Community College For All: How Two-Year Criminal Justice Transfer Students Perceive Their Educational Experience

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PRESIDENT OBAMA

AND OTHERS HAVE CALLED FOR FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE—"AMERICA'S COLLEGE PROMISE." YET CONTROVERSY SURROUNDS THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM, WITH PROONENTS EMPHASIZING THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED WHILE CRITICS BEMOAN THE HIGH DROPOUT RATE AND LACK OF EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES. LITTLE RESEARCH EXPLORES HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AT TWO-YEAR COLLEGES. THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES COMMUNITY COLLEGE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES AS PERCEIVED BY A SAMPLE OF SUCCESSFUL CRIMINAL JUSTICE TRANSFER STUDENTS. DURING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING, STUDENTS REPORTED THAT THEY HAD A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THAT IT ALLOWED THEM TO PREPARE TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT UNIVERSITY. EXPENSE, TEACHER AVAILABILITY, AND SMALLER CLASS SIZE WERE PERCEIVED AS REASONS THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE WAS ADVANTAGEOUS. NOTABLY, MANY STUDENTS SENSED THAT THEY MISSED OUT ON A STEREOTYPICAL COLLEGE EXPERIENCE BY FIRST ENTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE. SOME REFERRED TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE AS THE "13TH YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL," "FAKE COLLEGE," OR NOT A "REGULAR" INSTITUTION.
How Two-Year Criminal Justice Transfer Students Perceive Their Educational Experience

Brint and Karabel's (1989) early work reported that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely than others to attend community college. Since the early 1990s, community colleges have enrolled a majority of first-time freshmen. Since the late 1970s, women have outnumbered men in this population (Gonzalez 2013; U.S. Department of Education 2012). A major function of community colleges is to prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions (Beach 2011; Brint and Karabel 1989; Cohen 2012; Dougherty 1987; Grubb 1989; Zwerling 1976). Provasnik and Planty (2008) reported that the majority (approximately two-thirds) of seniors who entered a community college immediately after high school intended to pursue a bachelor's degree. Much work has addressed how well community colleges prepare students for transfer; however, few researchers have asked successful transfer students about their community college experience. The purpose of the present work is to explore how successful community college transfer students (those who soon will complete their bachelor's degrees) reflect on their community college experience. This work offers valuable insights into challenges that policy makers may want to raise should “America's College Promise” become reality.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE CRITICS

Community college critics have long argued that relative to four-year college entrance, community college entrance has a negative impact on adult socioeconomic attainment (Bailey 2012; Dougherty 1992; Pincus 1980; Velez 1985). Like four-year college entrants, the majority of community college entrants hope to earn a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education 2012); however, fewer community college entrants do so. Further, it is estimated that up to 80 percent of community college entrants drop out (Admon 2007; Grubb 1989; Velez 1985; Zwerling 1976). Among community college entrants, college retention is complicated by having to gain entrance to a four-year institution as well as by what coursework will transfer for credit.
Critics have long argued that community colleges depress educational attainment in part because their entrants take classes that do not transfer to four-year institutions (Alexander, Holupka and Passas 1987; Dougherty 1994; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Tinto 2006–7). Others have emphasized problems related to counseling and the extent to which counselors encourage community college students to continue their education (Brint and Karabel 1989; Myran and Parson 2013; Reininger 2007; Valez 1985). How well community college students are advised about the best classes and tracks in which to enroll (in terms of not losing credits in the transfer process) continues to be debated (Admon 2007; Clark 1960; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Gonzales 2013; Levey 2006).

