

**DO SUPPORT SERVICES AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
ENCOURAGE SUCCESS OR REPRODUCE DISADVANTAGE?**

**An Exploratory Study of Students in Two Community Colleges**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the ways that student support services in community colleges inadvertently perpetuate and legitimate disadvantage. Using interview data from students at two colleges in the northeast, we find that although support services are open to all students, only those who come to the college with pre-existing social and cultural resources can take advantage of them. However, because they are presented as open-access, students not able to make use of support services interpret their failure to progress toward a degree as personal, rather than structural.

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## Introduction

The role of community colleges in encouraging social mobility in America has long been debated within the sociology of education (Clark, 1960; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Cohen & Brawer, 1989). Because they are open-access, low-cost, and convenient, these institutions are generally seen as providing a route to a college credential for those students who may otherwise be excluded from postsecondary education. Community colleges also have the stated mission of encouraging access to a postsecondary credential for all students, and staff members are generally committed to helping disadvantaged individuals succeed in college.

But sociologists and others have noted that community colleges may not actually encourage postsecondary access and social mobility; they may instead perpetuate class stratification and reproduce inequalities, all while legitimating these inequalities by expressing an ethos of meritocracy. This paper contributes to this debate by exploring the ways that structures within community colleges may reproduce and legitimate inequality. We examined student use of support services at two community colleges in the northeast, and identify the ways that these services—although intended to encourage degree attainment by disadvantaged students—may unintentionally serve as additional stratifying mechanisms.

We find that although support services technically are open to all students, only those who come to the community college with pre-existing social and cultural resources can take full advantage of them. Therefore, students lacking such capital are further disadvantaged because they miss valuable opportunities that could encourage their persistence. However, because these services, and the colleges themselves, are presented as open-access and available to all, those students not able to make use of them blame themselves and interpret their failure to progress toward a degree as a personal, rather than a structural, failure. Thus, the system is legitimated.

## Background

The mission of community colleges is to provide access to a postsecondary credential for students who may not otherwise be able to attend college. This mission is explicitly noted on the website of the American Association of Community Colleges, which states:

Community colleges are centers of educational opportunity. They are an American invention that put publicly funded higher education at close-to-home facilities... they [are] inclusive institutions that welcome all who desire to learn, regardless of wealth, heritage, or previous academic experience (www.aacc.nche.edu, accessed 1/4/07).

As a result, community colleges hold a place in the public eye as institutions dedicated to achieving the American ideal of equal opportunity and social mobility.

Because of their convenient location, open access, and low cost, community colleges tend to enroll students who are more socially, economically, and academically disadvantaged than do other postsecondary institutions. For example, nearly 30 percent of community college students are Black or Hispanic, as compared to 20 percent of students enrolled in four-year public and private postsecondary institutions (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Approximately one-fourth of community college students come from families earning 125% or less of the federal poverty level, as compared to one-fifth of four-year college students (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Entering freshman at community colleges are more likely to need to take at least one remedial course than are their peers at four-year colleges, and are likely to need to spend a longer time taking such courses (US Department of Education, 2004).

In order to help their students overcome these disadvantages, community colleges have implemented an array of student support services. These services take on many forms and address a variety of student needs. According to Purnell and Blank (2004), the student services offered by community colleges fit into one of five categories (p. 7):

- *Academic guidance and counseling*, through which students gain information on educational and course planning and graduation requirements;
- *Academic supports*, such as tutoring, through which students receive additional help in meeting their academic goals;
- *Personal guidance and counseling*, such as mental health counseling or crisis intervention;
- *Career counseling*, through which students receive information on careers; and

- *Supplemental services*, such as child care or transportation assistance.

Grubb (2001) notes that these services can be organized in various ways. Some colleges provide an array of services in a distributed, or uncoordinated, way. In this model, a wide range of services exists on a campus, and students access them as needed. This allows services to be tailored to the individual requirements of a given student's personal situation. Other colleges, however, centralize these services, providing them in a "one stop" model. In this model, services are offered through one office potentially streamlining and simplifying the process for students.

Offering an array of services enables institutions to meet community college students' varied needs. The prevailing philosophy is that such services can increase student success in college and persistence to a degree by providing them with additional resources and opportunities for becoming integrated into the college environment (see Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, for a review of the motivation for such services and their empirical rationale). In addition, providing student services can be seen as compensatory, helping disadvantaged students overcome their potential lack of information, cultural capital, or academic preparedness.

Despite recognizing the importance of services such as guidance and counseling for nontraditional students, researchers have pointed out that the efficacy of these services is somewhat doubtful. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) note that the organization of student support services in many colleges assumes that students have enough knowledge, social skills, and motivation to "seek out and make use of those available services." This assumption may not always be valid. Faculty may not be able to help, either, as many faculty members do not know what services the college provides or where to send students in need of assistance (Grubb, 2001).

