Community College Journal

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FEATURE

Saving the 'Lost Generation'

BY ANTHONY E. BEEBE

HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN **INTERVENE** TO HELP **SAVE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS.**

Since the beginning of the American experience, labels have been used to describe generations. Among them are the "Puritan generation," the "greatest generation," the "baby boomer generation" and the "MTV generation." Today, we are creating a new generation—the "lost generation."

The lost generation represents a large and growing population of 16- to 24-year-olds who are high school dropouts. The educational system has tagged many of these young people as failures. They have broken spirits and broken lives. Most are unemployed or unemployable. People of color represent a disproportionate percentage of the lost generation. Unfortunately, many of its members wander aimlessly through life with low expectations, little guidance, and dismal prospects.

AN ESTIMATED 1.2 MILLION STUDENTS FAILED TO GRADUATE IN 2006.

PATRICK MAC SEAN/VEER

"THE EDUCATIONAL DISENFRANCHISEMENT OF THIS GROWING SEGMENT OF UNDEREDUCATED PEOPLE IS A CRISIS."

—Constance Carroll, chancellor, San Diego Community College District

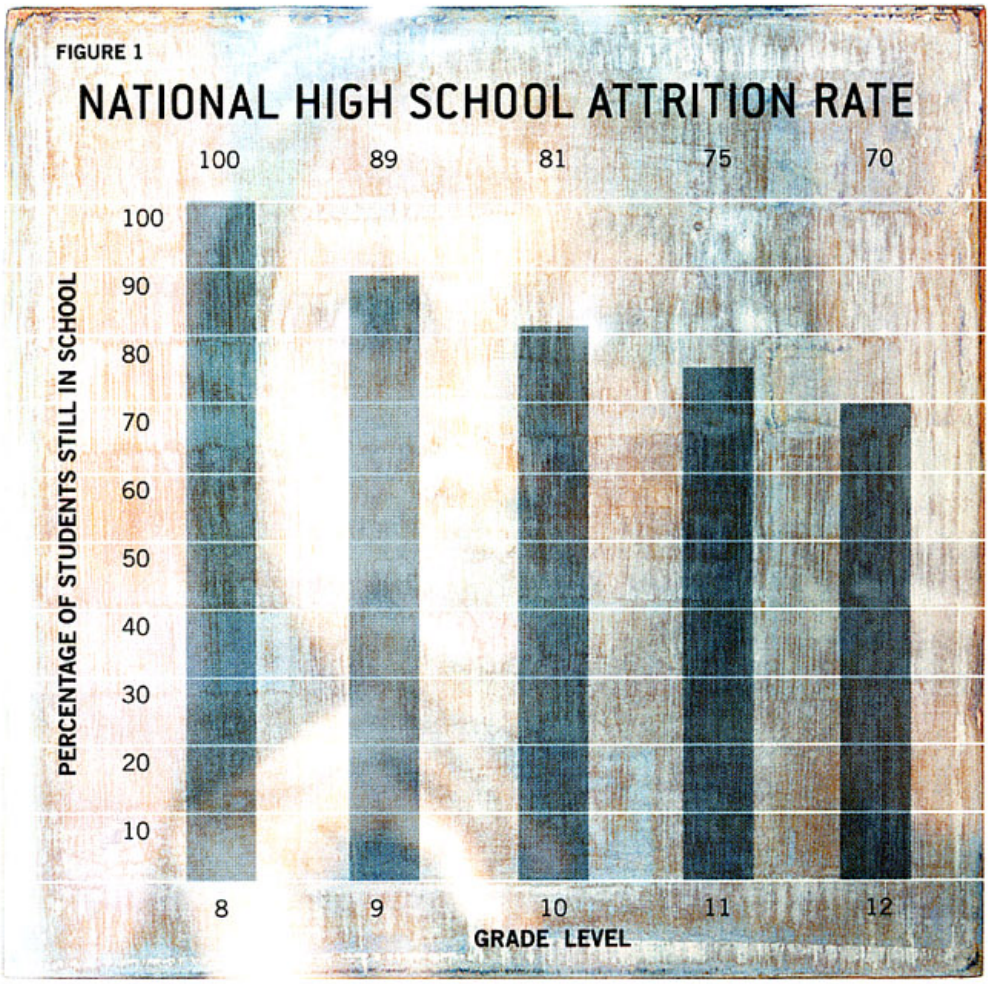
Portrait of the Lost Generation

The promise of public education to ensure that students graduate with a high school diploma has not been kept for all of our young people.

