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The Social Prerequisites of Success: Can College Structure Reduce the Need for Social Know-How?

By
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and
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A study of fourteen colleges finds that community colleges require certain kinds of social know-how—skills and knowledge less available to disadvantaged students. They present seven obstacles: (1) bureaucratic hurdles, (2) confusing choices, (3) student-initiated guidance, (4) limited counselor availability, (5) poor advice from staff, (6) delayed detection of costly mistakes, and (7) poor handling of conflicting demands. However, we find that a very different kind of college—the private occupational college—takes steps to structure out the need for this social know-how and address the needs of disadvantaged students. We speculate about possible policy implications.

Keywords: community colleges; proprietary; cultural capital; higher education; college students; dropout

In recent decades, community colleges have vastly changed higher education, and they have adapted in amazing ways. In addition to offering two years of a college education at low cost, they offer unprecedented flexibility to meet the diverse needs of nontraditional college students. For working students, community col-

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leges offer satellite campuses and convenient class schedules (Saturday, Sunday, and evening classes). For students with poor high school skills, they offer remedial coursework, sometimes even below eighth-grade level. For immigrants, they offer English language training. Community colleges enroll high school students, high school dropouts, older students, working students, and students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse goals.

Despite these amazing accommodations, we find that community colleges still pose hidden obstacles that present difficulties for nontraditional college students. Similar to the four-year colleges on which they are modeled, community colleges require certain kinds of social know-how—skills and knowledge that are more available to middle-class students than to the lower-income students who are a large portion of community colleges. These social know-how requirements constitute a hidden curriculum of social prerequisites necessary for navigating and succeeding in a college environment. The community college staff we interviewed are barely aware that these obstacles present systematic problems for students; they assume that students have the social know-how necessary to succeed. While these requirements may not be difficult for middle-class students who get help from college-educated parents, we find that they pose great difficulties for nontraditional students who lack this know-how and who face additional outside commitments and pressures, the very students these colleges were created to serve.

We find that community colleges present seven obstacles for students with less access to knowledge about college: (1) bureaucratic hurdles, (2) confusing choices, (3) student-initiated guidance, (4) limited counselor availability, (5) poor advice from staff, (6) slow detection of costly mistakes, and (7) poor handling of conflicting demands. Based on case studies in public and private two-year colleges, we find that community colleges implicitly demand social know-how about how to navigate a college environment and its bureaucratic structures. Our research identifies what social know-how students must possess, and it illustrates the deleterious consequences for students who lack this know-how. We suggest that students' social know-how—their knowledge about how to handle enrollment, class registration, and financial aid; to initiate information gathering; to access sound and useful advice; to avoid costly mistakes; and to manage conflicting demands—is likely to affect their ultimate college success.

However, we find that these social know-how requirements are not inevitable. Indeed, we report a study of a very different kind of college—the occupational college—that takes steps to structure out the need for this social know-how. These practices specifically address the needs of disadvantaged students who must face difficult decisions, strong competing pressures, little availability of crucial information, and large risks from even small mistakes. If community colleges are to serve nontraditional students, they must address this emerging issue of social know-how.

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Background and Previous Research

Community colleges have rightly been praised for democratizing higher education and making it accessible to all people, regardless of economic or educational background. Since 1960, while enrollment in four-year colleges has nearly doubled, enrollment in two-year schools has quintupled (National Center for Educational Statistics 1998, 206). The low tuition and open-access admissions policies of these institutions have reduced the barriers to higher education for disadvantaged populations.

While high schools used to be the last schools attended by most students, colleges have increasingly taken that role. While only 45 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college in 1960, 67 percent enrolled by 1997 (National Center for Educational Statistics 1998), and more than 60 percent of undergraduates participated in subbaccalaureate education (Bailey 2002, 4). Moreover, two-year colleges focus on serving disadvantaged students and on providing occupational preparation (Brint and Karabel 1989).

Much prior research on community colleges has been quantitative, focusing on degree completion (Dougherty 1994). A few ethnographies have examined behaviors, practices, and experiences within community colleges (London 1978; Neumann and Riesman 1980; Richardson, Fisk, and Okum 1983; Weis 1985), but these studies have not systematically explored the institutional mechanisms that affect retention across multiple institutions.¹ While Tinto (1993) provided a model explaining student persistence at four-year colleges, few of Tinto's factors exist at two-year colleges—residential dormitories, extensive extracurricular activities, and so forth.

Private two-year colleges are even more neglected. The best studies are either old (Wilms 1974) or purely quantitative (Apling 1993). However, a recent statistical analysis also described a single for-profit college and suggested practical lessons for community colleges (Bailey, Badway, and Gumport 2001). Our study explores that suggestion in greater detail.

This article also provides a new view of the sociological concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) contended that schools have implicit requirements of certain knowledge and skills (cultural capital) that low socioeconomic status students often lack, and these hard-to-see requirements interfere with their educational attainments. This study examines community college practices that generate these requirements and private college practices that avoid these requirements and seem to remove cultural capital obstacles to students' attainments.

Sample and Data

Our sample includes two types of colleges: seven community colleges and seven private occupational colleges in a large Midwestern city and surrounding suburbs.

Our research uses interviews, analyses of written materials, observations, and surveys in these colleges. Four of the occupational colleges are for-profit, or proprietary, colleges. The other three are nonprofit colleges. All offer accredited two-year degrees.

We focus on accredited programs leading to applied associate's degrees in a variety of business, health, computer, and technical occupational programs. We conducted more than 130 semistructured, one-hour interviews with administrators, administrative staff, program chairs, and deans. We interviewed 80 community college students and 20 occupational college students. Surveys of more than 4,300 students indicate strong similarity in the types of students at the two types of colleges: both enroll large proportions of low-income and racial minority students.²

Findings

Community colleges provide a vast array of programs: transfer to four-year colleges, two-year occupational degrees, remedial classes, General Equivalency Diploma preparation, English as a second language, adult basic education, vocational skills, contract training, continuing education, and lifelong learning. These institutions offer something for every segment of the population, and the diversity of students is a testament to their success in making higher education accessible.

