

### Community colleges: a report card

*Do Community Colleges Respond to Local Needs? Evidence from California.* By Duane E. Leigh and Andrew M. Gill, Kalamazoo, MI, W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2007, 219 pp., \$40/cloth; \$18/paperback.

When Duane Leigh and Andrew Gill ask the question, “Do community colleges respond to local needs?” they are using the term “needs” in two distinct senses. The more obvious interpretation is that of employer demand: to what extent do these educational institutions satisfy the requirements of job providers? But they also address the extent to which the student customers of community colleges, who are part of the labor supply to local employers, get what they want from the institutions in the way of career preparation and personal growth.

Community colleges play a multitude of roles: trainer of labor, provider of further education, and facilitator of student transfers to 4-year institutions among them. Leigh and Gill address two research questions about the California Community College system using the criteria that a labor-market-responsive community college seeks to develop programs that are aligned to changes in both the demand and supply sides of its local labor market. The first question concerns the supply-side changes associated with immigration into the California labor market and transfer to 4-year colleges. The second question asks whether community colleges provide occupational training that enables students to acquire marketable skills in the local labor market.

On the supply side, Leigh and Gill

analyze differences between Latinos and Whites and Asians and Whites in terms of receipt of an Associate’s degree, total credits earned, and transfer to a 4-year institution. They also analyze subgroups of first generation immigrants, high school dropouts, and students of specific national origins. First generation immigrant Asian students (57 percent of all Asian freshmen students on California community college campuses in 1996-97) do better than other immigrant groups and about as well as non-immigrant Asian students on the three outcome measures. Latino immigrant students (32 percent of all Latino students in the sample) do less well than other immigrant groups and Latino non-immigrants.

Just 35 percent of all entering students in the California Community College system used by Leigh and Gill stated plans to transfer to a 4-year institution. Looking at actual rates of transfer to 4-year institutions of male students, here are the percentages: Latino immigrant, 5.0; Latino nonimmigrant, 8.5; Asian immigrant, 23.4; Asian nonimmigrant, 28.0; White immigrant, 11.4 and Black immigrant, 14.1 Nonimmigrant transfer percentages for Whites and Blacks are not provided, but can be inferred to be lower than immigrant Whites and Blacks in contrast to the Latino and Asian numbers. The percentages were slightly higher for females in each subgroup except for Black immigrants, for whom the female transfer rate was lower than the male rate.

An important finding of the study is that “clustering” of students of particular ethnic backgrounds in specific colleges has different effects on the transfer rates of Latinos and Asians. A high concentration of Latino stu-

dents decreases their transfer rates, controlling for student background characteristics, while a high concentration of Asian students increases the rate at which they transfer to 4-year institutions. The authors attribute these differences to differences in cultural norms and educational aspirations within the various ethnic groups.

The authors measure the extent to which community colleges satisfy the skill requirements of local employers by comparing the distribution of occupational credits completed by students in their sample to the occupational distribution of projected new jobs. This measure of “responsiveness” does not provide any information on whether students actually find employment in their fields of specialization. Leigh and Gill find considerable variability in responsiveness across the 106 community colleges in their sample. However, multi-campus districts appear to be more responsive than single campus districts, perhaps because individual campuses within multi-campus systems in a district specialize in ways that complement each other. The authors contend that this means that the heterogeneity in programs and curricular emphases observed among individual colleges in a district is consistent with their being more responsive as a group; that one-size fits-all performance measures don’t fully capture the variety of programs, including transfer-oriented as well as vocationally-oriented, available in the district as a whole.

As the authors acknowledge, the two research approaches used cannot be melded together to answer the question of whether immigrants, or ethnic group members generally, are obtaining training and credentials of value in the various California labor

markets. Their preliminary findings, however, of which those mentioned in this review are but a share, indicate that further work on the ways in which different groups of students enter and prepare for the labor market and fur-

ther education, and complementary work on how skill demands get translated into careers, will yield helpful insights. It should be mentioned, finally, that the authors are scrupulous in their descriptions of the data and

their limitations, and provide a good example of productive labor market research.

—Stephen E. Baldwin  
Economist  
Bethesda, MD

### **Book review interest?**

Interested in reviewing a book for the *Monthly Labor Review*? We have a number of books by distinguished authors on economics, industrial relations, other social sciences, and related issues waiting to be reviewed. If you have good writing skills and/or experience, then please contact us via E-mail at [mlr@bls.gov](mailto:mlr@bls.gov)