

JACK KENT COOKE  
FOUNDATION

BREAKING DOWN WALLS

INCREASING ACCESS  
TO FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES  
FOR HIGH-ACHIEVING  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

*Jennifer Giancola, Ph.D. and Elizabeth Davidson, Ph.D.*

*January 2015*

## SUMMARY

Many more community college students could succeed at four-year colleges and universities than are given the chance. Significant numbers of academically gifted community college students start their postsecondary education at two-year institutions for a variety of reasons having nothing to do with their ability. Once at community college, however, these students are often unable to transfer to four-year bachelor's degree-granting institutions despite their documented ability, because they lack information, advising, financial support, and opportunity. Yet recent research and the experience of students who were awarded scholarships by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation upon transferring make clear that many high-performing community college students can excel even at the country's elite colleges and universities. Facilitating transfer would benefit both students and institutions of higher education at all levels. How far a student can take his education should be determined by his ability, industry, and creativity, not by the happenstance of the institution where he first began his journey.

## THE PROBLEM

Transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution is not easy. Though the majority of community college students aspire to complete a bachelor's degree, only a few succeed. Students face a myriad of barriers thrown up by community colleges, including a lack of adequate, quality transfer advising, and by four-year institutions, including limited financial aid and confusing credit transfer policies. In addition, some four-year institutions unilaterally limit the space allotted to transfers. This is especially unfair to the highest-performing community college students because they already have demonstrated the capacity to do superior college-level work.

## THE SOLUTION

To correct this problem, community colleges must improve transfer advising, and four-year colleges and universities must both expand their recruitment of community college students with successful academic records and better support them once they enroll. Because many community colleges have rigorous programs that prepare their students for further study—with courses that are eligible for transfer credit—both two- and four-year institutions would profit from paying more attention to transfer students; their admission validates the strenuous community college coursework and provides the four-year college with a new source of (often nontraditional) students.

Through its Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has repeatedly demonstrated that with proper

support community college students can transfer to, and graduate from, the most prestigious four-year institutions—with outstanding records. Transfer students excel notwithstanding having less-advantaged backgrounds; many are the first in their families to attend college, and their families often have incomes well below the poverty level. Fully 35 percent of Cooke Scholars have attended institutions designated by Barron's as "Most Competitive"; one in ten graduated from the Ivy League (see listing in box on page 2). Recent Cooke Scholars have included a computer engineering student who graduated from Cornell (with a final GPA of 3.71), a neuroscience major who graduated from Columbia (3.70 GPA), and a biology major who graduated from Brown (3.85 GPA). Nearly half (47 percent) of Cooke Scholars have gone on to do graduate work, including a student currently completing her Ph.D. at Harvard in history of science, another completing his medical degree at the University of Michigan, one who has completed both an M.B.A. and M.P.A. at Harvard, and one who completed her Ph.D. in physics at Washington State University.

Overall, 97 percent of Cooke Scholars earned their bachelor's degree within three years. In addition, over 76 percent graduated from their four-year colleges with a cumulative GPA higher than 3.5. The record of success of the Cooke Scholars makes it abundantly clear that many more community college graduates could go on to successful completion of four-year degrees than currently have the opportunity.

Cooke Scholars, however, have benefitted from additional support provided or facilitated by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. When we analyzed data from the National Student Clearinghouse for 3,600 previous applicants to our scholarship program, we found that while nearly all of our chosen Cooke Scholars attained their bachelor's degree (many at selective schools), only 72 percent of applicants who were not selected attained their bachelor's degree. Fully 28 percent either never enrolled or enrolled and dropped out before completion. All of these students were nominated by their community college for our award and all earned a GPA of at least 3.5 in community college. As colleges were typically permitted only to nominate two students per year; these students represent the best students at each college.

Knowing their incoming academic talents, we believe that these students could have completed their bachelor's degree at rates equal to Cooke Scholars, with the right support. That one in four of them failed to do so represents a huge loss of talent to our nation's workforce. It is likely that these students are just the tip of the iceberg of talented community college students who have the capacity to complete a bachelor's degree.