However, attrition has long been a serious problem. More than 42 percent of high school graduates leave two-year colleges without a degree (Dougherty 1994). In Illinois, state data indicate that roughly 45 percent of the students who begin in community colleges do not return by the following year (excluding transfers),³ and the rate is similar in the community colleges we studied (40 percent).⁴

Although more options sometimes leads to better decisions, they can also increase the need for information and may create confusion and mistaken choices. Multiple options make it difficult to coordinate college offerings and to allocate fixed resources. The career dean at one community college stated, "It's a balancing act, and we have these external pressures on us to do 14 million things." A dean of instruction noted that part of the challenge is "knowing exactly what our role is." These multiple missions may limit community colleges' capacity to serve as an avenue of social mobility.

While low-income, relatively young minority students face many cultural barriers (Zwerling and London 1992), choice itself can be another obstacle. Community colleges offer many program options and give students the autonomy to steer their own route through the educational process. This can be liberating for some but overwhelming for others. We find that disadvantaged students with limited time and finances to devote to education are often confused about their choices. They do not know how to get the information they need, and small amounts of confusion can evolve into large problems of wasted time and poor decisions. Students often come from public schools where counseling services are limited, and they lack the know-how they need to make the required choices.

We find that many students are first-generation students whose parents have not attended college. In some of these cases, families may not provide financial or other support. Beatriz, for instance, reported,

Getting myself into college was not an easy task at all to accomplish. Since I came from a Mexican family of eight, it was almost impossible to think of finishing high school, much less enter college. In my house, school was not really emphasized. Work, on the other hand, was all my parents talked about. . . . Many times, my father would yell at me, telling me I was just wasting my time and money and I was gonna go nowhere.

Other families provide emotional support but not information or financial help. For example, when asked if his parents encourage college, Derrick said, "Basically, it's my decision. They give me a pat on the back and say 'I'm glad you're doing it.'" However, his family cannot provide financial help, so Derrick works two part-time jobs to pay tuition and living expenses. Many students' families cannot provide guidance, information, or savings.

As we note below, we find that these community colleges pose seven obstacles for students with less social know-how, and occupational colleges have devised ways to reduce the need for this social know-how.

Bureaucratic Hurdles

While community colleges' size allows them to offer a broad range of courses and degrees, their complexity demands that students acquire and assess a great deal of information about courses, requirements, and options. Students who lack the social know-how needed to navigate through college are at risk of making serious mistakes that imperil their college careers.

First, bureaucratic hurdles arise from the size and complexity of community colleges. Students find their complicated class schedules and college catalogs difficult and time consuming to understand. At a community college that serves a high poverty area, the academic support center dean notes that many students make mistakes in selecting classes on their own, and they later learn that their degree will take longer than they had anticipated.

[Students] were constantly saying to us, "Nobody told me. I didn't know." . . . We can claim that . . . everything that they need to know we write down [somewhere]. [laughs] . . . It doesn't work that way. So they were getting frustrated, we were getting frustrated.

The college's reputation was suffering, as prospective students and their parents began asking questions. The dean of career programs noted that students want to know "how long it's going to take me" and say, "I don't wanna take a lot of unnecessary courses. I need to have a time line." He hears parents saying, "This is how much money I got. How much is it going to cost? They got two years, they'd better be at the end of the road."

This was a problem at the other community colleges in our sample as well, where the issue includes transfer. A student at another urban college commented, “One of my friends went [here], and she told me, ‘Don’t go there because you’re going to waste your time. You’re going to take classes that you won’t need when you transfer.’”

In addition, students face other hurdles: filling out enrollment forms, registering for classes, applying for financial aid, making choices that efficiently accumulate credits toward a degree, and fitting in work and family obligations. Students must figure out how to overcome these obstacles each semester. One student complained about his seven-hour registration ordeal: “I went to registration at 12, and I didn’t get out until 7,” and he became so frustrated that he did not register the second semester and did not return until four years later.

Information is hard to obtain. Students report having to search all over campus to get information about specific program requirements, to learn which courses lead to their desired goals and meet requirements most quickly. Many students are not aware of the state and federal financial aid options available. Some wrongly assume they would not qualify for aid because they are working full- or part-time or because the tuition is low. Students who apply for financial aid complain about the difficulty of the forms and the lack of assistance at these colleges. Unfortunately, many students faced unpleasant and even hostile encounters with financial aid staff in their attempts to complete the financial aid process. Two weeks after she started, Rosa still had not finished the financial aid process. She said of the financial aid department,

They’re rude. This lady kicked me out. . . . I didn’t have . . . my security card. She said, “Ah, just get out of here. Just go. You don’t have anything ready. Go.” . . . I understand they get frustrated, but they don’t have to be rude.

Corrie, who grew up in “the projects” and is now living with friends while she puts herself through school to become an occupational therapist, also faced hostility:

The financial aid office wasn’t what I expected. . . . I’ve had a bad experience with them. They’re just very nonchalant about your funding, and I feel like a lot of them don’t care because it’s like, “It’s not me getting the money, and I don’t really care.” And I’ve been yelled at a couple of times in financial aid by my counselor.

Bureaucratic hurdles continue in other domains. Because of problems with community college staff, when Lisette needed more information about transfer, she went directly to the college to which she planned to transfer to get information. Many students had similar problems getting correct information, and some, like Lisette, learned through other students or older siblings to seek information directly from the four-year colleges. Unfortunately, students who lack this know-how often found that poor information extended their time in college.

