources or rigidities due to perceived legitimation requirements. Thus, Grubb (1996) wrote, "Community colleges are given the most difficult teaching task . . . but (have) fewer resources to carry out that task . . . and rarely support or reward good teaching." In another passage, he wrote, "Even though (community colleges) include many non-traditional students, they largely act like traditional educational institutions" (pp. xvi-xvii).

Where Dougherty's signal contribution has been to the study of transfer students, Grubb's major contributions are to the study of vocational students and to the study of the quality of teaching in community colleges. With respect to vocational students, Grubb finds community colleges to be clearly a democratizing influence, bringing students who would not otherwise have attended college into postsecondary education. He finds significant rewards for investments in human capital development, particularly for those who complete vocational programs and study subjects in which they are already employed. At the same time, he finds that many fields have marginal returns, that completion of twelve credit units or less

brings insignificant rewards, and that most vocational programs have few links to employers and do not articulate well with the skills that employers want.

Grubb is critical of *The Diverted Dream* for seeming to disparage vocational curricula and for encouraging its continued stigmatization. But a careful reading of the book shows that Karabel and I did not disparage vocational training, only narrow forms of vocational education that do not connect students to public life and do not encourage their future opportunities for upward mobility. As we wrote,

The problem with community college vocational education is not . . . that it attempts to connect the educational system with the world of work. On the contrary, (we believe) in the desirability of linking, where possible, the process of education to the activities of work and community. (Brint and Karabel 1989, 228)

The problem with our approach to vocational programs was empirical, not ideological. While no one disputes our argument that two-year vocational programs are neither economically nor socially equivalent to the bachelor's degree, new evidence does suggest that we were wrong to consider community college vocational education as "the bottom rung" of higher education's tracking system. Economic rewards tend to be greater for vocational students than for academic students, if they complete the associate's degree, and vocational students are now as likely as academic students to transfer to four-year colleges. At the same time, our concern that community colleges' emphasis on vocational education came at the expense of comparable support for a rigorous academic culture seems to be borne out by Grubb's own work—and the work of others who have studied these issues.

Grubb's emphasis on assessing positive and negative consequences extends to the little-studied topic of teaching and learning in the community college setting. In a study of 260 community college instructors from a wide range of fields, Grubb and Associates (1999) found that small classes typical of community colleges provide a potential support for the community colleges' claims to provide superior teaching. They provide many examples of excellence in student-centered (or, as they call it, "constructivist") teaching practices, the dominant approach in community colleges. These successful practices are attuned at once to high content standards and the busy lives and hands-on learning styles of many students. The chapter on vocational classrooms is particularly valuable, for it provides strong evidence of the relative vitality of occupational education. "For many fields, occupational teaching turns out to be rich and complex, more so than teaching in academic subjects" (Grubb and Associates 1999, 99). At the same time, they report "collapsed" standards in approximately one-quarter of the classrooms visited, including quite a few of the vocational classrooms visited (see also Worthen 1997). In these classrooms, content was converted into simplified facts and slogans, anecdote swapping was used as a replacement for serious discussion, and humor was employed as a substitute for problem solving (Grubb and Associates 1999, 218-29). Perhaps most worrisome is the buried finding that community college reading lists "very common(ly)" total one five-to-eight-page article a week and required essays were often

two to four pages long. These low expectations arguably undermine the generally positive portrait of community college teaching found in the book. Moreover, practices related to literacy skills are especially uncommon in vocational courses, leaving students unprepared to meet the literacy expectations of their employers.

New structural critics. Regina Deil-Amen and James F. Rosenbaum provide a somewhat bleaker assessment of community colleges than either Dougherty or Grubb. Their image of community colleges follows the neoinstitutionalist model of public schools (Meyer and Rowan 1978). In this view, community colleges primarily provide credentials to students rather than concrete skills. These credentials are symbols that students deserve a certain status in society. These credentials are meaningful in the labor market, and the colleges do not, therefore, feel the need to help their students more directly by developing direct ties either to gatekeepers in four-year colleges or to employers in the labor market. Community colleges are, moreover, large and complex institutions, considerably understaffed, and their counseling staffs have relatively little time to offer to individual students. A culture of inclusiveness, reinforced by high dropout rates, has become the norm, and counselors are consequently reluctant to deliver unwelcome news to students. Counseling is used to encourage and build students' self-esteem, not to "cool out" students.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum make effective use of proprietary and private, non-profit colleges in much of this work. In contrast to community colleges, proprietary schools have been subject to high levels of regulation since 1992, due to abuses of the financial aid system, leading to hundreds of closures. With their legitimacy in question, proprietary schools have worked hard to capture a student market, help students complete their programs, and find jobs for those who do complete. National Center for Education Statistics data suggests that proprietary colleges do a better job than community colleges in bringing students to certificate or degree completion (Futures Project 2000). Compared to community colleges, the culture of proprietary colleges is far more results oriented. Because the demographic characteristics of community college and two-year proprietary students are similar, the contrast between the two is particularly effective.⁴