In addition, there are concerns regarding the quality of community college education (Green 2007). Dougherty (1992) questions students’ preparation in basic courses (Bailey 2012; Rosenbaum, Redline and Stephan 2007). Notably, the vast majority of four-year college faculty were awarded the terminal degree in their field of study; by contrast, only 20 percent of full-time community college faculty (and only 10 percent of part-time faculty) have this degree (Braxton and Hirschy 2005; Link and Ratledge 1975; Spence 1976; U.S. Department of Education 2008). Community colleges rely heavily on part-time/adjunct faculty, who typically have a master’s degree or have earned eighteen credit hours in the discipline they are teaching (U.S. Department of Education 2008). McDonough and Calderone (2006) argue that the community college environment is more similar to that of a high school than a four-year college in terms of expectations for success, involvement in campus events and organizations, and opportunities to learn outside the classroom (Levey 2006).

**COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROONENTS**

Advocates of community colleges have emphasized the democratic function they play by offering an inexpensive and convenient higher education to all (Follins 2003; Raby and Thomas 2006; Reynolds et al. 2006; Roksa 2008; Rosenbaum 1998; Rouse 1998). They also argue that the transfer function works effectively (Cohen 2012; Holahan et al. 1983; Nickens 1972). Nolan and Hall (1978), for example, found that compared to their counterparts who attended an institution continuously, transfer students received comparable grades. Hilmer (1997) considered whether community college entrance harmed students’ chances of transferring to a higher-quality university and reported that community college students actually choose higher-quality universities than do students who enter university immediately after high school. Others have argued that a credit is a credit and that where one attends college does not affect his earning ability (Ehrenberg 2004; Kane and Rouse 1999; Pascarella et al. 2004).

**COLLEGE ENTRANCE AND COMPLETION OF THE B.A. DEGREE**

Levey (2006) argued that community college effects are complex. Specifically, he suggested that community colleges may be an inexpensive route toward upward mobility if one looks at mobility across generations. On the other hand, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), “The percentage of students who had left school by 2006 without completing a degree or certificate program was higher among 2003–4 community college freshmen who intended to transfer to a four-year college than among all 2003–4 freshmen at public four-year institutions. What role community colleges play in enhancing educational opportunities will be the focus of much future work as sociologists and economists concede that educational attainment is a critical variable in shaping adult socioeconomic opportunities.

**METHODS**

The sample for this study was drawn from criminal justice majors at a large urban university. Criminal justice was selected because it is one of the most popular social science majors at the university. All majors must complete theory. Typically, students enroll in this upper-division class when they are juniors and seniors. In this particular semester, two theory classes were offered. Initially, students in both classes were asked two questions: (1) Did they begin their college career at a two-year college? and (2.) Would they be willing to be interviewed regarding their experience? Interviews were scheduled with those students who answered yes to both questions. Interviews were conducted in the researchers’ office at a time convenient for each party. Students who participated in the research were awarded extra credit points. To ensure fairness, students who did not meet the criteria and who did not want to participate in the research were also offered an opportunity to earn extra credit.
In all, approximately 28 percent of students in selected classes (n=30) began their higher education at a community college and were eligible to participate in this research. Of these, 23 agreed to be interviewed. The project received human subject approval from the college before interviewing began.

THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

This work rests on a qualitative interview methodology. The interview was estimated to take less than an hour. Students were asked a variety of questions ranging from where they started their community college education to how many semester hours they completed there and whether they earned a degree (and if so, what degree). Next, students were asked, "For you, was going to a community college a good experience?" This question was followed by "What were the advantages of starting your higher education at a community college? What were the disadvantages?" Students were encouraged to share their perceptions of their educational experience honestly.

Responses were analyzed, and emergent themes were identified in an effort to better understand how students perceived the experience of starting their higher education at a community college. A related effort was to identify institutional practices that supported student transfer to a four-year college—a retention issue Tinto (2006–7) believes to be critical to the success of community college students—especially economically disadvantaged ones.

RESULTS

Most (48 percent) of the students in the sample began their higher education at a community college in the local area. Another seven attended community colleges outside the state (e.g., California, West Virginia, New York, Florida). Others began at a community college in the state but beyond the area where they were currently enrolled. Almost half of the students completed the credits for an associate's degree. The number of credit hours completed ranged from six to more than 100.

