

Early Institutional Assessments of California Junior Colleges

By J. M. Beach

Despite operating under fiscal, political, and educational constraints, the over worked California Community Colleges have never had impressive measures of institutional success, and they have often been blamed for their second-class status – even though this status and their lack of success have always been structurally determined by socio-political forces external to the institution. Amidst current calls for increased institutional accountability, effectiveness, and standards in California Community Colleges, it is important to gauge the issue of institutional effectiveness historically in order to fully understand, not only the progress that may or may not have been made over the last century, but also the inherent difficulty of measuring institutional effectiveness, and the varying political purposes for doing so. Gauging educational effectiveness has never been an easy task. First, data on student achievement has always been sparse, and no individual or agency has ever systematically collected student achievement data on the community college until the late 1990s. More importantly, the multiple missions of the institution make any single measure of student achievement problematic. No one has yet determined what a community college *ought* to do in terms of institutional mission, let alone conceptualizing the many ways each institutional mission might be defined in terms of student achievement.

But for the historian of community colleges, California presents some unique opportunities. First, the progressive reformers who initiated and guided the junior college in California were preoccupied with educational and social “efficiency.” Thus, there are existing records of several early junior college assessments, which were conducted throughout the 20th century. These early assessments can be used to understand how the early missions of junior colleges were defined and how the effectiveness of this institution was measured. These early studies can also shed light on the varying measures of institutional effectiveness and the difficulty of measuring the “efficiency” of an educational institution. They also help contextualize current calls for institutional assessment by providing a long-term historical context with which to understand and evaluate the *overall effectiveness* of institutional effectiveness movements.

Merton E. Hill, principal of Chaffey High School and Chaffey Junior College and an early evaluator of junior colleges in the state of California, once asserted that junior colleges in California should cooperate with other branches of the state school system by “neither dominating any nor being dominated by any.” However, it is clear that the junior college, what Hill termed a “semi-higher institution,” has always been dominated by the other educational and political institutions in the state, especially the University of California and the state legislature.¹ Early in the 20th century Walter Crosby Eells warned that the formative accreditation and standards movement of the junior college was being lead by officials who had a skewed, “university-preparatory point of view” in terms of how junior college should function and what student achievement markers should be measured. Thus, early evaluations of the junior college tended to focus on educational and organizational aspects that were connected solely to the

¹ Merton E. Hill, *The Functioning of the California Public Junior College: A Symposium* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1938), 108, 5.

transfer function (grade point averages, transfer rates, retention, and education of faculty). These measures were integral to University of California and its institutional concerns, but these measures did not give a full picture of the evolving missions of this institution. Other conceivable measures of institutional or student performance that could have measured indigenous institutional goals were largely ignored, especially any attempt to measure the efficiency of various vocational programs, which were the pet projects of junior college leaders for most of the 20th century.²

University and state legislator oversight of the junior/community college has been a constant in California. It was university and state legislative officials that gave birth to this institution to begin with, and these educational and political leaders kept tight control over its development. After only five years of being in existence and with a statewide population of only 77 junior college students, the University of California had already published a pamphlet in July of 1915, *The Junior College in California*, in order to establish standards for the areas of faculty, equipment, curriculum, and articulation. This would be the first of many attempts throughout the 20th century to rationalize and control the junior college through institutional effectiveness markers and external oversight.³ Twelve years later, in 1927, the state legislature created an educational commission to study public secondary and post-secondary institutions. The California Curriculum Commission was established to examine and coordinate the different levels of the public school system, which included the junior college. Merton E. Hill was one of the members of this commission and he would later produce the first comprehensive, statewide institutional evaluation of California junior colleges in 1938.⁴

² Eells, *The Junior College*, 184.

³ Cooper, "The Junior-College Movement in California," *Ibid.*; Gray, "The Junior College in California," *Ibid.*; Whitney, "Present Standards for Junior Colleges," *Ibid.*

⁴ Cloud, *Education in California*, 149, 151.

