

# == Chapter 1 ==

## College for All: New Opportunities Through Community Colleges

**T**HE UNITED states has embarked on a new educational goal in recent decades. The policy of “college for all” (hereafter CFA), which expands educational opportunity and encourages all youth to attend college, has dramatically changed the higher education landscape, with consequences that have reverberated across American society. National and state policies have been enacted to encourage increased college enrollment, including support from scholarships, grants, and loans. Reflecting the American ideology of equal opportunity, CFA encompasses both practical policy and our highest ideals.

To adults who believe that youth do not listen, the history of CFA provides a surprise: youth have in fact responded to the call to enroll in college. In 1960, only 45 percent of high school graduates entered higher education right after high school.<sup>1</sup> Since then, reforms have focused on encouraging more students to enroll in college, and these efforts have been a tremendous success. Each decade since 1960 has seen more students aspiring to college.<sup>2</sup> About two-thirds of high school graduates now enroll in college right after high school.<sup>3</sup> But by ignoring the many students who delay entry into higher education, even these oft-cited numbers understate the successes. By 1990, the rates of college attendance in the eight years after high school graduation were similarly high for whites, African Americans, and Hispanics (83, 80, and 80 percent, respectively).<sup>4</sup> More recent data find that 90 percent of on-time high school graduates enroll in college in the eight years after high school (see chapter 2).

Nearly all students have internalized the message that college is necessary for getting a good job—80 percent of students enter community college with the reported purpose of getting a better job.<sup>5</sup> Even students who report hating high school, students whose academic achievement is low, and students who are in jail express college goals. Some high school

graduates who had planned not to attend college change their minds after they enter the workforce (see chapter 2). College access has long been the major obstacle to upward mobility, but that is much less true today. College completion, however, remains a critical problem, especially in open admissions colleges. Although “over 80 percent of entering community college students intend to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 15 percent have done so six years after initial enrollment.”<sup>6</sup>

## College Access Versus College Completion

Outspoken public leaders continue to debate whether policy should encourage college for all, and the answer is usually a simple yes or no, justified, respectively, by ideals or pragmatism. The question, however, is no longer whether we should strive for CFA; we have already achieved it to a large extent. The real question now capturing the attention of researchers and reformers has become: How can college access be turned into *dependable completion and job payoffs* so that more students benefit from the experience?

To answer this question, it is important to understand the new realities of higher education and the many alternatives to the traditional BA degree. The pressures of CFA policies to increase college access have radically changed both the types of colleges available and the types of students who attend. Besides traditional selective colleges, CFA has led to an increase in the number of open-access institutions—public community colleges, private occupational colleges (for-profit and nonprofit), and unselective four-year colleges.<sup>7</sup>

Community colleges are particularly important for increased access to higher education. Of the 17.6 million undergraduates in higher education, roughly 40 percent attend a community college.<sup>8</sup> The nation’s 1,200 community colleges offer convenient locations, including satellite campuses near homes and workplaces. They offer flexible time schedules, including night and weekend classes, and low tuition (often under \$3,500 a year).<sup>9</sup> Most important for American ideals, community colleges are nonselective—even students who barely pass high school can attend. Naturally, being so different in these ways from traditional selective four-year colleges, these institutions attract different types of students.

In the traditional college model before 1980, the typical entering student was a young, high-achieving, and affluent high school graduate. This is no longer the typical college student.<sup>10</sup> Colleges now serve both traditional students (young, affluent, and high-achieving) and nontraditional students (older, lower-income, and lower-achieving).<sup>11</sup> We cannot assume that what works for the first group will automatically work for the second, but that has been the usual strategy. Forced into a system not built

for them, nontraditional students make enormous sacrifices to attend college and then face countless obstacles after they arrive.<sup>12</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that nontraditional students drop out of college at higher rates, especially when pursuing traditional bachelor's degrees.

The enormous gains in college access are often wasted when students drop out of college without completing a credential. Students forfeit time and earnings, acquire new debts, and often get no earnings payoff. Instead of a useful degree, they leave college with nothing except diminished resources and shaken confidence. Instead of offering a dependable transition to productive adulthood, many colleges offer coin-toss odds of success, with some research showing abysmal degree completion rates, often less than 20 percent.<sup>13</sup> In losing the potential of its youth to take middle-class jobs, society also suffers from these failures.

Moreover, open-access colleges, particularly community colleges, fall seriously short of the goals of raising academic achievement, awarding bachelor's degrees, and helping students attain high-paid jobs. After decades spent trying to find remedial education programs that improve students' academic achievement, researchers have finally concluded that this approach shows no dependable successes.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, for ambitious students with BA plans, graduation rates are very low.<sup>15</sup> Readers of these reports can sense the authors' real disappointment, and sometimes even their anger.