In addition, these services tend to be "underfunded, underused, and sometimes embattled" (Grubb, 2006, p. 196). Because these activities generally do not generate revenue in the form of full-time equivalents (FTEs), they are an easy target for elimination when budgets are tight. In fact, community colleges in general have the fewest resources with which to educate the neediest students, as compared with other education sectors (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Over the last several years, the state revenues that the colleges are highly dependent upon have shrunk due to recessions and as other priorities, such as health care, have taken larger shares of state budgets. As enrollments have grown while funding has decreased, colleges have had to either raise tuition or cut spending.

Research on the effectiveness of student support services is sparse (Bailey & Alfonso, 2004; Grubb, 2001). Bailey and Alfonso (2004) note that much of the literature on the effectiveness of student supports focuses on four-year college populations, whose needs differ from students enrolled in community colleges. They also note that data to rigorously evaluate program effectiveness is not widely available.

However, it is clear that, despite their best efforts and investment in an array of strategies intended to increase persistence and graduation rates, student success at these institutions remains low. Six years after enrollment, 45 percent of community college students had earned a certificate or degree, or had transferred to a four-year institution (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). While eight percent of students were still enrolled, 47 percent had left school without earning a credential (Bailey et al., 2005). Although these statistics include some students who enter the community college with goals other than degree attainment or transfer, it is clear that many community college students do not persist toward an educational credential, despite institutions' best efforts to support them in doing so.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sociologists have used a variety of theoretical frameworks to explore the role of community colleges in society. As Dougherty (1994) points out, arguments have traditionally taken one of three perspectives. Those writing from a functionalist perspective, such as Cohen and Brawer (1989), tend to view community colleges as serving a variety of societal needs, including preparing individuals for economic demands and democratizing access to postsecondary education. Conflict or Marxist theorists (for example, Bowles & Gintis, 1989) take the opposite view, emphasizing the ways that community colleges maintain economic stratification by preparing working class students for working class jobs, in effect limiting social mobility while hiding this purpose under a veneer of equal opportunity. Finally, institutionalists such as Brint and Karabel (1989) view community colleges as institutions with a unique role in society—to bridge the contradictions between the American ethos of social mobility and the realities of the social structure. Community colleges, in this view, serve to “manage ambition” of students by providing them access to a postsecondary credential—albeit not the bachelor’s degree students say they desire.

One can find some support for all of these perspectives—there is evidence that community colleges, with their generally low tuition and proximity, do increase access to higher education (see Bailey and Morest’s summary, 2006), yet one can also see conflict theory played out in the state-level struggles over resources that ultimately leave the colleges unable to make much of a difference in bringing about mobility. Certainly the tiered nature of American higher education reflects the Marxian and Weberian views that elites perpetuate their high social status by creating exclusionary social structures, with the result being the reproduction of inequality.

Theorists such as Lukacs (1971) and Gramsci (1971) help explain why the disadvantaged classes participate in the reproduction of inequality, rather than revolt against a system that does not provide them with true social mobility. Lukacs introduces the concept of “false consciousness,” in which actors do not see the contradictions inherent in capitalist society and come to believe that the system is “real” and immutable. Gramsci expands on this, noting that the hegemony of the elite class—their ability to control not only the method of production but also religion, education, media and ideologies—enables them to gain consent from lower classes. Through these mechanisms, the high social status of elites is legitimated.

In the United States, the ideology of meritocracy, that all people have a chance at economic and social success if only they prove themselves “worthy” enough, contributes to the legitimation of social reproduction. Elite institutions, such as schools and the media, perpetuate a Horatio Alger-like belief that all individuals can rise within the social hierarchy, thereby discouraging lower class individuals from recognizing that status is often reproduced over generations. Community colleges play an important role in this story. By providing access to higher education for all, and transfer to four-year institutions for some, they provide evidence that a college degree and its attendant economic gain is available to anyone willing to work for it. Because they are open-access institutions, community colleges provide a second chance at earning a postsecondary credential for those whose previous educational endeavors may have been unsuccessful.

These characteristics of community colleges are, of course, both real and important. From a conflict perspective, however, they mask the reality that most of those who enter a two-year college will not earn a four-year degree. And because the opportunity to succeed is theoretically open to all, those who fail to win in the “contest” of social mobility are seen as flawed individuals, not worthy of a four-year degree, rather than as disadvantaged by an exclusionary



system (Turner, 1960). The ability to blame the individual, rather than the system, leads to the legitimation of this process. Moreover, because the carrot of success in the future continues to be held out to all, those disadvantaged by the system do not fight it (Turner, 1960).

In addition to focusing on the ways that unequal outcomes are legitimated, some explanations of the reproduction of inequality examine the mechanisms by which inequality is perpetuated in the first place. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), for example, focus on the ways that elites define what “good” cultural knowledge is, and include or exclude others based on their possession or lack of this knowledge. Cultural capital consists of those symbols that have been deemed by elites to be valuable in a specific field. Dressing “properly” or using “correct” language patterns are examples of this; those who do not understand how to display their knowledge of these unwritten norms are excluded from high-status jobs and social positions. Cultural capital is transmitted within social classes, thereby limiting the access that lower class children have to high-status cultural knowledge.

