

**On Second Chances and Stratification:  
How Sociologists Think About Community Colleges**

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### **Abstract**

Community colleges increase college access – extending postsecondary educational opportunities to students who otherwise may not have access, but they also exhibit low rates of program completion and transfer to four-year colleges. Sociological research on community colleges focuses on the tension between increasing educational opportunity and failing to improve equity in college completion across key demographics, like race and socioeconomic status. This paper provides an overview of sociology’s approach to understanding community colleges. We describe sociological theories, examine the contributions they make to the field, and discuss the discipline’s recent debates regarding community colleges. We conclude by highlighting research areas for further progress and discussing the role sociology could play in transforming community colleges.

*Keywords:* sociology, community colleges, social stratification, college access, educational attainment

## **On Second Chances and Stratification: How Sociologists Think About Community Colleges**

In the minds of sociologists, educational institutions are part of the social fabric shaping everyday lives. Depending on one's theoretical perspective, colleges and universities sift and sort individuals, act as hubs where people come together, or function to incubate new ideas and research (Stevens, Arum, & Armstrong, 2008). Each of these purposes shapes society, but when it comes to community colleges, sociologists emphasize that first function: the sifting and sorting of individuals within society – that is, how institutions impact social inequality (e.g. Brint and Karabel, 1989; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Labaree, 2013).

Since the 1970s, critical education theorists contemplated how schooling both mitigates and reproduces social and economic inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Sociological research on community colleges focuses on the tension between the democratizing mission of these institutions and the somewhat meandering route they offer as a path to social mobility. While community colleges increase college access – they enable more students to enter postsecondary education, they also exhibit low rates of degree attainment and transfer to four-year colleges. Community colleges are thus portrayed as a contested site in which inequality is simultaneously ameliorated (by increasing educational opportunity) and exacerbated (by failing to improve equity in college completion across key demographics, like race and socioeconomic status).

To interrogate this tension and investigate underlying causes for the reproduction of social inequality in American postsecondary education, sociologists use history, culture, and social structure and examine the institutional development and functions of community colleges (Brint, 2003). They interpret individuals' educational decisions within the contexts of social

processes. This stands in contrast to the traditional human capital viewpoint of economists, which holds that individuals make decisions about continuing their education based on anticipated gains in income, skills, knowledge, or the costs of investment, but does not fully consider the influence of social processes on individual preferences. For instance, sociologists acknowledge the roles that cultural capital (knowledge and attitudes that demonstrate belonging) and social capital (social ties of mutual acquaintance and recognition) play in sorting students into institutions and offering advantages to improve college success.

This article provides an overview of a stratification-focused approach, viewing colleges as institutions that impact social stratification, to understanding community colleges and examines the contributions that this theory makes to the field. We first review the sociological literature on stratification in postsecondary access and outcomes in the United States. That research serves as the root of most sociological research on two-year colleges. We then discuss the theories and approaches to understanding community colleges from a sociological perspective, before moving into recent debates and research. We conclude by highlighting areas for further progress in sociological research and discussing the role sociology could play in transforming community colleges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Social Stratification: Postsecondary Education as a Sieve**

The American ethos positions education as a powerful mechanism through which young people achieve status based on their own merits, unconstrained by their family origins. Decades of sociological research, however, demonstrate that family background (such as income, wealth, parents' occupation, and parents' highest achieved level of education) predicts educational attainment and the strength of its influence is growing (Hout, 2012; Reardon, 2011). At the same

time, postsecondary educational attainment offers a chance to overcome one's socioeconomic origins.

### **Postsecondary Education and Life Outcomes**

Educational attainment is an increasingly important determinant of economic and social success in the United States. Improving college completion rates among students who are traditionally disadvantaged in higher education is a promising tool to improve social mobility. The most obvious link between education and life outcomes stems from the strong correlation between educational attainment and labor market outcomes (i.e. earnings, occupational status, amount of time spent unemployed, etc.), but postsecondary education is also linked to several other life outcomes, such as fertility, health, and marital satisfaction (Brand & Davis, 2011; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Schwartz, 2010).

