

REDEFINING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE MISSION

Michael Perini

Reference, Research, and Instruction Specialist
George Mason University
Fenwick Library Reference, MS A224 H
4400 University Dr.
Fairfax, VA, USA 22030
mperini@gmu.edu
703-993-3710

ABSTRACT

The mission of community colleges in the United States is increasing in size and complexity. Among its potential roles or purposes are the first two years of a bachelor's degree, workforce training, remedial or developmental education, continuing education, community development, and community center. Some community colleges have begun to offer four-year degrees to meet local demand. At the same time administrators experience the internal and external competition for resources to meet these various demands. Long-term sustainability of this format creates concern and this article proposes the refocus of community college missions. Suggestions involve a reemphasis on vocational education, a reconsideration of open admissions, and a modification of the concept of community through expanded distance education access.

Keywords: Community college, community concept, vocational education, open admissions

1. Introduction

The roll of the community college has been diverse, especially when compared to traditional 4-year institutions. Community colleges' roles have included providing the first two years of a bachelor's degree, workforce training, remedial or developmental education, continuing education, community development, and a community center. Budgetary and practical concerns have forced administrators to reconsider some of their missions though in order to stay buoyant.

While a relatively new platform of education in the scope of the whole of American higher education, the community college has become an established institution in the public eye. Cohen and Brawer (2008) stated that: "The form of the community college will not change. The institution offering vocational, collegiate, developmental, and community education...has become well accepted by the public and by state-level and funding agencies" (p. 450-451). Drastic modification to the mission of the community college therefore would be met with displeasure from the communities in which it serves.

If the institution will not change its overall function, then it should at the very least modify some of its pillars so as to ensure the institution's long-term sustainability. Of Vaughn's (2006) description of the community college mission, this essay will consider the revision of his framework specifically for "serving all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy, providing a comprehensive educational program, and serving the community as a community-based institution of higher education" (p. 3). The society from which these standards emerged has evolved, and so should the collegiate institutions that serve the public. For sustainability purposes, administrators should question whether their programs reflect the best option for the college and its students, if open admissions policies are still sustainable, and if distance education is a viable undertaking. Therefore the following will suggest that community colleges and their administrators prioritize and reexamine their emphases and marketing of vocational program offerings, revise their admissions policies, and carefully consider expansion by means of distance education.

2. Brief History of Community Colleges

In the scope of American higher education, which more or less began with the founding of Harvard College in 1636, community colleges are a relatively new venture. This was mainly due to the fact that access to college tended to be restricted by cost or subjective measures (Karabel, 2005), and not a large number of Americans actually attended college. For example, in 1870, the population of the United States was 39,818,449, yet only 63,000 individuals were enrolled in higher education, or 0.002% of the population (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 106). The low enrollment was for two reasons. First, the number of high school graduates was significantly lower than modern times (Thelin, 2004). Second, junior colleges that prepared students for matriculation into 4-year programs existed, but they were more extensions of K-12 education and were therefore compliant to regional jurisdictional requirements (Thelin, 2004). In essence, there was not a need for modern incarnations of community colleges prior to the mid-twentieth century.

Joliet Junior College, which was found in 1901, is generally considered the first community college, though it had characteristics dissimilar to modern community colleges, such as selective admissions (Levinson, 2005). As well, they were preparatory institutions for 4-year colleges. "Whether public or private in affiliation, the typical junior college of the 1920's usually offered a liberal arts curriculum that represented the first two years of work toward a bachelor's degree" (Thelin, 2004, p. 250). Changes in educational needs over the first half of the twentieth century, such as vocational and adult or continuing education, slowly modified the scope of community colleges' purposes (Palinchak, 1973). Ease of travel also benefitted growth (Cohen & Brawer, 2010), as it allowed for realistic commutes between work, school, and home. Other factors of early expansion include immigration and population growth and schooling for assimilation and acculturation (Levinson, 2005). All of these considerations contributed to a boom in enrollment,

Vaughn (2006) cites three additional focused factors in the expansion of community colleges and access to higher education. These reasons are: the realization of college-aged individuals in the 1950's and 1960's that education equated to professional opportunity; the promotion of civil rights which led to greater access for women and minorities; and, the creation of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which provided monies for individuals seeking higher education (Vaughn, 2006, p. 3-4). Each of these dynamics modified the role and size of the community college, resulting in an increase in enrollment from 168,043 in 1950 to 2.1mil in 1970 (Thelin, 2004, p. 250). As such, by the 1970's it became an institution that truly resembled the modern form, complete with open access admissions.

