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Community College: The Chameleon of Higher Education

A perceived dichotomy in higher education frames the relationship between four-year universities and community colleges. The four-year university thrives on publishing research as much as it does on administering curriculum leading to a degree. The community college is focused on instruction which could lead to a degree, certificate, or other outcome that serves the needs of the community. The four-year university serves the traditional student who typically attends the institution full-time and is a recent product of secondary education. The community college serves the non-traditional student who typically attends the institution part-time and often has already entered the world of work. Although both types of institutions are necessary, the community college is more agile at adapting to societal trends, economic shifts, and changing demographics.

The community college is often maligned as a finishing school for the “slow starters” and “late comers” in higher education. The latter characterization of the community college, as a remediation agent, is actually one legitimate function of community colleges; however, this does not represent the full spectrum of the community colleges’ program of instruction. Community colleges lead higher education in evaluating and adopting trends in instruction that reduce cost and increase efficiency. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics “community colleges also have the greatest number of enrollments in distance education courses with 48% (1,472,000 students), while public four-year institutions enroll 31%” (Akroyd, Jaeger, Jackowski, & Jones, 2004, p. 40). Community colleges led four-year institutions by necessity in the transition to distance education because expanding access for commuter students, who balance work and family, benefits both the individual and the institution.

The agility of the community college also extends to the course offerings because “with less bureaucracy, community and junior colleges can often respond to marketplace changes and update curriculum much more rapidly than four-year programs” (Di Meglio, 2006, p. 3). This adaptability includes offering certificate programs in computer software engineering and traditional vocational programs like auto mechanics. The degree track courses also benefit from small class sizes and part-time faculty that are often full-time practitioners of the subject matter they teach. Undoubtedly the ability to adapt instructional trends to align with community requirements is a vital gap that community colleges aptly bridge.

A free-market economy is also a powerful engine which drives multiple industries and institutions. Higher education is not immune to volatile shifts in a nation’s economy. Access to higher education can become more cost prohibitive during economic shifts to the downside. Studies extol the virtues of a four-year degree but “rarely acknowledge that the option of attending a full-time residential college is not available to the vast majority of people matriculating in community colleges” (Cohen, 2005, p. 59). Many students are opting to attend community college for two years and then transferring to four year institutions based on the cost savings.

At Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas,

residents pay \$63 per credit hour-\$945 per semester or \$1,890 per academic year for full-time students-which is typical. At four-year colleges, even public ones such as the University of Texas, Austin, residents can pay more than \$7,000 for a full academic year (Di Meglio, 2006, p. 2).

Ultimately students whom opt to continue the education at four-year institutions receive the same baccalaureate diploma as their counterparts who spent the entire four years on campus.

Economic downturns also historically correlate with an increase in community college enrollments (Zeiss, 2008). The current high unemployment rate, resulting from the contracting economy, should likewise inspire an increased desire to attend community colleges. This is due to the need for displaced workers to attain new skills to become eligible for sparse employment opportunities. Despite tight family finances continuing education becomes a de facto requirement to align skills with the changing job market. This becomes the real stimulus package because "it is our community colleges' ability to produce more and higher-skilled workers that is critical for economic recovery" (Zeiss, 2008, p. 12). Furthermore, traditional students could be bound for community college due to the fact that; "financial aid is in for a big hit, which might make it impossible for many students to continue their education" (Galuszka, 2008, p. 16). The traditional student could opt to help support their families financially through this crisis by decreasing the cost of their education through living at home while attending community college.

The types of instruction sought at community colleges are also impacted by shifts in the state of the economy. "When the economy is good, enrollment in credit classes decreases because people are working and do not see a need to seek a college degree" (Frentzos, 2005, p. 94). They will instead take non-credit courses that are focused on leisure activities or certificates that enhance their status at work. When the economy is bad the converse is true, because a college degree is perceived as a mechanism to maximize earning potential and outpace the competition in pursuit of scarce employment opportunities. Many non-credit leisure classes will be seen as frivolous and certificates will only be pursued to the extent that they directly correlate with immediate employment or job advancement. Community colleges that have the vision to recognize that economic shifts are barometers for prioritizing course offerings will be successful stewards of community needs.

Community colleges empower people, enrich communities, and act for the common good where they are located. Although national statistics would portray community colleges as predominantly (67.6%) white, the proportions change based on local demographics. "For example, 94% of the students at Laredo Community College in Texas are Hispanic; 100% of the students at Lawson State Community College in Alabama are African American" (Cohen, 2005, p. 53). This means that community colleges in one location may be more focused on cultural diversity while those in another may be focused on linguistic diversity. Adult learning is familiar territory for community colleges; therefore, they are also better equipped to act as cultural and linguistic liaisons for higher education for diverse adults than traditional four-year institutions. Unquestionably to truly serve the local population community colleges must be thoroughly embedded in the culture and immersed in the language of their potential customers.

Regardless of the specific local demographics, the institution must bridge the diversity gap, foster the integration of diverse populations, and enable access to higher education for all. Pierce (1996), Seidman (1995), and the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) state “programs which support persistence-to-degree among diverse student populations, particularly important for community colleges because more than 50% of all full-time, first time students begin their education at community colleges” (Watson, Williams, & Derby, 2005, p. 79). The administration at the local community college may not endeavor to generalize diversity lessons learned outside of the institution. However the lessons learned may be invaluable to the community college population; therefore, the answer for many community colleges lies not in published research, but rather in grassroots activities in their own back yards.

Community college and four-year university students both face challenges in pursuit of educational goals. “Research has consistently found that college students, especially freshmen, are not independent, self-regulated learners” (Cukras, 2006, p. 194) and success in college may depend on an adaptable environment. Community colleges are more amenable to evaluating and adopting educational trends like distance education which enhances student access to education. These institutions are also more sensitive to economic shifts and are also agile enough to tailor offerings to meet changing community needs. The economics of the first two years of higher education can be mitigated through attendance at a community college before transferring to a four-year institution. The latter strategy can also be a hedge against the current economic downshift and prove a feasible venue for matriculation during a recession. Ultimately, community colleges must champion their community’s needs and foster learner success. The community college is a vehicle of transcendence which opens the door to employment or continued higher education. Without a doubt, community colleges adapt to instructional trends, economic shifts, and diverse demographics to empower the community by bringing higher education to their front doors.

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