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ABSTRACT

Dateline: August 1989. Societal trends during the 1980's left community colleges with a smaller and older clientele taking fewer courses and providing fewer funds. Location, local support, and, most important, the attitudes of people within the college itself were the factors determining the success with which colleges met this challenge. Some colleges provided curricula responsive to the non-linear educational needs of adult students by integrating credit and non-credit areas. Other colleges, reluctant to part with transfer-oriented curricula, faced administrator-faculty disputes over class cut-off rates and the need for a marketing-oriented catalog. The former catered to older, better educated students who demanded well-prepared courses and doubled the proportion of college income from non-credit offerings. The latter invested energy in high school graduate recruitment and saw a decline in adult enrollment. Faculty members, reacting to changing enrollment patterns, either proved flexible by abolishing tenure and cooperating with part-time teachers or fought for protective agreements. Reacting to increased stress, some administrators fostered communication within the college toward the development of new ideas; others merely froze budgets and retreated, hoping to weather the storm. All colleges, however, faced increased government control and distrust between colleges and government agencies. (JP)

LOOKING BACK ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE 1980's

A Stimulus Paper

"AUGUST, 1989"

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(This paper is designed to stimulate thinking about the future of community colleges, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the State Board for Community Colleges.)

As the 1980's draw to a close, it seems appropriate to reflect on the experiences that have marked the past decade. Institutions are always affected by the larger fabric of society into which they are woven. In the 1980's, the community colleges were deeply affected by the larger changes that were occurring in the society. While college issues such as faculty development and funding formulas were important, the societal trends had enormous impact; some of the societal trends were:

*The rate of inflation: UP

*Growth rate of the economy: SLOW

*Unemployment among young persons: DOWN

*Costs for energy: WAY UP

*Affirmative action for blacks: DOWN

*Proportion of 18-22 year olds in the population: DOWN

*Proportion of senior citizens in the population: UP

*Size of government and the influence of regulations: UP

*Military draft: REINSTATED

The decline in the number of high school students was widely written about at the beginning of the decade, but few serious steps were taken to prepare for it. Coupled with the decline in the number of 18-22 year olds was the rise in inflation and energy costs, leading to higher tuition and less discretionary spending for college attendance. The reinstatement of the draft (for men and women) further shrunk the pool of full-time students. Finally, the activity related to affirmative action for black persons became largely record-keeping; with the federal budget straining under heavy retirement obligations, there was little additional money available for financial aid to black students.

Only the rate of college attendance by persons in their 30's and 40's operated to lift enrollment, and these students took far fewer courses than the Joe College of 10 years ago. With a growing number of older persons, state and local governments found it necessary to provide more services at a time when the tax base was growing more slowly. Citizens and their elected representatives were not of a mind to provide increased financial assistance to the community colleges. Thus colleges were in the double bind of having to become more attractive with less money to buy clothes.

The general state of stress that the 1980's brought to the community college system was met with a variety of reactions in the commmunity colleges. No one

picture can describe how the colleges reacted. Some colleges closed, some merged, and a few even prospered. The different outcomes seem to have depended upon the location, local support, and, most importantly, the attitudes of the persons in the college. The history of the 1980's is discussed in terms of curriculum, students, faculty, administration, and state and national affairs.

CURRICULUM. As each college labored with the curriculum, each gave birth to somewhat different children. However, certain commonalities emerged that can be described in the two modes below. Of course, some colleges traveled a middle ground.

College A

The meaning of the word curriculum moved from being a synonym for academic program to mean all the educational experiences of the college. The action in degree programs was in disciplines where the professions were developing discrete specialization and where accreditation agencies forced a strict adherence to a pattern of requirements. In fields such as business, so few students completed the program that the array of courses was far more important than the program. There has been an integration of the credit and noncredit areas, to be more responsive to the educational needs of the adult students and the businesses that have purchased educational contracts. The outcomes of courses became more clearly defined, and the time for course approval at the campus level was shortened considerably.

Education was seen as non-linear, with fewer prescriptions about what must be taken before what. So few students had actually followed the linear curriculum in the college catalog that the new approach was merely a recognition of the reality.

Much of the subject matter in the areas formerly known as transfer or general education is still being taught, but in quite different ways. Literature courses have become courses such as Women's Literature and Science Fiction. Physical education courses in the team sports have given way to courses such as bicycling and hang gliding. Philosophy courses are taught in the business division as Effective and Ethical Approaches to Decision-making.

