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The missionary zeal of community colleges in the 1960s is still needed to meet the challenges they still face today: helping underserved and underprepared students succeed, and offering a strong general education curriculum that provides the foundation and framework for later academic and professional success. Even as economic, social, and political conditions change, community colleges can and must still provide national leadership in helping more students achieve success, guiding unsuccessful students to alternatives that will allow them to be successful, and preparing students for meaningful citizenship.

The Next Community College Movement?

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It Was the Best of Times

In the fall of 1968, having just completed my master's degree, I began my first job as a counselor in a community college in upstate New York. Although my title was counselor, I was assigned administrative responsibility for the financial aid and job placement programs. My previous experience in financial aid consisted of a ten-week practicum in the Financial Aid Office at Michigan State University as part of my graduate program. To say it was a different time in community colleges would be an understatement.

After more than forty years of working as a community college educator/administrator, the last twenty years or so as a president, I retain my love and enthusiasm for community colleges. The community college has changed in the past forty years, of course, and the future promises more change. From the vantage point of nearing the end of my full-time professional career, I have pondered what future challenges are in store for community colleges. I do so with the full realization that there is no way to predict the pressures these colleges will face but also with certainty that community colleges must continue to change to fulfill their mission.

In 1968, the United States was nearing the end of a decade of exceptional growth for community colleges. Their enrollment grew from 646,527 in 1959–60 to more than 2.5 million by the end of the decade. Enrollment growth was helped considerably by a 52 percent increase in the fourteen- to twenty-four-year age groups during the 1960s. From 412 in 1960, the number of community colleges in the United States more than doubled to 909

by 1970 (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppliger, 1994). That growth represented adding a community college a week for ten years!

The 1960s were a period of great social change in America, and community colleges were well positioned to ride that wave of change. Providing more opportunity to underserved populations in higher education fit well with the social impetus to end poverty and racial and gender inequities. The tension between meritocracy and egalitarianism, an ever-present tug and pull in American democracy, swung sharply to the side of egalitarianism. The open-door community college was regarded by many as the type of institution that embodied the social consciousness appropriate to the times.

George B. Vaughan, while serving as president of Piedmont Virginia Community College, aptly captured the mood of community college educators when he wrote an essay comparing the community college to the beacon of hope the Statute of Liberty had been for immigrants landing at Ellis Island earlier in the century (c. 1980). Many who worked in community colleges were young and embodied the spirit of missionaries, often talking about the “community college movement” as a kind of sacred calling to break down the barriers of access to higher education. It was an exhilarating time for community college educators well into the 1970s, and there is no doubt about the community college’s role in helping open the doors of higher education to millions of previously underserved students.

Most of that early missionary fervor abated as community colleges matured and most of the gender, racial, and financial barriers related to access were addressed. Community colleges are in a much different place than they were fifty years ago. If they were the brash new institutions forcefully pushing aside the established order in higher education a half century ago, community colleges are now an accepted part of that established order. That is not to say that their core mission has changed significantly, but merely to observe that community colleges are no longer driven by the kind of revolutionary zeal that can occur at the beginning of societal social changes like those that manifested themselves in the 1960s.

As a mature system of higher education, one that still enrolls the greatest number of minority and low income students (Carnevale, 2009), there is still much work to be done and perhaps as much need for missionary zeal as there ever was—but with a very different focus. In this chapter, I focus on the community college mission as we enter the second decade of the new millennium and suggest issues to be addressed that warrant the kind of missionary zeal typical of an earlier time in the history of community colleges. These issues, in my opinion, relate closely with the emerging emphasis on student completion.

Mission Past

There is general agreement that the mission describes what an institution does. While discussing mission in general, it needs to be emphasized that

there is a great deal of variation among institutions that fall under the general category of community college. Differences in size, program mix, governance, and statewide coordination are among the elements that distinguish one community college from another. Such variation is not unusual; there is at least as much variation among four-year colleges. For the purpose of this general discussion of mission, then, mission will be considered in its broad sense.

