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ABSTRACT

Five major issues are currently confronting community colleges. The first issue relates to the need for a new measure of institutional functioning based on curriculum content (which is poorly represented by traditional program labels such as transfer or occupational programs) and student intent (which is rarely reflected by either program labels or students' own course-taking patterns). The second issue is concerned with managing access to a community college education in light of the trend in state after state toward limiting enrollments. Community colleges will be forced to make clearer distinctions among the student groups they serve, tightening attendance criteria and mandating entrance and placement testing. The third issue is the matter of student flow in community colleges. Community colleges operate in a context of public expectations of linear progress from entry to degree attainment, yet this pattern is atypical of community college student flow. The fourth issue, maintaining a comprehensive curriculum, relates to the other three. From their inception, community colleges have offered baccalaureate studies, occupational programs, continuing education, general education, and remedial education. Current funding priorities place transfer and occupational education in primary positions, with remedial education following in terms of funding and support. The last major issue is the aging faculty and the problems of maintaining a qualified body of instructors to staff the colleges. (RO)

Perennial Issues in Community Colleges

Arthur M. Cohen

Presented as part of a seminar series at
North Carolina State University

Raleigh, North Carolina

April 11, 1986

PERENNIAL ISSUES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Speech at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina
April 11, 1986
Arthur M. Cohen

We are prolific writers about the community colleges in America because we are always concerned about the system. It is wonderful being associated with publicly supported post-secondary education. If all your other endeavors lead nowhere but to frustration you can always say, "But I'm doing something good. I am engaged in a welcome enterprise. I'm not making bombs that blow up people. What I do has social merit." That should make you feel good. You are in a noble calling. I know that sounds trite, but education is a noble calling.

We not only write about the colleges, we conduct many research projects. One of our projects now is sponsored by The Ford Foundation: the Urban Community Colleges Transfer Opportunities Program. The Ford Foundation, which for twenty years has been concerned about the education of minorities in America, became convinced that if they were to do something for the education of minorities in post-secondary studies, they had to consider community colleges because minorities are heavily concentrated in community colleges across the country. Ford funded a series of projects to support transfer opportunities for minorities trying to get from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions. They awarded some grants to community colleges in large cities that had high minority populations. We have been helping them evaluate that project.

Last year, in association with that project, we surveyed

students in 24 colleges that had high minority populations. We asked about student intentions: "Why are you here?" "Why are you, the student, attending this institution?" We asked a variety of other questions: "How many courses are you taking," "What is your grade-point average." Dr. Brawer, Dr. Estela Bensimon, who was with us at the time, and I came to realize that there is a difference between the intention stated by the student and the behavior exhibited by the student.

There are students, (not here but in UCLA's commuter population) who intend getting doctoral degrees but who work full-time and have a full-time family to take care of. They come into the university for four hours a week to take a class and they plan to do their dissertation sometime around 1998. And so you conclude that the student's chances to complete the program are a little marginal. We lose a little more than half our students, meaning that 12 years after entry, somewhat more than half our students have not received the doctoral degree. If you ask them at entry, all of them will say, "Yes I intend getting a doctoral degree -- I'm entering the program." But there is a gap between intention and behavior.

The same phenomenon operates in the community college. You ask community college students, "What is your intention?" or "What is the highest degree you intend obtaining (that's the way the question is usually asked)?" They say, "bachelor's," "master's," "doctor's." And then you look at their course-taking behavior: the nature of their involvement with the institution; the number of times they have visited with a counselor; the

number of times they have been involved in transfer workshops; whether they have examined the catalog of the receiving institution; whether they have been advised by a faculty member, and how often. And you find that the space between the intention and behavior is rather enormous.

But because the students have indicated intention of receiving higher degrees, the researchers say, "Sixty percent of the students entering community colleges in America intend getting higher degrees." That is a fiction. It's true only because of the way the question was asked: "What is the highest degree you intend obtaining." What student will say "none" or "Certificate" or "Associate Degree" and conceptually foreclose his or her opportunities for ever progressing further in the education system. When you ask, "What is the highest degree you ever intend to obtain?" they check "Ph.D.," "M.D." Why not?

Then you look at the behavior and you find they are taking one evening course in Conversational Spanish. Have they ever been to a transfer workshop? No. Have they ever been to counseling? No. Have they ever gone to the remedial study skills center? No. They check no, no, no. "Why not?" "I don't have time for it." When you put the behavior questions next to the intention questions you realize the disparity, or the gap. And you realize why so called dropout figures make no sense whatsoever.

Categorizing the Curriculum

Now, in our current work, having come to this realization, we have decided that not only is the space between intention and behavior marked but that the names of the programs are wrong.