Based on this contrast, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum criticize community colleges for their failures in networking with employers and communicating with students. In their view, faith in the power of credentials too often substitutes for concrete social contacts. Although advisory committees exist on paper to link community college vocational programs and local employers, these advisory committees are usually moribund, according to Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, and instructors are not expected to be involved in placing their students. Nor do community college instructors query employers concerning the kinds of skills and abilities they require. By contrast, instructors in proprietary colleges are expected to build and maintain ties with employers and to provide reliable information about the qualifications of particular students. Ironically, proprietary schools have devel-

oped mechanisms that allow them to place students more effectively than their higher-status public sector counterparts (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2001).⁴

Proprietary schools also succeed more often in building students' "social know-how" because they tell students exactly what they need to do to complete programs and because they limit the number of course and program options available to students. By contrast, community college counselors expect students to shepherd themselves through a bewildering number of course and program options. Student confusion and frustration is tied to both the scarcity of effective counseling and the proliferation of programs (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003 [this issue]). Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum argue that self-esteem building has replaced "appropriate redirection" as the central ethos of counseling in community colleges. Today, counselors no longer use testing to redirect students into more "appropriate curricula." Instead, they seek to encourage students by accentuating the positive features of their records, however weak those records may be. Because they fail to provide honest assessments, counselors do not provide students with the information they need to improve. This too can encourage confusion and frustration (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002).

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum base their conclusions on qualitative studies of programs in five community colleges and four occupational colleges (two proprietaries and two independent nonprofits) in the Chicago metropolitan area. Are these Chicago-area colleges representative of the national picture? Some doubts are raised in my mind by the colleges' apparent emphasis on academic transfer programs. Nevertheless, much of the analysis rings true. *The Diverted Dream* (Brint and Karabel 1989) also discussed the curious lack of interest of "career-oriented" community colleges in developing ties with local employers or studying their skill needs. Neoinstitutional theory provides a way to understand this otherwise puzzling oversight. The failure of the colleges to develop their students' social know-how meshes nicely with Dougherty's emphasis on the tensions created by program proliferation combined with tight resources. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's emphasis on the unintended consequences of the self-esteem culture is consistent with recent work on socialization messages in public schools (Brint, Contreras, and Matthews 2001).

Although Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum are clearly critics of the community colleges, the overall thrust of this work is at odds with *The Diverted Dream*. It assumes a world in which occupational training, far from representing the lowest rung in postsecondary education, has become a generator of student engagement and the center of labor market reward. The issue for them is not, as it was for Karabel and me, how to "heat up" students so that they can realize upward mobility through B.A. completion but rather how to help students who are not likely to complete their B.A.s to find their way more effectively into the world of work. Theirs is a world in which the job-related needs of employers are primary but not well understood (see also Rosenbaum and Binder 1997). Ours is a world in which promises of upward mobility are primary but not very often realized.⁵

The Revisionists Revised?

Thanks largely to the work of researchers discussed in this article, we have much more clarity now on several issues raised in *The Diverted Dream*. But has this new clarity substantially altered the portrait we drew of the community colleges?

In my view, not much of the picture drawn of community colleges in *The Diverted Dream* requires emendation. Our emphasis on the interests of four-year college leaders in the birth of junior colleges has not been seriously disputed. Neither has our emphasis on the advocacy of the AAJC as a force in the institutionalization of the two-year college concept. Our critique of consumer choice and business influence models as explanations for the vocationalization of community colleges has not been challenged. Most scholars accept our notion that the colleges, led by the AAJC, were themselves primarily responsible for this transformation, although Dougherty rightly amplifies on the interests and motives of influential state actors. Most scholars also accept our sense of the organizational interest behind this transformation, namely, the constraints on and opportunities for monopolization of training markets. Nor is our view of the largely supporting role played by foundations, the federal government, and corporations beginning in the 1960s in dispute.⁶ Many empirical studies have confirmed our emphasis on the continuing advantage of bachelor's degrees over vocational associate's degrees. Many studies have also confirmed the declining condition of academic programs in community colleges and the advantages that four-year college students hold over community college students in obtaining bachelor's degrees, even after background and test scores are controlled. Our emphasis on the high dropout rates typical of community colleges has not been challenged. Nor has our argument that high levels of dropping out reflect, in part, the subordinate position of community colleges in the American system of higher education. Our concerns about the flexibility of vocational programs and about the high variability of labor market returns to these programs have been confirmed by subsequent scholarship.

