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## Impact of Community College Pathways on Social Mobility in the United State

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between community college attendance and social mobility outcomes in the United States. This paper presents a systematic review of empirical evidence on community college pathways and social mobility that elucidates the conditions under which two-year institutions are effective in fostering upward socioeconomic mobility. This paper synthesizes findings from a variety of earlier empirical studies, including transfer pathway efficacy, labor market returns to associate degrees, and stratification in searching across outcomes. The study shows that though two-year schools with open-access policies enroll 40 percent of all undergraduates, just 16 percent who start at a community college go on to transfer and earn bachelor's degrees (below four-year entrants by 15 percentage points). At the same time, associate degrees offer sizeable returns of \$4,640-\$7,160 per year in earnings Vs. Non-completers that increase over the lifetime years. Other findings from the paper were that socioeconomic stratification is still very evident, as half of the lowest-income quintile students attended a community college, compared with just 18 percent of the highest-income students, and wage gaps persist even when those with similar credentials are granted. The paper also finds that community colleges serve as both ladders of opportunity and mechanisms of stratification, depending in part on characteristics of the institutions themselves, the preparation levels of students, and policy contexts. Additionally, the study shows that although these institutions deliver substantial labor market benefits, they do not compensate for this on their own without a more systemic level change.

### INTRODUCTION

Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals or families to move up and down the social ladder in terms of wealth, power or status. Factors such as income, education and occupation (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018) shape this mobility. Among these factors, education plays a particularly important role in promoting upward mobility because it provides people with knowledge and skills (and often valid certification of their capabilities) that enable them to access better jobs and achieve a higher standard of living (Hout 2012; Blanden 2013). Consequently, education is regarded as one of the most powerful tools to counteract structural disadvantages and support long-term social mobility.

Community colleges have a well-established role as sources of social mobility in America by providing pathways to higher education and postsecondary opportunities for millions who would otherwise be left out (Romano & Eddy, 2017; Cabili, 2025). These universities enroll 40% of the undergraduate students nationwide and are a key component of the American educational system, which embodies one of the most important democratic ideals Americans have about opportunity for all social classes (Kisker *et al.*, 2023; Villarin *et al.*, 2025). In theory, community colleges are engines of social mobility because they emphasize open-access (no high school degree or minimal SAT scores), low tuition rates and programs that accommodate a diverse student body from 1st generation college students to individuals in the labor

force attempting to pivot, to economically disadvantaged residents.

However, empirical studies linking community college attendance to social mobility outcomes are mixed and have sparked significant scholarly debate. While advocates suggest community colleges offer critical points of entry for advancement in the economy, through both "terminal" credentials and transfer opportunities to four-year institutions, detractors argue that these same institutions have "accidentally" created a system designed to sort students into lower-level programs and away from direct enrollment in bachelor's degree programs (Jaro, 2023). This friction is compounded by new data that show the national transfer-out rate of community college students to four-year institutions is around 31%, but just 46% of those transferring complete their bachelor's degree in six years. Further, graduation rates are still low with 13% at two years, 22% at three years, and 60% at four years overall, which points to ongoing obstacles in degree completion, particularly for underrepresented student populations (Kisker *et al.* 2023).

This debate has broader implications than just academic disagreement but touches on key issues regarding educational equity and the nature of U.S. higher education. For instance, children in the lowest income quintile who forgo the attainment of a four-year degree are four times more likely to persist in the bottom income quintile than those earning bachelor's degrees (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). Current research, moreover, indicates that students

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from families in the top 1% of income distribution are 34 percent more likely to enroll in top-tier colleges than their peers: a testament to ongoing structural impediments to educational advancement (Palm 2025).

During the past twenty years, the empirical literature on community college pathways and social mobility has greatly expanded, which has developed more sophisticated methods of study and employed longitudinal datasets. Many of the earlier studies used simple correlational analysis that did not control for selection bias and heterogeneity in student populations. Subsequent investigations used more rigorous quasi-experimental designs, instrumental variables, and propensity score matching techniques to better account for the selection process associated with attending community college itself being correlated with educational and labor market outcomes. These methodological advances have uncovered patterns that complicate celebratory or (as the Brookings study suggested) dismissive narratives about community colleges as avenues to upward mobility.

