

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

**The American Community College in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **Democracy's College: The American Community College in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Framing the Issue**

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**Abstract:** In this manuscript, the guest editors of the EPAA Special Issue on "Democracy's College: The American Community College in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century": a) introduce the background, history, and context of community colleges in the larger higher education landscape; b) summarize the three research papers and two video commentaries that were peer-reviewed and selected for inclusion in this special issue; and, c) discuss the individual contributions and major themes across the selected papers. Their importance is discussed in terms of each paper's insights for the general research on this topic and each paper's potential to inform community college research, practice, and policy.

**Keywords:** community college; higher education; student access; persistence; nontraditional students

**Universidad de la Democracia: La universidad comunitaria en el siglo XXI: Delimitando la discusión.**

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**Resumen:** En este trabajo, las editoras de este número especial de EPAA en la "Universidad de la Democracia: La universidad comunitaria en el siglo XXI: a) presenta los antecedentes, la historia, el contexto de la universidad comunitaria (en inglés *Community Colleges*) en el escenario más amplio de la educación superior b) presenta un resumen de los tres artículos de investigación y de los dos videos con comentarios que han sido evaluados por pares y seleccionados para formar parte de este número especial, y c) analiza las contribuciones individuales y los principales temas transversales a los trabajos seleccionados. Se discute la relevancia de cada trabajo en términos de las ideas que cada uno aporta a la labor de investigación general sobre este tema y el potencial de cada trabajo para informar a la investigación, la práctica y la política en las universidades comunitarias.

**Palabras clave:** universidad comunitaria; educación superior; acceso; persistencia estudiantil; estudiantes no tradicionales

**“Universidade da Democracia: A universidade comunitária americana no Século XXI”:  
Delimitação da discussão.**

**Resumo:** Neste texto, os editores convidados do Número Especial da AAPE sobre “Universidade da Democracia: A universidade comunitária americana no Século XXI”: a) introduz o plano de fundo, história, e contexto das universidades comunitárias (em inglês *Community Colleges*) no cenário mais amplo da educação superior; b) resume os três trabalhos de investigação e os dois comentários a vídeos que foram revistos por pares e selecionados para integrar este número especial; e, c) discute as contribuições individuais e os principais temas transversais aos trabalhos selecionados. A sua importância é discutida em termos das ideias que cada um dos trabalhos traz para a pesquisa geral sobre este tema e o potencial de cada trabalho para informar a investigação, as práticas e as políticas sobre faculdades comunitárias.

**Palavras-chave:** universidades comunitárias; educação superior; acesso dos estudantes; persistência; estudantes não-tradicionais

## Introduction

Over the past 300 years, American higher education has been transformed from an exclusive system comprised of elite colleges that enrolled the sons of wealthy families to a more porous system with multiple points of access that serves racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse students (Beach, 2011). In the early twentieth century, university leaders created the community college as an institutional effort to expand access to higher education. The first community colleges were junior colleges housed in high schools. As the structure of public schooling was elaborated and increasing numbers of students began attending high schools, community colleges developed as stand-alone institutions that provided a local, low-cost avenue to higher education that was largely but not exclusively oriented toward vocational training (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; The President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947). Championed as “dream makers” and criticized as “dream diverters,” community colleges have served a unique role in the American higher education system (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community colleges support local, regional, national, and global communities by providing academic coursework for transfer, vocational training, and continuing education courses. Because of their open access policies and ties to the labor market, community colleges are crucial agents of democracy – they promise and provide access to higher education for traditionally underserved populations (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Today, community colleges must balance their multiple institutional missions in the face of changing demographics, an increasing emphasis on institutional accountability, and struggling national and state economies. Despite enrolling close to 11 million students annually – more than

one-third (38 percent) of all postsecondary students and half (53 percent) of all public postsecondary students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012) – transfer and award completion rates at community colleges continue to lag behind other sectors. Among beginning postsecondary students enrolled at a community college, 14 percent earned an award within 3 years and 21 percent within 6 years (Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey [BPS], 2009).<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade community colleges have experienced an influx of federal and non-governmental financial support aimed at helping them increase student persistence and graduation rates (e.g. *Achieving the Dream*, n.d.; Brandon, 2009; *Completion By Design*, n.d.; *Complete College America*, n.d.; Duncan, 2010; Lewin, 2012; U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). One major goal of these efforts has been “developing a flexible, highly-skilled 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce to meet emerging regional business needs” (Solis, 2012, para. 1). Furthermore, the national dialogue around the purpose and place of the community college within the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education landscape has shifted from emphasizing access – an area in which the community college has tended to excel at – to improving equitable outcomes.

