

A PLATFORM FOR MOBILITY

Though neglected and under-funded by local officials, community colleges play a vital role in boosting New Yorkers into the middle class

For much of the 20th century, New York City provided unparalleled opportunity for individuals from modest backgrounds to rise up into the middle class. Longtime residents with limited education and newcomers with poor English skills could get ahead here thanks to an economy that produced hundreds of thousands of blue collar jobs in sectors from the rag trade to the ports. But with the city's industrial sector now only a skeleton of its former self, higher education has become the single most important ticket to the middle class.

In today's information age, a college education has become the minimum requirement for a significant share of the jobs in the city that pay middle-income wages and provide a path to upward mobility. Several blue collar fields now require at least some college coursework, while most of the middle class job titles that are projected to grow in the years ahead—from nurses to legal secretaries—also require either a two- or four-year college degree. Further, the payoff for those with a college degree is greater now than ever before. Individuals who have graduated from college now earn 76 percent more than those with only a high school diploma—up from 36 percent more in the 1970s—and are far more likely to hold jobs that provide health insurance.¹¹¹

While four-year colleges and universities generally open more doors than two-year institutions, community colleges arguably play an equal or greater role in elevating New Yorkers into the middle class.

For tens of thousands of low-income residents and immigrants, New York's community colleges are the only entry point into the higher education system. Many of these individuals don't have the grades, money, language skills or connections to attend a four-year institution. For others, four-year colleges

simply don't offer the flexibility they need to take classes while maintaining a full-time job to support themselves and their family.

By themselves, community colleges provide meaningful economic advantages: Individuals with an associate's degree earn \$10,000 a year more than those with only a high school diploma or GED.¹¹² They also give countless New Yorkers who otherwise wouldn't be able to qualify for or immediately afford a four-year institution the chance to do so. Indeed, 68 percent of community college graduates in New York transfer to four-year institutions.¹¹³ Additionally, community colleges enroll thousands of adults who have been in the workforce but need to obtain new skills, either to keep pace with technological advancements in their industry or to position them for an entirely different career.

"Community colleges are real gateways to opportunity," says Regina Peruggi, president of Sheepshead Bay-based Kingsborough Community College, one of six community colleges in the five boroughs that are part of the City University of New York (CUNY). "You definitely need higher education to compete in today's economy. Years ago, people would compete with a high school diploma. But today, continued training after high school is almost a necessity."

Economic data supports this argument. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, half of all jobs nationwide that are expected to grow most significantly in the years ahead will require at least some postsecondary education, and the training for 60 percent of those jobs can be handled exclusively by community colleges.¹¹⁴ An associate's or bachelor's degree will be even more essential for jobs that pay middle-income wages—particularly in New York. "This is a city that rewards education," says James Brown, a labor market analyst for the New York State

Department of Labor. "Overall, it's increasingly clear that you need more than a high school education to make good salaries."

Brown says that many of the new, decent-paying jobs specifically require an associate's degree. And for a number of other positions that do not require college, a degree from a community college gives applicants a leg up over those who only have a high school diploma. "If you're an employer and six [applicants] have an associate's degree and four have only a high school diploma, you might cut out the people that only have a high school diploma. It becomes a way of screening, even if it doesn't say so in the ad," says Brown.

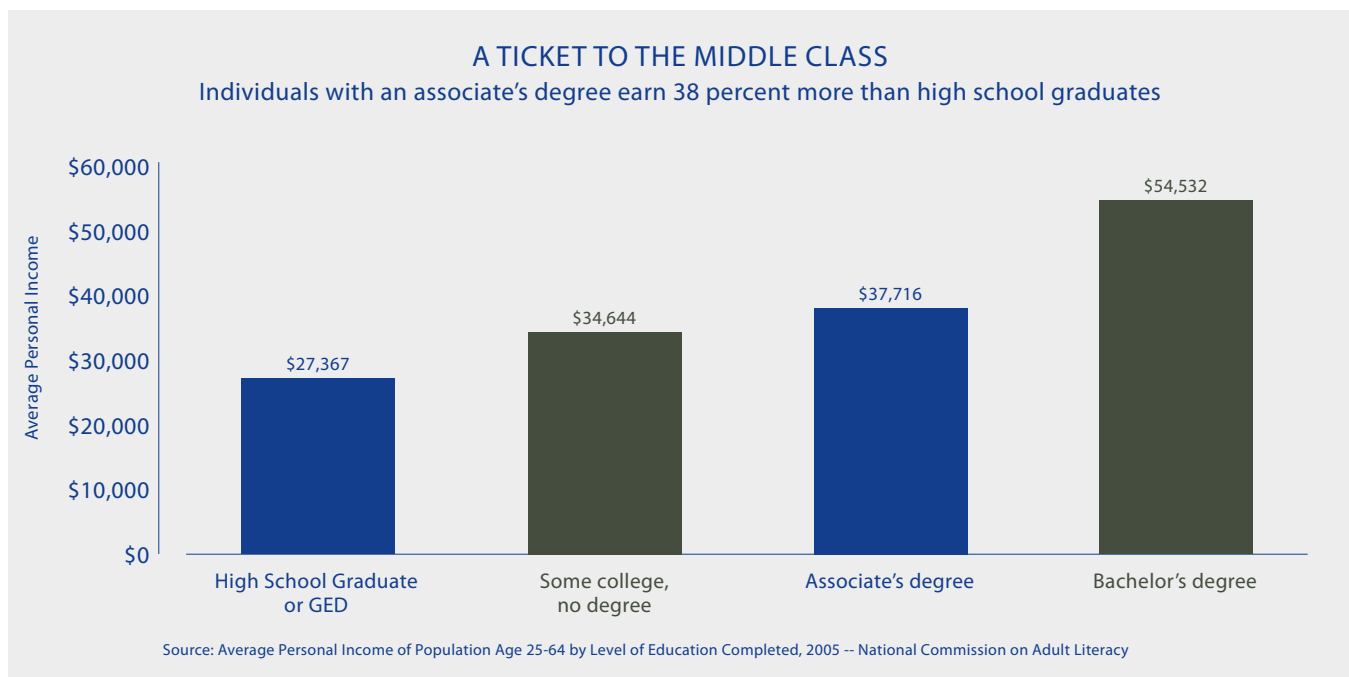
"A nice chunk of the workforce falls into the education category of 'some college,'" he says—perhaps not even a two-year degree, but indicative of time spent in a college classroom. "You don't need a four year college degree. You do, however, need significant training beyond high school," Brown says. "For instance, legal secretaries make quite good money and [the field is] growing well. You don't need a college degree to be a legal secretary, but you'll find that college degrees are becoming more common."

