

CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNITY COLLEGES: TRADITIONAL COLLEGE PROCEDURES FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

The United States is well on its way to a previously impossible goal: universal higher education. Over 80 percent of high school graduates enter higher education in the eight years after high school (Adelman 2003, table 2.7). College enrollment has dramatically increased, and most of the gain is in a relatively new institution: community colleges.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES TODAY: ACCESS FOR ALL

Minor institutions just a few decades ago, community colleges are now a major player in American society. A generation ago, public two-year colleges were called junior colleges, were considered unimportant, and enrolled only a small portion of college students. Now called community colleges, they have become comprehensive institutions that have greatly increased in size and importance, and serve a broad segment of the community. Where enrollment in four-year colleges has doubled since 1965, enrollment in community colleges has increased five-fold. Today, almost half of all new college students are in community colleges (NCES 2002).

Community colleges are amazing institutions designed around an idealistic goal: increasing college access. Community colleges are the primary source of opportunity for ethnic minorities, immigrants, and low-income students. They offer a second chance for students who attended poor high schools, or who did poorly in high school. They also provide new benefits:

Besides preparing students to transfer to four-year colleges, they also offer certificates and associate's degrees in occupational fields (Brint and Karabel 1989), as well as a wide range of noncredit classes, training activities, and community services.

BEYOND ACCESS: OLD PROBLEMS SOLVED, NEW PROBLEMS CREATED

Because of these rapid changes and new missions, community colleges are poorly understood, and policy makers struggle to figure out how to use this new institution to accomplish societal and labor market goals. College faculty and staff report vague and inconsistent descriptions of community college activities, as we shall see.

As community colleges have evolved over recent decades, old problems have been solved only to give rise to new challenges, some of which are rarely seen or understood. Despite the amazing increases in college access, most community college students do not complete degrees, and, as we detail later, many leave with no new qualifications—no degrees, and often no credits (Adelman 2003). For these students, college provides little or no labor market benefit (Marcotte et al. 2005). These colleges obviously do not work for many students. Increasing access was an important step, but it was only the first. We must now work to improve these colleges so that they can effectively educate and graduate their new students.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS: EXPLANATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

To solve these new problems, we must explain why they occur. This is a major undertaking. Although statistics can demonstrate the magnitude of the problems, numbers alone cannot flesh out the underlying issues. To understand such complicated and often hidden factors, one must go beyond the existing quantitative literature, which this book does, employing multiple research methods.

Throughout, we compare community colleges with private colleges that also offer accredited associate's degrees in the same occupational fields (which we call occupational colleges). Through detailed comparisons in local and national data, we discover that these two types of colleges use different procedures that handle students' problems in different ways. The community colleges we studied place responsibility on individual students, often expecting ill-prepared students to catch up on their own, and reforms

focus on fixing individuals. In contrast, the occupational colleges we studied take some responsibility for student success by addressing student problems with institutional innovations rather than trying to fix the problem student by student. In other words, institutional deficiencies, rather than student deficiencies, are examined as areas for improvement.

Our research shows that students experience many problems in dealing with community college procedures; similar students respond differently to occupational colleges' different procedures—they report fewer problems at college and achieve higher degree completion rates. These findings suggest that student deficiencies are not the only cause of the problems college students face, and that programs to reduce the deficiencies of individual students may not be the most effective solution. Instead, institutional and procedural changes in community colleges may lead to greater success for their students, who are otherwise similar to their peers at occupational colleges. These comparisons bring to light the shortcomings of previous approaches and suggest some innovative alternatives.

This study has little to say about teaching and instruction (see Grubb and Associates 1999). Our focus on other aspects of the college experience helps to demonstrate one of our primary points. Colleges, and indeed all schools, are more than classrooms, and must provide more than instruction. Schools are organizations in which students have careers over several years. Aside from judging instructional quality, we should also judge schools on other criteria: students' persistence, degree completion, and employment outcomes, for example. School success in these areas may depend on whether college staff make correct assumptions about student needs and capacities and devise appropriate organizational procedures.

This chapter first examines three revolutionary changes in American society which have transformed community colleges and have given them a central role in society. We discuss the innovative ways that community colleges have dramatically improved college access for new groups of students. Yet, despite this remarkable success, students with degree aspirations have dismal rates of degree completion at community colleges. We consider two explanations. The first comes from a youth development or individual approach, which blames students' deficiencies for their failure at college and proposes to increase college completion rates by improving individuals' capabilities. These strategies, however, are difficult to fit into students' already overburdened lives, and it is questionable whether this approach seriously considers the adult responsibilities that many students must manage while in college.

The second explanation comes from an institutional approach, which examines how colleges' organizational procedures may not match the needs of the new students in these colleges. Consistent with this, we demonstrate how occupational colleges, which are similar to community colleges in the students they serve and the occupational programs they offer, have much better degree completion rates and different organizational procedures. As we will show, many problems that are blamed on student deficiencies are less likely to arise in occupational colleges. These problems also seem to be reduced by certain organizational procedures, which could be adapted for use in community colleges.

THE RISE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES: AN UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

American society is now in the midst of major transformations. In one generation, American society has been radically transformed by three revolutions, each related to community colleges.

1. The labor market has increasingly demanded college degrees.
2. Community colleges have emerged as a major societal institution.
3. Community colleges have adopted a revolutionary policy of open admissions.

First, the labor market has dramatically changed. Just forty years ago, most jobs required little education. For example, high school dropouts with poor academic skills could get high-paid jobs in factories. This is no longer true. Most of those manufacturing jobs are gone, and the remaining ones require academic, problem-solving, technical, and social skills. These new basic skills include academic skills at only the tenth grade level, but the majority of high school graduates lack such competencies (Murnane and Levy 1996). Although students formerly acquired these skills in high school, many no longer do, and employers increasingly seek out college graduates. Today, the fastest growing jobs are those that require at least some postsecondary education (Barton 2005; Carnevale 2001), and the demand and wage premium for college degrees is growing (Grubb 1996).