During this expansion period, community colleges emphasized their role and service to their local community and their "commitment to serving the needs of a designated geographic area" (Vaughn, 2006, p. 6). This concept encompasses not only traditional education for college-aged students, but also adult learners returning for a degree or supplemental education or community residents broadening their educational horizons with individual courses. Thus community colleges filled this aspect of their role through encouragement of teacher education and development as scholars, as well as the promotion of lifelong and community education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

However, fulfilling all of these missions- the education of the 2-year student, vocational education, continuing and teacher education, and community learning- create concerns. "What was more important: to serve as a port of first entry for underserved and undereducated individuals, or to provide postgraduate refresher courses or retooling for citizens who already had bachelor's and master's degree" (Thelin, 2004, p. 334)? Traditional 4-year colleges began to overly rely on community colleges to fulfill the general education courses prior to transfer (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This resulted in a decline in applicants from community colleges to the 4-year bachelorette programs. As well the students who did transfer often fared worse than their counterparts who began at the university (Thelin, 2004). Other quandaries such as poor graduation rates (Pope, 2012; Adams, 2011) and academic attrition (Bahr, 2012; Schuetz, 2005) persist. This has led to some community colleges adapting seemingly radical solutions in hopes of resolving their overstretched missions. The following will offer three focused suggestions as to how community colleges might address some of the problems facing their institutions.

3. Focus on Vocational

Vocational training has been a primary function of community colleges since their inception, in part due to its applicability to the community. "Vocational programs benefit society because of the increased productivity of the labor force, higher probability of students' going to work after graduation, and the aid to industries that will stay in an area where a trained workforce is available" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 178). Vocational education is traditionally defined as an educational program that provides "vocationally-oriented students with a skills-based curriculum devoid of extensive liberal arts courses" (Levinson, 2005, p. 118). This can be in the form of a certificate or a 2-year degree meant to prepare a student for immediate entry into the workforce. For the sake clarity in this conversation, vocational education will pertain to a degree or certificate designed to achieve employment in a specified field, and not a 2-year degree designed to prepare the student for further education at a 4-year institution.

In recent years, budget issues have become increasingly problematic for community college administrators, resulting in seemingly drastic changes to the traditional institutional formula and a shift away from 2-year or vocational training. For example, there has been a push by some community college administrators to offer 4-year degrees at the community college. The reasoning behind this tends to be two correlated themes. Basically, society promotes educated individuals, so 4-year degrees are more desirable than 2-year degrees for the student (Walker, 2005). In addition, the economic community in which the

college exists and the desire for workers holding a 4-year degree promotes the necessity of students with a bachelor's level education (Walker, 2005). Petrosian (2013) in fact found that "student need and workforce need have been determined to be key factors that contributed to the development of the [community college bachelor's] degree" (p. 741). Thus, community colleges sought to resolve the issue by providing 4-year degrees in order to meet the demands of both the student and society.

The problem with this solution is that it is short-sighted. First is the sustainability of such an approach. What happens when the community suddenly requires master's level degrees for employment? Does the community college then begin offering MAs? Second is the perceived value of the 4-year degree. If the point of the community college bachelor's is to satisfy the educational needs of a local community, then the value of the degree is established by the fact that it will gain the student a job in that particular community. However, what if the student chooses to move elsewhere? Will the 4-year degree from a community college be valued the same as bachelor's degree from a traditional 4-year institution? This question has yet to be researched, but it is a viable concern.