Even if students manage to graduate, they have difficulty searching for work among unfamiliar jobs. Rapid changes in the labor market have created new jobs and new job requirements. Most youth (and many adults) do not understand today's middle-class jobs and have poorly informed ambitions.<sup>16</sup> For example, in one study, we interviewed a high school senior who planned to become a surgeon, with a backup plan to work at Starbucks. She did not know about all the occupations in between high-status professions and low-level service jobs—that is, the many rewarding mid-skill occupations.

Open-access colleges can prepare students for employment in a rapidly changing market. Associate degrees and certificates prepare students for vital mid-skill jobs—such as airplane mechanics, auto repair mechanics, computer technicians, HVAC services, manufacturing workers, medical aides, and elevator repair workers. The nation may be hemorrhaging jobs to low-wage countries and to automation, but many of these occupations cannot be offshored or automated.<sup>17</sup> They must be done in the United States, but they require specific college programs.

Our daily activities, and indeed our lives, depend on the skills of these workers. Several years ago, one of us (James Rosenbaum) went in for surgery. His anxieties initially focused on the surgeon's skills, but going through the process, he quickly realized that his life depended on the

technical skills of an entire team, including twenty-year-old surgical tech assistants with one-year college certificates from open-access colleges. Students want jobs that can make a difference, but they rarely see these jobs that will enable them to make important contributions as young adults.

Open-access colleges, particularly community colleges, embody American opportunity ideals. They are pivotal to society's success in filling vital occupations and providing opportunity to nontraditional students. In studying these colleges, we have discovered not just the difficulties of providing that opportunity but also the ways in which open-access colleges nevertheless manage to provide it. These colleges offer many alternatives to traditional BA degrees, including alternative credential options with different qualifications, requirements, job prospects, and job rewards. Open-access colleges can also implement alternative procedures at every step of a student's college career, from revamping the college entry process to helping students discover and attain promising jobs.

Having already improved college access, community colleges can increase educational and employment opportunities that are essential for the welfare of the next generation and a strong middle class, which is the foundation of democratic society. But for this to work, we must find ways to create and expand alternatives that reliably lead to college completion and subsequent job payoffs. This book considers what can be done to increase students' success in the new college reality by examining alternative options for students and alternative procedures for colleges. In particular, we explore the alternatives that work well for nontraditional students, who often lack the time, resources, and family support demanded by traditional college programs.

## **Exploring Alternative Options and Procedures**

College for all is an ambitious goal that the United States has largely attained, but the even more ambitious goal of a bachelor's degree for all is rarely attained—for instance, only 20 percent of community college students obtain a BA in the eight years after high school.<sup>18</sup> We are not criticizing CFA, but we find that a single-minded “BA for all” focus underestimates alternative options and procedures that have real value, build the middle class, offer high odds of college and career success, and can be stepping-stones to a BA degree.

Students should be aware of the different credentials, qualifications, job rewards, and degree strategies now offered by colleges in order to assess which option is best for them. At the same time, colleges should use new procedures to assess students' academic preparation, create

degree ladders, reduce transition obstacles, and support students' college progress and success. In addition, instead of blaming students for their failures, colleges could devise ways to reveal their previously unrecognized abilities. These new options and procedures could provide opportunity to new kinds of students who do not typically succeed in traditional colleges.

However, information about these alternatives and their job payoffs is hard to come by; even researchers and educators rarely have adequate information. We find that the changing array of credentials, requirements, and careers is poorly understood and underutilized. Addressing this lack of clarity on all the new options, our research has uncovered many alternative ways in which students can succeed in college and in their careers.

## **Can College Solve Societal Needs? The College-for-All Gospel**

Despite our deep-seated ideals about equal opportunity, American society is increasingly unequal, most obviously in income and material well-being but also in health, family support, food insecurity, and mental and physical health.<sup>19</sup> Indicators in each of these domains show increasing advantages for those at the top and increasing disadvantages for those at the bottom.

The stakes are broader than just education. Youth unemployment, job turnover, drug use, and political disaffection are strongly related to education.<sup>20</sup> Without a college degree, youth often get locked out of promising careers. In a society increasingly polarized between “haves and have-nots,” college has come to define who has a chance at a decent life.

Although college can lead to good jobs, people who do poorly in high school often see college as an obstacle; indeed, a lack of college-level academic skills can lead to college failure, poverty, despair, and even political backlash. Even as they blame automation and offshoring for the loss of well-paid jobs, many non-college-educated men do not see college as an option, believing it to be unavailable to those who were not high achievers in high school. And if they do enter college, most who were low achievers in high school are assigned to noncredit remedial classes; there they see their college dreams die, and they soon drop out. Instead of offering opportunity, college often blocks opportunity, and no other options are seen or valued.

