

The “Cooling Out” Hypothesis & Community College Choice

Under the “cooling out” hypothesis, students enroll in community colleges because their grades are not good enough, they do not feel like they are ready for a residential university, or because they failed out of another institution. National data, however, shows this may not be the case for many community college students. While historical research showed that community colleges may lower educational aspirations, new models indicate that students who exhibit a higher levels of uncertainty about educational aspirations may be more likely to choose community colleges.⁵

A recent longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education showed students who attend community colleges can raise their educational expectations.⁶ Another showed that nearly 40% of community college students are academically qualified to attend four-year colleges, with 24% scoring in the highest proficiency levels for math and 17% in reading during their senior year in high school.⁷ This means that between 20% and 25% of community college students are more than proficient in reading and math.

The results of this survey suggest students choose community colleges primarily for three reasons: low price, proximity to home, and the availability of a specific program. An open admissions policy and entrance requirements, college choice variables consistent with the “cooling out” hypothesis, play less significant roles in the decision to attend a community college. This seems to confirm that, rather than providing a place to “cool out” or “divert” other aspirations, practical considerations play a more prominent role in the college choice process for community college students.⁸

⁵ Romano, R.M. (2004). “Cooling out” revisited: Some evidence from survey research. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 28.

⁶ Adelman (2005).

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *Community college students: Goals, academic preparation, and outcomes*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

⁸ Absher, K., & Crawford, G. (1996). Marketing the community college starts with understanding students’ perspectives. *Community College Review*, 23.