A few images and assumptions of *The Diverted Dream* do, however, require revision based on contemporary research. The most important correction has to do with our image of vocational education. Our assumption in the mid-1980s was that vocational education represented the lowest rung in postsecondary education. Today, this characterization must be considered incorrect. Vocational programs may indeed draw more motivated students and more effective instructors than do academic programs. Certainly, their labor market returns are not worse than the returns to comparable levels of academic course work. Some programs, such as nursing and electronics technology, have shown strong returns. Nor are these programs less prestigious today in the eyes of students. Partly because of the emphasis on vocational training, academic programs have fallen on very hard times. Students who do not successfully transfer to four-year colleges from academic programs face relatively unpromising job prospects, even if they obtain an associate's degree. One cause of this change is the preference of employers for students with practical

skills; another is the increasing proliferation of parallel occupational programs in four-year colleges.

It is important to be careful about how seriously this change affects the findings of *The Diverted Dream*. The historical argument about vocationalization is not affected, because vocational programs have only recently gained the status advantage over academic programs. In the book, Karabel and I were skeptical of the promises of vocational education, but our main argument was that associate's degrees in occupational fields were not comparable to bachelor's degrees, either in prestige or in immediate or long-term earnings. This conclusion is even more true today than it was in 1989 due to the increased earnings gap between college graduates and those with lower educational attainments.

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Our emphasis on diversion requires some revision. Recent work suggests, as we did, that community colleges both divert students from attending four-year colleges and bring students who would not otherwise attend college at all into the postsecondary system. In our efforts to balance the picture, we were perhaps too prone to emphasize the first effect over the second (see also Rouse 1995, 1998). The consensus among researchers today is that most students attending community colleges would not otherwise attend any postsecondary institution. Again, it is important to be careful in judging how seriously this finding undermines our argument. Most students who are the beneficiaries of this democratization effect of community colleges do not complete many units and, consequently, show only very small or negligible improvements in their job prospects.

Our emphasis on diversion may have hindered us from grasping the significance of new approaches to counseling emerging at the time of the book's publication. We may have been generally correct about the mechanisms used by counselors to encourage "realism" among the students in the years before the late 1980s, but times have changed. Instead of encouraging student realism, many

counselors now attempt to build student self-esteem. "Soft landings," those that do not threaten students' self-confidence, are highly desired today, although no evidence exists that landing sites themselves have changed greatly. Students who need encouragement may gain a bit from this change; students who need clear information about where they stand may lose out.

Karabel and I developed a version of historical institutionalism to explain the origins and transformation of community colleges (Brint and Karabel 1991). This perspective remains valid, but it does not foreclose the contribution of other theoretical traditions. State theory, as employed by Dougherty, does, for example, help to fill in the sources of support for community colleges, although it tends to obscure the significance of intellectuals like Koos and Eells, who created conceptual models for the community college movement, and the role of the AAJC, which effectively promoted these models to state legislatures.

With respect to processes of organizational transformation, our analysis was clearly weighted toward power factors. Karabel and I emphasized the colleges' resource commitments, managerial techniques, and media images of changing labor market conditions as factors influencing student choices in the direction of vocational programs. I do not judge this to be a significant shortcoming. Dougherty's main point is that in an organization with multiple goals and limited resources, some goals are more likely to be effectively institutionalized than are others. Our emphasis on the resources and ideas available to vocationalizing leaders helps to explain why certain functions became more effectively institutionalized over time; Dougherty's Mertonian approach cannot. By contrast, the neoinstitutionalism employed by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum does help to clear up one puzzle we were unable to solve, namely, why explicitly career-oriented institutions spend so little time developing close connections to employers. Like other organizations with well-institutionalized charters, community college leaders assume that the credentials they confer will carry weight in the market—and that no further actions are necessary to link students and jobs.

