PATHWAY TO MIDDLE CLASS:
ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The American community college has historically played an important role in providing a means for upward social mobility among lower socio-economic groups by providing an affordable and accessible path to a four-year baccalaureate degree. Over the years the community college model has evolved from its original conception as a “junior” college to the community college of today, which employs a multipurpose model and serves a diverse student population with varied expectations. As policymakers and administrators contemplate the future direction of the community college, lessons gleaned from studying the institution’s century-long history should inform the policies that will direct and shape the school’s mission into the current century. In an attempt to identify these lessons, this study examines the community college system within a “Past, Present, Future” framework.

Under the contemporary model, community colleges are expected not only to serve in their traditional collegiate function—that is, preparing students for eventual transfer to a four-year baccalaureate-granting school—but also to fill various workforce and community development roles. Consequently, some critics contend that the schools are increasingly distracted by the emphasis placed on their vocational programs and, as a result, have lost sight of their primary purpose of providing the academic schooling that enables students to advance within the higher education system toward a baccalaureate degree. In light of these
criticisms, the primary question guiding this study is whether, with so much emphasis turning to applied and specialized training, the community college will continue to be able to fulfill its collegiate function for students whose goal is a four-year baccalaureate degree.

In an attempt to address this research question, this study examines the existing academic literature on community colleges including their traditional collegiate function, the evolving role of the schools from both an educational and cultural perspective, the academic debate over the value of liberal arts education and the role federal policies play in formulating curriculum objectives. Additionally, the contemporary community college model is examined, focusing on its open admissions policies, the demographics of its students, and the current challenges to administrators. Special attention is given to the debate over whether community colleges are able to effectively administer both academic and vocational training and what impact this curriculum structure has on students whose goal is to transfer to a four-year institution. Finally, recent developments such as President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative and the emergence of the “applied baccalaureate” degree are analyzed for implications for the future direction of the community college system.

Beyond a literature review, Reading Area Community College (RACC) in Reading, Pennsylvania, provides an informative case study on how one mid-sized community college is adapting to changes precipitated by the “new knowledge economy.” As its student body diversifies and the local economy shifts toward high-technology industries, RACC is responding by initiating innovative programs that offer flexibility for all students, regardless of their degree aspirations. Studying RACC offers insight into how smaller communities
may cope with challenges brought on by changing demographics and suggests possible strategies for meeting the needs of a rapidly shifting local economy.

Based upon the study’s findings, the community college is shown to be well poised to provide educational opportunities that align with the needs of an ever-diversifying workforce seeking higher-level skills and training. However, in order to perform this pivotal role, the community colleges will need to demonstrate a commitment to integrating broad-based, general education elements into all of their program offerings to ensure that every student is taught the higher-level skills that employers will expect graduates to possess. The emergence of the applied baccalaureate is an exciting development that combines academic elements with the specialized training required in rapidly expanding high-technology fields. However, additional studies will be necessary to evaluate their acceptance and value within the marketplace. Additionally, as community colleges continue to innovate with new programs, greater assessment practices for measuring and evaluating student learning outcomes will need to be developed. Finally, the schools will need to develop strategies for more effectively engaging students in their personal academic and career development. Two strategies that may prove effective are 1) connecting with students early in their academic careers, e.g. while still in high school through dual-enrollment programs or through community outreach programs, and 2) providing in-depth counseling or orientation courses that survey the school’s degree offerings, focusing on their academic requirements as well as their linkage to specific occupational opportunities within the marketplace.
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INTRODUCTION

Deeply ingrained within the American ideology, education is viewed as the best means of realizing upward social mobility. A truly democratic concept, education is seen as leading to a more enlightened citizenry and thus to a more powerful and influential nation within the global society. These roots can be traced back to the birth of the country when many of our founding fathers advocated for the establishment of a national university in order to teach the ideals of republican democracy to the country’s citizens and future leaders.¹ They recognized that, for their grand democratic experiment to be successful, the American people needed to be taught the moral and intellectual lessons that would make them responsible citizens able to fulfill their democratic duties. Educated themselves during the Age of Reason, the nation’s leaders viewed education as the means of instilling in the American people a sense of intellectual responsibility and moral integrity essential to the continuation of their new republic.

Though many of these educational ideals persist today, the nature and culture of education have evolved over the centuries. Today, while the type of liberal values taught during Washington and Jefferson’s times are still embedded within the liberal arts curriculums found in the nation’s colleges and universities, we have become a country concerned primarily with earning credentials, sometimes at the expense of the learning process itself. This phenomenon is manifested in the fact that between 1993 and 2004 the percentage of Americans earning Associate’s degrees rose from 6% to 8%, those earning Bachelor’s degrees rose from 15% to 18%, and those earning Master’s degrees rose from 5% to 7%.² At the same time, however, national studies indicate that U.S. students are
performing behind their counterparts in other leading industrial countries, particularly in the areas of math and science. Despite this alarming trend in student performance, credentials continue to be viewed by workers and employers alike as a primary means of accessing higher paying jobs and are often required to transition from one career to another.