During the first couple of decades of the 20th century, the effectiveness of this institution seems to have been defined and measured primarily in relation to the transfer function, even though university and college leaders were trying to expand terminal vocational programs. One of the earliest reports on junior college effectiveness in California was published in 1915, and this report offered assessment data on faculty qualifications, student grade point averages, and transfer numbers to the University of California. Fresno Junior College had a particularly educated faculty with four of nine (44.4 percent) faculty members possessing an advanced degree (Masters or higher), and two of those faculty had earned a PhD. Other junior colleges supposedly had comparably trained faculty, although no data was given to support this claim. It seems that junior college students at all three of the established state institutions (Fresno, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara) had distinctly higher grade point averages during their first two undergraduate years, compared to high school students who went directly to the University of California.⁵

Although not discussed in this report, the data also indicate a high, but ambiguous dropout-rate between the freshman and sophomore year. The ambiguity of the data is caused by the fact that some freshman students were transferring to the University of California after the first year, some students transferred to other colleges, universities, or junior colleges, and some students simply dropped out altogether. No attempt was made to clearly filter out all of these distinctions, nor were students followed once they left the junior college. But clearly, there was a lot of turnover in this institution from the very beginning.

Taking a look at four of the five junior colleges in operation from 1910 to 1915, there were 101 freshman students during the 1913-1914 school year, but this number drops to only 45 sophomore students during the 1914-1915 school year, with roughly 17 freshmen transferring to

⁵ Gray, "The Junior College in California."

the University of California during 1914. Thus, there was almost a 39% attrition rate between the freshman and sophomore year, although the data reveals that as many as 39 students between 1913 and 1915 had not yet graduated, but left their junior college to enroll in “other colleges.” These high levels of attrition seemed to follow a general pattern of high attrition rates in U.S. public high schools as measured during the 1917-18 school year. In a report for the Bureau of Education, H. R. Bonner reported that public high schools lost 32.4 percent of students between the freshman and sophomore years, 30.2 percent between the sophomore and junior years, and 22.9 percent between the junior and senior years. Given this data, junior colleges were obviously not the only institution with high attrition rates at this time. It would be consistent that junior colleges attached to high schools would see similar rates of student loss as the curriculum became more advanced and the increasing need of many students to enter the labor force.⁶

Another, perhaps less rigorous measure of institutional effectiveness used by early junior college leaders was the student survey. Walter Crosby Eells, a professor of Education at Stanford University, was only the second scholar in the U.S. to use a survey instrument to measure the satisfaction levels and motivations of junior college students.⁷ Eells surveyed 28 junior colleges in California during 1928, which represented 13 of the 16 public districts, and 2 of the 13 private colleges. Altogether he received replies from 3,058 students, which amounted to 36 percent of the student population of these 28 junior colleges. 55 percent of the respondents were men and 45 percent were women; 61.6 percent were freshman and only 33.7 percent sophomores. 90.4 percent of the students had the goal of continuing their postsecondary education after graduating from the junior college, which Eells paradoxically commented, “at

⁶ Ibid.; Koos, *The American Secondary School*, 119.

⁷ According to Eells, the first student survey conducted with junior college students was done by J. Fletcher Wellemeyer in 1926 who measured the opinions of 469 Kansas junior college students. See: J. Fletcher Wellemeyer, “The Junior College as Viewed by Its Students,” *School Review* 34 (December 1926): 760-67.

once a gratification and a warning.” 54.4 percent of the men and 19.7 percent of the women were working at least part time, and 17.8 percent (men) and 13 percent (women) of these working students were putting in between 31 and over 40 hours a week. The primary motivation for enrolling in the junior college, according to the polled students, was “to save money.” A close second was “to prepare for work in the university.” 85.3 percent of the students indicated that if they were not enrolled in their local junior college they would “probably be in college elsewhere.” 63.5 percent indicated that if they could start over again with “free choice,” they would again enroll in a junior college. The primary advantages of the junior college were (starting with most important): saving money, small classes, individual help from instructors, and living at home. Roughly 30 students out of the total of 3,058 (less than 1 percent) said that the advantage of the junior college was vocational training or terminal degrees. The major disadvantages, beginning with the worst, were: no college “atmosphere, spirit, life, color, or traditions,” a limited curriculum, lack of social life influenced by predominance of high-school students, and a lack of “equipment, laboratories, and other facilities.”⁸

