

## **Social Mobility: Can Community Colleges Make a Difference?**

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Historically, community colleges have promoted social mobility by providing access to higher education, especially for the underrepresented segments of the population. By reason of their geographic availability, open admissions policy, and low cost, these colleges have expanded educational opportunity to millions of Americans, both the young and the not so young. Recently, however, under pressure to increase America's global competitiveness, colleges have been called upon to increase the number of graduates. Most of this increase is expected to come from the community colleges where completion rates, as conventionally measured, are low (Obama, 2009; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011).

The focus on completion rates versus access has shifted institutional attention from inputs to outputs (Lumina, 2017). The metrics that matter now are the number of graduates, persistence, job placement, and other outcomes measures (see Romano & Palmer, 2016a for a critique of outcome measures that pertain to the community college). Many states have established completion targets, often linked to Performance Based Funding, created certificate programs to help meet these metrics, and joined national efforts to focus on guided pathways in hopes of smoothing the educational progression of students and increasing student success (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; D'Amico, Friedel, Katsinas, & Thornton, 2014). Specialized programs like the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY), have been established to provide students with extensive scaffolding to be successful, and have marked early successes (see <http://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/>).

Community colleges were established to promote access and to serve as agents of economic development (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Meier, 2013), but, as singular organizations, they cannot counter larger societal inequalities alone. Chronic poverty and an unstable labor market present barriers to economic mobility (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003). Pointedly, Brick (1994) identified four basic social and economic forces leading to the early development of the junior college: "(1) equality of opportunity, (2) use of education to achieve social mobility, (3) technological progress, and (4) acceptance of the concept that education is the producer of social capital" (p. 44). Today, community colleges are still viewed as an

important part of the higher education network working to increase social mobility, however, rising economic inequality and lack of public funding reduces their potential as agents of mobility (Romano & Palmer, 2016a; Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). In a system in which higher education is becoming increasingly stratified, the poor will stay poor without strong intervention and a strong economy.

As we look into the future, we can see that the high cost of higher education has the potential of moving more middle income students into community colleges. For both 2- and 4-year colleges, the quest to increase completion rates confronts institutions with the temptation of making tradeoffs between admitting more qualified and paying students versus admitting poorer students who require more academic support and developmental coursework (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Mullin, 2012).

Leaders of community colleges can help bridge the divide between what these institutions can and cannot do. Campus leaders serve as critical policy actors on the ground who can help define policy issues and influence change on campus. State system leaders or coalitions of college leaders can show what is effective in practice and what barriers remain for student success. National association leadership from the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees can lead broad based dialogue regarding the larger societal issues that need attention. Clearly, education is part of the solution, but community colleges operate in a larger societal context that cannot be ignored.

In the US it is sometimes said that Americans have the strongest belief in rags-to-riches stories among people in modern industrialized economies, but studies show that they actually have low mobility rates among OECD countries, for instance (Cingano, 2015; OECD, 2015). Yet, Americans also have great faith in the educational system as an equalizer that will reduce social stratification and promote social mobility. Our task here is to explore the role that community colleges can, or do, play in this process.

In this paper, we first review concepts of social mobility and discuss both intergenerational and intragenerational mobility for community college students. Next, we introduce research on the Mobility Report Card (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017). We focus specifically on situating mobility rates for students attending community colleges. From the data analysis of the Mobility Report Card, we highlight the top 10 community colleges with the highest levels of mobility. Here we discuss common themes and

attributes of these colleges including those involved the City University of New York's (CUNY) ASAP program. As a comparison, we also investigate commonalities among institutions identified by the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. Finally, we conclude with implications for practice and focus in particular on the role of community college leaders to effect change on campus.

### **Social Mobility**

Broadly defined, social mobility is the movement up or down of individuals or groups in socioeconomic status relative to others in a given society. Socioeconomic status (SES) is commonly measured by a combination of income, education and occupational status. Thus, we talk about high SES and low SES individuals and families. When we combine these three measures, we almost always find that they all move in the expected direction. In particular, more education leads to higher incomes and greater occupational status (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). But, there are exceptions. For instance, U.S. Supreme Court justices are well educated and have high occupational status but not necessarily high incomes; whereas drug dealers may have high incomes but low occupational status.

The measure that we are concerned with in this paper is a narrow one that focuses on education and income but ignores other measures of success such as occupational status or happiness. One reason for the focus on income is that income is easier to measure and less subjective than some of the other SES measures. The focus on income is also relevant to the current environment in which the importance of jobs and income are used to justify the investment in colleges that students, parents, and governments are making (Dowd, 2003; Mullin, 2010).

**Intra and intergenerational mobility.** Mobility may take place within the same generation (intragenerational) or between generations, such as from parents to their children (intergenerational). Much of the research on the connection between higher education and social mobility is intragenerational (Ma et al., 2016); that is, we study the effect of going to college on the future income of the participants, or we might calculate the rates of return to those participants of investing in a college degree (Taylor et al., 2011). From this standpoint, we know that it pays to go to college for both the participants and the society; that is, education has both private and social benefits and that these benefits outweigh the costs (Labaree, 1997). Since more is known about the private benefits, this is where we concentrate our attention. The social

benefits are much harder to measure, but it is assumed that those attributed to the 4-year college also apply to the community college (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2015).

Focusing on the private intragenerational benefits of education, we would find that the expected lifetime income stream for those with an associate's degree lies somewhere between those of a high school and a bachelor's degree. One such estimate puts associate degree holders with roughly \$325,000 more in lifetime income over those with just a high school degree. Those with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn up to a million dollars more than those with a high school degree (Abel, Deitz, & Su 2014). Of course these incomes are averages. Educators are increasingly aware that earnings depend, not just on credentials, but also on what you study, where you work, and when you enter the labor market. The realities of the labor market are behind the national push to promote STEM and other programs with high wage potential.

Good employment outcomes also underscores the importance of strong national and regional labor markets to provide the necessary job openings. That said, a recent study by the Brookings Institution estimated that "half of all STEM jobs are available to workers without a four-year college degree" (Rothwell, 2013, p. 1). Two-year colleges can provide economic benefits to those graduates pursuing a STEM degree, but key here is getting students into STEM majors and moving them through the programs to completion (Dowd, 2012; Wang, 2015).

