

## Opinion

**The Real College Scandal:** We skimp on the students who need the most help.

By **Richard D. Kahlenberg** (a senior fellow at the Century Foundation) - April 25, 2019.



Don Emmert/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The sexy elite college admissions scandal involving the offspring of Hollywood celebrities and business executives sits atop a less noticed — but far more consequential — higher-education disgrace. Year after year, policymakers have chosen to severely underfund America’s two-year community colleges with the full knowledge that doing so means a majority of their students will fail to earn a certificate or degree.

The community college scandal has received comparatively less attention among elites because their own children are rarely found on community college campuses. But it is wrong to ignore what goes on there.

Since President Harry Truman jump-started the community-college movement in the 1940s, two-year colleges have been regarded as quintessential institutions for striving low-income, working-class and minority students. While elite four-year colleges boast of the proportion of students they reject, community colleges take pride in educating the “top 100 percent of students,” as Eloy Ortiz Oakley, the chancellor of the California community college system, put it.

The success or failure of the nine million students who attend America’s community colleges has a lot of influence on whether America’s promise of social mobility will be kept.

Routinely given too few resources, community colleges often fall short of their promise. Sixty-two percent of students entering community college fail to complete a degree or certificate within six years. While 81 percent of students entering community college say they aspire to eventually transfer and receive a four-year degree, only 15 percent do so after six years.

Part of the responsibility lies with K-12 institutions, which do not adequately prepare students for community college, and part of the fault lies with the two-year colleges themselves, for failing to provide enough structure and guidance to undergraduates. But the bulk of the blame lies with policymakers who systematically shortchange community colleges financially, even though they are aware that community college students often need extra support to help them surmount the many obstacles to academic success that they face — working two jobs to make ends meet, for example, or missing class to take care of a sick child.

A majority of community college students come from the bottom half of the socioeconomic distribution, compared with one in five students at selective four-year colleges. Researchers have long recognized that disadvantaged students need more resources to succeed than those who have enjoyed many advantages, and yet policymakers have starved community colleges of the funds they need to succeed.

On average, private four-year research institutions, which receive enormous federal tax and tuition subsidies, spend \$72,000 per full-time student annually. Public research universities spend \$40,000. Compare both those numbers with the \$14,000 spent by community colleges.

The differing research functions of these schools explains some of the discrepancy, but when you exclude research and focus on education and related expenses, private research universities still spend triple what community colleges do. Public research universities spend 60 percent more.

All of this matters because careful research has found “significant causal impacts” of spending on degree completion. Scholars looking at community colleges between 1990 and 2013 found that a 10 percent spending increase raised the number of awards of certificates and degrees bestowed by 15 percent. When students complete an associate degree, they see their lifetime earnings increase on average by more than \$300,000.

What can be done? This is a case where money really is at the heart of the matter. States and municipalities should immediately begin to increase community college funding to expand opportunities for students. Federal and state governments should band together to create federal-state partnerships for community colleges in which states would receive federal matching funds if they agreed to increase investments in two-year institutions.

In the longer run, federal and state policymakers — and foundation officials — should support a new body of research that will establish, for the first time, what it costs to give community college students a reasonable chance of succeeding and entering the middle class. Similar studies are commonplace in public K-12 education, where for 40 years researchers have sought to establish what level of funding is required to achieve adequate outcomes. Such studies, for example, were pivotal to determining the amount of funding required for a “sound basic education” as part of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity’s case against New York State. These studies can also provide guidance on where money should be invested to achieve the best results.

The first step in estimating costs is to identify with some precision the desired outcomes, which raises some interesting philosophical questions about the purpose of community colleges. For K-12 schooling, researchers often calculate the cost of achieving a certain level of proficiency on standardized tests or high school completion. But in higher education, such tests of learning outcomes are not widely available. For community college students, calculating the costs of raising the number of students who complete a degree or certificate to a satisfactory level is a good starting point. Completion will normally be a reasonable proxy for increasing the likelihood that students will achieve their own goals — whether that is to gain the skills that will allow them to earn a decent living, to become a better parent or simply to grow in knowledge and wisdom.

In some cases, though, if a degree or certificate has little value in the labor market, completion may not be a sufficient way of measuring progress. Anthony Carnevale, the director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, suggests an additional measurement: Community colleges should be funded at a level that will allow graduates a reasonable chance of entering the middle class within 10 years of graduating.

Professor Carnevale and his Georgetown colleagues, Jeff Strohl and Artem Gulish, peg that minimum threshold for middle-class life nationally at \$35,000 (which translates into \$50,000 for a typical household). This income level, they say, allows individuals to meet basic material needs, which is an important objective for many students. But it also helps them to form families more easily, to engage more fully in their communities and to participate in other activities that can enrich life. This \$35,000 rule of thumb, they suggest, should be adjusted for regional cost-of-living variations and to account for racial and gender discrimination in the labor market, among other things.

It is astonishing that no rigorous research has established the minimum amount of money required to make community colleges successful, given their critical potential to increase social mobility for millions of students. Higher education, which is, after all, in the business of research, needs to figure out what it will take to support community college students, who have so much to contribute to our society, if only we would let them.

**Source:** <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/opinion/college-scandal.html?fbclid=IwAR3P5JdiVZiDoxINfdodQ09Mp6BXeZdHRGMnB7bBkjswyrnNJiHPCiCzrnY>