

# CUNY Community College Graduation Rates Do Not Effectively Measure Student Success

*by Jeffrey Lax*

The Center for an Urban Future (CUF) released a report last November asserting that, with a six-year graduation rate of 28 percent, City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges “should be doing much better.”<sup>1</sup> The report declared graduation rates “lackluster” and criticized community colleges for “not yet delivering on their potential.”<sup>2</sup>

But the CUF report’s perception that low graduation rates demonstrate a failure of the system (and therefore a disservice to students) profoundly oversimplifies—and misstates—the true goals of a community college and its students. The report misunderstands not only how to make sense of community college graduation rates contextually and as compared to those of four-year schools, but also the true meaning and usefulness of these statistics. To understand these issues, it is imperative to understand and scrutinize three major flaws in the CUF report, which undermine its intended effect as a tool for “economic reform.” Those flaws are: 1) the uniquely complex issues administrators and faculty face in graduating community college students as compared with four-year students; 2) that the community college graduation rate is not an effective measure of its “success rate”; and 3) the value of conveying even some college-level experience to students who may otherwise receive none at all.

The first major flaw in the report is that, while it recognizes that community college students often encounter hardships not as prevalent among four-year students, such as language barriers or socioeconomic disadvantages, the report down-

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plays the impact of these obstacles and fails to appreciate how profoundly and pervasively they affect community college students.

The unique difficulties faced by community college students are many, including: language barriers, socioeconomic disadvantages, single-parenthood and work obligations, and underdeveloped academic habits and skills. In 2010, the New America Foundation issued a report finding that many low-income students prefer community college as their initial entry point to postsecondary education and that many of these students arrive “with the kind of life circumstance that make it hard to succeed in school, like limited financial resources, demanding family obli-

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gations, or difficulty finding transportation or child care.”<sup>3</sup> A disproportionate number of community college students also have numerous academic deficiencies. Recent studies have shown that community college students require remediation at three times the rate of four-year students.<sup>4</sup> All else is therefore not equal between typical four-year students and their community college counterparts, and community colleges cannot magically “cure” these extraneous challenges and difficulties. The reality is that many students, no matter how well-guided by caring and qualified administrators and faculty, encounter a greater incidence of these obstacles than the average four-year student.<sup>5</sup> The unfortunate but unavoidable result is that a significant percentage of community college students will not graduate no matter how perfect the system.

Moreover, while the CUF report lauds the CUNY community colleges’ open enrollment admissions policy, it fails to recognize the profound trade-off required to accommodate such a practice. Unlike the approach at four-year schools, no student with a high school diploma is turned away from a community college. It would be a simple task to increase graduation rates by imposing grade requirements on candidates for admission, but this would mean turning away many disadvantaged students and that is not the community college way. Instead, community colleges—as recognized by their students—are a school of last resort. They are the place to go for students in even the most dire financial, social, and academic circumstances where they can receive one last chance to succeed. A large number of these students will be unable to take advantage of this opportunity, given the severe handicaps they come in with. What is remarkable is not how many do not graduate, but how many students are able to make use of community college resources and support systems, turn their life around and succeed. Community college administrators and faculty engage in a noble undertaking: helping disadvan-

taged students overcome hardship in an effort to even the playing field, as much as possible, with four-year students. That this playing field can never be entirely leveled cannot simplistically be blamed on the failure of community colleges to graduate a particular percentage of students. Further, the CUF report's contention that the 28 percent six-year graduation rate is too low is a dubious one given that the report itself concedes that CUNY's community college graduation rate not only exceeds the national average, but is surpassed only by Los Angeles among the five largest cities' graduation rates in the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

A second flaw with the CUF report is that it measures success solely by grad-

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uation rate. This is not an appropriate indicator of success and certainly should not be treated as a dispositive one. The report indicates that within six years, nine percent of students are still enrolled in a CUNY two- or four-year program while another 11.8 percent transfer out of CUNY. The report improperly classifies these two groups of students as community college failures because they are not calculated as part of the 28 percent who have graduated a CUNY institution. In reality, a large number of these students are community college success stories. Many (if not most) of these students have moved on to four-year programs (either inside or outside of CUNY) indicating that, although they did not receive a degree from a community college, they have succeeded in their quest to gain admission to a four-year school. A significant number of these students are on their way to a bachelor's degree, a statistic not measured by the CUF report.

Another problem with trying to measure the six-year success of transfer students (and those still enrolled in CUNY after the six-year time frame) are the problems faced by those students who make it into a four-year program and are denied credits for various non-remedial classes they have already taken and passed at a community college. Many four-year colleges have policies, or have constructed obstacles, that routinely deny these credits, making it much more difficult for community college students to compete on an even playing field with students who have taken the same courses at a four-year institution. This, despite the fact that many CUNY community college professors have also taught, or teach concurrently, at four-year CUNY schools.

Imagine how demoralizing it must be for a community college student to pass an extremely difficult advanced business law class only to be told she must take it again at her new school. The setback is not merely an emotional one; by routinely denying credits for coursework already completed, four-year schools create seri-

ous impediments to community college students' prospects for graduation. At best, a student's progress may be significantly delayed while, at worst, some students may be frustrated into deciding not to continue at all.

