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ABSTRACT

Critics of the community college are justified in challenging unsubstantiated statements about the institution by college spokespersons or in public relations releases disguised as institutional analyses. During the 1960's, for example, increasing enrollments were often cited as evidence of public support for community colleges--without reference to the social and demographic factors that caused the enrollment boom. Similarly, claims that community colleges do a better job of teaching than research-oriented universities are not substantiated by evidence of actual student learning. Critics should not, however, confuse institutional intentions with actual outcomes by asserting that because community colleges have not eliminated the social class structure, they are part of a conspiracy to maintain it. Indeed, the community colleges have provided higher education with a means of accommodating the increased demand for educational access that emerged in the 1960's without compromising the quality of the universities. The two-year college provided access to students who could not otherwise participate in higher education, assured a mechanism of social mobility, and helped the country avoid the problems faced by European nations who have no alternative means of dealing with students who are not admitted by universities. While the critic should expose rhetorical aberrations, s/he should do so to protect the real virtues of the community college. (JP)

CRITICIZING THE ROLE

Arthur M. Cohen

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Presentation to AACJC Forum #57
Questioning the Community College:
Some Critical Views

April 22, 1981

CRITICIZING THE ROLE

George Vaughan is an unusual community college president. Whereas most presidents are concerned only about maintaining their own institutions, he worries about the colleges overall. His issue of New Directions for Community Colleges, entitled "Questioning the College Role," brought together the allegations made by those who have criticized the community colleges' social role.

UCLA has its share of critics of community colleges. Burton Clark and Alexander Astin both are on our faculty. They, and I too, have addressed the community college role from different viewpoints. We stand outside the institution but, as McLuhan said, "If you want to understand the water, don't ask the fish." We have a perspective different from those who work within the community colleges; no less worthy, just different. Along with George, we look at the institutions as a group. And we have reason to challenge the assertions of unlimited good that are often made by national spokespersons whose primary mission is to obtain support for the institutions.

My own criticism has been directed primarily at the shortsightedness of the institutional spokespersons. During the 1960s they were saying that growth was the sine qua non, that the community colleges were the best thing that had ever happened to American education. "We can prove that," they said. "Look at the growth. Look at the people flocking to our doors." Purposefully ignoring the World War II birth rate that had led to a substantial increase in the nation's population of 18-year-olds in the 1960s, they also played down the fact that more people wanted to go to school than had so chosen in earlier decades. The community colleges happened to be convenient, accessible institutions for

this great cohort of college seekers. But the advocates chose to interpret growth as meaning that the community colleges had discovered on relevant education and established a monopoly on it.

Another concern of mine was that many of the community college leaders were fond of comparing it with the universities. They were saying, "We teach better because our instructors spend more time in the classroom and are not responsible for research or scholarship." An examination of that statement points to its being a fallacy in logic similar to the one that says that a cow is a man because it is not a horse. Teaching is not necessarily better because the teachers are not also productive scholars. In a teaching institution the people are supposed to learn something. By definition teaching effects learning. But evidence of learning attained was rarely brought forward.

The community college is a public institution, supported by the public, dependent on relations with the public. Its supporters must feel that it is doing good works. Any social agency must maintain an image of providing a public good. No quarrel with that. But an unremitting stream of releases from public relations offices presented in the guise of institutional analysis is difficult to accept.

I have been called a critic of the community colleges, a term that I gladly accept if the people using it understand that the act of criticism is the act of defining, of viewing with a sharper eye, of effecting new images. Criticism is the art of seeking better questions. It is the art of converting statements of fact such as, "We teach better than do the university faculty because we don't do research," into such questions as, "How so?" "Do students not learn in universities?" "Where is the evidence of student learning in community colleges?" It is the act of saying that such allegations are not legitimate ways of examining the teaching role of the community colleges.

The critic has a responsibility for determining just what is being criticized. Do we criticize the rhetoric emanating from the institutions or do we criticize institutional reality? If we criticize the rhetoric we must be sure that we announce that is what we are doing. If we attempt to criticize the reality we are cast in the posture of researchers, finding out just what is going on in the institutions, looking behind the rhetoric to perceive the institutions' true functions. Although I began my career as a critic by analyzing the rhetoric, more recently I have become a researcher analyzing institutional intentions and effects. That alone is important because there are differences in what the institution is trying to do and what it actually does. Some of the other critics have confused intentions and outcomes. They say that because the community colleges have not assisted in overturning the social class structure of America (as though any institution in itself could effect a classless society), they are part of a conspiracy designed to maintain it.

