America’s Great Working-Class Colleges

The heyday of the colleges that serve America’s working class can often feel very long ago. It harks back to the mid-20th century, when City College of New York cost only a few hundred dollars a year and was known as the “Harvard of the proletariat.” Out West, California built an entire university system that was both accessible and excellent. Now mostly a byword for nostalgia.

It should not be.

Yes, the universities that educate students from modest backgrounds face big challenges, particularly state budget cuts. But many of them are performing much better than their new stereotype suggests. They remain deeply important to push many Americans into the middle class and beyond — many more, in fact, than elite colleges that receive far more attention.

Where does this optimistic conclusion come from? The most comprehensive study of college graduates yet conducted, based on millions of anonymous tax filings and financial-aid records. Published Wednesday, the study tracked students from nearly every college in the country (including those who failed to graduate), measuring their earnings years after they left campus. The paper is the latest in a burst of economic research made possible by the availability of huge data sets and powerful computers.

To take just one encouraging statistic: At City College, in Manhattan, 76 percent of students who enrolled in the late 1990s and came from families in the bottom fifth of the income distribution have ended up in the top three-fifths of the distribution. These students entered college poor. They left on their way to the middle class and often the upper middle class.

The equivalent number at the University of Texas, El Paso, is 71 percent. At California State University in Bakersfield, it’s 82 percent. At Stony Brook University, on Long Island, it’s 78 percent, and at Baruch College in Manhattan, it’s 79 percent.

“We are the engine of the ability to be socially mobile,” Baruch’s president, Mitchel R. Wallerstein, said. Most Baruch graduates, he added, are making more money than their parents as soon as they start their first post-college job.

I’ll admit that the new data surprised me. Years of reporting on higher education and left me focused on the many problems at colleges that enroll large numbers of poor and middle-class students.

Those problems are real: The new study — by a team of economists led by Raj Chetty of Stanford — shows that many colleges indeed fail to serve their students well. Dropout rates are high, saddling students with debt but no degree. For-profit colleges perform the worst, and a significant number of public colleges also struggle. Even at the strong performers, too many students fall by the wayside. Improving higher education should be a national priority.

But the success stories are real, too, and they’re fairly common. As I thought about the new findings in light of the other evidence pointing to the value of education, they became less surprising. After all, the earnings gap between four-year college graduates and everyone else has soared in recent decades. The unemployment rate for college graduates today is a mere 2.5 percent.

Those college graduates have come from somewhere, of course, and most of them are coming from campuses that look a lot less like Harvard or the University of Michigan than like City College or the University of Texas at El Paso. On these more typical campuses, students often work while they’re going to college. Some are military veterans, others learned English as a second language and others are in their mid-20s or 30s.

“There are a lot of people who would not go to college at all, and would not get an education at all, if they had to go through some selective criteria,” said Erik Pavia, a 2010 graduate of the University of Texas at El Paso, known as UTEP. “UTEP opens the doors to people from all walks of life.”

Pavia grew up in Canutillo, a poor neighborhood in El Paso, the son of a construction worker and house cleaner. He did well enough in high school to attend many colleges but — as frequently happens with low-income students — was not willing to leave home at age 18 for an unfamiliar world. “I just didn’t feel like I was ready to go out to college on my own,” he said. “So I decided to stay home and save money.”

After college, he went to law school and today is a business manager at a technology start-up called Knottch. Twice a year, he returns to UTEP to teach an intensive two-week class on business and law. Pavia’s story is the classic story of the American dream. Lower-income students who attend elite colleges fare even better on average than low-income students elsewhere — almost as well, in fact, as affluent students who attend elite colleges. But there aren’t very many students from modest backgrounds on elite campuses, noted John Friedman of Brown, one of the study’s authors. On several dozen campuses, remarkably, fewer students hail from the entire bottom half of the income distribution than from the top 1 percent.

“There is a real problem with the elite private flagship publics in not serving as many low-income students as they should,” John B. King Jr., President Obama’s education secretary, told me. “These institutions have a moral and educational responsibility.”

Because the elite colleges aren’t fulfilling that responsibility, working-class colleges have become vastly larger engines of social mobility. The new data shows, for example, that the City University of New York system propelled almost six times as many low-income students into the middle class and beyond as all eight Ivy League campuses, plus Duke, M.I.T., Stanford and Chicago, combined.

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The research does come with one dark line — one that should motivate anyone trying to think about how to affect government policy in the age of Donald Trump. The share of lower-income students at many public colleges has fallen somewhat over the last 15 years.

The reason is clear. State funding for higher education has plummeted. It’s down 18 percent per student, adjusted for inflation, since 2008, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The financial crisis pinched state budgets, and facing a pinch, some states decided education wasn’t a top priority.

“It’s really been a nightmare,” said Diana Natalicio, UTEP’s president and herself a first-generation college graduate. “The state does not recognize — and it’s not just in Texas — the importance that the investment in public education has for the economy and so many other things. Education was for me, and for many of the rest of us, the great opportunity creator.”

Obviously, colleges don’t deserve all the credit for their graduates’ success. But they do deserve a healthy portion of it. Other research that has tried to tease out the actual effects of higher education finds them to be large. And they’re not limited to money. Graduates are also happier and healthier. No wonder that virtually all affluent children go to college, and nearly all graduates.

The question is how to enable more working-class students to do so. “It’s really the way democracy regenerates itself,” said Ted Mitchell, Obama’s under secretary of education. The new research shows that plenty of successful models exist, yet many of them are struggling to maintain the status quo, let alone grow. It’s true in red states as well as in many blue and purple states, and it’s a grave mistake.

There is a reason that City College and California’s universities evoke such warm nostalgia: They fulfilled the country’s highest ideals— excellence, progress and opportunity. Many of those same colleges, and many others, still do. They deserve more than nostalgia.