In addition, work done by Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce shows considerable overlap between the earnings of those with the associate's degree and those with the bachelor's degree. "For instance, 22% of those with an occupational or vocational [associate's degree] earn more than the median earnings of those with a B.A. and 14% earn more than the median earnings of those with graduate degrees" (Carnevale, Strohl, & Smith, 2009, p. 22). Clearly, community colleges can contribute to greater earnings potential for some graduates more than others.

Looking more closely at the rates of return to a community college degree, Belfield and Bailey (2011) have done an analysis of intragenerational mobility literature and concluded that "almost all studies have found that the average earnings gains from the associate's degree is 13% for males and 22% for females;" while "the average earnings gain for those attending the community college without obtaining a credential is estimated at 9% for males and 10% for females (Belfield & Bailey, 2011, pp. 49-51). The rate of return to an associate degree is higher than that from a bachelor's degree because the cost of the degree is lower. A more recent study

by the same authors and based on labor market returns from 2000 to 2014, found that getting an associate's degree paid off more than getting a long-term certificate, which in turn paid more than getting a short-term certificate. In general the authors found that "more credits lead to higher earnings, even for students who do not complete an award" (Belfield & Bailey, 2017, p. 10). In the eight states examined, women generally had higher returns than men and most vocational fields (especially health) had higher returns than awards in the humanities.

Twenty years ago, studies of the intragenerational impact of attending a community college were comparatively rare. However, due largely to the work of Thomas Bailey and his colleagues at Columbia University and Anthony Carnevale at Georgetown University, we now know a lot more about the connection between education and income at this level. On the other hand, studies of the impact of the community college on intergenerational mobility are seldom done. We will highlight two notable exceptions here, one an early mixed method study, the other a recent important quantitative one.

Sociologists Paul Attewell and David Lavin (2007) conducted a detailed examination of the intergenerational impact of the City University of New York's (CUNY) open admissions experiment in the 1970s. They followed the lives of three generations of women, their parents, and their children, admitted to the CUNY system because of its open admissions policy. Sixty percent of the roughly 2,000 women followed over a 30- year period started at the community college level.

Overall, Attewell and Lavin found a 70% graduation rate among the cohort of initial women they followed. But, even more remarkable, was the positive impact on the children of those who enrolled. The extended benefits from one generation to another included not only higher rates of educational attainment and higher incomes but also more stable family structures, higher asset accumulation, improved childrearing habits, and greater community involvement.

Attewell and Lavin (2007) help us to realize that we have not fully appreciated the impact that expanded educational opportunity has on the social mobility of the extended families of disadvantaged students. We can measure the impact of going to college on income and jobs held by a given cohort of students, but a more complete analysis of the long-term impacts of education would recognize the benefits to the children of those given an opportunity to attend the community college because of its open admissions philosophy.

The idea that more educated parents have a positive impact on their children is a continuing theme in the intergenerational mobility literature (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). A recent study by Reeves and Howard (2013) for the Brookings Institution, for instance, demonstrates that parenting behavior has a large impact on their children's future income and social mobility and that education is the major driver of that behavior. This reinforces the findings of Attewell and Lavin (2007) of the benefits of education, in particular that the education of mothers will lead to greater educational attainment of the children. Reeves and Howard (2013) also show that "those born at the bottom or top [in the U.S.] are more likely to end up in the same place as adults than in other countries" (Reeves & Howard, 2013, p. 2). In the U.S., downward mobility of those in the top two quintiles, however, is less likely to occur as parental wealth helps assure their economic status via a "glass floor" (p. 1).

The income status of children born to wealthy parents translates to a great many of those children retaining their position at the top of the economic ladder as "39% of top-quintile children end up as top-quintile adults," even if these children have modest cognitive skill levels (Reeves & Howard, 2013, p. 2). For children born into the bottom quintile of the income distribution, however, a sticky floor holds them down and 42% of low-income children are estimated to stay at the bottom. But, Reeves and Howard (2013) also noted the influence of education on the ability to move up in income status as "those with a degree had a 42% higher chance of making it from a lower-income household as a child into the higher-income bracket as an adult" (p. 8).

The bottom line is that educational attainment results in mobility both within a generation and across generations. Critically, intergenerational mobility can occur, especially with education as a mechanism for moving out of the sticky floor of poverty. On the one hand, those born in families of wealth have protection against downward mobility. The poor, on the other hand, have income inequalities perpetuated and reinforced across generations unless they can use a lever of educational attainment to achieve social mobility.

**Mobility report card.** The most recent examination of intergenerational mobility is a detailed quantitative study by a team of top academic economists led by Raj Chetty of Stanford University (Chetty et al., 2017). The Brookings Institution heralded the work of this research team as another "Chetty-bomb" in the mobility debate (Haliklis & Reeves, 2017, para. 1) and Harvard economist Lawrence Katz called Chetty's previous work "certainly the most

comprehensive analysis of intergenerational mobility in the contemporary U.S.” (as quoted in Leonhardt, 2013, para. 28).

Among the conclusions of earlier studies by Chetty and colleagues were that mobility in America was declining, as “only half of Americans born in 1980 were economically better off than their parents, compared to 90 percent of those born in 1940” (Chetty et al., 2016, p 2), and that “intergenerational mobility varies substantially across areas within the U.S.” (2014, p. 1553). The latter study noted five factors associated with upward mobility: “1) less residential segregation; 2) less income inequality; 3) better primary schools; 4) greater social capital; and 5) greater family stability” (p. 1553). The backdrop of this previous research provides the foundation for the mobility scorecards.

The study just released (hereafter referred to as the Chetty data, 2017) expands this earlier research on mobility to the role that individual colleges play in mobility. Using a rich new data set which covers all degree-seeking undergraduates in the U.S. from 1999 to 2013, this study provides longitudinal data on the connection between higher education and income on over 30 million students. Data were obtained from college enrollment records and federal tax records. After eliminating a few colleges due to insufficient data, they were left with 2,436 colleges and 28.1 million students.