The way the community colleges are typically viewed by funding agencies, state agencies, researchers, scholars, and so on is in error. When they talk about the "transfer program," the "occupational program," the "community service program," those terms are wrong. There is no transfer program. There are courses that students may take and if and when they do transfer to a baccalaureate degree-granting institution, those courses will be accepted for credit. But it is a long way from that definition to a transfer program because many people take courses for which a senior institution would award credit but who have no intention of transferring and/or their behavior suggests that they are never going to transfer. So to call it a transfer program and therefore to judge its merit on the number of people who go through it and transfer, is to do it a disservice, and the students too, by the way.

And many people who intend transferring take courses for which transfer credit would not be awarded. For example, remedial. Right now in Florida the median number of credits earned by students who receive Associate degrees is well over 70. The student only needs 60 units if all is in order. Why are they taking 10 to 20 more hours? What are those hours? They are remedial courses and courses which do not help the student qualify for a particular program. Because many students enter with marginal literacy or are non-native English speakers who need a lot of English as a second language, they take up to 20 hours for which transfer credit is not being awarded. Is that not part of the transfer credit program? And if it is, why

aren't they getting credit for it and who is funding it and is it being funded on the basis of transfer?

Occupational programs are similarly misconceptualized. Occupational education again describes a function and not a program because there are curriculums leading to occupational certificates and the curriculums are comprised of courses, among other elements. But many people who take those courses have no intention of obtaining certificates. They may intend to transfer. There are more students transferring to universities from so-called occupational programs than from so-called transfer programs. So the occupational program is more nearly a transfer program. And not only that (you know they get credit for those courses when they transfer), there is a sizable proportion of the students taking courses in the occupational curriculum who already have jobs in that field and need a course for upgrading to learn the latest skills or get a promotion. There are many people taking courses in those programs who have no intention of working in that field at all. They are working in some other field. Or they are taking the courses for avocational interests, for personal intersts. You see them in welding classes, in the woodworking classes, and they are doing it because they are interested in those skills as a hobby.

Even though the terms "transfer" and "occupational" are misnomers, much of the funding is based on those terms. The student intention, "I want to learn woodworking so I can make furniture in my basement. I'm not going to go to work in a cabinet shop ever, I'm a doctor," is not considered. The student intention on one hand and the student behavior on the other is at

variance with the title, definition, funding, and operation of the program.

We cannot readily resolve the difficulty. The best we can do right now is to plead for some new measure of institutional functioning based on curriculum content and student intent. The curriculum content would be subdivided into liberal arts and skills. The liberal arts would be further divided into humanities, sciences, social sciences, and fine arts. The skills component would include literacy, recreational skills, and occupational skills.

The separate measure of student intent, for purposes of categorizing, suggests itself as job gaining, job upgrading, baccalaureate, and personal interest, including avocational and recreational. I don't know if these categories will hold, but they seem better than to say that everybody taking a course in English composition is a transfer student or everybody taking a course in woodworking is an occupational student.

It might be possible to change the conceptualization of the curriculum into categories of content and intent. Granted there are some difficulties but if we went to work on it we could determine (1) if conceptually it holds together, and (2) if practically it can be measured. I know that the measures that we are applying to community colleges now do not do justice to the system. They do not accommodate the person who is taking transfer classes for personal interest or occupational classes for transfer purposes. They do not accommodate the middle-aged lady with the master's degree who is taking Art 101 at 11:00 in

the morning because she wants to paint and be with other ladies who are painting and have their works criticized by an art instructor. That class is funded as a transfer class and not one of those ladies in there is ever going to transfer. They already have degrees. That is one of the things we are working on now because we were uneasy with definitions, dropout rates, and transfer rates on the one hand, and student intentions and behavior differences on the other.

Issues

I also want to speak about "Contemporary Issues in Community Colleges," a chapter that is going into a work that is going to be published by the ERIC system.

You have all used ERIC. ERIC is a document base with a total of around 300,000 pieces in it, all of which is computer retrievable and is searched through index terms. The citations and the abstracts are available on computer, and the full text of the citations is available in your library on microfiche.

The directors of the 16 ERIC Clearinghouses decided to produce a system-wide product using the knowledge that they all have by virtue their knowledge of the literature of their scope area. I personally scan 1,400 documents a year that come into the ERIC Clearinghouse, deciding whether they ought to go into the data base. Each of the directors in the other Clearinghouses does the same thing for his or her scope area. We feel that over 20 years we have built up a sense of the literature and of the major issues that are concerning the practitioners in our corner of the education world. So we are doing a system-wide product called, "Contemporary Issues in Education," and each of

the ERIC directors is going to contribute a chapter.

What are the major contemporary issues facing community colleges and how will they be resolved in the next few years? There is a nice order for you: to review all of the documents about funding, alumni relations, competition, new students, old students, teaching, community relations, and on and on and reduce them to three to five issues.

