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ABSTRACT

In examining research on the characteristics and problems of small/rural community colleges, one finds that a consistent definition of 'rural' does not exist, and that most research has traditionally focused on the differences between private and public colleges, not between small and large institutions. Research indicates that: (1) classes tend to be smaller in the private colleges (most of which have fewer than 1500 students) with the instructors using less reproducible media; (2) there is a much higher percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees (many doctors of divinity) in the private institutions as well as a higher percentage of part-time faculty; and (3) private and small public institutions are underrepresented in political science, Spanish, philosophy, and interdisciplinary humanities curricula. The literature on small/rural community colleges focuses on problems of finding job sites for cooperative education students and locating factory equipment for occupational students to practice on; the lack of a pool of people from whom to draw part-time instructors; funding limits due to low enrollment; and the overburden of tasks required of administrators. The literature also reveals that the rural college is often a cultural center, and frequently has easier access to private foundation funds. (MB)

CURRENT RESEARCH ON SMALL/RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES: SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

By Arthur M. Cohen

Paper presented at the National Conference on Small/Rural Colleges (1st, Blacksburg, Virginia, August 1978)

Speech to Conference on
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Arthur M. Cohen

I am pleased to be here representing the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, one of the cosponsors for this meeting. The Clearinghouse is a federally-funded national information retrieval, analysis, and dissemination center. I have brought information for ERIC document contributors, other brochures, and a list of products available from the Clearinghouse. ERIC staff members also prepared an annotated bibliography of documents on the small/rural community college especially for this conference. The bibliography includes more than 30 citations and abstracts. It can serve as a beginning point for anyone who wants to study the small/rural community college literature.

In preparing for this meeting I used that bibliography to familiarize myself with the topic upon which I had done no prior study. Whenever I am invited to a meeting the first thing I do is ask the Clearinghouse staff to do a search of the ERIC collection for documents pertaining to the topic. I look at the abstracts, get the full copy of documents that appear to have promise, and read those materials to get ideas for my talk. You can do the same thing. Here at Virginia Tech there is a complete ERIC collection in your Newman Library. There are 30 other ERIC collections around the state including those in the library in Reston, University of Virginia, Commonwealth University, Northern Virginia College, and elsewhere. Using the ERIC system is invaluable for a speech maker just as it is for an instructor or administrator who is confronted with the necessity of gaining information rapidly.

I have been asked to speak about the problems facing small/rural community colleges, particularly emphasizing research that has been done. The first problem that I found in the literature is that defining the term "rural" causes many problems. What is a rural community college? The AACJC attempted to solve the problem by asking people contributing data for their Directory whether their institutions were rural, suburban, or urban. Apparently that procedure had some limitations: Moorpark College in a suburb of Los Angeles and Westchester Community College near New York City defined themselves as rural whereas the Arizona College of Technology in Winkleman, Arizona called itself urban. I am certain that the population of Winkleman is less than 1,000, college students and all, but the college is probably located right in the heart of the city.

College size seems a more reliable way of defining the institutions that are the topic of this meeting. In 1973 there were 665 colleges with fewer than 1,500 students. By 1974 the number had dropped to 630 and to 539 by 1975. In 1976 there were only 521 colleges of fewer than 1,500 students. Obviously the number of small institutions is steadily dropping as new college openings subside and as the old institutions grow past 1,500 students. Not incidentally, all but a dozen or so of the 203 private junior colleges in America are in the category of small.

The lack of a consistent definition causes problems for the researcher. If each person studying small/rural community colleges applies a different definition, the results will be inconsistent, to say the least. We at the Center for the Study of Community Colleges have been studying curriculum, instruction, and faculty in the sciences and humanities in community colleges nationwide and have attempted to partition our data according to the self-definition of "ruralness" that the colleges applied and according to our own definition of "smallness" into which we placed all colleges with fewer than 1,500 students.

When we had examined our data we noticed several differences in curriculum and instructional methods between the small colleges and the larger institutions. But because we knew that practically all the private two-year colleges were small, we were not sure whether the observed differences were related to "smallness" or "privateness." Accordingly we ran the data again, separating institutions into private and small public categories. Then we found that most of the differences between institutions have to do with the differences between private and public colleges, not between small and large institutions.

We found that classes tend to be smaller in the private colleges with the instructors using less reproducible media. Class size and media use tended not to be different between small public and large institutions. We found that instructors in private junior colleges have less access to readers, paraprofessional aides, and clerical assistants. They would like more access to those instructional aids. They are also more likely to desire stricter prerequisites for student admission to their classes. They would like more media production facilities and test scoring assistance. In short, the instructor in the private two-year college is more likely to be a solo practitioner. These differences do not pertain between the small public and the large institutions.

