

## The Neglected Majority: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary!

By Anthony E. Beebe and R. Dan Walleri

*“With so many educational reform reports coming so fast, it would be easy to grow cynical—to say “These too will pass.” But such an attitude will result in the loss of a tremendous opportunity. ... These reform reports provide motivation for taking some positive additional and public steps toward educational excellence at all levels, steps discussed for years and residing in the hopes and dreams of those who live their lives in the educational trenches of our schools and colleges. Now is the time to move toward educational quality — opportunity with excellence.”*

-- Dale Parnell, 1985

An Open Letter to the Leaders of American  
High Schools and Community Colleges

It is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Dale Parnell’s landmark book *The Neglected Majority*. In this book, Parnell pointed out that for too long our educational system has focused on the highest and lowest achievers. He made the case that most of those students in the middle two high school quartiles neither prepare nor aspire to baccalaureate study. He further pointed out that in 1985, roughly 80 percent of the adult population in this country did not hold a bachelor’s degree.

Yet, as deep-rooted tradition has it, the baccalaureate degree represents the solitary image of success. It is the “gold standard” against which all other measures of success are compared. The result of this is that many students go through life feeling like dropouts and failures because they were not able or did not aspire to obtain a four-year degree. Even for many community college administrators and faculty in this country, the ultimate mission and goal is to feed four-year institutions with transfer students. The allure of baccalaureate degrees is so great that some community colleges have felt it necessary to offer them in selected disciplines. Although there are certainly valid reasons for this recent trend – labor market needs and failure of four-year college and university systems to respond – the obsession of community colleges with baccalaureate degrees is the classic case of the tail wagging the dog. The question that Dale Parnell posed to all of us was in essence: What is educational success for the average student, those in the middle, those for whom the baccalaureate degree is not the right option, that 80 percent who comprise the “neglected majority”?

Using current data, we revisit Parnell’s book and examine who comprises the neglected majority, including an ethnic breakdown. We review the dilemma of defining excellence.

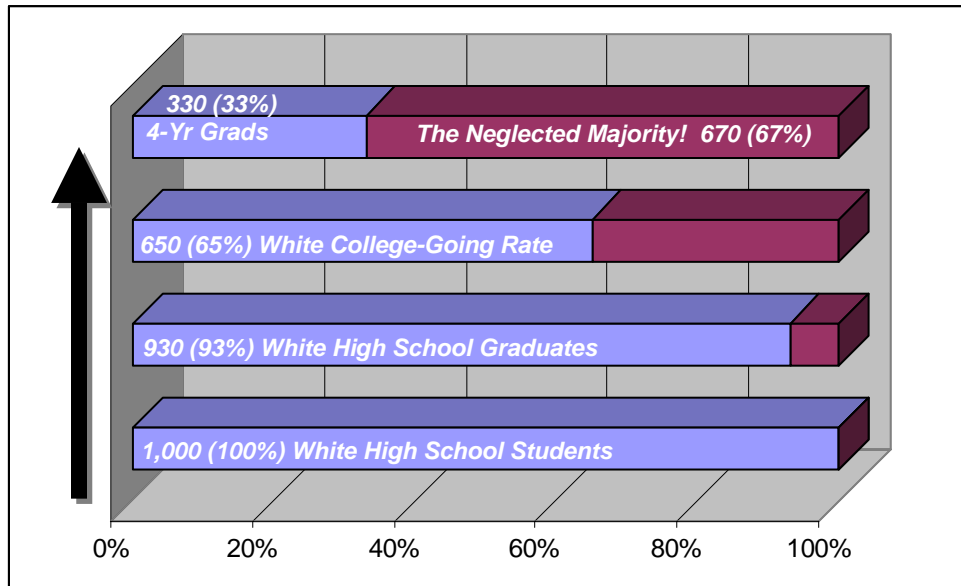
Finally, we share Parnell’s comments from a recent interview, looking back and looking forward at *The Neglected Majority* and explore the impact of the book.

### Who is The Neglected Majority?

The neglected majority represents “non-baccalaureate-degreed” America. Nationwide, this group represents 65 to 75 percent of the total U.S. population. For a multitude of reasons, this population has not completed a baccalaureate degree. Reasons for not completing relate to economics, family, time, work, academics, and childcare. The more traditional among us, those who hold the baccalaureate degree, may view these students as educational failures or “washouts.”