According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, we are failing about a third of our high school students. An estimated 1.2 million students failed to graduate in 2006 with a regular high school diploma. This translates into about 7,000 dropouts each day. This is reflected in the trends provided in Figure 1.

The National Center for Educational Statistics has tracked high school graduation rates for more than 100 years. These rates rose from 1869 to 1969, when they peaked at 77 percent. Since then, they have been trending downward to the current rate of about 70 percent. These data are presented in Figure 2. As Barton (2005) points out, the striking thing about the declining period is that it occurred during a period of educational reform and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). An unintended impact of this legislation was to focus on quality but not quantity.

The ethnic and racial makeup of a school district has a relationship to graduation rates. Figure 3 provides national graduation rates by race. Native American, black and Hispanic children have about a 50 percent chance of graduating. This is clearly a crisis by any standard.



Source: "Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates," *Education Week*, June 22, 2006.

Cost of the Lost Generation

The lost generation is disconnected from society. Those who do not finish high school are four times as likely to be unemployed. They are far more likely to end up on welfare. Related to this is their poor access to health care, resulting in high school dropouts dying younger than graduates do. Equally alarming, high school dropouts are more likely to go to prison and join that population of about 50 percent dropouts (Olson, 2006).

Economist Enrico Moretti of University of California, Berkeley, notes that a 1 percent increase in the high school completion rate would save the United States as much as $1.4 billion a year in reduced costs from crime borne by victims and society at large.

Certainly these costs of the lost generation are multiplied many times over when we consider the convergence of the three current mega-forces in America: (1) low literacy and numeracy levels compared with other countries; (2) the unprecedented transformations of the new economy, eliminating low-skill jobs altogether; and (3) the effects of the influx of immigrants, 46 percent without high school diplomas and 80 percent lacking fluency in English (Kirsch, 2007). High school completion impacts our collective future on every level.

Community College Mission

Since their creation, community colleges have had a mission to fill the gaps in student learning. We have always been thought of as "the people's college," opening our doors to all adults who can benefit from the instruction. We have been on the front line of educational opportunity and career training for returning World War II and Vietnam veterans. We have provided workforce training for dislocated workers and established pathways from welfare to work.

We now have a new challenge, for which the need is great and the response will be demanding. Two California CEOs, representing two of the largest community college districts in the nation, have described the situation as an emergency.

According to Chancellor Constance Carroll of the San Diego Community College District, "The educational disenfranchisement of this growing segment of undereducated people is a crisis deserving the same priority that we assign to transfer and workforce education." Chancellor Rocky Young of the Los Angeles Community College District adds, "This is also a moral issue, which disproportionately affects Latino and African-American males whom our systems have failed."

Second Chances

America's community colleges are ideally positioned to take the lead in providing second-chance opportunities for our high school dropouts. We have strong connections with local high schools. Given that 61.1 percent of entering community college students need some kind of remedial education, community colleges are already providing precollegiate instruction (Department of Education, 2004). We are also the teaching experts, having some of the finest instructional faculty in the world.

Some community colleges are deeply committed to providing second-chance opportunities for high school dropouts. The San Diego Community College District is an excellent example of what can be done to turn these students' lives in new directions.