The modern community college plays an important role in educating the American populace and providing an avenue to earning the credentials that Americans are seeking more and more. Serving approximately 35% of all students enrolled in postsecondary studies, it has evolved over the years from an institution primarily suited to providing the foundational general education curriculum for the first two years of postsecondary schooling to an institution with a myriad of purposes. Today’s community colleges not only serve in their traditional function of providing academic training for transfer to a four-year school but also provide a host of vocational and workforce development training programs, community and recreational service programs, and remedial and developmental educational courses, all while often serving as community centers advancing local arts and cultural events. With so many disparate purposes, some commentators have questioned the community college’s ability to aptly serve its constituents and meet the diverse needs of its students.

As identified by David Levinson in his *Handbook to community colleges*, one of the common criticisms often cited by critics of the schools is that they tend to conform to the existing tracking structure found within other areas of the educational system, thus perpetuating the effects of sorting students into either academic or vocational programs based on nonacademic factors. In this manner, the colleges have been criticized as having a
“cooling-out” effect in that they dissuade students from pursuing personal academic ambitions and instead steer them into narrow occupational programs with limited opportunities for advancement. Critics also contend that many students who otherwise would attend a four-year school to obtain a baccalaureate degree are enticed to the community colleges by their affordability and are thus sidetracked in their pursuit of obtaining a four-year degree. In light of the high attrition rates found at community colleges, these criticisms are valid and warrant careful examination.

This study will attempt to explore these criticisms, beginning with an examination of the community college system from an historical perspective to better understand the evolving needs of community college students now and into the future. Using a “Past, Present and Future” framework allows for broad trends to emerge that will help in identifying effective educational strategies that may warrant increased attention and resources. In particular, special attention will be given to the debate over offering both academic and vocational curriculums and how such a dichotomy within the school system impacts students of lower socio-economic backgrounds. By analyzing the historical patterns of community college enrollment and administration, lessons can be learned that have the potential to inform the future growth of its educational system. Particularly as the economic landscape continues to shift and broadens to a global sphere, there is a growing need to identify the skills and abilities that employers will expect graduates to possess when entering the labor market.

At the same time, the demographics of the country are changing in ways that suggest communities will need to be able to adapt their resources to provide for a more
diverse population with varying needs and aspirations. Reading Area Community College in southeastern Pennsylvania provides an informative case study on how one community college is dealing with a diversifying student population coupled with the challenges of difficult economic times. Like most community colleges in the country, it is faced with the combination of increased enrollments and significant funding cuts, presenting new challenges that will likely persist for the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, as the nation enters into a new economic reality, workforce training and development continues to be at the forefront of federal policy initiatives. However, as more and more emphasis is placed on vocational and applied career tracks, there is a growing concern that a continued shift in this direction could be detrimental to the academic programs offered by community colleges. As a result, community colleges may find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of the new economy while balancing their fidelities to their various stakeholders, particularly those students for whom a community college offers the only viable pathway to a baccalaureate degree.

In spite of all the criticisms, community colleges are filling a needed role in the system of higher education. For many students the accessibility of the community college is the only means for advancement within the educational system and, therefore, administrators and policymakers must do all they can to ensure that this needed and important resource is used to its greatest potential. The challenge for these schools in the near future will be in determining how best to move into this new economic era characterized by workforce development while still upholding their traditional mission of
providing collegiate preparation for students whose only pathway to higher education is through the community college.
CHAPTER 1

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: PAST TO PRESENT

To fully understand today’s current community college, it is important to look back at the development and evolution of the community college system in the United States from the time of its conception. The community college has evolved significantly from the first “junior college” founded at Joliet, Illinois, in 1901. By analyzing the changes that have occurred in its educational framework over the last century, educators, administrators and researchers can identify the most effective strategies for educating an ever diversifying student population in an increasingly technologically driven economy. Community colleges have faced significant economic and demographic shifts before, so important lessons can be drawn from past experience that should be considered and can help to inform decisions for the future.

Thankfully, other researchers have identified this need, and there have been several studies that have approached the critical analysis of the community college from this type of historical perspective. One of the seminal works in this area is Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel’s *The Diverted Dream: Community College and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. Their primary thesis is that the junior college – the predecessor to today’s community college – was developed as a mechanism for diverting less academically prepared students away from the four-year schools while appeasing the country’s demand for access to higher education. They contend that this system of diversion has been perpetuated through the development of vocational educational programming which has gradually overtaken the original mission of the schools, which was
to provide the first two years of general academic training for eventual transfer to a four-year institution. They argue that, as a result, the democratizing mission of community colleges has been thwarted so that many students whose aspirations include earning a baccalaureate degree are instead diverted into terminal, two-year programs. Though other critics have echoed these criticisms, such a strong critique warrants further examination of the history and development of the community college system.