Community colleges seek to help youth escape poverty, but this is not easy. Poverty is a powerful foe: beginning early, it colors many facets of individuals' lives. In a recent study, the sociologist Jennifer Silva describes in rich detail the workings of poverty and its devastating

impact on young adults' efforts to escape minimum wage jobs and get a college education.<sup>21</sup> Poverty poses many obstacles, making it difficult to enter college, to commute to college, to stay in college, to get a job, to keep a job, to dress appropriately, to speak appropriately, to pay rent and utilities, to stay healthy, to care for ill or disabled relatives, to eat a good diet, and sometimes to eat at all.<sup>22</sup> Even when young adults make good efforts to escape poverty by going to college, poverty stops them at every turn. Preventing poverty, moreover, is not just about helping the poor. The many middle-class students who drop out with no credentials and no job payoffs eight years after high school may be headed toward poverty, or at least a low-income life (see chapter 2).<sup>23</sup> We need to understand what colleges can do to help all students avoid the grasp of poverty.

"College" is a word with powerful, almost sacred, connotations. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson have called the American approach to college "the Education Gospel"—a faith that education can solve societal problems.<sup>24</sup> Although skeptical about nearly everything and unable to agree about anything, Americans share a profound faith in education, particularly higher education, across party lines. Even now, as higher education faces increasing criticism for high costs and low standards, few doubt its importance to our society and the labor markets.<sup>25</sup>

The Education Gospel has turned into the college-for-all ideal. High school vocational education used to provide job skills, give students advice on career choices, and assist them in job searches, but now it has been replaced by more ambiguous college- and career-readiness programs. Under the umbrella of career and technical education (CTE), these programs promote college-going and career exploration, often at the expense of specific job preparation.<sup>26</sup> Many programs once found in high school vocational programs are now in community colleges and may require technical skills considered to be beyond the abilities of high school students. As high schools increasingly focus on test scores and college admissions, their capacity to prepare students for work has declined and colleges have become the primary means of preparing students for careers.<sup>27</sup>

The ideology and realities of CFA have even forced us to reevaluate our own views. In 2001, one of the authors (James Rosenbaum) wrote *Beyond College for All*, which showed how American society had shifted to urging all youth to attend college, how youth had responded, and the difficulties that resulted. He criticized the narrow CFA focus and described some avenues for occupational success that do not require college, such as good high school vocational programs. Since 2001, however, these noncollege avenues have been undermined and deprived of resources, while jobs have increased their skill demands. A living wage

increasingly requires skills that come mostly from college programs.<sup>28</sup> Popular books with titles like *Success Without College* describe alternatives to college, but these are idiosyncratic niche opportunities that will not help many people.<sup>29</sup> College for all has become the reality, and college credentials are key to a living wage. The push for CFA may have made college essential.

But more is at stake than college degrees and earnings. As the classic “Forgotten Half” report showed, fully half of the nation’s youth, not just those in poverty, are struggling in “the passage to adulthood.”<sup>30</sup> Instead of blaming youth, this report found that the problem is rooted in society’s failure to provide mechanisms that support youth’s transition into productive adult work roles, which are crucial for the preservation of society. The report saw these problems as serious threats to society, but showed how society could build such transition mechanisms.

We see the same problem today. In 2015, almost 40 percent of young Americans (eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds) were living with their parents or other family members—the largest proportion since 1940, according to the U.S. Census.<sup>31</sup> These numbers suggest not so much the “failure to launch” of massive numbers of individuals as a failure of societal transition mechanisms.<sup>32</sup>

The *Pathways to Prosperity* report contends not only that society needs to develop supportive transitions into productive adult work roles, but that no institution is now addressing that need.<sup>33</sup> This report suggests that society use existing institutions to perform this function, and it identifies apprenticeship programs that work with high schools, much as German apprenticeship programs do.<sup>34</sup> Yet college for all has prompted many U.S. high schools to ignore work and focus on test scores and college preparation, and CFA thus may lead employers to regard high school graduates as unprepared for work. Apprenticeship programs have promise, and turning U.S. high schools around to support such programs is possible, as recent reports have indicated.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, these efforts must overcome major obstacles.

Community colleges may be easier to adapt to apprenticeship programs than high schools. They already have ongoing occupational sub-BA programs with many valuable elements—experienced teachers, practical lessons, equipment, employer-advisory committees, work-site visits, internships, and job placement arrangements. They already exist in over 1,200 locations across the nation, and they are already doing some of what we would want apprenticeships to do, although unsystematically. If American society is to repair the institutional supports for youth aspiring to productive careers, we must understand what community colleges are now doing and how they can be adapted to better serve society’s needs. Our goal is not merely to increase the education or credentials of

young people, but to have community colleges create transition mechanisms that will prepare them to embark on productive careers.

Although community colleges serve all ages, this book focuses on youth because we want to examine how community colleges can become dependable institutional supports for youth seeking productive adult roles. Not only do youth and society desperately need such institutional supports, but as we shall see, many elements of such a role can already be found at community colleges.