Second, community colleges have emerged as a major societal institution. Since 1965, while enrollments at four-year colleges doubled, community college enrollments increased five-fold (NCES 2002, table 173). Although community colleges began as a small part of higher education, today almost half of new college students attend community colleges (NCES 2002, table

190). The proportion is higher for nontraditional students (economically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, immigrants, older individuals), who are the fastest-growing segment of students in higher education. Providing access into higher education for over five million students every year, community colleges have become a central component of American society.

Third, whereas four-year colleges increased opportunity by tinkering with admissions criteria, community colleges adopted a revolutionary policy of open admissions, admitting all interested applicants regardless of academic achievement. This is the most amazing change, removing virtually all obstacles to college. For the 86 percent of young adults with a high school diploma or GED (NCES 2002, table 8), college access has almost become an entitlement. High school was the highest level of education that most Americans attended in 1965, but today most young people attend college. The first half of the twentieth century led to universal access to secondary education; in the second half, the United States is approaching an age of nearly universal college attendance.

Innovations of College Access

Community colleges have transformed higher education. Community colleges offer many new options, including one-year certificates and two-year associate's degrees, in addition to preparation for transfer to four-year colleges. With their low cost and convenient locations, they have reduced financial and spatial barriers, allowing students to attend college while living at home and continuing their family or work duties, with no additional housing costs or job-related sacrifices. With open admissions, community colleges remove academic barriers and offer second chances for college to students who did poorly in high school.

Community colleges have shifted traditional notions about college in both space and time. Initially each state had only a few public colleges, but today every state has numerous community colleges, many with multiple campuses. More than 1,100 public two-year colleges are located in cities and towns across the nation, and many have satellite locations (NCES 2002, table 246). Instead of offering courses only on a college campus, community colleges are also located in storefronts or office buildings convenient to homes or workplaces. Such satellite locations allow students to fit college into their daily lives with less commuting and fewer sacrifices. The emergence and expansion of online options has extended this access into students' homes.

Besides spatial convenience, community colleges have also shifted time schedules. They offer classes before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. on weekdays,

Saturdays, and even Sundays. Some campuses offer Internet classes, lessons, and help sessions that are available around the clock. College has shifted from a nine to five schedule to 24/7.

Community colleges have also transformed high schools. “College for all” has become the guiding principle in high schools, and guidance counselors have changed their advice. Whereas old studies found that guidance counselors acted as gatekeepers to keep students out of college (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963), by the 1990s some guidance counselors were, one study found, urging most students to attend (Rosenbaum 2001). Obviously such expansion means more students enter college. It also means new kinds of students. This diversity has further increased with the changing ethnic composition of the United States.

In studying community colleges, we were impressed with the ambitious idealistic goals of these institutions, the extensive breadth of program offerings, the extraordinary dedication and efforts of some faculty and administrators to extend themselves well beyond formal job duties to support students in college and into careers. We were impressed by the sense of mission that many faculty and administrators demonstrated. Some devoted sixty hours a week to making sure that they reached students and helped them succeed. The deeper we delved, the more impressed we were with the heroic efforts of community college faculty, staff, and administrators. A simple focus on average statistics misses the important and inspiring achievements we describe later in this volume.

We also marvel at their impressive successes. As we interviewed students, we were repeatedly impressed by the dramatic changes in opportunities offered to students who came from very disadvantaged backgrounds. If it were not for these institutions, many of these disadvantaged students would have no chance to escape poverty.

College attendance is now possible for most high school graduates. Indeed, recent analyses indicate that over 80 percent of high school graduates attend college, and most surprisingly, the racial gap in college attendance has largely disappeared. Eighty-three and a half percent of whites attend college in the eight years after high school, and the numbers are only 3 percent lower for blacks and Hispanics (80.2 percent and 80.6 percent; Adelman 2003, table 2.7). Although blacks and Hispanics face greater barriers in graduating from high school, high school graduates find that the major barriers to entering college have fallen, and college attendance is universally high across most ethnic groups. Because of community colleges, the major barriers to entering college have fallen.

Access, but Poor Completion

Despite these achievements, degree completion is disappointing in community colleges. A national survey found that, of students who began in public two-year colleges, only 26 percent completed any degree five years after entrance (NCES 2002). Moreover, there are serious racial gaps. Whereas 28 percent of whites complete degrees, only 11 percent of blacks and 21 percent of Hispanics do so (NCES 2002; see also Bailey et al. 2003; Dougherty 1994; Dowd 2003; Grubb 1996). Following students over a longer period increases degree completion, but the results are still poor, and sometimes dismal. Analyzing high school graduates who had degree plans and entered public two-year colleges immediately after graduation, one study finds that only 40.8 percent of students complete any degree over the next eight years (Rosenbaum and Stephan 2005). Moreover, the racial gap is huge: 45.2 percent of whites complete degrees, but only 32.6 percent of Hispanics and 18.7 percent of blacks do so (2005).

Indeed, many students barely enter college. Defining incidental students as those with ten or fewer credits eight years after graduating high school, Clifford Adelman (2003, table 3.1) finds that about 20 percent of African American and Latino college students are incidental students, but fewer than 10 percent of whites are. Moreover, 75 percent of incidental students attend community colleges (Adelman 2003, table 3.2). Community colleges provide access to higher education for many new groups of students, but it is not clear whether these students are actually in college, and whether they accumulate enough credits to improve their job opportunities (compare Marcotte et al. 2005).