From this “big data” set the authors calculated a mobility report card for nearly all colleges in the U.S. They measured the income mobility of students who attended college during the study years against the incomes of the families they came from. Various starting and end points can be calculated from the raw data to arrive at a mobility rate for each college. For example, we can measure the fraction of students who come from the lowest income quintile and advance to the top 1% of the income distribution (Berkeley and Columbia lead the pack here). Or we can calculate the fraction of students who come from the lowest 40% of the income distribution and rise to the top 40% of that distribution, etc. As a starting point, the authors developed a baseline sample which looks at the fraction of students in the 1980-82 birth cohort who advance from the bottom quintile to the top quintile. The college of record is the one most attended during the years 1999-2004. That makes this cohort young (attended between ages of 19 and 22) and not necessarily graduates.

Calculating the mobility rate for each college from their baseline sample shows that students who attend Ivy + colleges (8 Ivy’s plus Chicago, Stanford, MIT, and Duke) from the



lowest income quintile have the best chance, almost 60%, of advancing to the highest income quintile by their early 30's (after that age the positions in the income distribution are relatively stable). However, the mobility rates of these elite private colleges is not very high because they do not enroll a very high percentage of these low income students. Thus, the mobility rate for each college is based on both the fraction of students who come into a given college from the bottom income quintile (this is labeled access) multiplied by the fraction of students who end up in the top quintile (this is labelled success). In this way, ease of access is combined with the value added by the college in propelling students forward in the income distribution (Chetty et al., 2017).

One of the major findings drawn from the baseline sample is that “children from low-income and high-income families at a given college...have very similar earnings outcomes” (Chetty et al., 2017, p. 19); that is college has a leveling effect. What accounts for this? Is it something the colleges are doing (value added) or is it the ability and motivation of the students entering a particular college (selection)? Or, is it factors over which the college has no control over such as the health of the labor market? These are ideas that we will explore further with respect to community colleges.

In looking at mobility rates across all colleges, community colleges score high on the access number but low on the success one, giving them generally low mobility rates. Some notable exceptions occur. Glendale Community College near Los Angeles, for instance, has a very high mobility rate and as Table 1 shows, is the seventh highest in the nation among all colleges (Chetty et al., 2017).



Table 1 Top 10 Colleges by Mobility Rate

Top 10 Colleges by Mobility Rate (Bottom to Top 20%)					
Rank	Name	Mobility Rate =	Access	x	Success Rate
1	Cal State, LA	9.9%	33.1%		29.9%
2	Pace University-New York	8.4%	15.2%		55.6%
3	SUNY-Stony Brook	8.4%	16.4%		51.2%
4	Technical Career Institutes	8.0%	40.3%		19.8%
5	University of Texas—Pan American	7.6%	38.7%		19.8%
6	CUNY System*	7.2%	28.7%		25.2%
7	Glendale Community College	7.1%	32.4%		21.9%
8	South Texas College	6.9%	52.4%		13.2%
9	Cal State Polytechnic-Pomona	6.8%	14.9%		45.8%
10	University of Texas—El Paso	6.8%	28.0%		24.4%

\*Includes both 2- and 4-year colleges; (Chetty et al., 2017, p. 64)

Table 1 lists the colleges in the Chetty data (2017) with the top 10 mobility rates. Among all of the colleges in the U.S. only one is a private college, Pace University, and only one, Technical Career Institutes, is a for-profit school. Glendale’s mobility rate of 7.1% is the product of its 32.4% access rate from the bottom quintile of families and its 21.9% success rate in propelling them into the top quintile. For students who did not attend college, 34.5% of them came from the bottom quintile and they had a mobility rate of 1.3%. While these students do not appear to have needed college to achieve economic mobility, we also know that others within the bottom quintile were not able to attain their potential (Chetty et al., 2014).

Next, we looked at the Chetty data (2017) to determine the top 10 community colleges by mobility rate (see Table 2). Here, Glendale is ranked first followed by two other colleges from California, four from New York City (CUNY), and three from Texas. Of the top 10 community colleges, all are from border states (NY, CA, TX) with high minority/immigrant student populations. Indeed, California and Texas are already majority-minority states, and New York City is the leading metropolitan gateway for legal immigrants into the U.S. About 36% of the city’s population is foreign born and only 44.6% are classified as white (Teixeira, Frey, & Griffin, 2015). We will focus on these 10 colleges in the discussion below.

**Table 2** Top 10 Community Colleges by Mobility Rate

Top 10 Community Colleges by Mobility Rate (Bottom to Top 20%)					
Rank	Name	Mobility Rate =	Access	x	Success Rate
1	Glendale Community College (CA)	7.1%	32.4%		21.9%
2	CUNY Borough Of Manhattan Community College (NY)	6.1%	35.1%		17.5%
3	CUNY LaGuardia Community College (NY)	6.1%	36.8%		16.5%
4	CUNY Bronx Community College (NY)	5.9%	41.0%		14.4%
5	Southwest Texas Junior College (TX)	5.8%	43.0%		13.3%
6	Queensborough Community College-CUNY (NY)	5.5%	27.6%		20.1%
7	Imperial Valley College (CA)	4.8%	35.9%		13.4%
8	Pasadena City College (CA)	4.8%	27.9%		17.2%
9	El Paso Community College (TX)	4.8%	40.9%		11.7%
10	Odessa College	4.7%	20.7%		22.7%

(Compiled from data tables supplied by Chetty et al., 2017)

### Top Ten Community Colleges

We sought to understand what other shared characteristics the top 10 community colleges held in common. Using institutional reported data from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), comparisons were conducted on student enrollment and demographics, faculty composition, and retention and completion rates. Perhaps the most notable characteristic, as pointed out above, is the fact that all top 10 community colleges are located in three states: California, New York, and Texas. Meier (2013) emphasized that the frontier traditions of California and Texas, coupled with the populist and progressive ideologies of community colleges, contributed to the formation of the two-year sector in these two states. Because these states did not have a strong four-year college network, as compared to New York and the New England states that had strong private colleges in place, their two-year systems emerged as comprehensive institutions. California, in particular, sought a college mission focused on lifelong learning and the transfer mission in their master plan (Kerr, 1991). The City University of New York (CUNY) colleges included in the listing in Table 2 are all located in New York City and are a part of a small network of city colleges separate from the 30 community colleges

coordinated by the State University of New York (SUNY) system. The CUNY system includes both senior colleges (11), community colleges (7), and graduate and professional schools (5).

