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Our Universities: Community College Prejudice

People are concerned about community colleges. Faculty and administrators at some universities see the two-year institutions as competition. Others look down their noses at transfer students. But we better quit grouching about it and address the real issue. Students enrolled in community colleges pay about a fifth of the tab required at Big State U – and only a tenth of what they would pay at a private university.

Community colleges are deeply unsexy. This fact tends to make even the biggest advocates of these two-year schools — which educate nearly half of U.S. undergraduates — sound defensive, almost a tad whiny.

Laura Fitzpatrick, Time Magazine, Austin July 20, 2009

American pre-eminence is waning in a number of arenas. One example often cited is the shifting balance of domestic and international students in our top universities and graduate programs.

And it's true. Not all of America's best young minds are in a position to benefit from our university system. Financial issues beyond their control sideline some. Others are “graduating” from high school unprepared for serious academic achievement. (No finger pointing, no whining, no lamentations - just facts.) But we have in place a way to remedy these problems that doesn't require us to compromise the high admission standards which have allowed our university system to climb to the top of global rankings.

A prominent feature of American higher education was fully developed in California: the integration of community colleges into the education calculus. However, in recent years, an undercurrent of condescension - nearly contempt - from members of senior institutions, discourages students from pursuing higher education goals for which they have both the desire and ability to achieve.

UCLA faculty and economist, Matthew Kahn, recently published a post on his blog that was picked up by the Christian Science Monitor. In it, he pondered the negative impact of community college transfers on public universities, citing “watered down” content as the culprit. He back peddled as fast as he could, but his true colors were exposed.

This attitude is shameful.

In 1960, when Clark Kerr was chief of the University of California, he championed a three-tier system known as the California Master Plan. Community colleges were a central component of his model. They efficiently provided access for all residents to a general program of higher education, allowing the research universities to specialize

their missions and cater to students preparing for careers requiring advanced levels of expertise in specific disciplines. The plan was nearly perfect.

California is home to over 100 community colleges that serve more than 2.5 million students. If the students in that system inhabited their own state, they would rank between Nevada and New Mexico in total population, at number 36. These are hard numbers with which to come to grips.

Economist Kahn has apologized for his remarks and said he didn't mean to imply that the community colleges were offering "watered down" UCLA courses, though, to be honest, I don't see how else one could reasonably interpret his initial statement. It's disappointing, but, with this attitude, he joins hoards of administrators and faculty in denigrating community colleges.

In a meeting at a national research university, I asked 200 faculty and administrators how many had attended a community college. Over half sheepishly raised their hands, looking right and left like politically motivated city council members as they vote, or like first-time AA participants to see who else is in their company. I then asked them to keep their hands raised if they spent more than one year in attendance. Only a few hands disappeared. What was important to me about the event was the apologetic looks they exhibited, as though they had embarrassed themselves by attending a junior college.

Supercilious vanity.

When William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago in 1901, got together with J. Stanley Brown, superintendent of Joliet Township High School, to establish Joliet Junior College and support students looking to eventually attend the University of Chicago, they weren't trying to create a second-rate university. Rather, Harper saw deficiencies in student skill sets and wanted to create a preparatory environment so motivated students could hone their abilities, compensate for any deficiencies in their transcripts, and have an opportunity to prove their mettle or gain invaluable vocational training.

A good idea in 1901. A better idea in 2012.

Community Colleges are not degenerate universities. They are not proto-universities. What they are is a way to make sure we realize the potential of every American.