

MAKING NEW YORK CITY FLOURISH: INVEST IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By Gail O. Mellow

A century ago, higher education in New York City looked very different from today. It reflected the needs of the nation's largest city, an industrial and commercial behemoth, which required millions of men and women to work in its shipyards, sugar refineries, and garment factories. At the beginning of the 20th Century, few adults attended one of the many colleges or universities in New York City. Higher education was for an elite few, educating a tiny minority of the city's population. College students then were financially well-off white males who would assume top level jobs in the city's small "white collar" economy: the corporate, banking and legal sectors.

One hundred years later, our economy, our higher education system, and the needs of our city's residents for higher education look very different. With the advent of what has been termed the "Knowledge Era" or the "Innovation Economy," a college education is more important than ever. In this economy, people must be highly educated to be both productively employed and to participate meaningfully in their communities. The challenge this presents is profound. In order for people to thrive, and for our city to flourish, higher education has to do a better job in enrolling larger numbers of students, closing achievement gaps between sub-populations and having more students completing a degree or certificate. Disturbing educational disparities still exist: African-American and Latino New Yorkers continue to be underrepresented in the population of high school students attending colleges, and males in general are becoming an endangered species at our colleges. Colleges and universities must learn to not only effectively educate every student who graduates from high school but must succeed with a significantly larger swath of the adult population as well.

Unfortunately, we have been hobbled by an unrealistic, almost romantic, version of what the college experience looks like for Americans. The picture of who goes to college has not caught up with the reality of the college-going student of today. Popular media represents a reality that is most germane to a small group of middle- and upper-class parents and students. Look at, for instance, how the “college theme” develops over the year in any magazine or newspaper. It begins in November with high school students taking the SAT tests, continues in the early spring with the nail-biting anxiety of waiting for acceptance into the best schools, and reaches a conclusion in September with images of parents helping their child move into dorms. It just happens to be only a very, very small part of what is actually occurring to the individuals who will be the majority of students in colleges in this city and across the nation.

The reality: Nearly half of all undergraduates, and more than 50 percent of all black and Latino students, attend community colleges. The average American college student, whether attending a two- or four-year college, is over 24 years of age and commutes to college, rather than residing in a dorm. The average student also works, often full time, but typically more than 20 hours per week.

The average American student no longer corresponds to a traditional stereotype of “college student.” It is important that policymakers not ignore the vast number of Americans, especially new immigrant, minority and urban students, who don’t complete high school in their teens and will return to college later in life. It is essential to appreciate the large number of high school graduates who do graduate, but need intensive remedial help in math, writing, and reading and are not fully ready to take on a full load of college-level courses. We need to recognize that today’s college students are very likely to need classes offered in the evening and on weekends to accommodate work schedules and on-campus child care services to allow them to fully concentrate on their studies.

Our city and the nation’s higher education policy need to be grounded in the reality of today’s college students and today’s changing economy. Yet policy change cannot come soon enough because the

implications of a narrow, ill-organized higher education system are profound for both individuals and the broader society.

For earlier generations, a high school or GED diploma was sufficient to securing a living wage job. No longer. Completion of a two-year degree has a profound impact on an individual's earning ability and their ability to get and hold a job. According to a 2007 College Board study, median lifetime earnings for individuals with associate degrees from a community college are 28 percent higher than lifetime earnings for those with just a high school degree, and that gap is increasing over time. Higher education is correlated with more stable employment, better health, and superior educational outcomes for the children of parents who attend college.

As a nation, the economy demands better educated and trained workers. Yet, if current trends persist, tomorrow's workforce will be less, not more, educated. Because younger age groups in the nation are more racially and ethnically diverse and have historically lower rates of higher education enrollment and completion, the educational preparedness of Americans will be lower at just the time when we need a more highly educated workforce. This is occurring right at the time when the fastest growing jobs, those that pay a living wage, require a postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, America can no longer sit contently thinking we have the best educated workforce in the world. When the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, a group of the 30 wealthiest nations in the world, measures the percentage of adults with at least an associate's degree, we rank 8th. Shockingly, the United States is the only nation within the OECD whose older generation (those between the ages of 45–54) is more educated than those of younger generations (ages 25–34).

The answer to redressing these challenges lies with community colleges. The nation's more than 1,200 community colleges, and the six community colleges of The City University of New York, are a unique system that is best-positioned to meet and fulfill a diverse student body's needs and aspirations. Community colleges have an

open admissions policy and accept all students who have earned a high school degree or GED. Sadly, many students—more than 75 percent—are not prepared for college-level work and need remedial help in mathematics, writing or reading. And, despite these challenges, community colleges succeed at providing a brighter future. The extraordinary thing is that community colleges are successful with the students who by any statistical category, such as race, ethnicity, lack of academic preparedness, poverty, or immigration status are not only the most challenging to serve but the least likely to succeed in college. Community colleges also provide GED preparation and extensive English as a Second Language programs to place students on a track towards climbing a career ladder and, for many, a college education.

