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Four-Year Graduates Attending Community Colleges As Serious Credit Students

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Introduction

The community college has often been described as a "second chance" institution for students who have failed in previous educational efforts or who have stopped short of reaching a desired level of educational attainment. For example, low grades in high school may have prevented some high school graduates from attending their "first choice" school. Others, because of grades or difficult life circumstances, may not have graduated from high school. Older students may be returning to education from low-skill jobs because they fear that the prospect for these jobs is bleak in today's economy.

Another type of second-chance student is the traditional four-year undergraduate who is compelled to attend community college until his or her cumulative grade point average is sufficient to allow return to a four-year college. These students have been defined as "reverse transfers" because they reverse the traditional progression from two-year colleges to four-year institutions.

A quite different kind of second-chance student is one who enters the community college after having successfully completed a four-year degree or higher. These students have already demonstrated their academic ability. Many are looking for a second chance of a different sort: getting their first economically successful job; starting a new career (some after successful long-term positions); exploring what they really want to do for a career; or developing serious, creative, self-enrichment interests. The research literature addresses this population to a limited extent, but much more needs to be understood about this growing population. Prospective four-year college students and their parents, governmental policy developers, and administrators and faculty in higher education join the

research community in an interest in this population.

This Brief is drawn from a report of a qualitative study conducted at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina. The study took two approaches—a telephone survey of four-year graduates who had completed at least 15 credit hours at that community college, and an examination of student records to describe the enrollment trends of this population over a ten-year period. The results from these two approaches were compared with the findings reported in the literature.

Findings

Enrollment trends

Nationally, the population of baccalaureate reverse transfer students is substantial and appears to have stabilized at about ten percent of all community college credit students. An early nationwide study (Heinze & Daniels, 1970) found that 9 percent of all community college students were reverse transfers. A decade later, Hudak (1983) reported a reverse transfer population of 16 percent—an increase of 7 percent in just over a decade. (These two studies did not differentiate between reverse transfers with and without four-year degrees.) Other studies estimated the reverse transfer population to range between 5 and 13 percent (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Hogan, 1986; Mitchell, 1984; Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Ross, 1982; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984). There appears to be little growth since the 1980s. However, because many community colleges may not identify all of the reverse transfer students in their populations, there is good reason to believe that these students may be undercounted (Delaney, 1995).

In the fall of 1996, Central Piedmont Community College had over one thousand students (1,104)—a little more than 7 percent of the school's total enrollment—who had previously earned a baccalaureate degree. This study included students in the count only if they had completed at least 15 credit hours at the community college; other studies had not imposed this condition. Therefore, the finding of 7 percent is within the 5 to 13 percent proportion reported in the literature. Although the proportion of baccalaureate reverse transfer students increased at Piedmont in two of the last three years, the increase was small.

Demographic and student status characteristics

The demographic and student status characteristics of the baccalaureate reverse transfer student are fairly consistent in the research literature, but the generalizability of these findings to the total population could be strengthened. In the research literature, the typical baccalaureate reverse transfer student is male, over 40, and white. These students are employed full-time and attend the community college part-time.

Very few of the respondents at Central Piedmont were of traditional college age. Over half were 41 or older; over 80 percent were over 30. More than 80 percent were white; slightly more than ten percent were black. The typical baccalaureate reverse transfer student at Central Piedmont was part-time: almost nine out of ten were attending the community college on a part-time basis, with about two-thirds taking only one course.

As a group, these students are serious about their education and show a high level of academic achievement. One-fifth of them had earned a straight A average, and over 80 percent had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. About one-half of the respondents reported reaching their educational goals or being very close to reaching them. Almost all of the remaining students reported that they were continuing to work toward achieving their goal. It should be noted, however, that this study did not investigate how individuals persist over time at the community college. There is no clear pattern in the literature.