The neglected majority is most clearly understood by following an average cohort of high school students. Figure 1 presents such a cohort of 1,000 White high school students as it progresses through a postsecondary education. Based on 2001 data for the 25-29 age group, 930 (93 percent) of these students will graduate from high school. Of these, 650 (65 percent) will go on to college. Finally, of those 650 who begin college, only 330 (33 percent) will ultimately graduate with a four-year degree. Accordingly, the remaining 670 (67 percent) students are the neglected majority.

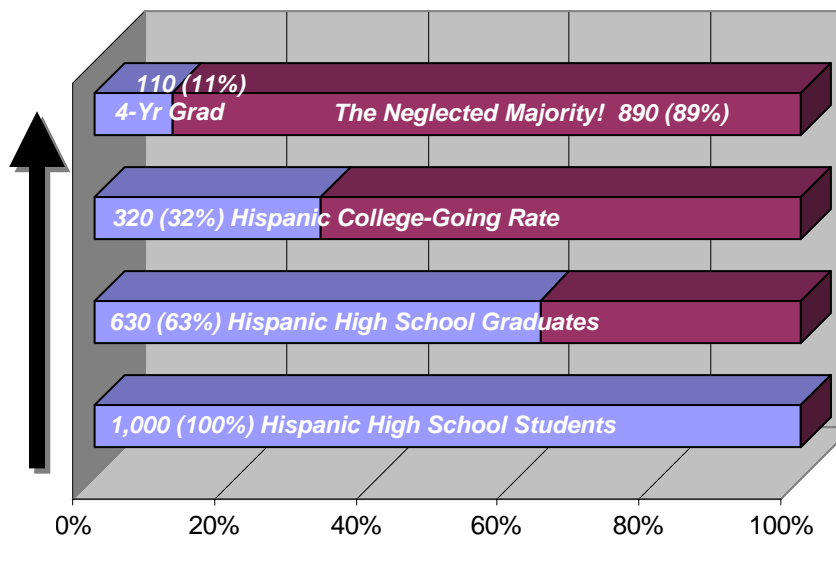
**Figure 1**  
**Who is the Neglected Majority?**  
*(Based on Year 2001 National Rates for White 25-29 Years Olds)*



Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2002*

The neglected majority becomes even more pronounced when we consider other ethnic groups. This is particularly true of Black and Hispanic populations. Parnell made the observation in 1985 that, "... almost half the Hispanic high-school students in the country drop out before graduating from high school. This is more than double the rate of Black students and three times the rate for White students" (Parnell, 1985). Figure 2 offers the same cohort analysis for Hispanics. Note that Whites are three times more likely to obtain a four-year degree than Hispanics.

**Figure 2**  
**Who is the Neglected Majority?**  
*(Based on Year 2001 National Rates for Hispanics 25-29 Years Old)*



*Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, The Condition of Education 2002*

The Hispanic population in the United States is growing rapidly and will soon become the largest minority group, surpassing Blacks. Hispanics have made gains in several key education areas in the past 20 years, but despite these gains, gaps in academic performance between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White students remain. In the 1999-2000 academic year, Hispanics earned 9 percent of all associate degrees, 6 percent of bachelor's degrees, 4 percent of master's degrees, 3 percent of doctoral degrees, and 5 percent of first-professional degrees.

## **The Best Begins in the Middle**

Parnell argued that what is needed is an educational system, which focuses on bringing out the best in the ordinary student -- the student who makes up the majority of all students in this country. This would require a major mind shift from an emphasis on simply cherry picking proven winners (creaming the best) to actually coaching and facilitating the creation of winners out of the majority of students.

In such a system, the baccalaureate degree is certainly one important pathway to success. However, there would be other equally successful pathways to excellence for students who did not want to pursue the baccalaureate. In fact, the number of these pathways should be as great as the ever-expanding diversity of our students in this country. In this education system, no longer are efforts expended solely on the upper (baccalaureate bound) and lower (Adult Basic Skills) ends of the student population. Rather, the focus is on the middle cohort—the majority. The mission of the community college is then based on the premise that the best begins in the middle, rather than at the top or the bottom. There is much less emphasis on sorting and screening students out, and more emphasis on figuring out what is needed to get them in and keep them in. Parnell professes that the goal is to develop and nurture the best in each student. The shift is away from a focus on teaching to some standardized test to the recognition of the value-added from the educational experience. The consequence is about relative student goals and achievement and recognizing a variety of pathways for student excellence. It is important to make some kind of assessment of what students know, but it is even more important to assess what students can do with what they know, thus connecting knowing with doing.