The Early “Junior” College

As the country entered the twentieth century, major changes in the cultural and economic landscape were taking place. The frontier had recently closed, and major corporations were forming the backbone of the nation’s economy. As a result, the notion of the American Dream was forced to undergo a reformulation in order to fit within the new socio-economic structure. The idea of the “self-made man” was a nineteenth century phenomenon that needed to be replaced with a new definition of the American success story, and education as a means of bettering one’s social and economic standing emerged as this new narrative. The onus was still on the individual, but, through hard work and determination, education was viewed as giving all the opportunity to raise one’s lot in life in direct proportion to his or her intellectual capabilities.

In the Progressive mood of the early twentieth century, reformers advocated for public education that was accessible to all. This growing public demand for accessible education, coupled with changing national economic priorities, led a group of university administrators to coalesce around a new concept for a “junior” college that would, in fact, serve as an extension to the high school curriculum. These early junior colleges garnered
much of their support from some of the most prestigious schools in the country, including the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan. The junior colleges were conceived as a way of providing access to postsecondary education for the masses while alleviating some of this pressure from the four-year schools that were already feeling weighted down with the responsibility of providing the required general education courses of the freshman and sophomore curriculum. In part, the motivation driving the formation of the junior college was to transfer this burden away from the four-year schools so they could focus on what their administrators perceived to be their primary purpose, research and scholarship, while also maintaining their elite status achieved through selective admissions requirements.5

In fact, there was a debate within the junior college movement itself over where the junior college fell within the educational hierarchy. Some leaders, such as Leonard Koos, favored a 6-4-4 plan that incorporated the junior college into the high school curriculum as a capstone to a student’s secondary education. However, his colleague, Walter Crosby Eells, advocated for a 6-3-3-2 plan that placed the junior college outside of the high school structure. As Brint and Karabel note, “…it was Eells’ plan that ultimately triumphed despite its relative unpopularity inside the junior college movement, for it spoke to the desire of a population thirsty for upward mobility to attend a genuine ‘college.’”6 As a result, junior college administrators felt significant pressure to legitimize their institutions as genuine “colleges” by offering the traditional collegiate-level courses that would be accepted as transfer credit at the four-year schools.7 For the first few decades of their
existence, providing the traditional collegiate function was the primary mission of the junior colleges and, in turn, they attracted a well-educated, affluent group of students.8

However, Brint and Karabel argue that there was an ulterior agenda being devised among the leaders of the junior college movement who felt that, for the schools to be truly democratic, they needed to provide “practical” and “realistic” opportunities for their students.9 “The ideal of equal education would have to be forsaken, for only differentiated education – education that fit students for their different vocational futures – was truly democratic. Paradoxically, then, if mass education were to realize the promise of democracy, separate vocational tracks had to be created.”10 However, these vocational offerings, which were primarily terminal, two-year programs with no transfer eligibility, were snubbed by students who saw benefit only in the academic tracks that led to a bachelor’s degree.11

Emergence of the “Community” College

World War II and the years immediately following the war brought significant changes to many facets of the nation’s cultural identity, including educational patterns among Americans. President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education, established in 1947, was instrumental in this process in that it called for the need for additional free, public two-year colleges to handle the expected enrollment surge in the coming decade. Prior to the war, less than ten percent of high school graduates pursued postsecondary education, but the Commission recognized the need for a more educated citizenry to meet the needs of the post-war economy.12
Moreover, the Commission’s report validated the modern community college framework with its delineated tracks for academic and vocational courses. In doing so, however, it also highlighted for educators the importance of incorporating general education elements into their vocational offerings:

…the community college must prepare its students to live a rich and satisfying life, part of which involves earning a living. To this end, the total educational effort, general and vocational, of any student must be a well-integrated single program, not two programs. The sharp distinction which certain educators tend to make between general or liberal or cultural education on the one hand and vocational or semiprofessional or professional education on the other hand is not valid. Problems which industrial, agricultural, or commercial workers face today are only in part connected to the skills they use in their jobs. Their attitudes and their relationships with others are also important. Certainly the worker’s effectiveness in dealing with family, community, national, and international problems, and his interest in maintaining and participating in wholesome recreation programs are important factors in a satisfying life. Many workers should be prepared for membership on municipal government councils, on school boards, on recreation commissions, and the like. The vocational aspect of one’s education must not, therefore, tend to segregate “workers” from “citizens.”