Just over 60 percent were in academic programs in the technical or vocational area. Of these students, nearly one-fifth were designated non-specific technical, and the rest were in specific technical programs (e.g., computer systems, engineering, paralegal). Nine percent of the students were majoring in a health field. The specific majors with the largest concentration of baccalaureate reverse transfer students were, in descending order: computer, paralegal, business/accounting/international, physical therapy, engineering related, interior design, industrial-manufacturing related, horticulture, and electronics.

Educational and work backgrounds of baccalaureate reverse transfer students

Contrary to expectations, the majority of baccalaureate reverse transfer students have four-year degrees in *career* areas, not the liberal arts. Moreover, most students in this group have considerable, not limited, work experience. At Central Piedmont, about half of the students had worked for over five years before returning to the community college, and the average number of years worked was 16 years. These findings dispel the belief held by some that baccalaureate reverse transfer students are primarily liberal arts majors who could not find jobs after graduating from a four-year institution. These

findings support Hogan (1986), who reported that many reverse transfer students were employed in professional and managerial roles prior to enrolling in a community college.

These findings reflect the restructuring of the American economy (Handy, 1989). The middle-level management sector—normally requiring a BA degree—has been greatly reduced in recent years. These displaced workers seek more secure jobs in growing sectors of the economy—technical and health-related jobs. (These jobs typically require more than high school but less than a four-year degree.) Individuals are increasingly being forced to abandon plans for a vertical ascent of a single career ladder and recognize that viable careers can also be horizontal and even discontinuous. As fast-paced technological developments and increased global competition continue to change the nature of jobs, it is likely that multiple careers will become commonplace. It is also likely that many individuals will interweave their careers with periods of study (Handy, 1989).

Reasons for enrolling

Traditional reverse transfer students—those without a four-year degree—come to community colleges because of such factors as academic failure, uncertainty about a major, or problems with adjustment while attending a four-year school (Hogan, 1986; Kintzer, 1973). In sharp contrast, baccalaureate reverse transfer students typically have strong academic credentials and firm career aspirations. Consistent with previous findings, this study found that almost eighty percent of the baccalaureate reverse transfer students at Piedmont Central Community College came with career intentions, and most of those (56 percent) intended to prepare for a new career.

However, although the majority attends primarily for career reasons, many baccalaureate reverse transfer students have multiple, linked goals for enrolling at a community college. At Central Piedmont, one-third of the baccalaureate reverse transfer students had multiple goals, and it was their experience that one goal often led to another. For example, an initial personal interest led to a later career development goal, or an initial enrollment for career reasons led to classes for personal enrichment. Significantly, students tended to see their goals as naturally linked, not separate or mutually exclusive.

Many previous studies reported that the majority of reverse transfer students attended community college for personal-interest reasons, but those studies did not require students to have completed 15 credit hours to be included in the sample. At Central Piedmont, only a minority (about 15 percent) had enrolled for personal-interest reasons, and even these students were not casual attendees. Several

had completed a large number of credits, and many also reported career reasons for enrolling.

Thus, the profiles of typical baccalaureate reverse transfer students are more complex and numerous than previous research has indicated. Prior research was primarily conducted with instruments—either structured surveys or interviews—that were based more on what was known about student profiles from other populations than the unique characteristics of the baccalaureate reverse transfer student. The design of this study, with open-ended personal interviews of students, permitted the complexity and breadth of different types of these students to emerge. We identified several prototypes:

Explorer. This group represents a departure from the common wisdom about the role community colleges play in the process that students use to choose a career. It is well known that many young, first-time students enroll at a community college to explore different curricula to decide on a career. The respondents in this study pointed out that the community college is also an ideal place for individuals with considerable college and work experience to explore for a new career. In particular, these students mentioned as important factors the accessibility—in terms of both cost and location—and the comprehensiveness of offerings at community colleges. As jobs become more varied and complex, the importance of career exploration as a goal for all types of students will increase.

Personal enrichment. About one-fourth of the respondents attended Piedmont Central for personal enrichment. It was anticipated that the study's design—requiring 15 hours of credit at the community college for a student to be included in the study—would eliminate those students from the sample. However, there is apparently a group of consistent personal-enrichment students (as well as those who attend on a more limited basis). Most of these persistent attendees took courses in the arts, without any linkage to a current or future career, but others indicated that their initial self-enrichment interest might lead to a career change.