While all postsecondary institutions have experienced an increase in student enrollment over the past decade, the majority of non-traditional students enroll in America’s community colleges (Complete College America, 2012; NCES, 2002; National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey [NPSAS], 2008). The NCES (2002) defines a non-traditional student as one that has one or more of the following characteristics: a) delayed enrollment into college; b) attends part-time; c) works full-time (at least 35 hours per week); d) is financially independent; e) has dependents; f) is a single parent; and/or, g) does not have a high school diploma. The number of non-traditional college students has been increasing across all types of postsecondary institutions over the past two decades. In 1986, 65 percent of all undergraduates were non-traditional (i.e. they had one or more of these characteristics<sup>2</sup>) compared with 70 percent of undergraduates in 2007 (NCES, 2002; NPSAS, 2008). Likewise, the percentage of non-traditional students enrolled at community colleges continues to increase; in 2007-08, approximately 88 percent of all community college students were non-traditional, with 69 percent having two or more non-traditional student characteristics (NPSAS, 2008). These figures suggest that non-traditional students continue to be the rule rather than the exception at community colleges.

Research on community colleges has increasing national relevance as federal and state policymakers grapple with questions related to how higher education should be funded and reformed. To this end, three manuscripts and two video commentaries are featured in this special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (EPAA). Given the growth in non-traditional student enrollment, it is not surprising that two of the articles in this special call for papers address the lives and experiences of non-traditional community college students. While non-traditional students are sometimes referred to in the literature as an “at-risk” student population – more at-risk of stopping or dropping out and failing to complete a degree – this special call for papers finds that these risks do not necessarily derail students: the support of family, friends, co-workers, faculty, and administrative staff can contribute to enrollment and completion. The articles featured here also address crucial points in the postsecondary pipeline – high school to college transition and developmental education placement, low-income and first generation student persistence, and successful transfer to four-year institutions. Taken together, the articles and commentaries featured

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<sup>1</sup> How best to measure community college success is under debate, as the standard four-year graduation rate is based on traditional students enrolled at four-year institutions. It may not be appropriate to use graduation rates to capture the success of the community college population given that community college students enroll for a range of reasons (e.g. personal enrichment, vocational training) aside from seeking a degree, are more likely to have unconventional enrollment patterns, and – as illustrated here – are largely non-traditional.

<sup>2</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578f.asp>

in this special call for papers provide a complex portrait of the community college and its students, and advance our thinking about the role of community colleges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Special Issue Summaries

Today, EPAA features Alicia C. Dowd (University of Southern California), Jenny Pak (Biola University), and Estela Mara Bensimon (University of Southern California) on *The Role of Institutional Agents in Promoting Transfer Access*. These authors follow the transfer experience of 10 low-status community college students who successfully transferred to selective four-year institutions. Approached through the lens of attachment theory, the authors highlight the important democratizing role institutional agents (e.g. community college faculty and staff) play as transitional figures in facilitating student transfer. The authors argue that institutional authority figures in community colleges are instrumental in nurturing collegiate identities and aspirations for low-status students. In addition, the authors provide an overview of, and hyperlinks to, additional resources that academics and practitioners can use to build capacity in their own school settings to act as institutional agents that facilitate the matriculation of community college students to four-year schools, and in particular low-status and marginalized students.

With the release of this article, EPAA will also feature today a video commentary on the special call for papers by Dr. William Tierney, University Professor at University of Southern California, Co-Director of the [Pullias Center for Higher Education](#), and current President of the American Educational Research Association. Dr. Tierney shares his thoughts on the role and future of community colleges in the higher education landscape as they confront issues of equity and access, and comments on the articles in this special issue.

On Wednesday, EPAA will feature two articles and a second video commentary. The first article is a statewide analysis of the relationship between high school achievement and two measures of college outcomes, first-year course-taking and academic performance, at California's community colleges by Michal Kurlaender and Matthew Larsen (University of California, Davis) *K-12 and Postsecondary Alignment: Racial/Ethnic Differences in Freshmen Course-taking and Performance at California's Community Colleges*. Using a unique dataset, the authors focus on the high school to college transition experience and academic success of five cohorts of entering first-year students. The study also evaluates the extent to which high school achievement tests – which are currently not used for student placement at California's community colleges – predict students' future academic success. In addition, the authors explore how course-taking patterns and students' college GPAs vary by race/ethnicity and high school achievement.