Our society's prosperity depends on effective procedures for implementing CFA. American colleges already enroll millions of students, but too many students fail to obtain degrees. With a focus on the steps that students and colleges can take to improve students' odds of success, we hope that this study will contribute to that goal.

## **The Critical Role of Community Colleges**

The United States has been through educational revolutions before, having offered public schooling for all, high school for all, and expanded college access through avenues such as the GI Bill and community colleges.<sup>36</sup> In the past century, as high school became universal, it was radically transformed to serve all students and prepare them for a diversity of careers.<sup>37</sup> This history suggests that our preconceptions about college may be failing to match the new reality; perhaps we should now expect colleges to work differently as they expand and become universal.

Worldwide, the expansion of higher education has taken different forms. Some nations have only a single form, the highly selective university, which is expanding.<sup>38</sup> Some nations are differentiated, with some credentials rapidly expanding. In comparison, the United States is highly differentiated, with diverse institutions (public, private, two-year, four-year, and so on) and diverse credentials (certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and so on). Like other nations, the United States has vastly expanded the number of less selective institutions and credentials.

Over the past forty years, college enrollment has increased, especially in two-year colleges. In 1973, 14.9 percent of recent high school graduates attended two-year colleges and 31.6 percent attended four-year colleges. By 2012, the former had nearly doubled (to 28.8 percent), while the latter had increased much less (to 37.5 percent).<sup>39</sup> Moreover, this is an underestimate, since students who attend two-year colleges often delay entry and many are over age twenty-five. With reduced barriers of time, distance, cost, and school grades, it is easy to see why so many students enter community colleges. These institutions offer valuable opportunities to any student, regardless of socioeconomic or academic background.



In 2015, the actor Tom Hanks wrote in the *New York Times* about his time in community college and how it launched his career as an actor.<sup>40</sup> Over seven hundred people responded, many with stories about how community colleges had opened up opportunities for them as well. Like Hanks, they reported having poor achievement and motivation in high school and said that community college had provided a second chance that changed their lives.

Yet even these enthusiastic reports seem to include a disturbing element of random luck, the sense that their positive experience with community college was a fortunate accident that contributed to their success. Clearly, not everyone can count on such luck, and many students do not have positive experiences at community colleges. The national data on degree completion indicate that the success stories are too rare.

Community colleges can serve as stepping-stones to successful careers, particularly for disadvantaged students. As a result of their open access and convenience, community colleges enroll students who are quite different from students in four-year colleges. Compared with four-year colleges, community colleges enroll more students with disadvantages—those with less-educated parents or single parents, public aid recipients, and students who are disabled, ex-offenders, or housing-insecure.<sup>41</sup> With their distinctive population, community colleges face unique challenges. Solving the problem of access creates the new problem of understanding how these institutions can help these students have more college and career success.

Unfortunately, while providing college access for many disadvantaged students, community colleges try to emulate traditional four-year colleges. They provide all students with the kind of information and procedures that were designed for traditional college students whose college-educated parents give them advice and financial support. To improve community college completion rates, we must consider alternative options and procedures to reduce their students' difficulties. Offering the same options and procedures to nontraditional students might look like equal treatment, but it is not equal because many of these students do not have the same resources as traditional college students and cannot benefit in the same way. This strategy backfires and leads to low success.

We find that students face obstacles in three transitions—in entering college, completing degrees, and entering careers. When they enter college, most students must take remedial courses that give no college credits, and when they choose their courses, they often mistakenly choose courses that do not count for their program. In addition, although 80 percent of students enter community college with the reported purpose of getting a better job, community colleges rarely tell them

how college is related to jobs or inform them about occupational programs.<sup>42</sup> Later, when students graduate, community colleges do not tell BA-transfer students which four-year colleges will recognize their credits in their intended major, and they rarely help graduates identify and apply to jobs that will value their skills and compensate them appropriately.

However, community colleges also provide new opportunities for success. Our own wide-ranging study uncovered multiple pathways to newly important credentials, jobs, and job rewards with fewer obstacles. We also discovered nontraditional institutional procedures that reduce transition obstacles, offer new kinds of opportunity, and support success even for low-achieving youth. We found that many more students can succeed than is commonly thought, and that many more can get good jobs with more job rewards besides earnings. This book reports on these findings in examining how community colleges can offer alternative procedures that help students cross the three college transitions.

## **BA Blinders and Signs of BA Mania**

From 1945 to 1990, going to a “real college” was mostly seen as pursuing a bachelor’s degree in a selective four-year college.<sup>43</sup> Since 1990, however, broad-access college alternatives—nonselective four-year colleges, community colleges, for-profit colleges, and digital courses—have become important postsecondary options for many students.