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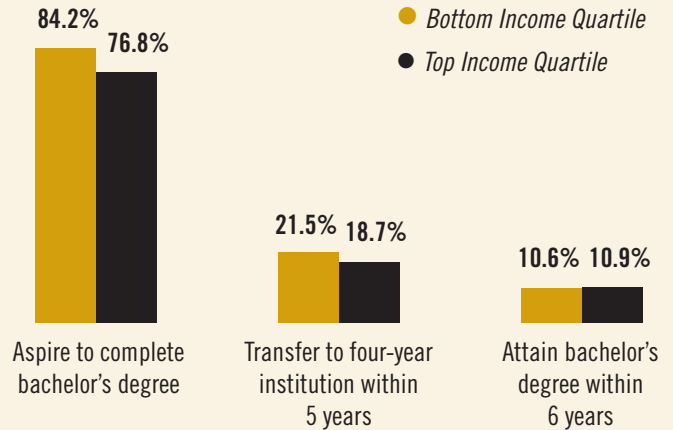
### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Every year in the United States, more than seven million students enroll in community colleges.<sup>1</sup> This group constitutes 45 percent of all postsecondary enrollment. A disproportionate number of them come from poor families. While 44 percent of low-income students enroll in community college after high school, only 15 percent of high-income students do so.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, this income disparity holds true for the brightest students. One in four high school students in the top academic quartile of their class who are from families in the bottom socioeconomic quartile will enroll in a two-year (or less than two-year) college. At the same time, only 10 percent of high-achieving students from families in the top socioeconomic quartile enroll in two-year colleges.<sup>3</sup> In other words, thousands of bright students with the academic readiness to complete a bachelor's degree start out at community colleges *primarily for financial reasons*.

Certainly by educating underprivileged students and setting them on the path toward upward social mobility, community colleges perform an essential public service. Moreover, they are succeeding at raising aspirations; more than 80 percent of first-time community college students aspire to complete a bachelor's degree. Only a little more than one in ten will succeed, however (see chart at right).<sup>4</sup> Skeptics suggest that this low rate of success stems from the transfer students' poor academic preparation.<sup>5</sup> But that is not true; even the best-prepared and most talented community college students face similar odds.

### DEGREE ASPIRATIONS AND TRANSFER BY INCOME LEVEL (For First-time Beginning Community College Students)



1. [U.S. Department of Education \*Digest of Education Statistics 2013\*](#).
2. [National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education](#)
3. [Education Trust, \*Falling Out of the Lead: Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond\*, 2014. Difference significant at the p<0.05 level.](#)
4. Horn, L. and Skomsvold, P. Community College Student Outcomes: 1994-2009. U.S. Department of Education Web Table NCES 2012-253. November 2011.
5. [See comments on Richard Kahlenberg's article "Facilitating Community-College Transfers", \*The Chronicle of Higher Education\*, June 3, 2011.](#)

### INSTITUTIONS ATTENDED BY COOKE UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER SCHOLARS INCLUDE:

Amherst College  
Brevard College  
Brown University  
Bryn Mawr College  
Bucknell University  
Claremont McKenna College  
College of William & Mary  
Columbia University  
Cornell University  
Emory University  
George Washington University  
Georgetown University  
Harvard University

Johns Hopkins University  
Lehigh University  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
New York University  
Northwestern University  
Oberlin College  
Reed College  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
Smith College  
Stanford University  
Tufts University  
Tulane University  
University of California, Berkeley

University of California, Los Angeles  
University of Chicago  
University of Miami  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
University of Pennsylvania  
University of Rochester  
University of Southern California  
University of Virginia  
Washington University in St. Louis  
Wellesley College  
Wesleyan University  
Yale University

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Many community college students had distinguished high school academic careers. Fully 35.5 percent had a high school GPA above 3.0, including 11.5 percent above 3.5.<sup>6</sup> Yet they face barriers at every level. In addition to the challenges that *all* community college students face in navigating the path from associate to bachelor's degree (inadequate advising, confusing credit transfer policies, murky articulation agreements, limited financial aid), high-achieving community college graduates are hampered by limited transfer slots at the institutions best suited for their academic ability—i.e., selective colleges. In a 2006 study, we found that less than one out of every 1,000 students at the nation's most selective private institutions was a community college transfer. What's more, at that time the trend lines were heading in the wrong direction: the percentage of transfer students at these schools declined from 10.5 percent in 1984 to 5.7 percent in 2002.<sup>7</sup> These are the most recent data available.<sup>8</sup>