Similarly, Coleman (1988) describes the ways that social connections, or social capital, can be used to create or inhibit economic success and social mobility. Relationships between individuals can be leveraged to access high-status positions in society. Individuals may gain valuable information, knowledge, or exposure to valued norms and behaviors via their personal relationships. And without such relationships, individuals may be denied access to valued social positions. Elite actors may pass this social capital to their children, thereby perpetuating their advantage.

Students may bring both social and cultural capital to school, and schools—as institutions established by elites—value the possession of high-status capital. Thus, schools are structured such that students who lack this capital, those from deprived backgrounds, are further disadvantaged in such a setting where they cannot compete with those who arrive better-off (Bourdieu, 1977). However, because the possession of social and cultural capital is presented as an objective criterion for success, actors do not recognize the advantages that the possession of such capital creates.

In this paper, we use the conflict perspective to argue that community colleges inadvertently perpetuate inequality, despite their best intentions to do the opposite. In doing so, they legitimate unequal access to postsecondary credentials by creating structures that appear to be open-access, easy to use, and fair. In other words, through the very act of offering a wide

range of support services, particularly when these services are offered in an uncoordinated way, colleges perpetuate the notion that those who cannot effectively use such services are not worthy of a college degree. The locus of success or failure is shifted away from the structure of the institution and onto the student.

This argument in many ways mirrors that of Rosenbaum and his colleagues (2006). They examine community colleges and find that the organization of these institutions actually does a disservice to students. They describe a variety of ways in which this is so, including the ways that colleges require students to navigate support services on their own. They note that the low levels of student success in community college may be a result of the structure of the colleges, rather than characteristics of the students. Like Rosenbaum and his colleagues, we move the focus of analysis away from the individual toward the structure of the organization. However, we take this argument a step further by examining the mechanisms through which student disadvantage is not only perpetuated but legitimated.

### **Methods and Data**

We conducted a qualitative study of student persistence in community colleges to explore, among other things, how institutional support services contribute to or hinder student progress toward a degree. We conducted interviews with community college students during their second semester of enrollment,<sup>1</sup> and re-interviewed the students six months later, whether they remained enrolled or not.

Participants were students in two urban community colleges in the northeast enrolling significant numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students (we refer to these institutions by pseudonyms, Northern Community College and Eastern Community College). The first interviews were conducted during the spring of 2006, with follow-up interviews in the fall of 2006. This paper examines both the first and second rounds of interviews to identify student use and knowledge of the institutional services available and to compare the knowledge and use of those services among students making and not making progress toward a degree, while taking into account those students' social and cultural capital.

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<sup>1</sup> Since we were interested in the progress of degree-seeking students, including only students who had persisted to a second semester of enrollment was appropriate, as it excluded those students who might be considered "experimenters" or who otherwise might not have had degree completion goals.

The institutional research office at each college generated a list of all students who were first-time enrollees in the fall of 2005 and returned for the spring 2006 semester. Non-matriculating and continuing education students, as well as those who already had earned a postsecondary degree elsewhere, were excluded from the list. We randomly selected students to invite to participate in the study.

In early 2006, we sent letters of invitation to 120 students. Due to a low response rate, we subsequently sent letters to an additional 56 students. Each student was also contacted by phone three times at various times of the day. Despite these efforts, we were able to schedule interviews with only 46 students (a 23% response rate). Two students were later dropped from the sample because they did not meet the selection criteria, such that our final sample included 44 students from the two colleges. Table 1 shows the demographic make-up of the sample. Participants were paid \$50 for each interview.

**Table 1:**  
**Demographics of the Full Sample**

Site	Gender		Race/ethnicity				
	Female	Male	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	White	Unknown
Eastern CC (25 students)	18	7	6	7	7	5	0
Northern CC (19 students)	10	9	5	3	0	9	2
Total (44 students)	28	16	11	10	7	14	2

Through phone conversations with students, we determined that the low take-up rate was due primarily to the many demands on students' time. Between school, work, and familial responsibilities, even an hour-long interview was impossible to schedule for many students. In addition, a significant number of students or their families did not speak English and so did not understand the nature of the research or were reluctant to participate in an interview.

Contacting participants for the follow-up interview in fall 2007 was an equally difficult undertaking. To schedule interviews, students were called once every three weeks during a three-month period and flyers were sent to their homes. Once interviews were scheduled, students

received a reminder telephone call and/or text message just prior to the meeting, yet some still did not attend their scheduled interviews. Other students never responded to requests for interviews despite telephone calls, flyers, and an increase of the monetary incentive from \$50 to \$75. By the end of the second round of interviews we had spoken to 36 of the original 44 students in the sample. Five students we spoke to several times, but were unable to interview because of time constraints and missed appointments; three students were never heard from. The fall 2007 responses of the students in the sample, as well as responses by student demographic characteristics, are shown in Table 2. The difficulty we had in recruiting and following up with students for the study, even while offering a cash stipend, is an indicator of the many demands and barriers faced by the students as they sought a postsecondary credential.