## **Defining Excellence for Every Student**

Parnell made the point that we have created an artificial image of excellence. He described the Madison Avenue ideal of excellence “as a thin, attractive, white family, confident and happy in a meticulously landscaped and spacious suburban home... Each morning, after a breakfast, which provides fiber and builds bodies 12 ways, two children, perfectly groomed, emerge from a model kitchen and skip off to the neighborhood school. Presumably, within the allotted time they will graduate. Then, with little or no effort, they will continue their education at an elite four-year college or university” (1985). Parnell went on to point out that, “faced with such an artificial image, one can understand the chagrin and frustration” of the majority of students, who have never entered such a world. In the majority’s world, being “average” is an

accusation and something to overcome. The problem is that the definition of “excellence” must not be so limited and narrow as to foreclose or discourage opportunity for the masses.

Patricia Cross (Parnell 1985) may have said it best in her following statement:

In the end, the task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate “apparently ordinary” people to unusual effort. What do the reports on school reform have to contribute to that goal? In the first place, there is surprisingly little attention given to “ordinary people” in the school reform reports. There is the clear implication that the rising tide of mediocrity is made up of embarrassing numbers of ordinary people. Teachers’ colleges are advised to select better candidates, colleges are encouraged to raise admissions standards, and the federal government is urged to offer scholarships to attract top high-school graduates into teaching. There is not a lot said in the education reports about how to stimulate unusual effort on the part of the ordinary people that we seem to be faced with in the schools and in most colleges... The tough problem is not in identifying winners; it is in making winners out of ordinary people. That, after all, is the overwhelming purpose of education. Yet historically, in most of the periods emphasizing excellence, education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them.

One of the things touted repeatedly in the media is the “increased earning capacity” of the baccalaureate degree over sub-baccalaureate degrees. Since Parnell wrote *The Neglected Majority* in 1985, studies have been conducted reviewing this assertion. There is evidence that simply comparing the earnings of one degree over another is not all that straight forward. Carnevale (2000) reminds readers that such comparisons are done on average earnings. In actuality, almost 80 percent of employees with associate degrees or some college earn as much as those with bachelor's degrees, with a third actually earning more than the average four-year graduate. Other studies have indicated related findings (Lin and Vogt, 1996; Grubb 1999). Additionally, Carnevale suggests that it is the occupation – not necessarily the degree level – that determines salary. For example, the highest salaries are generally in business, engineering/computers, health, and math/science; while the lowest are in social sciences, the humanities, and education.

Figure 3 provides examples of actual advertisements taken from newspapers across the country. In each of the job announcements, the specific phrase “associate degree preferred” was prominently listed in the qualifications. Using any Internet search engine, one will find thousands of other jobs asking for associate level credentials.

**Figure 3  
Associate's Degree Preferred**

**Family Development/Outreach Worker. Associate's Degree Preferred** min: \$13.48 max: \$21.53 per hour. Provide home visitation, support and advocacy to families of infants and children in an intervention program to prevent abandonment of infants and children with prenatal substance exposure. Sensitivity to cultural diversity required. Bilingual (Spanish/English preferred).

**Residency Coordinator - Obstetrics. Associate's Degree Preferred** and three (3) plus years of relevant experience in an educational or administrative capacity, preferably in a healthcare setting. Excellent verbal/written communication skills, as well as organizational and interpersonal skills.

**Accounts Receivable Accountant. Associate's Degree Preferred** in Accounting or Business Administration. Two years of Accounts Receivable/Billing or related Cash Receipts experience. Proficient using accounts receivable software system.

**Telephone Assistant Manager. Associate's Degree Preferred** Salary \$14.48 per hour 1 Year of telephone operations experience required 4 Years of diversified experience working in a financial institution branch. Supervisory experience in a financial institution preferred. Working knowledge of personal computers. Pleasant telephone voice.

Table 1 reveals the dominance of technology and health industries in high growth occupations, both in 1985 and in 2000. Parnell successfully predicted the growth and soon to be pervasiveness of computer technology. Entrance to many of these occupations requires or benefits from postsecondary education less than a bachelor's degree. Also, note that the fastest growing occupations are not necessarily those with the greatest labor shortage such as is the current case for nurses.