Unfortunately, policymakers rarely notice these alternatives. Having attended four-year colleges and obtained BA degrees themselves, policymakers and educators often wear “BA blinders”: they see the BA as the best, truest, and often only credential worth pursuing. This view is widespread, and it operates literally as a blinder, preventing educators and students from seeing alternatives that could improve students’ success.

When we ask Internet search engines, “What percentage of Americans have a college degree?” the answers are responses to a different question: “What percentage of Americans have a bachelor’s degree?”<sup>44</sup> An article on the website salary.com, “8 College Degrees with the Worst Return on Investment,” considers only majors that lead to BA degrees.<sup>45</sup> Educators, reformers, and the college-choice industry stress K–16 reforms and BA goals, but say little about sub-BA credentials.<sup>46</sup> A “college results online” webpage lists only four-year colleges.<sup>47</sup> Even researchers studying upward mobility sometimes consider the BA the only college degree, ignoring alternative degrees when classifying education levels.<sup>48</sup> In an important book, Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson warn about students’ unrealistic ambitions and advise parents to provide better information for college planning, but they do not mention sub-BA credentials.<sup>49</sup> Almost all of us, it seems, wear BA blinders.

In this context, “college for all” becomes “BA for all.” A society that worships higher education sees a BA degree as the only college degree. In the policy debate, BA-for-all advocates urge all students to seek BAs and ignore lower credentials.<sup>50</sup> According to one commentator, the BA degree is “the only sure route out of poverty.”<sup>51</sup> Others worry about tracking less-privileged students into a non-BA path. In contrast, BA-for-all critics, arguing that many youth are unlikely to complete a BA degree, would encourage them to follow alternative routes to good jobs, including job training programs and high school vocational programs.<sup>52</sup> Both sides recognize that low-income and low-achieving students face major college and labor market obstacles. However, BA-for-all advocates urge policymakers to redouble their efforts against those obstacles, while the critics suggest that a BA-for-all approach is not feasible. This war is highly polarized and tends to go nowhere.

The BA goal has made its way into policy. Public school systems, the College Advising Corps, and many nongovernmental support organizations have policies to help all students apply to four-year colleges and seek BA degrees, regardless of their academic skills or occupational interests. Following the widely cited announcement that a BA degree has a \$1 million lifetime payoff, educators urge all high school seniors to pursue BA degrees.<sup>53</sup> As they urge even low-achieving youth to have BA plans, they do not mention (and probably do not know about) the low odds of college completion, the ineffective remedial courses they will be required to take, or the wisdom of having backup options. Educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders fail to identify the disadvantages of seeking a BA degree—the low odds of succeeding, the long timetable for many students (it often takes a community college student six or more years to obtain a four-year BA degree), and the low earnings payoffs. Youth are told almost nothing about alternative credentials, much less their desirability.

High school students have listened to this idealistic encouragement: close to 80 percent of recent high school graduates have BA plans when they enter college. Even students who learn valuable job skills in the career and technical education (CTE) courses they may be taking in combination with their BA plans tend to dismiss their job skills as unnecessary to their future once they get a BA degree.<sup>54</sup> By 2002, 84 percent of high school sophomores expected to earn a BA degree or higher, including many students with poor grades who disliked school.<sup>55</sup>

The stakes are high. The BA is viewed as essential and worthy of any sacrifice. In pursuit of a BA, low-income students in particular make major sacrifices; they may not only suffer hunger, sleep deprivation, and stress but also acquire enormous debts that are not protected by the option of bankruptcy. Their efforts may not even lead to dependable earnings

payoffs.<sup>56</sup> Many levels of policy and practice are affected. Policymakers urge free tuition for college; high school principals' pay depends on students' college enrollment; students say they must attend college to become respected adults; and high school counselors call in students who have not applied to college and bus them over to the local community college to sign up. A website warns that "simply put, a *college education is the gateway to opportunity in life*, and the sooner children understand, the more willing they will be to put in the hard work required."<sup>57</sup>

Going to college has become a pervasive and life-altering goal for American students from a very young age. Indeed, the BA pursuit sometimes resembles a kind of mania. Summer camps focus on college prep. Children's games claim to provide college prep. One kindergarten program canceled the school play so that children could spend more time on college preparation. Of course, the BA degree has real value, but these are disturbing signs of exaggerated claims and ignorance of alternative options.

### **Traditional Procedures for Nontraditional Students: A Bad Fit**

The word "college" conjures images of what are in fact many optional features of the educational experience—athletic teams, Frisbee on the quad, university seals embossed with Latin slogans, beautiful college campuses, dormitories with carefree students studying together, debating metaphysical issues, and completing papers after arduous all-nighters followed by sunrise epiphanies. As the sociologist John Meyer observed, we often define "college" by traditional institutional customs and practices that are irrelevant to producing functional skills.<sup>58</sup>

BA blinders can lead to excessively narrow traditional expectations that academic success will be pursued through the traditional procedures developed for the BA degree. Students, even those in community college, are expected to pursue BA degrees, take four years of full-time coursework, receive no interim credentials or payoffs, and explore many "general education" fields before choosing a major. They are expected to choose their courses from a wide range of options, and colleges often do not closely monitor their progress. When students take courses that do not count toward their degree, colleges tell them they are "broadening" their learning, knowing that the added costs will be absorbed by affluent parents.

