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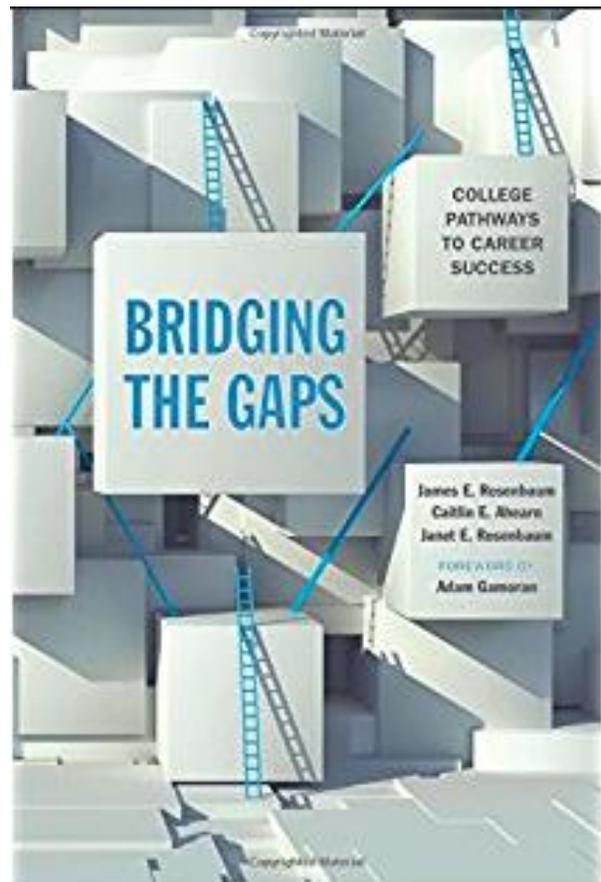
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In *Bridging the Gaps*, authors James Rosenbaum, Caitlin Ahearn, and Janet Rosenbaum question the actual benevolence of the theoretically benevolent College-for-All (CFA) movement as well as the value and attainability of the Bachelor of Arts (BA), especially for non-traditional students within a traditional college pathway and environment. The authors make a convincing case that college entry is not the problem, citing statistics that show how 90% of on-time high school graduates enroll in college within eight years (p. 1). Rather, according to the authors, these statistics illustrate the American student's internalization of the idea that college is necessary for a good job.

In this, CFA has been successful in terms of access. However, the authors cite plummeting college retention rates, especially among minorities, non-traditional, and less affluent students, and specifically at the community college level. Non-traditional students are defined by the authors as minority



students, economically disadvantaged students, and/or first-generation college students. The pervasive idea of college for all has taken hold, writes Rosenbaum, “and acceptance of this reality has led to high enrollment rates, but because too few students are able to navigate the transitions into college, through college, and into the labor market, completion rates lag” (p. xii). This trend shows that mere access is insufficient for long-term success.

In the preface of the book, Adam Gamoran describes these unsuccessful college attendees as the “forgotten half,” who attend but receive no degree, no certification, and no boost to their labor market prospects. Even the “some college completed” usually found on applications proves to be a sign of fruitless struggle, as the data indicate that those who have enrolled in college but dropped out were no more likely to be employed than only high school graduates with no college. (p. 32), nor were there any other strong benefits of “some college” (p. 51). High schools and secondary policy makers play a significant role as well in this systemic issue, with secondary schools focusing on test scores and traditional college preparation, citing initial enrollment rates as evidence of success and ignoring the atrocious retention rates.

Community colleges (CCs), state the authors, perpetuate this problem by seeking to emulate four-year institutions because of the BA emphasis. Yet retention rates continue to plummet due to CC’s adoption of traditional pathways, despite their increasingly non-traditional student enrollment. These non-traditional students generally lack the resources and affluence of traditional students that the four year institution is designed to serve, all the while ignoring the validity of “lower credentials” (p. 11). These lower credentials are dismissed by society as a product of low expectations, in what has even been compared by former President George W. Bush to “soft bigotry.”