Human capital theory also makes an undeniable contribution to our understanding of the economic consequences of different levels and types of educational attainment. At the same time, it is prone to unscientific rationalizations in support of the status quo. Because outcomes are for human capital theorists, by definition, based on rational choices, whatever exists must somehow be rational. Therefore, outcomes that look like failings to many sociologists are generally interpreted by economists as successes. Economists' treatment of high community college dropout rates shows the difficulty. In their view, many students come to a community college and mull about searching for a life course. Some come to the conclusion that they are not college material and therefore choose not to invest further in the educational system. Economists interpret high dropout rates as the result of rational choices, which have a beneficial effect both for individuals (who are saved from unrewarding investments) and society (which saves potentially wasted resources).⁷ From a sociological perspective, this analysis neglects the influence of social structure on individual decision making. What of the social class milieu and institutional climate in which community college students are embedded? It is very doubtful

that such dim views of students' capacities for achievement would be taken seriously if they were addressed to higher-status people, many of whom have also been known to show signs of fecklessness on occasion.

Have Community Colleges Changed for the Better?

This leads to a final question: How much has changed in the community colleges since the mid-1980s? Have the colleges changed for the better, have their problems increased, or are the institutions still following the same course?

In terms of growth, community colleges remain, as we wrote, the great success story of American postsecondary education during the last century. Although they enroll less than half as many students as four-year institutions, they have continued to grow at a faster rate. More than 300 new community colleges have been added to the postsecondary landscape since 1989, compared to 235 four-year colleges (U.S. Department of Education 2002). For the high school class of 1982, community college dropouts and associate's degree holders made up nearly as large a segment of the "sub-baccalaureate labor market" as those with high school degrees only (34 percent to 39 percent) (Grubb 1996, 56).

The colleges have also succeeded on their own terms. They are now clearly vocationally oriented. Approximately 60 percent of community college students are enrolled in vocational programs, and a comparable number say that their major interest relates to occupational preparation. Short-term contract courses with local businesses are now found at nearly all community colleges, and half of the colleges have one contract student for every five regularly enrolled students (Kane and Rouse 1999). And of course, community colleges are very much a part of their communities in other ways as well. They offer a wide range of recreational and avocational courses, bringing together widely scattered individuals around common interests in such topics as digital photography, Web site design, Native American dances, and the history of jazz. These include an increasing number of emeritus colleges serving retirees.

Indeed, a good case can be made that the community colleges have shown the face of the future to American four-year colleges much more than have the traditional Ivy League leaders in this sector. Increasingly, four-year colleges, too, have emphasized occupational programs, worked to accommodate part-time and non-traditional students through flexible scheduling and distance education, and reached out to their communities through extension classes and service to local business, government, and nonprofit organizations (Brint 2002).

Yet it is difficult to see the community colleges as stronger today than they were when we finished our research on them in the mid-1980s. A basic flaw in the human capital argument, as it applies to community colleges, is that noncompletion rates continued to grow and transfer to decline at a time when, using high school graduates as a reference group, the premium for a bachelor's

degree among full-time workers ages twenty-five to thirty-four was growing from 40 to 60 percent (Ellwood and Kane 2000). Transfer rates have picked up in some states recently, but academic programs have apparently continued to deteriorate as institutional energy has shifted more decisively to the vocational tracks.⁵ Few community colleges offer academic course work beyond the introductory level, and the concept of weekly assignments has been reduced to a bare minimum in many classes.

Faculty work conditions at many of the colleges have also deteriorated. Almost two-thirds of the faculty at public two-year colleges teach part-time, twice as many as at four-year comprehensives. Forty percent of community college faculty hold a rank of instructor or lecturer, and more than 10 percent have no rank, five times as many as at four-year comprehensives (U.S. Department of Education 2002). These

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high proportions of adjuncts, in all likelihood, reduce institutional identification among instructors and perhaps also traditions of collegiality and shared governance. Two-year college faculty are much more likely than four-year faculty to be unionized (Rhoades 1998). Moreover, a study of student performance in sequential courses suggests that adjuncts are less effective in introductory courses than full-time instructors (Burgess and Samuels 1999). Community colleges claim to be teaching centered, but they usually do not provide support for good teaching. Most students come to community college with weak literacy skills, but literacy-building practices are uncommon (Worthen 1997).