EPAA will also feature on Wednesday *Public and Private Lives: Institutional Structures and Personal Supports in Low-income Single Mothers' Educational Pursuits* by Christine Cerven (University of California, San Diego). This case study provides a grounded account of the supports and barriers that influenced the postsecondary educational experiences of 60 low-income single mothers who participated in welfare-related programs. Part of a larger five-year study ([Pathways to Postsecondary Success Project](#)), the author explores how these women's access to and participation in community college was influenced by both traditional gender roles and the constraints of welfare program policy. A variety of institutional structures ("public" lives) and personal relationships ("private" lives) have shaped their persistence: welfare department staff; institutional agents; and family, peers, and friends. This study adds to the existing literature by highlighting the important role these networks play in how low-income single mothers access and navigate the intersections between public social programs and higher education.

Complementing the release of these two articles on Wednesday, EPAA will also post a video

commentary by Dr. Alfredo de los Santos, Jr., Research Professor at Arizona State University's [Hispanic Research Center](#), founding president of El Paso Community College, and former Vice Chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College System. Dr. de los Santos discusses how the community college landscape has changed for practitioners, how issues of equity and access have informed the work of community college faculty, and the challenges and opportunities community college leaders face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Framing the Issue**

Next we turn to the dominant themes common across these papers. Collectively these papers provide a multi-faceted view of the American community college system through the experiences of the students who attend them. Their findings are applicable to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Given the large number of students served by California's community colleges, it is not entirely surprising that two of the three articles featured in this call for papers are connected to the Golden State. California is home to 115 of the nation's 985 community colleges (12 percent). The California Community College System is the largest higher education system in America, and enrolls one out of every four community college students – over 2.5 million students annually (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2011; NCES, 2011). California has supported the expansion of its community college system for over a century, most notably through the Master Plan for Higher Education (1960) and the resulting Donahoe Higher Education Act. Like the state itself, California's community college students are the most racially diverse in the nation; among students enrolled in 2011-2012, 36 percent were Hispanic, 31 percent White, non-Hispanic, 13 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 8 percent African American, and 3 percent Filipino (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2011). Kurlaender and Larsen's quantitative analysis highlights this diversity, as do the qualitative case studies by Cerven and Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon.

Second, these analyses each address a different part of the community college pipeline: access, persistence, and transfer. Kurlaender and Larsen explore the high school to college transition experience of "traditional" community college students and speak to issues of developmental education placement and course enrollment, while Cerven addresses the lived experiences of highly non-traditional students as they navigate community college enrollment and coursework. Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon's life story case study analysis focuses on non-traditional students who were able to successfully transition from a community college to highly selective four-year institutions.

Third, these articles each bring something new to the community college literature. Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon focus on the experiences of successful community college transfer students and the key role institutional agents play in their success. Kurlaender and Larsen draw on a unique administrative dataset capturing all California high school students who went on to enroll in a California community college directly after high school graduation. This study addresses the effectiveness of high school achievement tests at forecasting course performance in the first year of college. High achieving students are more likely to take the equivalent of one additional CSU transferable course compared to their low achieving peers, although the racial/ethnic gap in course taking patterns is still considerable. Using a grounded theory approach, Cerven sheds light on an often overlooked population – low-income single mothers – as well as the intersection and interaction between outside agents (welfare programs) and community college enrollment on a subsample of highly non-traditional students (low-income single mothers).

Lastly, the articles featured here are applicable to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon draw attention to the important role institutional agents

play in facilitating student transfer and provide resources for researchers and practitioners. These resources are drawn from case studies of students and institutions, and include narrative profiles of institutional agents, self-assessments, and a toolkit for increasing Latino/a STEM baccalaureates. As action research tools, they are designed to encourage and complement efforts to build the capacity of community college faculty and administrators to act as institutional agents by promoting inquiry and reflection. Likewise, the other two articles include concrete recommendations for improving community college practice. Cerven provides practical suggestions for improving the experiences and subsequent outcomes of low-income single mothers, such as practices that would build stronger relationships between students and college counselors, professional development for college counselors related to working with non-traditional students, and collaboration between colleges and local welfare agencies. Kurlaender and Larsen's analysis indicates that students' course-taking patterns vary by community college campus, which has direct policy implications for proponents and reformers of California's Master Plan.