Unfortunately, despite the Commission’s efforts to encourage broad-based general education for all students regardless of their chosen track of study, the main argument of community college critics remains today: the continued focus on vocational programs, begun decades earlier, has threatened the community college’s standing as a legitimate academic institution while perpetuating its diversionary effects by sidetracking students into vocations that offer limited mobility and no opportunity for educational advancement beyond terminal degrees. To better understand their argument, a closer look at the contemporary community college model is necessary.
Today’s community college is a diverse organization serving multiple constituencies and purposes, drawn together with the unifying mission to support and promote student learning. At the core of the college’s course offerings are its traditional academic courses and vocational programs. In addition, many community colleges also provide continuing education in the form of job and skill training and recreational programming as well as remedial and developmental education and workforce development through partnerships with the local business community. Each of these individual functions will be addressed in more detail below.

Programming

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of the “junior” college when first instituted was to provide the coursework for the thirteenth and fourteenth grade levels, or the freshman and sophomore years of college. By providing general education courses found within the traditional liberal arts curriculum, the junior colleges prepared their students for the upper-division work at a four-year school. Subjects typically associated with the liberal arts include those in English, humanities, social and hard sciences, and fine and performing arts. Providing academic training in the liberal arts remains a primary function of the schools today. Students who pursue this track take a mix of liberal arts courses in designated subject areas, with the program culminating in the conferral of an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree. If desired, the student is able to apply the academic credits earned at the community college to a four-year school.
Viewed by some critics as standing in direct opposition to the academic offerings are the vocational and applied occupational programs. Vocational programs provide training in very specific subject areas and typically do not contain many, if any, general education requirements. These programs are generally terminal in design, culminating with the conferral of an Applied Associate of Science (A.A.S.) degree which traditionally has been ineligible for transfer to a four-year school. Some of the most popular vocational programs offered in recent years are in the allied health and technical fields.

In part due to their popularity among students, there has been a gradual shift in focus to vocational programming, with many schools now concentrating their marketing efforts in these areas. While the traditional collegiate function still exists as one of the primary functions in most community colleges, much of the recent academic research studying the schools has examined how to strengthen their traditional collegiate function in light of the shift in focus to vocational programming. This debate over whether the vocational programs are undermining the traditional collegiate function, particularly for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds, will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

Another significant function handled by community colleges is providing remedial, or developmental, education. This type of coursework is at the sub-collegiate level and is intended to assist students who enter the community college academically less prepared than other students. Many times a student may be required to complete remedial coursework in writing or math as a prerequisite to enrolling in one of the school’s academic programs. While studies indicate that students who successfully complete remedial
coursework typically continue to perform well throughout their college careers, remedial courses also have a disproportionately high failure rate compared to collegiate-level courses.\textsuperscript{17} Because of their relatively high failure rates, there is concern among some scholars that the growing number of remedial offerings may threaten the academic integrity of the community college system as a whole.

Besides offering degree programs for many first-time students, community colleges have found a market niche in providing continuing education and job training for workers already in the workforce. Particularly as technology advances, workers are finding the need to upgrade their skills, and community colleges offer a low-cost, convenient way for employees to obtain the training required for them to maintain their current positions or advance to higher positions. Likewise, workforce development initiatives have allowed for a mutually beneficial arrangement between local businesses and community colleges. Community colleges are able to offer cost-effective training to corporations at either on-site or off-site training facilities. By contracting out the work in this manner, businesses are able to save valuable money on training costs while community colleges receive local tax benefits for collaborating on workforce initiatives that benefit the local community.

Finally, also under the umbrella of Continuing Education, many community colleges have found an alternative tuition revenue source by offering recreational programming to the local community. Such programming can range from cooking classes to home improvement courses to dance and music programs. In some schools, Continuing Education programming can account for as much as 40% of total tuition revenue streams, providing a crucial funding source.\textsuperscript{18}
Admissions

True to their democratic objective, community colleges are unique within the higher education system by employing an open admissions policy. Going back to the founding mission of the junior college, school reformers wanted an affordable and *accessible* avenue to higher education. This aim has been maintained in the contemporary community college, so that most colleges (approximately 95%) do not apply any type of admissions criteria for entering students. Although most will administer entrance examinations in order to determine appropriate placement within academic courses, there is no minimum grade point average or SAT score required for admission to most schools. The exception to this rule would be the small percentage of schools that may require a high school transcript, English proficiency exam score, or the results of a college admission test.19

In light of their open admissions policy, one of the greatest challenges to the schools is maintaining academic excellence. By accepting all applicants, community colleges attract a greater proportion of students who are less academically prepared than students entering directly into the four-year schools. Many of these students are first required to enroll in remedial courses and be able to demonstrate acceptable proficiency in the subject matter before they are eligible to enroll in academic courses. Additionally, as enrollments have begun to surge, some schools have needed to cap enrollments in certain courses, thus undermining their open admissions design.