Building on the earlier metrics and studies noted, this study seeks to systematically gather, synthesize, and evaluate empirical research examining the relationship between community college attendance and social mobility outcomes in the United States. The objective of this study was to examine the mechanisms via which community colleges promote upward economic mobility and to ascertain the role played by these factors at an institutional level, along with others occurring at a student level. Approached from this exhaustive standpoint, the research provides empirical reflections on how to accept or modify policy reformations concerning the way two-year institutions might offer parity and a piece of the economic pie.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for conducting systematic literature reviews to examine the relationship between community college pathways and social mobility in the United States. The review applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor. To be eligible, studies had to focus on community college students in the U.S., measure outcomes related to social mobility such as transfer rates, degree completion, or labor market returns, and employ empirical quantitative methods. Only peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and January 2024 were considered, and articles were required to report disaggregated community college data with at least a two-year follow-up period. Studies that were theoretical, qualitative-only, not U.S.-based, unpublished, or lacking measurable outcomes were excluded. This framework ensured that only high-quality, directly relevant studies were included in the review.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across seven major databases: ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR, ProQuest Education Database, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Premier, and Google Scholar.

The search was carried out from each database's inception through January 2024, using Boolean search strategies that combined terms related to community colleges, social mobility, educational pathways, and labor market outcomes. For example, common search strings included "community college" AND "social mobility," "two-year institution" AND "degree completion," and "associate degree" AND "labor market outcomes." Reference lists of included studies were also scanned (backward citation searching), and forward tracking was conducted to capture additional relevant publications not retrieved through the initial search.

A title and abstract level screen was next conducted by two reviewers who selectively filtered the remaining items by screening out those that did not meet the predetermined eligibility criteria; the remaining items were then subjected to a full-text evaluation, where further filtering was done based on the inadequacy of quantitative data, inadequate duration of follow-ups, or inadequate representation of populations of community colleges. The resultant corpus, therefore, consisted of the studies that met all the inclusion criteria, and it was considered appropriate to undergo the final analytical stage.

Data from these studies were extracted using a standardized framework that recorded study characteristics, participant demographics, methodological approaches, and outcomes. Quality assessment focused on sample representativeness, statistical rigor, longitudinal adequacy, and control for selection bias. Because of heterogeneity in study design and outcomes, a narrative synthesis was used rather than meta-analysis, with findings grouped into three thematic areas: transfer pathway effectiveness, labor market returns to associate degrees, and socioeconomic stratification in community college outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The evidence base is growing in the areas of community college pathways and social mobility, with a number of empirical analyses over many decades assessing the connection between two-year college attendance and increased economic success. Questions surrounding community colleges serving as tools of social mobility in American society have been addressed through a multitude of research methods. Research on the existing community college student population has produced inconsistent results: the effectiveness of the sector varies with institutional factors, student characteristics and program types.

### Transfer Pathway Effectiveness in the US System

Transfer pathway effectiveness has been at the heart of debates over whether community colleges truly expand opportunity. Transfer is often presented as the primary route to upward mobility, since bachelor's degrees yield the largest lifetime returns. However, evidence consistently shows that students who begin at two-year colleges encounter substantial barriers to transferring and completing four-year degrees. For instance, Wyatt,

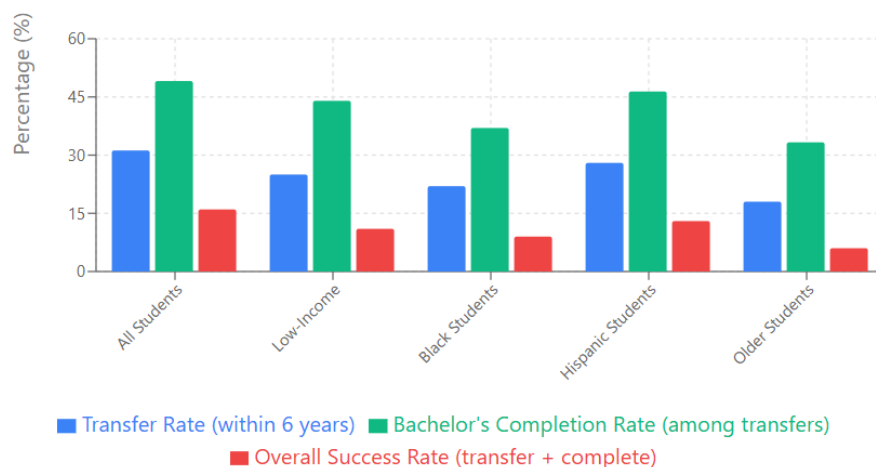
(2021) found that Oklahoma community college students transferred at disproportionately low rates compared with their stated aspirations, while (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015) reported that community college transfer students were 15 percentage points less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than peers who started at four-year institutions. Barger (2023) documented that transfer students took longer on average to finish, raising concerns about debt accumulation and delayed entry into the labor market, factors with direct implications for intergenerational mobility. Li (2010) further demonstrated that disrupted enrollment, whether at two-year or four-year institutions, is strongly associated with lower completion. More recent quasi-experimental approaches, such as (Goodman *et al.*, 2017), refine these findings by showing that transfer outcomes are highly context-dependent, varying by institutional capacity, state policy, and student preparation. Collectively, these studies highlight that transfer is not a consistently reliable mobility pathway. Rather, it is constrained by systemic barriers such as financial hardship and uneven advising, suggesting that institutional and structural conditions, not individual deficits, drive these outcomes. At the same time, a notable gap in this literature is the lack of attention to how transfer interacts with race, class, and gender. While aggregate completion statistics are important, mobility cannot be fully assessed without examining how stratification shapes transfer outcomes across different student populations.