Career and skills update—for their current jobs. The career and skills update function is what was expected for this student population. These students explained that they enrolled in computer courses because competency in the latest computer applications had become a requisite for continuing success in their fields. They noted that their prior formal education did not include an adequate foundation in technology—and that even if it had, the training would be outdated today. As a result, they particularly value community college courses that are technologically up-to-date and that have an orientation to today's workplace. These students expected that the update function would become an important part of their lives as long as they remain in the workplace.

Supplemental-income seekers. About ten percent

of the respondents in this study returned to the community college to gain skills in an occupational area secondary to their principal jobs. Three students, for example, took courses in real estate; one earned a broker's license. The number of respondents attending community college to gain skills needed to generate supplemental income through a secondary career is consistent with the working patterns of many Americans today. It has become increasingly common for professionals and managers to seek a second career on the side.

New career seekers. Over half (56 %) of the respondents in this study enrolled at the community college primarily because they were seeking a new career. (Many other students mentioned a new career as a possibility, but this was not the major reason they returned to college.) Perhaps one of the most revealing findings of this study was the breakdown of the new-career seekers into different subgroups. Prior research tended to place all of these respondents into one category, but this study revealed four distinct groupings:

1. Individuals who never intended to use their four-year degree to secure employment. Contrary to the common assumption, respondents who never intended to use their four-year degree to secure employment comprised only a small part of the sample. Although most of these had earned degrees in the arts—difficult to market in today's workplace—one had earned a degree in a career area.
2. Individuals who worked only a short time before deciding to return to school. All of these respondents entered community college career programs that had strong links to the workplace—computer science, postal technology, and nursing.
3. Individuals who were displaced from their jobs by external forces such as the bankruptcy of an employer or the restructuring of an industry. All of these students decided to seek careers in technical or health-related areas. It would be interesting to learn why these respondents did not seek to continue their education on a graduate level.
4. Individuals who were driven primarily by internal, personal motivation to change their careers. Almost 20 percent of the students fell into this grouping. The nature of the life circumstance driving this change was different for each person. In most cases, the change represented an entirely new career path—for example, business to physical therapy, or photography to civil engineering.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be argued that the earliest roots of the American community college lie most firmly in the soil

of the transfer mission—students transferring from two-year colleges to four-year institutions. However, from its inception, the community college mission has been comprehensive, including vocational/technical education, continuing education, and community service (Cohen and Brawer, 1989). Historically, the community college mission has changed to meet the educational needs of the community that it serves.

A good example of this accommodation process is the phenomenon of the reverse transfer student. The early leaders of the community college movement probably never envisioned that community colleges would include reverse transfer students. Certainly, the founders of the community college did not expect baccalaureate graduates to attend the community college as serious, long-term, degree-seeking students.

The baccalaureate reverse transfer student represents a very different type of second-chance student for the community college. Although this study has broadened our understanding of these students, there is much more to be understood about this population, and further research is imperative. A quantitative national survey could reveal the diversity within this population and focus on the issues that are key to understanding its complexities. Since the two populations of reverse transfer students—those who had previously earned a baccalaureate degree and those who had not—are quite different in terms of student and demographic characteristics and educational goals, it is important that researchers study these populations separately. Unfortunately, most studies conducted in this area have been limited to a single institution. It has been almost 15 years since the last national study was conducted (Hudak, 1983), and that study did not differentiate between the two types of reverse transfer students. Since both reverse transfer populations comprise a significant proportion of the community college population, a comprehensive national study is overdue.

A comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this new type of second-chance student will have implications for the way community colleges provide instruction and student services and the way they market to their key constituencies. At this point, reverse transfer populations have not reached the status of a new mission area. But as the economy continues to restructure, enrollment in community college may increasingly become a logical choice for many baccalaureate graduates. Given its size and unique nature, this population may eventually comprise a distinct mission area for the community college. Understanding more about this population will help us prepare for that eventuality.

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