Demographics of Students

When compared to four-year schools, community colleges have a different demographic makeup. Overall, they enroll more women, minorities, and members of lower
socio-economic groups than do four-year schools. As well, a far greater percentage of community college students attend on a part-time basis than in four-year schools. Finally, the aspirations and goal attainments of students in community colleges are much more diverse than in four-year institutions.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, as of January 2009 women comprised 58% of all community college students. Likewise, community colleges enroll a greater percentage of minority students. In 2003-2004, the community college student population was comprised of 15% Black and 14% Hispanic students compared with 10% Black and 9% Hispanic students at public four-year schools. Furthermore, studies show that Hispanics utilize the resources of community colleges at a greater rate than other racial/ethnic groups. Though in general they attend college on a smaller scale than other groups, they enroll in greater proportions in community colleges than in four-year schools.20

Community colleges also enroll a far greater proportion of part-time students than do their four-year school counterparts. Approximately 60% of community college students attend class on a part-time basis compared to approximately 26% in four-year schools.21 With more part-time students, another challenge to community colleges is to provide opportunities for the meaningful social integration which is shown to increase student success. Some scholars have noted that students tend to have higher persistence and performance rates when they are “well integrated into the academic and social systems of a college campus, especially through informal, out-of-class interactions with peers and faculty, and participation in extracurricular activities.”22 Providing these types of social interactions and engagement is one of the biggest challenges when dealing with part-time
students who typically do not live on campus and have competing priorities among school, work and family.

Studies have also shown that community college students enroll for a myriad of reasons. In a survey from 2003-2004, students reported a variety of reasons for enrolling in a community college, including eventual transfer to a four-year school (36%), completing an Associate’s degree (43%), completing a certificate (17%), obtaining job skills (42%), and for personal interest (46%). Since respondents were permitted to select more than one reason, it is not possible to identify their primary reasons for attending. However, the results of this survey do indicate the diverse motives of the students. As noted by the authors providing the survey’s analysis, “Given the great diversity of community college students, their varying reasons for attending community colleges, and their different levels of commitment, any analysis of community college students—especially one that looks at their access to postsecondary education and their persistence and attainment once enrolled—is complicated.”

Current Challenges

Adding to the challenges already identified are more recent trends that will need to be addressed by administrators in both the immediate and long terms. One of the primary issues is the surging enrollments being felt at community colleges across the country at the same time as they are experiencing major funding cuts. Following the economic collapse of 2008, many first-time students turned to community colleges as a more affordable alternative to four-year universities. As well, unemployed workers returned to school
following layoffs in order to upgrade their job skills to make themselves more marketable or to pursue an alternative career path altogether.

Higher enrollments would normally be good news for the community colleges, except that they have seen their budgets cut by huge percentages as a result of state and local budget deficits. As a result, many colleges are reporting major programmatic and staffing cuts which will, in turn, affect their students in terms of the services and courses offered. Already some of the larger community colleges serving major metropolitan areas, such as Miami Dade College in Florida, have had to cap enrollment on certain courses, leaving some students without the needed credit hours required to graduate.\(^{25}\) For colleges with smaller enrollments and, thus, smaller sources of tuition revenue, the next several years will be particularly challenging.

While enrollments increase, so, too, does the amount of remedial assistance which students require. In 2003-2004, almost 30% of community college students self-reported having enrolled during their first year of school in some form of remedial class.\(^{26}\) As mentioned above, maintaining such a high proportion of remedial offerings perpetuates the image of community colleges as schools with subpar academic standards. This stigma may well be exacerbated by the current economic situation, as it is likely that more and more states will move most remedial coursework out of the public four-year schools and into the community colleges, a trend that has been growing in recent years.\(^{27}\)

Related to the growing number of students requiring remedial work is the larger question of how schools should best manage student ambitions that are incongruous with their realistic educational attainment. Burton Clark identified this conflict in his seminal
study on the “cooling-out” function in community colleges. He found that higher educational institutions, and community colleges in particular, are faced with the difficult task of advising students whose degree aspirations are incompatible with their academic abilities. He argued that to deal with this situation, school administrators have developed a mechanism for gently deflecting students’ educational ambitions toward more “realistic” goals through an institutionalized process of counseling, testing, and self-assessment.