These statistics indicate an amazing success and a startling failure. Community colleges have dramatically lowered barriers to college access. They serve nontraditional students, who are often the first generation in their families to attend college (Dougherty 1994). They also serve nontraditional purposes, offering occupational programs that respond to labor market needs (Bailey, Badway, and Gumport 2002; Brint and Karabel 1989; Grubb 1996; Jacobs and Winslow 2003; Shaw and Rab 2003; Wilms 1974). However, degree completion is shockingly low for whites, and abysmal for blacks and Hispanics.

BLAMING STUDENT DEFICIENCIES: THE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

To understand such problems, one approach is to study individuals, explaining outcomes with multivariate analyses of student attributes (disadvantaged

backgrounds, poor achievement, and the like). This approach assumes that students have deficiencies that must be repaired. However, this implicit blame of students does not inform colleges and policy makers what actions can remedy the problems because the deficiencies arise before students enter college and may not be easily redressed. This individual model has serious limitations, which suggest the need for other, more structural, approaches.

Psychologists have focused on identifying the problems that minority and disadvantaged students face. Their studies have led to a wide variety of ambitious youth-development programs that target risk factors and seek to build youths' capacity to surmount educational obstacles. For example, a National Research Council report enumerates a long list of goals for improving the lives of young people. It includes twenty-eight attributes in four broad categories: physical health, intellectual development, psychological and emotional development, and social development—to be targeted for improvement (Eccles and Appleton Gootman 2002).

In an ideal world, these approaches are obviously desirable; it is always valuable to improve individuals' capabilities. However, in the real world that disadvantaged students inhabit, this approach is often unworkable. It demands precious time and money from low-income youths for whom resources are already scarce, and may make further demands on the support from significant others. The additional demands of youth development programs may impose new costs and fail to improve students' success.

An illustrative example comes from our interview with Sheila, a student who faces difficulties similar to many others we interviewed (all respondent names in this book are pseudonyms). Sheila was a twenty-two-year-old African American from a low-income background. She did poorly in high school, has never married, and had two babies before she was twenty. Although she received only occasional childcare help, she managed to attend college full-time, work forty hours a week, run a household, prepare meals, and read to her two preschool children. Sheila struggled with her college coursework, and managed a B average. She blamed herself for not working harder in college, but could not start her schoolwork until the children went to bed, and blamed herself for sometimes falling asleep over homework. Her two-year degree would take at least four years to complete, if she could persevere that long. She did not realize that many of the courses she had to take for the academic associate's degree did not confer college credits, nor did she know that the college offered an applied associate's degree that did not require some of these remedial courses, yet would confer virtually the same, if not better, benefits in the labor market. If she had known, she might have chosen the latter and completed the degree by the

time of our interview. Meanwhile, her mother was helping with child care, but, as Sheila began her fourth year in college, her mother repeatedly asked how much longer the “two-year degree” would take.

The typical youth development approach would provide Sheila with better academic skills for getting through college and better life skills for managing the many competing demands on her time. These would be useful, but it is hard to imagine where she would fit this program into her already busy schedule, and whether she (or her mother) would be patient about extending her college career with another noncredit delay. This approach would provide Sheila with a great deal of information about college procedures, much of which would be of little use later in life.

Moreover, this individualistic approach has some limitations that are often ignored. First, despite claims about focusing on the positive, many youth development programs pose a daunting array of ambitious goals that might be overwhelming and discouraging to practitioners and students, particularly students who have failed in the past. Second, though this approach intends to operate in all domains, the emphasis has been on providing small, add-on social services programs (during or after school), rather than on fundamental redesign of major societal institutions such as schools. As such, there is a risk that it will not reach all students in the way that institutional changes do.

BEYOND INDIVIDUAL BLAME: AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

Instead of focusing only on improving individuals, the problem may reside in the person-environment fit. Describing research on the motivational effects of small schools, teacher efficacy, and junior high school structures, one review concludes that many of the typical problems faced by young people are not developmental, but rather, the result of a poor match between young people’s needs and institutional structures (Eccles et al. 1993).

Rather than analyzing individual traits, this book takes a different approach, examining different institutions and how they may contribute to college failures for disadvantaged students. Instead of seeing students’ actions as related solely to internal motivation, individuals also respond to external incentives. A sociological analysis can uncover the ways that different organizations provide students with opportunities and incentives, yet also pose obstacles, including some that may be unnecessary and unintended. As we illustrate, organizations may contribute to students’

successes and failures, and studies of their alternative procedures can suggest practical steps that schools can take to improve student outcomes.

For Sheila, and for many students like her, a structural approach of studying and remedying college organizational procedures has obvious attraction. Instead of adding a new program to provide Sheila with the many skills and extensive information she would need to cope with community college, colleges may be redesigned so they demand less prerequisite information, make it difficult to make mistakes, and reduce the impact of mistakes. This study will enable colleges to identify institutional barriers and make organizational changes to help students who lack the time or resources to attend additional intervention programs.

INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES: PROCEDURES AND OUTCOMES

We seek to understand the ways that institutions contribute to students' outcomes by comparing two types of institutions: public community colleges and private occupational colleges. Although the public and private two-year colleges we studied offer accredited programs in the same occupational fields and enroll similar students (as we show later), they handle the same issues in different ways. We examine the ways that each type of college tries to engage students who had previous difficulties in school, to respond to students' difficulties, to bolster students' confidence in college payoffs, and to teach them social and cultural skills required in school and in the college labor market. We examine how these colleges provide institutional contacts with employers, and we compare how they operate across different occupations and in different college structures. This comparison lets us see the ways similar students respond to very different organizational procedures. Instead of blaming students for their outcomes, private occupational colleges address problematic outcomes by using procedures distinctly different from those used in public two-year colleges. These procedures seem to lead similar students to fewer problems and greater progress.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are accredited, public, two-year colleges that began as feeder schools (junior colleges) into traditional four-year colleges and have evolved to offer extensive occupational programs (Brint and Karabel 1989). They frequently have been the focus of research (Dougherty 1994; Grubb 1996). Our sample of community colleges covers a large metropolitan area and is racially and socioeconomically highly diverse.