However, traditional students are no longer the only type of college student, and these procedures designed for them pose serious obstacles for nontraditional students. With their BA blinders keeping them focused on options that are a poor fit for many students' needs, educators and

researchers rarely notice broader college alternatives, so it is unsurprising that students fail to see the benefits to pursuing these alternatives.

Michael Kirst and Mitchell Stevens warn that “the remaking of college in the contemporary epoch has repercussions across society,” and that “a variety of paths through college is risky for students.”<sup>59</sup> We agree that changing college is risky. College as it stands, however, with the heavy emphasis on BA degrees, is obviously not working. This book extends Kirst and Stevens’s argument to show desirable alternatives that are often ignored. Research often ignores “the variety, complexity, and agency of schools,” but here we present research that recognizes these issues.<sup>60</sup> Although we agree that too many options can be overwhelming, we show how colleges can structure alternative options and procedures to reduce risks. We provide evidence that recent changes in higher education make it crucial that colleges offer new options and procedures.

Our understanding of “college” must expand so that CFA can dependably provide all students with the opportunity to succeed and prepare them for the diverse needs of a complex and fast-changing society. Our faith alone in college’s ability to help society will not automatically make it happen. That depends on what form college takes and its ability to adopt alternative procedures that will pose fewer obstacles, provide more support, and help students discover their abilities, pass tests, form realistic plans, and make dependable progress toward degrees and desirable careers. In chapter 8, we describe two colleges that implement these procedures and provide some of the key information students need to form realistic plans that will lead to successful outcomes.

## **Alternative Options for Students: Qualifications, Credentials, and Jobs**

Policymakers and researchers usually focus narrowly on one-dimensional goals—attaining a BA degree, improving academic skills, and increasing earnings. However, the progress of many students toward one-dimensional goals inevitably falls below average. Ironically, even as reformers think that they are being idealistic, urging youth to see success as one-dimensional implicitly disparages the many students who end up in the bottom half of measures of academic skills and earnings. In fact, all three views of these goals—BA attainment, higher earnings, and better academic skills—are too narrow.

### ***What We Miss by Focusing on BA Attainment***

BA blinders prevent us from seeing valuable sub-BA credentials: occupational certificates and associate degrees. Many open-access institutions, especially community colleges, confer these credentials and provide

**Table 1.1 Earnings Quartiles for Full-Time, Full-Year Workers Ages Twenty-Five and Older, by Gender and Education Level**

	Females			Males		
	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile
High school	\$21,100	\$30,000	\$40,500	\$27,300	\$40,400	\$56,500
Some college	25,200	34,600	47,000	31,700	47,100	67,200
Associate degree	26,900	39,300	53,400	36,000	50,900	71,900
BA degree	35,100	49,100	69,000	43,900	66,200	100,000

Source: U.S. Census 2012; Baum, Ma, and Payea 2013, 15.

Notes: The highest quartile of associate degree earnings is higher than 50 percent of holders of BA degrees. The lowest quartile of BA earnings is lower than 50 percent of associate degree earnings.

technical skills in a variety of occupations. Occupational associate degrees are not usually intended as a path to a bachelor's degree, although this is increasingly possible for applied BA degrees.<sup>61</sup> Occupational sub-BA programs mostly aim to prepare students for viable employment after graduation. These programs are growing, and now most associate degrees and almost all certificates are completed in occupational fields.<sup>62</sup>

Twenty years ago, BA blinders may have been warranted. Researchers found that sub-BA credentials offered little earnings payoff, so research focused on BA payoffs.<sup>63</sup> However, recent years have seen a change in this trend. After careful review of new evidence, Steven Brint reversed his prior verdict and reported strong indications that sub-BA credentials have significant payoffs.<sup>64</sup> Yet public discourse mostly ignores alternative credentials, which are considered the product of "low expectations" and a distraction from the only desirable prize—a BA degree. But this view is too simple. Although BA degrees confer higher average earnings than sub-BA credentials (certificates and associate degrees), there is a big overlap. The top quartile of certificate and associate degree graduates have higher earnings than most BAs, and the bottom quartile of BA graduates have lower earnings than most sub-BAs.<sup>65</sup> The BA degree is valuable, but it is not the only path to good earnings (see table 1.1).

