

**Investigating Who Succeeds and What “Success” Means
for California Community Colleges?
A Statewide Study of Student Enrollments, Success Rates, and Award Attainment
with Emphasis on Vocational Education**

Josh M. Beach
California Community College Collaborative (C4)
University of California, Riverside

Although the vocationalization of higher education and community colleges in particular has led to a number of research investigations and scholarly works over the past three decades (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Labaree, 1997; Levin, 2001), there are few accounts of the specific outcomes of vocationalization, particularly for minority and low socio-economic populations. As national and state accountability initiatives become more imperative politically, it is important to ask, “Who succeeds?” and “What ‘success’ means?” In California, both state-wide and institutionally, there has been a marked tendency to evade these complex questions. Most state-wide and institutional reports give vague and general indications of student success with no indication of how success might be mediated by race, class, and gender.

Assembly Bill 1417 (Sept 18, 2004) required the California Community College system to design an annual evaluation “structure” to measure district-level performance in meeting statewide educational outcomes. The state required three basic performance outcomes: (1) student progress and achievement type-a (degrees, certificates, and transfers), (2) student progress and achievement type-b (vocational, occupational, and workforce development), and (3) pre-collegiate improvement (basic skills and ESL). The California Community College Chancellor’s 2007 *Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC)* is the first “pilot phase” draft of the new annual evaluation structure. The 2008 report will be the “first definitive report.”

The 2007 draft report listed the state-wide “vocational awards” by program from 2003-2004 to 2005-2006. For this three year period there was overall growth in total awards (60,749 to 63,167) and overall growth in both degrees and certificates. The ratio of AA/AS degrees to vocational certificates (some certificates require fewer than 18 units) is about 35/65. AA/AS degree attainment ranges from 35.6% to 36.6% of total awards. The report also included an analysis of the income change in three cohorts three to five years after attaining a degree or certificate (and who did not go back to school or transfer to a four-year institution). For all three cohorts there was a marked rise in income ranging from +\$19,365 to +\$23,723 over three to five years; however, this is an average with no indication of which degrees/certificates or majors fared better, and there was no indication of who held what awards. The majority of the report lists institutional data, which gives general population, student achievement, and student persistence data.

Overall, the nature of the *Accountability Report* is general in its standardized benchmarks and it makes no attempt to analyze who succeeds in community colleges (and if all races and genders succeed equally), which programs lead to greater transfer or employment success, which colleges offer more successful programs and why, and perhaps most importantly what “success” actually means for individual students.

The Chancellor’s office released a more specific report in 2006, which addressed the question, “How does attaining a degree or certificate from a California Community College affect wages earned?” The study focused on a cohort of 7,208, which represents students who earned only one award and whose employers reported earnings across three years following the award (2001 to 2004). The study found a 13% increase in wages from 2001-02 to 2002-03 and a 4.4% increase in wages from 2002-03 to 2003-04. There are two important upward biases that were not analyzed, but they were acknowledged, in this study: an upward bias after degree completion that could reflect a transition from part-time employment during schooling to full-time employment during the first year of study (2001-02); and an upward bias over time that could reflect “the common upward trend of incomes as workers age.” The summary of the study concludes: “We tentatively conclude that students receiving awards from community college programs generally experienced wage gains in the three years following award attainment.” While this conclusion seems reasonable and valid based on the data gathered in the study, it ignores a qualitative and comparative analysis of the data, i.e., (a) wage differentials due to certificate/degree type (not mentioned at all in the study and not reflected in the data); (b) wage differentials due to area of study in relation to medial wage earnings (reflected in the data, but not analyzed); (c) level and differentials in wages earned after three years in relation to U.S. poverty levels (could be abstracted from data, but not analyzed); and (d) wage differentials due to race, gender, and class of students (not collected or mentioned).

To follow up on (c), we analyze the 84 award/job categories presented in the report in order to compare the wage earned after three years of degree completion with poverty levels in the U.S. The official poverty measure as of 2005 is 29% of median family income (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2007, p. 282). Based on 1994-2000 data, the lowest (poor) household income quintile in the U.S. is \$0 to \$32,700 and the 2nd lowest household income quintile (lower middle) is \$32,701 to \$51,900 (Hertz, 2006, p 9). The breakdown of the 84 degree/jobs listed in the 2006 Chancellor’s office report is as follows: 2 jobs’ wages (2.4%) place students in the upper 4th quintile (upper middle); 13 jobs (15.5%) place students in the 3rd quintile (middle); 32 jobs (38.1%) place students in the 2nd lowest quintile (lower middle); and 37 jobs (44%) place students in the bottom quintile (poor), with 8 of these jobs (9.5%) below, at, or just above the poverty level for a household of four. Our preliminary analysis shows that 82% of these students make wages that, if they are the sole source of income for a household, would put that household in lower middle to poor quintiles. Almost half of these students (44%) were poor going into a degree/certificate program and were still poor three years after achieving an award.

We have been working to provide more detail on the questions: Who succeeds? and What “success” means? – especially in relation to a highly vocationalized community college system. We have completed the first phase of our research and we are preparing to move into phase two. This work focuses on the data we have collected and analyzed in phase one, and we intend to gather critical questions and comments from conference participants to help us both review our findings and evaluate the scope of phase two.

Phase One of this research project organized and analyzed state-wide data collected by the California Community College Chancellor's Office Data Mart. The collected data were broken down into two broad areas: (1) state-wide enrollment numbers, retention rates, and passing rates for specific curricular areas of study broken down by race and gender; (2) total vocational certificates and degrees offered in curricular areas of study with special notion of ratio of certificates to degrees.

The data presented in this poster session show general trends in terms of who is succeeding in what curricular areas correlated by ethnicity/race and gender, as well as a longitudinal analysis of the credential output for the various curricular areas. We have gathered complex data on who succeeds and in what curricular areas of study. As we show from the data, there are clear variations in program success and retention rates, and the variations are correlated to gender and ethnicity/race. These variations raise questions about who attains degrees in what areas and why certain populations succeed more than other populations. The data collected in Phase One will form the basis of Phase Two: The California Community College Collaborative is currently planning and writing several research papers for our *Policy Paper Series: Re-Examining and Re-Imagining Vocational Education in California Community Colleges*. Our first published report came out this summer, "Short-Term Credentials and the California Community College Curriculum, 1993 – 2006." Future papers will address the complex accountability measure of student "success" in relation to the achievement gap, the vocationalization of the California curriculum, the inequitable economic rewards associated with various credentials, and the current state of community college vocational education.

California Community College Collaborative
Graduate School of Education
University of California, Riverside
1361 Sproul Hall
Riverside, CA 92521-0128
C4@ucr.edu

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