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Actually Getting There Is Only Half the Battle

Melanie Breault | July 14, 2010

The next time you go to the University of Southern California campus at five in the morning, check some of the cars in the parking lot. Chances are that one of them, maybe more, will have a struggling student sleeping inside.

This is the story for a few students who have transferred from community colleges to four-year schools. It's an extreme version of the story but not an unrepresentative one. They sometimes sleep in their cars, not because they can't afford to stay on campus—even though some of them can't—but because they did not have a mentor or a network to guide them through on-campus housing selections once they successfully transferred.

Moreover, since they were once a community college student, there's a 20 percent chance that they spend anywhere from six to twenty hours per week commuting to and from classes. What's the point in driving an hour, two hours or three hours home when you have class at 8 AM?

As higher education costs grow, students are adopting new strategies to afford education. One strategy is to go to a community college for one to two years and then transfer to a four-year institution for the last two to three years. Seems simple enough: you still get the credits, you save money and you get a degree from that four-year school, which looks great on a résumé. But what actually happens after these students transfer? They are now in a system with no network of friends, no acquaintances or any professional training on how to get a job after graduation.

There are more than 1,100 community colleges in the United States. As of the fall of 2007, community college students accounted for 46 percent of all US undergraduates, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Yet, as Laura Fitzpatrick noted in an article for *Time* magazine last year, "federal funding has held virtually steady over the past 20 years for community colleges, while four-year schools' funding has increased." But with almost half of all undergraduates in the community college system, wouldn't it be best to invest more in these students?

One student who has had to sleep in his car is Scott Stimpfel, the co-founder of Resources for Educational and Employment Opportunities (REEO), a nonprofit organization that works with community college students to help them transfer to a four-year university, earn a bachelor's degree or obtain a professional position upon graduation by providing financial, educational, career and leadership development resources. As a transfer student himself from Pasadena City College to the University of Southern California, Stimpfel knows exactly what kind of systemic and personal challenges transfer community college students have to face.

"Community college students do not receive the same level of professional development resources as their peers who attend a four-year university. Therefore, when you transfer you are at a significant disadvantage," Stimpfel says. "When I transferred to USC, I didn't know how to put together a professional résumé or what professional dress was." Stimpfel says that Pasadena City College did have a career development center, but its resources were limited and there was only one counselor for more than 20,000 students.

"I wanted to apply to a four-year school, but there was a lack of mentors and guidance in the system to help me navigate the transfer process," he says. "This is not necessarily the community colleges' fault either. Because of their restricted budgets, they usually only have one counselor to help thousands of students."

The lack of mentors is not the only hurdle these students have to overcome. What many students don't realize is that not all of their credits taken at a community college can actually transfer to a four-year institution. Because of a lack of articulation agreements between schools, community college students don't know what classes to take and if those classes will be accredited once they transfer. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education recommends that states forge articulation and credit-transfer agreements as the record shows that these comprehensive, integrated approaches "demonstrate a higher success rate in getting transfer students to the four-year degree."

States such as Florida and New York have such agreements, and, "on average, transfer students at CUNY have slightly higher graduation rates and slightly higher GPAs than students who have been there through the four years," says Associate University Provost at CUNY, Julia Wrigley. "We need to understand and appreciate the work these students went through just to get to the senior schools. They are very determined people."

Wrigley is also a professor of sociology at CUNY. She says every transfer system is built on course equivalencies, and professors from senior colleges and community colleges have to sit down together and work them out. "This happens regularly at CUNY," Wrigley says. "It is hard to keep articulation agreements up to date, however, and when it comes to majors, it can also be hard for some senior college professors to accept that community college courses can be as challenging as their own. We need to figure out how we can create a more effective system to make the experience better for all students and to make sure that our higher education system is as open and democratic as possible."

Transferring to a four-year university is only half the battle. Because transfer students lack the professional skills of their peers, they become even less attractive candidates for jobs and internships. "The majority of job offers come from internships that students receive the summer before their senior year," Stimpfel says. "I applied to many internships and full-time jobs even though I didn't know what I was doing. As a result, I didn't get a job offer after my graduation, despite graduating summa cum laude."

These students, who were already in economically disadvantaged situations, end up graduating with a mountain of debt and no job, worsening their economic conditions. "If I asked a room of 100 students from the REEO program to raise their hands if they were going to college so they could get a degree, get a job and improve their socioeconomic status, all 100 hands would be raised," Stimpfel says. "Community college students are coming from very difficult economic situations. They're not just going to college to go to college. They want to help their families' financial position by obtaining a decent paying job after graduation."

When President Obama talked about his "American Graduation Initiative" at Macomb Community College in July 2009, he said he would produce 5 million more community college graduates

within the next decade. He said his plan includes funding for not only enrollment in community college programs but also for completion of those programs. "More than half of all students who enter community college to earn an associate degree, or transfer to a four-year school to earn a bachelor's degree, unfortunately fail to reach their goal," he says.

As great as an additional 5 million graduates sounds, it doesn't change the employment landscape for all college graduates. A college degree today may be critical, but it doesn't have the same economic guarantee it did for previous generations. But this doesn't mean the government shouldn't still be funding community college students at higher levels. Although the unemployment rate for people with a bachelor's degree or higher is 4.4 percent as of last month, it is still significantly less than a person with some college or an associate degree at 8.2 percent.

Obama says he wants to figure out what is keeping students from "crossing that finish line." What the president doesn't see is that the struggle is not just about "crossing the finish line." The struggle is about access to information and options. We're not really helping students like Stimpfel if we fail to connect him with a network of mentors and other transfer community college students. "It's not just about access to higher education," Stimpfel asserts. "It's about breaking the socioeconomic cycle of poverty that these students have to face every day. What have we accomplished if a student graduates with a bachelors degree, but has enormous debt and no job?"

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