EMERGENT THEMES

Students were asked if they believed that attending community college was a good experience and then were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of starting their higher education at a community college. Three main themes emerged from students' responses to the first question (was community college a good experience?): preparing students for further study, building confidence, and flexible scheduling. Three themes—cost, teacher accessibility, and class size—were identified as advantages of community college.

Was Going to Community College a Good Experience?

The first theme, preparing students for further study, was the perception that attending community college would help one succeed later in college. For example, two respondents thought that "some professors were very tough in grading in order for students to rise to a four-year level" and "two of my teachers said they intentionally were tough in order to prepare us for a four-year college." Tied to the idea of preparation was building a better academic record. One respondent said he did not perform well in high school, and community college "gave me time to raise my GPA. [I] learned study habits for college." Another respondent said that community college helped her "prepare." She believed that if she had started at the university, it would have been a waste of money. Another respondent said he would recommend community college "for anyone who is unsure about what they [sic] want to do." In other words, community college might prepare one for a better college experience. It was, as another student noted, "a place to start."

The second theme, building confidence, was defined as gaining the recognition that one could succeed academically in college. One student said that going to community college was a deliberate decision "to prove to myself that I could do it, to show me that I could do it." Another respondent said similarly that "once she finished at [the local community college], she had the confidence to pursue a four-year degree." This sentiment was clearly echoed by yet another, who stated that going to community college "allowed him to rebuild his confidence."

Others said it helped in a successful transition from high school to college as they got "a taste of college." Others described community college in the following ways: "a more comfortable environment"; "a lot less intimidating"; "a very easy transition for me from high school to college." Another student said, "I don't think it started getting really, really hard and time consuming until I transferred to the university. But I do think I was ready for university..."
as well.” Another student was not sure about college and “didn’t want to waste dad’s money,” so he decided to go to community college. Some students noted that it was easier to get in to the community college, which clearly afforded them the opportunity to enter the higher education system. At least one student acknowledged that having another degree—the associate degree—was an advantage and helped further her sense of being prepared to go on in higher education.

The final theme centered on flexible scheduling and convenience, which was defined as finding classes that easily fit into busy lives and did not require major life changes to enter college. Students said, “Online schooling ... with [local community college] just seemed a lot easier and cheaper too” and “It was cheaper, close to home, free parking.” Like many others, one student said, “It was closer to home, so I didn’t get homesick.” With regard to more flexible scheduling, some respondents reported that community college “allowed [them] to work while going to school (class flexibility).” Another respondent said, “I need to support myself, so I have to work full time and take classes at night, and it was good for that... the community college [was] cheaper and very flexible.” Another student concurred that the local college offered “flexible hours for working full time and having a child.” Having transferred to the university, many students said that they had had to leave their jobs—even if they had taken another less time-consuming job—in order to focus on their classwork.

Advantages of Going to a Community College

The first theme, cost, was defined as recognizing the relative inexpense of a two-year college. Respondents said that the “biggest advantage was cost...knocked out his general education requirements and they transferred. This saves a lot of money”; that the “main advantage was the money. Two years completed debt free”; and “knock out credits for 1/10 the price.” Another student said it was “kind of the only option, it was cheap”—a refrain echoed by many. One student said that he had been accepted at a lot of universities, but his father died right before he graduated from high school, changing his college plans. Some students got very specific about the cost of their education. One said that in Florida, “each credit hour is $60... so I took four classes every semester... my parents paid for it, and then when I transferred here, it was really expensive, so I’ve gotten student loans for my last two years.” One student felt that she did not get “much help through the financial office (at the local college)...as far as how to actually pay for school.” Some students felt that because they paid for their education themselves, they had “more incentive to do well.” One argued that the low cost offered the opportunity to get a start or better oneself whereas four-year students were perceived as being in school in part because it was expected that they would get a college education. Nevertheless, for many, cost was central to their decision of which type of college to enter. One student said, “The decision to start at a community college depends on the person and what their [sic] financial situation is.”

