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Community colleges' success story has earned more taxpayer support

Why go to a community college?

Emily Dickinson once said, "Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne'er succeed." If you don't have something, you long for it more than those who have it. The wonderful thing about community colleges is that you can get the it. Community colleges enable low-income students to rise above their station.

The "it" of success reaches 43,000 credit students and 15,000 noncredit students enrolled at Austin Community College

The 2013 Texas Public Higher Education Almanac reports that 576,693 students attended four-year schools, with an average tuition of \$7,411, while 732,112 attended community colleges, with an average tuition of \$1,585. Did community college students get an education with lesser quality? No. When I taught at Lone Star College, I used to tell my students, with some truth in jest, that they could get a lesser quality of education by attending a traditional four-year institution. The first two years of introductory courses at four-year colleges are often taught by young, inexperienced teaching assistants. At community colleges, instructors are older and much more experienced — and a whole lot less expensive.

When a former president of Dartmouth was asked, "What is the

most important question parents should ask in determining where to send their children,” the president responded, “Ask who teaches the freshmen.” Community colleges win hands down.

Do community college students learn much? As always, it depends on the motivation of the individual student. In the exhaustive study, *How College Affects Students*, the authors reviewed three decades of research, culminating in an 800-page tome. I focus on three of their findings: one, “The great majority of postsecondary institutions appear to have surprisingly similar net impacts on students.” Elite schools do not have more impact on student growth than do ordinary schools. Two, “When ambition is taken into account ... the impact of college selectivity on earnings tends to be negligible.” Excellent students will excel later wherever they attended college. Three, expensive schools are not necessarily educationally better than relatively inexpensive schools.

What is the return on investment in attending a community college? In the study, “What’s an associate’s degree worth?” authors Jorge Klor de Alva and Mark Schneider report: “Even after factoring in the student costs of earning the associate’s degree, we see that the degree is a good investment: with a median net gain over a 40-year work-life of over \$259,000 compared to a high school graduate in the state where the community college is located.” They surveyed 579 community colleges throughout the nation.

Unfortunately, there is a huge disparity between rich and poor schools. In their study, “Cheap for Whom?” Klor de Alva and Schneider find: “Among not-for-profit institutions, the amount of taxpayer subsidies hovers between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per student per year until we turn to the most selective institutions Among these already well-endowed institutions, the taxpayer subsidy

jumps substantially to more than \$13,000 per student per year.”

The University of Texas System’s endowment in 2013 was \$20.4 billion; Texas A&M System’s, \$8.7 billion — the two wealthiest public university systems in the country.

The authors conclude, “If the country is to retain its competitive edge, it must reverse the current policies that result in providing the lowest levels of taxpayer support to the institutions that enroll the highest percentage of low-income, nontraditional, and minority students — the fastest growing segments of the population.”

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reports that from academic years 2002-03 to 2014-15, state funding for four-year colleges per full-time student equivalent declined 12 percent, while state funding for community colleges declined 17 percent.” The Legislature should examine this disparity.

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