Yet despite the tradition of criticism, in the past 20 years there now exist strong indications of the significant payoff of sub-BA credentials, including competitive wages, autonomy and career relevance (pp. 14, 32, 37). The job market echoes this tenet with employers reporting shortages of qualified applicants for mid-skill jobs. The authors cite the startling number of 2 million unfilled, quality jobs that require a sub BA credential but have gone unfilled because of a lack of qualified candidates, and since “many mid-skill jobs require specific technical skills that BA graduates do not possess” (p. 63). Yet the “some college” students who do not complete a degree or credential are unaware of the desirability or even existence of these paths due to the institution’s insistence upon the traditional BA process, despite the student’s non-traditional background. Further, the researchers found through a detailed quantitative analysis that modern associate degree- and certificate-holders received “nearly all the same job benefits as BA holders” (p. 53), reinforcing the authors’ challenge to the BA-path as the only indicator for student success.

Of the 80% of students who enter community college with plans to pursue a BA, only 15% actually do so within six years of enrollment (p. 2), leaving their college experience with “diminished resources and shaken confidence” (p. 3). With a heavy emphasis on the BA, the college for all policy, according to the authors, is not working (p. 13). Nor do remedial classes begin to address the issue of poor retention, as the authors cite studies showing that these courses merely “consume students’ time and money, but they provide no college credits, and their record in improving students’ academic skills is poor” (p. 78). There also exists a titanic failure on the part of community colleges to inform students of the nature of remedial courses. For example, the authors cite the Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study, which surveyed 4,400 community college students

and indicated that two-thirds of them did not know that these courses did not count for credit (p. 79). In addition to this, Rosenbaum finds that “most students assigned to the remedial sequence never complete it” (pp. 80, 117). Rosenbaum and his fellow researchers dismiss the typical reaction to poor retention rates that places the blame squarely on the student, who bears the sum of the responsibility for failure to complete a degree or certificate.

In their well-organized critique of the traditional college pathway for the non-traditional student, the authors question the value of the BA versus the certificate or accreditation offered by specific trade schools. They also insinuate that the emphasis upon the BA is a result of the bias of legislatures who are nearly all BA degree holders and so accredit their own success as policy makers to their attainment of such a degree. These policy makers assume, therefore, that it is the only pathway to success thus further forcing the traditional college path onto non-traditional students (p. 10).

Along with the systemic problem outlined, the author details a few specific issues within the community college institution, such as the poor counseling process. A grim picture is depicted of college counseling: individual counselors have case-loads in excess of 1,000 (p. 100), and these professionals themselves, whether through institutional demands or an internalization of the BA-as-the-only-way guide non-traditional students towards the less promising BA path, which the data indicate is not usually in that student’s best interest. The authors cite anecdotal evidence stating that the counselors they interviewed “reported that they did not mention occupational programs to young students . . . and even discouraged sub-BAs” (p. 119).

To address this systemic issue, the authors propose a reorganization of the community college model based on

occupational community college programs and private/public trade schools that cater to non-traditional students in the new college reality. According to the authors, no college is currently addressing the need for supportive institutions that help transition students into productive adult work roles.

The systemic issues pervading the college retention problem demand a multifaceted, expansive response. The authors begin a list of proposed solutions with an over-arching statement that delineates the demand and future for mid-skill level jobs and advocates for community colleges as the keystone for change:

Associate degrees and certificates prepare students for vital mid-skill jobs—such as airplane mechanics, auto repair mechanics, computer technicians, HVAC services, manufacturing workers, medical aides, and elevator repair workers. The nation may be hemorrhaging jobs to low-wage countries and automation, but many of these occupations cannot be offshored or automated. They must be done in the United States, but they require specific college programs. (p. 3)

Although community colleges are criticized for lower BA completion rates than four-year colleges, this completion rate is greatly reduced if sub-BA credentials are considered. The authors affirm this sub-BA credential as a viable alternative despite the tradition of stigma for non-traditional students seeking such a credential. Urging all students to aim for the BA is not, argue the authors, a benevolent policy when the reality is that the institution has set these students up for failure (p. 128).