Looking at the size of the colleges in the top 10 list it is notable that all are located in or near large urban areas, which have lower than average unemployment rates and a greater growth in job openings than in most rural areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). While most community college students do live in urban areas, 60% of all two-year colleges are smaller than those in the top 10 on the Chetty list and are located in rural regions (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). In contrast, the colleges in the top 10 list are large with an average enrollment of 16,416. Three of the colleges are below 10,000 in enrollment, four between 10,000 and 20,000, and the remaining three are over 25,000. The size of these institutions aligns with the regions in which the colleges are located, and these regions impact the job opportunities and hence the mobility rates found in the Chetty data (2017). Again, this is one of the external factors over which individual colleges have little control.

Student enrollment patterns from the top 10 community colleges are similar to overall national community college statistics (49% full-time students and 51% part-time students vs 41% FT and 59% PT overall). Differences emerge between these two groups, however, in looking at the demographics of students and their ages. Figure 1 highlights these differences based on race and ethnicity.

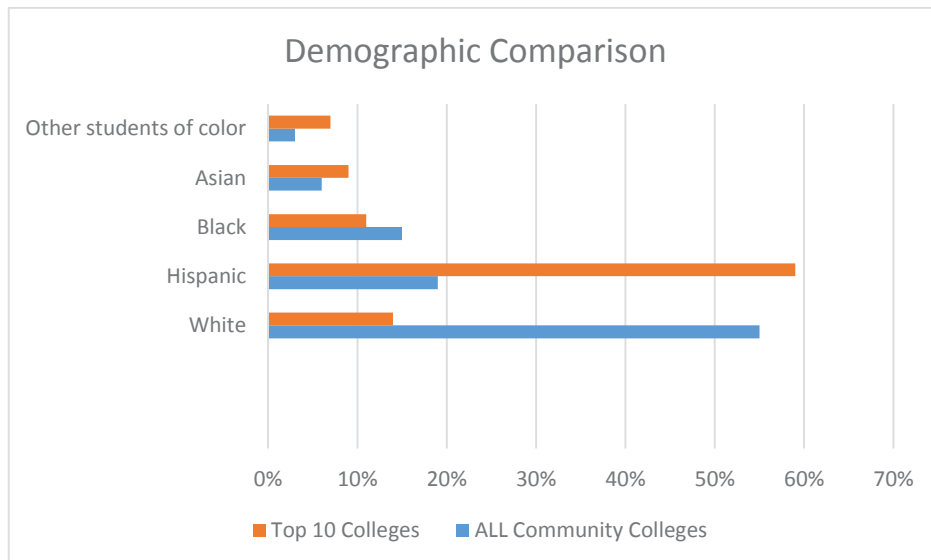


Figure 1. Comparison of Top 10 Community College by Mobility and Community College Averages

The student demographics for the colleges that witnessed the most mobility enrolled fewer White students and more Hispanic students than community colleges on the whole. The top 10 community colleges also enrolled a larger percentage of younger students, 24 and under, than the national average (72% vs 53%). As border states, California, Texas, and New York have large immigrant populations and the open access mission of community colleges, the prevalence of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, and enrollment of undocumented students (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals—DACA) make two-year institutions the college of choice, and most often the only choice (Cohen et al., 2014).

Another noticeable difference between the top 10 community colleges identified for mobility and community colleges in general pertains to finances. On average, the tuition rate at the top 10 two-year colleges was \$2136 per year compared to the national community college average tuition of \$3430 (2015-16). The lower tuition cost of the top 10 colleges contributes to their access. In addition, at these top 10 colleges, 66% of the students received Pell grants compared to the national average of 36% at community colleges in general. Not only were the community colleges noted in the top 10 cheaper to attend, the students who did enroll received more federal funding support via Pell grants. It is also notable that the states of California and New York have among the most generous state, need based, financial aid systems in the nation (see Romano & Palmer, 2016a, pp. 12-15).

Below we highlight some of the special characteristics of the top rated community college—Glendale—and a program at four of the community colleges in the top 10 list from the CUNY system that targets at risk student populations.

**A closer look at Glendale.** Looking at mobility rates and IPEDS data only tells us so much about a campus. For instance, even a cursory look at Glendale, the top ranked community college for mobility, reveals interesting information.

The Chetty baseline study (2017) makes frequent references to Glendale community college and locates it in Los Angeles. However, a look at the Glendale website shows that it hardly looks like downtown LA. It has a picturesque campus located in the city of Glendale on the slopes of the San Rafael Mountains, just 10 miles north of downtown LA. The city of Glendale is 71% white and 17% Hispanic, and the demographics of the campus are somewhat more diverse, with 50% of the student population being White and 29% Hispanic (2014-15).

The city has one of the largest Armenian populations in the U.S. In 2005 approximately 50,000 of its 200,000 residents were of Armenian descent and about 40,000 of them were recent immigrants who swelled the local population during the 1970's and 80's. All indications are that the Armenians are well integrated into the local economy and in 2015, 3 of the 5 members of the city council were of Armenian descent.

Since the Chetty data (2017) baseline sample we have been working with followed the 1980-82 birth cohort it is highly probable that some of the children of these immigrants were enrolled at the local community college at the time of the study. It is also possible that these children were supported by a well- educated Armenian community who were more upwardly mobile than many immigrant populations. The nature of the student population at Glendale during the period of the Chetty baseline study may very well be the major reason that the college had such a high mobility rate.

It is usual that when better educated immigrants come to the U.S., they suffer a decline in income as their job and language skills are not up to their new environment. However, knowing the value of education, their children overcome these obstacles and can have incomes and mobility rates which approach or exceed those of their parents and the native population. This convergence of labor market incomes describes the standard model of assimilation (Chiswick & Miller, 2012).

Research does show that such a convergence occurs, but that it differs among different immigrant groups. Baum and Flores (2011) have done a very useful review of the connection between higher education and the mobility of the children of immigrants. They find that children of the more educated immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, parts of Asia, India, China, Japan and many African countries have high success rates, whereas those from Haiti, Laos, Cambodia, Mexico and Latin America have, on average, "lower rates of participation and success in post-secondary education" (Baum & Flores, 2011, p. 186).