Confusing Choices

Second, students face a confusing array of hard-to-understand choices because of the wide variety of programs, each having different requirements for their various degrees and certificates. Students may not even have a clear picture of their goals, which makes it harder to get good advice. Indeed, in our interviews, most students who had not chosen a major had not sought counselor advice about their course selections in their first year. In the words of one administrator, this often results in students' "wandering aimlessly through the curriculum, amassing large numbers of hours but not making progress toward a degree." He feels this explains the fact that a third of the college's students failed to complete 75 percent of their courses, which is considered unsatisfactory academic progress and threatens their financial aid eligibility.

Community colleges implicitly demand social know-how about how to navigate a college environment and its bureaucratic structures.

Even after students have chosen a program, choosing classes is still a daunting task. It can be difficult to schedule all the required courses in the correct order while still paying attention to prerequisites and general education courses and synchronizing course schedules with work and family schedules. We encountered many students who were confused about general education requirements and the necessary prerequisites for their major courses. If students do not fulfill a course requirement, they may have to wait an entire year before the course is offered again. These mistakes can be overwhelming setbacks for students with limited resources and constrained timetables, and they can lead to disappointment, frustration, and eventual dropout.

Given the complex course catalogs and class schedules and the lack of structured guidance, these are surprisingly easy mistakes to make. Even sophisticated observers could have difficulty: the authors, both Ph.D.s, spent many hours trying to understand some of the catalogs' labeling systems for classes and degrees, and several interviews were necessary to clarify the information. Not surprisingly, disadvantaged students rarely know what questions to ask. Due to the catalog's lack of clarity and her misunderstanding of how these classes fit into her program requirements, Annette was not aware that the remedial courses she had to take would not count toward her degree:

Why didn't anyone tell me that? . . . They had me registering and everything. . . . This is going to hold me back. . . . So I still have two years to go 'cause none of these classes here even count. So I was a little upset about that because it was really misleading.

Apparently, Annette is not alone in her uncertainty. Our surveys find that many community college students, especially from low-income families, were uncertain of their program and degree requirements and course prerequisites.

The Burden of Student-Initiated Assistance

Third, the burden of student-initiated guidance also raises obstacles, especially for disadvantaged students. Although community colleges make guidance available to students, the colleges require that students initiate the process of seeking out guidance. The consequences of this situation for at-risk students are fourfold. First, students must be aware of what kind of help they need and when they need it. Second, they must be informed about how and where to get this help. Third, they must actually go get it. Fourth, students must seek this information well in advance.

Unfortunately, these conditions do not serve first-generation college students well. Those students whose parents have not attended college cannot easily get advice about how to succeed, what pitfalls to avoid, or how to plan their pathway through college. These students are left to navigate college on their own.

Often, students do not even know that they need help, so they do not take the initiative to seek it out, particularly for long-range planning. Although students know they must ask counselors or faculty to approve their course selections for the next semester, students do not seek information about long-term plans, such as figuring out how to meet their degree requirements efficiently or discussing their educational or career goals. As a result, students are often left without a plan of action, and they make seemingly arbitrary decisions about their classes, the direction of their education, and their career goals.

Even for students who talk to counselors, first-generation students' limited knowledge of college and career paths often make these interactions ineffective. Students often cannot see the pathway for how to get to their occupational goal, and they ask questions and gather information based on wrong assumptions. Putting the burden of initiating advice on inexperienced students leads to poorly directed college strategies, particularly when counseling assistance is focused on selecting classes, not on mapping out long-range plans. Sonia, for instance, is a first-generation college student who comes from a low-income family of eight. In her interview, it was clear that her only source of career advice had been her older brother, who was in his early twenties. She is following the requirements for a math major although she wants to be an accountant or possibly major in computer science. When we asked what career she is considering, Sonia told us accounting. However, in her brief meeting with a counselor, he only asked about her course interests, which led him to suggest only a math major.

Sonia: Well, I was confused. . . . I had to talk to a counselor. . . . He wanted to know what I was going to major in. . . . I told him I liked math, so I'm taking math courses. . . . So that's it.

Regina: Did you try to go through other degrees, like accounting?

Sonia: No.

Regina: Did you tell him that you were interested in those things, too, or just math?

Sonia: Just math. I figured math and accounting were maybe the same. I'd never taken accounting.

In the brief session, Sonia did not think to mention her career interests, so she is pursuing only one option. If it becomes too difficult or uninteresting, she has no plan for considering alternatives, and her courses were not chosen to provide prerequisites for other majors.

Limited Counselor Availability

Fourth, the limited availability of counselors is a serious obstacle to getting good advice. Counselors at community colleges are typically overburdened, responsible for advising students not only about academic planning but also about the transfer process, career exploration, part-time job placement, and personal issues. They are vastly understaffed, with typically 800 students per counselor. According to one counselor, "We don't have a command performance. Obviously, we couldn't have with just 8 of us for over 6,000 students." This 1:750 ratio is actually better than many of the other community colleges in our sample, and it can be compared with high schools where a ratio of 1:400 is common and is widely believed to be inadequate.

In fact, some administrators report that students need to schedule appointments months in advance to see a counselor. Counselors typically schedule thirty minutes for each appointment, and times fill up quickly, especially around registration time when counseling is needed most. One administrator highlighted the need for students to plan far ahead of time: "they're going for preregistration and they go make an appointment, and then it's October, and the counselors say, 'Well, you could come in December sixth.'" Students report being "too busy" to see counselors, but that should not be mistaken for indifference. For instance, Dan tried to see a counselor several times, but each time, he had to schedule one far in advance, and then he either forgot or could not make the appointment.

None of the community colleges involved in the study required students to meet with counselors even once during their schooling. The majority of students we interviewed had not spoken with a counselor because of the difficulties and delays entailed. Although she is conscientious about meeting the various demands on her, Lauren is completing her second semester and yet reports, "I haven't talked directly to counselors."