Brint and Karabel also describe this contradiction, terming it the “management of ambition.” They identify an inherent conflict within the American ideology which asserts that by working hard every person has an equal chance of getting ahead, since there will always be more people aspiring for higher levels of status than the American economic structure can support. The challenge to administrators, then, is how to provide truly democratic educational opportunities that do not have the unintended consequence of diverting personal student ambitions that, in turn, can lead to disengagement, disillusionment with the educational system, or at worst, actually work to perpetuate existing social inequalities. On the other hand, administrators are dealing with already high attrition rates, in part due to the lack of academic preparation of many entering students. This issue has particular pertinence when discussing the curriculum paradox between academic and vocational offerings which will be examined in the following chapter.

Furthermore, administrative efforts of many schools have focused primarily on the recruitment of new students and maintaining sufficient levels of continuing students. As a result, the assessment of learning outcomes has often been overlooked in favor of these more immediate enrollment concerns. However, there has been a recent initiative among
scholars to push for more coordinated efforts in schools to assess actual learning outcomes of their students. W. Norton Grubb addresses these informational gaps in his essay looking at economic returns to sub-baccalaureate schooling: “Setting standards for outcomes, operationalizing them in performance standards, and then using the resulting information to provide better advice to students about career options and better information for state and federal policy makers are obvious remedies for the information problems that now exist.”

Likewise, accrediting organizations are emphasizing the need for community colleges to establish set performance measures that assess a student’s “knowledge, skills and competencies” to ensure they are meeting institutional expectations. The broader goal is to use the outcomes data to identify strategies for further improving student learning.

A fact often cited by its critics, community colleges are serving in an ever-growing number of roles within their local communities. With so many disparate functions, setting clear institutional goals that address their many constituents in a unified manner will require increased coordination among all levels of staff, faculty and administrators. In addition, identifying better ways of reconciling their sometimes conflicting missions (e.g. offering both academic and vocational programming) must be made a priority to avoid further criticism which would serve only as an unneeded distraction at such a pivotal time in the schools’ development. Clearly, none of the issues discussed above are independent of one another. How each one is addressed necessarily impacts policy decisions in other areas, which makes understanding the nuances and interdependency of the many functions performed by the modern community college of critical importance.
CHAPTER 2
THE CURRICULUM PARADOX: ACADEMIC VS. VOCATIONAL TRAINING

As seen in Chapter 1, today’s community college serves many purposes and diverse constituencies. As a result, it often faces harsh criticisms that it is a “contradictory” college and fails to meet the needs of many students because of its opposing missions.\(^1\) At the heart of this debate is the contention that there is a fundamental conflict in offering both vocational and academic programs. Critics assert that many students are inevitably tracked into vocational programs that divert them from their true aspirations of obtaining a baccalaureate degree and that such programs undermine the academic integrity of the schools.\(^2\) Defenders, on the other hand, argue that any harm that may result due to students being diverted is outweighed by the opportunities the schools afford to a vast number of students who otherwise would not pursue any degree at all.\(^3\) This chapter will explore the primary arguments from both sides in an effort to determine which viewpoint is most persuasive.

Relevant to this discussion is the issue of transfer to four-year schools. Due in part to the increased focus on vocational programs, the community college has been criticized in recent years for failing in its mission to prepare its students for transfer to four-year schools.\(^4\) We will take a closer look at these criticisms as well as other factors that might be hampering students’ desires to transfer. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of actual outcomes and labor market returns with respect to both baccalaureate and sub-baccalaureate education, including a comparison of academic and career majors. By
looking at the relative value of specific degree programs within the marketplace, policies and programs can be developed that will better inform students of their options and, hopefully, encourage a greater number of students to persist in their studies toward their ultimate degree goals.

*Rise of Vocational Programming*

Since the late 1960s there has been a significant increase in the amount of vocational programming offered within community colleges. In fact, between 1959 and the mid-1980s there was a 20-40% jump in the number of community college students enrolled in vocational programs, so that by the mid-1980s 40-60% of all community college students were enrolled in such programs. With such a huge increase, it is informative to look at the primary forces driving this level of vocationalization.

There have been several models put forth to explain the rise of vocational programs within the community college. The traditional economic-based theories include the business- and consumer-choice models which purport, respectively, that the rise of vocational programs was in direct response to demand from the business community for trained workers in specific trade areas and from consumer demand for educational opportunities that would prepare them for the types of jobs businesses were seeking to fill. More recently, new theories have been advanced that focus on 1) institutional characteristics inherent in the schools that have led to the rise of vocational programming as well as 2) the role government officials have played in formulating policies affecting school programming. The latter of these two theories will be explored in more detail.
Brint and Karabel advance an institutional model arguing that the rise of vocational programs was the work of school administrators who were motivated to carve out a unique and stable market niche for themselves. Since the state universities and private colleges held a stranglehold on the market for professional training via the traditional liberal arts curriculum, junior college leaders identified the next most prestigious training fields not yet dominated within the higher educational system. After analyzing labor market trends and surveying business leaders, they deduced that there was a genuine need for semi-professional training and then worked with other university administrators to identify, of those semi-professional jobs, the ones that were of the highest status and that did not currently have representation within the four-year school curriculum. Brint and Karabel state as follows:

The underlying logic of the junior college vanguard’s vocationalization project was rooted in its members’ forthright recognition of the hierarchical character of the division of labor in industrial societies and the conviction that the educational system should be consciously designed as to produce trained workers to fill the slots in this hierarchy.