The second theme, teacher accessibility, was defined as the ability to easily communicate with faculty. One student reported, “I felt like I could just talk to my teachers if I didn’t understand something”; another believed that community college faculty are “there because they want to teach you. They’re not worried about... being a founding father of cell division or whatever.” This sentiment was echoed by other students: “They’ll put that information up there in a fashion that you can understand”; “Teachers were more available [and] gave us more attention.”

Many students liked that classes tended to be smaller at the community college. This theme was defined simply as recognition that class size was smaller and appealing. One respondent reported, “I personally like...the size of the classrooms. At no time did you ever have more than about 25 or 30 people. And I think that’s effective because you don’t feel like you get lost in the crowd.” Another shared that the class size tended “to be a lot smaller, which gives you a better relationship with all the professors... you tend to learn their names [and] they tend to know your name, and you know you can have a nice conversation and they’ll help you with anything you need.” Another student said, “I knew everyone.” The smaller class size allowed yet another respondent “to get more from each class.” Instructor accessibility was often reported as even more attractive than the cost of attending community college. One respondent said that the advantages of community colleges were “smaller class sizes, able to get more from each class... instructors work more with students...cost was important but a secondary concern.” One student reported that compared to class size at the university, class size at the community college was “probably 12 to 20 students. I had
a couple with 40 students, but that was rare. Here I’ve had 40- to 60-people—couple-hundred people—classes—monster classes.”

Students also reported that it was easier to ask questions in smaller classes. One said, “If you want to ask a question or you don’t understand something, you raise your hand, and they respond to you.” Related to “small class size” was the idea that the “community college is smaller.” This theme ties to prior themes of preparing students and building confidence. One respondent said, “Wow, you’re in college now...so you could get overwhelmed by that feeling and then showing up to a big class [and realizing] ‘I don’t understand something’; ‘I’ll find out on my own’; or ‘oh well’...” This student believed that small class size allowed her voice to be heard and enabled her to find out what she needed to know. On the other hand, many students reported liking the personal stories they heard from community college instructors and noted that at the university, “more professors were into theory... they have more of a textbook knowledge.” Clearly, students perceived many advantages of community college education.

Three themes emerged from analysis of students’ comments about the disadvantages of going to community college: lacking a stereotypical college experience; negative perceptions of community college; and frustration with the transfer process and counseling at the community college.

Disadvantages of the Community College Experience

Lacking a stereotypical college experience was defined as sensing that something was being missed socially by enrolling at a community college instead of a college or university. Students noted the lack of social activities, peer group association, and other aspects of a four-year college experience. One referenced “the lack of... peer groups... there [aren’t] as many people like me, who are 18 and 19 years old...there [are] more people in the 25-plus range.”

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Another student reported, “I also had a feeling of missing out on the college experience.” One volunteered “that some people might be jealous that their friends were off at a party school or regular university.” Another advised, “If you’re really seeking college to be this social experience, where you want to make friends and have fun, then community college isn’t for you.” This student felt that community college entrants know this: “They know they’re not going to get that college experience, so it’s not a shock.”

This feeling of lack continued even after students transferred to university: “When you go to community college, even if you transfer to a university, you always feel like you didn’t get the stereotypical college experience. I’ve never lived in a dorm, I’ve never joined a sorority, I don’t think I’ve ever been in any clubs... and honestly, all four years of college I’ve never really had a lot of friends.” Another student said that when she transferred to the university, she didn’t know anyone and “wasn’t in a group.” Students seemed to feel that community colleges “didn’t have a lot of social activities, not a lot of social interaction.” One student said that his community college lacked social interactions and that “lots of students skipped classes.”