Our direct experience supporting transfer students gives us no reason to believe that the situation has improved in the years since the 2006 study. Rather, our experience has led us to the conclusion that many four-year institutions have transfer acceptance rates significantly lower than their acceptance rates for high school students, even when these community college students have already excelled academically at the post-secondary level. Princeton University, for instance, has an outright moratorium on transfers, while Harvard admitted just 15 in 2012.<sup>9</sup> (In contrast, Columbia and Cornell actively recruit high-performing community college students.)

The difficulties these students face do not end once they have been admitted. Transfer students often struggle to integrate into their new institution as they adapt to a different instructional style, more demanding coursework, and varying faculty expectations.<sup>10</sup> In addition, their time commitments to family and work can affect their successful academic integration, as they try to balance their personal lives and school work. Data collected by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation from a sample of high-achieving, low-

income students who transferred to a four-year institution in the fall of 2012 indicate that 92 percent of students found it “challenging” to manage their new academic work load.<sup>11</sup> In addition, 20 percent considered dropping out of school their first year. Yet because of their academic talent and persistence they prevailed; all but one of these students were still enrolled in spring of 2014, on the way to graduation. More telling, 93 percent had a B average or better.

## COOKE SCHOLARS DEMONSTRATE EXCELLENCE

The experience of the Cooke Scholars demonstrates that if given support, including grant aid and high-quality, professional advising, students with financial need can attain academic success at the same rate or even better than other students. The scholarship recipients chosen in 2014 had an average community college GPA of 3.98 and 79 percent were the first in their families to attend college. Their median adjusted gross income was \$4,500.<sup>12</sup> It is telling that 88 percent of these scholars matriculated at an institution classified by Barron's as “Most Competitive” or “Highly Competitive;” the students' competitiveness in admissions is undeniable.

Year after year, once enrolled, Cooke Scholars shine. Over the last decade, 76 percent have graduated with a 3.5 GPA or higher. As noted, Cooke Scholars have gone on to graduate programs at the nation's best graduate institutions. They are contributing members of the workforce, including as engineers, artists, physicians, policy analysts, biochemists, software developers, and attorneys. This success story could be expanded if other high-performing community college students received similar financial and counseling support.

## CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

It is anachronistic to think of community colleges as the weaklings of academia. Community college coursework is becoming much more rigorous. More than 160 community colleges now sponsor honors

6. Provasnik, S. & Planty, M. (2008) *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

7. Dowd, A., Bensimon, E.M., Gabbard, G., Singleton, S., Macias, E., Dee, J., Melguizo, T., Cheslock, J. & Giles, D. (2006) *Threading the Needle of the American Dream*. Executive Summary.

8. While the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System does capture transfer students, it does not distinguish between students who transfer from two-year versus four-year institutions.

9. Petey E. Mentz (2012). “The Real 1%: Harvard Admits 15 Transfer Students.” *The Harvard Crimson*.

10. Townsend, B. K. & Wilson, K. B. (2009). *The academic and social integration of persisting community college transfer students*. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10(4), 405-423.

11. Schmertz, B. & Carney, J. (2013) *Making the Leap: Understanding the Successful Transfer of High-Achieving, Low-Income Community College Students to Four Year Institutions*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Presented at Association for the Study of Higher Education annual conference.

12. Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) is a family's total income minus certain tax deductions. The median AGI is the level that divides the pool of scholars in half (i.e., half have more and half have less than the median AGI).

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programs recognized by the National Collegiate Honors Council.<sup>13</sup> One of the most noteworthy examples of a flourishing community college honors program is the Honors College at Miami Dade College. The school combines rigorous academic standards, a global perspective, the opportunity for leadership experiences, and an experienced faculty; it serves some of the best young minds in Florida. The students earn financial awards, take advantage of one-on-one advising, and enjoy enrichment opportunities. The Honors College even offers a “Bridge to the Baccalaureate” program that provides a pathway to earn a bachelor’s degree at the University of Miami.<sup>14</sup> Many of the students in this Honors College have gone on to graduate from top colleges and universities nationwide. Over one thousand community colleges also have chapters of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honors society of two-year colleges and academic programs, which inducts 133,000 members annually, typically requiring a 3.5 GPA to qualify.<sup>15</sup> In short, there are many strong students who could credibly compete in four-year institutions if they were not walled off.

