Washington Monthly

College Guide

Feature

America's Best Community Colleges

by Kevin Carey

On July 14, 2009, President Obama stood on an outdoor stage at Macomb Community College in suburban Detroit. In the crowd below local dignitaries mingled with students and former autoworkers. Obama had campaigned at Macomb during the presidential election and was returning to announce the signature higher education effort of his administration: the American Graduation Initiative.

The goal, Obama said, was for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, a lead it had long held before falling behind other Western industrialized countries in recent years. To accomplish this, he promised to invest an unprecedented $12 billion to rebuild crumbling community college facilities, increase the number of two-year students who graduate and transfer to four-year schools, improve remedial education, forge stronger ties between colleges and employers, and create inexpensive, open-source courses for students to take online. It would be, he said, the most historic effort on behalf of community colleges since President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill.

A year later, the American Graduation Initiative is in ruins. While the administration convinced Congress this past March to take tens of billions of dollars in government subsidies away from the for-profit student loan industry and use the money to increase Pell Grants for low-income students, last-minute wrangling with conservative Democrats in the Senate gutted the graduation initiative, removing most of the programs and funding that might have helped more students earn degrees. Community colleges were left with a $2 billion Department of Labor career training program and a White House summit as consolation prizes. Further funding is unlikely.

Nevertheless, in the course of his Macomb speech, Obama made a key statement that should continue to guide his administration: we must "measure what works and what doesn't" in community colleges. "All too often," the president said, "we don't know what happens when somebody walks out of a classroom and onto the factory floor or into the laboratory or the office. And that means businesses often can't be sure what a degree is really worth. And schools themselves don't have the facts to make informed choices about which programs achieve results and which programs don't."

Obama was right to call for more research about what works. But there's a lot we already know. Since 2001, a nonprofit organization called the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, based at the University of Texas, Austin, has been gathering information about which community colleges do the best job of adopting institutional practices and encouraging student habits that years of research have shown to be strongly correlated with higher levels of learning. CCSSE has surveyed hundreds of thousands of students at over two-thirds of all community colleges in America about practices including the number of books and papers assigned, the frequency of group assignments, the amount of student interaction with faculty, hours spent preparing for class, and the quality of support services. Unlike similar surveys conducted for four-year colleges and universities, all CCSSE results are published on a Web site (www.ccsse.org) for anyone to see.

In 2007, *Washington Monthly* combined CCSSE results with graduation rates published by the U.S. Department of Education to create the first-ever list of America's best community colleges. This year, we

have updated the list with all-new CCSSE data (see "A Note on Methodology," page 51), ranking more than 650 community colleges nationwide in order to identify the fifty best community colleges of 2010. As usual, they're all over the map: there's a small, science-oriented tribal college in New Mexico (at number thirty-five), a job-focused technical institute in rural Hazard County, Kentucky (number eighteen), a midsized suburban college in Washington State that prepares students to transfer to four-year universities (number seventeen), and a college built on the rainy side of an island paradise (number twenty-four). Many of the 2007 colleges reappear on this year's list, underscoring the reliability of the CCSSE survey. Others stand out for the first time.

Here are some things we learned from these schools:

Selectivity Does Not Equal Excellence

It is commonly accepted that the colleges with the toughest admissions standards are the most excellent. Since community colleges don't have admissions standards, many of us discount the idea of excellence in the two-year sector. Community colleges are supposed to be substandard, the thinking goes—somewhere you go if a four-year college won't have you. To get a great education, you need to go to a famous university.

The list of America's best community colleges proves this notion wrong. While all the schools on it are inexpensive, have open admissions, and are largely unknown outside their local communities, they stand out in teaching and helping students earn degrees. When it comes to quality of instruction they outperform not only their two-year peers, but many elite four-year research universities as well. As the table on page 50 shows, students at the top community colleges are more likely than their research university peers to get prompt feedback from instructors, work with other students on projects in class, make class presentations, and contribute to class discussions. Research universities too often subordinate teaching to research. At the best community colleges, teaching comes first.

So uncelebrated are America's best community colleges that one thing the top ones tend to have in common is an underappreciation of just how good they are. That's what we found when we visited the number one institution, Saint Paul College, in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. (For more information about Saint Paul College, see Erin Carlyle, "Shakespeare with Power Tools," page 52.)

Money Isn't Everything

Community colleges receive far less funding per student than do four-year institutions. This is despite the fact that they are more likely than four-year institutions to enroll students who delay entry to college, have jobs and families, receive a substandard high school education, and struggle economically. In a just world, they would be funded more generously, not less, than four-year schools to compensate for the more difficult job they do.

But, while community colleges could benefit greatly from more resources (and Congress was shortsighted to eviscerate their funding), the schools on our top fifty list do markedly better than their peers in making the best of the dollars they get. Also, while the top fifty schools devote slightly more per student ($12,903) than the average for community colleges we ranked ($11,045), the amount of money they spend isn't determinative. Nine of the top community colleges spend less than $10,000 per student. For instance, Saint Paul's spending is below average. The right leadership, organizational culture, and approach to teaching can make a big and immediate difference, even when colleges and students lack all the resources they need.

Make It Harder and More Will Graduate

Some colleges allege that poor graduation rates are an unavoidable—even laudable—consequence of maintaining high academic standards. But CCSSE researchers have found the opposite to be true. The higher the level of "Academic Challenge"—one of the five CCSSE measures that contribute to our rankings—the more likely students are to earn degrees, even after controlling for student preparation.

At Hesston College in Kansas (number two on our list), 63 percent of students report having to write eleven or more papers during the school year. At the average community college, only 26 percent of students report such workloads. At Hesston, 85 percent of students report being assigned five or more textbooks during the year. Nationwide, only 55 percent of students at community colleges report such levels of assignment. Nevertheless, Hesston graduates nearly two-thirds of its students in four years, far above the national average of 28 percent.

The best community colleges have found that when you set high expectations, students will live up to them—even when those students face barriers to graduation. Indeed, the top fifty community colleges enroll a higher percentage of students with Pell Grants (46 percent) than the average (41 percent) for the more than 600 colleges we ranked.

We believe that ranking community colleges is important. Nearly half of all American students begin their college careers at two-year institutions. But unlike in the four-year sector, students don't compete to get into community colleges, and community colleges don't compete in a national market for students. So there is little demand for national rankings of the kind published annually by *U.S. News & World Report*—and by the *Monthly* elsewhere in these pages. That means that students, educators, and policymakers have no comparable, consumer-friendly information when evaluating two-year schools.

Also, it's essential to learn from the best. As President Obama noted in his speech, most community college students never graduate or transfer to a four-year school. This represents a huge loss of potential. Community colleges have the toughest job in higher education, teaching academically and financially challenged students with a fraction of the resources given to four-year institutions. That makes it essential to spotlight the schools that have surmounted these challenges and served their students well.

Of course, our rankings aren't perfect. Like the president, we wish we knew how community college graduates fare in the job market and their future careers. We'd like to know if students who transfer to four-year schools get good grades, earn bachelor's degrees, and go on to graduate and professional schools. It would help to have more objective measures of learning outcomes of the kind pioneered by nonprofit research organizations like the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures higher-order analytic, communication, and critical-thinking skills. The more we know about community college excellence, the better the case for investing in the best institutions and holding the rest accountable for improvement.

But that's all the more reason why the Obama administration should make the president's call for more research and data into learning outcomes central to its future community college strategy. Information is cheap, in the grand scheme of things, and we still know far too little about the colleges that educate nearly half of all college students. In exchange for new federal funding, community colleges should expand their already laudable commitment to transparency. In higher education, more knowledge isn't too much to ask.

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