Stratification has also increased. Between 1980-1982 and 1992, the proportion of students from the lowest income quartile who enrolled in community colleges increased by 6 percent (from 16 to 22 percent), while it declined very slightly in four-year colleges. The proportion enrolling from the highest income quartile stayed constant in two-year colleges (at just less than 20 percent), while it increased from 55 to 65 percent in four-year colleges (Ellwood and Kane 2000, 286). Family income has a strong effect on the distribution of students with similar test scores

that such dim views of students' capacities for achievement would be taken seriously if they were addressed to higher-status people, many of whom have also been known to show signs of fecklessness on occasion.

Have Community Colleges Changed for the Better?

This leads to a final question: How much has changed in the community colleges since the mid-1980s? Have the colleges changed for the better, have their problems increased, or are the institutions still following the same course?

In terms of growth, community colleges remain, as we wrote, the great success story of American postsecondary education during the last century. Although they enroll less than half as many students as four-year institutions, they have continued to grow at a faster rate. More than 300 new community colleges have been added to the postsecondary landscape since 1989, compared to 235 four-year colleges (U.S. Department of Education 2002). For the high school class of 1982, community college dropouts and associate's degree holders made up nearly as large a segment of the "sub-baccalaureate labor market" as those with high school degrees only (34 percent to 39 percent) (Grubb 1996, 56).

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between two- and four-year colleges (Ellwood and Kane 2000; Kane 2001). Most college students today work while they attend school, but community colleges have become the primary home for part-time and older students. Today, two-thirds of community college students attend part-time. About one-half say that work is their primary focus, not school, compared to one-quarter of four-year college students (Horn, Beckett, and Malizio 1998).

Given the community colleges' emphasis on occupational training and the job-advancement interests of these student-workers, it is not surprising that vocational programs appear to be in good shape compared to academic programs. And yet even here, the situation may be not quite as rosy as it first appears due to changes in market conditions for subbaccalaureate labor. Instability and low-wage work (defined as earnings of less than \$11 per hour in 1999 dollars) have increased markedly in the labor market, and this rise of unstable, low-wage work has hit workers with "some college" experience hard. According to Bernhardt et al. (2001),

Those with the least amount of schooling, a high school diploma or less, have seen a strong rise in low-wage careers, more than doubling from 14.4% in the . . . cohort [that came of age in the mid and late 1960s] to 35.3% in the more recent cohort. Workers with some college experience were hit just as hard in proportionate terms—their percentage of low-wage workers more than doubled—from 10.5% to 25.4%. (P. 157)⁴

One result is that workers with some college—including the two-thirds of community college entrants who do not complete an associate's or bachelor's degree—now look more like high school graduates in their earnings profile than like college graduates.

Semiprofessional jobs tied to high-tech, medical, and business services are faring well, by and large, but most semiprofessional jobs are not tied to these sectors. Overall, the new economy looks less like Silicon Valley than Wal-Mart Valley. It is composed of more low-wage, unstable jobs in retail and other service industries, most of which are not unionized and carry minimal benefits. As Bernhardt and her colleagues (2001) concluded,

Economic mobility has deteriorated in this new economy, so that workers now face the prospect of more limited and more unequal wage growth from ages 16 to 36. Job instability has also risen in recent years and this rising instability appears to play an important role in explaining mobility trends. (P. 174)

Community colleges' problems come into sharper relief if we look at the interaction of three structural characteristics: (1) the centrality of occupational training programs, (2) the weak academic preparation and part-time status of most community college students, and (3) the public collegiate identity of the colleges (including required general education courses and academic-transfer tracks). General education courses are required for all students, but they are difficult for students with weak academic skills and complicated schedules to complete. Difficulties in satisfying general education requirements, therefore, become an important source of structural blockage. Because transfer, vocational, and recreational users each

have different needs and interests, instructors in general education classes have trouble knowing how to orient their classes. As a solution, many instructors lower standards in an effort to increase interest among vocational and recreational students and to reduce dropout. Whatever prophylactic effects this may have, this strategy fails to provide university-level instruction for prospective transfer students, thereby increasing the incidence of transfer shock. By contrast, occupational courses are popular but often do not include the literacy-building activities that most students need. Not surprisingly, evidence is beginning to accumulate that the reformed, results-oriented proprietary schools are doing the better job of occupational preparation for job-oriented students, while residential four-year colleges continue to do a better job of academic teaching for comparable students aspiring to the B.A. The low cost and convenience of community colleges make them attractive, but their combination of multiple goals, limited resources, academically marginal students, and hefty general education requirements make them effective for only a relative few of those who enter with a degree objective in mind.