**Table 1**  
**Twenty Fastest Growing Occupations**  
**(Comparison of 1982-1995 and 2000-2010)**

#	<i>Twenty Fastest Growing Occupations, 1982-1995</i> (Parnell, 1985, p. 12)	<i>Twenty Fastest Growing Occupations, 2000-2010</i> (Bureau of Labor Statistics, <a href="http://www.bls.gov/news.release.ooh.t01.htm">www.bls.gov/news.release.ooh.t01.htm</a> )	<i>Most Significant Source of Education for 2000-2010 Fastest Growing Occupations</i>
1	Computer service technicians	Computer software engineers, applications	Bachelor's degree
2	Legal assistants	<b>Computer support specialists</b>	<b>Associate degree</b>
3	Computer systems analysts	Computer software engineers, systems software	Bachelor's degree
4	Computer programmers	Network and computer systems administrators	Bachelor's degree
5	Computer operators	Network systems and data communications analysts	Bachelor's degree
6	Office machine repairers	<b>Desktop publishers</b>	<b>Postsecondary vocational award</b>
7	Physical therapy assistants	Database administrators	Bachelor's degree
8	Electrical engineers	<b>Personal and home care aides</b>	<b>Short-term on-the-job training</b>
9	Civil engineering technicians	Computer systems analysts	Bachelor's degree
10	Peripheral EDP equipment operators	<b>Medical assistants</b>	<b>Moderate-term on-the-job training</b>
11	Insurance clerks, medical	<b>Social and human service assistants</b>	<b>Moderate-term on-the-job training</b>
12	Electrical and electronic technicians	Physician assistants	Bachelor's degree
13	Occupational therapists	<b>Medical records and health information technicians</b>	<b>Associate degree</b>
14	Surveyor helpers	Computer and information systems managers	Bachelor's degree
15	Credit clerks, banking & insurance	<b>Home health aides</b>	<b>Short-term on-the-job training</b>
16	Physical therapists	<b>Physical therapist aides</b>	<b>Short-term on-the-job training</b>

17	Employment interviewers	<b>Occupational therapist aides</b>	<b>Short-term on-the-job training</b>
18	Mechanical engineers	<b>Physical therapist assistants</b>	<b>Associate degree</b>
19	Mechanical engineering technicians	Audiologists	Master's degree
20	Compression and injection mold machine operators, plastics	<b>Fitness trainers and aerobics instructors</b>	<b>Postsecondary vocational award</b>

### Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Parnell Interview

In an attempt to understand Parnell’s vision better, the authors conducted an interview with him in August 2003. He explained that Tech-Prep has accomplished some magnificent things, but that there is much work yet to do. He also believes that the vision he articulated in *The Neglected Majority* 20 years ago is even more relevant today. Parnell explained that:

“I think good progress has been made. ...[D]own at the grass roots, I run into wonderful things all over the country. The National Tech Prep Network has 3,000 dues paying members, there’s a Tech Prep Coordinator in every state. ... A group that I give credit for keeping Tech Prep going is COD, The Center for Occupational Research and Development in Texas.”

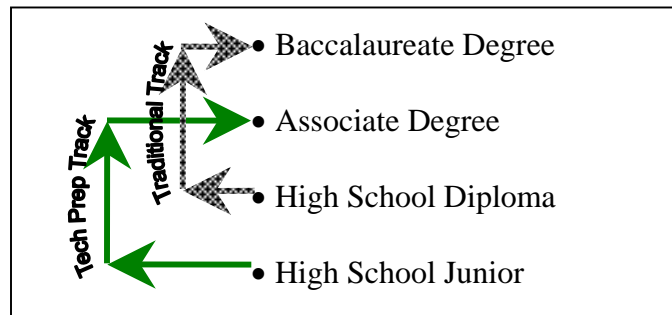
Parnell feels that the federal legislation (Perkins) has been the key to sustaining Tech Prep, and without it, what progress that has been made would not have occurred. Sadly, the Bush administration has recommended that this important legislation for community colleges be eliminated. Parnell went on to explain that the basic problem with high school remains, “If anything, we’ve gotten worse about the neglected majority.” Most high schools have dropped the general education program, a central criticism in *The Neglected Majority* as a dead end for students: “[General education programs] didn’t prepare students for work and didn’t prepare them for college. By and large that’s gone. But instead they’ve substituted a college preparation program. So what they’ve done is make even more people feel like failures. That’s why the dropout rate has not improved very much across the country.” People need to connect learning to a valuable, real-world future vision for themselves. A generic general education program or college preparation program does not make this connection.

As for community colleges:

“The community college leaders have not really taken hold of the program the way I had hoped. ...I’ve always thought of it as a four-year program like a four-year baccalaureate program, but a four-year college Tech Prep program, using the last two years of high school with two-years at a community college. ... I don’t think that idea has ever really caught on.... (see Figure 4)

Tech Prep is often artificial rather than the organic four-year program envisioned. Educators have yet to catch onto the power of a good college Tech Prep program. ... If the leadership of a college does not really endorse Tech Prep and keep the thumb” in the back of the people who are doing it, it won’t go as well. You have to have some missionaries underneath them that keep it going ... but I’d like to see the leaders endorsing it and providing leadership for it.”

