

Book review of Thomas Bailey and Vanessa Smith Morest (eds.) *Defending the Community College Equity Agenda* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2006) pages 299, ISBN 0-8018-8447-0.

America's 1,200 community colleges enroll nearly half of credit-earning undergraduates, and first time students. However, scholarly attention to this growing postsecondary sector is dwarfed by research and publications concerning 4 year institutions. Community colleges serve a disproportionate share of low income students including 79% of California's Latino students. Public four-year institutions grew by 3.5% from 1990 to 2000, but public two-year enrollments grew by 14%.

This timely book addresses several key threats to the community college equity agenda. It is filled with current statistics, trends, and citations that will be a bonanza for future scholars. It also analyzes how a small sample of 15 colleges in six states have responded to these challenges. It ends with an excellent summary of the equity outcomes and recommendations to improve institutional practices and policies.

The co-authors have long and deep backgrounds through their leadership roles in the Community College Research Center at Teachers College. Two of the ten chapters are authored by researchers not affiliated with Teachers College.

The book provides a balanced picture of the challenges facing community colleges and the resulting inadequate outcomes for students. The final chapter is a powerful indictment of many components of community colleges including their inadequate : completion rates, developmental education operations, information systems, transfer of credits to four-year institutions, advising, and quality of online instruction. But community colleges enroll almost anyone who wants to come regardless of preparation. Community college budgets are very fiscally constrained, and often lag enrollment growth. Moreover, need based student financial aid has not kept up with the changing student bodies. Many students, however, do succeed in community colleges despite long odds.

The authors summarize their conclusions this way:

It is fair to say that community colleges have made a crucial contribution to opening college access, but their role in providing overall equity in higher education outcomes is less clear. The majority of students who start community college do not earn a degree or certificate (p. 247)...

Thus, the good intentions and hard work of community college faculty in promoting the success if their students are not reinforced by institutional incentives and information systems. (p. 248).

The book begins with the historic dilemma of how community colleges can balance their multiple missions – four-year college transfer, vocational education, continuing education for businesses, basic adult education such as learning English, and

recreational courses. This multiple mission analysis is highlighted by the authors' concern for a recent trend of shifting college attention and policy away from low income and disadvantaged students. Moreover, community colleges aspire to moving up the academic ladder by emulating practices and policies at four-year institutions. This chapter emphasizes that a larger and growing proportion of community college students are recent high school graduates, so college mission needs to shift more to the 17-20 age range. The multiple mission concern is heightened by the chapter on lack of accountability. The authors conclude that "accountability, especially performance-based funding, so far has been a paper tiger. It has not threatened college funding or enrollments" (p. 249).

The chapter about increasing competition and growth of the for-profit community colleges is fascinating. It includes some criticisms of for-profits, but also stresses for-profit community colleges focused more effort on job placement than the public community college case study institutions that the authors studied (p. 96).

The edited volume includes a significant focus on the community college role in preparing students for work. An entire chapter is devoted to industry certification programs with an emphasis upon industry technology certification. This chapter analyzes the rapid rise and fall of industry certification during the technology boom and bust from 1995 to 2005. Workforce issues also are featured in an excellent chapter by Norton Grubb of the University of California at Berkeley on the inadequate community college resources devoted to counseling.

There are two chapters on the remediation issue and another chapter on dual enrollment that helps high school students understand academic challenges at community colleges. However, the book's coverage of weak secondary school academic preparation is my only disappointment. There is no chapter or deep analysis that looks back to secondary schools as a cause and solution for excessive remediation (Kirst and Venezia, 2004). The book does not have a K-14 focus, and is essentially a horizontal treatment of the community college rather than a vertical perspective. The authors mention the college preparation issue several times, but do not push much beyond that.

For example, hundreds, if not thousands, of different placement tests are used to evaluate entering students, so it can be difficult for students to understand what is expected of them. California community colleges, for example, use more than 100 different tests. Texas has a required statewide placement exam, but many colleges in Texas also use their own exam for placement. The most widely used placement tests are constructed by ETS and ACT, but many others are designed by higher education departments or faculty at individual community college campuses.

There is a wide range of acceptable student-performance levels on placement tests, and tracking the proportion of students who need remedial education is virtually impossible. Indeed, estimates of the number and percent of remedial students are all over the place. None of the experts are comfortable with the current definitions.

The most widely cited remedial rates from the U.S. Department of Education, Condition of Education, 2001, are among the lowest: 42 percent of students in two-year institutions, and 20 percent in four-year institutions. Other indicators are much higher. The Academic Senate for the 109 California Community Colleges found far more than half of their entering students were placed at a "level below college readiness." The U.S. Education Department's "Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000" reports that 12th graders in 1992 had a remediation rate of 61.1 percent for community colleges and 25.3 percent at four-year colleges.

What does "remedial" mean? While a term that is used so frequently, and so freely, might seem to call for a clear definition, when applied to postsecondary education, its meaning is murky at best.

Once remedial students reach community college the book provides impressive and novel insights about developmental education. The use of case studies works well for these topics. The authors conclude with two major points:

...there is no general agreement as to the specific reading, writing, and math skills needed to learn from the postsecondary curriculum. The lack of a common benchmark creates problems for deciding what should be taught in developmental education courses.

...there is a serious shortage of controlled evaluation research to support them, which is troubling in view of claims that postsecondary remedial course work is ineffective [page 257].

Teachers College is the site for a multi million dollar U.S. Department of Education randomized clinical trial of community college interventions such as dual enrollment. We can look forward to more major publications by Bailey and Mores.

Sources:

Kirst, Michael and Venezia, Andrea (eds.). *From High School to College* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004).