In a comprehensive analysis of community colleges, Thomas Bailey and his colleagues probed deeply into the barriers that keep students from attaining their BA goals, and the remedies they suggest are insightful.<sup>66</sup> These researchers emphasize BA degrees because most students report having BA plans upon arrival at college, and they believe that col-

leges should be judged on how well they meet students' reported goals at entry. When we interviewed students, however, we found that they often did not understand BA degrees or their disadvantages. We also found that many students did not know about certificates and occupational associate degrees, how long it takes to earn these credentials, their requirements, or their career outcomes.<sup>67</sup> Like the student who plans to become either a doctor or a Starbucks barista, many students are unaware of the in-between occupations.

With 1,000-student caseloads, college counselors are hard pressed to provide detailed advising on these issues. In interviews with counselors, we found that few warned students about the challenges of the BA goal, the low (20 percent) success rates, or the fact that the "four-year BA" typically takes many community college students six or more years to attain.<sup>68</sup> No one tells students that a slower pace and interim successes can sometimes help them be higher-achieving and that sub-BA credentials offer less risky steps.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, colleges do not provide clear descriptions of alternatives in catalogs, websites, or information sheets. Seeking to avoid what President George W. Bush called "the soft bigotry of low expectations," educators encourage BA goals for all students and do not feel authorized to burst students' BA dreams.<sup>70</sup> For many students, the BA degree is a high-stakes gamble: it has high costs in time and money, high academic demands, and low odds of success. Indeed, BA plans most often lead students to "some college with no credential" and no greater earnings than they would have had if they had never attended college (see chapter 2). In contrast, sub-BA credentials are rarely mentioned and poorly understood, but there are fewer obstacles to attaining certificates and associate degrees, and they come with higher odds of success, good earnings payoffs, and sometimes even later BA degrees.

We believe that encouraging students' poorly informed BA choices is not the best way to support their success. Entering college students, especially those who were low-achieving high school students, need to be informed about alternatives before choosing their first credential goal. Chapter 2 provides updated analyses of sub-BA completion, employment, and earnings.

### *What We Miss by Focusing on Earnings*

Policymakers often assess college outcomes by examining earnings, which are easily measured. Earnings and employment are important, but they are only one aspect of labor market outcomes; jobs can also provide autonomy, learning, and career futures. Chapter 3 examines whether young working adults value other nonmonetary job rewards, and which credentials lead to such job rewards.

### *What We Miss by Focusing on Academic Skills*

Reformers claim that students must be “college-ready” and have BA-level academic skills to benefit from college and progress to decent careers. Just as sub-BA credentials prepare students for specific jobs, they also have specific requirements. For example, students with poor academic skills often thrive after earning certificates as electricians and computer network technicians, sometimes earning over \$60,000 by age twenty-six. In addition, students often later gain gratification outside of the realm of academic skills when they are recognized for their problem-solving skills working, for instance, as medical assistants, machinists, or technicians. Chapter 4 explores how sub-BA credentials provide students with low to average academic skills with opportunities for success.

### **Alternative College Procedures for Navigating Transitions: Beyond Curriculum Pathways**

Community colleges offer the promise of a degree that will provide a dependable escape from poverty, but they have difficulty making good on that promise. Now that the college-for-all standard requires all students to add college to their work-entry process, students must cross *three transitions*—college entry, degree completion, and career entry. Students report, however, that they cannot get traction across these three transitions—they get courses without credits, credits without credentials, and credentials without payoffs. As though stuck in a Kafkaesque nightmare, they take steps but make no forward progress and their efforts do not lead to the expected outcomes. Although students are blamed for their failures, their failures are in fact built into traditional college procedures, which are not built to help them succeed.

If students are to succeed, colleges must create procedures to help nontraditional students navigate these transitions. Our prior research showed that colleges can structure curricula to prevent student mistakes and failures. In 2006, we criticized the “cafeteria” model of higher education, which leaves students free to choose their courses but often leads to poor progress, and we noted the advantages of “dependable pathways” that give more structure to curricular choices.<sup>71</sup> Curriculum pathways remove some of the difficulty in choosing aligned coursework that will dependably lead to a degree. Since then, leading researchers and reformers have joined in criticizing the cafeteria model and elaborating curriculum pathways.<sup>72</sup> Although curricular pathways began in community colleges, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, two prominent sociologists, advocate for curriculum pathways in four-year colleges as well.<sup>73</sup>



Chapters 5 through 8 examine ways colleges can improve students' college progress, testing procedures can reduce remedial needs, degree-ladder procedures (streamlined sequential degrees) can expand paths to BA degrees, and college procedures can reduce transition gaps and improve student supports. Although most educators assume that the traditional barriers to college transitions are there for a reason, some colleges have redesigned those transitions to reduce the obstacles and support student success as they go through them. Moreover, even as reformers have begun to accept and advocate our ideas about curriculum pathways, our new research indicates that pathways can go beyond curriculum. Pathway procedures are institutional procedures that colleges, on their own, can devise to guide and support students' career progress in crossing the three transitions—delayed obstacles, quick successes, proximal incentives, incremental success, curriculum pathways, monitoring and mandatory advising, and career-entry support. This book reveals and questions the many taken-for-granted traditional procedures that block students' path to success, and it identifies alternative procedures, often not seen or appreciated, that community colleges can implement. We can help youth escape poverty by succeeding in college, but only if we notice and make use of these options.