The available empirical literature on community college transfer pathways consistently documents low transfer and completion rates, countering the, albeit largely theoretical, promise of two-year institutions as efficient bridges to baccalaureate education. Wyatt (2021) conducted a study focusing on community college transfer students in Oklahoma and discovered that the rate at which students successfully transferred to four-year institutions was

disproportionately low compared to the rates of students who originally reported transfer goals at community college entry. Among its findings: CC students who transferred to four-year institutions graduated with a bachelor's degree in six years at significantly higher rates than native-level students, especially those receiving an associate's degree from the community college. Li (2010) aggregated data to produce results specific to four-year-to-four-year transfer students. His research also demonstrates that transfers between four-year institutions have substantial declines in bachelor's degree completion rates compared with those who do not transfer out or even return to the same institution after a break. Li *et al.* (2010) showed that Heckman's two-step model, adjusting for sample selection bias, found significant transfer-student hurdles to graduation, with interrupted enrollment patterns a significant signal of not completing. Categorization of these findings underscored the importance and inferences from Indian autonomy that apply to the USA context if financial aid interventions are to increase transfer efficacy amongst students moving from four-year institutions, a population that has been largely unstudied in existing remediation and transfer research.

Monaghan and Attewell (2015) operated a National Education Longitudinal Study data in which they established that the benefits of children who read to their children 30 minutes, 5 times a week, were not notably different from children whose parents did not ever read to them. They found the community college transfer students were 15 percentage points less likely to earn bachelor's degrees than comparable students who started at four-year institutions. Additionally, Barger (2023) found in their study that transfer students took longer on average to receive a degree - 5.2 years compared to the 4.3 direct enrollment years; These longer times to completion have important implications for student loan debt burden and opportunity costs, factors that may erode the labor-

Transfer rates, completion rates, and overall success rates by demographic group (2024)



**Figure 1:** Community College Transfer Pathway Effectiveness in the United States

Sources: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2024), Community College Research Center, Columbia University (2024), U.S. Department of Education (2023).

market benefits of attending community colleges. Recognition of the potential utility of individual-level data means that more sophisticated methodologies have been used in work on transfer pathways recently, which enhances the ability to address issues such as selection bias and further allows us to better isolate the causal effect of community college attendance on educational outcomes. Though instrumental variables and quasi-experimental studies of transfer effectiveness are more definitive. Goodman *et al.* (2017) replicated their core findings using similar propensity score methods, but they also cross-validated their work through ongoing discussion and writing related to how community college attendance does and does not negatively influence outcomes. These methodological improvements have led to an understanding of the efficacy of transfer pathways, revealing that results are highly context-specific due to variations in student preparation, institutional capacity, and state policy contexts.

As evidenced by the graph above, higher education outcomes compared for different demographic groups showed huge differences, with only a transfer rate of about 18% for older students and 31% overall, slashing eligibility to small proportions based on inherent hurdles from financial hardships or past academic records. Baccalaureate completion is relatively equal across all transfer student groups at between 33 and 47%, but the lower transfer rates of some populations are major determinants of overall success. The data shows that older students and Black students have the gateway closed on their faces in the transfer process: respectively, their success rates are 6% and 9%, compared with an average of 15% of all examinations carried out.