The mission of community colleges has changed significantly since the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901. Originally created as junior colleges that provided a broad general education to students at the freshman and sophomore level to prepare them for the rigors of the university (and, from the university president's point of view, to keep them from diluting the intellectualism of higher education), community colleges expanded their mission to include vocational programs and a wide array of community service programs. In Vaughan's (1995) short history of the community college, he includes developmental education and student support services as parts of the mission. Developmental education is a large part of the educational program of most community colleges. As it is a vertical change in mission (providing an educational program at the high school level), here it is considered a regular part of the mission. Student support services, which certainly are an important aspect of what community colleges provide as well, are not considered here as a separate mission element.

By the 1960s, most community colleges addressed these general roles in their mission statement, although there was and continues to be considerable variance among these colleges regarding the emphasis each role receives. As might be expected, much has been written about the community college mission. To some, the comprehensive mission of the community college reflects the impossible goal of being "all things to all people." Cross (1985) questioned whether the community college could continue its comprehensive mission, indicating that if the comprehensive mission was maintained, "there is little doubt that priorities will have to be set and observed over the next decade" (p. 36). Twenty-five years later, it would be hard to find evidence of priority setting in regard to the comprehensive mission of the community college.

The community college mission will continue to change, a reality inherent to the nature of the basic orientation of the institution. In addition, there will likely be continuing calls for the community college to prioritize its mission elements, a more likely possibility if financial support diminishes.

Vaughan (1988) captured the reality of the ever-changing mission of the community college when he discussed the successful community college, the one that is true to its mission, as the college that "will squeeze, push and pull on the mission to make it conform to community needs" (p. 26). Comparing the mission to a balloon, Vaughn saw changing societal pressures as causing community colleges to change the shape of the balloon

but not alter the core elements of the mission contained within the balloon. As one part of the mission expanded, another part of the mission was diminished.

A more important consideration than expanding or contracting the mission of the community college in the future, however, may well be refocusing on mission success as determined by the degree to which the mission is accomplished. The most significant question community colleges will deal with in the future may not be their mission—what they do—but how they carry out that mission. The outcomes of the educational experience, captured in the catchphrase “student completion agenda,” will be the new focus. The remainder of this chapter suggests evolving issues community colleges will need to address.

Equality of Opportunity Just the First Step

As briefly discussed earlier, community colleges have no doubt expanded educational opportunity. They enroll the highest percentage of low-income students (Carnevale, 2009), students who are seeking economic and social mobility. Coupled with the growth of college preparatory programs to address the academic needs of underprepared students, the job for community colleges of helping these students achieve academic success remains extremely challenging.

Cohen (Cohen and others, 1971) has for many years pointed out the hollowness of using access as the measure of success for achieving educational opportunity. “Although the institution offers equality of opportunity, this does little to ensure equality of educational effects” (p. 3). Even earlier, Blocker, Plummer, and Richardson (1965) questioned the return on investment for developmental education students and called for an honest reporting of results.

This is not to say that community colleges have not struggled mightily with the challenge of helping underprepared students achieve academic success and continue to do so. Providing access to higher education for underserved groups has been a monumental accomplishment for community colleges, but there will be increasing pressure for these colleges to demonstrate their success in regard to the educational progress for such students.

One of the educational controversies of the 1960s related to the role of higher education in helping students realize their aspirations in light of the realities of their academic achievement. Clark’s “The Cooling Out Function in Higher Education” (1960) caused heated discussion about the appropriateness of enrolling underprepared students who had little chance of achieving their educational goals, and many who were committed to egalitarianism, such as many community college educators, saw cooling out as just one more way to deny low-income and minority students a fair chance to be successful in higher education. Cooling out, of course, is the result of

many students' inability to achieve academic success in light of their hopes and dreams for a better life.

Although there is little discussion of cooling out today, there is also no clear solution to how best to help all students who enter college academically unprepared. An exception is a recent AACCC Policy Brief in which Mullen (2010) mentions the cooling-out function in relation to the need for community colleges to increase their completion rates. It is clear that many underprepared students are not successful, but does the community college role end by simply giving such students a number of chances to address their academic deficiencies and, for those who cannot do so, sending them on their way? Here lies a continuing issue for community colleges (and the nation) in the future.

