

# Chapter 14

## Unwarranted Stigma: Economic Impact of Community College Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Investment in higher education is essential to improve the knowledge and skills of a country's labor force for economic growth. Higher education is a dynamic context with various institution types. However, the higher education market and research has generally suggested a single higher education institution, university education. Such single entity promotion has informed policies to increase university enrollments and completions resulting in a belief that universities are prestigious institutions that provide greater economic growth while stigmatizing community colleges as less prestigious and of little or no value to economic growth. University models have provided higher education to selected members of society which has not met the global demand for education or improved economic growth. This chapter will demonstrate that community colleges are becoming a higher education policy focus for their ability to provide flexible, short cycle education, and new research demonstrates their short- and medium-term economic impact. Thus, the community college stigma is unwarranted.*

### INTRODUCTION

Increasing the number of students enrolled and completing higher education has become a key initiative in many governmental policies and non-governmental organization initiatives due to a belief that investment in higher education promotes greater economic growth. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has developed initiatives focusing on global higher education enrollments and completion, especially in developing countries (UNESCO, 2010, 2014). In the United Kingdom, The Browne Report emphasized the role of advancing domestic higher education attainment to improve the country's economic growth (Browne Review, 2010). During Barack Obama's tenure as President of the United States, higher education was a necessity for all members of society and essential to the economic growth, economic prosperity, and international competition of the United States

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(U.S.) economy. Former President Obama's sentiments were echoed by many politicians and carried on through the next political election campaign by United States Senator from Vermont Bernie Sanders. These higher education initiatives increased global demand for higher education around the world, especially in developing countries and low-socioeconomic areas of developed countries (Hanushek, 2013). However, such domestic and international pushes for increased numbers attending and completing higher education emphasized or implied increasing the numbers in university education institutions, meaning focusing on bachelor's degrees and above.

Initiatives to expand access to higher education have focused on the university education models that are elite centers providing education to selected individuals that meet strict guidelines. Governmental and non-governmental initiatives have tended to focus on the university level of education due to their prestige (Bashir, 2007; Castro, Bernasconi & Verdisco, 2001; Roggow, 2014; Wang & Seggie, 2013; Woods, 2013; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). The elite status of university education has come to fruition due to the prestige associated with the curriculum focusing on theoretical frameworks that generate new knowledge and their active research agendas (Castro et al., 2001; Psacharopoulos, 1985; Roggow, 2014; Schroeder & Hatton, 2006; Wang & Seggie, 2013; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014), which are deemed to provide greater returns to investment for the local economy (Aghion, Boustan, Hoxby, & Vandenbussche, 2009). Policymakers have emphasized university education because it is believed that higher levels of education lead to greater economic growth, and universities provide the highest level of education.

As the domestic and international community pushed for greater higher education enrollments and graduation, developing countries also started to seek ways to increase their higher education enrollments and graduate initiatives. Most governments and citizens in developing countries believe the domestic higher education is inferior to developed country universities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bashir, 2007; Mohamebdbhai, 2008; Lane & Kinser, 2011; Tiliak, 2011) and they lack the resources and capacity to develop an elite and prestigious higher education model. To rectify the domestic financial and knowledge gap of higher education, developing country governments established international trade reforms to allow various ways for international higher education institutions to increase higher education enrollments and graduates (Tiliak, 2011). The reforms initially focused on partnerships with prestigious bachelor's degree granting institutions due to the lack of prestige and the belief that these universities would provide higher education that would lead to greater economic growth than any other type of higher education institution (Castro et al., 2001; Psacharopoulos, 1985; Roggow, 2014; Schroeder & Hatton, 2006; Wang & Seggie, 2013; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).

Improvements in human capital, through increasing higher education enrollments and completions, leads to greater productivity, which helps increase wages, creating a strong foundation for economic success (Berger & Fisher, 2013; Jorgenson & Fraumeni, 1992). Initial policy initiatives focused on increasing higher education enrollments and completions through elite institutions, believed to provide a superior higher education, leading to greater economic return on investment. Such beliefs promoted misconceptions, negative connotations, and stigmas about other higher education institutions, especially the community college model. Community college models are believed to be inferior to university higher education models due to the perceived little economic return on investment. Further, such notions were perpetuated by developing countries' citizens believing community college models were even less prestigious than the inferior university models within their respective countries.

However, the greater emphasis on the need for higher education enrollments and completions has increased global demand for higher education for all citizens. The increased demand has demonstrated how diversification of higher education, through various structures, helps meet the educational needs

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