The third flaw with the CUF report is the faulty assumption that all drop-outs are failures of the community college system. This overly-simplistic view fails to recognize that many of these students would never get an opportunity to take college-level courses at all if not for the open-enrollment policy of community colleges. Recently, the University of Washington published a study finding that the marginal value of a year of college is somewhere between six and ten percent of

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additional lifetime wages for each college year completed. Other studies have corroborated this figure.<sup>7</sup> Particularly compelling is that some studies have shown that prospective students who are “on the fence” about college—a group especially prevalent in community colleges—are the most likely to benefit from attending.<sup>8</sup>

While these studies indicate that obtaining a college degree increases lifetime earnings from between \$300,000 and \$600,000, they also recognize that there is quantifiable financial value in completing any college coursework at all. It is, therefore, unfair to characterize the success or failure of a community college student by graduation alone. Indeed, there are a number of students who enroll in community college with no intent of attaining a degree. Rather, they seek to develop or hone a particular set of skills, or to obtain specific knowledge by taking a few targeted classes that may be useful to their business or trade.<sup>9</sup> A bookkeeper might enroll in one or two accounting courses simply to sharpen his ledger skills. An immigrant who owns a small business could enroll in an English class to help her improve communications with clients. A hotel manager might feel that a hospitality course could help him provide better customer service. Such students are, in fact, not really “students” at all, but may be professionals, business people, or highly-skilled workers who enroll in these courses, successfully obtain the desired knowledge or skill and then happily return to their trade to make use of what was learned. The CUF report classifies such individuals as “drop-outs,” an unfair characterization of a group that is, in fact, another community college success story. A fairer and more accurate definition of “drop-out” would be a student who enrolls in college with the goal of attaining a degree, but fails to do so.

#### DEFINING SUCCESS DIFFERENTLY

Community colleges are composed of incredibly diverse student bodies with

equally diverse purposes for deciding to enroll in classes. Because many of these goals do not include obtaining a degree, a far better measure of community college success would be to track whether each student achieves her desired goals as indicated by her upon enrollment. In the same way that every institution currently asks students to declare a major, schools could easily collect more accurate success data by simply asking students, at the time they enroll, what their goals are in attending the college. Then, colleges could follow up with these students three or six years down the road to measure whether the students' stated goals have been achieved or not. In this way, each student would have a personalized, measurable

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“success rate” that evaluates their own goals and reasons for attending community college rather than an arbitrary one selected by somebody else.

None of this is to say that obtaining a degree is not a tremendous or extremely valuable accomplishment. There is no doubt that holding a college degree adds the most amount of value to a college education and that it tends to lead to much higher lifetime income than would otherwise be earned. Graduation is, after all, the goal that every faculty member strives for and seeks for all of our students. There is no prouder day for a faculty member than commencement. But neither Mark Zuckerberg nor Steve Jobs completed college and it is noteworthy that CUF's statistics would have both Zuckerberg and Jobs characterized as drop-outs and failures of the system when, in reality, neither would have achieved what he did without some college experience. It must therefore be recognized that having even some college experience can be profoundly helpful to many students.<sup>10</sup>

The CUF report did recognize that Kingsborough Community College stood out among CUNY schools and community colleges nation-wide, having attained a six-year degree conferral rate of 36 percent, well above both the national and CUNY community college rate. Dr. Regina Peruggi, Kingsborough's president, who has recognized and addressed the unique challenges faced by the institution's student base explains that, “at Kingsborough we have worked very hard at providing advisement to all incoming freshmen so that they begin their studies in a way that maximizes their chance for success. Students needing developmental work are tested and placed into an appropriate development English class and at that time are also scheduled for credit bearing classes based on their skill levels. In this way students can earn credit while gaining the skills they need for advanced work.” While the CUF report chooses to focus on those students who do not graduate within six years, what it does not point out is the remarkable success of communi-

ty college students who do graduate with a two-year degree. At Kingsborough, an impressive 94.1 percent of its 2008-09 graduates reported being “employed, in the military, or pursuing additional education or training six months after graduation.” I would encourage anyone with an interest in these issues to make an appointment to visit Kingsborough, sit in on a class, and see what we do. Statistics can be useful, but in the case of the CUF report, I believe they are misleading. Certainly, no school or system is perfect and community colleges should continually seek ways to improve and further the prospects for students. I firmly believe, however, that Kingsborough Community College, and others within CUNY, are exemplary models of success and provide a tremendous opportunity for our students to succeed. <sup>nea</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Hilliard, “Mobility Makers.”
2. Ibid.
3. Whitmire and Esch, “Pathway to the Baccalaureate: How One Community College is Helping Underprepared Students Succeed,” 2.
4. Ibid. See also Erb, “About 1 in 5 students Need Remedial Help in College,” and Chen, “Why Do 60% of Community College Students Need Remedial Coursework?”
5. Whitmire and Esch, op cit.
6. Hilliard, “Mobility Makers,” 3, 11. The report acknowledges that the CUNY community college graduation rate is “higher than three of the other four largest cities in the U.S.”
7. Bialik, “College Does Pay Off, but It’s No Free Ride.”
8. Ibid.
9. Chen, “The Catch-22 of Community College Graduation Rates.” “Many [community college] students are professionals needing additional education to compete in the workforce,” Chen writes. ...[t]hese students do not fit the traditional mold and may not require the traditional educational model of a set number of years of schooling and then a degree to succeed.”
10. Dr. Philip A. Pecorino of Queensborough Community College points out that many community college students do not have the goal of obtaining a degree, instead seeking one or a few courses for targeted reasons and that there are “substantial benefits... of attending college even without attaining a degree. Students benefit in terms of their knowledge and cultural awareness, and their children benefit from expanded cultural and academic horizons, becoming more likely to enter into higher education themselves.”

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