### US Labor Market Returns to Associate Degrees

The second theme concerns labor market returns to associate degrees, which offer a more direct pathway to mobility outside the transfer function. (Belfield & Bailey, 2017) found that associate degree holders in eight states earned between \$4,640 and \$7,160 more annually than students with no credential, while (Belfield & Bailey, 2019) showed that these returns persisted across the life course. A study by Minaya & Scott-Clayton (2022) reinforced this conclusion, demonstrating that associate degree payoffs not only persist but grow over time, with especially strong benefits during recessions. Certificates, by contrast, often yield smaller and less durable returns, with benefits that vary by program area and tend to decline over time. Collectively, these findings show that community colleges can and do provide tangible economic mobility through wage gains, improved job stability, and protection against labor market volatility. Yet, while research has convincingly established the earnings premium associated with associate degrees, it has been less attentive to other dimensions of mobility, such as wealth accumulation, job quality, or intergenerational outcomes. The heavy emphasis on wage returns, while valuable, leaves open questions about whether associate

degree holders experience broader upward mobility in terms of long-term stability and security.

Belfield and Bailey (2017) conducted a study of labor market returns to sub-baccalaureate college credentials using data from 8 states on the earnings of those who attended community colleges. Among the many studies, associate degrees are associated with the largest and most durable earnings increases. Students who earn associate degrees, which require two years of study, can expect to make an average \$4,640 to \$7,160 more per year than students who do not complete any award upon college entry. They offer evidence of positive returns with a half-life Certificate program, which demonstrates modest positive returns that decay over time. These benefits are not limited to students who obtain degrees, either; more credits lead to higher earnings even for students who do not finish their degree.

Another research by Belfield and Bailey (2019) analysed the labour market value of postsecondary education by completing a study where they sought to determine how lifetime earnings are affected by various levels of college educational attainment. They discovered that bachelor's degrees lead to the biggest gains in lifetime earnings, a total of more than \$250k on average. The employment benefits of an associate's degree greatly outweigh having no college, and they are also persistent. Although certificate programs increase earnings, there is significant variability in the magnitude and persistence of these gains. Advantages largely rely on the area of research study and the type of program. The authors summarize that nearly all college investments, including associate degrees, continue to pay substantial labor market dividends despite technological shifts in the workforce.

Minaya and Scott-Clayton (2022) analyzed labor market trajectories of community college graduates for eleven years after they entered college. They employed administrative data from Ohio, and the researchers investigated how the earnings gains of associate degrees evolve. Though the gains for associate degrees improve post-graduation, rather than remaining static. Across multiple dimensions, higher wages, greater job stability, and a higher likelihood of earning a living wage, associate degrees reliably trump non-completion. In addition, their research shows that associate degree payoffs are greater in recessions than they would have been during times before the recession. Certificates mainly benefit those who graduate by way of better employment prospects and a lower probability of using unemployment insurance, though these benefits do not accumulate over time.

### Institutional Characteristics of US Community Colleges

Institutional characteristics further condition the extent to which community colleges function as ladders of opportunity. (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021) found that relationships with institutional agents, faculty, staff, and administrators played a critical role in student persistence and success, highlighting the importance of social capital in higher education outcomes. Similarly, Ishitani and

Kamer (2019) showed that differences in institutional expenditures and program emphases significantly influenced graduation rates, with transfer-oriented institutions performing better than those with a primarily technical or mixed mission. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Centre concerning National College Completion Rate by School Type in 2024 also reveals substantial variation: public two-year colleges reported a 43.4% completion rate, higher than three-year benchmarks but still trailing public and private four-year institutions. These findings illustrate that outcomes are not simply a reflection of student effort or preparation but are deeply shaped by institutional environments and policies. Strong advising structures, sufficient financial support, and transfer-friendly curricula increase the likelihood of mobility, while under-resourced or poorly aligned institutions constrain it. Despite this, much of the existing research remains focused on documenting variation across institutions rather than explaining the mechanisms that link institutional structures to student mobility. Greater attention to how institutional culture, governance, and policy incentives interact to shape outcomes would advance this field.