Community colleges are already a key part of the education system both nationally and in New York. Today, community colleges enroll 46 percent of all undergraduates in the United States, including 55 percent of Hispanics, 47 percent of African-Ameri-

cans and 47 percent of Asians.¹¹⁵ In the five boroughs, 81,518 students were enrolled in community colleges in the fall of 2008.¹¹⁶

There's little question that these institutions need more help. Graduation rates at community colleges, both in New York and around the nation, are woefully low. Nationally, only about one out of every five students at two-year institutions graduates in two years. In a 2007 interview with the Center for an Urban Future, CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein said that this was likely the reason that community colleges haven't been embraced by policymakers. "This is a serious issue that pushes some people away from community colleges," said Goldstein. "There are legitimate reasons for this. Many students come in very poorly prepared, so we have to remediate them with work that is not college work. That can take a year or a year and a half. Also, the students are often poor. Many have to work while they are going to school, and that's a serious issue. And [the community colleges] are not well-funded, so we can't give a wide spectrum of courses over a wide number of hours during the day. You put all that stuff together and it adds up."

Unfortunately, policymakers here and in Washington have shown little understanding of the critical role these institutions now play in the city's economy, much less as vehicles for mobility. In New York, as in many other cities, community colleges are overshadowed



owed by virtually every other facet of the education system; they have not received the financial support needed to effectively educate students that come from a wide variety of backgrounds and often require academic remediation.

The need is becoming more acute as more New Yorkers look toward college campuses for advancement. Community college enrollment in the city has increased by 22 percent over the past 10 years—from 62,540 in 1999 to 76,018 in 2008—but total funding, adjusted for inflation, has risen by just five percent over the same period.¹¹⁷ “Funding is not keeping pace with needs,” says Carolyn Williams, president of Bronx Community College (BCC). “[Higher] education has been truly underfunded in the state for the last 15 years.”

Williams says that when she first assumed the position at BCC, she was surprised that community colleges were largely viewed in a negative light by policymakers and the public. This was not the case in her two previous stints running community colleges, in Michigan and California. “There was a respect for community colleges” in those places, says Williams. “In New York, it’s totally different.”

According to several education experts, limited public support for community colleges has resulted in a system with serious unmet infrastructure needs, too few full-time professors and outdated equipment that is often unable to prepare students for the technological needs of today’s economy. It also has constrained CUNY’s ability to keep tuition low. Indeed, while the CUNY community colleges across the five boroughs have open admissions policies, they are not necessarily affordable to all New Yorkers. Even the least expensive of the six institutions—\$3,104 at Bronx Community College to cover annual tuition charges and fees—runs almost a third more than the national average (\$2,361) for public two-year colleges and higher than all of New York’s peer states (California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas).¹¹⁸ By contrast, tuition and fees for a full-time community college student in Los Angeles averages just \$600.¹¹⁹

As individual costs have risen, state and federal public tuition assistance has not kept up. Today, many of those attending community colleges don’t qualify for state and federal aid programs. Numerous middle class students and their families earn too much to qualify for the state’s Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) but too little to afford the cost of tuition and

fees. Additionally, TAP doesn’t take into account the fact that a large number of community college students spend a year or more taking remedial courses before their college-level classes even begin. The grants typically expire when many students are only part of the way to their degree. “Many students are either denied TAP, exhaust their TAP prematurely or are forced to take more credits than they should really take, simply to qualify for financial aid, often without good academic results for the students,” says Lenore Beaky, a professor at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City.¹²⁰

City Hall could also be doing far more to support community colleges. In fact, the city has been the main impediment to dealing with the overwhelming infrastructure and maintenance needs at New York’s community colleges. Unlike CUNY’s senior colleges, whose capital needs are exclusively paid for by the state, construction work at community colleges requires the city to match state funding. During the Giuliani administration, this contribution rarely materialized. It has improved during the Bloomberg administration, but not enough. In 2008, for instance, the governor allocated \$1.4 billion to fund the critical maintenance needs identified for CUNY’s senior colleges. But CUNY received no similar infrastructure funding for community colleges because state officials did not feel confident that the city would match its contribution.

“There is a growing gap in our ability to expand classroom and programmatic space and improve conditions of the senior colleges, which are state funded, and our ability to provide the same for the community colleges and Medgar Evers [College], which are jointly funded by the state and the city,” said Iris Weinshall, CUNY’s vice chancellor for facilities planning, construction and management (and a former city commissioner under Mayor Bloomberg), at a February 2008 City Council hearing. “And that is due to the inconsistent manner with which CUNY receives funding from the city.”¹²¹

To its credit, the Bloomberg administration recently provided \$19.5 million to help CUNY develop a pilot program to help improve graduation rates among its community college student, known as the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP. At the same time, however, both the city and the state have reduced financial support for CUNY in their most recent budgets.