

# The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them

## SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

---

James Rosenbaum, Caitlin Ahearn, Kelly Becker  
*Northwestern University*

Janet Rosenbaum  
*State University of New York, Downstate Campus*



## “When nearly half of community college entrants fail to get a credential, our education system is also failing.”

---

In 1988, the William T. Grant Foundation issued “The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America’s Youth and Young Families,” which revealed that, although the nation was investing in young people who went to college, there was little or no support for non-college-bound youth. Unprepared for the job market and with diminished economic prospects, these young people—nearly half of the nation’s 16–24 year olds—had fallen far behind their peers who attended college.

In the 25 years since “The Forgotten Half” was published, a new reality has emerged. Amid expanded college access, as many as 86 percent of on-time high school graduates now continue their education. But the era of “college for all” has yielded a new set of challenges and obstacles for young people and the institutions that serve them, particularly community colleges.

In “The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them,” a new report commissioned by the William T. Grant Foundation, James Rosenbaum and his colleagues find that many young people who enroll in college fail to complete their studies and attain a degree, and that these youth fare no better in the labor market than those with only a high school diploma. And while 37 percent of on-time high school graduates enroll in community colleges and intend ultimately to pursue bachelor’s degrees, nearly half (46 percent) drop out within eight years, earning no degree and incurring significant expenses. These young people, who pursue but do not complete their higher education, are indeed the new forgotten half.

Using data from the nationally representative Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS), Rosenbaum and colleagues examine the unique circumstances of the new forgotten half, discuss their opportunities and challenges and outline strategies to help youth move beyond “some college” and achieve their potential.

# New Directions For Research

Although nearly half of community college students drop out, evidence shows that these young people have the potential to attain credentials and reap the benefits of a college education. Extant research has already begun to shape the national conversation about higher education, but future research, especially in the areas stated here, can do more to yield the types of smart policies and reforms that will improve outcomes for young people and the institutions that serve them.

## THE NEW COLLEGE REALITY AND ITS RANGE OF OPTIONS, ODDS, AND OUTCOMES

Given the importance of community colleges as places of opportunity for young people, especially youth of low-socioeconomic status, there is a pressing need to further examine and understand youth's experiences during and after community college.

Research should describe the new college reality and investigate the obstacles that prevent nearly half of community college students from completing their studies, including delayed enrollment after high school, extended timetables that increase time to degree and cost of enrollment, and students' understanding of various credentials and their monetary and nonmonetary outcomes.

### Credential Attainment

IN THE ERA OF COLLEGE FOR ALL

**46%** of community college students attain no credential within the eight years after high school

**20%** of community college students attain a bachelor's degree within eight years after high school

**33%** of community college students attain an associate's degree or certificate within eight years after high school

### RESEARCH MAY HELP US UNDERSTAND WHY STUDENTS DELAY COLLEGE ENTRY AND HELP US DEVELOP STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE ENROLLMENT DIRECTLY OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

Delaying college entry after high school reduces college success rates, and low-income youth are much more likely to delay enrollment.

### RESEARCH MAY STUDY THE PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE EXTENDED TIMETABLES THAT INCREASE TIME TO DEGREE AND COST OF ENROLLMENT

On average, students attending four-year colleges take six to eight years to complete a bachelor's degree, and only 20 percent of community college students attain a bachelor's degree within eight years of graduating high school. In the ELS, about half of those students who did not complete college reported leaving school because of financial issues. According to Rosenbaum, the costs of extended enrollment may contribute to students' challenges.

### RESEARCH MAY INVESTIGATE HOW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND VARIOUS CREDENTIALS, INCLUDING ASSOCIATE'S DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES, AND THEIR MONETARY AND NONMONETARY OUTCOMES

Sub-baccalaureate degrees can offer promising options that can lead to future success, including employment in industries with skills shortages. These alternatives to bachelor's degrees can be completed relatively quickly, and research has shown that, although many students do not learn of these options until after they have dropped out, sub-baccalaureate credentials yield far greater payoffs than a high school diploma or "some college" and no credential.

---

## HOW COUNSELING AND GUIDANCE CAN BETTER SERVE YOUNG PEOPLE

A better understanding of the challenges that students encounter in college can better equip high school and college counselors to advise students and improve their decisions.

Research can shed light on how counselors help students understand what college is, why they should care, how they can prepare, and what strategies and credentials will improve their odds of success.

### RESEARCH MAY HELP EDUCATE COUNSELORS ON HOW TO SUPPORT LOW-INCOME OR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

---

Many of the most important decisions about higher education are made while students are still in high school, and for low-income kids, high school counselors are often the main source of information about college.

### RESEARCH MAY GUIDE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN THEIR EFFORTS TO PAY FOR COLLEGE

---

Research can examine programs that help students and families understand the financial aid system and secure funding. Nearly half of the college students who attain no credential, as observed in the ELS, report financial challenges as the main reason for dropping out.

---

## INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS: ALIGNMENT, PROCEDURES, AND LINKAGES

Research has the potential to yield smart reforms to improve college achievement and positive outcomes for students.

Rosenbaum and colleagues offer three areas where future research may make a significant contribution: high school–college alignment, structured college procedures, and school–work linkages.

### RESEARCH SHOULD EXAMINE STRATEGIES TO ALIGN STANDARDS BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGES

---

Sixty percent of students who enroll in community colleges fail placement exams, and many are assigned to remedial courses. Research has the opportunity to discover which standards are needed for various programs and which skills best prepare students for different majors.

### RESEARCH MAY STUDY HOW STRUCTURED PROCESSES IMPROVE DEGREE PROGRESS AND CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT

---

Research can help to understand institutional procedures that simplify course choice and pathways to credential attainment, and how these procedures impact student outcomes.

### RESEARCH SHOULD STUDY HOW COLLEGES AND FACULTY CREATE SCHOOL–WORK LINKAGES

---

School–work linkages help students understand career opportunities and contextualize their skills and capabilities.

Aligning programs with employment is essential if students are to realize the benefits of occupational training. But community colleges are notoriously weak when it comes to linking programs with employers, and low-income students are more in need of such services.