



**The Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to  
Community College Student Transfer Access  
at Selective Institutions**

**A Report Submitted to**

**Jack Kent Cooke Foundation**

**Lumina Foundation for Education**

**Nellie Mae Education Foundation**

**By**

The New England Resource Center for Higher Education  
at the University of Massachusetts Boston

in collaboration with

the Center for Urban Education  
and the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute  
at the University of Southern California

April 30, 2006

## Preface

From the spring of 2005 through the spring of 2006, The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB) in collaboration with the Center for Urban Education and the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute at the University of Southern California (USC) conducted a comprehensive national study of factors affecting the successful transfer of community college students to highly selective four-year institutions. The study was carried out in response to a Request for Proposals from the Jack Kent Cooke, Lumina, and Nellie Mae Education Foundations to characterize (1) the prevalence of community college student transfer to highly selective four-year institutions and the outcomes of students who transfer, (2) the attitudes of faculty and administrators at two-year and four-year institutions towards low-income community college students and (3) successful programs that foster transfer access for community college students.

The Consortium of these three foundations wished to focus attention on the problem of transfer access<sup>1</sup> for academically prepared low-income community college students to highly selective four-year institutions.<sup>2</sup> The limited access of low-income students to selective institutions is well understood to constrain their chances of completing college, opportunities for graduate study, future earnings, and share of financial aid (*Access Denied*, 2001; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; *Empty Promises*, 2002).

The Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Enrollment at Selective Institutions was designed to deepen understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> In this document, the term “transfer access” refers to access to enrollment at selective four-year colleges and universities by students who begin their postsecondary education at community colleges and complete their associates’ degrees.

<sup>2</sup> The focus of the study was on community college student transfer access to *the most highly selective* colleges and universities in the United States. This group is defined more specifically throughout the report. The expression “elite institutions” is used interchangeably to refer to the most highly selective institutions.

ways to promote transfer access and to support program development through the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's new Community College Transfer Initiative. The study employed multiple methods of data collection and analysis to examine community college transfer student achievement; administrative and professorial attitudes towards community college transfers; and institutional policies, programs, and practices that promote transfer access. The problem of low transfer access was conceptualized as having three inter-related dimensions: (1) institutional economics; (2) informational barriers (particularly information about financial aid); and (3) cultural barriers.

#### *Institutional Economic Barriers to Transfer Access*

Economists who study higher education conceptualize not-for-profit colleges and universities as organizations that seek to maximize their revenue and their prestige (Massy & Zemsky, 1994; Melguizo & Strober, 2005; Winston, 1999). Increased revenues enable a greater number and scope of activities to pursue the institution's mission. Increased prestige enables an institution to charge higher tuition, enroll more qualified students, and attract external funding from governmental grants and philanthropic donors. Faculty members are expected to prefer more prestigious institutions, which provide higher salaries and higher quality "inputs" into faculty work in the form of bright students. Therefore, the study considered institutional prestige-maximizing behavior as a potential explanatory factor affecting transfer access.

#### *Informational Barriers to Transfer Access*

The cost of college, particularly at private selective institutions but also at public flagships, is certainly a barrier to enrollment for low-income students (*Access Denied*, 2001;

*Empty Promises*, 2002). In addition, because of the complexity of financial aid packaging, students who may be able to afford college with financial aid may not realize their eligibility for grants and loans (Kane, 1999; *The Student Aid Gauntlet*, 2005). Both a lack of adequate aid and a lack of transparency in college pricing create barriers to enrollment for low-income students.

Financial and informational barriers to college access have a social aspect. Coleman (1988) introduced the importance of family ties and community networks to explain the important role these social relationships play in providing information to students about their educational opportunities and responsibilities. Admissions, financial aid, and transfer counselors must play the role of family members in providing information to community college students to help them decipher the complex world of selective college application, admissions, and financial aid. As McDonough (1994) has argued, a student's place in that world is often defined by their own unconscious sense of where they do—or do not—belong and by the attitudes of counselors who advise them (McDonough & Calderone, forthcoming).

The debate regarding the community college's function to "cool out," or decrease, student aspirations is long, controversial, and sometimes bitter among practitioners who refute the charge (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen, 1990). We do know that students often enter community college with high aspirations, but relatively few of them achieve the goal of earning a bachelor's degree (Cohen, Brawer, & Bensimon, 1985; Dougherty, 1991; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2005; Melguizo, 2003). Gaining a social and cultural understanding of the institutional practices that may decrease (or fail to increase) student aspirations is essential to reduce barriers to transfer access.