Even when they meet, inadequate staffing also affects the students' interactions with counselors. If students do not know exactly what they need help with, then the counseling experience can be ineffective and anxiety ridden. Rolanda described her unsuccessful experience:

I talked to one of the counselors, but since there was a lot of people waiting, it was kind of fast. We didn't have much time to talk. Also, when you go to a counselor, many times you don't really know what you're going to talk about. You have an idea, but you don't know what questions to ask. I think counselors should ask more questions of us. They just answer our questions then say, "OK, you can go, since you don't know what to ask." It's hard. There are things we don't know.

As a result of her negative experience, Rolanda has avoided seeking further advice from counselors. Instead, she picks classes on her own from a transfer form that she noticed on the wall outside the counselors' offices.

Poor Advice from Staff

Fifth, poor advice is common. The complexity is so daunting that information proves to be challenging even for counselors and administrators. Students in search of information report that they often got conflicting opinions, which directs them to radically different actions. Many students report being guided into courses that were unneeded and thus a waste of their time and tuition money. Unfortunately, for students with limited resources, the time wasted and mistakes involved in figuring things out on their own can prevent them from completing their educational goals.

Even when students see a counselor, the information is sometimes wrong. Counselors might fail to get sufficient information about program offerings and requirements from departments, and their information is also often out of date. Some department chairs admitted that they had little communication with counselors:

Interviewer: How much direct contact does your department have with the counselors?

Department Chair: Very little. . . . I would say it's pretty much just "hello" in the hallway or something. There's no real . . . contact with them, unless they have some kind of question or something or we find out they're giving out bad info, we'll go down there from time to time to straighten them out or something.

Some administrators complain that counselors often have mistaken notions about their programs. With so many programs to understand and so many other responsibilities, counselors sometimes have difficulty keeping track of all the changes in requirements and curriculum. One department chair reports that students sometimes come to him complaining that the counseling office is giving incorrect information, which appears to make their plans unachievable. This chair will send these students back down to speak with the counselors again; "I tell them, . . . You know, stick to your guns and tell them, 'This is my life.' Or, don't go to them at all. Have me sign the darn registration and I'll do it!"

Other students' transfer plans are delayed due to poor and contradictory counseling from different counselors, who rarely have a long-term relationship with students. For example, Deanna spent four years at community college before she

actually transferred, and although she was extremely happy with her teachers and classes, she complained about the counseling system:

The only thing I had a problem with was the counselors weren't very helpful . . . not at all . . . You go to them for what classes you need to take. I feel I took a lot of wasted classes. You didn't get much help. Now that I'm in a university, I realize if I would have just had a good counselor I probably would have avoided a lot of this. You had a different one every time you went. I would have graduated in the two years like I should have if I had a better counselor. . . . I feel like [students] just don't get out of there. It's a rut you can get into. . . . Counselors don't tell you what you need to do. People are walking around blindfolded. . . . They don't know what to do.

Although counselors can see students' transcripts, they often lack detailed knowledge about students other than their grades. They also may not understand the program requirements.

Because counselors' advice is often inadequate, many students get advice from worse sources—faculty in other programs unrelated to their own. Although students must have their registration forms signed before they can register, this form can be signed by “any full-time faculty”—not just counselors. Often, this signing takes place during extremely busy and chaotic open registration periods, which are not conducive to careful guidance. Only students who know the value of counseling, who show initiative, and who make plans in advance manage to get counselors' time. Thus, most advising is done by faculty, who have no counseling training and who may not know the requirements for the student's particular program. Within this system, there is no assurance that the individual who signs the form can assess whether students are on track for graduation or whether a course will transfer or even count in the student's major. Anyone can sign their cards, and as a result, students are often entirely responsible for mapping out their own academic progress. For students with little knowledge about the college process, this responsibility can lead to small mistakes, which result in major setbacks.

Like many students we interviewed, Carlos's experience with his urban public high school's guidance counselors was limited to discipline problems. “[In high school] the only time you got to see a counselor was when you were in trouble. It was like that. Like, for cutting or whatever you did.” So, when he first began community college, Carlos thought that a good student is one who manages to avoid seeing counselors. He did not seek out any additional help to determine what courses he should take:

Nobody told me to go see a counselor. No. They just had that open registration. You go talk to anybody. The teachers are like, “What classes do you want? Here, go register. You've got your financial aid? Go take care of it.” Things like that.

In hindsight, he realized that getting a counselor's advice would have been important “so you don't waste your time here.” He thinks the fact that they leave it up to the student to seek assistance contributed to his initial difficulties:

Like, for example, they gave me a Biology 101. This was my first semester here . . . when I was first out of high school. I didn't know anything about college. . . . I thought I was getting credit for it, but I wasn't. Now when I dropped it, I got an F because I didn't see a counselor. I didn't even know you were supposed to go see a counselor. . . . Then when I went to go retake the class, the class isn't even offered anymore. Then I find out that you don't even need the class. I saw my GPA. . . . It brought me down.

This bad experience in his first semester led to his decision to drop all his classes and quit altogether. He did not return until several years had passed. Five years later, Carlos, twenty-three years old at the time of our interview, was starting his sixth semester of community college, yet he had accumulated only about two semesters of college credits. Having learned the value of seeking advice the hard way, he now speaks to counselors at four-year colleges for information about transfer:

Everything I've done was because I went to visit counselors at other schools. They helped me. They're the ones telling me what classes to take and this and that. Here, I don't know what the problem is, but they're not doing their job.

Carlos's lack of exposure to academic or career advising in high school was similar to that of many of the low-income students we interviewed. They lacked cultural capital regarding the value of counseling and therefore faced difficulties seeking this type of assistance in community college.