Educational attainment protects workers from low-wage jobs and unemployment. During the 2008 recession, the least-educated workers, those without a high school diploma, were four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed (Hout, 2012). Between 2007 and 2009, workers aged 35-54 years old who had earned a high school degree had an unemployment rate of approximately 6 percent for workers with high school diplomas, compared to 2.8 percent for college graduates (Hout, 2012, Figure 1). Acquiring additional education beyond high school corresponds to an annual income increase of 20 percent per educational level (i.e. those with "some college" earn 20 percent more per year than those with a high school diploma, those with an associate degree earn 20 percent more than those with some college, and so on) (Hout, 2012). More importantly, Torche (2011) shows that, for Americans who obtain a college degree, economic success is independent of their socioeconomic background, but this is not the case for people who lack college degrees. Non-college-graduates from low-income families face

difficulty overcoming their limited social, cultural, and monetary resources, constraining their opportunities for economic and occupational success.

Postsecondary education also improves non-financial outcomes. Attending college is associated with increased marriage stability, altered parenting practices, and improved health outcomes (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Herd, Goesling, & House, 2007; Schwartz, 2010).

“Educational homogamy” – having similar educational backgrounds as one’s significant other – is likely to occur among college attendees and reduces a couple’s probability of divorce (Schwartz, 2010). College enrollment also impacts the way women raise their children; mothers from poor backgrounds who attend college invest more time and resources in children’s education (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). This investment, including time spent helping with homework and the presence of books and other educational resources in the home, translates into better educational outcomes for the next generation (Attewell & Lavin, 2007, p. 6). Additionally, greater educational attainment appears to suppress the onset of health problems (Herd et al., 2007). Research suggests that formal education informs healthy living and develops habits that promote good health (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

To gauge the impact of mass higher education on social equality, some sociologists argue that we should not focus solely on the outcomes of college-goers, but on whether underprivileged attendees “break the cycle of poverty,” pulling their children into the middle class (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Postsecondary education improves upward mobility – the ability to surpass the occupational, social, or economic position of one’s parents – through social as well as financial means. Given the importance of education to overcoming family background and education’s role in predicting social and economic outcomes, greater college access in the United

States should, ultimately, reduce inequality. Next, we challenge this hypothesis, examining institutional stratification among American colleges.

### **Extending Opportunity; Protecting Privilege**

While improved access to higher education theoretically reduces inequality, this likely untrue if gains in access are limited to less prestigious institutions. The higher education system in the United States is structured as a “pyramid of institutions,” simultaneously extending opportunity and protecting privilege (Labaree, 2013, p. 48). The base is comprised of the most inclusive institutions. The most prestigious institutions are fewer in number and more exclusive. In other words, American higher education offers the “possibility of getting ahead” but also “the probability of not getting ahead very far” (Labaree, 2013, p. 48).

### **Extending Opportunity**

Through open-access and low costs, community colleges aim to reduce inequality in educational opportunity by increasing postsecondary access. According to recent cross-national research, greater access to education benefits everyone. Analyses of data from 15 countries indicates that, as access to higher education expands, all social classes benefit in terms of educational attainment (Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). The results hold true even in cases of postsecondary privatization and differentiation. In the United States, the postsecondary system is both privatized (there are private colleges in addition to the public) and differentiated (institutions are stratified by prestige, resources, and selectivity of both faculty and students).

According to Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran (2007), the proportion of citizens attending higher education is much larger in countries with diversified systems, like the United States, than those with other systems. This is because the “expanding pie” of education is increasingly inclusive even if relative advantages are preserved (Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007, p. 29). The

expanding pie metaphor, in which students who might otherwise not have attended college are now able to do so, describes the “democratization” of postsecondary education. In countries where the most advantaged already have significant access to higher education, educational expansion offers the greatest opportunity for the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Indeed, research suggests increasing postsecondary opportunities through broader access results in greater equity in college attendance in an American context. Attewell and Lavin (2007) tracked women who entered the City University of New York (CUNY) between 1970 and 1972 under its open admissions policy. Under the policy, every high school student in the city was guaranteed a seat in the CUNY system, which includes two- and four-year colleges and, at the time, offered free tuition. High school graduates with an average of 80 percent in college-prep classes or ranking in the top 50 percent of their graduating class qualified for a spot at one of the four-year colleges. Those that did not meet at least one of these criteria were able to enroll at a two-year college.

