

THE CENTER FOR COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

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The Darlings Versus the Black Sheep

by Daniel L. Bennett

Last week, the Obama Administration hosted a so-called community college summit at the White House. As Neal McCluskey at Cato describes it, it was just another public education love-fest at its finest:

President Obama and Second Lady Jill Biden, a community college professor, couldn't keep their hands off their significant other, lavishing all sorts of praise on their favorite little schools.

So the community colleges are apparently the little darlings of the education community because they offer educational options for the nontraditional student at costs that are perceived to be very low, but are in fact quite expensive, once taxpayer subsidies are considered. Meanwhile, the haranguing of the for-profit sector, which happens to serve very similar demographics and has total costs comparable to community colleges, continues in Washington.

McCluskey added another critique of the community college sector:

Community colleges might be a good option for some people, but they are hardly paragons of educational success. Quite the opposite: According to the U.S. Department of Education, they have the worst graduation rates of any two-year sector of higher education. Only around 22 percent of public, two-year college students graduate within three years, versus roughly 49 percent of private, not-for-profit attendees and about 59 percent of private, for-profit students

Education Sector's [Ben Miller](#) disagrees, arguing that:

Community colleges produced the vast majority of their



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graduates in programs of at least two years and less than four years—most likely associate degrees. They also had a substantial number of students who transferred out. Unfortunately, we don't know where they ended up, but it's a safe bet that a relatively large number went to a four-year school and just did not earn a degree from the community college.

...more than 100,000 transfers at community colleges, many of whom probably ended up at four-year schools. Part of the mission for community colleges is to prepare students to enter a four-year school, so they should get some credit for successful transfers

For-profits, on the other hand, mostly had graduates in programs of less-than two years.

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While I agree with Miller that the federal graduation rate data are flawed, I find his argument that transfer students go on to success at 4-year schools unconvincing and akin to voodoo statistics. There surely are plenty of individuals who started off their academic careers at a community college before transferring into and completing a BA degree at a 4-year school. However, the same can likely be said of students who started off at a for-profit institution. Not to mention that many students who begin at a community college are unsatisfied with their experience (for whatever reason) and then go on to finish a program at a for-profit institution. According to Miller's logic, the community colleges should be given a pat on the back for this type of transfer as well.

Now, I'm not saying that for-profit schools are superior to community colleges or vice versa, but I am quite tired of the public sector being painted as darlings while the private sector is portrayed as the black sheep. There are problems in all of higher education in this country. Mainly, we continue to pump billions into a system and yet know very little about what students are learning or how the money is being spent. We need more accountability and productivity in all of higher education, not just the for-profit sector. The public sector is just as guilty of academic malfeasance, if not more.

POSTED BY DANIEL L. BENNETT AT 2:00 PM



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