### *Cultural Barriers to Transfer Access*

Informational barriers are closely intertwined with cultural factors. College students navigate the institutional culture of higher education with the help of “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These are faculty members, administrators, and counselors who help students to feel they belong at a particular institution and can successfully achieve their goals there. Through these trusted institutional agents, students accumulate *funds of knowledge*, which are networks, resources, and opportunities for upward mobility. To obtain these funds students must develop supportive relationships with institutional agents. For students who are not part of the dominant cultural group, developing these relationships may require particular effort to understand, decode, and gain trust in the culture of higher education (González, 2001; González, Stone, & Jovel, 2003).

This cultural perspective provides a framework for interpreting the positive aspects of learning communities and cohort-based curricula and social activities as elements of access programs that are designed to attract applications, enrollment, and successful participation among low-income, racial and ethnic minority, and first-generation students at selective four-year institutions. By recognizing cultural barriers, the role of trusted agents, and the mechanisms by which students acquire funds of knowledge, administrators may be better able to design access programs to lower these barriers and facilitate the acquisition of cultural knowledge among students whose families cannot guide them through a foreign milieu.

### *Developing Transfer Capacity*

The solution to the problem of low transfer access depends on the development of transfer capacity at community colleges and elite four-year institutions alike. The concept of

transfer capacity is based on broader understandings of organizational capacity (Newman & Rigdon, 1997). Drawing on research on organizational learning and institutional change (Bensimon, 2005a, 2005b; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004) as well as the literature on professional accountability and performance indicators (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Dowd, 2005; Dowd & Tong, 2004; Elmore, 2002; Newman & Rigdon, 1997; O'Day, 2002; Rowan, 1996), transfer capacity is defined by three dimensions: information, practices, and policies. The quality of practice in these dimensions depends on the way in which the human, technical, and social resources of community colleges and selective four-year colleges are coordinated to advance transfer goals. To paraphrase John Dewey, in order for individuals to form relevant and effective goals they must first be acquainted with and take notice of the actual conditions of student transfer. The development of indicators and benchmarks of transfer capacity based on this study enables institutions to concretely examine and subsequently improve the quality of their information, practices and policies in the area of transfer.

### *Structure of the Report*

The results of the Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access at Selective Institutions are presented in four sections, following an Introduction that introduces and synthesizes the key findings. Section I provides national estimates of transfer access and bachelor's degree attainment at four-year colleges and universities based on analyses of two national longitudinal education surveys from the National Center for Education Statistics: the High School and Beyond and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (Melguizo & Dowd, 2006). Section II provides estimates of the two-year

transfer population at the most elite institutions in the United States and examines the effects of various institutional enrollment characteristics on transfer access (Dowd & Cheslock, 2006). Section III describes the experiences of 10 individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who crossed the border between the worlds of the open access community college and the exclusivity of elite postsecondary education. The life histories of these individuals inform understanding of the critical role of institutional “transfer agents” in validating students’ aspirations and sense of belonging as they negotiated socially and culturally complex transfer pathways (Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, Márquez, & Park, 2006). Finally, Section IV demonstrates exemplary practices for facilitating and promoting transfer access, closely examining the resources and structures that enable “transfer champions”—those who work within administrative structures to communicate with colleagues about transfer students’ perspectives and needs—to shape the culture of their institutions (Gabbard et al., 2006). These programmatic structures and committed individuals create a shared sense of responsibility on their campuses to promote transfer access and view that responsibility as one of their institution’s most important roles.

# **The Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access at Selective Institutions**

## **Principal Investigators**

Dr. Alicia C. Dowd  
Assistant Professor, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Dr. Glenn Gabbard  
Associate Director, New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE),  
University of Massachusetts Boston

## **Researchers**

Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon  
Professor and Director, Center for Urban Education,  
Rossier School of Education,  
University of Southern California

Dr. John Cheslock  
Assistant Professor,  
University of Arizona

Dr. Jay R. Dee  
Associate Professor, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Ms. Thara Fuller  
Research Associate, New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE),  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Mr. David Fabienke  
Research Associate, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute,  
University of Southern California

Dr. Dwight Giles  
Professor, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Ms. Rhonda Gabovitch  
Research Assistant, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Ms. Nancy Ludwig  
Research Assistant, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Dr. Elsa Macias  
Senior Research Associate, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute,  
University of Southern California

Ms. Lindsey Malcom  
Research Assistant, Center for Urban Education,  
Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California

Ms. Amalia Márquez  
Research Assistant, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute,  
University of Southern California

Dr. Tatiana Melguizo  
Assistant Professor, Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California

Dr. Jenny Pak  
Research Associate, Center for Urban Education,  
Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California

Mr. Daniel K. Park  
Research Assistant, Center for Urban Education,  
Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California

Dr. Tara L. Parker  
Assistant Professor, Graduate College of Education,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