From their perspective, offering community college students an alternative track to stable, albeit, middle-level jobs consistent with “actual life prospects” was the most democratic approach they could take.

Kevin Dougherty expounds on this theory, asserting that government officials at all levels have also been instrumental in pushing the vocationalization of the schools. In his “relative autonomy of the state” theory, he proposes that government officials, like school administrators, have pursued their own self-interests when setting education policy:

Local administrators of community colleges and their state and national associations have been long drawn to occupational education. It is a means of leveraging the
political and monetary support of business and elected officials. It also protects their institution’s reputation as an avenue of opportunity by providing salable job skills to students who leave without going on to four-year colleges. Meanwhile, state and national elected officials—ranging from state governors to U.S. Congress members—have supported occupational education in order to enhance their reelection chances by stimulating economic growth. State universities, finally, have seen occupational education as protecting university selectivity by channeling away the flood of students bidding for entry into the university.¹³

This theory, particularly, has renewed relevancy in light of the recent government-sponsored workforce development initiatives that are currently being brought to community colleges across the country. As will be discussed in the following chapter, policymakers would be prudent to bear in mind the various implications such initiatives may have in influencing the long-term direction of the schools.

No doubt, the cast of players determining the priorities of the community college is vast and extensive. Considering the complexity of the modern community college, it is likely that all of these models help explain in part the evolution of the vocational curriculum. Certainly since the late 1960s businesses have taken a much more serious interest in vocational programming, hiring many community college students to fill needed roles as technicians, nurses and computer programmers, to name just a few. As the job prospects for these types of professions have heated up, consumers have increasingly been attracted to community college programs that offer the training and educational background employers seek. For many students today, the community college vocational programs offer a legitimate avenue to well respected, lucrative careers, and this is one of the great successes of the modern community college. However, the argument of many critics remains: for students whose ultimate goal is to obtain a baccalaureate degree, community
colleges have the unintended effect of actually lowering their chances of earning the degree than if they enroll in a four-year school.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Educational Attainment}

Let us now turn to the issue of educational attainment to evaluate the impact community college attendance has on the degree prospects of its students. Studies have consistently shown that students who enter community colleges obtain fewer bachelor’s degrees than students who enter directly into four-year schools, even when controlling for characteristics such as degree aspirations, socio-economic background, and academic aptitude.\textsuperscript{15} Even community college defenders cannot deny this “baccalaureate gap” which indicates community college students earn between 11-19\% fewer bachelor’s degrees than their four-year school counterparts.\textsuperscript{16} Since approximately two-thirds of community college students self-report aspiring to a baccalaureate degree upon entering the community college, it is important to understand how the community college is failing in its mission to facilitate transfer to a four-year school for those students whose ultimate goal is a baccalaureate degree.\textsuperscript{17}

In his influential article, “Community Colleges and Baccalaureate Attainment,” Kevin Dougherty identifies three critical obstacles community college students must overcome along the path to obtaining a baccalaureate degree. These are 1) staying in school during the first two years of school when the potential for withdrawing is at its highest, 2) successfully transferring to a four-year school, and 3) persisting at the four-year school after transferring.\textsuperscript{18} Adding to the many challenges community college students already face, Dougherty also discusses a number of \textit{institutional} factors that may be inadvertently posing
challenges to students who attempt to maneuver these three steps in order to attain a baccalaureate degree. Let us look at each of these steps in more detail.

The first two years in community college are difficult years for many students. In fact, a survey of first-time community college freshmen in 2003-2004 who intended to transfer to a four-year school found that 39% had withdrawn from school by 2006 before earning a credential. One of the greatest challenges for schools is to find meaningful ways to integrate their students both socially and academically. Experts agree that students are much more likely to persist if they have well developed social networks among classmates and professors and if they are engaged in extracurricular activities associated with the campus. The lack of dormitories, especially, has been found to limit the level of social engagement of students with their peers while also limiting the amount of interaction students have with faculty and other administrators. Unlike their four-year school counterparts, the majority of which offer on-campus residential facilities, very few community colleges offer on-campus housing to their students. The lack of on-campus dormitories severely limits the amount of social interaction students have with their peers, thus making meaningful social integration much less likely.