**Table 2:**  
**Second Round Responses by School and Demographic Characteristics**

	Eastern CC	Northern CC	Female	Male	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	Unknown
Second round participants (N=36)	21	15	22	14	8	13	8	6	1
Unable to* Schedule (N=5)	3	2	4	1	3	0	0	1	1
Never** Called Back (N=3)	1	2	2	1	0	1	2	0	0

\* "Unable to Schedule" are participants who did not show up for a scheduled interview, or students we spoke to, but never scheduled for a second interview in fall 2006.

\*\* "Never Called Back" are participants who never responded to repeated phone calls and flyer attempts to schedule the second interview in fall 2006.

During both waves of data collection, interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were semi-structured. They were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The spring 2006 interviews focused on students' initial experiences in college. We asked about their reasons for enrolling; goals; first and second semester courses; and use and knowledge of student services, such as counseling and tutoring centers. Finally, we asked about the challenges participants foresaw in completing their degree; where and from whom they sought and gained support and information about the college; and what the college could do to make it easier for them to

progress toward a degree. The fall 2006 interviews focused on students' decisions to continue in postsecondary education or not, and the challenges they faced in progressing toward their degree goals. We probed, in particular, for how the knowledge and use of available institutional services contributed to their progress toward a degree or lack thereof.

To generate a better understanding of the services offered at each institution, we conducted interviews with a range of college staff members. These included the president, vice president of student services, coordinator of developmental education, director of advising, director of additional support programs, and director of tutoring. In total, we interviewed seven staff members at Eastern and six staff members at Northern.

The transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo, a computer software program for analysis of qualitative interview data. We created codes addressing student knowledge and use of services, with close attention paid to student social and cultural capital using indicators such as parents' educational level. We compared the first and second interviews to identify which factors influenced students' progress toward a degree. We also coded student attributes, including race, socioeconomic status, and gender, as well as student progress toward a degree.

Once the transcripts were coded, we read the interviews thematically, examining the ways that students discussed various aspects of their college environments. For example, we read all transcript pieces related to student participation in a student success course, as well as all transcript sections related to advising. We sought themes that emerged from the data.

## **Findings**

### **Unequal Access to College Services**

The colleges in our study offered many common student support services, using a distributed model. They focused most of their attention on academic advising and support. They sponsored a range of offices and programs intended to provide students with information about course selection and graduation, including college-wide and departmental advising programs, as well as transfer offices. They also had a variety of academic support services, including tutoring and writing centers. Both colleges had specialized programs providing additional information

and support, including student success courses and programs targeted at special populations. The two colleges offered some career counseling and had job placement or career centers.

With the exception of some programs targeting traditionally disadvantaged minorities and first-generation college-goers, these services were open to everyone. In interviews, college staff expressed a belief that the services were well-publicized and effective. Interviews with students, however, indicate that even the most basic services were more easily accessed by students who possessed relatively high levels of social and cultural capital.

### Student Success course

Many colleges offer courses in student success (sometimes called College Survival or College 101) to help first-year students acclimate to the postsecondary environment. These courses orient students to the college, giving them information on things such as program planning, support services, financial aid, and graduation requirements. They also assist students in career planning, study skills and other life skills. Both colleges in our sample offered this course, and in interviews, college staff indicated that they believed that this course contributed positively to student outcomes. Research evidence from Florida supports this contention; students who enrolled in a Florida community college and took a student success course were eight percent more likely to earn a credential than their peers who did not do so, after controlling for characteristics such as race and college entrance exam score (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

Our qualitative research supports the notion that participating in such a course can encourage student success. Students at both schools generally found their Student Success courses to be helpful and informative. In fact, this course was the arena through which the vast majority of students gained the bulk of their college-related knowledge. When asked where they had learned about other student support services, respondents invariably replied that they had done so through their College Success class. The following quotes provide examples of the ways in which this course helped students learn about and gain access to valuable college services.

I have a better understanding of a lot of things. I understand more. I know who to talk to, where to go, how I could go about doing this, and I know I could take advantage of a lot of the programs that's out there now, that otherwise I'd just be too shy or [think] they can't do nothing for me. (EF1)

[The teacher] tried her best to inform us how to use everything. How to use the library, the databases there, then she informed us about the tutoring center, about student activities that are going on, about the student center, about several clubs that they have here, about ways that you can learn effectively. (NF2)

Yeah, that's the class that gets you into college, like helps you when you want to transfer or if you're going for an Associate degree they'll tell you what you have to do. They help you out that way; basically they try to tell you how to plan out your years at [Northern Community College]. That's a good class. (NM3)

Despite its usefulness, not every student was required to take Student Success. At Northern, only full-time students had to enroll; part-time students were exempt. Students not required to take the course did not do so; none of the part-time students from Northern in our sample enrolled in the class.<sup>2</sup> One student even asked if she should take the class and was discouraged from doing so, saying, “I asked if I had to take this class, the Forum, and they said no I don’t have to because I’m a part-time student. I say what if I go back and be a full time. [They said] you’re not now, so you don’t have to” (NF10).