Occupational Colleges

Occupational colleges are also accredited two-year colleges that offer occupational programs, but are private rather than public. Many began as traditional business or technical schools, but unlike most schools of this sort, these colleges are now accredited to offer associate's degrees by national associations, similar to the regional groups that accredit most community colleges. They have a long history of providing postsecondary education in occupational fields to students who generally come from less advantaged backgrounds.

Readers may think of these colleges as trade schools, vocational colleges, business colleges, technical schools, or health services schools; however, there is an important difference. Although they began as business and technical schools, they have changed over the past fifteen years. Now these and many like them have upgraded their programs to offer accredited associate's degrees. Accreditation is important, because it sets these occupational colleges apart from over 90 percent of private postsecondary institutions, which offer no degree above a certificate (Apling 1993). Beyond accreditation, occupational colleges are also similar to community colleges in that they increasingly offer transfer opportunities for four-year degrees (mostly in applied occupational fields), and prepare students for the same jobs, in the same local labor market, for the same high-demand skilled occupations (for example, health services, technicians, computer information systems, administrative, paralegal). However, these occupational colleges do not offer the other programs offered by community colleges (for example, liberal arts, remedial, GED, adult education, hobbies, self improvement, second language programs). Most interestingly for this inquiry, these private colleges design their programs and services differently (as we will discuss later), which may account for their better degree completion rates.

Although in earlier decades some private schools offered poor training (or even fraudulent practices), federal regulations in the early 1990s radically altered these institutions, forcing 1,300 out of business and imposing performance criteria that improved the others (Kelly 2001). The institutions in our sample have a history of serving low-income and minority students, and have successfully met these performance requirements.

Our study has nothing to say about private colleges generally; we are studying some of the best ones—an ideal type. This point must be emphasized. Although our community colleges may be typical, our private colleges are not a representative sample of such institutions. Rather, we focus on a small, handpicked group of private colleges. These colleges are not a

random sample and do not represent private for-profit or nonprofit colleges nationwide. We chose colleges offering some of the best programs in occupational fields, and those most comparable to community colleges.

The ideal type provided by the private colleges in our study presents a different perspective on how two-year colleges can operate, which we contrast with our community colleges. Our aim is not to compare average private and public colleges, nor to discount the other extensive educational functions community colleges provide that occupational colleges do not. Our aim is instead to compare private and public colleges that are highly similar in terms of the accredited occupational programs they offer, the students they enroll, and the geographic region and labor market they serve. At the same time, we seek to contrast how these colleges use different procedures, to understand how these procedures operate, how students respond to them, and how students' experiences and outcomes differ in comparable colleges using different procedures.

Comparing Degree Completion Rates

Private two-year, degree-granting colleges (for-profit and nonprofit) have higher graduation rates, and possibly smaller racial gaps, than community colleges. Analyzing high school graduates with degree plans who entered two-year, degree-granting colleges right after graduation, James Rosenbaum and Jennifer Stephan (2005) find that only 40.8 percent of community-college students complete degrees (associate's or above), but 58.0 percent of private-college students do so in the eight years after high school. The racial gap also may be smaller, although small numbers make this inference less certain (table 1.1).

Other research suggests similar conclusions. Using National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data, Stephan and Rosenbaum (2006) found that students attending public and private two-year colleges are highly comparable. After creating a multivariate logistic model of students' propensity to attend community colleges (versus private two-year colleges), the study found many students in each college type at every propensity level, and the two groups of students were not significantly different on any of the extensive array of pre-existing attributes tested. Moreover, after matching groups of students who were highly comparable in propensity and balanced on forty-five relevant attributes, the study found that degree completion was significantly higher in private than in public two-year colleges in every comparison (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2006).

In our local sample, only one occupational college provided degree completion data. That college shows dramatically higher six-year completion

TABLE 1.1 Degree Completion Rates

	Whites	Hispanics	African Americans
Public colleges	46.7% (1207)	32.5% (270)	18.9% (110)
Private colleges	58.7% (81)	25.0% (13)	64.3% (12)

Source: Rosenbaum and Stephan (2005).

Note: Numbers taken eight years after college entry. Number of cases unweighted.

rates than the above community college rates, especially among minority students (65.1 percent for all students, 57.0 percent for blacks, 77.9 percent Hispanics).

The Illinois Board of Higher Education collects systematic data that permits computing graduation-enrollment ratios for all colleges in the state (2002). While these ratios are not the same as degree completion rates for a cohort, they are a rough approximation. Analyzing all colleges in Illinois, Davis Jenkins (2002) finds that private two-year colleges have much higher graduates-enrollment ratios than community colleges, especially for African American and Hispanic students.

All these analyses lead to the same conclusions. First, private colleges have higher completion rates than public colleges. Second, the racial gap in degree completion may be smaller in private colleges than in public ones. Each of these analyses has potential sources of error. Yet it is noteworthy that the same conclusions are suggested in analyses with different sources of error—small numbers of minorities in the national data, only one college in our data, and uncertainties about graduates-enrollment ratios.