The open-access policy translated into increased enrollment among students who otherwise would not qualify for admittance. The more lax admission requirements drastically improved the accessibility of college education for racial minorities, including blacks and Hispanics. The authors’ estimate that under more selective policies, like those previously in place, only 31 percent of black female attendees and 17 percent of black male attendees would have enrolled in CUNY two-year colleges (Attewell & Lavin, 2007, p. 189).

Most community colleges operate under similar broad-access admissions policies. They draw in students who would otherwise miss out on postsecondary educational opportunities, admitting students with very diverse skills and backgrounds and giving them “second-chance” access to higher education. Community colleges offer a cheaper alternative to four-year colleges.



Furthermore, they are often dispersed throughout states, offering a local postsecondary option for residents without the financial, familial, or personal flexibility to “go away” to college.

Admitting students who are otherwise unlikely to attend college has important implications for their life outcomes. Students who are least likely to attend college appear to benefit more from degree attainment than their peers (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Brand & Xie, 2010). Women admitted only under CUNY’s open-door policy gained more from college, 30 years after enrollment, than those who would have met previous selection criteria, showing a larger boost in earnings and homeownership (Attewell & Lavin, 2007, p. 190). The admissions policy also improved the rate of their children’s college-going by 5 percent (p. 194).

### **Protecting Privilege**

While community colleges increase access to the American higher education system, access to selective colleges that yield the greatest returns is still “profoundly and persistently unequal” (Hout, 2012; see also, Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Students are sorted into tiers of higher education that have become increasingly segmented in terms of fields of study, degree conferred, and returns to credentials. The differentiation of postsecondary institutions and its implications for returns to schooling “creates a structure in which [colleges] are formally equal but functionally quite different; where institutions that are most accessible provide the least social benefit, and those that are least accessible open the most doors” (Labaree, 2013, p. 48).

Today, more Americans attend college than ever before. Between 1985 and 2011, the number of Americans enrolling in college increased by almost 60 percent, from 10.6 million to 18.1 million (US Department of Education, 2013). While community colleges increase educational access, they also “effectively maintain” inequality – they give the illusion of increasing opportunity while still preserving a top tier of postsecondary education (elite four-

years) that are out of reach for all but a few (Lucas, 2001). As larger shares of high school graduates reached some form of higher education, socioeconomic class differences in access to selective colleges in the United States grew (Alon, 2009). Affluent youth are more likely to attend selective four-year institutions, while the less privileged increasingly attend lower prestige institutions, including two-year colleges (Alon, 2009).

Sociologists describe the stratifying processes in terms of differences in quantitative and qualitative aspects of higher education, referred to as “vertical” and “horizontal” stratification (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Gerber & Cheung, 2008). The vertical dimension refers to the level or quantity of education received (number of years or “highest” degree). The different quality of education received (e.g. institutional selectivity, field of study, etc.) at a particular level represents the horizontal dimensions.

Because community college degrees represent fewer years of education than bachelor’s degrees, the stratification between these institutions is a form of vertical stratification. However, if two years of attendance at a four-year college or university are not equivalent to two years at a community college, then there is also horizontal stratification. Horizontal stratification may occur due to ascribed qualitative differences between two-year and four-year institutions and the type of degrees they yield. For instance, two- and four-year colleges offer different programs of study, with two-year colleges providing more vocational programs and general academic programs (e.g. “liberal arts and sciences,” “general studies,” and “humanities” majors) that may result in sub-baccalaureate degrees, but not easily transferrable credits to earn a bachelor’s degree (Bahr, 2010; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Roksa, 2006, p. 502).

