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Our Research

CCRC conducts research on the major issues facing community colleges and contributes to the development of practice and policy that expands access to higher education and promotes success for all students. We carry out studies in eight related topic areas:

- The role of the community college
- High school to college
- Developmental education and adult basic skills
- Student services, financial aid, and other supports
- Online education and instructional technology
- Student persistence, completion, and transfer
- College to career and workforce education
- Improving community college institutional performance

These topic areas are described on page 3.

The End of the Cafeteria College?

Thomas Bailey



Since the early 2000s, community colleges have participated in a robust reform movement involving the dedicated efforts of thousands of community college leaders, faculty, and staff. These efforts have been driven in part by ambitious goals set by President Obama, a number of states, and various philanthropic organizations to substantially increase the proportion of Americans with college credentials. While success rates at community colleges have remained largely flat, it is nevertheless an optimistic and exciting time. Extensive experimentation, research, and evaluation has given

us a much clearer understanding of the central challenges facing community colleges and the strategies needed to overcome them.

What are these challenges? In a new book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, my CCRC colleagues Shanna Jaggars and Davis Jenkins and I describe how most community colleges employ a cafeteria-style, self-service model of education. The cafeteria model is designed around the goal of offering a wide variety of courses at low cost to many kinds of students. It arose from a national policy focus on providing abundant college access, coupled with a public financing system that ties funding dollars to the numbers of students colleges enroll. But a model geared toward increased college enrollments is not the best one to maximize student completions.

Under the cafeteria model, students face a bewildering array of options to consider. Navigating community college entails a series of high-stakes choices about what courses to take, which program to pursue, how and when to seek out academic support, whether to enroll full- or part-time, whether to seek a certificate or an associate or bachelor's degree, and whether and where to transfer. And students must make these choices largely on their own. The system offers broad flexibility, but it is also confusing and frustrating. It works for self-motivated students who have clear goals and a network of family or peer support, but it is often disastrous for students who do not possess these assets. Many students make poor decisions in navigating community college—including the decision to drop out.

The cafeteria-style selection of courses also impacts curriculum, instruction, and student supports. Courses within a program do not necessarily build upon one another; faculty teach in isolation from one another; and academic support and career services tend to be optional for students, detached

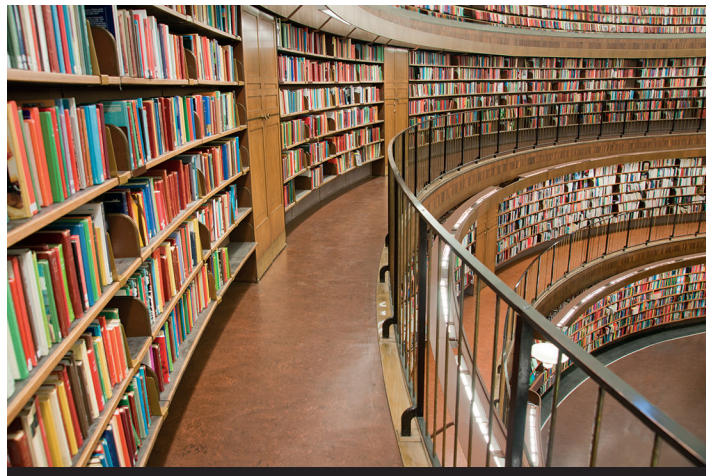
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The End of the Cafeteria College?

from courses and programs of study, and housed in different locations across the campus. Our research has convinced us that this “à la carte” organization of courses and services is a strong contributor to the low completion rates at community colleges.

In our book, we describe how promising reform initiatives have resulted in flat or modestly positive results that tend to fade over time. This is because most large-scale reform efforts have focused only on improving discrete pieces of the cafeteria model. For example, many developmental education reforms have worked to improve the courses within the developmental pipeline, but they have not connected that pipeline to college-level programs of study. Similarly, student success courses—which are designed to give students the skills they need to succeed in academic courses—often provide students with little opportunity to transfer new skills to their concurrent academic coursework. Moreover, because reforms tend to focus on individual elements of the student experience, most faculty in a college are unaware of, uninvolved in, and unaffected by reform efforts.



