

## The New Forgotten Half: Those Who Pursue College But Never Earn a Degree

### A Forum Hosted by the American Youth Policy Forum

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In 1988, the William T. Grant Foundation released the landmark report, *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families*, highlighting the plight of the majority of America's youth who at the time did not complete high school or pursue career-related postsecondary education, thereby facing dim economic and social futures. In 1998, The American Youth Policy Forum released *The Forgotten Half Revisited*, an update on youth and young adult participation in education, the workforce, and society. Both publications helped to focus more policy attention and support on the "forgotten half."

A new study commissioned by the William T. Grant Foundation, [\*The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them\*](#), finds that many young people who enroll in college fail to complete their studies and attain a degree and that these youth fare no better in the labor market than those with only a high school diploma. And while 37% of on-time high school graduates enroll in community colleges and intend, ultimately, to pursue bachelor's degrees, nearly half (46%) drop out within eight years, earning no degree and incurring significant expenses. These young people, who pursue but do not complete their higher education, are, according to the authors, the "new forgotten half."

This forum included two panels focused on community college students who do not obtain a credential; the multiple challenges facing students after entering college, such as lack of guidance and counseling in course selection and course sequencing or financing; and the fact that policy does little to prevent college dropouts or to address the needs of those who have dropped out. The forum also considered gaps in academic and social supports, future directions for research on this group of young adults, and effective strategies and policies to promote postsecondary degree attainment.

#### Panel I

**Adam Gamoran, President, William T. Grant Foundation**, provided background on the Foundation's commission of *The New Forgotten Half*. The WT Grant Foundation has a long-standing focus on young people and recently announced a new initiative to support research on programs, policies, and practices to reduce inequality. The initiative is based on four central points about inequality: 1) levels of inequality are exceptionally high; 2) excessive inequality causes economic and social harm; 3) social policies can combat inequality; and 4) research is needed to identify approaches that are effective in reducing inequality. As part of this work, the Foundation is supporting research on policies, programs, and practices to reduce inequality, beginning by commissioning papers in four domains of inequality: 1) immigrant children and families; 2) mental health and mental health services; 3) the justice system; and 4) postsecondary education and workforce development.

**James Rosenbaum, Professor, Northwestern University and lead author of *The New Forgotten Half***, began by noting that research for this report indicates changing conditions that must be understood in order to direct youth in the right directions. In 1988 college was considered the ticket to successfully entering the labor market, and *The Forgotten Half* called for society to create new transition strategies to help youth transition to adult roles. Today, we have

much the same problem, but it is manifested quite differently. Secondary and postsecondary administrators are proud of high college-going rates, but they often fail to look at college persistence and completion. The true challenge today is not so much getting into college as it is getting something from that experience. In order to ask how education helps today's youth transition to productive adult roles, the authors of *The New Forgotten Half* used a national data set following high school sophomores for a ten-year period from 2002 to 2012. They found that 86% of high school graduates attend college soon after high school. Yet, many do not get much from that. While policymakers often encourage students to get a four-year bachelor's degree, for students who begin in community college, the average time to obtain a bachelor's is actually six years. Rosenbaum's study confirms national data that reveal among community colleges more students get certificates or associate's degrees than bachelor's degrees; and while these sub-BA credentials vastly expand young people's possibilities, they are not well-understood.

Unfortunately, many college students fail to obtain any credential at all, despite the fact that associate's degrees and certificate programs lead to jobs with higher pay and better non-monetary job rewards. Nearly half of community college students exit without a credential. At four-year colleges, 45% of the lowest achievers obtain no credential. For those who attend college but earn no credential, there is no earnings pay off. Interviews with community college counselors indicate they do not realize the value of these sub-baccalaureate credentials and do not know how to help students avoid no-credentials outcomes.

Rosenbaum suggested opportunities for college-level policy changes to address the problem of students leaving college without a degree or credential. First, schools should work with employers to understand the value of sub-baccalaureate credentials for mid-skill jobs. Second, schools should inform their students about the value of sub-baccalaureate credentials. Third, postsecondary institutions should create clear program pathways with structured course sequences that help guide students. Finally, schools should create incremental success pathways that allow students to combine credentials (credential/degree ladders or stackable credentials). Rosenbaum also suggested opportunities for national and state-level policy to increase the proportion of students completing a postsecondary degree or credential. First, standards and credits should be aligned between educational institutions. In addition, community colleges and four-year colleges should work to develop more articulation agreements (including, for example, which courses count toward a particular major). Postsecondary institutions should be provided with funds to support enhanced advising and job placement programming. Finally, federal and state government should allocate funds to encourage sub-baccalaureate occupational programs.