Both two- and four-year institutions have it within their ambit to address this issue simply by paying more attention to the issues facing transfer students. To enable more high-achieving, low- to moderate-income community college students to transfer to bachelor’s degree granting institutions, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation from 2006 to 2014 partnered with 14 highly selective colleges and universities under the auspices of its Community College Transfer Initiative (CCTI). The results: in just three years, almost 1,100 students matriculated into the eight inaugural CCTI institutions, and they attained a 3.0 combined GPA. Remarkably, a number of faculty members who were critical at the beginning of the program later asked, “Can we get more CCTI students?”<sup>16</sup> The CCTI initiative identified a number of steps four-year institutions can take to increase the success of transfer students, including paving the way for change by building institutional support, finding and preparing the right students, and supporting students through to degree completion (see more detailed discussion in box on page 5). Only a few institutions nationally have adopted all of these measures.

## CONCLUSION

Results from national studies, including our own, show that upon transferring to a four-year school, community college students do more than just “get by”—they equal or surpass their peers at their new schools. Recent analyses from the National Student Clearinghouse indicate that nationally 60 percent of community college students who manage to transfer earn their bachelor’s degree within four years. The highest performing college students do even better: 97 percent of Cooke Scholars earn their bachelor’s degree in three years.<sup>17</sup> Since 59 percent of bachelor’s degree students graduate within six years, transfer students are completing their four-year degrees actually at a *higher rate* than students who came straight out of high school.<sup>18</sup> The recent research and the experience of the Cooke Scholars makes it simply undeniable that community college transfer students are just as competent as students who begin their studies at a four-year college, and maybe more so.

In sum, the structural barriers to transferring are problematic on two levels. At a minimum, four-year colleges that do not recruit high-performing transfers are missing an important pool of potential applicants. Certainly, the success of the Cooke Scholars suggests that able candidates exist and that, given a chance, they will do very well. On an individual level, the walls that have kept high-performing students who are potential transfer students from fulfilling their potential are grossly unfair. A gifted student who is denied an education commensurate with her abilities will not make as large a contribution to the common good, to their families or to their own personal success. We do ourselves a disservice as a society to deny these gifted students the opportunity to fulfill their potential simply in virtue of their having begun their academic careers at a two-year institution. The message for both colleges and education policy makers is clear: where a student began her studies should not ineluctably determine her entire academic career or her life chances.

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13. [National Collegiate Honors Council](#)

14. [Miami Dade College](#)

15. [Phi Theta Kappa](#)

16. [Jack Kent Cooke Foundation \(2014\) Partnerships that Promote Success: Lessons and findings from the evaluation of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s Community College Transfer Initiative.](#)

17. Shapiro, D. & Dunder, A. (2013) *Baccalaureate Attainment: A National View of the Postsecondary Outcomes of Students Who Transfer from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

18. [U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. \(2014\). The Condition of Education 2014 \(NCES 2014-083\)](#)

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### HOW FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS CAN BETTER SUPPORT TRANSFER STUDENTS LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER INITIATIVE

#### PAVE THE WAY FOR CHANGE

- Address transfer issues in the institution's mission or strategic plan
- Build a critical mass of supporters across campus, including administrators and faculty members

#### PARTNER WITH TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

- Identify prospective students early
- Nurture students' self-belief
- Ensure students take the right classes

#### REACH OUT EARLY AND OFTEN TO STUDENTS

- Appoint a campus point person for transfer students
- Offer joint classes and summer academic programs
- Provide workshops so students can learn what it takes to succeed at a four-year institution
- Facilitate campus visits

#### SUPPORT STUDENTS POST-TRANSFER

- Improve credit transfer policies
- Develop social integration strategies (cohort activities, peer mentoring)
- Designate trusted "transfer agents" to help students

Giancola, J. & Davidson, E. (2015) *Breaking Down Walls: Increasing Access to Four-Year Colleges for High-Achieving Community College Students*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

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