

Democracy's Colleges: The Evolution of the Community College in America

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American community colleges are much like the nation that invented them. They offer an open door to opportunity to all who would come, are innovative and agile in meeting economic and workplace needs, and provide value and service to individuals and communities. Little wonder that they are increasingly emulated around the world and have become the largest and fastest-growing segment of U.S. higher education.

A Century of Growth

From relatively modest beginnings at the turn of the 20th century, community colleges now enroll close to half of all U.S. undergraduates (43%; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007a). Especially in times of economic uncertainty, the colleges provide an affordable option to both recent high school graduates and returning adult learners, with an average cost of just \$2,544 per year (College Board, 2009). Reflecting the current economic downturn, credit student enrollment in community colleges increased 16.9% to 8 million per term over the past two years (Mullin & Phillippe, 2009), with noncredit enrollment in basic skills, short-term workforce, or avocational courses conservatively estimated at an additional 5 million students (AACC, 2010a).

Originally developed as open-admissions junior colleges, offering the first two years of a baccalaureate education, community colleges have evolved into comprehensive institutions. They serve the postsecondary educational needs of communities in many ways, in particular preparing students to transfer to upper-division universities or to enter the workforce directly. The close to 1,200 community, junior and technical colleges in the United States are regionally accredited, nonprofit higher education institutions and include public, independent, and tribal colleges. While most community colleges

restrict their programs to two years or less and confer associate degrees and certificates in a wide variety of subject areas, a growing number of them now offer baccalaureates in applied fields, teacher education, and nursing.

Although the roots of this uniquely American contribution to higher education extend to several specialized two-year institutions that began in the late 19th century, most community college historians point to the founding of Joliet Junior College, near Chicago, Illinois, in 1901 as the true beginning of the American community college movement, a social movement that has widely broadened access to higher education and training opportunities to students who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to attend college due to economic, mobility, and social barriers. William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, and J. Stanley Brown, the principal of Joliet High School, collaborated to found Joliet Junior College in order to expand educational opportunity and to prepare the very best students for the senior college at the University. Joliet is the oldest community college that is still in operation.

The Democratization of Higher Education

The Truman Commission report, issued in 1947, changed the course of higher education in the United States from “merely being an instrument for producing an intellectual elite” to becoming “the means by which every citizen, youth, and adult, is enabled and encouraged” to pursue higher learning (President’s Commission, 1947). The Commission’s report marked the first general use of the term *community college* and recommended that they expand nationally to provide universal access to postsecondary education. Expanding to every state and shaped by such forces as the educational and training needs of returning veterans, the baby boom

generation and the growing need for skilled workers in a shifting economy, community colleges have changed the paradigm for higher education in the United States from one where students had to “go away” to college to one that provides access to high-quality and affordable higher education and training in local communities. Underscoring their accessibility, there is a community college within a short commute of 90% of the U.S. population, and they provide a learning lifeline in hundreds of small, rural communities (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008).

Economic Engines for the Nation

Community colleges play an essential role in preparing the nation’s workforce. They prepare over half of the nation’s registered nurses and the majority of other health-care workers, over 80% of first responders with postsecondary credentials (paramedics, EMTs, firefighters, and police officers), and a growing percentage of the nation’s technological workforce (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008). Community colleges have also become the institutions of choice for workers upgrading their skills and for displaced workers preparing to reenter the workforce.

Community colleges also develop curricula to respond to the needs of local economies, working closely with industry, government, and other education sectors. For example, Alabama Southern Community College has a paper technology program because of the importance of the pulp industry in that part of the country; Napa Valley College has a viticulture program; and colleges along the Gulf Coast have petrochemical technician programs. As the importance of green technologies has become more evident, the colleges have geared up programs in fields such as wind and solar technology and energy efficiency. The colleges also respond quickly to meet community needs. During the current economic downturn, stories of community colleges sending staff into factories to counsel displaced workers and guide them on a path to retraining made national news.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has identified public community colleges as the main source of postsecondary education for technicians. NSF’s Advanced Technological Education (ATE)

program utilizes community college educators to lead programs that involve universities, secondary schools, and business to prepare and strengthen the skills of the nation’s technological workforce. ATE programs prepare technicians in strategic areas including agriculture, environmental technology, biotechnology, engineering technology, manufacturing, information technology, telecommunications, cybersecurity, and process technology (NSF, 2008).

Diverse and Inclusive

Community colleges provide access to higher education to the most diverse student body in history. It is diversity in every respect: age, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, and degree of disability. Forty-seven percent of first-generation college students, 53% of Hispanic students, 45% of Black students, 52% of Native American students, and 45% of Asian/Pacific Islander students attend community colleges. Although the average age of community college students is 28, 46% of them are age 21 or younger (NCES, 2007c).

Meeting the Challenge of Completion

Last July, President Obama called on community colleges to increase the number of graduates and program completers by 5 million students over a 10-year period, a 50% increase over current numbers (Obama, 2009). Although Congress was not able to deliver federal funding support to the colleges through the American Graduation Initiative as proposed, the administration has stated its continued commitment to increasing the educational attainment levels of Americans, challenging community colleges to bear a significant part of the burden. On March 30, 2010, at a ceremony at Northern Virginia Community College, President Obama signed H.R. 4872, the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act, into law. The Act provides \$2 billion for the Community College and Career Training Grant Program, a new Trade Adjustment Assistance program focused on workforce preparation.