The value of returns to years of education at two-year versus four-year institutions remains unclear. Gerber and Cheung (2008) theorize that heterogeneous returns for the same

number of years of postsecondary schooling – for instance, receiving a greater earning boost from attending one year at a public four-year college verses one year at a community college – may occur for several reasons. In this case, four-year colleges may more effectively develop students’ human capital (e.g cognitive and noncognitive skills) or social capital (e.g. network connections). Furthermore, differences between the students attending the institutions influence labor market returns, independent of the institutional quality, making it difficult to detect differential returns across colleges and sectors (Gerber & Cheung, 2008). It is also very likely that differential returns to the same number of years of education may stem from a “signal effect” (Spence, 1973). Attendance at a four-year institution may signal greater ability or knowledge to potential employers than attendance at a two-year college, regardless of whether the education at the institution actually imparted skills more efficiently (Gerber & Cheung, 2008). Perceived differences in quality can translate into negative connotations of two-year degrees. Recent research suggests that employers perceive associate degrees as an indication of a lack of academic ability, initiative, or skill compared to bachelor’s degrees, particularly when the local labor market is saturated by applicants with bachelor’s degrees (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2012).

### **Unpacking Stratification: How and Why the Community College Sorts Students**

Sociological research seeks to understand the production of inequality within community colleges. Sociologists have developed several theories about the sorting mechanisms. One of the most prominent is Clark’s (1960a, 1960b) “cooling-out hypothesis.” Drawing from a case study, Clark’s research highlights the role of organizations in enabling and constraining the actions of individuals. Clark interprets the discrepancy between the open-door admission policies of community colleges and the failure of many students to meet their aspiration of attaining a college degree as a structural component of the institution. Community colleges “cool out” high-

aspiring, low-ability students through a process of “soft denial” (Clark, 1960a, p. 569). He suggests that community colleges offer students “substitute avenues” for success (i.e. terminal two-year degrees) (Clark, 1960a, p. 574). The substitute outcome becomes palatable to students over time, after college counselors alter student intentions by accumulating evidence, through grades and recordkeeping, that bachelor’s degree aspirations are overambitious. The theory of the “cooling-out function” of higher education is drawn from Erving Goffman’s earlier usage of the phrase “cooling-out” as an institutional means of managing an individuals’ disappointment of a goal. In this way, community colleges function to allow four-year colleges to concentrate resources on more “able” students.

Brint and Karabel (1989) are more critical in their analysis of community colleges. Like Clark, they describe community colleges as agencies for the “management of ambitions” (p. 7-10, 213). However, they see community colleges as a mechanism for reproducing inequality. Community colleges reconcile the high demand for college-level education and the limited supply by channeling students into vocational programs and away from baccalaureate programs (Brint and Karabel, 1989). Brint and Karabel recognize that community college students are those who may otherwise have entered a state university. They argue that community college diverts students from a higher postsecondary track, resulting in lower educational and economic attainment for students.

Dougherty (1994) attempts to resolve the debate between these two perspectives, or what he deems the “defenders” of community colleges (like Clark) and “critics” (like Brint and Karabel). Defenders purport that community colleges serve a central need of society, providing postsecondary opportunity for underachievers while preserving the excellence of universities. Critics argue that community colleges’ offer a façade of equal opportunity and instead reproduce

class inequalities. *The Contradictory College* (1994) suggests that both sides minimize the role that government officials play in the origins, impacts, and missions of community colleges.

Drawing on case studies in five states, Dougherty finds that state governors and legislators promoted community colleges out of self-interest, though the colleges ultimately benefit interest groups (like businesses in need of trained workers, constituents in need of training, and state university officials interested in preserving elite educational institutions). “State relative autonomy” theory adds the pivotal participation of “self-interested, relatively autonomous” government officials in supporting and vocationalizing the community college (Dougherty, 1994, p. 35). Dougherty argues that the contradictory nature of the community college – which democratizes access to higher education, while hindering the educational aspirations of students – occurred because community colleges are products of many actors with varying interests. Goal diffusion combined with inadequate means to meet concurrent goals translates to ineffectiveness. The desire to provide educational opportunity, which should occur through the community college’s transfer function, is “undercut” by competing goals of vocational education and government cost-saving (Dougherty, 1994, p. 8).

New structural critics similarly argue that, at the institutional-level, community colleges are overextended and have not found effective means to achieve their goals (Brint, 2003; Dougherty, 1994). Unlike Burton Clark (1960a, 1960b), they do not blame low student ability and subversion by counselors for students’ unmet aspirations and expectations. They suggest that community colleges enroll too many students and employ too few counselors for a systematic institutional “letdown” of student goals. Instead, institutional constraints contribute to a structure that ignores the adult responsibilities and realities of the student population. Community colleges could more effectively meet student needs through organizational change.