Keeping track of persistence rates does not seem to have been an early focus for junior college evaluators, perhaps because it was widely assumed that postsecondary education was only for a select and talented minority of the population, and therefore, the attrition of the less talented would be expected. W. J. Cooper created a table on student enrollments from 1917 to 1927 in which he distinguishes between freshman and sophomore students. Cooper had no interest in what would come to be called “persistence rates,” but his data does provide evidence for high attrition rates between the freshman and sophomore years. And yet, between the 1917-1918 school-year and the 1924-1925 school-year, the junior college persistence rate steadily

⁸ Walter Crosby Eells and R. Romaine Brand, “Student Opinion in Junior Colleges in California,” *The School Review* 38, no. 3 (March 1930): 176-190.

increases. Persistence goes from a low of 17 percent of freshman in 1917-18 who would become sophomores one year later, to a high of 48 percent for the 1923-24 freshman class. These numbers are even more impressive given the fact that the Californian junior college student population grew by over 4,000 during this period. From 1924 to 1927, persistence rates drop a bit to 43 percent and 46 percent, but the population of students also increased by another 2,800 students. Now these rates should be seen as preliminary because, as mentioned earlier, some freshmen would transfer to the University of California or to other postsecondary institutions, which would raise the overall persistence rate of students who staid in college, but data is lacking to make such a distinction. Cooper's data indicates high attrition rates; however, the data also seem to indicate an institution that was not only accommodating increased amounts of students, but was also becoming more effective in helping these students persist into the Sophomore year.⁹

In 1938 Merton E. Hill published the first comprehensive, statewide institutional evaluation of junior colleges in the state, *The Functioning of the California Public Junior College*. His report was sponsored and published by the University of California, Berkeley. Robert G. Sproul, the President of the University of California, argued in the Foreword that the "pioneer era of the junior college" was ending and a new era of scientific management with "controlled experiments" and "facts" was being inaugurated. Thus, university officials in conjunction with junior college presidents would use this new knowledge to rationally determine the appropriate "methods of differentiating abilities," so that post-secondary institutions could be efficiently arranged to meet "the needs of the student and of society."¹⁰

Hill documented, analyzed, and evaluated the California junior college, which he called a "semi-higher institution." The majority of Hill's report is descriptive as it focuses on the

⁹ Cooper, "The Junior-College Movement in California," *Ibid.*, 422.

¹⁰ Robert G. Sproul, Foreword, in Merton E. Hill, *The Functioning of the California Public Junior College*, 2.

individual curriculum, missions, and organization of the 42 public junior colleges in the state. But Hill also provided some statewide data on junior college enrollments, grade point averages, transfer rates, and some data that can be used to estimate persistence rates. In the fall of 1937 roughly 16 percent of the high school population in California was going on to higher education. 11 percent of high school students enrolled in junior colleges. The 42 state junior colleges enrolled more first-time freshmen (17,941) than both the University of California (4,304) and the seven state colleges combined (3,260). While there were 17,941 first-time freshmen, there were only 9,302 sophomores, which meant that an estimated 48 percent (8,611) of California junior college students either transferred or dropped out during their first year of college. This number is roughly consistent with a national study done in 1937 of over 15,500 students in 25 universities, where over 50 percent of the students dropped out or transferred between entering the university and finishing the sophomore year. But the evidence indicates that from 1935 to 1937 only about 1,864 students, on average, transferred to one of the two campuses of the University of California. These two campuses would have been the primary four-year institutions in the state where a student could earn a bachelor's degree during the 1930s, although there were also seven public state colleges (recently converted from normal schools), and two highly regarded private universities, University of Southern California and Stanford University. If the 48 percent attrition rate held roughly constant from 1935 to 1937, this would mean that at least 22 percent or more of this population were successfully transferring to four-year colleges and universities, which is consistent with data presented by Walter Crosby Eells, who computed a transfer rate between 20 and 25 percent. But when the number of transfer students is divided by the total student population for 1937, only about 7 percent or slightly more of all freshman and sophomore students transferred during these years.¹¹

