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Faculty Grants: Research by Howard London

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I couldn’t go to college right out of high school even though my grades were good enough to get into any of a dozen colleges in the Boston area. First of all we didn’t have much money in my family, and there was lots of pressure on us to go to work if it wasn’t really clear that you were some kind of schoolwork genius. Besides, nobody in my family had ever gotten to finish college. My brother took some courses before dropping out for a job he got, and other relatives have taken courses part-time, but it’s not like going to college was the expected thing, like in some families. So after working at crummy jobs for a few years I started at Massasoit Community College part-time. Then I went there full-time and got all “A’s” after a while. I went right on to Bridgewater State where I was on the Dean’s list for all four semesters. Next year I am going to the University of Connecticut on a fellowship so I can get a masters degree in social work. I never thought I’d go this far or wind up with this kind of career.”

(These remarks are quoted from a 1992 interview with a senior at Bridgewater State College for a study of educational paths taken by “late-blooming” students.)

EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is the undisputed champion of educational opportunity. We believe strongly in education as the best route for upward mobility among those with the desire and ability. As a result, American education is open, decentralized and diverse. By comparison, in Japan, France, England or Germany, education is relatively centralized and exclusive. In any of these countries students who wish to go on to university education must take national exams in their teens. If they do not perform well they are effectively denied any chance for higher education, ever. Higher education in Europe and Japan is still reserved for a relatively small percent of those who would like to attend. The percent of Americans attending colleges and universities is double the figure for any Western European country and more than that compared with Japan. After WWII the United States was the only allied country to establish a G.I Bill of Rights, a program to open college enrollment and pay for the education of returning soldiers. And, lastly, the United States has the greatest variety of higher education institutions in the world. Not only is there a large system of private educational institutions paralleling and competing with the public system, there is also a range of institutions from elite research universities to local community colleges from which applicants may select. Whatever competition the United States faces from Asian and European countries, our belief in making higher education available to a wide range of Americans remains intact.

American rags-to-riches stories, cases of upward mobility achieved by hard work and brains, often have important educational chapters. One version is of the bright youngster from a relatively poor family who goes to an Ivy League school on scholarship and makes a great success in life. But frequently the path to success first leads through non-elite institutions of higher education, such as community colleges. In the United States, unlike the countries mentioned above, it is not unusual for a person to attend a two-year community college (they used to be called junior colleges), then transfer to a four-year college or university to earn a bachelor’s degree. It is a route to upward mobility that is worth our attention as a society. It is an especially important topic for improving upward mobility among the least advantaged members of American society since minority and low income students are disproportionately concentrated in community colleges.

Howard London, of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, is the re-
The first step in Dr. London's research was to identify the community colleges to be studied. After months of studying possible research sites, four schools with high transfer rates were chosen. They are: Community College of Philadelphia, Seattle Central Community College, Palo Alto Community College in San Antonio, Texas and Wright College in Chicago. These schools are geographically distributed across the country, and have very different sorts of students. For example, Palo Alto Community College serves a largely hispanic community, while Seattle Central Community College has a high percent of Asian heritage students.

By the end of the first year of the grant, four researchers had been hired to conduct studies of the colleges. At the core of the research is the assumption that colleges with higher transfer rates somehow operate differently than others, and that close study of them can reveal just how they differ. It is clear from earlier research that formal transfer agreements between community colleges and area four year schools (called articulation agreements) do help increase transfer rates. However, there must be something else at work since there are many community colleges with extensive articulation agreements, but low transfer rates.

During the second year of the study each researcher in Dr. London's study will conduct in-depth interviews and observations on their particular campuses, attempting to discover if there is something in the "culture" of the school that contributes to its high transfer rate. For example, it might be found that these schools do not define themselves as educational end-points, but as way-points in a longer educational path. Researchers may discover that some of these schools encourage career achievement so that students come to see transfer to a four year college as a necessary, and normal, part of their lives. Or it may be found that faculty members are the main source of norms emphasizing transfer to four year colleges and universities.

Research like this which is designed to describe the culture of a group or institution is called an ethnography. It calls for a particular style of data collection that requires close and sustained contact between researcher and his or her subjects, and care in drawing conclusions about the meaning of the behaviors observed in the field. To help in this process, researchers in Dr. London's study will be in frequent contact with Dr. London, one another and with selected experts via conference calls and occasional meetings of the entire research team in Boston.

Ethnographies require researchers to become intimately familiar with the lives of the people they study. It takes a great deal of skill and experience with the method for researchers to develop the necessary rapport with the subjects of their study. To increase the likelihood that this will occur, highly qualified ethnographers were chosen, and carefully matched to the characteristics of the institutions to which they were assigned. For example, the ethnographer studying the Community College of Philadelphia, a school with a high percentage of black students, is an African-American woman who is a doctoral student in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania. And the researcher chosen to study Palo Alto Community College in San Antonio is an hispanic Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas campus in that city. At Seattle Central Community College the researcher speaks all five languages that are commonly used there.

In the third year of the grant, four more community college campuses will be selected and studied, building on insights achieved in the study of the first four campuses. Ultimately, Dr. London is responsible for the presentation of the findings of the entire study to the Ford Foundation, and to interested regional and national audiences. This means Dr. London will present his findings at higher education meetings, publish a number of articles and write a book on the cultures of community colleges and their effects on transfer rates. If the Ford Foundation grant has its intended effect, information will be made available that can lead to changes in the operation of community colleges in America, changes which can lead to upward mobility that is still unique to the American system of higher education.