Work by Deil-Amen and colleagues (e.g. Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006) provides insight into processes within community colleges that result in low degree attainment and transfer rates for disadvantaged students. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) suggest that cultural capital, which they define as a form of social know-how, is necessary for students to overcome obstacles and successfully navigate the complex postsecondary institution. Students with the appropriate cultural knowledge, perhaps obtained from more highly educated parents or academic preparation, are more likely to make it through. Despite serving students with diverse backgrounds and needs, who are often less academically prepared for college, community colleges offer little institutional structure and guidance to support students in navigating bureaucratic hurdles and dealing with conflicting demands. This lack of structure results in long, meandering educational pathways.

Based on case studies of community colleges and for-profit two-year colleges, *After Admission* (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006) recommends organizational changes to minimize bureaucratic hurdles. The degree completion rates at proprietary two-year colleges surpass those at community colleges. Their students report less difficulty, on average, navigating the pathway to degree attainment. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) suggest that proprietary colleges may be more successful at helping students reach their aspirations because they offer one-on-one assistance for students and simplify processes like enrollment, course selection, and financial aid application (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). To achieve similar completion rates, the authors argue that community colleges need to match the more prescriptive structure of the proprietary two-years.

### **New Lines of Research on Community Colleges**

The sociological theories described above attempt to explain how and why community colleges stratify students, despite their broad-access missions. Much of the current sociological research on community colleges situates empirical findings into overarching theories about stratification and postsecondary education in the United States. Recent sociological exploration of community colleges focuses on three areas: 1) individuals' aspirations/expectations, 2) students' movement through postsecondary systems, and 3) campus interactions and non-academic supports.

#### **The Ambitious Generation Meets the Open Door College: Research on Expectations and Aspirations**

The status attainment model, pervasive in sociological research, emphasizes the role of students' educational degree plans for their subsequent educational and occupational attainment (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). The pervasive "college-for-all" ethos encourages even poorly prepared, weakly motivated youth to aspire to attend college, even if their optimism is unrealistic (Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 2000). Recent sociological research explores whether the high educational expectations of youth attending community colleges are indeed "cooled out" by attending community colleges.

Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle (2008) examine the expectation to complete a bachelor's degree within a predominantly low-income, African American sample of Baltimore youths. While Clark (1960) and Brint and Karabel (1989) emphasize the diversionary effects of community college attendance (rerouting students from their original degree goals), Alexander and colleagues suggest that the educational expectations of low-resource youths are not distinctively cooled out by their experiences at two-year colleges. Instead, the authors argue that two-year college attendance is more associated with "warming up" (i.e. increasing) educational

aspirations than with “cooling out.” Furthermore, “holding steady” – maintaining expectations – is the modal pattern. However, the authors find that limited socioeconomic and academic resources are correlated with giving up on bachelor’s degree expectations. The authors recommend a broader framework that considers external pressures, like financial problems and familial obligations, to account for post-high-school changes in college degree expectations. Instead, Clark’s cooling-out hypothesis is decidedly narrow.

In Clark’s theory, institutional actors (i.e. community college counselors) play a key role in redirecting students to lower their expectations. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2013) further challenge postsecondary researchers to extend their understanding of the processes affecting students’ aspirations and expectations. Instead of focusing on the actions of institutional actors, the authors explore whether student finances influence student decisions. Using data from an experimental study of need-based aid, the researchers find that private need-based aid *decreased* the educational degree aspirations and expectations of two-year college students. They attribute the surprising results to the complex manner in which aid is delivered: financial aid packages fluctuate from year-to-year (or even term-to-term) and different financial aid awards (e.g. a Pell Grant verses a privately funded grant) often have different performance requirements for renewing the award (for instance, one may require students to maintain a higher cumulative GPA than the other). Broton and Goldrick-Rab argue that future research needs to explore a wider range of mechanisms that influence the fluctuation of educational degree goals. This research, along with the new structuralist critiques of community colleges, removes the blame from individual actors, instead focusing on the role of bureaucratic structures in shifting community college students’ expectations.