Rosenbaum concluded by stressing that changes in higher education over the past 25 years have created a new college reality we are only beginning to understand. Overly-idealistic school districts trumpet their college-going rates but fail to look carefully at college completion rates. Rosenbaum said, "We manage to get most high school graduates into college, but then we blow it. We offer students a lottery ticket, with low odds of achieving what they want. Then we fail to tell them about new opportunities, so young people fail to see them and reap the benefits."

**Barbara Veazey, President, West Kentucky Community and Technical College**, provided an overview of work by West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) to improve credentialing rates of its students. The College is a small community college located in rural Western Kentucky, an economically depressed area where college attendance is 70%. Fall enrollment in 2014 was about 6,500 students, with 62% of first-time students eligible for Pell grants, with 20% students of color, and 58% aged 24 or younger. Sixty-five percent of the college's students attend part-time.

When Kentucky decided to merge their community and technical college systems in 2002, WKCTC wanted to be recognized as a premier community college in the nation, committed to excellence and student success. In 2007, WKCTC looked at its data and saw that students were not reading at the national level (41% of the basic skill level compared to 60% nationally). For this reason, WKCTC decided to focus intently on improving reading skills, instituting the *Focus on Reading* program across the curriculum. The College used a variety of strategies to infuse reading across the curriculum to improve reading and included the focus in its professional development as part of the two-year new faculty orientation program. Veazey reported that WKCTC's intentional focus on reading made a tremendous difference to the College's graduation and success rates.

Working closely with high school faculty to increase the local college-going rate, WKCTC formed the West Kentucky Academy, a program enrolling high school students in dual credit courses. Now 78% of area high school graduates attend college. One strategy WKCTC has used is creating intentional pathways that lead to credentials along the way to a degree. The College's Health Science Technology Associate in Applied Science begins with the same courses as needed for a nursing degree. If students are not able to earn the full degree, they can complete various certifications (e.g., nursing assistant, advanced nursing assistant, phlebotomy, and pharmacy); that not only lead to the Health Science Technology Associate in Applied Science but also to good-paying jobs and careers.

#### **Q&A for Panel I**

##### ***What role do for-profits, such as Phoenix, Corinthian, etc., play in all of this?***

Rosenbaum asserted that for-profit colleges know their clients and their problems, and some do a good job. Some have practical procedures that community colleges could emulate.

##### ***Woodrow Wilson was hoping for a two-tiered approach to education- Is that what you're proposing?***

Rosenbaum said he is advocating a two-tiered approach, but not one that is either/or. You can do both/and. We are doing it already with the 30 percent of two-year college students who go on to get a BA. We can combine these various options. Gamoran pointed out that the U.S. has always been a land of second chances in education. Often students accumulate many credits and then realize they do not add up to a degree. It is possible to implement a system that allows for progression and does not put young people into dead-end situations, a true two-track system. Veazey pointed out that the key is advising. We need to avoid students leaving us with nothing, she argued. We need certificates along the way so if they leave they have something useful in the workforce.

##### ***The original Forgotten Half talked about apprenticeships, why are you not mentioning apprenticeships?***

Rosenbaum indicated that he does discuss apprenticeships in the full report. Apprenticeships are very much consistent with this whole approach. Community colleges can feed into apprenticeships and might do so very effectively.

##### ***How can we create greater awareness and encourage a broad effort to improve completion? Is this something that can be done through higher education associations?***

Rosenbaum responded that the first thing needed is simply awareness that when we advise students to get a BA without providing information about other options, we are doing them a great disservice. If you lose these students, it is hard to get them back. If you facilitate an early

success, they can then go on later to pursue further education. We are not there yet. We still worry we are having low expectations for students if we counsel them to work toward anything less than a four-year degree, but often that pathway leads to nothing.

## Panel II

**Mark Mitsui, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Community Colleges, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education**, provided thoughts on the need for strategic coherence around postsecondary completion. It takes strong leadership in order to create the landscape of initiatives and strategic change needed at community colleges across the country. A recent book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, suggests a guided pathway approach to redesigning community colleges. President Obama called for increases in rates of college completion, and this has created a focus on community colleges. Now it is hard to find a funder, nonprofit, state system, or community college that is not thinking about how to help more community college students be successful. We have also seen Executive action on many inter-related initiatives focused on student success. For example, the My Brother's Keeper Initiative is focused on improving outcomes for young men of color, with a strong postsecondary completion aspect. Similarly, the Task Force for New Americans addresses the financial aid needs of the many community college students who are undocumented. The federal government is also interested in stackable credentials, with a pilot in six states to explore creating career pathways with employers in which students do not lose credit.