Delayed Detection of Costly Mistakes

Sixth, students' mistakes are easy to make and hard to detect, and even a few simple mistakes can be devastating. Given the complexity of choices and the inaccessibility of guidance, students often make mistakes. An admissions counselor says that first-generation college students face many difficulties because information about the system is not apparent. "They don't even know what type of degree they're getting. They're not aware of whether the degree they're getting is a terminal degree or not." Ivette, who is in her second full-time semester and aiming for an A.A. degree, responded to the question about when she expects to complete her degree by saying, "I still haven't seen what credits I need for the classes." Although her classes had been mostly remedial and do not count toward her degree, she assumed she could finish a two-year associate's degree within the "promised" two years.

Although their choices are crucial, students often do not understand their situation. The risks of student error are increased because they do not know what they do not know. Many students we interviewed did not know how to distinguish between different types of degrees and different types of credits. Considerable background knowledge is required to make these distinctions, and failure to see crucial distinctions can have serious repercussions. For example, Raymond had

trouble distinguishing between credit, noncredit, and remedial classes, and he did not understand the difference between required and optional courses. Because he did not seek counselors' advice at registration, he signed up for a reading class, after finding that a math class he needed was closed. He did not realize that the reading class was remedial, and he was paying for a course that would not count for degree or transfer credit.

Students' mistakes are often not detected for some time. Many students reported that they subsequently discovered that they had wasted time and money in courses that do not contribute toward their educational goals and that they had made less progress than they expected. Denise's problems, for instance, resulted from problematic counselor advice and her own mistakes. In her second year, she realized that she cannot finish this year—a major adjustment given her financial and child care constraints:

I took it upon myself to be my own counselor. I took five unnecessary classes because I thought I knew everything. . . . The first counselor I had, the one that gave me those wrong classes, . . . wasted my time, so I took it upon my myself and I didn't go see a counselor anymore. She gave me wrong classes, but I messed up more.

Such discoveries are disappointing and may lead students to drop out of college. Although we did not interview dropouts, our respondents described struggles that led them to contemplate dropping out, and they reported that many of their friends did drop out in comparable circumstances.

Community colleges are expected to be all things to all people. They have made concerted efforts to remain flexible, preserve choice, and minimize the constraints on students. However, without good counseling, a multitude of options can lead to poor choices for students without the necessary know-how. For students who are not familiar with the system and do not seek out appropriate help, higher education can pose overwhelming choices. By the time these students have learned how to navigate the system, many may have lost valuable time and tuition dollars or may have given up and dropped out.

Disadvantaged students are especially harmed by the lack of accessible and reliable information. Often, no one in their family or social circle has attended college, so they may not be aware of how colleges work or even what programs are offered. In our interviews, administrators and faculty often spoke about students who lacked clear direction or goals:

I think when a lot of students come in, they don't know what they want to do. And a lot of them, I think, are like pinballs. They're bouncing from one thing to another, you know, before they find something that they actually like.

Our results help explain why many students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges take courses that do not count for transfer credit at four-year colleges (Dougherty 1994).

In addition, low-income students generally have limited time and money for college and may often have parents pressuring them to take full-time jobs. For such

students, the longer they take to choose their program, the greater the chance that they will run out of time or money and be forced to drop out of school with only an array of unrelated courses to show for their efforts. For such students, confusing choices and poor guidance creates frustration and disappointment, which may lead students to give up on the pursuit altogether.

Poor Handling of Conflicting Demands

Seventh, colleges poorly handle conflicting outside demands. Compared with other students, nontraditional students usually face more numerous and more severe conflicts with outside demands. Students report many problems that pull them away from school: parent illness, financial need, child care crises, unanticipated pregnancies, automobile breakdowns, and work obligations. Unlike young, full-time students, nontraditional students often have less flexible outside prior commitments and crises that impinge on their studies, and some lack know-how about how to balance school with other demands.

Administrators, faculty, and staff at these community colleges boasted that the variety of morning, afternoon, evening, and weekend class times allowed students to arrange their school schedule around their outside obligations. However, although this approach clearly adds flexibility, it ironically imposes further problems. Class schedules are driven by student demand rather than planned sequencing, and course schedules change every term, so students cannot anticipate their class schedule from semester to semester. Given the vast array of course options that community colleges offer, administrators cannot create coordinated schedules for students. Students report that the courses they need to take are often scheduled at vastly different times of day, and some are not offered for several semesters. This makes their education extremely difficult to coordinate with outside work and family commitments. Moreover, their course schedules in the spring term are invariably quite different than those in the prior term, so the work and child care arrangements created in one semester fail to work in the next. In addition, some students find that necessary courses are already closed to additional students, conflict with other necessary courses, or are not being offered in the term originally expected. Ironically, community colleges' attempts at flexibility may delay students seeking to finish their degrees.

Moreover, even though these conflicts are common, community colleges do not systematically provide students with advice or assistance to handle these conflicts. This failure to provide know-how that will help students cope with conflicts is not limited to just course selection and degree planning.

Community colleges view work as an unfortunate necessity that competes with school. One program chair described this view: "Well, in the best of all possible worlds, I think a student should not work. But, that is not an option for most of our students. . . . They have to make money." Although community college administrators are proud of their nontraditional student body, their comments about work commitments imply that the traditional student model is the ideal. When asked

why students do not succeed, faculty members often suggested that students need to reduce their work hours to solve the problem.

Viewing the problem as external to the college, they do not focus on institutional strategies for improving retention. Rather than helping students incorporate school and work, they merely tolerate work as an economic necessity. These community colleges help students find part-time jobs, but they are often unrelated to students' area of study (cf. Grubb 1996).

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Many students are in desperate need of career counseling and advice about how to explore opportunities that will best prepare them for their desired career. For example, one student sought a career in film, but he did not understand how to gain experience in that industry: "I'm going to be starting at Blockbuster Video . . . because I want to . . . make movies, work in film. Blockbuster seems like a pretty good place to get some knowledge." This student was trying to incorporate his need to work while in school with his desire to gain some experience related to his chosen field of study. However, he has received no guidance from the college about how to do that.