Looking at the data on Glendale over time, Chetty and colleagues (2017) found that their access rate declined significantly and "whatever made [Glendale] exceptional has faded" (p. 37). Again, we might speculate that it is the nature of the student body that passed through Glendale at the time which that accounted for the high mobility rate and not the college itself.

A more detailed exploration of the connection between immigrant student populations and college success is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as we have noted several times,

all of the top 10 community colleges in the Chetty sample listed in Table 2 are located in Texas, New York (City) and California, border states with high immigrant populations.

**Student support at CUNY.** It's not fashionable these days to say that we can solve social problems by throwing money at them. Nevertheless, money matters, and the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at CUNY is an example of what greater funding can do to improve student outcomes, especially if the funds are targeted at those who need the most help. CUNY two-year colleges comprised four of the 10 community colleges topping the list of mobility rates. Just as Glendale provides a good case to examine more closely, so does the ASAP program in the CUNY system.

Started by CUNY in 2007 with a cohort of 1,132 students, ASAP was designed to improve graduation rates over a three-year period. At first, the program was only for full-time students who did not need remedial classes, but in 2009 it was expanded to include students who needed remedial help (Linderman & Kolenovic, 2013). Of note, three of the CUNY community colleges listed in the top 10 mobility list in Table 2 lead the way in this selective group with the highest percentage of full-time student enrollment (CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community college 66%, CUNY Bronx Community College 61%, and CUNY Queensborough Community College 60%).

In 2009, CUNY hired an outside independent research group—MDRC—to conduct an evaluation of the impact of ASAP on low-income students needing remedial courses, typically those with the highest attrition rates.

The elements of the ASAP program included: (drawn from Scrivener et al., 2015)

- Full-time attendance and fewer than three required remedial courses
- Regular meeting with ASAP designated advisors, career counselors and tutors. This required the colleges to hire additional counselors, which lowered the case load from the traditional 600 to 1500 students per advisor to 60 to 80 students.
- Enrollment in a more restricted curriculum with some linked or blocked courses
- Participation in a seminar covering goal setting, study skills and academic planning
- Free tuition and fees where the college would waive what was not covered by federal and state financial aid
- Free metro cards and free use of textbooks

This extensive scaffolding for students was designed to combat many of the challenges facing low-income students in breaking the cycle out of poverty.

To evaluate the program, MDRC conducted a randomized control experiment at three of the CUNY community colleges involved in the ASAP program, Borough of Manhattan and LaGuardia (both on our top 10 list), and Kingsborough. One cohort of new students in the spring 2010 semester and another in the fall 2010 semester were randomly assigned to participate in ASAP (the treatment group) or a control group, who would get only the normal college services. In 2015, an evaluation report was issued by MDRC that showed the following results:

- Almost a doubling of the graduation rate—40% for the treated group compared to 22% in the control group
- A 22% increase in credits accumulated by the treated group
- A full 25% of the treated group had transferred to a 4-year college compared with 17% from the control group.

In its concluding remarks, the MDRC (Scrivener et al., 2015) report stated that “overall, ASAP’s effects after three years are the most positive MDRC has found in over a decade of research in higher education” (p. 85). The doubling of graduation rates compares to all the previous MDRC research of other programs that found improvements of only 4% (Scrivener et al., p. ES 6). The 40% graduation rate produced by ASAP in the review period was dramatically higher than the roughly 15% national graduation rate, within three years, for students who start with a need for remedial education (Scrivener et al., 2015, ES-1). But, what about the cost?

The cost of the ASAP program was substantial. MDRC calculated it at an extra \$16,300 per student over the three-year period studied. The costs broke down into the following categories: \$6,238 on administration and staffing, \$2,927 on student services, \$1,558 on course enrollment, and \$3,305 on financial supports, for a total of \$14,029 in direct costs plus \$2,256, which is an estimate of the cost associated with ASAP students attempting more college courses during that time. Despite the high outlay per student, when viewed from an outcomes perspective the program was cost-effective. Because it produced so many more graduates, it lowered the cost per degree by \$13,423 or 11.4%.

Greatly encouraged by the impressive results, CUNY put up an additional \$42 million in 2015 to expand the program from 4,000 students to more than 25,000 by 2018. Bronx Community College, which has only an 11% graduation rate among its general population but a



61% rate among ASAP students, is targeted to increase the percent of its full-time students enrolled in ASAP from the current 11% to 100% (Jaschik, 2015). Recall, that Bronx Community College (BCC) is one of the top 10 community colleges noted for mobility (5.9%), which is especially notable as 89% of its students receive PELL grants.

In the end, the MDRC was not able to answer the question of which components of the ASAP program were the biggest drivers of the increased student success. Research does show that more attention to students support services pays off in higher retention and graduation rates (Tinto, 2004; Webber, 2011; Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010). Student surveys indicated that all of the components listed above played some role in retaining and moving them forward to persisting or graduating. Future research with different populations will add to our knowledge of which levers help students the most. What the compilation of the factors do, on the whole, is create a culture for student success. In the end, it may be that no single feature of the program is more needed compared to another, but rather that all are needed as they provide a synergy and campus environment that allows students to stay in college and break out of a life of poverty.

The ASAP program has attracted national attention and, with the help of funding from private foundations, it has been replicated at three community colleges in Ohio and is scheduled to start in California and expand to upstate New York in the fall 2017 semester (Mangan, 2017). Early results for the Ohio colleges are promising but if successful, it remains to be seen whether the public sector will be willing to pick up the extra costs of running the program, as the CUNY system did, once private support ends (Sommo & Ratledge, 2016).

As far as the CUNY system is concerned, as important as it is, it is unlikely that the ASAP program contributed very much to the mobility rates calculated by Chetty and colleagues (2017), as the number of students enrolled in the program were small during the time frame studied. The results highlighted by MDRC (Scrivener et al., 2015), however, point optimistically to a prediction that with an expanded ASAP program, not only will completion rates increase but also that mobility rates will be even higher than that shown in Table 2, other things being equal. As it stands, the CUNY ASAP program is an example of what can be accomplished with extra money and student support services directed at increasing the graduation rates of high risk students.

