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Though Enrolling More Poor Students, 2-Year Colleges Get Less of Federal Pie

By DAVID LEONHARDT

WASHINGTON — Community colleges have received a declining share of government spending on higher education over the last decade even as their student bodies have become poorer and more heavily African-American and Latino, according to a report to be released Thursday.

“Many community colleges end up receiving minimal federal support,” said [Richard D. Kahlenberg](#), a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, which is publishing the report. “The kids with the greatest needs receive the fewest resources.”

The report argues that colleges have become increasingly separate and unequal, evoking the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which barred racial segregation in elementary and secondary schools. Higher education today, the report says, is stratified between four-year colleges with high graduation rates that serve largely affluent students and community colleges with often dismal graduation rates that serve mostly low-income students.

In 2009, community colleges spent \$9,300 per student on educational resources, virtually unchanged from 1999 once inflation was taken into account. Public research universities spent \$16,700, up 11 percent from 1999, and private research universities spent \$41,000, an increase of 31 percent.

Community colleges often receive substantially less money per student than elementary or high schools, said [Sara Goldrick-Rab](#), a University of Wisconsin professor who served on the 22-member committee that wrote the report.

The other members included the chancellor of Syracuse University, the president of the New York Public Library and three community college presidents.

Community colleges, which enroll about 44 percent of the nation’s college students, will play a major role in determining how quickly educational attainment rises in the United States, experts say. While the United States once led the world in educational attainment by a wide margin, it [has fallen behind](#) some other rich countries over the past generation.

President Obama has called for the country to regain its lead by 2020, and community colleges would probably have to improve significantly for that goal to be met.

Although 81 percent of new students at community colleges say they want to transfer to a four-year college and earn a bachelor's degree, only 12 percent do so within six years, according to the report. Most entering students also fail to receive a two-year degree, although some community colleges have compiled an impressive record of graduating low-income students.

Community colleges began in the early 20th century, known then as junior colleges, and expanded rapidly in the 1960s. They became not only steppingstones to four-year colleges but also places that trained students for specific jobs, like nurses, paralegals or engineering technicians.

The largest, each with tens of thousands of students, include Miami Dade College; Northern Virginia Community College; City College of San Francisco; Lone Star College, in Houston; and Kingsborough Community College, in Brooklyn.

The report describes a network of federal and state educational policies that has failed to keep pace with the increasing enrollment of lower-income students in higher education. The largest federal financial aid program — Pell grants, which go to lower-income students to offset tuition — does relatively little to help community colleges because their tuition tends to be low.

“In the 20th century, going to college was not necessary for getting a job in the middle class,” said [Eduardo J. Padrón](#), the president of Miami Dade College and a co-chairman of the 22-member committee. “But in today’s job market, if you don’t have a postsecondary credential, you can’t get a job that lets you achieve the American dream. It keeps you in a cycle of poverty.”

Community colleges and four-year colleges have both suffered in recent years from state budget cuts, said [Sandy Baum](#), a senior fellow at the George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. But four-year colleges have made up some of the shortfall through tuition increases, while community colleges have not increased tuition as rapidly.

The financing gap, Ms. Goldrick-Rab said, “is contributing to really appalling completion rates.”

The report recommended a series of policy changes, including more transparency about who benefits from federal education spending; more outcome-based financing, to reward colleges that do the best job with challenging students; and programs to make community colleges economically diverse. Community colleges could create more honors programs, including classes for high school students, and four-year colleges could set aside more slots for community college transfers, the authors said.

Other research has found that poor students tend to fare worse, all else equal, when enrolled in a school made up mostly of poor students. Yet over the last generation, higher education appears to have become more stratified.

In 2006, 28 percent of community college students came from the bottom quartile of the socioeconomic distribution, up from 21 percent in 1982. Only 16 percent of community college students came from the top quartile in 2006, down from 24 percent in 1982.

By comparison, only about 5 percent of students at the 200 most selective four-year colleges came from the bottom quartile in 2006, according to Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, of the [Center on Education and the Workforce](#), at Georgetown University.