## The Sociology of Ability

Americans believe that all youth deserve the opportunity to attend college and that all will benefit from this experience, gaining credentials, status, and job payoffs. CFA generates hope by encouraging every student to enroll, regardless of past experiences and academic records. The premise of this policy is that if students make an effort, they can succeed, and their prior achievement history will not hold them back. This attitude allows us to maintain the darker, often unspoken assumption that students who fail in college have simply not worked hard enough.

Much higher education literature focuses on students' failures and limited ability, but such a focus ignores the influence of social context on ability. In his book *Real Education*, Charles Murray assumes that high rates of college dropout are attributable to the low ability of some students.<sup>74</sup> Although Murray is correct that many students do not succeed in college, he draws the wrong inference. High college dropout rates reflect not only individuals' ability but also the *demands imposed by traditional procedures* on students with nontraditional backgrounds. Although students' problems are often blamed on their own academic deficiencies, our research finds that many of them do not complete degrees because they make non-academic mistakes related to course choices, time allocation, degree plans, and so on. We suggest that this

happens in part because the traditional procedures in community colleges set students up for making such mistakes.

Students' "ability" to succeed in college can increase if they have better knowledge about alternative options and if institutions change their procedures to reduce arbitrary and culturally determined demands. A student who "fails" in the traditional college environment may be much more successful in a college that organizes its programs to reduce obstacles. In other words, we propose a "sociology of ability" and contend that "ability" is much stronger in a social context that poses fewer cultural obstacles and provides supportive, nontraditional procedures.

### **College for All Changes Everything: Alternative Options and Procedures**

Our usual commonsense understandings about college are narrow and misinformed—four-year BA degrees may take six or more years to attain, "college-level" academic skill requirements can be arbitrary and often unnecessary, and some job rewards are more satisfying than income. Colleges assume that remedial classes will fix students' deficiencies, that students know their own interests and abilities, that they can make good choices despite being uninformed, and that they will seek advice when needed. These commonsense assumptions are consistent with traditional college procedures—and *they are all wrong or misleading*.

College for all has changed everything. Under CFA, the concept of "college" has become broader than the traditional concept; "college students" are now more diverse, with more diverse qualifications; and "college success" has come to include newly important credentials with different requirements. In addition, being "college-ready" is now understood as including academic readiness for some programs that require only tenth-grade academic skills, and there are many more jobs and job rewards that lead to "career success" than indicated by the usual focus on earnings, including jobs with better career futures.

Although they have been around a long time, certificates and associate degrees are newly important options that serve new students, offer credentials in new majors, and lead to new jobs and job rewards. Instead of operating by traditional procedures, programs offering sub-BA credentials operate by new rules that avoid old obstacles (socioeconomic status, test scores), reduce traditional transition gaps, and support success for a broader variety of newly important careers.

This book presents new issues not covered in our prior book, *After Admission*.<sup>75</sup> It is divided into two parts: alternative options for students, and alternative procedures for institutions. Alternatives for students include sub-BA credentials (chapter 2), their job outcomes (chapter 3),

and the alternative qualifications required by these programs (chapter 4). Like most research, our prior book did not challenge popular “college-readiness” rhetoric, and it ignored certificates and “some college,” which are important and frequent college outcomes. Alternative procedures for institutions include remedial placement testing procedures (chapter 5), curricula incorporating alternative course structures that create steps on degree ladders (chapter 6), and procedures at both public and private colleges to reduce the transition gaps that impede student success (chapter 7). These alternatives were not recognized in our prior book. For the first time, we examine here how SES and test scores are related to completion of various credentials and to earnings within credentials, with surprising results. We also present new findings related to the sociology of ability and the discovery of unseen abilities. Nonmonetary job rewards from sub-BA credentials were neglected by most prior research, including our own.

Since *After Admission* was published in 2006, reformers have begun to implement our ideas about structured curricula, and in chapter 8 we describe how two community colleges implemented and extended ideas in that book. However, even as other researchers adopted our ideas about course pathways, we came to see pathways as procedures that change social contexts and reduce transition gaps. This book reflects our growing understanding that the college experience encompasses more than coursework.

If the bold stance of college for all is going to succeed, colleges must embrace a wide range of alternative ways to educate nearly all students. Our methods are designed to discover rarely considered alternative approaches, and an important goal of this book is to determine which ones are worth further exploration.