College B

The faculty stayed with the more traditional four-year college curriculum. The faculty felt good about this, but more and more course sections were closed because there were not enough students to fill them. At the beginning of each semester, there were strong arguments about when a course should be cancelled, with the dean generally fighting for higher cutoff and the faculty fighting for a lower one. The dean generally accused the faculty of not understanding the finances of the college, and the faculty accused the dean of trying to run the college like a business.

The contents of the college catalog were much the same as the contents of the 1979 catalog, except that the publication was now done by a professional printing firm, and designed by experts in marketing. Hence, it was more flashy and written for youthful readers.

The curriculum of College B was a partner in a love affair. Most faculty, administrators, and board members were educated in a curriculum much like the one offered at the college. Together, the faculty and the curriculum had shared a lot of passionate fights and exciting fun; an understandable dependency had developed. Since the traditional curriculum had served the college so well, it was difficult to break off the romance. There were valuable elements in the curriculum, and that made it all the more painful to contemplate a separation.

While the use of television has increased as a learning medium, most of the learning was informal, and not related to the community colleges. Cable television has grown dramatically, but is also unconnected with most colleges. Except for a few colleges, there has been little involvement with televised instruction, largely because of the high costs. Independent study represents only a fraction of the educational offerings, unchanged from a decade ago. While self-paced instruction was widely offered, it was never embraced by as many students as predicted.

STUDENTS. Reflecting a trend that began in the late 1970's, the number of full-time students continued to decline in the 1980's. Correspondingly, the average number of credits taken dropped as well. The most difficult years were clearly from 1983 to 1986, when the number of students graduating from high school declined sharply; in Maryland for example, the number dropped 15 percent in the four year interval.

College A

The decline in the pool of 18-22 year old students affected College A, but with its emphasis upon adult education, the total enrollment rose in the decade. Located in a state where there is a state subsidy for noncredit courses, the proportion of college income from noncredit offerings has more than doubled.

As the median age of the College has risen, more students attend to update career skills and to pursue personal interests. The proportion of students attending to take the first two years of a bachelors degree has fallen sharply. Students are better educated at the time that they enroll, and many come from professional and technical occupations. There is a remarkable similarity between the the profile of all community college students in 1989 and the profile of noncredit students in 1979.

Using research that was reported more than ten years ago, College A recognized the different learning styles of younger and older students. The influx of older students brought a preference for course organization and integrated reading assignments. Many of these students sought well prepared and stimulating lectures, and stayed away from group discussion courses.

College B

Even though the college had a majority of part-time students before the 1980's began, the decline in enrollment among full-time students was dramatic. Determined to maintain its mission as a two year college for transfer and occupational preparation, the college invested its energy in trying to recruit a higher proportion of the graduating high school seniors, and in persuading those students to attend the community college and not a four-year college or university.

College B's sister institution also held to the transfer preparation model, but met with more success, because it was in a rural part of the state where four-year education was not readily available. Located in an urban setting with plenty of four-year colleges within commuting distance, College B was not as fortunate.

The young students at College B tended to have learning styles that needed interaction and personal relationships. They preferred informal setting and practical experiences; while many faculty found their teaching styles coincided with the young students need, older students who attended College B felt less at home there and did not return for additional courses.

FACULTY. Among all of the subgroups in the community college, the group faced with the most difficult adjustment in the decade was the faculty. Because of reductions and shifts in enrollment patterns, faculty members could no longer teach in an institution like the one where they were taught. They could not teach their former subjects and they could not teach their former students.

College A

There was considerable discussion about collective bargaining, but the faculty voted for no agent. The president and deans expressed their reservations about collective bargaining, but did not attempt to stop its arrival. Administrators at College A were excellent listeners, and tried hard to avoid "we-they" conflicts among board members, administrators, and faculty.

The most startling event during the 1980's came when the president of the faculty senate proposed the abolition of tenure! Seeing the rigidity of the college and its inability to react to changes in enrollment and mission, the senate president decided to take a proactive position rather than waiting for the administrators to come up with some ignorant scheme.

The most potent dose of new blood and enthusiasm came from the part-time faculty. Since the credit and the noncredit areas were blended at College A, there was more interaction among full and part-timers. The part-time faculty was more involved in the mainstream of faculty life, and the full-timers found that they could learn much from the "practitioners."