Ms. Sharon Singleton  
Program Associate, New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE),  
University of Massachusetts Boston

## References

- Access denied: Restoring the nation's commitment to equal educational opportunity.* (2001). Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
- Bensimon, E. M. (2005a). Closing the achievement gap in higher education: An organizational learning perspective. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *Higher education as a learning organization: Promising concepts and approaches* (Vol. 131). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bensimon, E. M. (2005b). *Equality as a fact, equality as a result: A matter of institutional accountability* (Commissioned Paper). Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.
- Bensimon, E. M., Polkinghorne, D. E., Bauman, G. L., & Vallejo, E. (2004). Doing research that makes a difference. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(1), 104-126.
- Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carnevale, A. P., & Rose, S. J. (2004). Socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and selective college admissions. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *America's untapped resource: Low-income students in higher education*: Century Foundation Press.
- Cohen, A. M. (1990). The case for the community college. *American Journal of Education*, 98, 426-442.
- Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F., & Bensimon, E. M. (1985). *Transfer education in American community colleges* (A Report to The Ford Foundation). Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Supplement), S95-S120.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). *Standards and assessments: Where we are and what we need*. Retrieved February 16, 2003, from <http://www.tcrecord.org/>
- Dougherty, K. J. (1991). Community colleges and baccalaureate degree attainment. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63(2).
- Dougherty, K. J., & Kienzl, G. S. (2005). It's not enough to get through the open door: Inequalities by social background in transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges. *Teachers College Record*, forthcoming.
- Dowd, A. C. (2005). *Data don't drive: Building a practitioner-driven culture of inquiry to assess community college performance* (Research Report). Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.

- Dowd, A. C., & Cheslock, J. J. (2006). *An estimate of the two-year transfer population at elite institutions and of the effects of institutional characteristics on transfer access*. Boston, MA and Tucson, AZ: University of Massachusetts Boston and University of Arizona.
- Dowd, A. C., & Tong, V. (2004, November). *Developing peer comparison and benchmarking systems for institutional effectiveness*. Paper presented at the Northeast Association for Institutional Research, Portsmouth, NH.
- Elmore, R. F. (2002). *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement: The imperative for professional development in education*. Washington DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Empty promises: The myth of college access in America*. (2002). Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
- Gabbard, G., Singleton, S., Bensimon, E. M., Dee, J., Fabienke, D., Fuller, T., et al. (2006). *Practices supporting transfer of low-income community college transfer students to selective institutions: Case study findings*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.
- González, K. P. (2001). Inquiry as a process of learning about the other and the self. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 543-562.
- González, K. P., Stone, C., & Jovel, J. E. (2003). Examining the role of social capital in access to college for Latinas: Toward a college opportunity framework. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 2(1), 146-170.
- Kane, T. J. (1999). *The price of admission: Rethinking how Americans pay for college*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.
- Massy, W. F., & Zemsky, R. (1994). Faculty discretionary time: Departments and the academic ratchet. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65(1), 1-22.
- McDonough, P. M. (1994). Buying and selling higher education: The social construction of the college applicant. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65(4), 427-446.
- McDonough, P. M., & Calderone, S. (forthcoming). The meaning of money: Perceptual differences between college counselors and low-income families about college costs and financial aid. *American Behavioral Scientist*.
- Melguizo, T. (2003). *What types of colleges are doing a better job of graduating minorities?* Unpublished Dissertation, Stanford University.
- Melguizo, T., & Dowd, A. C. (2006). *National estimates of transfer access and bachelor's degree attainment at four-year colleges and universities*. Los Angeles, CA and Boston, MA: University of Southern California and University of Massachusetts Boston.

- Melguizo, T., & Strober, M. (2005, March). *Determinants of full-time faculty salaries at four-year institutions in the U.S.* Paper presented at the American Education Finance Association, Louisville, KY.
- Newman, F. M., & Rigdon, M. (1997). Accountability and school performance: Implications for restructuring schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 41-74.
- O'Day, J. A. (2002). Complexity, accountability, and school improvement. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 293-329.
- Pak, J., Bensimon, E. M., Malcom, L., Márquez, A., & Park, D.K. (2006). *The life histories of ten individuals who crossed the border between community colleges and selective four-year colleges.* Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California.
- Rowan, B. (1996). Standards as incentives for instructional reform. In S. H. Fuhrman & J. A. O'Day (Eds.), *Rewards and reform: Creating educational incentives that work* (pp. 195-225). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 1-40.
- The student aid gauntlet: Making access to college simple and certain.* (2005). (Final Report of the Special Study of Simplification of Need Analysis and Application for Title IV Aid). Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
- Winston, G. C. (1999). Subsidies, hierarchies, and peers: The awkward economics of higher education. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 13(1), 13-36.