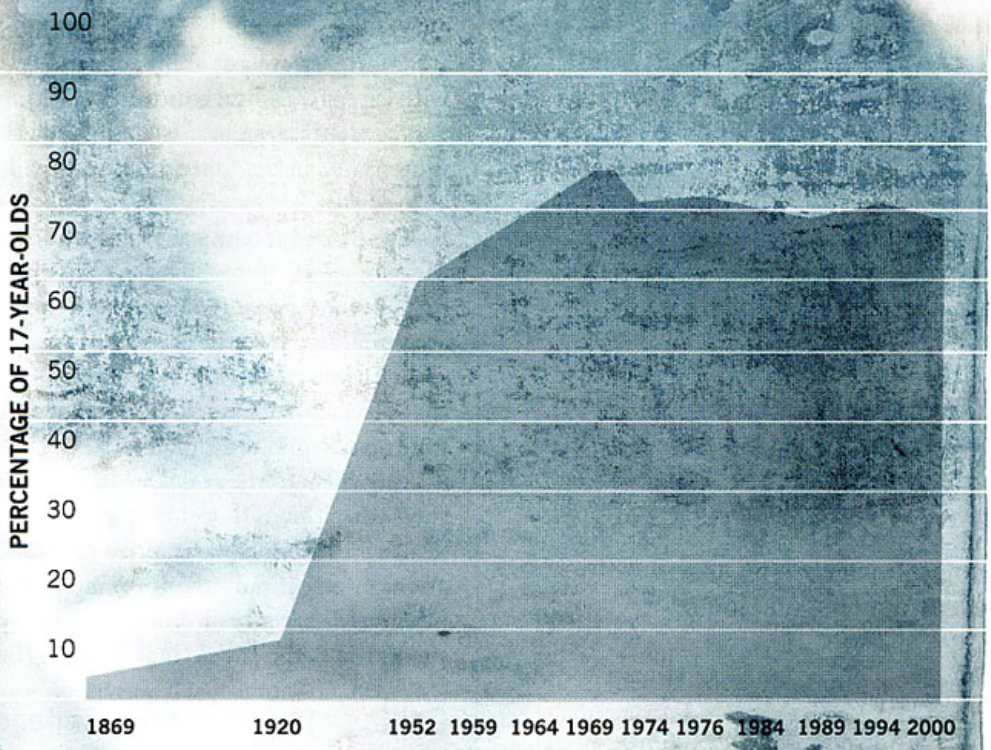
San Diego Continuing Education

The San Diego Community College District includes three comprehensive colleges: City College, Mesa College and Miramar College. The district is also home to San Diego Continuing Education (SDCE), one of the largest noncredit programs in California and the nation. It serves approximately 100,000 students annually, offering about 1,200 no-fee courses per semester in a variety of subject areas.

SDCE is the only accredited community college continuing education operation in California that is separately and fully accredited through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting

FIGURE 2

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AS PERCENTAGE OF 17-YEAR-OLD POPULATION, 1869–2000



Note: Graduates are of regular day school programs.
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Commission for Schools. The college is accredited to offer its own Adult High School diplomas. Last year, SDCE, jointly with the San Diego Unified School District, provided no-fee high school competition diplomas to 451 lost generation members.

In addition to high school diplomas, SDCE provides preparation for the General Education Development (GED) certificate. The GED is an important service for SDCE and other community colleges as, nationally, the GED retrieves about 500,000 dropouts each year from the lost generation.

Although the GED suffers from an image problem in academia, a growing body of research indicates that the certificate is a good second-chance option for dropouts. GED recipients are more likely than dropouts to get a job, will earn 40 percent more than dropouts, will feel better about themselves, and will encourage their children to get a good education (Tyler 2002). Probably the most important aspect of the GED is that 60.5 percent of GED recipients will continue their education or career training.

SDCE's GED students are held to the same classroom standards as any other students and are responsible for their progress through a specific course outline. These students also are assigned homework and are expected to turn it in for grading.

SDCE marries basic skills education with career technical education. We know that students learn best when information is presented in the context of how it will be used. SDCE is moving toward a goal of teaching career technical programs across the curriculum, for which the related basic skills of math, reading, and writing are integrated into the class content.

Rather than learning in theoretical isolation, students can use the new information and skills immediately, connecting them to the real world—whether their education is in welding, auto repair, health care, culinary arts, print press operations or one of our other programs. This integrated career technical training keeps them stimulated and actively learning.

