

== Foreword ==

IN 1988, THE William T. Grant Foundation released *The Forgotten Half*, a widely cited report that decried our national underinvestment in young people who did not attend college. “As young Americans navigate the passage from youth to adulthood,” the report asserted, “far too many flounder and ultimately fail in their efforts. Although rich in material resources, our society seems unable to ensure that *all* our youth will mature into young men and women able to face their futures with a sense of confidence and security.”¹

More than a quarter-century later, James E. Rosenbaum and his colleagues published *The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them*.² Part retrospective, part contemporary analysis, and part a prescription for the future in light of current needs, the authors pointed out that the “forgotten half” of today are no longer those who do not attend college, but rather those who do attend but do not complete—receiving no degree, no certification, no qualification, and ultimately little or no boost to their labor market prospects despite their college attendance. Today the vast majority of high school graduates attend some form of postsecondary educational institution, but nearly half are not rewarded for doing so because they obtain no mark of completion. In response, the authors laid down a set of recommendations for future research that could point toward ways to address the challenges faced by the new forgotten half.

It did not take long for Rosenbaum and his colleagues to follow their own advice. This book, *Bridging the Gaps*, represents an important step toward fulfilling the research agenda identified in *The New Forgotten Half*. It provides a clear-eyed examination of the challenges faced by students who enter postsecondary education ill-equipped to finish, not because they lack the talent or drive to do so, but because they face obstacles in a confusing, opaque system that does too little to support their progress. Yet such barriers are not inevitable. In *Bridging the Gaps*, the authors emphasize the potential of the community college sector to help their students succeed, especially through occupational preparation leading to specific job qualifications.

As is common in high-quality works of social science, the first contribution of this book is exposure: in this case, by uncovering the hidden story behind the lack of college success for the new forgotten half. What the authors dub “the new college reality” has emerged in a time of rising inequality: the income gains of the last three decades have largely been confined to the upper reaches of the labor market, and the wages of not only low-income but middle-income earners have fallen in real terms. A pervasive ideology of “college for all” has taken hold, and acceptance of this reality has led to high enrollment rates, but because too few students are able to navigate the transitions into college, through college, and into the labor market, completion rates lag. Moreover, whereas racial and ethnic differences in postsecondary enrollment are relatively small, the gaps in completion rates are large, and growing. In contrast to authors who cite students’ lack of ability as the reason for their failure, Rosenbaum and his colleagues show how the institutional conditions of community colleges pose formidable obstacles to student success.

Most works of social science would stop there, having documented the extent, sources, and consequences of inequality. In *Bridging the Gaps*, however, the authors have merely set the table for the repast that is to follow. Community colleges can be part of the solution, they argue, but need to be structured differently so that students can make informed choices to secure their futures. The authors proceed to lay out specific, research-based plans for reorganizing community colleges to elevate students’ chances of obtaining occupational certification and labor market benefits. Some of these ideas have been rigorously tested and others are more speculative, but all provide new directions for both research and practice. One reason that Rosenbaum and his colleagues are able to provide such detailed prescriptions is that they have spent many hours talking to the key actors—administrators, faculty, and students in community colleges—to better understand what they really need and what can feasibly be accomplished. The authors further recount two examples of community colleges that have reorganized in ways that are consistent with their recommendations, further fueling their claim that such reorganization is feasible and beneficial, not only to students but to the colleges themselves.

By moving beyond an account of where inequality comes from and why it matters to documenting specific *responses* to inequality, this book can serve as a model of public engagement for scholars in the social sciences. Often, researchers conclude a lengthy study of the nature of inequality with a concluding chapter that asserts, in essence, that if we would only cease the practices identified in the book that have generated inequality, we would have less inequality in the future. *Bridging the Gaps* shows the paucity of that approach and the value of a more

in-depth analysis of measures to reduce inequality that are informed by an understanding of the contingencies faced by individuals working in organizations as well as by the needs and struggles of their clients.

One way to achieve such depth of analysis is by carrying out research studies in the context of a partnership between researchers and the institutional leaders who are at the forefront of change. More common in the K–12 sector, research-practice partnerships allow researchers and school district leaders to work together to construct a research agenda that answers questions that matter to district leaders.³ For researchers, the partnership offers access to data and a real-world context for pursuing questions of practical import. For educators, the partnership expands their research capacity and provides an independent voice on program and policy effects. Extending such partnerships to the postsecondary level could foster analysis of the innovative ideas put forth in this volume.⁴

Of course, *Bridging the Gaps* is not the last word on the subject. On the contrary, its recommendations lend themselves to a new research agenda, one that focuses on a reorganized community college that achieves much greater completion rates than are typical today. Moreover, there remains much to be learned about the level of resources that will be needed for community colleges to reorganize effectively. Indeed, it seems clear that increased resources could well be justified by the increased efficiency documented in the success stories presented in the book. *Bridging the Gaps* thus presents a challenge and an opportunity for researchers as well as community college leaders to forge a new way forward.

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