### **Another Look at the Mobility Report Card**

The study by Chetty and colleagues (2017) is an important new dataset that must be addressed. But it only gives us hints at what causes the mobility rates to differ among colleges. Further research using this dataset data will help to clarify the causes. As soon as the mobility study was released it attracted a good deal of media attention. The *New York Times* published an online interactive guide to the data and invited readers to explore the mobility rates of the colleges that interested them (Some colleges have, 2017).

Interest groups seized upon the opportunity to respond to both the positive and negative results for individual colleges. On one end of the spectrum, Brigham Young University felt that its very low mobility rate was due, in large part, to a Mormon culture in which many women stayed out of the labor force to raise their children (Hansen, 2017); whereas, on the other end of the spectrum, HBCUs touted their high mobility score as evidence that they played an “important role in promoting upward mobility for poor black students” (Reeves & Joo, 2017, para. 8). These examples highlight how important it is to contextualize any data sources.

The critics have a point. The study leaves plenty of room for conflicting interpretations of its results as it does not prove causality. The authors freely admit this. They do some sophisticated tests for a few of the variables which might explain the different mobility rates between colleges. These include the location of the college, the area cost of living, and the differences in college majors, endowments, instructional expenditures and other institutional characteristics (Chetty et al., 2017, pp. 27-30). None of the variables tested were found to explain much of the difference between colleges.

However, in looking for correlations between variables, the authors note that they are using some imperfect proxies for measures such as the percentage of children from immigrant families at some colleges. The share of Asian and Hispanics, for instance, is “highly correlated with the mobility rate...[and] the correlation between racial and ethnic shares and mobility rates reflects [most likely] the fact that the children of immigrants are disproportionately likely to attend certain schools which have, for other reasons, very high mobility rates” (Chetty et al., 2017, p. 29). This point proved true in the top 10 community colleges listed above as they enrolled more Hispanic students than the national averages found in other community colleges.

We would argue that the Chetty (2017) baseline study sets a very high bar for economic mobility for community colleges. Moving from the bottom quintile to the top in the income

distribution is no easy task and depends on a host of variables external to the campus. As we have stated earlier in this paper, from studies done on intergenerational mobility we know that it pays to go to the community college. In an era where wealth and income inequality is increasing (Chetty et al., 2014), moving up one or two quintile from the bottom would be quite an accomplishment for these underfunded colleges.

Romano and Palmer (2016b) have also emphasized the role of these local colleges as part of the social safety net in a turbulent economy. The colleges are available and open should students, at colleges away from home, need a temporary landing place because of a failed academic experience, family illness, or a decrease in family income due to the loss of a job. Kalogrides and Grodski (2011) refer to the community college as something to fall back on, for some students, and their research shows that these students “have more favorable academic and labor market outcomes than similar students who drop out of postsecondary education altogether”( p. 853). As institutions of second chances (Cohen et al., 2014), it is important to consider a more thorough assessment of the role that community colleges play in promoting social mobility that would include factors such as these.

Criticisms aside, we acknowledge that the new Chetty data provides the raw material for a better understanding of the connection between higher education and social mobility. At the very least, on a purely descriptive level, the study of the highest ranking colleges highlighted by the Chetty baseline study, and in our sample of community colleges, are “colleges that deserve further study as potential engines of upward mobility” (Chetty et al., 2017, p.1).

#### **Other Measures of Success: The Aspen Prize**

The data and baseline study generated by Chetty and colleagues (2017) creates a new ranking of colleges based on income mobility. Yet, other, more established and tested, types of rankings exist, making it instructive to compare them with the Chetty rankings. We judge that the data produced for the Aspen Institutes’ prize for community college excellence provides the best national comparison available. This million dollar prize has been awarded every other year, starting in 2011, to honor colleges “that deliver exceptional student outcomes in the following four areas: 1) Retention and completion; 2) Learning, 3) Student employment and earnings, and 4) Equity for the underserved.” (Measures and selection process may be found at: <http://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize/>). The winners of the prize thus far have been:

Valencia (FL-2011); Walla Walla (WA-2013); Santa Barbara City (CA-2013), Santa Fe (FL-2015), and Lake Area Technical Institute (SD-2017).

The Aspen process is guided by an accomplished panel of researchers and practitioners, and the community college finalists for the prize proudly display their selection on their websites. The selection process goes through several rounds of vetting and includes collection of available national and local data, campus visits and attention to institutional practices and policies which promote student success. The model used gives attention not only to “absolute levels of performance [but also to] gains over time” (Aspen Prize, 2017, para. 2).

When the criteria used by Aspen for these colleges is matched against their Chetty (2017) mobility ranking, however, they tell quite a different story. As shown in Figure 2, the average mobility score for the Aspen winners is 1.7% (range= 1.2 to 2.1), considerably below that of the top 10 community colleges at 5.6%, and virtually identical to the community college average.