Calling on Community Colleges

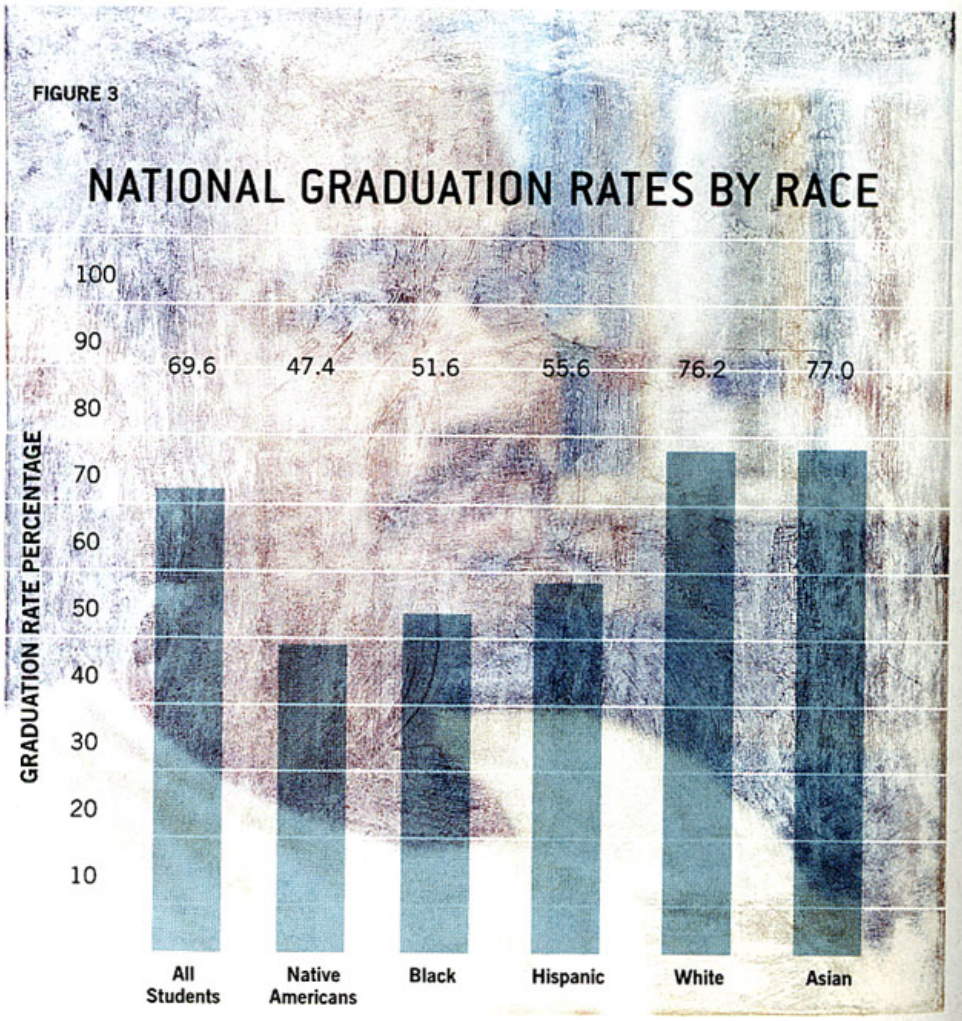
In many ways—socially, economically, academically, morally—the lost generation needs our focus and attention.

We are beyond finger pointing as to who is at "fault" that these young people are where they are. In truth, it is the fault of all of us. These are all our children. The question now is how we retrieve nearly a third of our would-be high school graduates from this lost generation, guiding them to a pathway of success and happiness.

Community colleges, as at so many times in the past, are ideally poised to take on this emerging mission. They are "the people's college," with a mission focused on teaching.

Most community colleges already provide some form of remedial education, so taking it an additional step is a logical and cost-effective progression. Certainly state and national legislators can make a tremendous impact, providing funding to help us restore the promise and potential of this segment of our population.

FIGURE 3



Source: "The Down Staircase," *Education Week*, June 22, 2006.

ANTHONY E. BEEBE *is President of San Diego Continuing Education, San Diego Community College District.*

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