While major foundations have recently directed focus to the problem of improving the success of underprepared students, there is no consensus on how best to do so. Institutions need to be honest about the resources that they will need to devote to college preparatory instruction if students are to have a realistic chance of success. A good start on the problem would be for colleges to report more publicly on their success rates with such students and to develop effective programs to divert unsuccessful students to other alternatives. Applying the missionary zeal of our earlier time to this more difficult challenge would be wholly consistent with the core philosophy of the community college. As the "student completion agenda" becomes the national mantra for higher education, it is the right time for community colleges to lead the way on this imperative.

Transfer Is Only Part of the Transfer Function

Many students begin their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree at the community college. This was the major function of the first junior colleges and remains a significant aspect of the community college mission. While much attention is given to the transfer function, that attention generally has to do with how many students actually transfer, the acceptance of transfer credits, and the eventual success of the students who transfer to the upper division in colleges and universities. As much has been written on the topic, it is not addressed here further from these aspects. Another part of the transfer function has not received much attention of late, and it will evolve as much more important in the future: the liberal arts/general education function embedded within the transfer function.

General education is one of the most important roles of the community college. In *America's Community Colleges: The First Century*, Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppliger (1994) noted: "Throughout the history of the community college movement . . . there has been a desire to provide individuals with an education that would enable them to become productive citizens of a democratic society" (p. 273). The authors go on to

relate that role to the educational ideal described by Thomas Jefferson. They are not speaking here of “productive citizens” being ones who have the skills to succeed economically, although that is likely a part of the intent, but of fully functioning citizens—citizens who can participate fully and rationally in the democratic process.

Although the community college does not bear total responsibility, they do share responsibility for not making the general educational role more important and coherent. In her recent description of current American culture, public intellectual Susan Jacoby concluded that “America is now ill with a powerful mutant strain of intertwined ignorance, anti-rationalism, and anti-intellectualism” (Jacoby, 2008, page xx). Jacoby places part of the blame for rampant “American unreason” on the changing curriculum of elementary and secondary schools (p. 172) and on a general overemphasis in education on practical results at the near exclusion of the liberal arts.

Diane Ravitch, in her most recent book (2010), opines: “Without a comprehensive liberal arts education, our students will not be prepared for the responsibility of citizenship in a democracy, nor will they be ably equipped to make decisions based on knowledge, thoughtful debate and reason” (p. 226). Ravitch aims much of her criticism at what she considers the overemphasis on high-stakes testing as the means of improving accountability in K–12 education. One result of this misguided effort to improve education has been to decrease the liberal arts part of the curriculum. It is this curriculum, according to Ravitch, toward which reform efforts need to be directed.

The community college, which has also closely associated its mission with the ideals of American democracy, has certainly not been in the forefront of deemphasizing general education and the liberal arts. But they are part of the greater educational enterprise that has done so, and they could provide leadership in reforming and renovating general education.

Cohen and Brawer (2008), who have been studying and writing about the community college for many years, have noted the important role of general education in the community college. “A general education that leads to the ways of knowing and the common belief and language that bind society together is offered in every culture through rituals, schools and apprenticeships. The community colleges are responsible for furthering it in the United States” (p. 3). The major culprit in preventing community colleges from achieving this result, according to Cohen and Brawer, has been the move to define general education as a set of distribution requirements. That change began in earnest in America in the 1960s as a reaction to what was perceived as an overly rigid, narrowly focused approach to general education. Jacoby (2009) traces the erosion of liberal arts back further in our nation’s history. She suggests that the liberal arts began to erode after World War II, when thousands of veterans entered higher education and the focus of higher education began to move toward a greater vocational emphasis.