Explaining Completion Rate Differences

Some critics argue that these degree completion rates ignore students who seek only certificates. Yet the evidence indicates that certificates have less certain labor-market value than most associate's degrees (Marcotte et al. 2005, table 3). Moreover, students rarely aspire to certificates alone (Grubb 1996; Rosenbaum and Stephan 2005; Tuma 1993), and they do not often complete them (Grubb 1996). Other critics contend that students do not get degrees because they chose to use college to explore their interests, prior to or instead of pursuing a particular degree (Adelman 2003). However, some results seem hard to explain as informed choices. For instance, among high school graduates in the class of 1992 who entered

postsecondary education, though only 8 percent had completed associate's degrees by the year 2000, another 10 percent had enough credits (sixty or more), but no degree (Adelman 2003, 34). Although they may have chosen to accumulate unrelated credits, one must wonder whether students would have chosen different courses if they realized that, more than eight years after high school, they still would not have the labor market payoffs that one gets only from a full degree.

In sum, earning the degree is important. Moreover, the evidence strongly indicates that completion rates are higher and the race gap may be smaller in private colleges than in their public counterparts. This volume seeks to explain these institutional differences.

UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES

Previous researchers have identified three different institutional explanations for community college difficulties. Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel (1989) trace the history of community colleges from their origins as transfer institutions for providing access to four-year colleges to a new emphasis on occupational goals. Analyzing historical materials and interviews with top administrators, they show that the new occupational mission has emerged victorious, supplanting the prior transfer mission. They titled their book *The Diverted Dream* and conclude that the original dream of transfer to bachelor's programs was diverted to vocational purposes.

Unlike Brint and Karabel, Kevin Dougherty (1994) contends that the occupational mission did not replace the transfer mission; both missions occur simultaneously, forcing the institution to embody many contradictions. Dougherty maintains that the conflicting goals of community colleges interfere with their success by overextending their resources. Indeed, community colleges seem to be the repository for many new goals continuously added to the college mission. Dougherty suggests that these new programs raise questions about priorities and coordination. Like Brint and Karabel, Dougherty not only suggests that the transfer mission should be primary, but also shows that students encounter many institutional barriers to transferring credits for particular courses, to obtaining financial aid, and even to getting dormitory rooms when they enter four-year colleges.

Unlike either Brint and Karabel or Dougherty, Norton Grubb (1996) sees community colleges' occupational mission as valuable: it is a way to provide significant opportunities to disadvantaged students. He demonstrates that the sector of skilled jobs requiring some college is growing, that there are clear economic payoffs to the associate's degree in certain

fields (business, health, and some technical fields), and that many students have entered community colleges with the goal of gaining preparation for good jobs. Interviewing faculty and staff, he shows that community colleges try to provide occupational training that meets the needs of the labor market, but that their efforts are repeatedly hampered by inadequate resources. Moreover, community colleges sometimes take on new missions without the resources to fund new programs or to integrate them with the existing institution.

JUGGLING MULTIPLE MISSIONS

As these models indicate, community colleges have responded to the influx of nontraditional students by adding new programs and missions that sometimes conflict with traditional programs and missions. However, as the following chapters will show, although we find some support for the three diagnoses (diverted goal, contradictory goals, and scarce resources), our analyses suggest that none completely explains students' difficulties in making good use of community colleges. True, as Brint and Karabel note, community colleges have devised new occupational goals, which are departures from traditional transfer goals, but this transformation is far from complete—it neither precludes transfer nor does it provide unambiguous support for occupational goals.

Indeed, both missions coexist in our community colleges, which are similar to many others statewide and nationwide: 50 percent of our community college students are enrolled in transfer programs, and the average for the entire state is also 50 percent (IBHE 2002, table VI-2). Nationally, the transfer emphasis is even stronger: 71 percent of community college students expect to earn a bachelor's degree or higher (NCES 2002, 27). Our findings are compatible with national studies. A study of administrators in eighteen community colleges across the United States (Cross and Fideler 1989) and a national sample of 1,725 faculty in ninety-two community colleges (Brewer 1999) both report that administrators and faculty are nearly evenly split in their ranking of transfer and workplace preparation as the top institutional priorities. Contrary to the reports of Brint and Karabel's presidents, transfer and occupational programs are evenly balanced.

These findings support Dougherty and Grubb, who both note that community colleges have taken on contradictory missions, which create administrative difficulties in coordinating offerings and allocating resources. However, our study questions whether these contradictions necessarily pose problems for students.

FITTING NONTRADITIONAL PEGS IN TRADITIONAL HOLES

The key issue is how colleges integrate their contradictions for students and whether they implement procedures to make each component operate effectively. Despite nontraditional students and nontraditional goals, community colleges have preserved many aspects of the traditional four-year college model—similar variety of courses, ways of choosing classes, registration and guidance procedures, academic emphasis, and career counseling. Their students, however, may have different backgrounds, needs, and goals than traditional college students, and this model may not work for many of them.

As we shall show, the integration of students, goals, and organization is incomplete at community colleges, and may be why so few students complete degrees. The contradictions of community colleges not only strain resources, as Grubb notes. They also confuse and distract students, obscure goals and pathways to goals, and prevent colleges from focusing on improving clarity and benefits. The unresolved contradictions, unfocused programs, and poor labor market linkages may leave students with serious shortages of information about the marketplace. Such contradictions could confuse any student, but are especially confusing for nontraditional students who often cannot rely on parents as a resource for college information and plans.

INTEGRATED MISSIONS AND NONTRADITIONAL PROCEDURES

Private two-year colleges, on the other hand, offer a variety of occupational programs and even four-year degrees without posing time conflicts, confusing choices, or ambiguity about payoffs for students. Institutions can offer multiple missions without harming students. If a college offers a clear way for students to choose among the college's missions, and an effective pathway to each program's goal (four-year college or occupation), students can navigate effectively through college. Although the range of programs is narrower than at community colleges, these colleges demonstrate that multiple missions do not necessarily mean that the contradiction is imposed on students, confusing them and impeding their progress.