A second theme was termed perception and was defined as some students’ belief that community colleges are essentially inferior to four-year institutions. One student was exceptionally critical of his community college experience and felt there was a huge difference between it and university. Specifically, the community college environment was disorganized (he described it as “a fake college”). He clarified that it was “because of the lack of professionalism, and the students didn’t care a bit about being there... there were always fights, and usually people didn’t come to class.” One respondent said there was no significant disadvantage in going to community college save “the stigma of attending a community college... assumptions of stupidity or poverty” for choosing this option. Another student said he had no interest in associating with his community college peers because “they were a bunch of losers.” A respondent who was not critical of the community college experience said, “I liked [community college] overall, but then again I felt like I was still in high school, I was just paying for it.” Likewise, one student said that the biggest disadvantage of going to community college was “feeling like it was the 13th grade.” Yet another said that “it was like a transitional experience from high school to college... it was slower paced and not as demanding... I definitely think it was easier.” One student offered the following insight about the primary difference between two- and four-year colleges: “Four-year students tend to have goals. It is much safer at community college not to have goals.... Community college students take a class here and there. Students are a lot different.”

Students who had transferred successfully looked back on their community college experience and perceived that university was “harder than” the community college and that their grades at the community college were “As and Bs, and here they are Bs and Cs.” Many felt that community college classes were “easier” and that “the classes are harder [at university], but you learn more.” Yet another reported that the transition “was rough because of the more rigorous education and larger class sizes.” Beyond finding the university classroom more challenging, some students pointed to the university’s larger size and faster pace: “There’s a lot more people, and it’s a lot more fast paced... oh, and this campus is a lot bigger.”

Interestingly, some students recognized differences in accreditation and research expectations between two- and four-year faculty. Thus, one respondent figured that his community college teachers had “at least a bachelor’s [degree] to be able to teach.” One student mentioned interactions with teaching assistants at the university and said “that the assistants are pretty much pawned off, you don’t really talk much to the teacher...you talk to them...they are helpful. The professors themselves weren’t available, but the teacher’s assistants were more than happy to help.”

Frustration with the transfer process and problems with counseling at the community college were the third identified theme. This was defined as angst—especially after students transferred to a four-year institution—that community college credits did not transfer in the way they believed they would and that advice offered at the community college was lacking. One student said, “At the time I thought it was a good experience, but then when I transferred, I wished I had just gone straight to [the university] because I had to take a lot of classes over.” Many students felt that the advice they received from community college counselors was lacking. One student who intended to transfer to earn a bachelor’s degree said he was given the wrong advice and was told that “these classes will help you—they’ll work at [university].” Still, this stu-
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dent returned and found another counselor who told him about a seamless transfer agreement between the community college and the university if one earned the associate’s degree. He pursued this path; however, “four of the five classes I was in wouldn’t transfer to [university]...So basically I wasted money” at the community college. Another student echoed this problem, saying that she “lost some credits and had to take some unexpected classes,...[I] may have wasted time.” Another respondent said to “make sure you get the classes you need to take.” This student reported that at the university, she had met with a counselor and mapped out what courses she needed to finish the degree. This was in stark contrast to her experience at the community college: “You decide—you bring what you want to take to them—and they just check it off; there’s never any assistance.” Yet another student said, “The only complaint I have about going to community college is the advisors. They almost seem like they really don’t care. They’ll sign you up for basically whatever you want to take, as long as you meet the prerequisite.” In addition, many students reported that getting “counseling appointments may take weeks and that administrative paper work was slow.” One respondent said that a disadvantage of going to community college was that “I kind of feel behind...kids from high school who are my age are already graduating.”