In addition to advocating for a change in our societal view of the sub-BA path, some of the specifics of overhauling the CFA policy include adding non-monetary job rewards to the College Scorecard, as salary alone is not

enough to account for job satisfaction. The authors encourage high schools to be aware that traditional academic achievement “is less important for sub-BA credentials . . . requiring only tenth-grade level or below facility with math and English” (p. 61). Although this may be unpalatable to some who are committed to education as a means of preparing students for active engagement in our democracy, the thinking is pragmatically consistent with the new college reality and getting students placed in good jobs. Further, the authors argue that students with poor academic ability are considered immature and irresponsible, but their successful completion of tasks within a sub-BA program makes a case for their capability of filling professional jobs (p. 68). Specifically, the authors advocate for alignment reforms and early testing in high schools to guide non-traditional students into credential programs, rather see them fall to the 15% completion rate of typical non-traditional students in community college.

Understanding that more testing in secondary is insufficient for enacting change at the post-secondary level, Rosenbaum takes to task the issue of remediation in colleges. He unequivocally demands that students be made aware of their options regardless of their institution or counselor’s bias towards sub-BA credentials since only two-thirds of students know the nature of non-credited remedial courses. The dropout rate could be greatly reduced, argues Rosenbaum, with a change in how colleges design their procedures. This sentiment stems from the idea of sociology of ability, which the authors define as ability that is shaped by social context and can thus be changed by redesigning social context, in this case, the community college.

Too much freedom of choice and exploration in building one’s schedule has shown to be an obstacle rather than a method of empowerment in class selection, especially for first-generation college students (p. 120). The authors call for community colleges to provide far more structure in the form of

“degree ladder maps,” which help students organize program options and structure credential choices into a coherent set of pathways to occupations (p. 101). Degree ladder maps offer a quick, reliable way to choose among varied options with opportunities for branching and crossover credits between tracks.

The authors also call for a “quick success strategy” to build confidence in students rather than the dismal remediation pathways. Proximal incentives factor into this model with career-specific pathways that lead to nearly immediate employment. Such a pathway significantly veers from the traditional college pathway wherein a student usually selects a major and, upon completion, must search for a job, which may or may not be in his or her field.

Students band with their classmates and cohorts rise together; isolated students are more likely to drop out. Since community colleges do not have dormitories and other social aspects, the authors introduce the concept of peer cohorts as a way to engender comradery, Mandatory advising and occupational internships are also encouraged by the authors as a method to increase investment and prevent isolation.

This study is exceedingly well cited, provides clear tables for the data and accessible discussion to frame the information for the reader; however, the book is not without its issues. Despite an unnecessary reliance upon anecdotal, opinionated and short “sound bytes” from community college faculty (mostly in chapter 4) in an attempt to reinforce the researchers’ findings, the data stands solidly on its own, and these diversions are extraneous and break the tone of the book. Chapter 4 is the weakest in this otherwise terrific study; with its departure from a clinical approach and a devolution into sentimentality and anecdotes from community college/trade school faculty. The sappy tone of chapter 4 reaches its apex in a quote from a faculty

member stating, “It [the community college occupational program] saved my life, and it can save yours too” (p. 70). The authors use this tone to give their solutions a panacea-like aura, an excess best avoided in academic writing. This chapter also extolls the strengths of the German Model (p. 68), but assumes that the reader is familiar with this model and gives few details as to how it functions. At least three to four pages could have been devoted to examining this model, for the benefit of the reader, before advocating for its implementation in the US.

The researchers are transparent in their adulation of private trade schools, though the reader should exercise caution as the authors do not adequately address the current abuses and fraud rife within the for-profit university and for-profit trade school market such as those perpetuated by Colorado Tech, University of Phoenix CTE, and the now defunct ITT Tech, to name a few. Though

admittedly, they do strike a distinction between private trade schools and private colleges, the contrast ought to be made more apparent for readers who are unfamiliar with the differences between types of private schools, as well as to address the poor reputation of these schools. The authors include more testing to align schools with sub-BA programs within the already over-tested high schools; this presents another problem of logistics and organization and is undeveloped in the study.

In sum, the authors of *Bridging the Gaps: College Pathways to Career* have made a compelling case for reevaluating our prejudices and collective reliance upon the BA as the only way to implement College-for-All. This text would be useful to principals, community college counselors, and policy makers who wish to see students attain gainful employment and receive adequate preparation for whatever that educational journey takes.

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## About the Reviewer

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