Also, adding a 4-year degree presumes that a 2-year degree is not profitable. This is not always the case; in Tennessee, for example, holders of 2-year degrees average an annual salary of \$1000 more than bachelor's degree graduates (Selingo, 2013). For a specific example, take an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) technician and compare their wages to an archivist. Northern Virginia Community College offers a 2-year associates of applied sciences degree specializing in HVAC. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) notes that the median wage for an HVAC technician is \$42,530 per year (BLS, 2013a). An archivist position requires a minimum of a bachelor's degree in a liberal arts discipline such as history and often even a master's degree, yet yields only a median income of \$45,200 (BLS, 2013b). Despite the higher cost of the 4-year degree, many other liberal arts degrees net salaries in the low \$30,000s (BLS, 2007). Thus, a 2-year degree can be just as profitable for a student, and in some cases more so, than a 4-year degree.

The main reason that community colleges should not explore options on 4-year degrees and re-emphasize vocational is the fact that many of the programs are exclusive to community colleges. If a prospective student in Northern Virginia desires to obtain an HVAC certification, it is not available at the community's largest 4-year institution, George Mason University, or at any of the satellites campuses of any of Virginia's 4-year universities. It is only offered at Northern Virginia Community College and competing for-profit institutions. However, the community college has much lower tuition. HVAC certification at Northern Virginia Community College would cost a student approximately \$5,057.25 in tuition and fees (NVCC, 2013); the same certification at Advanced Technology Institute (ATI) costs \$12,600 (ATI, 2013). This is a huge potential savings on the cost of college attendance that administrators might market.

Therefore, not only does the community college provide rare educational commodities, they do so in an economically feasible manner. Instead of redefining their respective scope by adding changes such as 4-year degrees, community colleges must realize that there is inherent value in some of their programs and practices. As opposed to a complete overhaul of the offerings, there just needs to be a reaffirmation of the vocational mission of the community college.

4. Selective admissions

The following suggestion would likely not be a popular one with community college leaders because the community college system has evolved through open admissions. Open admissions is a policy in which students are permitted institutional access provided the individual hold a high school diploma or the equivalent, without consideration being given to subjective admissions packet responses or standardized testing. Institutions such as The City University of New York (CUNY) were created to provide open admissions to all high school graduates for at least some form of collegiate education (Rempson, 1973).

CUNY's Open Admissions admits all high school graduates with an average of 80 or above, or those in the top half of their class in their respective high school are guaranteed a place in a senior college...Those with a high school average below 80 who also rank in the bottom half of their class in their respective school are guaranteed a place in community college (Rempson, 1973, p.35).

CUNY's system eventually faltered due to professors inflating grades, poor graduation rates, struggles with remedial education (American Decades, 2001), as well as budget cuts and inequity of resource distribution (McGuire, 1992). Essentially, CUNY and community colleges did not have the financial means to support open admissions.

Around the time that 4-year institutions noted that community colleges could focus on general education requirements, there was also an increase in the provision of remedial coursework at a significantly higher percentage than at the 4-year institutions. "By the 1970's, around three in eight English classes and nearly one in three mathematics classes at the community colleges were being presented at below college level, and remedial classes accounted for 13 percent of the enrollments in chemistry" (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 240). The issue is not that open admissions fuels the colleges with students who may not necessarily be prepared for a collegiate education, nor is it an affront to the premise that community colleges offer remedial classes at all. The problem is the academic success of the students in these remedial classes.

First, students that begin in remedial coursework have a significantly lower rate of course completion and transfer rate than non-remedial students (Bahr, 2008). One study found that out of 275 students entered into a remedial reading course in fall 2005, only 6 graduated within 3 years (Skinner, 2014). Also, students in remedial courses tend to falter in their non-remedial courses (Bahr, 2013). In essence, they have difficulty competing at the collegiate academic level. Community colleges have tried to address or at least understand these issues through means such as assessments like regression discontinuity (Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011) but conclusive success eludes. If the college cannot find a means for the student to realistically pass a course or a program, should the institution have admitted the student to begin with?

As mentioned earlier, community colleges once employed selective admissions. Some of the early colleges actually had admissions policies that eclipsed those of the 4-year institutions (Levinson, 2005). There were also means to lower or modify enrollment during the "boom" eras of the 1970's. "Community colleges...could restrict their enrollments by cutting the variety of programs offered, by marketing less vigorously, and through numerous other stratagems, including dismissing students who were not making satisfactory progress toward completing a program" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 176-177). Therefore, there is a precedent for restrictive admissions in community colleges.