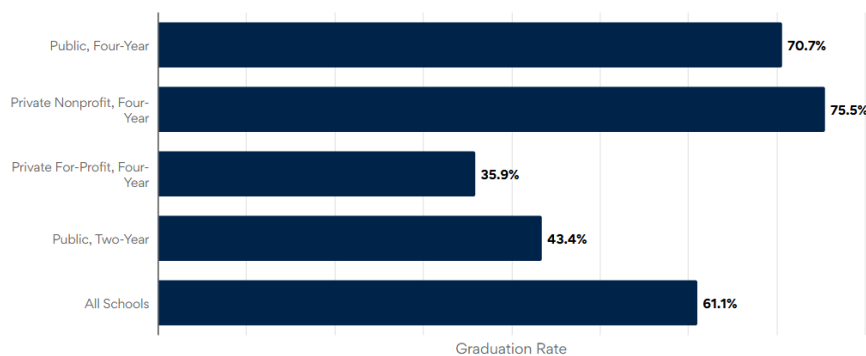
Studies have been conducted on this theme, and a few empirical reviews are discussed below:

Edenfield and McBrayer (2021) studied institutional conditions that matter to community college student success and looked at how campus environment and institutional agent role occupancy foster student achievement of educational goals using social capital theory. The researchers designed a qualitative multiple-

case study at Grace Home College, a multicampus state college in the southeastern United States. They gathered data through document analysis, observations, and in-depth interviews with students. Four dominant themes were reported as being especially supportive of the students' educational aims: institutional dimensions, a learning environment, and authentic relationships with college agents (i.e., faculty members, staff members, and administrators). The researchers designed a new model that mapped student interactions with institutional agents by levels of depth. The results highlight the key role that relationships with college personnel, often cultivated over time, play in student success.

Similarly, Ishitani and Kamer (2019) studied institutional characteristics and expenditures along with their differential effect on graduation rates, including three types of community colleges. Their study applied the 2015 Carnegie Classification system, where associate colleges are classified according to curriculum content: High Transfer, Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical, and High Career & Technical institutions. The researchers examined how institutional features and spending patterns influenced three-year graduation rates in different sectors. More importantly, the study revealed considerable variation in both institutional characteristics and their effects on graduation rates across the three categories of associate colleges. Underlying factors of student success are not the same across pure transfer institutions, pure career and technical education institutions, or mixed approach colleges. The investigators made practice suggestions derived from their findings and current literature.

**National College Completion Rate by School Type, 2024**



**Figure 2:** National College Completion Rate by School Type in 2024

The disparity in college completion rates is also exhibited across different institutional types in the above chart, with private nonprofit four-year institutions achieving the highest graduation rate at 75.5% and public four-year institutions following closely behind at 70.7%. This item also reports a higher overall completion rate for public two-year colleges (community colleges), 43.4%, than the typical three-year associate degree completion rates of 22-28% that have been cited, which reflects a

different time frame or metric for completion. A private for-profit 4-year institution ranks the lowest with 34.9% completion rates, potentially translating to academic or student support challenges. A national average of 61% hides these institutional variations in plain sight, which reveal that school type and sector exert a pronounced influence on the student success outcomes of American higher education.

### Socioeconomic Stratification in US Community College Outcomes

Finally, studies of socioeconomic stratification reveal the structural limits of community colleges as mobility engines. Canché (2016) showed that even when community college students eventually achieved advanced degrees, they continued to earn less than peers who began at four-year institutions, indicating that inequality persists across the educational pipeline. Holzer and Xu (2021) Also found that disadvantaged students often make program choices that reduce their long-term earnings potential, suggesting that inadequate guidance contributes to stratified outcomes. A study by Wolniak *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that higher socioeconomic status students employ more “enhancement strategies” to gain admission to selective colleges, compounding their advantages. Chester (2023) emphasized how financial burdens, including an average of \$11,000 in unmet need even after aid, pose barriers to persistence for low-income students. Federal enrollment data confirm these disparities, showing that 50% of students in the lowest income quintile attend community colleges, compared to just 18% of students from the highest income quintile, who are far more likely to enroll directly in selective four-year institutions. These findings show that while community colleges provide access, they remain embedded within a stratified higher education system that channels students into unequal outcomes. What is missing in this literature is a sustained focus on how structural economic barriers, such as housing insecurity, childcare responsibilities, or cumulative debt, intersect with community college pathways to shape long-term mobility.