Let us assume that the goals of community colleges are to provide college-level transfer work for those students intending to transfer to four-year institutions and occupational training that will facilitate mobility for those students who are not intending to transfer. When institutional leaders persistently fail to achieve their stated goals, it is time to wonder whether the real interests served by the institution are those stated or something else. Perhaps community colleges serve democratic, capitalist societies very well by failing to achieve their stated purposes. Perhaps these societies would not be as well served if, let's say, half of community college students received bachelor's degrees, rather than the current 16 percent. How many B.A.-level jobs, after all, does the economy produce? Perhaps the jobs available to community college vocational students do not generally include job ladders. How important are high-level cognitive skills—the kinds of skills that allow for significant mobility—if job ladders are scarce? From this perspective, the high community college dropout rate may not be a problem; it may even be a benefit to the economy. The colleges can say, "We gave them another chance." And the economy is not required to absorb tens of thousands more educated workers than it has places for.

A question remains whether the failure of community colleges is due to social circumstances of students (i.e., their complicated lives and relatively weak academic preparation), to the lack of incentives for policy makers and business leaders to create more effective institutions, or to the organizational problems of the colleges themselves. No doubt all three are important and mutually reinforcing. The major contradiction remains that community college students desire higher-level attainments than the colleges are able to help them realize. Under such circumstances, the community college cannot help but play the midwife to humbler dreams.

An observer might conclude that the colleges would achieve their stated purposes more often if they were divided into three separate institutions: one using the techniques of the reformed proprietaries for purposes of job training, one

linked as two-year branches of four-year colleges for purposes of academic transfer, and one projecting a community center approach for purposes of providing recreational courses. Yet such a differentiation is very unlikely to occur. Community colleges provide a maximum of perceived opportunities, and they do so at a minimum of cost. Moreover, many interests are vested in the continuation of the colleges, even if they do not work very well, and bigger institutions do enjoy certain economies of scale.

The Potential Contribution of Educational Reforms

The location of community colleges within the larger structure of American postsecondary education ensures that many of the problems discussed in this article will continue. Well-designed state and institutional policies can provide only partial solutions to the key problems of high dropout rates, low transfer rates, and uneven success in occupational training programs. Nevertheless, partial solutions are better than no solutions. In this last section of the article, I would like to draw attention to some of the more promising policies that have been developed by states and community colleges in recent years. I will also discuss some social scientific inquiries that would be valuable to future policy development.

Dropout and transfer. To help their students become better-informed consumers, community colleges might be required to post retention, transfer, and degree completion rates for their students four and five years after entry, comparing their own rates to those of other community colleges in their state and to national rates. These rates would be listed with estimates, based on state data, of the proportion of noncompleters and nontransfers who complete or transfer after moving to other institutions. If possible, these rates should be given by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender. The difficulty with this proposal is that community colleges generally do not have the resources to conduct accurate follow-up studies. States would have to invest considerable funds and training time for such statistics to be collected effectively.

Even in the absence of funds to provide this consumer information, community colleges could attempt to simplify requirements for degree-granting programs. In addition, mandatory meetings of those declaring for particular academic transfer and vocational programs could be held at least twice a year to discuss course-taking requirements for these programs. This would help to provide the social know-how that Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum find to be in such short supply among community college students.

Financial aid policies could also be improved. Because low-income and minority students are averse to taking out loans for fear of the financial burden they create, income-contingent financial aid policies can be developed to scale loan repay-

ment amounts and timing to adult income attainments. Such plans have been proposed by respected economists, such as William Bowen, but they have not been implemented. State experiments with such policies would be welcome.

Current studies of structural diversity in the community college sector have rarely yielded definitive results. However, one clear finding appears to be that transfer rates are higher in states that have formalized and explicit articulation agreements between two-year and four-year colleges (Keith 1996). Efforts to establish such agreements in those states that currently do not have them could help boost transfer. This requires considerable cross-segment cooperation, which appears to be easier in states with state higher education coordinating boards (Keith 1996). The size and organization of the two-year and four-year sectors may also affect dropout and transfer rates, and these also vary considerably by state. So far, studies of state variation have not been conclusive. More studies should be conducted of the relationship between the size of the two-year and four-year sectors and B.A. production by state, controlling for factors such as per capita income, tuition and fees, and student demographics. In these comparisons, the differences between states with two-year branches of four-year institutions and those with separate community college systems should be a particular focus (see Dougherty 1994).