In fact, most community college faculty members believe that students should try to minimize work hours. Working is seen as an impediment to success in school. Other than offering classes at different times and minimizing out-of-class group projects, the community colleges do little to help students manage their work and school responsibilities.

The New Private Occupational Colleges

Given students' many problems at community colleges, it is useful to examine alternatives. While most two-year college students are at public colleges, about 4 percent attend private colleges (Bailey, Badway, and Gumpert 2001). Like community colleges, the private colleges we studied offer accredited two-year degrees, and we selected colleges that offer similar applied programs such as business, accounting, office technology, computer information systems, electronics, medical

assisting, and computer-aided drafting. Each college offers degrees in three or more of these program areas, which are intended to lead directly to related jobs.

Although for-profit colleges acquired bad reputations due to past abuses and even fraud, 1992 federal legislation led to the demise of 1,500 schools and compelled the remaining schools to improve (Apling 1993). We selected occupational colleges that passed the same accreditation standards as community colleges and offer associate's degrees of similar quality to community colleges. As such, they are comparable to community colleges but dissimilar to 94 percent of other business and technical schools, which offer no degree above a certificate (Apling 1993). These private colleges should not be considered a random sample: they are some of the best programs in these fields and may be considered to represent an ideal type.⁵

We focus on the ways these colleges structure out the need for much of the social know-how that the community colleges require. They have developed original structures and processes that appear to reduce barriers to disadvantaged students with limited know-how by helping them navigate the administrative obstacles in college.

Structuring Out the Need for Social Know-How

The occupational colleges in this study have found ways to transform implicit rules into explicit organizational structures and policies. They create programs that students can easily understand, master, and negotiate, even if students know very little about how college works. In fact, many of these occupational colleges have found that they can improve student success by making their curriculum more structured, not less. By structuring students' choices, they have found that they also reduce the likelihood that students will make mistakes in their course choices. These colleges also implement strong guidance and tight advisory relationships with their students, which facilitates completion and successful work entry.

While community colleges have become overburdened with competing priorities and functions, occupational colleges continue to provide a limited number of clearly structured programs that lead disadvantaged students to a two-year degree and a stable job in the primary labor market. They accomplish this by procedures that address the seven above-noted problems in community colleges, as we detail below.

Eliminating Bureaucratic Hurdles

First, occupational colleges minimize bureaucratic hurdles. Enrolling is a simple process handled mainly by a single individual who makes all the arrangements for a student. Every student is then assigned to a single adviser who assists in selecting courses. Information is available in one place, and students do not have to run around the college getting information. Students deal with one staff person, not a bureaucratic tangle of scattered offices. Furthermore, registration each term is a

simple matter, and as noted later, course choices are simple and offered in the same time slots over the year, avoiding schedule conflicts. Students choose a package of coordinated courses, rather than selecting from a long menu of individual course choices with fluctuating and conflicting time slots.

Occupational colleges also reduce the bureaucratic hurdles to financial aid. At community colleges, obtaining financial aid is largely up to students, and little help is provided. Heckman (1999) has noted the low take-up rate on federal and state financial aid programs, and he speculated (based on no empirical data) that it was due to students' decisions not to seek aid. Our interviews with community college staff and students indicate that students do not apply because they do not know about it or they cannot figure out the complex forms. In contrast, occupational colleges help students through the application process to get the best aid package possible. Admissions staff physically walk applicants to the financial aid office, where a staff person answers all questions and fills out the financial aid application with each student (and their parents, if desired). Occupational colleges treat financial aid as an integral part of the application process, and college staff members explain and simplify the process. This is rarely done by the community colleges we studied or by those studied by others (Orfield and Paul 1994).

Reducing Confusing Choices

Second, while community college students face a confusing array of hard-to-understand course and program choices with unclear connections to future career trajectories, occupational colleges offer a clear set of course sequences aimed at efficient training for specific career goals.

When students first arrive at community colleges, they are often uncertain about what degree or program to pursue. Community colleges encourage students to explore, yet their model for exploration is based on that of four-year colleges—sample from a wide variety of unrelated courses that are highly general, do not specify clear outcomes, and may count for some programs but not for others. Much like a cafeteria where the customer is supposed to choose from the seven different food groups, students are encouraged to sample from five or more academic disciplines without much regard for future career goals.

This nondirective approach may work well for middle-class students who can count on four years of college, but it presents difficulties for many nontraditional students with a shorter time frame. Exploration at some community colleges is largely confined to liberal arts courses, in which many of these students have done poorly in the past. Confusion also arises from the lack of clarity about the implications and relevance of specific choices to future careers. For students with limited resources who must obtain a marketable degree with a minimum of forgone wages or tuition dollars, this approach is problematic (Wilms 1974). Many disadvantaged students do not understand college offerings, face strong pressures to get through

school quickly, and seek an efficient way to improve their occupational qualifications and get better jobs.

Occupational colleges help students to determine from the outset what degree program best coincides with their abilities, interests, and needs. When they enroll, every student is required to sit down with an admissions counselor who will go through all the degree programs and the courses they entail, with an explanation of implications, sequences, requirements, and job outcomes. Students' achievement and goals are assessed. In the words of one student,

You go through all the programs, and they evaluate you, and you take some tests. They just interview you, what you like, what you don't like. . . . They get a feel for you, and they tell you, you know, "We recommend this one. We think you'd be good at it."

In some cases, students are advised not to attend the college since their occupational goals do not coincide with program offerings. For students unsure of their future goals, this personal attention from a counselor who is familiar with all the degree possibilities can be very helpful.