In sum, the literature depicts community colleges as ambivalent institutions that simultaneously expand opportunity and reproduce inequality. Transfer pathways and associate degrees offer measurable mobility gains, but their effectiveness is constrained by institutional practices, program variation, and persistent socioeconomic disparities. This dual role reflects broader structural and institutional conditions rather than individual student deficits. At the same time, important gaps remain, including limited attention to intersectional outcomes across race, class, and gender, as well as the need to examine non-earnings indicators of mobility such as wealth, stability, and intergenerational change. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to assessing the true role of community colleges in shaping social mobility and to designing policies that can enhance their potential as engines of equity and opportunity.

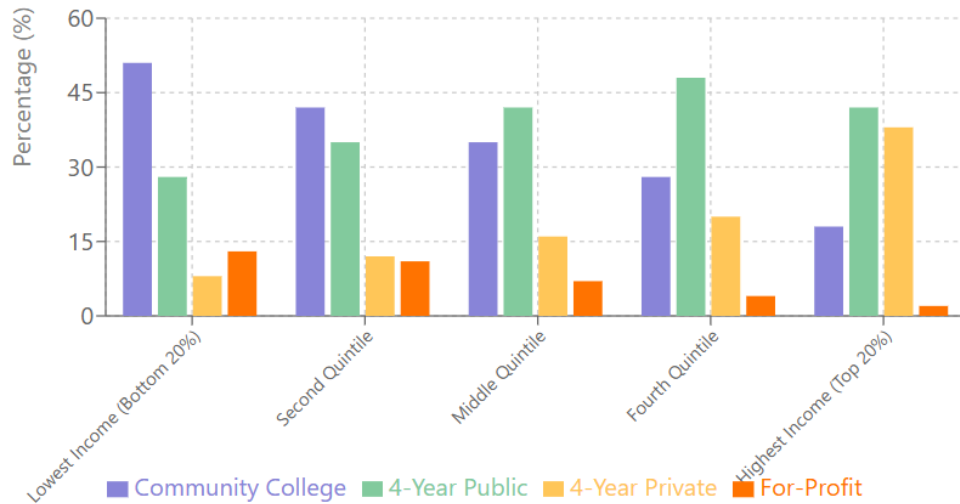
More recently, an analysis of career outcomes among community college scientists conducted by González Canché (2016) was the first study to look beyond graduation rates on transfer performance and salary discrepancies for students who sequenced educational paths between two-year institutions. Their study followed up on STEM doctorate recipients for 10 years using data from the National Science Foundation. The researchers divided students into those who started in community

colleges and four-year institutions. The results were consistent among community college students who learned to code, all of whom had lower incomes. They pointed out that these students earned less on average and their salaries grew more slowly than those of four-year graduates. After achieving similar levels of education, there still existed a pay discrepancy. Despite these limitations, the study revealed that community colleges are important players in training scientists. Therefore, their study concluded that community colleges can play an integral role in increasing the number of students graduating from 2-year institutions equipped to pursue a STEM major.

Holzer and Xu (2021) also conducted a study on community college pathways for disadvantaged students, examining how student choices affected their potential to acquire accessible, attainable credentials. The researchers make use of administrative data from Kentucky community college students. They were watching the routines these students performed in choosing their fields and the resulting outcomes. Pathway choices had a strong effect on completion outcomes in their study, and students often chose poorly, diminishing their likelihood of lifelong success and well-paying jobs. One major area where gender and academic readiness gaps appeared was in the choice of a pathway. This caused the need for too many credit hours because students often switched their pathways, and it was not easy to keep up with them. Based on the data, the researchers suggested that more guidance and institutional support would help students secure more marketable credentials.

Also, Wolniak *et al.* (2016) have investigated the role of students’ backgrounds in shaping college enhancement strategies and socioeconomic inequality. To explore how such relationships have changed over time and amid a backdrop of increasing college demand and class disparities, the researchers drew on two national datasets from the 1990s and 2000s. Their results suggested class adaptation: higher socioeconomic status (SES) students use a combination of more enhancement strategies. The strategies’ effects on predicting enrollment in selective colleges also increased. In this way, their research helps explain how socioeconomic stratification influences educational pathways at community colleges.

Similarly, Chester (2023) analyzed social stratification studies focused on the relationship between dropout decisions and academic performance among college students. Undergraduate student data from an urban four-year private HBCU, who graduated from a Title I High School, were used by the researcher. Social stratification was assessed by high school Title I status, academic performance by GPA, and academic progress through academic standing in the current institution. The studies show that many students are experiencing large financial difficulties when they attend college. Though loans, grants, and scholarships reduce that to around \$11,000 on average for a student working toward an associate degree in standalone programs or a bachelor’s



**Figure 3:** Initial college enrollment by income quintile (%)  
*Source: Federal data on socioeconomic status and college enrollment*

degree. These financial obstacles serve as a key retention and college completion challenge. Their study showed that the affluent and college-educated component of the population not only affects educational outcomes beyond the community college level but also starts having an impact right out of high school.

