

Excerpt from:

## The Next Community College Movement?

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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.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES, no. 156, Winter 2011 © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) • DOI: 10.1002/cc.464