Students saw the need for more program integration between local community colleges and the university “because so many will be wanting to transition to a four-year school.” Many students did not realize that technical training credits would not transfer to the university. One student reported that “none of the [paralegal] courses would transfer.” Many respondents in this sample were unaware of differences in the likelihood of success relative to transferring different two-year college degrees or specific classes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to report how successful community college transfer students understood the advantages and disadvantages of having started their higher education at a two-year institution. This work sheds light on “America’s College Promise,” the proposal to open community colleges to all. It is especially important for criminal justice students, many of whom will begin their higher education at community college. Students were asked open-ended questions about whether they felt the decision to enter a community college was a good one and about their understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of obtaining a community college education. Responses mirrored the debate found in related literature. While many students reported that their community college experience was positive, others did not share that perspective. The vast majority of students in this sample identified both positive and negative aspects of their decision to enroll at a community college. On the positive side, students said that the experience helped prepare them for success at a four-year college; boosted their academic confidence; and provided a place where academic and personal schedules could mix successfully. Advantages of community colleges were their inexpensive cost, the accessibility of teachers, and small class size, which provided ample opportunity for students to ask questions. Students often felt that they were not academically or personally ready to enter a four-year college or university immediately after high school—a change they perceived as a giant leap. Successful transfer students generally felt that the community college prepared them for success at the university. A key component that informed students’ feeling of being prepared was the smaller class size, which enabled them to get to know their instructors and to ask questions when they did not understand the material being presented in class. Many students clearly felt that community college was a good option for them, especially considering the cost of higher education. (Remember that these students were not only successful transfer students but also were only months away from earning their bachelor’s degree.)

Successful transfer students also identified disadvantages to having begun their higher education at a community college. Notably, the disadvantages are very similar to those detailed long ago by critics of community college education. First, students felt that they had missed out on the stereotypical college experience. They reported feeling a lack in terms of having a peer group or many social interactions at the community college. The community college appeared to be where students went strictly to attend class. Related to this was the perception that community colleges were somehow less than a “real” college. Several students said that community college felt like “13th grade” and referred to their peers who attended four-year institutions as being at a “regular” university. One student said that there was
a stigma attached to attending a community college: others assumed they were either poor or stupid for being there. Many students said that "lots of students skipped classes" and believed that community college classes were easier than those at the university. One student reported that the main difference between two- and four-year college students was that "four-year students tend to have goals. It is much safer at community college not to have goals... community college students take a class here and there." Finally, many students reported frustration with the transfer process and with the counseling offered at the community college. Much work remains to be done to ensure that community college entrants know which courses typically transfer to four-year institutions and that they are aware of transfer agreements between many community colleges and universities (should they want to obtain a transfer-oriented associate's degree). What appears to be basic information—especially for transfer-oriented students—is not readily available to many community college students.

The current research is limited by the sample selection, but it is notable that the themes that emerged from student interviews are in line with concerns noted by scholars with expertise in this area of higher education.

The debate about community colleges and divisions within U.S. higher education will continue, especially because educational attainment significantly influences adult socioeconomic status (Dowd, Cheslock and Melguizo 2008; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Tinto 2006–7). Community colleges appear to help those who feel they are not ready to enter the university system immediately after high school. Students are well aware that community colleges are an inexpensive way in which to acquire higher education credits and avoid debt. What they may be less aware of is how enrolling at a community college may affect the likelihood of their ever graduating from a four-year college (not to mention the effect this decision may have on their socioeconomic attainment).

Nevertheless, many students did not see another option; their choice was to go to a community college or to not go to college at all. If this is the reality for many students, then these respondents offer insights into how to increase the likelihood of success of community college entrants. Focusing on advising within community colleges and ensuring that students know the differences between technical and transfer-oriented classes and degrees would be most worthwhile. For community college proponents, one of the biggest challenges is how to transform negative perceptions of two-year colleges. Finally, four-year college and university faculty might evaluate their openness to students asking questions in their classes and determine what they can do to enhance the learning experience for all students. This area of research is worthy of further exploration—especially because policy makers in California and New York have sought to limit enrollment at four-year colleges and to encourage enrollment at community colleges instead (Kane and Rouse 1999). President Obama and others support the idea of community college for all, suggesting that upwards of 9 million individuals could benefit from such a plan. It is important to explore how to build on the strengths of the community college and to address lingering problems. How well these students will fare must continue to be tracked.

REFERENCES


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