The community colleges did some useful things in the 1960s. They popularized college going and made it possible for many people who would not have otherwise participated in higher education to begin their college careers. They also saved the universities from having to convert themselves into something other than what they were. The universities would have had to expand dramatically to take the influx of students who were clamoring for admission. They could not have done so without compromising what universities do best. The community colleges protected them by serving as the overflow institution. In a more dramatic but less far reaching outcome they saved the university from being burned down during the student upheavals when the people who demanded access to selective admissions institutions could be told accurately, "We are not denying access to you. Go to the community college first and, if you make a creditable record, then you can come to the university." Gordon Sproul, president of the

University of California in the 1930s had anticipated the demand for access and he was one of the most vigorous supporters of the community colleges.

Some critics have mistakenly said that because the community colleges are at the bottom of the higher education hierarchy, because they receive lower funding than the universities, because the people from the lower income groups who go to the community colleges have less money spent on their education, the existence of a conspiracy to keep the lower income groups in their place has been proved. I very patiently attempt to explain to some of my colleagues that for most students the choice is not between Los Angeles City College and Stanford, between Triton College and the University of Chicago. For most of the students who attend the community colleges the choice is between there and nothing. They are not being chanelled into the community colleges as a way of keeping them out of Harvard and Berkeley. If they do not go to the community colleges, they go nowhere. So far I have made some modest progress in helping some of my fellow critics understand that simple fact.

George mentioned that Burton Clark wrote a piece entitled, "The Cooling-Out Function Revisited," for his issue of New Directions. I want to amplify his remarks by saying that if you don't read anything else in George's volume, read Clark's piece. Clark simply states that if community colleges did not sort students, shunting them to various trades, educational opportunities, and alternative pursuits, some other agency would have to do it. He studied higher education in Europe and perceived the problems in educational systems that did not have a community college type institution to perform that cooling-out role. Italy and Germany particularly have had dreadful problems in providing alternatives to people who want access to the universities but who cannot be admitted because of lack of space or because the universities do not have the programs to suit them.

I have examined the community colleges' role in cooling-out people and

have argued the position as follows. Twenty years ago around 4 million children entered the first grade and this year we will award about 40,000 doctoral degrees. Something had to happen to the more than 3.9 million first graders who did not receive doctoral degrees. Somewhere along the way they had to drop off the formal educational system. We do not need 4 million Ph.D.s in this country. We are not sure what we will do with 40,000. Some institution must perform the role of sorting the people who will not stay on the Ph.D. track. Put another way, the people drop out all along the way and in this generation, the years between grades 12 and 14 are the place where the highest number of them do so.

As for the conspiracy theory, the idea that the community college is an element in a conscious effort to maintain the social class structure in America, that argument can be refuted rather quickly by the realization that social class is a zero sum game. If there is an upper class, a middle class, and a lower class, then by definition, when one person moves up, someone else must move down. The critics who argue that the community college is part of a conspiracy seem to neglect the fact that the colleges have made it possible for individuals to move between social classes even though they do not have the power nor the will to overthrow the social structure of the nation.

Taken broadly the community colleges have benefited from the peculiarly American belief that people can not be legitimately ill or healthy, intelligent or ignorant, or even religiously observant unless some institution has sanctioned that aspect of their being. The colleges have thrived on the belief that it is not possible for people to educate themselves. The United States values credentials issued by educational structures. Some institution must say that an individual has been educated before an employer believes it. As long as that is true, the community colleges will have an important role to play.

The community colleges represent one structure in the total fabric of American education. One of their main functions is to serve as the lungs of the

higher education system, allowing people to enter and exit almost at will. The colleges expand or contract as necessary to accommodate more or fewer students. As long as they can do so flexibly while maintaining their own integrity as educational structures they will thrive. Their leaders must realize that the ability to contract is no less valuable than the ability to expand. The institution with a leadership that understands the importance of shrinkage in certain areas is one with integrity. Unlimited growth is not a virtue; the concept of marketing is an aberration. The critic's function is to point up these anomalies, all with the intention of protecting the virtue of the institution to which he is committed.