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The Effect of Student Goals on Community College Performance Measures

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The graduation rates of community colleges have gained more attention recently as state and federal policymakers and accreditors increasingly assess college performance based on student outcomes rather than traditional input indicators, such as enrollment levels and faculty qualifications. At first glance, community college graduation rates appear to be low. In the first six years after initial enrollment at a community college, only 36 percent of all students earn a certificate or an associate or bachelor's degree, according to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study of 1996-2001 (BPS:96/01, U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Further, there are significant gaps in achievement among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, and between low- and high-income community college students. Within six years, 40 percent of White students earn some degree or certificate, but only 27 percent of Black and 31 percent of Hispanic students do. Moreover, for Blacks, the majority of those credentials are certificates, not degrees.

Whether graduation rates accurately reflect community colleges' performance and the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and practices is sharply debated, however. College faculty, administrators, and supporters present four general reasons why the rates are misleading. First, many of the economic, social, and academic problems that confront community college students and thwart their retention and graduation are beyond the control of the colleges. Second, the Student Right-to-Know (SRK) institutional graduation rate, which all colleges are required to report to the Department of Education, is said to present a biased picture of college performance. Third, the fact that short-term occupational certificates and baccalaureate transfers are important components of community college completion complicate efforts to measure community college "graduation" rates. Fourth, many community college students are pursuing goals other than degrees.

This Brief summarizes a Community College Research Center (CCRC) study primarily concerned with the last criticism. (Other CCRC publications address the other three criticisms.) Using national data, the study analyzed the extent to which community college students' reasons for enrolling and their educational goals and expectations influenced students' outcomes. Based on the findings, we present suggestions for how colleges should approach student goals and aspirations in seeking to improve student success.

The Nature of Student Goals

Many students arrive at community college intending to complete a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree. Their intentions may not be very concrete, however. Some students may be "sampling" college because community colleges are often closer to their homes and cost less than four-year institutions. Other students have very specific goals, but they can be met by taking a small number of courses. The nature of the goals of students who attend community colleges is relevant to the low graduation rates found at many of these institutions. Indeed, a study published by the National Center for Education Statistics (Horn & Nevill, 2006) suggests that when students' goals are taken into account, community college outcomes are better than they seem. The researchers found that only 49 percent of sampled students met the criteria for students "more committed" to earning a degree: attending college at least half time during the year under study and reporting that earning a community college degree or certificate or transferring to a four-year institution was a reason for enrolling. According to the study's authors, "[t]he results suggest that if community college graduation rates were based on students' expressing a clear intention of transfer or degree completion rather than simply being enrolled in a formal degree program, they would be considerably higher" (p. x).

Study Sample and Methods

Our analysis of student goals and outcomes is based on evidence from BPS:96/01 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), which consists of a nationally representative sample of students who enrolled in college for the first time in the 1995-1996 academic

year. The students were re-interviewed twice, with the last interview conducted in 2001, so they could be tracked over six years across multiple institutions and even into the labor market. We used these longitudinal data and an in-depth multivariate analysis to consider the educational outcomes after six years of the 1,080 students in the BPS sample whose first postsecondary enrollment was at a community college.

Study Findings

Primary Reason for Enrolling

To assess enrollment intentions of students as they began in college, BPS asked entering community college students “What is your primary reason for enrolling in this school?” and provided several response options. Fifty-seven percent said that they enrolled primarily to “obtain a degree or certificate” or to “transfer to a baccalaureate institution,” while 40 percent stated that they “wanted job skills” or “personal enrichment,” although they may also have intended to seek degrees as a means of attaining those primary goals.

Outcomes for the total sample. Six years after enrolling, 30 percent of students who stated that their primary reason was “job skills” still earned a certificate or degree or transferred, suggesting that many of them indeed sought to attain their non-degree goals by earning postsecondary credentials, rather than just by taking a limited number of courses. Yet, three-fifths of these students were no longer enrolled and had not completed any degree.

In contrast, the students who stated that their primary reason for enrolling was transfer to either a two- or four-year college were much more likely to complete a degree: 40 percent had completed some degree or certificate, and almost half of those had earned a bachelor’s. Interestingly, students who said that their primary goal was “personal enrichment” also had high completion and transfer rates; they were, in fact, more likely to earn a degree or a certificate or to transfer than were students whose primary goal was a “degree or certificate.”