Students who did not take the course were clearly disadvantaged in their academic pursuits, as illustrated by another student, who did not receive tutoring assistance because she was not well-informed about the tutoring program at her college. “Sometimes they have like tutors in the building, peers. But I’ve never been to one myself personally because usually they charge. But besides that I don’t—I haven’t really—there’s no where else to really go to, like that for help” (NF12). Tutoring at Northern was, in fact, free, a fact that was discussed multiple times in the student success course.

The part-time students in our sample were more likely to have entered college with fewer resources than their full-time peers. They were more likely to work full time, thereby limiting the social networks they were able to form on campus and also limiting the amount of time they had to devote to exploring campus resources independently. These students also tended to be older, thus lacking family resources that could help them navigate college. The full-time students in our sample, in contrast, were more likely to have families that were supporting their college educations, financially and otherwise. Those whose pre-existing resources enabled them to attend college full-time were better able to acquire the contacts with people and the information that could help them navigate the college environment.

Thus, by virtue of college requirements regarding who must and must not take the College Success course, Northern Community College inadvertently created disadvantage and inequitable access to valuable information. An unintended consequence of the policy exempting part-time students from taking the Student Success course is that those students likely to be in most need of assistance did not get it, while their more advantaged, full-time peers did so.

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<sup>2</sup> Many full-time students also indicated that, had the course not been required of them, they would not have registered for College Success.



## Program advising

All students at both colleges were required to engage in some form of academic advising when registering for classes. For entering students, however, this advising consisted of meeting with a college counselor for a few minutes to determine their course schedule. According to our subjects, students met with whichever counselor was available, and if they had follow-up questions, usually met with a different counselor. These meetings were very general—although they were meant to ensure that students were meeting graduation requirements, they were not tailored to students’ interests or career goals.

The information gained through this form of advising ranged from adequate to incorrect. Most students felt that they received the most basic assistance—they registered for classes they needed, and were able to fulfill graduation requirements, but did not receive other useful information, such as which professors to take or how to put together a coherent academic plan spanning multiple semesters. One student described the process of signing up for classes with a college advisor as being like “throwing darts at a board” (NM6).

Other students received poor information through this process, often because of the depersonalized nature of the advisor-student relationship. One student, for example, was told by the counselor to take anatomy. Later in the semester, when she began failing the class, she spoke with her professor, who told her that she should have taken biology prior to taking anatomy, since she was an adult student and had last taken biology in high school a number of years before. The poor advising this student received led her to feel extremely frustrated and she discussed the possibility of dropping out of school, “Yeah, this class is making me not even want to be here. It’s too hard” (EF2). This student felt that a different advisor, more in tune with her individual situation and needs, could have given her better advice and perhaps helped her avoid academic frustration and a failing grade, as well as wasting her time and money.

More personalized academic advising was available to students at both schools, but only to certain sub-sets of students. At Northern, students who had declared a program major, such as nursing or criminal justice, could meet with a program-specific advisor. At Eastern, students who had completed approximately 30 credits were assigned a faculty advisor to guide them as they completed their degree.

However, at both institutions, this system created some confusion, and many students did not realize that these options were available. One student at Eastern, for example, was uncertain

as to whether her lack of personal advising was due to her status as a remedial student, or because she needed to sign up for an advisor on her own, saying,

Yeah, so you're able to check certain things [through the on-line information system] but a lot of things you're not able to check because you're on basic [remedial] level. Like, if I click 'advisor,' it will say 'not found' or 'not available.' Maybe because I haven't went there to maybe sign up for one... (EF11).

This student, who had earned her GED, did not have parents who had attended college, and worked full time, noted that she was unclear what the role of an advisor was and thus did not seek out strong advising.

At Northern, where access to program or faculty advisors was predicated on declaring a major, advantaged students were more likely to use this resource. This stemmed largely from the fact that students needed access to good information to even know that such advising was available to students in declared program majors. Students who had parents or friends familiar with the advising structure of the college were more likely to be aware of this fact, and to select a major accordingly. The availability of program-specific advisors was not well-advertised and often even students in declared majors did not know that they had access to this resource. Again, students with strong information networks—or more frequently, knowledgeable parents—were the ones most likely to take advantage of program-specific advising.

