How the 99 Percent Learn: America’s Overlooked Successes

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Abstract
It’s a pity the efforts of myriad institutions striving daily to help students of diverse backgrounds are eclipsed by Ivy League tales, says Alan Ruby.

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The diversity of the US higher education landscape is often left in shadow as elite liberal arts colleges such as Sarah Lawrence and Colby and the Ivy League universities hog the limelight. They are all relatively small, very expensive and highly selective. The basic sticker price for Brown University, which has about 6,500 undergraduates and accepts 9 per cent of applicants, is $49,346 (£31,579) for the coming year. Room and board and other expenses lift Brown’s estimate for the total annual cost to $65,380. Brown retains almost all its first-year entrants; 85 per cent of them graduate on time, and 11 per cent within six years. This is pretty much the norm for these prestigious institutions: very few who enter fail to complete.

But the student population of this elite is tiny. This year, the graduating classes of the eight Ivies totalled about 11,000 students.

This is about one-third of the total enrolment at Long Beach City College, a community college in the Californian city of the same name where my sister-in-law has worked for 35 years. LBCC also differs from the Ivies in having a student body that is older and more diverse, with both Hispanic and black students outnumbering white students.

Its students also have different aspirations. A good number are “dreamers”: young people who are primarily undocumented immigrants who have nevertheless successfully attended a California high school for three years, which makes them eligible for admission and financial aid under the California Dream Act.

LBCC offers nearly 900 courses, ranging from accounting through to welding and including homeland security administration, culinary arts and statistics.

It costs nothing like the Ivy League. An “in-state student” taking 18 credits a semester would pay less than $1,000; completing eight semesters of 18 credits, which approximates a bachelor’s degree, would cost less than $10,000. For a student from outside California, eight semesters would cost about $40,000.

Yet these prices are still challenging for students. Some need to feed and clothe themselves and their children.

Facing these realities every day is hard for teachers and counsellors. So good news stories need to be shared and successes celebrated. Two stood out at LBCC this year. One was 55-year-old Rodney Coulter, who earned a two-year associate’s degree and is now thinking about a career as a drug and alcohol counsellor and further study at a university. Mr Coulter’s past includes a criminal charge at age 11, for strong-arm robbery, and several jail terms for drug offences culminating in six years for possession of crack cocaine.

Then there was Kristen Ewan, a 40-year-old single mother who enrolled at LBCC initially to get financial aid in order to fund her decades-long drug habit. After getting her life in order, scoring near perfect grades at LBCC and topping the dean’s list, she transferred to California State University, Dominguez Hills. In May, Ms Ewan graduated magna cum laude with a human services bachelor’s degree and has been admitted to the social work programme at Columbia University – part of the Ivy League.

Such achievements renew the hope and faith of educators and advocates of affordable post-secondary education. It is a pity they are eclipsed by stories about the cost and selectivity of the privileged colleges that serve so few.

Alan Ruby is senior fellow, Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, University of Pennsylvania.