Whereas community colleges provide traditional college procedures to nontraditional students, the occupational colleges in this study have adopted a nontraditional approach to integrate new students and goals into their institution, and to shift some responsibility away from students. These

colleges have devised ways to reduce the need for information and to streamline the gathering of information so that nontraditional students are not hurt by their lack of “college knowledge.” Where Dougherty analyzes students’ difficulties in completing degrees and transferring to four-year colleges, and Grubb analyzes students’ difficulties getting preparation and entering the labor market, we examine ways these outcomes may be affected by different organizational procedures.

We find that colleges’ organizational procedures may have an important impact on students. All organizations have procedures that provide certain kinds of assistance to clients and make regular demands on them. Colleges’ organizational procedures include rules, ways of handling various tasks (for example, course and program choices), resources for assisting these tasks (staff and their duties), and the like. This volume identifies alternative procedures in different colleges and examines the implications for informing students’ plans and choices, bolstering motivation with clear incentives, teaching requisite social skills, and facilitating job placement.

The procedures we observe in community colleges and occupational colleges seem to arise from the organizational history and culture of these types of colleges. These procedures include a wide variety of details—curricula, prerequisites, program selection, course sequences, information collection and dissemination, and job duties of various staff. Although these procedures are often dismissed as details that are taken for granted and assumed to be unavoidable and unimportant in understanding student success, we find that both assumptions are wrong. We find that alternatives are possible: these colleges use different organizational procedures to help the same kind of students handle the same organizational problems. We also find that these procedures are important: alternative procedures make different demands on students, lead to different perceived incentives, and students report responding differently to them and having different consequences.

LEARNING FROM INNOVATION

As advocates often claim, private schools have the freedom to innovate. However, innovation can be positive or negative—indeed, it is often both. Innovation refers to departures from tradition, and though some traditions stifle responsiveness, others preserve deeply held values. Unfortunately, the for-profit sector of postsecondary education, especially at the subbaccalaureate level, has sometimes devised innovative fraudulent practices—for example, deceptive claims, poor employment rates, low

standards, and the saddling of students with large debts. While free markets or government regulation may drive fraudulent colleges out of business, these corrections take time during which many students can suffer. As noted, federal regulations in the early 1990s curtailed fraudulent practices, forced 1,300 schools out of business, and encouraged those that remained to engage in practices to improve graduation and employment rates. Today, the incidence of fraud is likely to be much less, but examples are still reported with some frequency, and the full extent of fraud is unknown. Many public concerns are still raised about some for-profit college practices regarding overly aggressive recruiting and misleading promises.

However, innovation can also be highly beneficial and regulatory procedures may stifle it. A community college instructor told us of his efforts to launch a new occupational program. After enormous efforts over many months, dealing with five levels of bureaucracy, the program was finally blocked at the sixth. He vowed never to innovate again because of how thankless and futile the effort had been for him. Those six levels of bureaucracy, meant to prevent wasteful and redundant programs and to ensure program quality, unintentionally stifle progress and improvements. By contrast, in occupational colleges, innovation is simple. Someone proposes an idea to the college president, who makes a decision, perhaps after consulting a few people, and the change is made.

Sometimes it is hard to tell if innovation is positive or negative. Private two-year colleges are criticized for lowering academic standards. In some cases, however, lower academic demands may be appropriate, for example, if jobs do not require high academic skills. If a business program required calculus merely because it is a traditional college requirement, but few business jobs need calculus, calculus would be an unnecessary barrier preventing access for otherwise qualified students. Unlike trade schools, these occupational colleges require some general education courses in English, humanities, social science, and math—accreditation demands it. We did not study academic standards and cannot say if occupational colleges have lower academic standards than community colleges, but the strong responsiveness of occupational colleges to employers' demands makes them unlikely to reduce standards to levels that would disappoint employers. We would be surprised if graduates of occupational colleges lacked the basic skills in reading, writing, and math employers require. This is a complex issue, requiring detailed information on job demands. It is beyond the scope of our study (compare Maxwell 2006).

COMPARING INSTITUTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS: INDIVIDUAL CHOICE VERSUS PACKAGE DEALS

Some community colleges have tried one or two of the procedures we find in occupational colleges (Palmer 1990; Roueche and Baker 1987), but have not implemented them as a complete package. Indeed, a combination of many procedures (for example, curriculum structure, information systems, mandatory advising, peer cohorts, and job placement) may have more than an additive effect: there may be a package effect. Even if students face strong pressures from work or family, they may find it difficult to walk away from an occupational college where many procedures operate: where they meet regularly with an advisor and a peer cohort, where their progress is closely monitored, where required courses are always offered at predictable times, where milestones come quickly, where most students complete degrees, where the college offers extensive job placement assistance and promises [and delivers] 95 percent job placement. Meanwhile, it may be easier to walk away from a community college that only provides two reforms (for example, an advisory meeting and a tracking system).

Just as a travel agent can eliminate headaches and crises associated with traveling by arranging a package deal for vacationers, occupational colleges provide complete packages in which many details are arranged and guaranteed, reducing the burden of collecting information and the risk of mistakes for students. The traveler and the student both have confidence that they will be taken care of and that little can go wrong. If a traveler were to have only flight arrangements, he would still be responsible for arranging the rest of the journey and thus open to making mistakes that could put the vacation in jeopardy. Similarly, the student who only has one or two aspects of the college process guaranteed may run into problems with other aspects, and, just as important, may lose confidence in the entire college experience.