For example, NF21 had an uncle who worked at Northern Community College and directed her to a program advisor, allowing her to receive detailed information about her requirements. She said, “I actually talked to the nursing advisor. And he actually told me all the prerequisites I need. He gave me a list of everything I need for that and to apply for that.” In contrast, another student, whose parents did not have college degrees and who worked full time, did not have an advisor. He received course information from college staff that he would occasionally run into in the hallway. He said, “I just run into other people’s counselors. I’m running into somebody.” When asked if there was a specific person he could go to for advice, he replied, “I’m pretty sure I can, I just never got around to it” (NM27).

Students who did not have access to program-specific or faculty advisors were not always limited to the more general advising system described at the beginning of this section. Many students sought out helpful faculty or staff members who served as informal program advisors, offering guidance on course selection and graduation requirements, as well as more in-depth

program and career planning. Students generally found the quality of advising they received from these individuals to be much higher than the quality of advising they received from general college advisors. A particularly motivated, high-achieving full-time student had even given a name to the professor she tapped for program advising—“my casual counselor” (EF16).

For example, EF22 relied almost exclusively on an informal staff advisor, after finding the regular counseling system to be confusing and full of contradictory information. She said that the system “kind of confused me because I didn’t have the right information and the counselors weren’t helping me.” Through a classmate, however, she met a faculty member who served as an informal advisor. She described this process by saying,

So, I finally went to this counselor. I think it was my friend’s professor, and she registered me even though she is not a counselor but she did anyway. She knows how the people are supposed to go to the counselors. She gave me a curriculum. She did it in the computer and we printed it out. She told me what I’m eligible for and what I’m not because of my test scores. (EF22)

To access this type of advising, however, students needed high levels of cultural or social capital. They needed to understand that faculty and staff members could serve as academic advisors, and to know how to seek out knowledgeable staff members for this role. They also needed the cultural competence to approach potential advisors and enlist their help. Similarly, students needed access to strong social networks that could guide them towards knowledgeable and helpful college staff members. This could include peers, who might provide recommendations about potential advisors, or family members, who could suggest types of faculty and staff who are most likely to provide strong course advising. The student quoted above, for example, had a parent with a college degree, attended school full-time and was not working. She had cultural knowledge of college as a result, and also had the time to spend on campus making friends and meeting with professors.

### Special support programs

Both colleges offered additional support services specifically targeted at students most at-risk of dropping out prior to earning a degree. These programs, including the Educational Opportunities Fund (EOF) and Student Support Services Program (SSSP), are intended to provide additional counseling, tutoring, financial aid, and general assistance to first-generation,

low-income, or minority students. In theory, all students meeting eligibility criteria should have access to these programs.

However, at both schools, while the majority of the student populations were eligible, very few students actually participated. According to interviews with staff members, approximately 250 students at Eastern and 240 at Northern participated in the special programs during the 2005-2006 school years (out of college enrollments of approximately 6000 students at each institution). To some extent, the low proportion of participating students was due to limited funding for each program. But it also stemmed from students' lack of awareness of these opportunities.

Extra support programs at both institutions were poorly advertised. Recruitment came through staff visits to selected classes or the posting of flyers on campus walls. Students who were not in those classes, or who did not have the time or inclination to read the myriad flyers pasted to bulletin boards, were unlikely to learn about the existence of these services.

Five students in our sample participated in EOF or SSSP. Many learned about the programs through their social networks, usually from friends or classmates who already participated. Explained EF2,

Actually they don't tell you about it. I just heard it from somebody that's in my class. I don't know if it's a secret but it's not really out in the open. People hear about it from word of mouth, and they just happen to tell me, and I was like, oh wow I really need that, so I went.

Thus, students who had access to more advantaged social networks, including friends who had attended college or were experiencing success in college, were more likely to learn about and draw upon additional support. Ironically, students needed relatively high levels of social capital in order to access these programs, which were intended to ameliorate inequalities in student access to such capital.

## Relationship Between Student Use of Services and Progression Toward a Degree

The findings presented here indicate that students with higher levels of social and cultural capital have access to more, and more effective, sources of support within community colleges. But unequal access to such supports is only problematic if the use of these services is related to degree attainment. Is student success likely to be related to students' social and cultural capital, mediated through their ability to access valuable support services? In examining this question, we limited our analysis to those students who completed both interviews (N=36).

To explore these relationships, we coded students as having low, medium, or high levels of capital. Students were coded as to whether they: had one parent with a college degree; received a high school diploma (as opposed to a GED); had a sibling or other relative who had attended college; reported having networks of individuals outside of school (such as employers) who provided them with information about college; and reported being part of a network of peers through which they received information about college. Students who had four or five of these characteristics were coded as having high levels of capital. Those with three of these characteristics had medium levels of capital, and those with two or fewer had low levels of capital. Not surprisingly, only four students were coded as having high levels of capital. Fourteen students had medium levels, and the remaining 18 students had low levels of capital.

We then coded students for their use of support services, counting how many of the following students reported: taking the Student Success course; meeting with a program or faculty advisor; meeting with an informal staff or faculty advisor; using a tutoring or writing center; use of other services such as job placement or supplemental supports; and participating in EOF or SSSP.<sup>3</sup> On average, students used 2 services. The range was from none to five.