Florence and I and our colleagues at ERIC decided on the most important contemporary issues facing community colleges. The first is preserving a comprehensive curriculum. The second is maintaining access for all who wish to attend. The third is effecting student flow through the colleges. And the fourth is maintaining an appropriate teaching staff. That may come as a surprise to you at a time of teacher over-supply but if you look down the line a little bit you realize that sometime in the very early 1990s there is going to be a teacher shortage in this country, especially in the community colleges.

Access

The community colleges grew large by allowing access. They were a point of easy entry. Anybody who wanted to come in could find something. A few students were turned away if what they wanted was too at variance with what we offered. But the community colleges' most prominent contribution to the world of higher education was access. They allowed people in.

There is some question now about access because policies in state after state are to limit enrollments. The idea is that, as I heard one of the members of the California State Community

College Board say, the lower schools are obliged by law to provide a place for every child. For every baby born in a school district, that district must provide a seat and a teacher six years later. Similarly, the parents are obliged by law to put the child in school. The community college does not have that type of constraint. It is authorized to provide educative services to everyone past the age of public school-leaving. But it is not so obliged.

Who or what sets limits to what a community college will offer or to the percent of the population that it will strive to have enter its doors? If the state agrees to provide funds for everyone who the community college can reasonably entice, for whatever reason, then the state cannot afford the bill. If the community college managers continue to advertise everything for anybody, all the time, anytime, and offer everything from kiddy college (gymnastics for babies) to advanced placement for high school students, to emeritus college for senior citizens, what are the limits? There is an incredible variety of activities offered under all the headings: lifelong learning, continuing education, community service, transfer, occupational.

If the managers feel that they must advertise, promote, sell, cajole, entice all members of the community to come in, the state will not fund the bill. That is why in state after state, there are caps on enrollment. The State of Washington put its first caps on enrollments about eight years ago and the enrollments have dropped by about 15 percent deliberately, by design, across the 27 community colleges of that state.

Therefore, access is not as open an invitation as some of

our community college leaders like to think it is. There are, by definition, limits to access, if not internally generated, then externally imposed. The limits will be placed. Unfortunately, many community college leaders deplore the limits because of their belief that institutional size is tantamount to institutional success. They have taken the position that the more members of the community they can entice in, the better, that if they are not growing every year, it is bad. We feel that one of the issues will be how to manage access.

Student Flow

The second issue is the matter of student flow. Education is time-bound. Courses and curriculum are built on the assumption that a student enters at one level of learning and in a period of time progresses to another level. Unless that assumption is there, the experience is not a course, not a curriculum; it's a set of activities that are like spectator events with no presumption of learning. Education includes a stated or unstated expectation that some number of the people coming in are going to learn something in a certain period of time and pass on through the system.

Community college operators don't like to deal with that concept because when they are compared with other educational structures their institutions suffer. For example, program completion in the universities ranges from around 25 to 80 percent of the matriculants completing a bachelor's degree within five years of entry, with the difference depending on institutional selectivity and residence patterns. You take a highly

select group, take them out of their home community, put them on a hill behind an iron fence and keep them there, and they tend to stay and to go through.

The community college does not enjoy anywhere near this completion rate. Around 10 to 30 percent of community college students receive an associate degree or an occupational certificate within three and one-half years of entry. The percentage varies based on institutional location, program type, and student ability and program match. Many community college people don't like to talk about program completion because they fear being compared to the universities with selective entry and a limited number of programs.

Unfortunately, the common perception and definition of education outside the academy includes this matter of student flow. Our support groups expect students to enter and progress. The whole American educational system is based on that. We talk about K-12, what does that mean? Grade one, which gives you a ticket of admission to grade two, which gives you a ticket to grade three, and so forth all the way through. The public doesn't believe that grades 12, 13, 14, 15 should operate in a different way. The perception is of a system leading from kindergarten to graduate and professional degrees. And a school is either in the core of that system or somewhere toward the margin. An institution cannot long survive if it is perceived as being on the margin. The major support will go to the institutions in the main stream: K-12, 16, 18, and so forth. I'm not applauding this concept. I understand that the continuing education dimension operates on a completely different basis. But

I'm saying that the public perception is that legitimate educational structures are built near the core of the American educational system.

I commend to you the book Predicting the Behavior of the American Educational System written by Thomas Green, an educational philosopher at Syracuse University, for a fuller explanation. I read that book a few years ago and it was like the light bulb went on illuminating for me some of the problems community colleges have. They are living too close to the margin; they are not sufficiently central to the American education system as it is commonly perceived.

