

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What Colleges Can Learn From K-12 Education

May 22, 2013, 7:06 pm

By *Richard Kahlenberg*

Our higher-education system is often thought of as a model for elementary and secondary education because top American universities rank among the very best in the world. But maybe it's the reverse that is true. After all, only about half of first-time college students earn certificates or degrees within six years, a completion rate much lower than among high-school students. At community colleges, while 81 percent of first-time entering students say they would like to earn bachelor's degrees, only 12 percent do so within six years.

Why are completion rates so low in higher education, especially community colleges? One reason, according to a blue-ribbon panel assembled by the Century Foundation, is that higher education has not directly confronted the growing economic and racial separation of students within its ranks. Largely separate sets of institutions for white and minority students—and for rich and poor—are rarely equal, either in K-12 schooling or in higher education.

In recent decades, colleges and universities, to their credit, have greatly increased access, educating a much larger and more economically and racially diverse set of students than in the past. But this positive trend has been accompanied by a troubling undercurrent: increased inequality within the higher-education system. According to research by Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, of Georgetown University, fewer high-income students attend community college than in the past. High-income students outnumber low-income students by 14:1 in the most competitive four-year institutions, yet poor students outnumber wealthy students in community colleges by nearly 2:1. Even within the two-year sector, new research for Century's panel finds considerable economic and racial separation and reduced outcomes where segregation exists.

At the K-12 level, substantial evidence has established that all students do better in economically and racially integrated schools than they do in high-poverty schools. Policy makers have put in place two sets of responses. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools took steps to desegregate by race, and more recently have sought to attract middle-class students to urban schools through "magnet" programs. On a parallel track, federal policy makers chose to provide extra funds to high-poverty schools through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of all states provide additional funds—most commonly 25 percent more—for low-income students or those in need of remedial education.

By contrast, in higher education, policy makers have adopted modest affirmative-action programs to integrate selective four-year institutions. But there are no comparable efforts to attract middle-class students to community colleges. And there is no higher-education analogue to state or federal policies

that provide extra institutional aid to colleges with higher-need students. Quite the opposite, we shower the most resources on the wealthiest college students and the least on the neediest. The federal tax and research-overhead subsidies at Princeton University, for example, amount to about \$54,000 per student, according to the economist Richard Vedder.

Economic and racial stratification is familiar but by no means natural, inevitable, or efficient. In K-12 schooling, low-income students given a chance to attend more-affluent schools rank two years ahead of low-income students at high-poverty schools on the fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress. In higher education, studies have found that students who begin at four-year institutions are 15 to 30 percentage points likelier to receive a bachelor's degree (controlling for entering preparation levels) than comparable students who begin at community colleges, where student bodies are poorer.

Moreover, new research from California, commissioned by the Century task force, finds that students who attend wealthier and whiter community colleges have higher success rates (controlling for student preparation at the institutional level) than those who attend poorer and more heavily minority two-year institutions.

Why does economic and racial separation appear to affect outcomes at the higher-education level? For one thing, institutions serving low-income and working-class people generally wield less political power and are shortchanged by legislatures. For example, from 1999 to 2009, operating expenditures per pupil increased by almost \$4,200 at public research universities, while public community colleges saw just a \$1 increase (in 2009 dollars). Research also finds that the economic makeup of the student body can affect the curriculum offered, the level of expectations that faculty have, and the academic culture.

What can be done? Century's 22-member Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges From Becoming Separate and Unequal, chaired by Anthony Marx, president of the New York Public Library and a former president of Amherst College, and Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, sets out a number of recommendations in its new report, "Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream."

The group, which is supported by the Ford Foundation, endorses the continuing efforts to expand best practices at community colleges but also suggests that policy makers must go further, taking substantial steps to address racial and economic stratification in higher education and to challenge a system in which two-year colleges are asked to educate those students with the greatest needs using the least funds.

In the short term, the federal government should support research on how much more it costs to adequately educate low-income college students compared with their middle-class peers, an analysis that has been widely conducted at the K-12 level. Likewise, the panel calls for greater transparency in public subsidies of wealthy four-year colleges through tax breaks. In the longer term, the task force seeks the creation of state and federal fund streams for higher education, coupled with accountability for outcomes, similar to those at the K-12 level that support institutions with greater numbers of low-income students.

To reduce stratification, the task force backs policies to attract more middle-class students to community colleges (funds for honors programs, guaranteed transfer to four-year institutions, the ability to grant bachelor's degrees in certain disciplines). For their part, four-year colleges should agree to accept community-college transfers for 5 percent of their junior class and should get public incentives to recruit low-income students out of high school.

Four-year students will benefit from economic and racial diversity, and community-college students will benefit from the political capital and social networks provided by integrated student bodies. These bold steps to bridge the higher-education divide will help colleges strengthen American competitiveness, bolster American democracy, and revive the American dream.

Richard D. Kahlenberg is a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and is executive director of its Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges From Becoming Separate and Unequal.