Finally, we coded students as to the level of progress they were making toward their degree. These codes were arranged on a continuum from least to most successful. At the lowest end of the spectrum were those students who were not enrolled in college during their third semester. Next were those students making *no progress* toward a degree. These students were defined as those who had repeated one or more levels of developmental courses (indicating that

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<sup>3</sup> Because all students were required to meet with general college advisors at least once in order to register for courses, we did not code their use of this support service.

they were struggling to attain college-ready academic proficiency) or who had failed more than one for-credit course.

Students making *some progress* were those who had progressed from developmental to credit-bearing courses; moved up one developmental level each semester and also earned some college credits, or who passed all but one college-credit course. These students were moving forward on their educational paths, but had not yet accrued a significant number of college credits and remained at risk of not completing their degrees. Finally, the most successful students were coded as making *steady progress*. These students had passed all of their college-credit courses and/or had moved out of developmental education after one semester.

Eight students were not coded for their progress, as we were unable to contact them for a second interview. Of the remaining 36, six (17 percent) were not enrolled. Four (11 percent) were enrolled but making no progress toward a degree. Fourteen (39 percent) were making some progress, and 12 (33 percent) were making steady progress.

Not surprisingly, students in our sample who began with higher levels of resources progressed toward a degree at higher rates. One hundred percent of students entering college with high levels of capital made steady progress toward a degree. Thirty-six percent of students with medium levels of capital, and 17 percent of students with low levels of capital did so. Analyzing the data another way, one-fifth of students with medium levels of capital and nearly one-third of students with low levels of capital were unlikely to earn a degree, either because they were not enrolled in college at the time of the second interview or because they were coded as making no progress toward a credential.<sup>4</sup>

Students in our sample who arrived at college with higher levels of capital accessed support services at higher rates. Students entering college with high levels of capital reported using, on average, 2.25 support services. Their peers with medium levels of capital reported using 2.1 services, and those with low levels of capital reported using an average of 2.0 services. Though this difference appears small, it is important to remember that they exist on a scale of one to five, so there is not much of a range in which they can vary.

Is the greater degree of progress made by students with high levels of capital related to their higher use of support services? With a small sample and in an exploratory study, it is not possible to analyze this with certainty. However, it is clear from the data that use of support

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that a high proportion of students in our sample progressed toward degrees.

services is related to progress toward a degree. Over 80 percent of students who used two or more services made progress toward a degree; 60 percent of students using fewer than two services did so. (It should be noted that some students making progress toward a degree reported using few services since they do not feel they need them—for example, they do not need tutoring since they are already receiving A's in their courses. Even accounting for this, students accessing fewer services progress toward graduation at lower rates than their peers who make use of the supports offered by the colleges.)

Moreover, students with low levels of capital who access support services make greater progress toward a degree than those who do not. Students with low levels of capital who nonetheless were making steady or some progress toward a degree used, on average, 2.3 services. Those who were not making progress used 1.6. In contrast, the use of services was irrelevant for students with high levels of capital—these students made steady progress toward a degree whether they used zero, two, or four services.

Thus, it is possible that using student services mitigates the influence of low levels of capital on degree attainment. In other words, if students entering community college with low levels of social and cultural capital are able to access and make use of student services, these services may help them make progress toward their degree goals, as intended. However, as we have demonstrated, student services in the community college are more accessible to those students who enter the institution with high degrees of capital. Thus, low-capital students are doubly-disadvantaged: first, because they enter college with fewer resources and second, because the resources that are intended to compensate for their lower level of capital are not easily accessed by them. Thus, those students entering the community college with relatively high levels of advantage maintained their privilege, while those who were disadvantaged fell further behind.

### **Legitimation of the Reproduction of Inequality**

Social reproduction theorists note that, not only are inequalities perpetuated through social structures, but that this process is hidden to actors. Individuals come to see the process of reproduction as normal or natural, and often as based on meritocratic rationales, rather than unequal access to opportunity. In this way, the reproduction of inequality becomes legitimated.

The perpetuation of advantage seen within the community college was legitimated through a number of mechanisms. First, students entered college with a strong internalization of the American ideology of meritocracy. They believed that lack of success was due to a failure on their part—that they were not smart enough or had not worked hard enough—rather than the result of institutionalized structures or disadvantage. For example, the student described earlier, who was told to take anatomy despite her lack of science background, attributed her lack of success in the course to her lack of time to study, rather than her poor preparation and advising when she said, “that’s probably why I’m lost in anatomy because I just don’t have time” (EF2). Although to an outside observer it was clear that the college had failed her by providing inadequate advising, she did not see it as so. Rather, she blamed herself, assuming that if she failed to make progress toward a degree, it was due to a shortcoming on her part rather than institutional barriers.