Overall, these studies point to the continuing need for qualitative studies to help us better understand the different pathways that students encounter within and across different community college settings. Together, they raise important questions about how marginalized, low-status, and non-traditional students experience community college, how can colleges more effectively assess and place students in appropriate courses, and the practices that effectively support the community college's transfer function.

## Conclusion

As Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon illustrate, social and economic mobility is aided when community college agents fully support the transfer function – particularly when they work with low-status students. Together with Cerven's study of low-income single mothers, we see how community colleges can offer non-traditional and low-status students a "second chance" at furthering their education. However, as Dr. Tierney points out, it may be that the national focus on increasing completion and transfer rates induces community colleges to focus their efforts on more traditional students who are the most likely to finish their programs quickly and with less need for institutional, state, and federal support (i.e. developmental education coursework, student financial assistance, other student support groups or mechanisms). These articles underscore that the least able students – marginalized, low-status, and non-traditional – are the ones who struggle the most at accessing and navigating higher education. Once again we are reminded of the inherent tension community colleges must balance as gateways to opportunity and gatekeepers from mobility.

Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon's recommendation and resources for a sustained internal process of inquiry and reflection are particularly relevant in light of Kurlaender and Larsen's finding that there is substantial variation in student course-taking across institutional contexts. The Center for Urban Education, the research center Dowd et al. are affiliated with, and national initiatives, such as *Achieving the Dream* and *Completion by Design*, ask colleges to tackle these difficult questions and engage in self-reflective praxis. In addition to understanding local institutional contexts, it is also necessary to better understand and improve students' high school experiences. While community colleges have been highly successful at offering students access to higher education, improving college outcomes may have to begin long before these students reach the community college door. Yet as Dr. Tierney also points out, not all community college students seek degrees or the opportunity to transfer to a four-year institution, which begs the question: how do we improve outcomes without compromising the ability of community colleges to serve as an entrée to higher education for non-degree seeking students?

Each of the articles featured in this special issue speak to the democratizing function and potential of community colleges within the broader context of higher education. As community colleges celebrate more than 100 years of service, they continue to face the challenge of preserving access for all students who enter their classrooms. As Dr. Tierney and Dr. de los Santos highlight in their video commentaries, these “Ellis Islands” of higher education balance external pressures to increase completion rates, declining public investment in education, and calls for more streamlined curricula to aid transfer and prepare students for the workforce. These pressures constrain the community college’s democratizing function by directly or indirectly limiting which students have access, what courses they can take and when they can take them, and – as both Dr. Tierney and Dr. de los Santos point out – the level of debt students must assume to further their learning. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need to continue to work together to ensure that community colleges more fully manifest their democratizing role in American society.

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Dr. Powers received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on school choice, accountability policies, school finance litigation, and school segregation. Her book, *Charter Schools: Reform Imagery, Reform Reality*, was published in 2009 by Palgrave Macmillan. One of Dr. Powers' ongoing projects is a historical analysis of Mexican American school segregation cases in the Southwest. For an example of this line of research, see, "Between Mendez and Brown: Gonzales v. Sheely (1951) and the Legal Campaign Against Segregation" (with Lirio Patton), an analysis of the legal arguments in Mexican American school segregation cases, which was published in March 2008 in *Law and Social Inquiry*. In another line of research she is examining how social science research shapes judicial decision-making in school finance cases. Dr. Powers' research has also been published in *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Policy*, and *Equity and Excellence in Education*. Dr. Powers is currently an Editor of *Education Policy Analysis Archives*.

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Ms. Topper has worked in the education sector for over 15 years as both an educator and researcher, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education Policy and Evaluation at Arizona State University. Ms. Topper has experience working on studies for the U.S. Department of Education, the Lumina Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Pell Institute, state agencies, and local school districts. She works with *Achieving the Dream*, a national community college reform movement, and has authored and co-authored numerous policy briefs on the initiative-wide database. Topics of research include postsecondary student access, persistence and retention; financial aid policies; community colleges; and, K-12 student migration and charter school enrollment. Ms. Topper's research has been published in *Review of Education Research*, *Journal of School Choice*, and *On the Horizon*, and she is currently a Managing Editor of *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. She holds a Master's in Leadership in Teaching from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, and a Bachelor's in the Philosophy and Classical Languages from St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland.

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