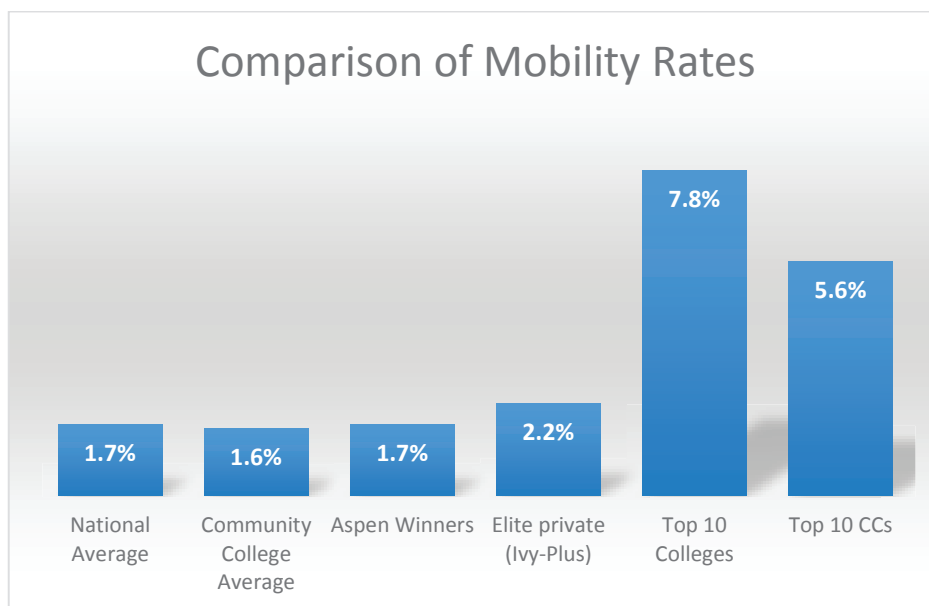


Figure 2. Comparison of Mobility Rates of Different College Groupings

Why don't the Aspen prize winners have higher rates of mobility for their students? First it must be acknowledged that the Chetty data (2017) and the Aspen data are taken from different years. The Aspen Prize is based on the data available at the time of the contest year; whereas the Chetty baseline study deals with students who attended college between 1999 and 2004, measuring their income levels in 2014. However, after checking the Aspen data over a period of

years, we judge the difference in the colleges' outcomes and characteristics has little variation and therefore conclude that the difference in years has a minimal impact on our analysis.

Next, we note that the Aspen criteria are broader than Chetty's (2017), even though higher completion and transfer rates should translate into higher lifetime incomes. We also know that the Aspen data on employment and incomes is much poorer than that found in the Chetty data, which is based on tax records not available to Aspen. Perhaps good processes and outcomes, as conventionally measured, do not translate into economic mobility. Or perhaps the Chetty "winners" are a result of factors beyond the influence of the college such as the ability and motivation of their students or the nature of the particular labor markets they enter. Recall in our analysis of the top 10 community colleges with respect to mobility that all the colleges are large, in states with high immigrant/ minority populations, and located along the borders of the US. These factors create different types of job opportunities for those entering the labor market compared, for instance, to rural areas of the country that have seen an exodus of business, industry, and job options.

A closer look at the differences between the Chetty (2017) rankings and those of the Aspen Institute leads us to believe that the latter is a better indication of institutional effectiveness because it measures factors over which the college has some control. That is, lifetime incomes depend not just on education, but also on the ability and motivation of the students as well as the strength of the labor market. That is not to say that colleges can't make a difference. They can, and research clearly shows that some colleges do a better job with the students and inputs given to them than others in producing the positive outcomes they have control over (see Romano & Palmer, 2016a, pp. 53-90 for a review of the evidence).

### **Leading the Way**

Further research will indicate whether the Chetty (2017) data can assist us in making a connection between individual colleges, social mobility and institutional effectiveness. But, as we have argued, at the present time the Aspen criteria provides a better measure of institutional effectiveness. The vetting process for the Aspen award focuses more centrally on factors that are within the control of the community college, and concludes that campus leaders have a role to play in improving student outcomes (Aspen Prize, 2017).

In what follows, we focus on the role leaders play in changing the landscape of their colleges to help support students on their way to better outcomes and improved social mobility.

Central to this discussion is how leaders frame change efforts on campus. We know change is hard; of note, 70% of change efforts fail (Kotter, 2008). Given this high rate of failure, what is different, then, for those college leaders who actually lead successful change efforts?

Community colleges were in the national limelight when President Obama focused attention on the pivotal role of two-year colleges in contributing to college completion rates. In 2009, the proposed American Graduation Initiative set a goal of increasing the number of Americans with a certificate or college degree by 5 million over a period of 10 years. The initial \$12 billion targeted toward this effort was ultimately reduced to \$2 billion for fiscal years 2011-2014 (Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT); Mikelson, Eyster, Durham, & Cohen, 2017). This influx of resources to the sector resulted in a number of national efforts to help improve student outcomes (see <https://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/> for a summary of programs supported).

Connected to this funding infusion was the Transformative Change Initiative (TCI), which started in 2012 and focused on “assisting community colleges to scale-up innovation in the form of guided pathways, programs of study, and evidence-based strategies to improve student outcomes and program, organization, and system performance” (Bragg et al., 2014, p. 3). The TCI provided short briefs on strategies used by TAACCCT consortia to scale change. The work of the TCI resulted in a listing of key themes in creating a framework of change, including:

- Leadership, organization, and support
- Adoption and adaptation
- Networks and professional development
- Policy-focused and publically financed reform
- Technology support and technology assistance
- Targeted sharing and dissemination
- Evaluation utilization to grow impact (Bragg et al., 2014, p. 7)

The focus on leadership in guiding change efforts highlights the central role of leaders in improving the community college context and culture to better support student outcomes. Focusing on streamlining processes to eliminate barriers for students begins with leaders creating an adaptive culture (Heifetz, 1998).

When the Aspen Institute looked more closely at the role of leaders at the award winning colleges, a pattern of qualities emerged. Their research highlighted five qualities in particular

that the presidents possessed, with the first building block being a deep commitment to student success and an ability to create lasting change within the college (Aspen Institute, 2013). This singular focus on aligning institutional programs, decision-making, resources, and a willingness to take risks to improve student success guided all campus actions. Here, a central vision based on student success guided all decision-making.

Internal changes to how community colleges structure academic pathways for students alters former practices of a cafeteria style course selection and provide a critical step in improving success (Bailey et al., 2015). Transformational change of this type requires more than single leaders can do on their own to be sure, but it is how these positional leaders guide efforts on campus that can make a difference.

Transformational change practices are at the heart of the Aspen Institute award for excellence. The leadership qualities of the president that focus on student success are translated to institutional practices. In analyzing common practices of institutions achieving exceptional outcomes for students, the Aspen Institute found five themes: (1) strong leadership and culture; (2) guided pathways to continuing education and well-paying jobs; (3) intentional focus on improving teaching and learning; (4) strategic data use to improve practice and close equity gaps; and (5) partnerships and structures aligned to defined student outcomes (Aspen Institute, 2014, p. 10). Taken together, these practices create a context ripe for improving social mobility for community college students.