College B

The faculty at College B voted for collective bargaining in a minute. While they won a few more dollars than their colleagues at College A, the administration also won some prerogatives, and there is less faculty involvement in governance.

The faculty fought for protective agreements involving the proportion of full-time and tenured members. Mostly, though, the faculty was into blaming: the state for not providing more funding, the dean for not taking their case to the president, the admissions office for not getting more students, and the president for not being a leader.

As a consequence of the protective agreements won by the faculty, there has been little turnover and few new hires at the college. While a few exciting ideas have been developed to teach a traditional two-year liberal arts curriculum, few students have enrolled, and a sense of futility has come over many of the faculty. Bitterness and hostility characterize the meetings of the faculty senate, and the stale air of most classrooms is beginning to have an effect upon student enrollment. Such trends take years to develop, though, and few will ever connect the loss of enrollment with the problems in the classroom.

ADMINISTRATION. One general result of the trends in society and education in the 1980's was stress. People were stressed in their maturity. Budgets were stressed in their obligations. Under these conditions, boards of trustees did not select any different level of competence than existed a decade ago. In contrast to previous times, though, colleges with mediocre leadership could not bluff their way through as easily. Colleges that did not survive the period or survived it poorly were invariably the colleges with less competent leadership among the deans and the president.

College A

Many observers (and a few of the college's board members) thought that the president and the deans at College A were unconventional. In the middle of much stress and anxiety, they increased their listening. The administrators shared more information about the depth of the college's problems. However, they were neither indecisive nor uncommitted. They presented well thought out proposals for dealing with problems, and then were open to suggestions for improvement.

The president held high performance and ethical standards for everyone at the college while operating with a nonpunitive style. Morale and trust were considered important ingredients in the recipe for a successful organization.

College B

Faced with shrinking enrollment and burgeoning budgets, the president took firm action. She dictated several memos directing that certain budget accounts be frozen and restricting contacts with the press by mid-level managers. The president and her deans spent much time together, and developed a close relationship. At every point, they were convinced that they could weather the storm.

The president held high performance and ethical standards, but found it difficult to understand why there was so much picky arguing on the campus. The faculty senate passed several resolutions about low morale, and the president requested a definition of morale and empirical evidence of the problem.

NATIONAL AND STATE AFFAIRS. The role of the United States Department of Education has been substantial in the decade. A national data file is now maintained on each student and employee of the college (at tremendous expense to the colleges). Assuming that data brings insight, the Department has promulgated pounds of rules and regulations for the colleges, with the most critical of them related to program development. While manpower data is still as soft as it was in the late 1970's, job openings are projected and money is dangled to colleges to develop programs in those areas. While some states (including Maryland) are still in a desegration suit with the Department of Education, the proportion of black faculty members and administrators is down slightly from a decade ago at most community colleges.

The centralization of power extended to the state level, and there were repeated and often successful attempts to make the separate community college and state college board divisions of the overall state education agency. Many state education agencies have course approval. Since programs at the community college level have become so meaningless, state bureaucrats felt that the only way to control "frivolous" expansion was through course approval.

The consolidation of power in state capitols and Washington has led to some advances in program coordination and the use of facilities, but one unintended consequence has been that there is little trust between the colleges and the state and federal agencies. Data is manipulated in subtle ways to give the agencies what they want to hear, and many clever strategies have been developed to avoid the red tape that has been wound around many out-baskets. One of the tragic losses of the decade has been in local initiative and creativity among states with extensive control and regulation. One piece of good news is that a few of the states that adopted more controls early in the 1980's have begun to return some prerogatives to the local colleges.

CONCLUSION. The 1980's have been a decade of pain and promise. Societal trends swept the community colleges as never before. The price of heat went up and the number of high school graduates went down. Tuition rose and financial support fell. The reduction in enrollment of young persons and the static financial support created considerable stress on established procedures and relationships. The best planning during the decade seemed to be that which looked beyond the college parking lot, and tried to see the societal changes and their implications. As always, institutions were judged by their social utility, and a few were judged not very useful. However, the pressures led other colleges to break away from their greatest constraints -- mental ones -- and create a new mission that placed adult education in the forefront. These colleges are prospering, their faculty are excited, and their students are learning.

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