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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades, community colleges have vigorously pursued the expansion of mission and clientele. However, resulting increases in student numbers, services, and facilities have not been matched by additional local, state, and federal revenues. This tension between continuing expansion and available resources, along with increased public concern for academic standards, high rates of attrition, and limited transfer rates have caused many administrators to search for more efficient ways of accomplishing current activities and to rely upon technological solutions. Instead, they should evaluate the relevance of their activities to a changing external environment and alter practices where necessary to preserve institutional integrity. In the next decade, educational leaders will need to address three key issues: (1) an increasing incompatibility and tension between adult education and community service missions and transfer and occupational education missions; (2) problems of defining, measuring, and maintaining educational quality given fixed or declining resources; and (3) an increasing faculty unwillingness to commit themselves to administratively defined priorities when their chances of success as teachers are declining. These issues center on institutional integrity and quality rather than institutional diversity and quantity, and require the establishment of and commitment to community-based priorities. (HB)

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE EIGHTIES: TIME FOR REFORMATION

BY: RICHARD C. RICHARDSON, JR.

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The Community College in the Eighties: Time for Reformation

Our task as set for us by Jack Fuller is to address the issue of whether changing standards represent renaissance or respite. I will argue that neither of these two alternatives is an appropriate description of current circumstances. Rather, I will suggest the need for reformation if the values important to us in the past are to survive into the 21st Century.

During the past two decades, community colleges have vigorously pursued the expansion of mission and clientele. We have operated under the assumption that numbers and diversity would translate into political support and dollars. The events of these decades have left community colleges with more part-time students who require the same services as full-time students, but who do not generate the same revenues; with increasing numbers of remedial students whose previous educational attainments make them more costly to serve effectively; with a growing diversity of expensive services such as child care centers, expanded financial aid offices, tutors and learning centers; and with greatly expanded delivery systems including colleges without walls, television media centers and other technological and human resource commitments. This explosion of clienteles, services, enrollments and delivery systems has not been matched by corresponding commitments of additional dollars from local, state or federal sources. Increasing administrative costs, reduced student services and the increased use of lower paid adjunct faculty, all provide evidence of adaptations administrators have had to make as the tension

between continuing expansion and available resources has increased.

Resource constraints are only a part of the picture. Of equal importance has been the changing public attitude toward academic standards. The expansion of access to postsecondary education was undergirded by the assumption that providing equal opportunity would reduce social and economic inequities. We soon learned, however, that differences in socio-economic background, previous educational preparation, motivation and a host of other factors produced an unbelievably high rate of attrition among the new student populations. When remedial courses failed to improve success ratios, we redefined the criteria for success. Students, we said, were better off if they attended a community college whether or not they graduated. Earning a degree was secondary to the real purpose of the community college, which was to develop everyone to his highest level of potential. As the emphasis on degree attainment began to shift, we created more and more courses for people we saw as incapable of pursuing the traditional curriculum. Concurrently, the standards to pass a given course or even to attain a general associate degree, began to change also.

The consequences of twenty years of evolutionary change in academic standards are only now becoming apparent. Concerns have been raised about the limited numbers of students who transfer from community colleges in some states, as well as their performance after transfer. Some states have already adopted requirements for testing the literacy skills of students entering the junior year of college or applying for a license to teach after completing a four-year degree.

Much of the current confusion about mission and identity stems from this new emphasis on achievement. Minorities are beginning to raise, with some insistence, the question of access to what? Legislators are demonstrating limited tolerance for educational inflation where students attend school for longer periods of time to avoid downward social mobility. Those who earned degrees when the possession of such credentials implied both a higher level of literacy and enhanced employment opportunities have become disenchanted with a system that produces credentials guaranteeing neither, and with increased public costs. Of course, the roots of many of these problems lie beyond community colleges, but their impact does not.

When community colleges enrolled less than 20% of the students entering higher education and were mostly small institutions supported by local taxpayers, many of whom had aspirations for turning them into four-year institutions, their presidents and boards were free to pursue any mission that captured their imagination and that was not forbidden by the generally permissive legislation of the times. But, community colleges have been so successful and have become so important a part of the postsecondary picture that they are not longer being permitted to define their own priorities and directions. The external environment has also changed. From surplus we have entered a period of scarcity. Accustomed to growth, we have attempted to forestall stabilization or even decline of enrollments by seeking new clientele. Many of the new clientele have problems which make them more expensive to serve effectively. Public policy makers have not been as enthusiastic about our pursuit of new clientele as we have been. Consistently, they have refused to provide us with the additional funds we have requested. We have responded by seeking greater efficiency and productivity.

Selznick describes the responsible leader as one who avoids both opportunism and utopianism. He defines opportunism as the pursuit of immediate, short-run advantages in a way inadequately controlled by considerations of principle and ultimate consequence. By contrast, utopianism hopes to avoid hard choices by a flight to fantasy. Selznick said, "Utopian wishful thinking enters when men who purport to be institution leaders rely on overgeneralized purposes to guide their decisions". He is also critical of leaders who hope that the solution of technical problems will solve institutional problems and describes the reliance on technology as another manisfestation of utopianism.