The chart above demonstrates the relationship between family income and community college enrollment, where students in the lowest income quintile (bottom 20%) attend community colleges at the highest rate, around 50% of them; conversely, for those in the top 20%, only about 18% of them go to a local two-year school. In contrast, the enrollment of four-year private institutions skyrockets with income level from roughly 8% for the lowest quintile to nearly 38% for the highest. These data reveal substantial social class sorting at the outset of college among recent high school graduates: High-achieving, low-income students are heavily skewed toward attending community colleges; however, affluent students in Alameda County enjoy greater access to selective four-year institutions.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The synthesis of the literature highlights four interrelated themes shaping the relationship between community colleges and social mobility: transfer pathway effectiveness, labor market returns to associate degrees, institutional characteristics, and socioeconomic stratification. Across these themes, a consistent pattern emerges: community colleges provide meaningful opportunities for advancement, yet systemic barriers and structural inequalities constrain their effectiveness.

To begin, transfer pathways are a central mechanism through which community colleges are expected to promote upward mobility. However, outcomes remain uneven and modest. As previously discussed, (Wyatt, 2021;

Monaghan & Attewell, 2015), only 16% of community college students successfully transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree, and transfer students graduate at rates approximately 15 percentage points lower than peers who begin at four-year institutions. Extended time to degree further imposes financial and personal costs (Barger, 2023). Even with institutional support, students face barriers including financial instability, inconsistent advising, and complex transfer policies. These findings indicate that, while transfer pathways are central to the social mobility promise of community colleges, their effectiveness is fragile without structural reforms such as aligned curricula, robust advising, and strengthened articulation agreements.

Additionally, the labor market outcomes provide an alternative avenue for mobility, especially for students who do not transfer. Evidence consistently indicates that associate degree attainment yields durable economic benefits. Graduates earn \$4,640–\$7,160 more annually than peers without postsecondary credentials, with returns persisting over the long term (Belfield & Bailey, 2017, 2019; Minaya & Scott-Clayton, 2022). However, returns are uneven across fields. Technical and health-related degrees produce strong payoffs, while other programs yield more modest or declining gains. Short-term certificates provide limited long-term benefit. These disparities underscore the need for policies aligning programs with labor market demand and ensuring students have clear information about career prospects. Furthermore, institutional context strongly influences outcomes, demonstrating that mobility is not solely determined by student effort. Relationships with faculty and staff foster social capital that supports persistence (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021), while institutional expenditures and mission type meaningfully affect graduation rates (Ishitani & Kamer, 2019). Completion

rates vary substantially across sectors, indicating that well-supported, transfer-focused colleges foster higher success rates than underfunded or technically oriented institutions. Interventions such as enhanced advising, adequate financial support, and capacity-building are essential to realizing community colleges' potential as pathways to upward mobility.

Finally, socioeconomic factors shape access to and outcomes in community colleges. Students from the lowest income quintile are disproportionately represented in community colleges (50% vs. 18% of affluent peers) yet face persistent disadvantages (Canché, 2016). Wage gaps remain even when low-income students attain degrees, and program choices often limit long-term prospects (Holzer & Xu, 2021; Wolniak *et al.*, 2016). Financial barriers, including a \$11,000 unmet aid gap, exacerbate inequities (Chester, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, community colleges hold significant potential as pathways to social mobility, yet their promise is conditional. Transfer pathways, while central, yield modest outcomes due to structural barriers such as inconsistent advising, financial instability, and misaligned curricula. Labor market returns from associate degrees provide meaningful gains, but benefits vary widely across fields and programs. Additionally, institutional support through faculty engagement, robust advising, and adequate resources profoundly shapes students' success, while socioeconomic inequities continue to constrain low-income and marginalized students' opportunities. These findings highlight that community colleges can advance upward mobility, but only when structural, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers are addressed. Policies that strengthen transfer pathways, align programs with labor market demand, provide targeted financial support for students, and invest in institutional capacity are critical. Addressing these dimensions is essential to ensuring that community colleges fulfill their promise as equitable engines of social and economic advancement in society.

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