As evident in the findings from the TCI as well (Bragg et al., 2014), leadership is central to efforts of institutional improvement and in the change process. Central to successful efforts are the ways in which leaders focus campus attention to issues (especially on effective strategies for improving teaching and learning), on making resource decisions to support these practices, and on changing organizational structures to remove barriers for students (Eddy, Sydow, Alfred, & Garza Mitchell, 2015). Building strategic partnerships helps community colleges leverage their scant resources and creates shared goals with partners in the business and social service communities (Eddy & Amey, 2014). All of these actions require community colleges to change their historic organizational patterns of doing business.

Change models have been around in business for decades, but more and more these models are being applied in higher education (Kezar, 2014). A popular model of change emerging from business circles is John Kotter's eight-step model (2002, 2008, 2014). Kotter's



(2014) model of change includes the following accelerators of change: (1) create a sense of urgency around a Big Opportunity; (2) build and evolve a guiding coalition; (3) form a change vision and strategic initiatives; (4) enlist a volunteer army; (5) enable action by removing barriers; (6) generate (and celebrate) short-term wins; (7) sustain acceleration; (8) institute change (pp. 27-33). This model provides a clear framework that leaders can employ as they work to change and transform their campuses. With a focus on equity, it is important to be clear on what is needed to remove barriers for students on their way to completion. Critical to this level of transformational, or deep change, is the need to question long-accepted assumptions about how students' progress and learn, and how faculty and institutional practices can best support student learning (Kezar, 2014).

Those leading transformational change efforts at community colleges must make decisions on how to use scarce resources to help fulfill the institution's vision and accomplish goals laid out in its strategic plan. Learning from successful change models highlights how leaders must frame change for others and draw attention to items needing attention (Eddy, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). In this case, how leaders focus the campus's attention matters in terms of what gets accomplished and what is not supported. Making these tough decisions means that community colleges can no longer be all things to all people (Vaughan, 2005). Instead, new approaches are demanded (Eddy et al., 2015). Leaders must be champions of change and rely on a larger network to accomplish the types of changes required to support students better. Moving into this new era of leadership requires the talents of many, a transparency of action, use of analytical data to make informed decisions, and leaders framing change to increase buy-in. Community college leaders must be advocates for their students and campuses and be the ones to ask the tough questions needed to advance opportunities for all students.

It is clear from our investigation on social mobility in this paper that leaders have a central role in supporting student success. Equally obvious is that factors external to the college influence how leaders can leverage change. A close examination of the Aspen winners provides insight on how leaders actually help to seed economic growth in their regions (Aspen Institute, 2017). Rather than rely simply on fulfilling employer needs, successful colleges and their leaders must find ways to work proactively to create economic development and react quickly to changes in the business environment.

## **Conclusion**

The function of higher education in promoting social mobility has never been more important than it is today. But, if we are to advance this process, the role of community colleges must be strengthened. The Chetty (2017) report cards highlight how access and student success must work in tandem to increase mobility. Community colleges have a strong legacy of access, but less so on metrics of success. This finding is not new to those working in or studying community colleges, yet our investigation shows signs of hope. The payoffs for investing in community colleges can be great, as evidenced with the success of the CUNY ASAP program.

The data provided by Chetty and colleagues (2017) shows that some children from low-income families were able to increase their social mobility, in part, by attending college. Further research using this dataset will help us isolate the factors which contribute to this mobility. History shows that parental support, in particular educational levels of mothers (Attewell & Lavin, 2007), contributes to opportunities for children to move up the economic ladder. The persistence of income inequality, however, creates environments in which more segregation exists, poorer K-12 schools are found, and more family instability occurs (Chetty et al., 2014). Overcoming the sticky floor of poverty is more difficult in these situations, and includes factors beyond the control of community college leaders.

Our investigation into the top 10 community colleges with high levels of social mobility found that some colleges were achieving success. The common factors among these community colleges with high rates of social mobility included their location in three border states (California, New York, and Texas), high enrollment of Hispanic students in these institutions, and stronger labor markets relative to their rural counterparts; using descriptive data we have speculated that all of these factors contributed to the leaps in social mobility witnessed by students enrolled in these top 10 colleges. In addition, the increased student support offered by the ASAP program for the four CUNY colleges in this group of 10 underscores how specialized programs that scaffold lower-income students can result in better completion rates, albeit at a price.

Alternatively, even though the winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence do not rise to the top of the Chetty (2017) rankings, these institutions have instituted change processes that address inequities and support student learning. In particular, the features highlighted in the Aspen Prize cover areas in which college leaders and stakeholders have more

control. Strategies employed by the leaders of these institutions can be used broadly as community colleges seek to improve completion rates and opportunities for students. Guided pathways, improved advising models, and access to support services all contribute to improving student outcomes (Aspen, 2013).

What is often missing in studies of mobility is the role college leaders can play in changing cultures to promote student success. Strategic leadership leverages institutional resources in transformational ways (Aspen, 2013; Bragg, 2014; Wyner, 2014). Leaders who have high levels of contextual competencies are able to understand the college and community environment and culture quickly (Eddy & Amey, 2014), and they are effective translators and boundary spanners who can lead change efforts (Bragg, 2013; Eddy, 2003, 2010). Successful change efforts require leaders to question assumptions regarding how operations have historically run and to frame change in ways that stakeholders can buy into new processes (Black & Gregersen, 2013; Kezar, 2014). In these cases, leaders look at institutional data to determine what supports the college mission and what is effective to improve student learning and outcomes. Data analytics provide new ways to look at persistent problems and provide college leaders with tools to change what they can in reaction to the larger environment.

Because 60% of all community colleges are located in rural areas, it is critical to understand what strategies work best in these environments. The ties of the community college to economic development are often stronger in these regions, and persistent cycles of poverty in rural areas highlight how difficult it is to create social mobility in these more remote areas of the country. In these cases, recasting the college role and focus can help create opportunities.

In the final analysis, we conclude that community colleges have the potential to contribute to social mobility to a greater extent than they have, if given the resources. Even though college leaders have little control over the external environment, they do serve as linchpins in transforming how their institutions can make a difference in improving student lives. In this role, it is important for two-year college leaders to advocate to state and federal policymakers the type of support and programming needed to improve completion rates. As evident in the ASAP program, scaffolding students during college can result in dramatic results. But this support comes at a cost. How states and private funders decide to financially support community colleges can leverage the potential social mobility possible in the sector. There is too much at stake not to continue asking the tough questions of what works for student success.

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