Under the guided pathways approach, the requirements and expected learning outcomes for each program are unambiguously defined, communicated clearly to students, and aligned with student end goals.

To achieve substantial improvements in student success, community college reforms require more fundamental organizational redesign. What would such a redesign look like? Imagine a college where every aspect of the institution is geared toward the goal of helping students complete a high-quality program of study that prepares them to transfer as a junior in their major or that prepares them for employment in locally available jobs with family-supporting wages. Such a college would look very different from the ones we typically see now.

The college’s intake services, first-year experience activities, and support services—including developmental education—would be systematically focused on helping students specify their interests and goals, readying them to enter an appropriate program of study. The requirements and expected learning outcomes for each program would be unambiguously defined, communicated clearly to students, and aligned with requirements at students’ transfer destination institutions or with industry standards. Faculty would map out default course sequences in their programs of study and would

work closely with support services staff to ensure that students received help when they struggled or veered off track.

Moving a college from the cafeteria model to what we call a guided pathways model is ambitious and difficult, but, as we argue in our book, comprehensive reform using a guided pathways approach offers the benefit of coherence—an organizing principle which can integrate otherwise disconnected and self-limited improvement endeavors. Efforts to improve high school to college transitions, developmental education, student supports, pedagogy, and baccalaureate transfer thus become oriented toward a clearly defined purpose shared broadly by faculty and staff.

We are not alone in proposing comprehensive reform using a guided pathways approach. And indeed a growing number of colleges across the country—Valencia and Miami Dade Colleges in Florida, City University of New York’s Guttman College, Maricopa Community College in Arizona, and City Colleges of Chicago, among them—are demonstrating that such change is possible. Encouraging early findings at these colleges suggest that the guided pathways model is worth pursuing. If widely adopted, this new phase in the community college reform movement could bring about long-sought and transformative improvements in student success.

For more information about our areas of research and to see a full list of research subtopics, projects, and publications, please visit our website at ccrc.tc.columbia.edu.

Our Research

The Role of the Community College

What role do community colleges play in the postsecondary landscape? We study the history and mission of community colleges, their commitment to access and equity, and the opportunities and challenges they face, including growing competition from for-profit colleges. Projects in this area include a study of the role of for-profit colleges in higher education, conducted by affiliated researchers under the aegis of the CCRC-led Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE).

High School to College

CCRC conducts research on programs and policies designed to prepare high school students for college, including short-term readiness programs as well as college-credit transition programs and vocational pathways.

In partnership with MDRC, CCRC is currently evaluating CUNY Start, a pre-matriculation program designed to help students with substantial remedial needs succeed in college. CCRC researchers are also studying early assessments and senior-year transition curricula in four states.



FEATURED PROJECT:

Reshaping the College Transition: Study of Early Assessment and Curricular Interventions

States across the country are trying out new approaches to improve college readiness among high school students. These include the early assessment of 11th and 12th grade students to gauge their progress toward

becoming college ready as well as the creation of a senior-year “transition curriculum,” in which high schools and colleges work together to develop a curriculum that prepares students for college-level academic work. This project is analyzing implementation of these initiatives in four states and is evaluating student outcomes in New York and West Virginia.

Project Lead: Elisabeth Barnett

Developmental Education and Adult Basic Skills

CCRC studies the factors that contribute to low rates of college completion among community college students assigned to remedial coursework and evaluates reform efforts aimed at helping under-prepared students achieve greater college success.

CCRC is conducting a study of statewide developmental education reforms in Virginia and North Carolina. CCRC also houses the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (see below).

CAPR | CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP: Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR)

CAPR conducts research to document current practices in developmental English and math education across the United States, and to rigorously assess the effects of innovative assessment and instructional practices on student success. CAPR is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences and operates in collaboration with social policy research organization MDRC and scholars at Queens College, City University of New York; Stanford University; the University of California at Davis; and Vanderbilt University.

CAPR Director: Thomas Bailey

Continued from page 3

Our Research

Student Services, Financial Aid, and Other Supports

Success in college requires more than academic skills. CCRC researchers study nonacademic factors that influence success as well as student support services, such as counseling, success courses, and online advising systems. We also study the effects of student employment and financial aid on student outcomes.