## **Patterns of Institutional Movement**

Rather than focusing purely on associate degrees as an end in themselves, research also studies student movement (or lack thereof) between two-year and four-year institutions, focusing on the transfer function of community colleges. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) extend previous research on average transfer rates from two- to four-years, considering variation in transfer behavior across levels of social background. Using two nationally-representative datasets, the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:1988) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:1990), the authors examine the impact of social background, educational preparation and aspirations, external demands, and college experiences on community college students' transfer to four-year colleges. The findings indicate that socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of transfer, net of these controls. The study suggests that the traditionally least advantaged students – low socioeconomic-status students and black students – are least likely to transfer out of community colleges to four-years, even if they are comparable to their peers in educational preparation and aspirations. This has important implications for social mobility, as the least educationally advantaged students stand to reap the greatest labor market returns from earning bachelor's degrees (Brand and Xie, 2010).

While the majority of research on community colleges and institutional transfer focuses on movement from two-year to four-year colleges, recent sociological research also acknowledges that students “swirl” through their college careers, moving laterally to institutions in the same sector, vertically between sectors, and in interrupted spurts of enrollment (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). The majority of work on postsecondary transfer focuses on the diversionary effect of community colleges, or how initial enrollment at a community college diverts students with bachelor's degree aspirations away from four-year colleges. Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer (2009)

suggest that “spinning downward” from a four-year to a two-year institution is a separate and potentially inequitable track that deserves additional attention from higher education scholars.

“Reverse transfer” describes a students’ movement from a four-year to a two-year college prior to earning a degree. Using the NELS: 1988, Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer (2009) find that being academically underprepared is the strongest predictor of reverse transfer. However, even after controlling for test scores and prior achievement, students from low-income families are still substantially more likely to reverse transfer than their peers, while high-income students who transfer are more likely to make lateral shifts (going to a different four-year institution). The downward shift of students from low-income families indicates additional stratification pathways within postsecondary education beyond the stratification that occurs when students initially enroll in two-year versus four-year pathways.

On the contrary, Kalogrides and Grodsky (2011) argue that movement from four-year to two-year colleges can actually act as a “safety net” for students, rather than a source of inequality. The authors examine the causes and consequences of reverse transfer. To determine the effects of transferring from a four-year college to a community college (i.e. reverse transfer), they use propensity scores to mimic selection into a community college among initial four-year enrollees in the NELS: 1988. They find that, while students who reverse transfer do not fare as well as students with exclusive four-year enrollment, they have more favorable academic and labor market outcomes than students who drop out of college altogether. Given the results, Kalogrides and Grodsky suggest that community colleges serve as a safety net, particularly for disadvantaged students, who are significantly more likely to drop out of college. This adds a complexity to the debate about the diversionary function of community colleges. Instead of viewing these institutions as facilitating or thwarting the movement from high school to four-

year colleges, the authors suggest that they play an important role in human capital accumulation for students who drop out of baccalaureate programs. In this way, they offer additional pathways to social mobility for students that would otherwise leave their college careers with no degree.

### **Campus Interactions and Social Networks**

Building on the structural critiques of community colleges, recent research explores the role of campus support services, both academic and non-academic, in aiding community college students. Nonacademic supports, including campus services and informal activities that address the social, cultural, and otherwise implicit demands of college, improve persistence and degree attainment (Karp, 2011; Schudde, 2014). They do so by creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations and crystallizing goals, building the social know-how to help students achieve those goals, and making college life feasible by confronting conflicting demands (Karp, 2011).

Participation in academically-related experiences, such as visiting faculty during office hours, meeting with an advisor, and participating in study groups, improves students' probability of earning a credential and transferring to a four-year college (Schudde, 2014). These activities help students feel comfortable in college and provide them with access to information that can ease their path toward a degree (Karp, 2011). Promoting campus relationships for non-traditional students is particularly important because they often have fewer opportunities for networking, due to competing demands on their time.