While this approach lacks the breadth of exploration in community colleges, it does entail exploration. Obviously, for these nontraditional students, many of whom did poorly in high school, the very effort to try out college is a daring and risky exploration, and each college course provides a challenge that could end their effort. In addition, while these occupational programs are far more directive than community colleges, they allow some exploration and some redirection of career trajectory after the first semester or after the first year. Moreover, at some occupational colleges, students who do well in the associate's program are encouraged to transfer to a bachelor's degree program in a related field.⁶

College-Initiated Guidance and Minimizing the Risk of Student Error

Third, in contrast to the burden of student-initiated guidance, occupational colleges have actually structured out the need for students to take the initiative to see a counselor when they need assistance. Instead, the colleges take the initiative by developing systems that provide guidance without students having to ask for it. They automatically assign each student to a specific counselor who monitors his or her academic progress. Students must meet with their advisor each term before registering for courses, and advisors provide assistance that is specific to each student's needs. One administrator explained the typical way that these meetings work. An advisor will sit down with the student and tell him or her,

Next quarter, you're going to take these classes, you have these options. . . . In this time slot, you can take this class or this class. Now, do you want to take psych., . . . soc., . . . political science, or . . . history? Here is why you are taking these classes. This is required here.

In addition, the occupational colleges have registration guides that tell students exactly what courses to take each term to complete their degree in a timely manner. Although this limits course flexibility, most students appreciate the system because it helps them to complete a degree quickly and prevents them from making mistakes. According to one student,

I think it's a good idea; a lot of people start taking classes that they don't really need and it throws them off. I think it's good . . . it's simple . . . all you have to do is follow it. There's no, "Oh my god, I didn't know I had to take that class!" There's a lot of classes where you have prerequisites. But if you go in that order, you have no problem.

In our survey of 4,300 students, we asked, "Have you ever taken any course which you later discovered would not count toward your degree?" While 45 percent of the community college students responded, "yes," this had happened to them, only 16 percent of the private occupational college students reported the same.⁷

Investing in Counselors and Eliminating Poor Advice

Fourth, while community colleges offer very few counselors, occupational colleges have invested in counseling services and job placement staff. For example, one of the occupational colleges we studied has four academic advisors and one dean devoted exclusively to counseling 1,300 first-year students, a ratio of 260 students to each staff person. Moreover, this college has five additional advisors for assisting with job placement. This provides a sharp contrast to community colleges, where counselors perform many counseling tasks, including personal, academic, and career counseling, and typically have 800:1 ratios for all these services.

Unlike community colleges, all of the occupational colleges devote substantial resources to job placement, separate from the other counseling and advising functions. Job placement offices are well staffed with low student-to-staff ratios, ranging from 90:1 to 122:1 at all these colleges. In contrast, none of these community colleges have any full-time staff devoted to job placement, and other research suggests that may be typical (Grubb 1996; Brewer and Gray 1999). Occupational colleges believe these investments are essential to their mission of helping students complete degrees and get good jobs.

Fifth, in contrast with community colleges, at occupational colleges, instructors communicate with advisors to exchange information about students' progress. Advisors are regularly informed about departmental requirements and faculty talk with advisors about particular students, a simple process given the highly explicit organization of programs.

Quick Detection of Mistakes

Sixth, in contrast to the difficulty of detecting student mistakes at community colleges, occupational colleges require students to meet with their advisors frequently—usually every term. At one college, students must meet with their advisor three times each term.

Occupational colleges also tend to have good student information systems that keep advisors informed about students' progress or difficulties. At several occupational colleges, attendance is regularly taken, advisors are quickly informed of absences, and students are contacted by their advisors before the problem gets serious. After midterms, instructors notify advisors of those students who are performing poorly in class. If the student seems to be having problems, the advisor is responsible for mediating between student and teacher to find a solution to existing problems and make sure the student receives academic support. Through the scheduled interactions, students get to know their advisors on a personal basis, and they are more likely to approach them for help even when they are not required to do so. This is a stark contrast to the more anonymous community college system of advising.

Reducing Conflicts with Outside Demands

Seventh, occupational colleges make efforts to alleviate external pressures that increase the chances of dropping out. These schools have adapted to students' needs by compacting the school year. In an old study, Wilms (1974) estimated that proprietary schools have competitive cost-benefit ratios, despite much higher tuitions, because of their speed at getting students to a degree that raises their earnings sooner. If an associate's degree raises students' wage rates, and if completing school increases students' work hours each week, then getting the degree nine months earlier increases earnings in two ways.

In addition, many students face strong pressures from parents, spouses, children, and jobs to complete schooling quickly. Private occupational colleges respond to these pressures by creating year-round schooling, which leads more quickly to degrees. Several schools have altered their school year to consist of year-round courses with only two one-week vacations in December and July. Students attend classes year round, and in one school, they can obtain a fifteen-month associate's degree.

Since disadvantaged students face many pressures and crises that cause students to lose the benefit of their prior work for the term, occupational colleges reduce the cost of such discontinuities by shortening the length of the school term. If outside pressures force students to suspend their studies and lose one term, it is a relatively short term, and they can resume their studies in a very short time. In

addition, prospective students do not have to wait long before a new term begins. Instead of offering classes in relatively long semesters, one school has altered the school year so that it now consists of a series of five ten-week terms, and several other schools have short terms.

While the answer is not to turn community colleges into occupational colleges, community colleges can better help students by borrowing some lessons from occupational colleges.

Moreover, unlike community colleges, which have complex class schedules in noncontinuous time slots, occupational colleges schedule two courses back-to-back that would typically be taken in a program. This blocking of courses decreases commuting time and makes it easier for students to attend school while they continue to work. Also, while community colleges' class schedules change from term to term, occupational colleges offer the same time schedules from one term to the next. As a result, work and child care arrangements made for one term will continue to work out in the following term.