Karabel (2005) demonstrated how selective admissions in combination with lax academic standards produced little academic output in the early 1900's. As well, when subjective admissions were introduced in the 1920's, academic showing again bordered mediocre as some of the top student academics were rejected due to their character "faults" and the campus community because insular (Karabel, 2005). When a

reemphasis on selective (rather than subjective) admissions involving a larger pool of candidates (women, African-Americans, Asians) came about in the latter part of the twentieth century, academic achievement rebounded.

Here one sees two major forms of admissions meritocracy; the first considers admission based upon standardized testing and the second is based upon character (Newfield, 2008). However, standardized testing has been shown to be inequitable to low-income and minority populations (Yaffe, Coley & Pliskin, 2009; Syverson, 2009). Further, many non-traditional students have been removed from standardized testing methodology for years or decades and therefore the tests may not be a reliable source of admission. Admission based upon character also creates issues because the nature of subjectivity leads to bias exclusions.

Therefore, this is not to advocate an overly selective admissions policy, especially for students who choose to attend such an institution due to their specific needs, such as time restrictions or campus availability. With that said, selective admissions do not necessitate the need to add standardized testing. A way to better manage inputs would be to add more admissions criteria such as stringent age or work experience requirements. This would benefit the classroom experience by creating the better possibility of students having more common life and professional experiences and generate the opportunities for enhanced networking through the establishment of healthier learning communities. It would also allow for more focused allocation of fiscal and human resources. Selective admissions might better help assign requisite courses leading to higher course completion rates and longer student retention. There would be less redundancy in the faculty's teaching load as they might instruct other courses. There must be a realization that the quality of the learning in the classroom is partially reflective of the students entering it.

5. Increase distance education and enrollment

If an administrator proposed restricted admissions at a conference such as the American Association of Community Colleges, they likely would receive skeptical or venomous responses. However, the next suggestion- the expansion of distance education and enrollment- might resolve some concerns that would arise. Proposing expansion of distance education is not new (Leist and Travis, 2010), though the scope at community colleges often remains on a local level. The major alteration proposed here is the extension of the concept of the community served using distance education for the sake of revenue growth.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) note that due to the availability of distance education in remote areas, collegiate study is available to more students. Truly one of the best attributes of distance education is the notion that "global" or internet-oriented distance programs possess a potential for student interaction from diverse cultures spread over a massive geographic and demographic scale (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). As with traditional students, these factors are complex and dependent upon individual situations. For instance, one student may be attending college for professional advancement and another might be interested in social networking and interaction (Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011).

These diverse reasons represent the purpose of the community college well though, as it serves the community. "The advent of the community college as a neighborhood institution did more to open higher education to a broader population than did its policy of accepting even students who had not done well in high school" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 16-17). The question becomes, though, what community? Community colleges have long served, by definition, local communities. Distance education bridges the locality gap in that it provides the opportunity for students in diverse communities to gain education. At the same time, it provides institutions with additional revenue.

Aside from the altruistic notion that distance education provides opportunities to enrich an institution's community mixture, the major diversity benefit for the institution is the ability to enroll more students from a wider range or localities. From a fiscal standpoint, this is especially meaningful as revenue may be generated at a potentially higher amount than would be available or feasible in a traditional setting. For example, Northern Virginia Community College charges \$143.15/credit for in-state residents; if they successfully recruit an out-of-state distance student, the tuition amount increases to \$322.40/credit (NVCC, 2013). Even in cases where the tuition is the same, such as an in-state student, the ability to enroll distant students from a variety of geographies represents a financial boon and value for the institution. If administrators consider restrictive admissions, distance education provides the means to buttress any enrollment shortfall. In short, more students equates to more revenue and economic value.

Distance education is not a solution to all problems however. For example, an initial consideration that might address some of the remedial student concerns are MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses), which are (usually) free courses that normally do not count for academic credit, but teach viable skills to the students engaged in the class (Clarke, 2013; Edelson, 2013). On the surface, MOOCs could also be a cost effective supplement to continuing education and community learning needs. It also might serve as a means of modified admissions. Students scoring low entrance grades might be required to pass a series of free MOOCs prior to formal admission. If the student passes, they can matriculate into the community college. If they do not successfully complete the MOOCs, the student would not gain admission, but at the same time would not accrue any debt.