Institutional actors, such as faculty and staff, can encourage student success by providing interpersonal connections, advice, motivation, and information. Advising positively influences completion of remedial courses, persistence rates, and transfer rates, even after controlling for preexisting characteristics (Bahr, 2008). Research suggests that information provided by social relationships and informal interactions may have a greater impact on students' use of academic support services than formal outreach like online resources or signs (Park, 2013). Unfortunately,

some students who know that they need academic assistance are deterred by perceived obstacles, including long lines, mismatch between availability of services and student schedules, and inability to keep appointments due to competing demands (Park, 2013). Yet students often need individualized guidance and coaching to support their decision-making; access to institutional agents would likely offer this support (Park, 2013, Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

While one-on-one support services are ideal, resource constraints at community colleges make it unrealistic without greater public investment in the institutions. Without additional funding, institutions must innovate to try to reach more students with limited means. Rios-Aguilar and colleagues (2012) document how postsecondary institutions now embrace social media platforms and mobile technologies to communicate with students, potentially altering the mode of social interactions and supports described above. Deil-Amen and Rios-Aguilar (2014) argue that community colleges are particularly ripe for technological innovations, given the need to improve students' ability to navigate college requirements and bureaucracy in cost-effective ways. Technology can facilitate person-to-person communication to help students navigate difficult processes like applying for financial aid. In their evaluation of a social networking tool at nine community colleges, the authors find that social media is most effective in building networks for the exchange of information if students are aware of the social media's availability and consistently engage in its application. If staff/advisors are able to respond quickly to students' inquiries, they can intercede in confusion and share necessary information. This approach is susceptible to the same challenges as face-to-face interactions – there must be an adequate number of staff/advisors to respond to student needs, but technological interventions may be a promising method for community colleges to offer the individualized guidance

recommended by Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person in *After Admission* (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014, p. 23; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

### **A Future Research Agenda**

Sociological theory stands to improve our knowledge about the sorting processes that occur between and within colleges. While extant research has yet to provide causal evidence about the influence of community colleges on achievement and attainment or the role of mediating processes, like campus interactions and experiences, the studies touched upon in this article offer a base of evidence from which we can build. Future research may also highlight the societal benefits of the institutions, rather than focusing on the diversionary effects of community colleges on educational goals, to build support for greater public investment. We think the following areas of research stand to benefit the field and hope to see continued research in these veins.

#### **Accounting for College Choice**

While sociology offers compelling theory suggesting that community colleges aid in both social reproduction and in opportunities for social mobility, empirical testing of these theories is complicated by students' "choice" of postsecondary institutions (Gerber & Cheung, 2008; Hout, 2012). Stratification in outcomes across students who enter two-year and four-year colleges is difficult to interpret due to systematic variation across two-year and four-year enrollees. Students who initially enroll in two-year colleges are more likely to be first-generation college students, often come from low-income backgrounds, and work for pay during college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Characteristics like these are highly correlated with dropout behavior. For this reason, one of the key methodological concerns in the literature is the problem of selection bias.

Evidence for how best to capture selection into college type is unresolved. The issue is complicated by the fact that most models of selection into college are theoretically grounded in rational choice theory – the idea that students make a rational cost-benefit calculation of the value of furthering their education. Evidence suggests that the effect of income returns to college education vary by race, class, gender, and cognitive skills (Beattie, 2002). To the extent that students are aware of these differences, group membership alters students’ calculated returns and their subsequent educational decisions. Because most models of selection into college fail to statistically account for the interaction between individual background characteristics and expected labor market returns, most selection models are best suited for white men with lower socioeconomic origins and cognitive skills (the students for whom the standard cost-benefit expectation of increased earnings through educational attainment apply), and do not align well to the diverse student populations who attend community colleges (Beattie, 2002).

To make comparisons across sectors (whether four-year verses two-year or public two-year verses private two-year) and obtain more precise estimates of the effects of attending community colleges, greater attention must be paid to selection into college types. It appears that research is headed in this direction (e.g. Brand, Pfeffer, Goldrick-Rab, 2012; Stephan et al., 2009), but the policy-relevance of proposals to restructure community colleges based on findings on proprietary two-year colleges hangs in the balance of proving their comparability.

### **Uncovering Mechanisms**

Sociological research on the organization of community colleges offers insights into institutional barriers to student success. To understand and intervene in stratifying processes, additional research to illuminate channels and barriers to success is necessary. Research needs to push farther to show the mechanisms that produce differential transfer rates and degree

attainment across socioeconomic status and race. Some avenues for further exploration include testing interventions to overcome external circumstances that likely inhibit success. Many community college students would benefit from help navigating “out-of-school” obstacles in order to meet “in-school” goals (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Gates, 2013). Some federal policies, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act, impeded welfare recipients’ educational access by putting them to work instead of enabling them to gain additional training (Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006).

Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Gates (2013) explore the impact of an intervention that merges social and educational policy strategies by creating comprehensive support services. Single Stop USA is a non-profit that partners with community colleges to provide tax preparation, financial counseling, and benefit access to the student body in order to ameliorate the impact of poverty on educational attainment (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Gates, 2013). Case studies suggest that students at Single Stop-participating colleges are able to access social services, like benefits from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or Unemployment Insurance, because trained staff guide them through complex application processes. Holistic research, examining the whole student, including challenges faced outside of campus life, offers greater insight into additional steps necessary to improve college completion among disadvantaged students.

A focus on the role teaching and learning at community colleges plays in sifting and winnowing students is also necessary. *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011) connects limited learning on college campuses to students spending more time on leisure activities, but the study only focuses on four-year colleges. It is likely that community colleges students face different barriers to learning and encounter different opportunities for learning. To our

knowledge, research has yet to empirically link students' time and resource constraints, learning, and stratified outcomes.

### **Community Colleges for the Public Good**

Greater empirical attention should be paid to the social returns to investing in community colleges. Brint (2003), Goldrick-Rab (2010), and Labaree (2013) note the “lower status” of community colleges. The scholars suggest that this reputation stems from a cultural bias against vocational training and the perception that its providers are “lesser.” Yet the focus on inequality production within institutions and the suggestion that vocational education is somehow lesser may reinforce cultural stereotypes about the institutions and the value of their degrees. Additional research on the value of community colleges might alter public opinion and increase support for greater investment.

Research may be moving in this direction. A recent *Sociology of Education* article indicates that public investment in community colleges improves employment growth and social returns to education in the long run. Crookston and Hooks' (2012) found that community colleges improve employment growth in rural areas, but only when coupled with public investment in community colleges. During periods of public support, the authors observed growth related to the presence of these institutions, but as the public spending on education declined, related job growth also declined. Similarly, a study in Texas investigated the returns on state investments in community colleges and state universities and found that the investment resulted in lower use of public assistance, lower crime and incarceration, and higher payback in the form of sales, property, and state income taxes (Murdock et al., 2003).

Overall, investing in community colleges offers benefits for society. Community colleges rely on states and localities for the majority – approximately 60 percent – of their revenues



(Crookston and Hooks, 2012). Further investment would likely help the institutions' overcome financial constraints and improve students' educational attainment.

### **Implications of Sociological Research on Community Colleges**

The disinvestment in higher education by states creates a new context through which sociologists will interpret the shifts in postsecondary access and completion patterns. In conjunction with disinvestment, there is a growing rhetoric of the importance of community colleges and the value of increasing educational attainment for all Americans. Recent evidence suggests that the American working class perceives an “absence of choice” at a “time when work is unpredictable, families are fragile, social safety nets are shrinking, and the future is uncertain” (Silva, 2013, p. 30). Students go to college, swayed by the college-for-all culture, but find themselves haplessly navigating complex bureaucratic structures, ultimately accumulating debt and failing to meet their educational goals.

Empirical research needs to acknowledge the economic and social contexts of community college students' experiences. Analytic models that do not consider the external pressures and obligations students face are incomplete. Students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, encounter a host of circumstances outside the classroom walls that make it increasingly difficult to remain enrolled and on track (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Gates, 2013; Silva, 2013).

Despite the presence of inequality-generating mechanisms in our differentiated postsecondary system, community colleges still represent a potential pathway to social mobility. Unfortunately, while community colleges often lack adequate funding to meet students' “in-school” needs, they must also address students' “out-of-school” needs in order to improve college completion (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Gates, 2013). This means policymakers and

institutions should take a holistic approach to understanding higher education. Yet, current policy focuses on quick fixes in postsecondary education, rather than building an integrated social safety net. Overcoming the challenges faced by community colleges and their students requires additional investment in both research to identify points of intervention and institutional resources to improve students' educational experiences.

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