Students also expressed this sentiment when asked if there was anything the college could do to help them be successful. They invariably replied that it was their own responsibility, rather than the institution’s, to ensure their college success. One student expressed this sentiment when she said that to be successful, “I think you just got to work harder really. You can do whatever you want to do as long as you put your mind to it.” She continued by saying that there was nothing the college could do to encourage this success: “I don’t think that depends on the college. The college doesn’t tell you to act this way; that’s your job and you have to do your job how you do it...” (EF14).

Second, that college support services were technically available to all students reinforced the idea that it was the students themselves, rather than institutional structures, who were responsible for lack of persistence. Respondents believed that the college provided them with ample opportunities for success, not recognizing that those opportunities were effectively limited to a sub-set of advantaged students. Thus, they felt that if they did not take advantage of these opportunities, it was their own responsibility.

The end result was that students who were less successful did not recognize that their lack of success had as much to do with social structures as any innate ability on their part. They did not recognize that their lack of preexisting advantage created further disadvantage in navigating the college’s services and acquiring the help they needed.



## Conclusions

There is a strong ideology in the U.S. that status and wealth are conferred upon those who deserve it, and that anyone with the drive can move up the social hierarchy, despite evidence that social and economic class is generally reproduced across generations. Schooling is a primary mechanism that is held in public consciousness to encourage social mobility. The presence of community colleges in the United States is typically seen as a way of providing individuals with “second chances” at increasing their status and of ensuring that all students, regardless of social background, have access to postsecondary education.

Reproduction theorists have pointed out, however, that community colleges do not provide as much social mobility as is commonly believed. Many students do not transfer to a four-year institution and attain a bachelor’s degree, despite their desire to do so. As Clark (1960) points out, this is often due to structural features of the community college. The ideology of meritocracy, however, encourages students to see this as a personal failure, rather than a structural one.

This study provides evidence that the structures of community colleges may, in fact, perpetuate inequality. We explored the ways that support services—intended to increase the likelihood of success for disadvantaged students—privilege those students who possess social and cultural capital. The unintended consequence is that students entering community colleges with more resources are more likely to make progress toward their degrees, while their disadvantaged peers face additional barriers. Difference in preexisting resources is reproduced within the social system of the community college.

We found that support services, particularly information about the college in the form of a Student Success course, quality advising, and special support programs, are most available to those students who have the cultural and social resources to seek and take advantage of them. Students who enter the college without cultural capital are unlikely to have the cultural repertoires to approach faculty members for informal advising, for example. Students lacking social networks may also lack access to information that could help them navigate the college. Within our sample, there was a high degree of collinearity among social background, access to support services, and progress toward a degree. Thus, it appears that students’ backgrounds were being reproduced by the very structures meant to minimize such inequality. Moreover, the ethos

of meritocracy and open access found in the community college, and internalized by students, legitimated and hid this process.

Our findings lend support to the idea that disadvantaged students may benefit from what Grubb (2006) and others term “intrusive advising.” Such advising includes structured meetings with advisors, mandatory activities such as academic planning (like those found in student success courses), and close tracking of student success. Grubb points out, and our findings confirm, that “relying on the initiative of students themselves” to take advantage of student services is unlikely to improve student outcomes (Grubb, 2006, p. 218). Although a system of intrusive advising is difficult to implement due to the limited funding of community colleges, it seems one way to ensure that disadvantage is not reproduced by institutional structures and programs.

Our findings also mirror those of Rosenbaum and his colleagues (2006), and further document the ways that community colleges’ institutional structures actually create barriers to degree completion, despite their efforts to the contrary. However, we extend this analysis by demonstrating that these structures not only prevent social mobility, but serve to legitimize the process. The open-access nature of community colleges, and the presentation of student services as open to all students, serve to hide the fact that the attainment of a college credential is reliant not only on students’ academic merit, but on students’ possession of social and cultural capital prior to enrollment.

The story that we present here portrays community colleges in a somewhat negative light. It should be emphasized that college personnel, in creating and implementing student support services, aim to increase—not decrease—social mobility and degree attainment. Services are good-faith efforts through which colleges try to meet their mission of providing higher education credentials to students from all educational backgrounds. That they do not always achieve this aim is hidden to college personnel as well as students. Support services, as we have noted, are often under-funded and colleges do the best they can to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students with limited resources. Moreover, as actors in a stratified social system, the perpetuation of disadvantage through institutional structures is often hidden to college personnel, just as it is hidden to students.

That they do not always succeed at promoting mobility does not mean that community colleges or college personnel should be condemned or seen as failures. Rather, the findings

presented here should be seen as a jumping-off point for further revision of the ways that low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students are served within the community college. For example, rather than providing personalized advising to students who are already on their way to earning a credential, colleges should consider assigning all students their own advisor. Colleges should also consider making a student success course mandatory for all students in their first semester of a degree program.

Finally, this study was exploratory, and included a small sample at only two institutions. Although it mirrors the findings reported by other authors, additional research is needed to substantiate the findings and further examine the mechanisms by which advantage is perpetuated and legitimated in the community college.

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