Vocational programs. Like dropout and transfer rates, placement rates in occupational programs should ideally be available to students. Some states require that colleges report placement rates, but these rates are reported to policy makers, not to students. A careful examination of the methodology of states requiring placement reports would be valuable. Follow-up surveys with students are not very reliable, and it is unlikely that many colleges have the resources to conduct such surveys very well. Nevertheless, several states have developed policies to monitor placement. Florida and Idaho both require proof of placement rates in the 70 to 75 percent level. Programs that fail to achieve this level of placement are subject to elimination. Tennessee reserves 5 percent as an incentive bonus for institutions with high placement rates (Grubb 1996, 106). Policies such as these, if they are based on reliable data (a big if), would improve the capacity of institutions to respond to changes in labor market demand for different fields.

Occupational programs are frequently more costly than academic programs. A number of states now provide differential funding for programs with different costs, either based on formulae or through negotiated budgeting. These efforts can improve performance by partially eliminating bias against high-cost programs (Grubb 1996, 106). Arum (1998) has found a relationship between higher graduation rates and higher levels of investment by states in vocational education at the secondary level. The connection between resources invested in occupational programs and educational outcomes should be investigated also at the postsecondary

level. If higher levels of investment are strongly related to lower dropout rates, the case for higher base budgets would be substantially strengthened.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2001), among others, have suggested that proprietaries may be outperforming community colleges in recent years. More systematic studies of the relative performance of the two sectors would be valuable, given the possibility that their case studies are not representative. If Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum are correct, however, community college leaders should be looking more closely at the proprietaries for ways to improve their performance in occupational training and placement. One advantage of the proprietaries discussed by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum needs no further study. It seems clear enough that institutional policies to encourage linkage between instructors and local employers would be helpful. At the moment, within community colleges, these linkages are haphazard and fortuitous for the most part. New policies might, for example, include a merit pay category for instructors who devote time to interviewing local employers and engaging in placement-related activities.

Notes

1. For an excellent study of alternative definitions of transfer students, see Bradburn and Hurst (2002).

2. Specific fields within these broad categories may be particularly highly valued in the labor market. Studies cited in Philippe (2000) find particularly high rates of return, for example, in the following programs: digital systems, facilities technology and maintenance, manufacturing process technology, dental hygiene, and nursing.

3. For a useful overview of the history of proprietary schools and their relations with community colleges, see the articles in Clawes and Hawthorne (1995).

4. This theme of differences between charter and network-organized labor markets has a parallel in the work of Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre (1986). Maurice and his colleagues compare the French charter system with the German network system and come to similar conclusions about the superiority of the network-organized system.

5. *The Diverted Dream* (Brint and Karabel 1989) roots these promises in the public character of community colleges and ultimately in the ideals of a democratic-republican polity. The public character of community colleges remains highly relevant, in my view, both for purposes of perspective and as a subject of empirical investigation. Empirically, community college attendance appears, for example, to be associated with higher levels of civic engagement than proprietary school attendance among otherwise comparable students (Persell and Wenglinsky 2002).

6. Foundations have continued to play an important, though contradictory, role in recent years. The Ford Foundation, for example, has funded studies of community colleges with high transfer rates, while the Sloan Foundation has funded projects aimed at encouraging the rationalization of community college activities in a direction compatible with business interests and practices.

7. Community college leaders have long proposed a number of similar explanations for high dropout rates: students choose alternative pathways through college, stopping out, temporarily dropping out, or switching between a variety of schools as they go along. No doubt, this is empirically true for many students today (see Adelman 1995). The conclusions drawn from this empirical truth, however, depend on the observer. Where economists see signs of hidden rationality in students' lack of clarity or motivation, educators see a chance to clarify and motivate, and sociologists see structural barriers that can, at least at times, be overcome.

8. Some exceptions exist to this trend in the deterioration of the academic transfer function. For useful case studies of academically oriented community colleges in urban areas, see Shaw and London (2001) and Rousehe, Rousehe, and Ely (2001).

9. The study addresses changes in the labor market between the early 1980s and the early and mid-1990s. It compares the work experiences of two cohorts from the National Longitudinal Studies—one aged twenty-eight to thirty-six in 1981 and another aged twenty-eight to thirty-six in 1994.

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