Community colleges create these miracles while being the least funded sector of education, with fewer dollars than are spent on elementary school students. Our nation's focus on the traditional college-going population has contributed to a severe disparity in support for community colleges. National expenditures for public two-year colleges in 2004 were \$24.4 billion. This is less than 20 percent of the \$124.8 billion expended by *public* four-year colleges and universities. The gap is shocking. American community colleges, despite enrolling almost half of all undergraduate students, spend 80 percent less than their public four-year sisters. If we looked at it through the lens of per capita spending, we in America spend three times more to educate each four-year college student than we do for a community college student (\$27,973 vs. \$9,183). Those most prepared to attend college are receiving support at rates far above those who need the highest level of support.

There has finally been a long-sought transformation in the recognition of the invaluable role that community colleges can play in changing lives. In his first address to Congress, President Obama underlined the importance of community colleges when he called upon all Americans to get more education or career training beyond high school. And then, in July 2009, the President laid out an ambitious agenda that would provide \$12 billion over five years to the nation's community colleges. The American Graduation Initiative set a national goal of graduating five million more students from community

colleges by 2020 as part of a larger goal to restore the United States as the country with the highest college graduation rate.

The President's initiative provides historic support for community colleges, creating for the first time a dedicated federal funding stream for two-year colleges. The proposal, now under consideration by Congress, establishes separate competitive funding processes for states and community colleges to design and implement programs that help students stay in college and complete their studies. To address the intense demand for new classrooms and laboratories, funding would also be available to build new facilities and renovate and modernize older buildings. In addition, the measure provides funding for the development of free high-quality online courses and supports the development of data collection and research efforts to evaluate community college success.

But the banks are standing in the way of progress. Their lobby is quietly pushing Congress to oppose the legislation that would result in enhanced student financial aid and more funding for community colleges. Though it passed the House, special interests have it bottled up in the Senate. Incredible, isn't it? The very same industry that has gotten billions of dollars in bailout money from the federal government is not ready to loosen its grip on the cash cow that is the private student loan industry.

Here in New York City, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg also stepped up to the plate to underline his support for community colleges. In August 2009, he set a goal of graduating 120,000 New Yorkers from community colleges by 2020 and providing \$50 million over the next four years. The mayor's initiative seeks to expand community college education programs by providing funding to increase education and training in nursing and green jobs, to expand the successful Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP), which helps students complete their studies within three years, and to open a new community college in Manhattan. It seeks to build on the strength of community colleges in providing technical support to local businesses by allocating funds to allow the six City University of New York community colleges to provide small business development courses to new entrepreneurs. It helps students stay in school by investing in student

advisement services, expanding child care offerings, and reducing the cost of textbooks.

In the philanthropic community there has been a burst of interest and investment by some of the nation's leading foundations. The Gates Foundation, already well-known for its innovative efforts to reshape K-12 education, is investing millions to improve community college completion rates. The Lumina Foundation, a foundation with a deep commitment to community college success, has spearheaded the development of the Achieving the Dream Initiative, a nationwide effort to employ data to better understand why students fail to complete college and to spur the creation of innovative programs.

These efforts are an important step forward. After years of neglect, community colleges are getting the recognition they deserve and the promise of additional funding. But more is still needed.

To reach the President's goal of having America lead the world in the number of college graduates, we will need to recruit a larger group of adults who should be in college, while investing in the faculty and student supports that will reduce the number of students who fail to graduate. This will require a lessening of funding disparities and an even greater investment of both public and private dollars.

Re-envisioning the American higher education system will not be cheap. At a time of declining revenues and growing deficits, it is a supreme challenge. But, the alternative is far worse. We can ill afford to have adult students hungry and ready for more education and training, wanting to earn a degree or certificate that will allow them to earn more, to be turned away because admissions have been closed. We can not have employers unable to expand, or moving their operations, because they are unable to hire employees who have the analytical and technical skills that today's jobs demand. Educating more students to higher standards than before will require a substantive rethinking of the funding mechanisms and the distribution of dollars in higher education.

Community colleges have been essentially given straw and expected to spin gold. Community colleges are the cornerstone of higher

education and provide a gateway for students to well-paying jobs and a bachelor's degree. We have allowed the four-year and community college systems to develop separately and unequally, with tenuous points of integration and inadequate financial support. Higher education funding, and too often the tools for how we measure community college success, are premised on what are now nostalgic memories of traditional-aged, upper-middle class college students. Unless we let go of this myth and realistically face the modern demographics of the American college population—who goes and who should go to college—the relevance and status of the American economy in a competitive, global economy will erode.

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