



Community Colleges: The Unsung Heroes of Higher Education



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Community colleges are the unsung heroes of higher education. They don't have big sports teams to attract attention, and they are open-admission institutions, so they lack the prestige that goes with attending a selective institution.

But here is what they do: They enroll close to half of all college students in this country. They serve disproportionate numbers of low-income students, first-generation college students, students of color. They serve working parents, laid-off workers, and other nontraditional students. They prepare people for jobs that make our communities run: nurses, firefighters, police officers, child care workers, office accountants. Students who receive an associate's degree earn, on average, \$8,500 more per year than those with only a high school diploma. Students who transfer successfully from a community college to a four-year college or university and earn a bachelor's degree will earn \$25,000 more, on average.

In sum: There is no greater investment that an individual can make in himself, or that society can make in an individual, than completing a college education.

The problem with this picture — and where the need for social policy research comes in — is to learn how to help more students in community colleges acquire the skills they need, stay in school, and complete a degree. Across the U.S., the dropout rate in community colleges is extraordinarily high. Close to half of all students who begin at a community college with the intention of earning a degree do not complete one at any institution within six years of starting.

Without question, a big part of the reason for low rates of success is that students in community college are often underprepared and they lead complicated lives. But it's also true that changes in public policies and institutional practices can create conditions that enable more students to succeed.

Let me give one concrete example. At **Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn**, New York, my colleagues and I evaluated a program called Learning Communities. Entering freshmen were placed in small groups of up to 25 students who took three courses together: English, which was usually at the remedial level; a student development course, in which a counselor taught students basic college-going skills, like how to study and use campus resources; and a standard college course, like Intro Psych or History. The faculty working in the learning community were expected to integrate their syllabi and meet periodically to discuss the progress of students.

Our evaluation at Kingsborough compared students who went through the Learning Communities program to an equivalent group of students who had the standard college experience, meaning that they took courses on their own (rather than in a cluster) and did not have the benefit of an integrated curriculum. After one semester, we found that students in learning communities were significantly more likely to pass all their courses and earn more credits. After one year, they were more likely to pass critical English examinations needed to graduate or transfer to a four-year college, and they rated their overall college experience more positively. After two years, they were more likely to still be enrolled in school than students who had not been in a learning community.

The evaluation is not the end of the story. After seeing the results, the administration of Kingsborough Community College made a commitment to expand Learning Communities to serve up to 80 percent of incoming freshmen. The college has also received foundation grants to teach other community colleges across the country how to implement the program. Not every study I've been involved with has produced the results we have seen at Kingsborough. But the example illustrates both the potential within community colleges to make meaningful reforms — reforms that lead to measurable changes in students' lives — and within the social sciences to produce evidence that can improve institutional practice and public policy.