

Not A Real College: The Stigmas Surrounding Community Colleges

Introduction

During the summer of 2018, posters of “college-bound” graduates of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo High School were posted by the lampposts aligning the side streets of Santa Fe Avenue and Willow Street in West Long Beach. Skirting further down the road, one will begin to notice the sheepish smiles of the high school alumni holding the banner representative of the university they will be attending their first year of college: University of California - Irvine (UCI), California State University - Long Beach (CSULB), University of Southern California (USC), etc. As one drives past these posters, one might question the district’s intentions for funding them: Is it to reward some of Cabrillo High School’s current graduating class for their four years of hard work (thus, leading to their college acceptance)? Does it aim to rebrand the high school as an institute of scholars? The posters paint the local high school in such a positive light, all the while prohibiting their “community-college-bound” students from getting posters of their own.

Indeed, community colleges (colloquially known as junior colleges) remain stigmatized in the 21st century. Junior colleges bridge the gap between those who are unable to afford access to a higher-form of education. The establishment of such institutions allows the public to have “egalitarian access to college (or democratic access)” (Bailey Wilson, Kristin, and Cristi D. Ford 3). As a result, college education becomes accessible to the children of low-income households, thus, widening the door for social mobility. Despite the roles junior colleges play in the democratization of the United States of America, negative stereotypes remain lurking in the public’s minds surrounding community colleges; and so, it’s vital to look back and ask why such

stereotypes exist. Why do community colleges hold a bad reputation in spite its enormous benefits? What role do school districts play in dismantling or perpetuating such stereotypes?

High School Districts

The four years prior to a person's official entry as a college student is vital as it could determine where they will pursue their higher education. Therefore, the role school districts play is an important factor to consider as it could potentially uncover why community colleges are stigmatized.

Schools in affluent neighborhoods have more access to college-related information (financial aid, college admissions, standardized testing preparations, etc.) thus, students there are likelier to finish college. In fact, Ann Owens, Ph.D., associate professor of Sociology at USC, found that "earning a BA depends on skills and resources drawn from a wider reference group than one's own family or individual traits" (Owen 300). To bridge such a gap to neighborhoods with low-income families, school districts set up "career centers" in each high school where federally-funded Upward Bound Programs are stationed to promote college education literacy to students in low-income families. Such programs inform students that going to a four-year university is a possible route to take regardless of their financial status. The districts' efforts made universities more accessible to students; however, due to the constant promotion of a four-year college education, the value of community college is then undermined. In 2018, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) funded more than one-hundred posters for "college-bound" students of Cabrillo High School and posted them by the lampposts of West Side Long Beach. The rhetoric in these posters, labeling "four-year" bound students simply as "college bound", suggests the notion that community colleges are not "real" colleges especially

because they prohibit community-college-bound students of Cabrillo High School to have posters of their own. LBUSD's restrictions, consequently, perpetuates the long-term stereotype surrounding community colleges because it does not celebrate every student's decision to simply continue their education; rather, it celebrates a student's victory in overcoming scrutiny in the eyes of the admissions officers when applying to four-year colleges. The masses' perception of community colleges is evident as Josh Lafazan, who opted to go to Nassau Community College in 2012 to focus on his duties as the youngest Nassau county legislator, was met with ridicule among his peers for deciding to go to junior college. Coming from Syosset High School, a highly-ranked public school nationwide located in suburban New York, his peers have told him that he is "pursuing the worst life plan ever" ("Community College to Harvard: Rethinking College Admissions | Josh Lafazan | TEDxYouth@Shadyside."). Lafazan's experience circles back to Owens' findings: the probability of completing a bachelor's degree correlates with the resources available from one's environment (Owens). Since Lafazan's peers come from suburban New York where they have resources that direct them towards a four-year degree, they're likely to go straight to a four-year university where a bachelor's degree is attainable. By embarking on a different path from his peers, he forcefully sets himself up in a vulnerable social position. This also connects to LBUSD's decision to only fund posters specifically for four-year bound students. Aiming to bolster Cabrillo High School's reputation, displaying the achievements of students going to a four-year college gives the school a higher rate of return (in respect to public perception) in contrast to promoting students who are community-college-bound. While LBUSD's decision is both cost-cutting and practical, it still promotes the stigma surrounding community colleges.