Instructor patterns differ as well. There is a much higher percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees in the private institutions but there is also a higher percentage of part-time faculty. And there is a relationship between those two characteristics: many of the part-timers are doctors of divinity from the area who teach the religion courses in the private colleges.

Curriculum differs not only between public and private institutions but also between small public and large colleges. In the humanities, the

private institutions teach predominantly history, literature, and religious studies. Both they and the small public institutions are underrepresented in political science, Spanish, philosophy, and interdisciplinary humanities. In the sciences and social sciences the private colleges tend to be higher in chemistry and economics. The differences between small public and large institutions' curriculum relate primarily to the fact that course offerings are limited: whereas a large institution can support a variety of courses in history, chemistry, biology, and other basic disciplines, the smaller institutions frequently offer little more than the beginning or introductory courses in those areas.

Moving now to the literature on small/rural community colleges, I find that many problems were recounted at the Workshop on Rural Community Colleges sponsored by the Southeastern Community College Leadership Program at Tallahassee in 1975. The report of that meeting is cited as the first document in your bibliography. George Vaughan has also written about problems pertaining to the small public colleges and Harold McMullen and Bill McCoy were quoted extensively in the article on small/rural colleges in a recent issue of Change magazine. I will summarize some of those problems they noted.

Finding job sites for cooperative education students and locating factory equipment for occupational students to practice on were noted as problems. A college in an urban setting typically has little difficulty in locating employers who will take students in cooperative education programs and in finding industries where students may be placed as apprentices. One suburban Los Angeles college has developed a strong diesel mechanics program; less than a mile away is one of the biggest truck diesel overhaul centers in the region. That center serves as the college's laboratory.

There is a limited number of those kinds of facilities in rural areas.

The second problem noted in the literature was the lack of a pool of people from whom the college could draw their part-time instructors. Urban community colleges have the advantage of a large supply of qualified people they can draw on to teach single courses without making a long-term tenure commitment. However, the data from our studies of the sciences and the humanities show that the small institutions have been able to utilize part-time instructors. One way they have surmounted the problem of a lack of people in the area is by having the administrators teach the specialized classes. Whereas the president or dean of a large institution is rarely found in the classroom, a common practice in the smaller colleges is for all administrators to teach a class or two during the year.

Many commentators discuss funding problems. Because the colleges tend to be reimbursed on the basis of student enrollment, and because by definition student enrollments are low, sizable funds to commit to volitional activities are not available. The problem also becomes acute when enrollments decline even by 20 or 30 students; in an institution with only 200 or 300 students that makes quite a difference in the available funds. Many people writing about small colleges are concerned about constant administrative costs and physical plant charges that do not change. They worry that their costs per student are higher because of their small classes.

Staffing presents specialized problems. The administrators in small colleges must do several different tasks. Few of the colleges can afford an institutional research officer, hence they may have difficulty in coping with the flood of federal and state forms that must be completed and also in collecting data about their own institution. And the administrator who must perform several different types of tasks may find himself unqualified for at least some of them.

As I reflected on these problems I wondered whether some of them were truly problems or not merely differences between small and large institutions. The idea that large size leads to economy of operation needs more exploration. Certainly the physical plant is better utilized if classes are larger and students occupy the buildings from eight in the morning until ten at night. But the costs of administration are not as clear. The institution that has more administrators has more administrative tasks; each administrator creates work for all the others--each has his own set of forms that he keeps passing to his colleagues as a way of justifying his own job. (As Parkinson noted, each administrator has assistants who pass paper to him and to others.) Seen from the standpoint of administrative tasks that are imposed on faculty, students, counsellors, librarians, and all other people in large institutions, the small college may not be in such a bad way. If all those tasks are assigned a price depending on the time that it takes everyone to complete them, then the differential cost of administration between small and large institutions diminishes. However, if we peruse salaries of administrators only, small institutions seem to suffer from high administrative costs. I am concerned that administration in a large institution has hidden costs that may show up in another way--in staff morale, for instance.

Some writers have said that the rural institutions are "out of the mainstream of innovative action and involvement." That may be a characteristic of the institutions but I am not certain that it is a problem. How much action and involvement do you want? Much of the so-called innovation in large institutions has yielded little in student learning. I tend to put it more in the category of wheel spinning. Perhaps the smaller institutions are fortunate that they have less of such involvement.