Completion differences based on student characteristics. To predict the probability that community college students would complete a degree or certificate or would transfer within six years, we conducted a regression analysis using the BPS sample. The analysis took account of variables for full- or part-time status, gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, age (traditional college age or older), prior academic achievement, and socioeconomic status (SES), in addition to variables for students’ reasons for enrolling.

We found that Black students had a 20 percent lower probability of completing compared with White students. There was no distinguishable difference in completion probabilities among the other race categories compared with Whites. Regarding SES, it is

widely believed that the influence of social class operates primarily through the parent’s education level, and we indeed found that students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree were 15 percent more likely to complete than those whose parents had no more than a high school degree. Students who enrolled in remediation were 16 percent less likely to complete than those not so enrolled.

Students who stated transfer as a primary reason for enrolling were 22 percent more likely to complete than students whose stated goal was to obtain job skills. There was no statistically significant difference in the probability of completion among students who stated that they were seeking a credential or were enrolling for personal enrichment.

Goal attainment. Using the same method as we used to analyze student outcomes in general, we analyzed whether students achieved the specific goals they indicated upon entry to college. (Note that we did not have a measure of whether students obtained desired job skills.) We found that students with a transfer goal were more likely to transfer or complete a degree than those students without such a goal. We found that 49 percent of students who enrolled with the goal of transferring actually did so within six years, and 55 percent either transferred or were still enrolled. (Note that this estimate of goal attainment did not count students who completed certificates or associate degrees without transferring.)

Still, accounting for students’ goals for entering did not increase community college completion rates substantially. Fewer than half of students with transfer as their primary reason for enrolling had actually transferred after six years. Only 36 percent of students who entered with the goal of earning a certificate or degree attained that goal within six years.

Long-Term Educational Expectations

BPS also asked students during their first year of postsecondary enrollment “What is the highest level of education you ever expect to complete?” Logically, the answer should understate a student’s aspirations since some students may aspire to a higher degree but believe that they could not really achieve that goal. The results suggest, however, that community college students are very ambitious over the long run: 70 percent of those in the BPS sample expected to earn a bachelor’s degree or more, 80 percent expected to earn at least an associate degree, and even 60 percent of students enrolled in a certificate program expected to earn at least an associate degree eventually. Nearly 80 percent of students whose primary reason for enrolling in their initial postsecondary institution was either to gain job skills or for personal enrichment still expected to earn some credential — at least an associate degree — ultimately.

Students’ long-term educational expectations were also correlated with their educational attainment: more

ambitious students earned higher degrees, and students with expectations for a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to transfer. However, the overall six-year graduation rate (earning a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree) hovered near 40 percent for all students except for the small number who explicitly expected to earn no credential and the students with unknown degree or certificate expectations. Only 27 percent of students whose long-term expectation was to complete an associate degree completed an associate or bachelor's degree within six years, and 57 percent were no longer enrolled, having completed no degree or certificate. Among those expecting to receive a bachelor's, 27 percent earned that degree or an associate degree after six years, while another 19 percent of that group was still enrolled in college. Overall, among those students whose long-term expectation was to earn a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree, after six years 50 percent or fewer of those students had either achieved their goal or were still enrolled (presumably with a chance to eventually achieve it).

Shifting Student Expectations

When analysts or community college educators suggest that students' expectations be taken into account when examining student outcomes and college performance, they may be implicitly assuming that expectations are stable and fixed characteristics. But student goals and expectations are the product of social processes that interact with the factors that determine college outcomes. Student expectations might change over the course of the college experience, as students solidify their understanding of their own interests and capabilities, or as the colleges themselves provide counseling, career planning, or good teaching that inspires students to gain confidence and causes them to raise their goals.

BPS asked students "What is the highest level of education you ever expect to complete?" in the 1995-96 school year and then again in 2001. In 1995-96, 37 percent expected to earn a bachelor's degree. By 2001, however, just under one third of that group (11 of that 37 percent) had raised their expectations, between a quarter and a fifth (8 of 37 percent) had lowered them, and the remaining half (18 of the 37 percent) had maintained their initial level of expectation. Students who started with very low expectations tended to raise them and those with the highest expectations were, not surprisingly, more likely to lower them. Such findings support the idea that goals and expectations can change over time.