Societal Perception

It's important to look at the common masses' point of view surrounding community colleges. Despite the negative connotations associated with two-year colleges, it is evident that they have numerous benefits: they are cost-effective, they are accessible to the public, their classes have a smaller student-professor ratio compared to big public universities, etc. Ironically, some of these benefits contribute to how negative perceptions surrounding junior colleges manifest.

Four-year universities have a significantly lower acceptance rate (depending on their prestige and the number of applicants they receive) compared to community colleges. USC recently dropped their acceptance rate from sixteen percent (2017) to thirteen percent (2018) for the Class of 2022 (Mackovich). New York University (NYU) also dropped their acceptance rate from twenty-eight percent (2017) to nineteen percent (2018) for their newly admitted freshman class in 2018 (Keogan). It is likely that the acceptance rates of various universities are going to decline for years to come as the number of applicants continue to increase each year. Meanwhile, community colleges, in their promise of democratization, guarantee admission to all of their applicants. Because four-year universities have a much more sophisticated screening process in granting admission to their students, the notion that their students are superior to those that go to junior colleges become ingrained in the masses' minds. The masses love the spectacle of suffering; and the idea of students getting accepted to a four-year university despite the odds stacked against them is akin to the "hero's journey" archetype: the flawed man embarks on a quest where he battles numerous adversities and emerges victorious. Students in community colleges, on the other hand, didn't have to undergo such a journey. It was as if their endeavor - to

go to college - was simply handed to them. As a result, society values the education given by four-year universities over the one given by two-year colleges as it could be perceived that the students of the former are more intelligent (or “qualified”) than the latter.

The significantly lower cost of community colleges also plays a role in the negative societal perception surrounding them. According to Amalia Dache-Gerbino (professor at University of Missouri) and Julie A. White (Senior Vice President at Onondaga Community College) “the locations of college campuses and how residents and students travel to school can thereby be a means of inequity, leading in turn to discourses of criminalization, given that certain neighborhoods and the use of public transportation are associated with racialized poverty and criminal activity” (Dache-Gerbino, Amalia, and Julie A. White). This suggests that since community colleges attract students coming from low-income families, the masses then cling onto the stereotype that junior colleges are unsafe. This leads them to favor four-year universities over their two-year counterpart. Furthermore, the Public Policy Institute of California states that community college funding “is still lower than per student funding in the UC, CSU, and K–12 systems” although it has reached an “all-time high” (Cook). This means that the selective four-year universities in California have more resources for their students than those who study in junior colleges considering the former’s higher tuition fees and larger funding, thus, devaluing community college education.

Conclusion

Although junior colleges give opportunities for social mobility for low-income families, stereotypes surrounding junior colleges are still prevalent in today’s society. The stigma with community colleges are born out of a myriad factors, two of them being the measures provided

by high school districts to promote four-year college education among their students, and the masses' belief in the stereotypes surrounding community colleges. School districts, in particular, play an important factor in perpetuating the negative perceptions associated with community colleges as they encourage their students to go to four-year universities after high school which consequently perpetuate the stigma and stereotypes associated with two-year colleges.

Additionally, the holistic approach universities take in reviewing an applicant's application also affects societal perception in accordance to the masses' romanticization of the "spectacle of suffering" archetype. As a result, community colleges are viewed as "subpar" or even the "last resort". The fact that community colleges are cheaper in contrast to their four-year counterpart is also a factor in the festering stigma junior colleges still face in the 21st century as the campus of the former could be seen as less safe than the latter.

It is unlikely that the attitude society has towards community colleges will change any time in the future. However, it is evident that community colleges are one of the pillars of democracy. They encourage the integration of education among the lower class and allow them the opportunity to have similar learning resources as their wealthy counterparts. Community colleges offer the same General Education classes for a cheaper price compared to those offered in a four-year university. They are also accessible to the public, which means that a diverse array of people take part in the college tradition, even more so than four-year universities.

In other words, the stereotype regarding community colleges is just that - a mere stereotype. Rising high school seniors should not be swayed by their high school district's propaganda and glorification of a four-year college education and start viewing community

colleges as places to be instead of last resorts. After all, the peer pressure one feels in the present is not going to pay the student debt he or she accumulates in the succeeding years.

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