Ongoing CCRC work in this area includes an examination of Bronx Community College's First Year Seminar, a study tracking the implementation and impacts of online planning and advising systems at multiple colleges, and research on how students choose programs of study at City Colleges of Chicago. CCRC researchers are also studying the impacts of the Federal Work-Study and Pell Grant programs under the aegis of the CCRC-led Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE).

Online Education and Instructional Technology

Technology plays a growing role in postsecondary education. Our research examines the structure and design of online instruction and its impact on persistence and completion rates of community college students.

CCRC researchers are currently studying the effectiveness of blended learning models, which mix online and in-person instruction, in developmental classrooms as part of a larger study on statewide developmental education reforms in Virginia and North Carolina.

Student Persistence, Completion, and Transfer

Student persistence and completion rates at community colleges are low, particularly among low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students. CCRC studies how student populations progress through college and how the structure of college programs and pathways may influence rates of completion and transfer.

Ongoing CCRC work in this area includes a project that will identify successful transfer partnerships between two- and four-year institutions and facilitate their replication, and several projects on the implementation and impacts of reforms to create clearer, more coherent program pathways through college that lead to successful college completion, transfer, and careers.



FEATURED PROJECT:

Driving College Completion and Enhancing Equity via Transfer

With the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), CCRC is examining transfer practices that substantially increase degree completion, with a special focus on STEM fields. The study uses NSC data to identify successful transfer partnerships between two- and four-year institutions. CCRC and its partners will produce a guide describing the practices that support successful transfer relationships and a set of data tools that will allow colleges and universities to nationally benchmark their transfer outcomes in order to guide improvements in practice.

Project Lead: Davis Jenkins

College to Career and Workforce Education

Preparing students for the workforce is a central mission of community colleges. CCRC studies the role of community colleges in the U.S. economy and their effectiveness in preparing students for the labor market.

CCRC houses the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE), a U.S. Department of Education-funded center that analyzes the labor market returns to postsecondary credentials. CCRC is also studying collaborations between community-based organizations and community colleges that facilitate workforce preparation among underserved adults, and the labor market outcomes for different program pathways at City Colleges of Chicago.



FEATURED PROJECT:

City Colleges of Chicago Pathways Analytics

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) is undertaking a major systemic “reinvention” that places it at the forefront of a national movement to improve student success by building more clearly defined, educationally coherent program pathways to student end goals. CCRC is conducting a two-year applied research project focused on CCC’s guided pathways reforms. The project will chart CCC student progression into and through program pathways, analyze how students make decisions about which program to pursue, and measure the labor market returns and net benefits for each program pathway.

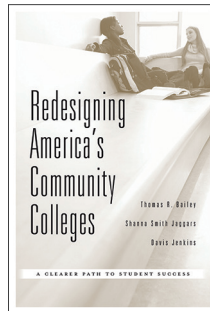
Project Leads: Davis Jenkins, Melinda Mechur Karp

Improving Community College Institutional Performance

CCRC works with major initiatives that aim to improve student outcomes by helping colleges use data to implement significant institutional changes. CCRC also studies system-wide reform models, such as performance funding, to identify practices that increase student success across colleges.

CCRC is leading a study of state performance funding systems and is contributing to projects working with states and college systems to create more structured pathways to degrees and transfer between public two- and four-year postsecondary institutions.

New from CCRC



**NEW BOOK
ON COLLEGE
REDESIGN
BY CCRC
RESEARCHERS**

Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success is a new book by CCRC Director Thomas Bailey, Assistant Director Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Senior Research Associate Davis Jenkins published in March by Harvard University Press. The evidence-based book diagnoses the primary challenges facing community colleges and offers a prescription for change to substantially increase student success.

Community colleges currently employ a “cafeteria” or “self-service” model, in which students must find their way through an often disconnected and confusing array of courses, programs, and support services. The authors argue that community colleges need to replace this model with a “guided pathways” approach. Faculty and student services professionals must redesign key college functions to create clear, educationally coherent program pathways that are aligned with students’ goals, help students explore and select pathways of interest, and track and support students’ progress to completion and transfer. The authors also discuss colleges that have begun to undertake this approach.