**Figure 4**  
 Tech Prep vs Baccalaureate Four-Year Programs  
*(Tech Prep Program focuses on finding excellence for The Neglected Majority)*



Another problem cited by Parnell is the missed opportunity of community colleges to emphasize and tell the story of the associate degree. The associate degree is the American community college’s signature product and a viable option for the neglected majority, but we are not stressing it. Parnell says about this topic that,

“I think some progress has been made, but community colleges generally have not been giving high schools and the employer community clear enough signals about the value of completing the associate degree. And I underline completing the degree requirement. This was one of the biggest disappointments for me when I was President of the American Association of Community Colleges. I started a program called Associate Degree Preferred because I wanted to get the employer community acquainted with the Associate degree and start requiring it. ... You think I could get my colleagues and community colleges excited about that? I just bombed!”

More fundamentally for Parnell, progress has been stymied by the inability at both the high school and community college level to adapt to the diversity of student populations: not only race/ethnicity, gender, age and cultures, but the diversity in student learning, both in pace and context.

“The gap still exists to a large extent because we have not recognized the diversity of our student populations in high schools and community colleges. We really, even today, still do not recognize how different the majority of people learn from the way we generally teach. What I worry about is the pressure of testing driving teachers, even though they know better. It is driving them into the old ‘sit and listen’ approaches to education because good contextual teaching takes time. We think that everybody learns at the same rate of speed. When we know that some people are fast, some people are slow, some people are in the middle and yet we still organize community colleges around quarters and semesters. If you aren’t a semester learner, we’re going to flunk you and put it on your record and it will be there forever, for as long as you live, even though you might be a 20-week learner, rather than an 18-week learner. Education never adjusted to that.”

Parnell argues that the same holds for “applied” education.

“We still have vocational/tech over here, liberal arts over here. In peoples’ minds, they’re still separated. However, of all the places that ought to be able to use applied English or applied math, it would be the community college because they have both the application/vocational and the theoretical/academic sides. Why not bring them together? There are too many cases where they are not only geographically separated but also psychologically separated. In today’s world I want students to be able to read and write and compete better than anybody else. I want a nurse who shoots stuff into my arm to be literate. I want the aircraft technician that prepares that craft for flight to be able to read the directions.”

### **The Impact of *The Neglected Majority***

Parnell’s book spawned the tech-prep movement, including funding through the federal Perkins Legislation. The power of Parnell’s vision was succinct: Only a third of the U.S. adult population has earned a four-year degree—what about the rest? By building articulated professional technical programs from the last two years of high school to the community college (2+2), fewer high school students drop out and they are better prepared and motivated for college. By completing a two-year community college program, students are better prepared for occupations requiring more than high school preparation but less than a four-year degree. Access to the community college has been enabled through relatively lower tuition than that of four-year colleges. This new structure, combined with educational reform (contextual learning, etc.), enhances prospects for student success, including the possibility of continuing on to a four-

year college (2+2+2). With the majority of students better prepared and credentialed, future incomes would be enhanced while also addressing labor shortages. This makes every student a winner. This is demonstrated every day very adeptly in exceptional tech-prep programs across the county.

Beyond the founders, Dale Parnell is clearly one of the most influential leaders in the history of the community college movement. His legacy is not only in what he accomplished as an educational leader, but also in his writings, with *The Neglected Majority* at the top of the list. What is troubling is that the vision has not taken root to the extent that it should have. Today, *The Neglected Majority* is more relevant than when it was written. The need for education beyond high school but short of a four-year degree is essential if the nation is to remain competitive in a knowledge-based economy. It is also essential if current patterns of social stratification are to be reduced and the need for highly-trained workers is to be realized. Looking back to *The Neglected Majority* is especially pertinent given the current generational leadership change occurring within the community college movement. The question is whether the new leadership will be able to pick up the mantle left by Parnell and achieve the vision for community colleges that Parnell so ably articulated.

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A fuller review of *The Neglected Majority*, with particular focus on research implications, can be found in the forthcoming fall 2005 issue of the *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, New Forums Press (<http://www.newforums.com/>).

*Anthony E. Beebe is vice president for Instruction and Student Services at Yakima Valley Community College, Yakima, Washington.*

*R. Dan Walleri is director of research and planning at Mt. Hood Community College, Gresham, Oregon.*