However, while MOOCs are seemingly a low cost way for students to enhance their education, and institutions to address remedial needs, MOOCs presents troubling issues. First is the completion rate, as "most MOOCs have a completion rate of less than 13%" (Katyjordan.com, 2013), which is a lower percentage than almost all traditional forms of education. Second, one must question the validity of the education gained and its inherent value. While a good supplement to academic credit, it seems unlikely that an employer will value a plethora of MOOC credits more than an accredited degree. Colleges would have to monitor MOOC enrollment to ensure matriculated student progress through their academic programs.

Also, consider faculty; they have additional time requirements with distance education and the inherent challenges when compared to teaching traditional classes (Young, 2002). Due to the expected availability and responsiveness of the faculty, work becomes almost constant (Major, 2010). Even though there is an expectation of availability, institutions often do not pay more for online instruction (Haber, & Mills, 2008; O'Quinn, 2002). Ulmer, Watson and Derby (2007) argued that less experienced faculty endured a rougher time with distance education than their more seasoned colleagues, making the argument for a better systematized training program. Collaboration with experienced colleagues sometimes negated the training difficulties, though this adds additional time burden to the mentoring faculty (Lackey, 2011). One of the widely documented problems is that instructors need to be prepared in the interface technology in order to teach, which has been found to not always be the case (Lorenzetti, 2010; Paulus, et. al., 2010; Taylor, & McQuiggan, 2008). Non-monetary benefits also must be documented, as "research tells us that faculty participation hinges on [the faculty] being intrinsically motivated and equitably rewarded for their efforts" (Wolcott & Shattuck, 2007, p. 386). Essentially, faculty appreciate the necessity for additional compensation for their extended hours and acquisition of new technical abilities, but require support and training for the venture to retain intrinsic value. These are all faculty concerns that community college administrators must address prior to embarking on a distance education venture.

As well, an institution must invest a substantial amount of money in order to develop and maintain the distance programs. Even MOOCs, which generally do not produce revenue for an institution, cost capital to build, revealing something about the true purpose of that distance education venture. “The investment of tens of millions of dollars and the discussion of assessing nominal fees suggest that more than goodwill is at work and that an inventive, revenue generating model underlies this variant” (Edelson, 2013, p. 59). Ultimately, distance education, in any form, must profit the institution for it to be sustainable. While the medium will drastically expand the concept of “community” within the college mission and provide educational and instructional opportunities previously unobtainable, thinking that distance education alone is a solution to all problems is short-sighted and foolhardy.

6. Conclusion

Cohen and Brawer (2008) optimistically stated that “as long as college degrees are perceived as the route toward personal advancement, people will demand access and will eventually pay for it” (p. 449). Recent economic concerns, though, have called into question the value of a college education. Student loan debt in the United States is estimated at \$1.2 trillion (Adrianova, 2013). Most college administrators would not advise elimination of the college degree, but they may suggest alternatively productive means.

If the ultimate purpose of a college education, as Cohen and Brawer seemingly suggest, is the route to career progression, then vocational education at a community college is a viable and affordable option that community college administrators should highly emphasize in marketing. Long a bastion of open admissions, community college administrators might consider more selective admissions processes to ensure the success of admitted students and dissuade others from wasting time and money in remedial purgatory. Lastly, community colleges should reconsider the concept of the community itself. Distance education, when properly developed, can be an advantage for students, faculty, and the institution.

While the suggestions provided focus on the community college, combinations of the ideas offered here are adaptable to other educational entities and represent profitable case studies for both future research and administrator experimentation. Still, they do not represent individual or collective “cure-all” solutions for sustainability-minded administrators. The mission of the community college must expand from one that serves the local community into an institution with an expanded national and international perspective. The community college emerged from a localized vision of service and these colleges can still provide aspects of these initial goals. However, that community conceptually and actually is much larger and has changed; so must the mindset of administrators who consider the missions of these colleges.

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