It is one thing for an institution to applaud itself on providing access and giving everybody something they want. The North Carolina designation, "Early Leaver with Marketable Skills," is facinating but somewhat difficult to defend. Still, it's better than nothing. In some states the community colleges are like the parks and recreation department and the libraries where people come in and use the system and leave and are not asked whether they learned anything or where they went. They may or may not come back, have another picnic or check out another book. It's difficult for people to understand an educational system that operates that way. That is a major issue in student flow.

Maintaining a Comprehensive Curriculum

The third issue I want to mention, maintaining a comprehensive curriculum, relates to the first two. From their inception the community colleges have had baccalaureate studies, occupa-

tional studies, continuing education, and remedial education (or picking up what students should have learned in lower schools). And early on there was even a concept called general education which had to do with citizenship. Only those of you old enough to remember or you who have read books written in the 1930s and 40s would recall the real meaning of general education for citizenship. Since then it's become a set of distribution requirements which makes sense according to faculty politics but not from the standpoint of student education.

The colleges' five curricular functions have shifted around in emphasis but now the state agencies and the review commissions are looking at the community colleges and saying it is time to support some more than others. Which of these five functions are the most important? Which do we want to pay for? In state after state the conclusions are as follows. Baccalaureate studies and occupational studies are running neck and neck; they are both primary. Remedial has come way up and is considered third now as worthy of funding and support. General education is gone. The idea of education for an enlightened citizenry, the social responsibility and social cohesion dimension of education, is in a downturn. (It will come back up again if some foreign ideology threatens us as in the 1930s and 1940s.) The other function, adult and continuing education, is being perceived as authorized and useful, but is at the bottom of the funding priorities. If the colleges want to offer it and can find the money for it, which translates as making the participants pay for it, that's ok, but don't sent the bill to the state.

I realize that North Carolina may be in a different position

but sometimes you have to consider what is going on elsewhere. Baccalaureate studies, occupational studies, and remedial studies are the big three. Forget citizenship training and forget adult and continuing education unless the participants pay for it. How can you maintain and adjust the institution to accommodate the trend toward valuing some curriculums over others? You are going to find yourself working on that.

The Aging Faculty

The last major issue that I mentioned is the aging faculty; maintaining the body of instructors who will staff the schools. The community college has never had difficulty in finding somebody to get in the classroom. The certification requirements are not stringent. There is a sizable pool of individuals with a degree in a subject area or experience in a trade, or both, who can participate in the classroom. But the question of certification, evaluation, and orientation of the people who will well serve the colleges remains open. There's a whole dimension of professionalization of community college instruction that has not yet been addressed sufficiently. There is a wave of young people who will turn 18 in early 1990s, just when the instructors who began teaching in the 1960s will retire. Will they be well taught after they enter college?

Those are the issues. The way that we see them being resolved or summarized is as follows.

Access. How long does the public's obligation to provide educational opportunity to every applicant continue?. Can any student take courses indefinitely at public expense? To whom

does the community college have primary obligation: students just out of high school? Adults? Senior citizens who have paid taxes all their lives? Must the applicants display some minimal level of ability? Should the college mandate entrance tests?

We think that in the next few years the trend will be toward tightening criteria for attendance. The colleges in some states will be forced to make clearer distinctions among the student groups they would serve. We think there will be minimal criteria for admissions and that entrance testing and placement will be mandated. This is going to happen very quickly.

Student Flow. On what criteria of student achievement should the colleges be appraised? The number of students completing programs? The degrees attained? The exit test scores? There is already a sophomore test in Florida and entrance tests are mandated elsewhere. Should different types of programs be funded under different formulas because more students go through them? Will student flow become a measure? Or will the colleges be supported as continuing education centers with no assumption of accountability for their students?

We think that funding formulas that take into account the variations in student intent seem to be emerging and that differential funding or programatic funding is going to become more prominent in the community colleges. And as a quid pro quo the colleges will become more vigorous in separating students according to intent and behavior and program and ability. There's going to be a lot more redirection of students within the colleges and between the colleges and other educational agencies.

Comprehensive Curriculum. Who decides on the basis for assigning curriculum priorities? What is the balance among liberal arts, occupational, remedial? Can general education or that education which leads toward a sense of social responsiblity be resurrected?

We think that except in the states where the colleges are directed especially toward occupational studies, a comprehensive curriculum will be maintained. The three main curricular functions are exceedingly well entrenched. General education will limp along. Adult education will survive but funding will have to be sought from sources other than the states' educational budget.

Aging Faculty. Can measures relating student learning to instructor activities be developed? On what criteria should instructors be evaluated and why? Should the faculty strive toward a higher level of professionalization? And if so, on what criteria?

We think that none of that is going to come to pass. The faculty is comfortable, content to hide behind the classroom door, well paid relative to their counterparts a decade or two ago. Teaching is going to remain a solo performance. The uses of faculty evaluation are going nowhere. The instructors who retire will be replaced by others whose main distinction is that they are thirty years younger.