**Josh Wyner, Executive Director, College Excellence Program, The Aspen Institute**, argued that we need better coordination across systems. He cautioned against advancing choice too early on, noting that while students do need to make a choice about a career path at some point, we need to make sure we are not channeling students into certain pathways based on race or class. The system of community colleges is built on the general higher education model and includes over a thousand courses of study. We should consider, he argued, how to streamline the choices for students. He also pointed out that we need to talk not only about what programs work, but also about what institutions work. The Aspen Institute thinks the challenge is about leadership. Wyner said we need a new national strategy on higher education leadership. Finally, Wyner pointed out that excellent community colleges make learning interesting and have a culture in which faculty are continuously improving what they do. In addition, they are good at helping students obtain a job.

**Gardner Carrick, Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, Manufacturing Institute, National Association of Manufacturers**, provided an employer/industry perspective. Thirty years ago, manufacturing jobs required a high school diploma or less. Now, there is an increased need for more rigorous and specific technical skills, given advances in technology. In the last five years there has been job growth and a resurgence of manufacturing in the U.S., and manufacturers are scrambling to find individuals with the skills to operate those machines. One challenge has been inconsistency across community college programs. To address this issue, the Manufacturing Institute and the National Association of Manufacturers identified industry-based certifying bodies that work with manufacturing programs at community colleges as a way to bring a consistent level of quality in the sector.

Carrick said a second challenge has been dealing with the poor image many people have about careers in manufacturing. In the past, manufacturing was viewed as for the lowest achieving students, so no parent wanted their child to go into those careers. Now the industry is challenged to ensure we view these training programs as "college," and as a desirable, and

perhaps even prestigious, career path. The industry has succeeded in getting many stackable certifications embedded in postsecondary programs.

## **Q&A for Panel II**

***How do we make sure we are providing all students with the best information about what opportunities exist? Often low-income students or students of color are directed into pathways that might not be the best for them. How do we get farther down the road in this discussion?***

Wyner argued that as long as colleges are offering programs that are not very good, it will be hard to make sure they are not counseling students into low-quality programs. Strong leaders will close poor programs. We have to ask what's working and what's not.

Rosenbaum responded that in the past the story was, "What are we doing with students and what are the students' problems?" Now we are saying, "The problem is in the institution, between institutions, between high school and college, college and work." We are now identifying the problem with the system. It is hard to tell someone not to go for a BA, but we know students with low achievement levels often have little chance of obtaining the degree. Because a BA is not something that can be counted on, we should be giving everyone dependable successful options, knowing they can always continue with their education.

Mitsui said that we have a better picture of what works now than 10 years ago. We are finding out that there are ways we can help students complete who formerly would have struggled to do so. We also know that additional resources are needed. For example, instructional expenditures in public versus private postsecondary institutes are not equitable. Better-prepared students are attending more selective institutions, where more is spent on them. We should be incentivizing the states to reinvest in higher education.

Gamoran argued that the key is to make postsecondary programs meaningful, with useful training that is part of a career ladder. Should we see community colleges as a force for diversion (from four-year colleges), or as a force for inclusion (for those who would not have gone to college at all)? We can have our cake and eat it too. If programs in community colleges are meaningful and provide good options for continuing education in the future, this does not have to be an either/or choice.

Veazey responded that for many colleges it is still difficult to sit down with students and counselors and actually say "look, if you're in the logistics or transportation area, you're going to be able to make this wage." Also, college counselors have never wanted to look at a student and say "nursing is probably not going to fit in your pathway right now." We need to make it our job to have these conversations with students.

***When you talk about completion rates, what is the time-frame?***

Veazey said at West Kentucky Community and Technical College they look at three years. Wyner indicated that Aspen is looking at 150% of "regular" time. They are also looking to see if a student gets a BA later.

***What do we do with the large number of already forgotten young people who have gone to several years of college and have nothing to show for it but debt?***

Veazey reported struggling with this every day at WKCTC. Many students have maxed out their financial aid. We make calls to let students know they only have a certain number of hours left

to complete their degree. They are trying to figure out how to get students back when they do not have any money.

Carrick suggested such students could go back for a technical certification program, since that is where there are jobs. We need to get the word out about different opportunities for youth and young adults in such situations.

Mitsui indicated that loan default is a big issue for returning students. The federal government is working with community colleges to spread financial literacy as a strategy to help students get through. Also, there are some experimental sites where colleges are piloting credit for prior learning and competency-based education.