In an earlier address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama asked every American to commit to at least one year of higher education or career training so that the United States would once again

have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. The president made the point that, in an increasingly competitive world economy, America's economic strength depends on the education and skills of its workers. The Obama administration has pointed out that, in the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as those requiring no college experience. In its report of the Springboard Project, the Business Roundtable (2009) echoed President Obama's challenge to increase education attainment levels to build a competitive workforce. The report recommends unlocking the value of community colleges, stating that these institutions have the potential to play a dominant role in strengthening local economies.

In order to accomplish these goals, community college student completion and transfer rates must improve. Too many students do not make it successfully through remedial programs into college-level courses, and too many do not complete their programs because of insufficient financial support or poor institutional or state policies and practices. The first significant effort to improve student completion in community colleges was set in motion by Lumina Foundation for Education in 2004, with the launch of the national Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative (ATD). The goal of the initiative is to help more community college students succeed, especially students of color, working adults, and students from low-income families. The ATD initiative emphasizes the use of data and the creation of a "culture of evidence" at the colleges to inform decision-making and to measure progress against a specific set of student success metrics. Ultimately, Lumina's "Big Goal" is to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) rates the current educational attainment level for the United States at 40% (OECD, 2009).

Begun with a cohort of 26 colleges, ATD has now expanded to 128 colleges in 24 states, including the District of Columbia. ATD efforts have focused on improving or expanding developmental education, gatekeeper courses, first-year experience, learning communities, academic and personal advising,

student support services, and tutoring. A recent report indicated that the initiative is effectively increasing student persistence rates by as much as 13% (Jaschik, 2010). ATD colleges are also working to strengthen linkages to K–12 and to engage the community. The initiative also is focused on changing state and federal policies that create barriers for students (ATD, 2010).

In 2009, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a major postsecondary success initiative. The foundation is focused on ensuring that postsecondary education results in a degree or a certificate with genuine economic value. The foundation has set an ambitious goal to double the number of young people who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with value in the marketplace by the time they reach age 26. The foundation notes that the types of jobs fueling our economy continue to change rapidly. Success in the workplace demands advanced skills in critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as the ability to shift readily from one task or project to another. Workers with strong language and math skills, technological capabilities, and a capacity to work well in teams are most likely to succeed. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) project that, through 2018, nearly two thirds (63%) of all new jobs will require more than a high school diploma; nearly half of those will require some college but less than a bachelor's degree. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that, 21 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations require postsecondary education (Lacey & Wright, 2009, Table 4).

In April 2010, six national community college organizations—representing trustees, administrators, faculty, and students—signed a call to action to commit member institutions to match President Obama's 2020 goal (AACC, 2010b). The organizations are currently seeking funding to develop cohesive and integrated strategies to move ahead, although challenges presented by the current economic climate could very well inhibit early progress. In the face of a surge of enrollment pressure, states have cut funding to public higher education, including community colleges. Hundreds of thousands of students were turned away from classes last fall, roughly 140,000 students in California alone (California Community Colleges, 2010), and the situation in fall 2011 may be even

worse due to continuing economic challenges in the states. If the United States is to meet the challenges of the future, policymakers must provide needed support to colleges and universities and their students. Education, at all levels, must be seen as an important state and federal investment in our future, and policies must be put in place to ensure maximum return on that investment.

A Shared Investment in Student Success

Support from policymakers and a foundation is important, but goals of improving educational attainment in the United States can best be met if educators take the lead in improving student success. College and university faculty and administrators need to work together to improve completion rates and to facilitate the transfer of students from community colleges into upper-division course work through better course articulation and improved student advising. In their book, *Crossing the Finish Line*, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) said that many four-year institutions could increase their own overall graduation rates, while enrolling and graduating more students of low socioeconomic status, by increasing their numbers of community college transfers. They said that transfer students do better in four-year universities than if they had come directly from high school with the same credentials. While community college transfer students generally do at least as well as native university students after transferring, both in terms of both grade point average and degree attainment, not enough community college students transfer. It is important for both policymakers and educators to address the barriers to student success and transfer. Higher education in the United States is exemplary in many ways, but it can be much stronger if the contributions of community colleges are appropriately recognized and if educators work together to break down barriers to student success.

The Globalization of the Community College Model

In an increasingly global society and economy, education and training beyond customary compulsory primary and secondary education is seen as essential to a nation's competitiveness and the standard of living of its people. The need to open the doors of

higher or further education beyond the relatively limited enrollments in selective universities has spawned an international movement to develop or expand institutions that are generally less expensive, more accessible, more flexible, and tied more closely to business and industry.

Recently, there has been an increasing international interest in the American community college model. In July 2009, Jill Biden, wife of the U.S. vice president and a community college faculty member, presented a keynote address at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris, encouraging the leaders of developing countries to consider the community college model. Community colleges based on the American model have now been established in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Republic of Georgia. Representatives from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and China have sent delegations to the United States to study community colleges. Representatives from U.S. community colleges have been invited to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, India, South Africa, and Ukraine to explain our American model and how it might be adapted to fit the cultures of other countries. The American Association of Community Colleges has signed cooperative agreements with postsecondary education systems in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and it is a member of the World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics, an organization dedicated to the improvement of workforce education and lifelong learning.

Although they have been a part of U.S. higher education since 1901, community colleges have traditionally had a low profile and have received little attention in national media. Today, they are receiving significant attention, not only in the United States but also internationally. In other countries, they are seen as vehicles to improve skills and to expand educational opportunity. In the United States, they are seen as important to economic strength and recovery and are being challenged to increase student success and completion significantly while increasing both access and quality. If we are to meet the 10-year challenge issued by President Obama and make good on the commitment to increase the numbers of student completers, educators must build on and

expand programs and practices that reduce student barriers.

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