At this point in American history, it would be difficult to argue that there is not a strong strain of antirationalism in the country. Many factors account for that, of course, including a highly polarized political system, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and the constant availability of opinions, most not based on relevant facts, through electronic devices. More than ever in our history, the need for citizens who can think critically, understand our democratic system of government, and be thoughtfully engaged in the democratic process is essential to our future.

As community colleges ponder the future, one very significant opportunity is in rethinking the general education function as an important aspect of the student completion agenda. There is no reason community colleges could not lead a renaissance in reconsidering the purposes of the general education function and restructuring the curriculum to ensure that students gain the knowledge and sense of common culture to be truly productive citizens. While there is no need to return to the rigidity of the previous general education approach, a general education based on a wide range of distributive requirements is clearly not serving American society well. Student completion must be undergirded with demonstrated learning outcomes, and general education should be a significant aspect of those outcomes.

Can Community Colleges Deliver?

Higher education has enjoyed an exalted place among institutions in the perception of the American public and its leaders. While other institutions in American society (Congress, the government, and so on) are held in low esteem, the feelings about American higher education have remained relatively positive. The community college, after decades of being ignored by the public media, has recently received much more attention, almost all of it positive. The Obama administration's American Graduation Initiative, references in political speeches about the value of American community colleges, and the attention Jill Biden has brought to community colleges, among other things, have all raised the visibility of the community college.

There are other forces in play, however, that raise questions about whether the positive public perception of community colleges is more fragile than we are aware. In a recent analysis of the mood of the country, Yankelovich (2009) indicated that the prevailing political trend is quite negative toward institutions and that this is a very dangerous development for our democratic process. There are reasons to be concerned that higher education, including community colleges, could become a target for public resentment in the future.

In general, much of the public support for higher education, and certainly for community colleges, comes from the perception that education is the vehicle to a better life—primarily a good job. Higher education has

embraced this view and frequently links the years of additional education one receives to higher earning potential. And there is little argument that the more years of education one has, the better off one is economically.

Yankelovich's research found that 87 percent of the public believe that a college education is as important as a high school diploma was in the past and that 88 percent feel that qualified students should not be denied access to higher education because of costs. As Yankelovich (2009) says, "The heart and soul of the American core value system is that education is the royal road to middle-class status" (p. 26). If that social contract is no longer perceived as viable, due to continuing high unemployment and deleveraging of the economy, might not the "institution" of higher education begin to lose its luster? The best defense against that possibility, it seems, is greater transparency about what higher education accomplishes with its students and assuring that those students have the skills and education to be truly productive citizens.

Is the "Completion Agenda" the Next Community College Movement?

A report titled *Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States* (Davies, 2006) focused attention on the falling completion rates in America's higher education and outlined an agenda for states to follow to improve educational attainment, a recognized necessity for competing globally. The framework recommended in the report includes:

- *Preparation* (how well students are prepared for higher education and training)
- *Participation* (are there sufficient opportunities for enrolling in education beyond high school?)
- *Affordability*
- *Completion* (the progress students make in attaining degrees and certificates)
- *Benefits* (what benefits derive from an educated population?)
- *Learning* (what is known about what students actually learn?)

Community colleges are a very significant part of ensuring that the nation measures up on these indicators. The first three of these—preparedness, participation, and affordability—are ones that relate closely with the core of the underlying community college philosophy. Lower costs and access have always been important aspects of community colleges, and many community colleges are working closely with their high school partners in identifying academic deficiencies in students before they enroll.

It is the last three of the indicators—completion, benefits, and learning—where there is much work to be done. The two issues I have raised here—success of underprepared students and general education—relate

directly to these issues as two prime examples of areas that demand attention.

Community colleges, which are so closely associated with the ideals of America's democracy, should provide national leadership in helping more underserved students achieve success, guiding unsuccessful students to alternatives that will allow them to be successful, and preparing students for meaningful citizenship. These issues may not be as uplifting as expanding access has been but are as important to the future of the nation. We need to rekindle the missionary zeal of the 1960s and tackle these much more difficult issues, and the completion agenda may provide the necessary impetus. I am convinced that community colleges are up to the challenge.

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