EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Access Matters: The Community College Student Body

More and more Americans today acknowledge the value of community colleges to students and community partners. An important reason for this awakening, among many others, rests on the growing realization that reported rates of success for students at community colleges are understated and misleading. In addition, the increasing focus on public returns on investment may be incentivizing colleges and universities to be more discerning about whom they enroll. Needless to say, these changes do not bode well for college access.

With the growing attention the public is paying to community colleges, it is important to remember just whom community colleges serve, noting what is distinctive and what has changed about this population. In this brief, I consider the unique variety of students who are drawn to and served by community colleges.

The magnitude of access is generally understood at the level of fall enrollments. For institutions that enroll students year-round, however, more students access higher education than is commonly realized. At community colleges, for example, referencing unduplicated year-round enrollments increases the number of students accessing higher education by 56%. The magnitude of access is increased even further when noncredit students are included.

Between 1993 and 2009, the student body—as defined by the distribution, not the number, of students—on community college campuses shifted. For instance, students under the age of 18 are increasingly enrolling in community colleges. While the student body is becoming increasingly younger, the characteristics of younger students are not homogenous across all sectors of higher education. Community college students have a greater proportion of students with various risk factors when compared to all of higher education.

These colleges also provide access to nearly half of all minority undergraduate students and more than 40% of undergraduate students living in poverty.

Community colleges are open access and do not, with the rare exception, build a student body. As this brief points out, the open door philosophy not only benefits students attending community colleges, but also benefits other sectors of higher education. Unfortunately, other members of the higher education community may not appreciate this role that community colleges play.

While enrollments continue to increase, there is the concern, among some, that a focus on completion has the potential to influence just who is allowed to take advantage of educational opportunities. In policy conversations, especially those concerned with policies related to access and choice, there is a silent movement to redirect educational opportunity to “deserving” students. This brief highlights some actions that can be taken to ensure that access is not deteriorated.

Policy actors engaged in ensuring the United States has the most educated workforce in the world must remember that all citizens of a nation are included in the denominator of the equation. To ensure the focus on completion does not result in a more restricted student body, the institutions that provide the broadest swath of opportunity must be incentivized to continue providing access. Access to college, for everyone, matters.