Student Background and Educational Expectations

Research shows that there are clear economic benefits to credentials, and in particular to a bachelor's degree. Students from higher income families

understand this, therefore 81 percent of high-income students (those in the top quartile of household income) expected to earn a bachelor's or higher degree, but we found that only 60 percent of low-income students (those in the lowest income quartile) had such expectations. The low-income students were also considerably more likely to have unknown expectations or to have a certificate as their highest expected credential. Similarly, when asked their "primary reason for enrolling," low-income students were more than twice as likely to state that they wanted job skills, while high-income students were far more likely to be pursuing transfer. Although White and Black students had little difference in degree expectations, Hispanic students exhibited higher expectations for earning bachelor's and graduate degrees (79 percent of Hispanics had such expectations, versus 70 percent for Whites and 68 percent for Blacks).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our analysis of BPS:96/01 data shows that, controlling for personal characteristics, students with more ambitious goals were more likely to graduate, transfer, and persist. Measuring student outcomes against student reasons for enrolling gives mixed results, however. Those enrolling with the intention to transfer did have higher completion rates, but after six years, only about half of them had achieved their transfer goal.

Our findings concerning the effects of race and socioeconomic status suggest that there are gaps in student attainment even after accounting for differences in students' reasons for enrolling: Black students and those from lower SES backgrounds were less likely than White or higher income students to complete degrees.

We also found that expectations of students change as they experience college. The pattern of these changes suggests that many students who leave without any degree are not those who arrived with modest goals and then leave satisfied. A substantial number in our sample who did not earn credentials had lower educational aspirations than when they began, although we cannot say for sure what caused the students to lower their sights.

This fluidity of goals implies both that the colleges themselves can have an influence on student expectations and that researchers who analyze the effects of student goals should be careful when using goals recorded after the student has entered college. Colleges and researchers should take this into account when examining the relationship between student goals and outcomes.

Whether colleges have a responsibility to encourage their students to be more ambitious may depend on the type of students and the concreteness of their goals. It is one thing for adult full-time workers returning to college in order to learn some specific skills

for job advancement to say that they do not intend to seek a credential. We should be less willing to accept such unambitious goals from students of any age who have had little success in school or work, who have limited access to information about college and related employment opportunities, or who lack confidence about their abilities or knowledge about what they need to do to advance.

In particular, our finding that lower income students have lower expectations suggests that even when such students state that they do not seek degrees, colleges should strive to raise those students' aspirations, including helping them recognize the economic benefits of additional education and their potential for success in postsecondary education.

This study's findings are also relevant in addressing how well completion rates illustrate the performance of community colleges. Raw graduation rates, published without comment or an explanation of the context, will provide an unfairly negative impression of community college performance in most cases, since many factors beyond the control of the colleges hinder their ability to increase the rates. Community colleges are expected to open their doors to all students, regardless of academic or socioeconomic challenges, but are given limited financial resources to do so. Moreover, community colleges serve some students who are not seeking a degree; therefore, limiting college completion rates to community college students with concrete degree intentions would produce rates somewhat higher than the overall rates. The public, policymakers, and anyone else judging the performance of community colleges should be made aware of these considerations.

To evaluate the institutional performance of community colleges, it makes the most sense for colleges, policymakers, and researchers to use a variety of measures, including those that take goals into account. As CCRC has argued in other studies (see e.g., Bailey et al., 2006), methods of measuring college performance that adjust for the characteristics of the student body, such as family income, race, and age, may provide a fairer way to compare college effectiveness.

The challenges raised by the community college open-door mission should be recognized, but it does not follow that community colleges should be content with their performance. Some colleges are able to achieve higher student completion rates, even after taking account of the characteristics of the students they serve, but a majority of community college

students with degree or transfer goals do not end up earning a credential or transferring. Further, differences in reasons for enrolling and long-term expectations cannot explain the continued gaps in achievement among racial, ethnic, and income groups. Our analysis of changes in student expectations over the course of their college experience suggests that many students who leave without completing a credential or transferring have lower expectations of educational attainment than when they first enrolled. Hence, assumptions about community college student goals should not be used to justify low graduation rates or to justify complacency about efforts to improve student outcomes overall and to reduce disparities between groups.

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