Some writers have complained that small institutions cannot provide program diversification, and indeed our studies of curriculum have borne out that contention. That seems to be an artifact of the way the institution is structured. If the small institution attempts to support separate classes in each of the major foreign languages for example, it is doomed to small classes and high cost per student. Accordingly few of the smaller colleges have comprehensive language programs. However one language teacher can teach Spanish, French, Russian, and German simultaneously if he avails himself of the audio tapes and workbooks that are widely available. One room with 15 or 20 students and one instructor in it can have four or more languages being taught all at the same time. There seems little reason to say that just because we have a small college and could never get more than 3 students to study Russian at the same time we can never offer Russian.

I was surprised to find another contention, one that said: "The institution has difficulty attracting proven professionals." That may have been the case at one time but we may now be moving into a different era, one in which many highly skilled professionals find rural settings attractive. In short, the rural community college may well benefit from urban flight in coming years.

The problem of institutional research is less easily overcome. The dean of Ranger Junior College (Texas) surveyed institutional research in small colleges in his state and found that half the deans felt their institutional research was inadequate. They, the deans, were forced to collect and compile data on faculty contact hours, student demographics, student status, and other information needed to satisfy state reporting demands. Few of them tended to collect information on faculty activities. And long-range planning could not be undertaken without special funds to employ outsiders to do it.

Although the problems of the paucity of institutional research cannot readily be overcome in small institutions some steps might be taken. A "circuit riding" institutional researcher might be one answer. Several colleges could band together and contribute to the support of a full-time institutional researcher who would collect the data they all need. A second way of ameliorating the lack of an institutional research office is to enlist the aid of faculty and students in doing community surveys. Some institutions have had notable success in planning and conducting surveys in that fashion.

Rural colleges have certain positive characteristics. The institutions are often the only cultural centers in their districts. This affords them the opportunity to do community-based humanities forums, drama workshops, art festivals, recitals, exhibits, and other activities that bring the arts and humanities to their area. That is an important role for the community college; it must fill the gaps in cultural opportunities for the people it serves. One of the most highly developed programs in the arts is offered at a community college only a few miles from the center of Los Angeles. It is certainly less important for that college to present cultural programs to people who have the facilities of the major metropolitan area available to them than it is for a college located in a rural setting.

Small rural colleges have certain other advantages, both present and potential. It is easier for them to acquire funds from private foundations. The small rural college that makes a funding connection with a foundation wanting to support its activities can readily find a source of money that in percentage of college budget far exceeds anything available to the larger institutions.

As a way of accommodating the problem of program diversity some

colleges have had success in employing a full-time faculty member as a circuit rider. That instructor sets up in donated facilities in different towns around the district, teaching an introductory science course Mondays in one town, Tuesdays in another. He brings his media and equipment with him. That form of outreach seems more suitable than does the alternative practice of employing a part-time teacher in each town. At least the element of quality control is more likely to be fulfilled.

The future for the small/rural college is uncertain. You can do some things well and although you have your own problems, you are also spared some of the greater problems facing the large/urban institutions. One caution: it is more difficult for the smaller institution to surrender an unwanted program. Public relations are more precarious. A large/urban institution may take actions that go unnoticed; the small/rural institution is in a fishbowl. Recently the Los Angeles Community College District found it necessary to divest itself of certain noneducative activities, particularly those that fall into the category of transfer payments for senior citizens and unemployed youth. It was able to do so by giving them off to other social service agencies in the community. The small/rural institution must be wary of accepting those functions initially because if they must be cut back it may be more difficult to find another agency willing to accept them. Hence the program would have to be closed with attendant penalties to institutional image.

The future may also see programmatic funding rather than reimbursements on the basis of student attendance. I think that would be desirable but it is also going to be difficult to effect. The roots of the community colleges are in the K-12 system and K-12 gets its dollars on the basis of student attendance. If the colleges had developed from the university

system they may have had a better opportunity to effect such a funding pattern.

Does the small/rural community college have unique problems? I am not certain. The literature is not surfeited with reports of unique problems. It seems the colleges are like the man who observes that he is five-feet, eight-inches tall and weighs 160 pounds. He looks at his six-foot, two-inch, 190 pound neighbor and says, "I'm obviously different, therefore I must have different problems--but I am not sure what they are." The work of your Council may help to define the different problems. But do not be surprised if you find they differ only in degree, not in kind. And do not be surprised to find a broad range of offsetting benefits to either smallness, ruralness, or both.