Indeed, the comparison of the traditional practices of community colleges and the nontraditional innovations of occupational colleges suggests two different models with different assumptions. Community colleges use procedures that seem to be based on the assumption that students already have certain attributes—plans, motivations, information, social skills, and job search skills. Students who do not have them have difficulties in community colleges. Even current reforms continue to assume that students come to college fully prepared. In contrast, occupational colleges do not assume that students have these attributes initially but ensure that they develop them.

Although the community college approach lends itself to blaming student failures on their deficiencies, these occupational colleges devise organizational procedures to help students succeed in each of these realms, regardless of personal background or preparation.

We discover that private colleges handle these issues differently, using procedures that make having prior knowledge and skills less necessary.

1. While community colleges assume that students can make effective plans on their own, occupational colleges give students a package deal plan for attaining an explicit educational and career goal in a clear time frame.
2. While community colleges assume that students are motivated, occupational colleges foster motivation by bolstering incentives and students' confidence that they can earn their degree.
3. While community colleges assume that students have enough information to make choices on their own, occupational colleges devise extensive procedures to inform students, guide their choices, and prevent mistakes.
4. While community colleges assume that students have professional social skills, occupational colleges teach these skills.
5. While community colleges assume that graduates have job-search skills and can get jobs on their own, occupational colleges actively help graduates get jobs related to their studies.

Despite the inevitable uncertainties in inferring causality, these findings identify entirely new college organizational procedures that may have a large impact on students. These procedures are strikingly different from the traditional approaches of community colleges, and our findings suggest that new types of students have fewer difficulties with occupational college procedures. This volume examines each of the assumptions discussed and their corresponding procedures.

BEYOND EXPLORATION AND CHOICE

Occupational colleges pose serious challenges to our ideas about what college is and how college can assist students. We often assume that college entails choice, and choice is desirable. However, in looking at students' experiences, we find that students report many difficulties when confronted with choices that occupational colleges address in novel and effective ways.

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz (2004) notes that when people are offered many options, they sometimes want an option that spares them from the burden of so many choices. Although community colleges offer many choices, we find that they rarely offer one: highly structured programs that curtail choice but promise timely graduation and an appropriate job.

To many readers, the students we interviewed may seem narrowly focused on pragmatic and vocational goals. As R. D. Cox (2004) has shown, community college students want occupational training, not exploration. This should not be surprising. Vocationalism has become an overwhelming part of education in the United States, in two-year and four-year colleges (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Hearing that the labor market punishes individuals who do not attend college, many students enter college who might not have done so otherwise. Over 70 percent of students in our sample said that they entered college to get a good job. It is not surprising that they did not want to explore academic options. Such students have every reason to be pragmatic, given that financial circumstances may demand that they proceed quickly into a career, and any delay poses the constant threat of crises, interruptions, and dropping out. Regardless of whether we like vocationalism, we must recognize that students shoulder serious constraints on their time, resources, and social support.

Sometimes our ideals, no matter how good they may seem, do not apply to other people's life circumstances and should not be imposed on them. Phrases like Dewey's—"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children"—expresses an appealing ideal, but ignores the reality of social context. Yes, we should all want the possibility of limitless opportunity for all of our citizens, but at whose expense? Does our idealism sometimes blind us to the reality that those most in need and most likely to fail in their attempt at a college education are, in some sense, victims of that idealism? When so many leave college without attaining their goals, is the possibility of opportunity enough, or should we consider ways to offer more effective, albeit possibly less idealistic, pathways to success? Studying students' experiences in community colleges leads us to ask new questions. Should colleges offer open-ended exploration without time limits to students whose life circumstances impose time limits? For nontraditional students who need many remedial courses, and face acute pressures to complete degrees on a short timetable, does the rhetoric of exploration offer false promises? Does the same kind of education have the same value and payoff for all?

LARGER IMPLICATIONS

These findings have general implications for our understanding of how to apply sociological insights. For social scientists, private colleges' procedures are especially interesting because they seem to reflect sociological insights. These colleges respond to important factors that are often the focus of sociological analyses, such as organizational requirements, students' social worlds, and information processes. The private colleges in our sample seem to respond to implicit organizational requirements for the information and social skills that students need to graduate. The colleges also seem to respond to students' social worlds, recognizing how school success depends on the student's ability to balance home, work, commuting, and peer influences. The occupational colleges respond to information processes, devising effective social mechanisms to provide information. Their procedures pay explicit attention to the kinds of information students need, the kinds of mistakes students make, and the kinds of concerns students have.

If the successes of occupational colleges are due to specific organizational procedures, community colleges may also be able use them to provide similar benefits for their students. In other words, the shortcomings of community colleges may not be inevitable. These findings suggest policy alternatives that are not usually considered.

Although we are only studying two-year colleges, our findings may have implications for other institutions. Many four-year colleges strive to assist disadvantaged students, who experience similar problems to those we see in two-year colleges, perhaps for similar organizational reasons. Many high schools are concerned about students' poor choices and guidance counselors' difficulties in assisting student progress, which resemble some of the problems we observe. Even job training programs offer either skill training or employer contacts, but rarely connect the two. Our studies offer new ideas about how organizational procedures can address these difficulties.

Community colleges, four-year colleges, high schools, and job training programs can use these findings to transform good intentions into sound understandings, and disorganization into effective procedures. These various institutions have well-meaning goals, but their traditional procedures create difficulties for students, which they do not always see. That is the great advantage of this research. Our studies permit us to examine multiple levels of influence: organizational policies and procedures, faculty and staff actions, and student perceptions and behaviors. In some cases, faculty and staff are aware of students' difficulties, but do not know how to respond, do not see alternative procedures, or assume another office is handling the

problem when in fact no one is. Solutions can come from institutional procedures rather than from painstaking efforts to fix each individual student. Many of our results suggest some potential remedies that would not be difficult to try in these organizations.