In addition, while community colleges offer so many courses that they cannot promise to offer needed courses each term, occupational colleges preplan sequences of courses for each program, and they make sure that every program has the courses necessary to make progress every term. Obviously, when all students in a program are taking the same courses, this is relatively easy and economically efficient, but the commitment of these colleges goes beyond that. In several cases, a few students fell out of their cohort's sequence in their course taking, and the colleges offered classes with only three students, just so students could finish their degree within the promised time frame. This is very expensive, but the colleges prized their promise that students can complete the degree in the customary time. In the community colleges, classes below a minimum enrollment were routinely cancelled.

In contrast to community colleges' futile attempt to downplay students' jobs, occupational colleges essentially turn what is viewed as something negative into something that can advance students' career goals. Students receive detailed guidance on how to combine their need to work with their educational goals. These occupational colleges consider work a valuable experience related to their degrees, and they help students find relevant jobs, even if they may pay less. Advisors encourage students to get jobs related to their goals:

We tell them in the first quarter . . . try to get a job, even if you're just answering the phone, let's say, at Arthur Andersen, but you're an accounting student. One day you can say, "Here's my resume, I want to see if there's something for me here." And then you can be a clerk, you know; you've just got to move your way up.

Instead of lamenting the reality of students' need to work, occupational colleges try to guide students toward using their work to advance their career goals.

Conclusion

While we have seen that community colleges pose some serious problems for students who lack know-how, some occupational colleges have found ways to address these problems. While the answer is not to turn community colleges into occupational colleges, community colleges can better help students by borrowing some lessons from occupational colleges—(1) creating clear curriculum structures, (2) vastly improving counseling, (3) closely monitoring student progress, (4) implementing an information system that would quickly show signs of student difficulties, and (5) alleviating conflicts with external pressures.

This article has addressed an issue in community colleges that may influence the outcomes of low-income, first-generation, and nontraditional students. We show how the structure of community colleges we studied creates a need for students to have extensive know-how about the college process. We have also found that by making the implicit explicit, some occupational colleges eliminate the know-how prerequisite that community colleges seem to require for students to be successful in completing their educational and career goals.

Although most people in our society must learn to cope with bureaucratic complexities eventually, students' ability to cope and learn from them may improve with experience—they may be able to adapt to complexities better as they proceed through college, after acquiring social know-how and academic successes.⁸ An individual's capacity to adapt to complexities may depend on attainment of basic skills or increased maturity. It is also possible that procedures that gradually introduce the complexities in small steps may make them easier to manage, and strong advising and school supports may also make adaptation easier.

The occupational college model is not for everyone. Although these occupational colleges offer degrees in several fields, students' options are limited. On the other hand, community colleges offer a more diverse range of programs and courses. For students who have the know-how for making these decisions and who do not face strong external competing pressures, community colleges may provide an inexpensive version of a four-year college education that works very well. However, community colleges pose challenges that often require students to devote additional time (and tuition) obtaining information, puzzling among choices, exploring, and making false starts and mistakes in pursuit of a degree in this complex system. For students who lack social know-how, their attempts at college may amount to nothing more than a series of unrelated credit hours and failed dreams.

Notes

1. A more recent study by Shaw (1997) does compare institutional cultures and ideologies across several community colleges, and it is an excellent example of the value of such comparative qualitative work. Yet her focus is on remedial programs and not on the general experiences of credit-level students. Furthermore, her work does not specifically connect qualitative data with issues of persistence.

2. Surveys were administered to students in class; therefore, the response rate approached 100 percent. Classes were selected to target a cross section of credit-level students in comparable occupationally focused programs across the various colleges. Surveys asked about students' goals, background, attitudes, experiences, course-taking patterns, and perceptions. In both types of colleges, students' families are generally lower and middle income, with 41 percent of community college students and 45 percent of occupational college students reporting parents' annual incomes less than \$30,000 (and nearly one-quarter less than \$19,000 in each type of college). Approximately 83 percent of community college students and 89 percent of occupational college students have parents with less than a bachelor's degree. At community colleges, 25 percent reported grades of Cs or lower in high school, and at occupational colleges, 28 percent reported these low grades. Moreover, at both, students want similar things from college, with just less than 70 percent at community colleges and slightly more than 80 percent at occupational colleges indicating that they were in college to "get a better job." These findings confirm well-established findings of prior research (Dougherty 1994; Grubb 1996).

3. In the fall of 1999, 121,573 undergraduate freshman were enrolled, but only 57,670 undergraduate sophomores were enrolled in the fall of 2000. Since only 12,286 students were reported to have transferred from community colleges in that same semester and 4,391 transferred to community colleges, and freshman enrollments increased by only 799, these data suggest that roughly 45 percent of the 1999 freshmen did not return the following year as sophomores. Some, especially part-timers, may have returned as freshmen again, but since this same pattern persists from 1997 to 2000, it is likely that this percentage reflects attrition during the first two years. This percentage is likely to be higher than in longitudinal studies since it does not account for students' degree intentions or follow the same students over time.

4. Sophomores are 41.5 percent of the previous year's freshman enrollments, and the fall 2000 transfer percentage was doubled to 20 percent, assuming that each of the fall and spring semesters would include 10 percent of students transferring.

5. These colleges, which we termed "occupational colleges" (Deil and Rosenbaum 2001), are similar to what Bailey, Badway, and Gumport (2001) referred to as "Accredited Career Colleges." They have very low loan default rates, unlike many former proprietary schools that were closed as a result of new legislation. Two-year business colleges and technical colleges can be found in every major city and are widely advertised in local media.

6. Two of the colleges in our sample have their own accelerated bachelor's degree programs in business, computer, and technology fields.

7. This analysis includes only those students who had not attended a previous college.

8. While this entire discussion has focused on community colleges, similar issues arise at other levels of education, such as high schools, where students make choices about courses in increasingly complex "shopping mall high schools," where curricula are unstructured and implications of choices are unclear. For instance, failure to choose algebra by ninth grade precludes precalculus by twelfth grade, which makes science majors difficult in college, yet these implications of ninth-grade choices do not become apparent for many years.

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