¹¹ Hill, *The Functioning of the California Public Junior College*, 5-15; J. H. McNeedly, *College Student Mortality*,

It is clear from Hill's data that transfer students to the University of California had been steadily increasing from 1919 (64 total transfers) to 1937 (1,996 total transfers). But if you consider that the state went from 18 junior colleges in 1920, with total student enrollments around 1,500, to 42 junior colleges in 1937, with total student enrollments around 29,000, then the total yearly transfer rate probably never exceeded 10 percent of all students. Hill, however, put the total transfer number around 20 percent a year, which can be deduced from a statement he made in his report that "nearly eighty percent of the junior college students will probably not go on to college." This percentage is roughly equivalent to the high school graduation rates between 1910 and 1930, which hovered between 13 to 15 percent. But once junior college students successfully transferred, they still had trouble completing the requirements for a bachelor's degree. According to Hill, from 1921 to 1935, only 63 percent of junior college transfer students at the University of California earned a bachelor's degree. If these university persistence rates were constant for other four-year colleges and universities in the state, this would mean that less than 13 percent of all California junior college students were able to earn a bachelors degree from 1921 to 1935.¹²

Burton R. Clark conducted one of the first in-depth institutional assessments of an individual junior college in the 1950s. He focused on San Jose Junior College. Clark was specifically concerned with evaluating the organizational structure of this institution to see if it was managed efficiently, and to see if it was producing an adequate level of education that would benefit both students and the state. He was disappointed with what he found. Overall this junior college was operating inefficiently because there was a "conflict" between administrators and

Bulletin No. 11 (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1937), cited in Walter Crosby Eells, *Why Junior College Terminal Education?*, 49. On California high school enrollments and junior college transfer rates see: Walter Crosby Eells, *Why Junior College Terminal Education?*, 53, 60.

¹² Ibid. On high school graduation rates see: Walter Crosby Eells, *Why Junior College Terminal Education?*, 44, 46.

students over the purpose of this junior college. Students wanted an academic education that would help them transfer to a four-year college or university, while the public school administrators wanted the institution to focus on terminal, vocational programs that would give San Jose Junior College a “unique” and rationalized function in the San Jose metropolitan area. Despite the efforts of administrators and faculty to divert students into vocational programs, the academic transfer curriculum enrolled close to 60 percent of all students in 1953 and this increased to 75 percent by 1956. However, Clark pointed out that the majority of these students were reaching beyond their actual abilities.¹³

Student attrition was severe each year, and most of the students enrolled in the academic transfer curriculum would never transfer or graduate with an associates degree. From 1953 to 1957 over 30 percent of students, on average, would leave the school between fall and spring semesters, while an average of 55 percent of students would leave between spring semester and the following fall. Out of about 3,700 students who were enrolled in fall of 1953, just over 16 percent were able to earn an associates degree in four years, about 5 percent of students earning associates degrees each year. About 22 percent of all junior college students in the state of California transferred to four-year institutions. Clark found that about 25 percent of all enrolled students from San Jose Junior College were able to transfer and they typically transferred after enrolling for 2.3 semesters. This particular institution lost on average about 85 percent of its students each year, but only about 25 percent of these departures were transfer students and/or graduates with an associates degree, which means that about 50 to 60 percent of students each year from 1953 to 1957 were non-completers, who either dropped out, or perhaps they stopped out and later returned. This lead Clark to argue that the majority of junior college students, regardless of their aspirations for transferring and earning a bachelors degree, were actually

¹³ Clark, *The Open Door College*, 42-43, 47.

“latent terminal” students, who in reaching beyond their actual means were “student[s] who ha[ve] assigned [themselves] to failure.” Thus, Clark famously concluded, “the public junior college tends to be a classification and distribution center from which large numbers of students leave education after a relatively short stay...The student who filters out of education while in the junior college appears to be very much what such a college is about.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 63-65, 68-67, 71, 77, 84-85.