BOOK OUTLINE

As institutions develop, the problems they confront unfold in a dynamic sequence, which the following chapters show and discuss. The problems used to be what Burton Clark (1960) called cooling out student plans and stigmatizing students with remedial needs. Community colleges have found ways to avoid them (see chapters 3 and 4). New problems arise from the new procedures, however. We find that avoiding cooled plans and stigma may sometimes prevent students from having realistic expectations and timetables.

Another former problem, limited college access, has been dramatically lessened. The problem in its place is completing college. The assumptions that emerged from nineteenth-century elite colleges are not particularly appropriate for community colleges whose nontraditional students and occupational programs call for nontraditional procedures. Chapters 5 through 10 indicate that community colleges make many mistaken assumptions about student information, college information procedures, college-to-career procedures, and student social skills. These assumptions lead to serious problems for nontraditional students in community colleges, though private occupational colleges avoid the assumptions and the corresponding problems for similar students. Analyzing private occupational colleges, we discover new institutional procedures that community colleges could use to reduce student problems. This dynamic sequence is unavoidable—clearly, it is impossible to talk about completion when no one yet has access. We believe, however, that the time has come to stop fighting old battles and turn to the new challenges that confront us.

Some of these new procedures will make readers cringe and wonder, “Is this really college?” Yet that discomfort may be necessary. If colleges are going to include new groups of students, we may have to question some of the traditional practices that we have assumed are a necessary part of college.

Because society’s shift to college-for-all policies is rarely stated explicitly, no one has considered whether it creates difficult contradictions. All students are admitted to college, but remedial programs are the only accommodation for the new students. Obviously, this is not working. Students mistakenly expect to get a degree, when in fact, large portions fail every year, blame themselves, and do not realize these failures were easily predictable. Only 41 percent of students entering community colleges manage to complete

any degree in eight years (and only 19 percent of African Americans do so), yet the labor market payoffs are primarily to those who get degrees. Clearly, we need to think about other procedures to improve completion rates.

Colleges need to examine which procedures are essential to higher education and which are not, and which new procedures would better accommodate the needs of these new students so that college can offer them meaningful opportunities rather than empty promises. In comparing these two types of college, we find that we are comparing two models of schooling: individual and institutional. The first assumes that individual students determine their own outcomes; the second shifts some responsibility to the institution, on the assumption that institutional arrangements can affect students' outcomes. This volume examines various issues about which these models conflict: plans, motivation, information, social skills, and finding jobs.

Chapter 2 describes our research methods. By gathering data from different actors in fourteen colleges, we are able to discover aspects of these institutions that are not generally seen by any single group of individuals (for example, students, teachers, or administrators alone). By comparing alternative types of colleges, using both qualitative and quantitative data, we are able to examine alternative procedures that are not usually considered. We also use a national longitudinal survey to examine generalizability and longer-term outcomes.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on community colleges and describe the ways they handle students' plans and motivation. Community colleges are often criticized for cooling out students' plans. Chapter 3 finds that warming up is actually more common, and faculty engage in extensive efforts to elevate students' plans. Chapter 4 then describes some dilemmas that emerge from warming up and sustaining students' high hopes as faculty and staff seek to protect remedial students with procedures that do not stigmatize. These procedures solve some problems but provide new ones, preventing students from getting information and anticipating the implications of their placements. Surprisingly, we find that cooling out has some benefits for degree completion, and nonstigmatizing procedures have some costs. However, solving students' problems by changing their aspirations is not enough to result in increased graduation rates. The remaining chapters examine whether another kind of college with different procedures can reduce students' problems and improve their outcomes.

Chapter 5 considers the problem of informed choice and suggests that students' selection into the different college types entails a certain degree of randomness. Although they were criticized for blocking students' choices in the past (Pincus 1980; Brint and Karabel 1989), we find that community col-

leges now provide ample choices, but that students lack the information they need to make the choices that best suit their needs. Overall, students report that serious information problems and community college procedures are sometimes responsible, but those in occupational colleges report fewer information problems and planning difficulties, even net of student attributes.

Chapter 6 examines difficulties that arise from community college procedures as they relate to students' college knowledge after enrollment. We find that community college procedures implicitly require students to have various kinds of social know-how, but that occupational colleges use different procedures that reduce information gaps and the risk of mistakes in student choices.

The next four chapters describe how the organizational procedures address the transition from school to employment. Chapter 7 contrasts the emphasis of community colleges on career counseling with the highly developed job placement procedures of occupational colleges. Chapter 8 describes the informal faculty activities to improve job outcomes in both types of institution. Chapter 9 examines how these job placement activities might affect students while they are still in college, possibly improving motivation and confidence (in our local sample) and degree completion (in national data).

Chapter 10 examines organizational procedures for ensuring that students meet the soft skills requirements of the labor market. Where community colleges assume that students have professionally relevant social skills, occupational colleges train such skills with mandatory procedures.

Chapter 11 pulls our findings together and considers implications for policy and future research. We find that many of the complaints against community colleges are misdirected. Rather than being concerned about excessive cooling out, stigmatizing, structuring, and socialization, the occupational college model suggests that disadvantaged students need information, supportive structures, social skills, and dependable job placement to succeed in earning college degrees and getting relevant jobs. Although community colleges should not totally emulate occupational colleges, we suggest ways that community colleges might help some students by creating programs that use the findings of this research.

Given the dismal completion rates at community colleges, it is important for research to examine how college procedures may be contributing to these outcomes. Our results are not definitive, but they do at least provide new ideas and evidence about what is happening. Rather than being the last word, these findings are closer to the first word on a number of topics that merit careful study.