Funders for Active Projects

- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Ford Foundation
- Joyce Foundation
- Kresge Foundation
- Laura and John Arnold Foundation
- Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust
- Lumina Foundation
- National Science Foundation
- Smith Richardson Foundation
- Spencer Foundation
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences

The Year in Review



JANUARY/APRIL 2014 Accolades for CCRC Research Associates

In January, CCRC Postdoctoral Research Associate Di Xu (left) received the 2013 New Scholars Grant from the Association for Education Finance and Policy. Xu will leave CCRC to start as an assistant professor at University of California, Irvine, in July 2015. In April, CCRC Postdoctoral Research Associate Rebecca Natow (right) received the Politics of Education Association's Outstanding Dissertation Award for 2013–2014.

JUNE 2014

Study by Judith Scott-Clayton Inspires Senate Proposal to Simplify FAFSA

In a *New York Times* op-ed, U.S. Senators Lamar Alexander and Michael Bennet announced proposed legislation that would dramatically reduce the size of the federal financial aid application. The senators cited evidence from a study co-authored by CCRC's Judith Scott-Clayton as the basis for the legislation.



Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO) introduces a bipartisan bill to reduce the 10-page FAFSA to a form the size of a postcard.

2014



MAY 2014 Melinda Mechur Karp Appointed CCRC Assistant Director

In May, Melinda Mechur Karp was named CCRC's assistant director for staff and institutional development. Karp, who began as a research assistant at CCRC in 1999, is a leading expert on smoothing students' transition into college and supporting them once there. She leads several CCRC projects and plays a vital role in shaping the center's research agenda. Karp holds a PhD in sociology and education from Teachers College, Columbia University.

JULY 2014

CCRC Receives IES Funding for New Developmental Education Center and Research on CUNY Start

CCRC, in collaboration with social policy research organization MDRC, was awarded a \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to create the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), dedicated to research on developmental education. Also in collaboration with MDRC, CCRC received funding to study CUNY Start, an innovative program designed to help students with very weak academic skills prepare for college-level courses before they enroll at the City University of New York.



SEPTEMBER 2014

New Study on Successful Transfer Partnerships

In collaboration with the Aspen Institute and the National Student Clearinghouse, CCRC received funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Helmsley Charitable Trust to identify and study highly effective transfer practices and to help colleges and universities replicate successful transfer partnerships between two- and four-year institutions.

DECEMBER 2014

White House Hosts Second College Opportunity Day of Action

CCRC’s Judith Scott-Clayton joined President Obama, the First Lady, and Vice President Biden at the December 4 White House summit that brought together leaders from colleges and universities, businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations that are committed to improving college opportunities for students across the country.



2015

AUGUST 2014

White House Event Announces Launch of CAPR

CAPR

CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS

CCRC Director Thomas Bailey, along with other CCRC researchers, joined White House officials and college leaders to discuss best practices in remedial education and to formally launch the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR). Bailey spoke at the event on the importance of reforming developmental education but warned that in the absence of comprehensive institutional change, developmental reforms can have only limited impacts on student completion.



U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Education Jamieenne Studley and Thomas Brock, Commissioner of the National Center for Education Research, spoke at CAPSEE’s 2014 conference.

SEPTEMBER 2014

CAPSEE Hosts Conference in DC

The Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE), an Institute of Education Sciences–funded research center led by CCRC, hosted a conference on “the value of higher education—and how to further strengthen it.” Scholars presented research on state-level labor market outcomes and federal financial aid programs, and state and college education leaders discussed how they use data on labor market outcomes to shape policy and strengthen college programs and pathways.

About CCRC

Housed at Teachers College, Columbia University, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) is the leading independent authority on the nation’s nearly 1,200 two-year colleges. Our staff is comprised of economists, sociologists, and other scholars whose specialties range from high school–college transitions to workforce education. We produce reports, briefs, practitioner packets, and other materials; present widely at conferences and colleges across the country; and provide testimony before Congress and state legislatures in order to help community colleges achieve their mission of providing effective and affordable postsecondary education for all students.

CCRC was founded in 1996 with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. At the time, very little was known about two-year public colleges despite the fact that they enrolled nearly half of the nation’s undergraduates. In the years since, thanks to support from Sloan and other funders, CCRC’s work has served to generate and inform a renewed interest in these essential higher education institutions and continues to make vital contributions to higher education research, policy, and practice.

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