Why do responsible leaders need to avoid opportunism and utopianism? According to Selznick, the failure to avoid these two extremes carries with it the risk that institutions will not accomplish necessary adaptations during periods of change, and as a result, will become attenuated and confused. By attenuation, he means that organizations do not establish a distinctive purpose but rather become vague and abstract and thus unable to influence deeply the work of their staffs and operating divisions. He sees this happening when "the formulation of institutional goals is an afterthought, a way of rationalizing activities actually resulting from opportunistic lines of decision".

One of the examples that Selznick used to point out the problems of image and mission clarity was the community college. Clearly, our institutions have some reasonable claim to being described as opportunistic. The use of marketing concepts has been advocated as an approach for identifying new clientele and as a way of positioning the institution to respond to the needs of these new groups. When confronted with the growing scarcity

of resources and the problems of serving a more diverse clientele effectively, many administrators have suggested that these problems will be resolved by technology. Increasing productivity has also been seen as an important response. Those who have advocated technology and productivity as responses to current issues may wish to ponder Selznick's admonition that the search for more efficient ways of accomplishing current activities may overlook the need to evaluate the relevance of those activities to a changing external environment.[1]

An issue for all administrators is whether they will choose to pursue greater efficiency in current practices or attempt to exert leadership to alter practices where that is necessary to preserve institutional integrity. Within the context of this larger question, I believe we will face three key issues in the next decade.

The community college appears at a historic crossroads in terms of its mission. One route leads to the folk school, organized around the needs of adults and focused on cultural and vocational interests not requiring degree attainment. The second and more historic route involves concentration on programs and services designed to assist students attain the baccalaureate degree or entry to an occupation that could not have been attained without education beyond high school. The extent to which these two directions may be incompatible is evidenced by tensions which currently surround discussions of community college mission as described in the recent Brookings Institute Study by Breneman and Nelson.[2]

[1]Selznick, Philip Leadership in Administration. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957. Chapter 5.

[2]Breneman, David and Nelson, Susan Financing Community Colleges: An Economic Perspective. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1981.

Closely related to the issue of mission clarification is the problem of defining and seeking quality. The quality issue is confused by the lack of generally accepted measures of its presence or its absence. Quality thus becomes something that everyone can claim because no one can identify. At least, that is how community colleges have dealt with issues related to quality during the past two decades. Now, however, there are pressures to equate quality with outcomes. Most businessmen and legislators would argue from personal experience that given fixed resources, numbers and quality vary inversely. That is, the more you do of anything, the less likely you are to do it well. Increasingly, there is concern about the ability of the community college to do all of the tasks it has undertaken for all of the clientele it has identified with a resource base that in most states is either fixed or declining in terms of constant dollars. This issue has deeply divided faculty and administrators. Many faculty believe that the transfer function and career education should be core concerns. They do not agree that mission expansion has been accomplished without declines in quality and they refuse, in increasing numbers, to support new institutional priorities.

The quality issue leads very naturally to a third concern that surfaces often in discussions among community college administrators. Decreasing numbers of faculty are willing to commit themselves to the achievement of administratively defined priorities. They have more students who have more serious deficiencies and they are often expected to teach them effectively with fewer resources. Faculty question their opportunities for success as they define it and find the odds against them lengthening.

Bob McCabe of Miami Dade discussed the problem in an interview last Fall published in Change. "I wouldn't know how to deal with a class if I had people reading on a fifth grade level who are trying to compete in a college level class. I don't think our faculty do either. We discouraged many good faculty by putting them in a position where they really couldn't do a good job. If there is anything that can ruin an institution, it is taking away from faculty the ability to succeed".

From my perspective, the issues of the eighties seem likely to center on institutional integrity and quality rather than institutional diversity and quantity. The question often asked today is, "How do we get more money to carry out our mission as we want to expand it." Perhaps the time is near when we may wish to ask instead, "Given available resources, what priorities should we establish to make certain we do well those things that are most important to our community?" This line of inquiry could easily lead to some very difficult decisions centering on such questions as:

1. Is the community college primarily an educational institution or should it assume more of the character of a social welfare institution?
2. Is it better to serve everyone to some minimum level or to serve specific constituencies with a defined level of excellence?
3. Should priorities be established by administrators and boards based on their values and preferences or should faculty values and preferences receive more attention in the interests of improving quality of implementation?

These are important questions and the answers are by no means obvious. The issues they represent have developed over more than two decades and they are not likely to respond to the quick-fix. Administrators

who choose leadership roles in confronting these issues will need patience and a long view of the historical forces at work.

These are not the kinds of issues that foreshadow a renaissance. Nor do they necessarily imply a return to the dark ages of ignorance and restricted opportunity. Rather, they suggest the need for reformation. I hope you will view the challenges they present as a manifesto figuratively nailed to the front door of every community college in the country. It may well be time to cease the sale of indulgences to special interest groups in our communities under the rubric of marketing and to return to the tried rock moral and educational priorities that gave rise to the flowering of our community colleges during the past two decades.

Thank you.