This is even more important for community college students who are disproportionately nonwhite, working-class, female, and first-generation college students. Cultural studies indicate that particularly minority and working-class students are quite ambivalent when it comes to postsecondary schooling and feel a lot of external pressure from family and friends who may be resentful of their decision to pursue higher education. Kevin Dougherty observes the following:
They may want to do well, but they are also afraid of failing. Furthermore, they tend to view academic success as requiring them to take on the culture of an alien group and to repudiate (and be repudiated by) their family and peers. Hence, working-class and minority students often develop powerful norms against taking academic work seriously.\textsuperscript{23}

In such situations, especially, it is important for schools to foster strong social integration of their students who may need the extra support from peers and fellow classmates.

Likewise, Mariana Alfonso discusses the need for strong \textit{academic} integration.\textsuperscript{24} Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), she analyzed the impact community college attendance has on baccalaureate attainment. The NELS dataset consists of a national cohort of students who were in the eighth grade in 1988 and who were tracked through 2000 to study educational outcomes following their high school graduation. Before controlling for specific variables, the survey found that, of those members of the 1992 high school class who entered a community college, only 20\% had obtained a bachelor’s degree by 2000. In comparison, 71\% of the class who entered a four-year school had obtained a bachelor’s degree by 2000.\textsuperscript{25} Even when attempting to control for such variables as students’ diverse educational aspirations, non-traditional enrollment pathways, and the self-selection process of deciding on which college to attend, a significant baccalaureate gap remains.

Alfonso finds that this baccalaureate gap might be partially explained by the “weak academic integration” argument put forth by other scholars such as Dougherty. Like the importance of meaningful social integration, students perform better and typically persist at higher rates when they are well integrated into the school academically. Therefore, when schools such as community colleges have low selectivity – as they do with their open
admissions policies – students tend to have lower expectations for themselves. These lower expectations are often, in turn, mirrored by teachers who lower their expectations for their students. Kevin Dougherty discusses this phenomenon:

Many observers have noted that community college teachers tend to have low expectations of their students, perceiving them as largely lacking academic ability and motivation...low expectations tend to lead teachers to withdraw attention and praise from poorer students, which in turn reinforces the very poverty of the student performance that is being decried. Demoralized teachers not only teach badly but also tend to provoke students to react to teachers’ restricted expectations by curtailing their own effort and treating teachers and courses with disrespect.

Such a situation perpetuates the notion of community colleges as second-class institutions which overall has a negative effect on students’ persistence rates.

Assuming community college students persist through the sophomore year, there is the next significant hurdle that must be jumped, that being the transfer to a four-year school. This can be an emotionally daunting process for students since it requires enrolling in a completely foreign school, possibly in a new city or town. Furthermore, there are a number of institutional factors that have been identified as having a negative impact on students’ transfer rates including lack of financial aid, lack of support and guidance from community college faculty and administrators through the transfer process, and rejection from receiving schools.

Furthermore, many scholars have criticized the increased vocational nature of community colleges as having a detrimental effect on the academic programs, the traditional pathway for transferring to a four-year school. Critics argue, and studies corroborate, that schools with a more vocational bent have lower transfer rates than schools with a stronger emphasis on academic programs. There are two primary reasons for this.
First, schools with a stronger liberal arts focus typically are more effective in preparing their students for academic coursework at the senior institutions. Studies have shown that, besides ethnicity and socio-economic status, academic preparation is one of the most telling factors predicting transfer success:

On average, those students most likely to transfer to a senior institution had taken an academic program in high school, more math and science courses, and were more engaged with campus life at the community college. These findings, coupled with the positive correlation between liberal arts course offerings and transfer rates, suggest a direct link between academic preparation and the liberal arts curriculum.30

Secondly, vocational courses are less likely to be accepted for credit at senior institutions than liberal arts courses, and when they do transfer, they typically are counted as electives and not toward a student’s major.31

Furthermore, some scholars argue that the rise of vocational programs has had a deleterious effect on the quality of the academic programs found within community colleges.32 As the vocational programs have risen in popularity, they have been more aggressively marketed than the academic programs with the result that many academic departments have been cut back and courses eliminated. Of legitimate concern among scholars is the trend of students who enter community college undecided about their career plans who are ultimately enticed into the vocational programs over the academic tracks due in large part to lack of information on academic programs and an abundance of information on the vocational programs. As a result, these critics contend that many students with baccalaureate ambitions are diverted into vocational programs that are terminal in nature and end up never transferring to a four-year school.33
One proposal that has been advocated by several scholars is to better integrate general education elements into the vocational programs so that they more closely parallel the liberal arts courses, including their potential to transfer to a four-year school. Tronie Rifkin sums up this notion:

Particular attention needs to be given to curriculum design and revision for two-year college occupational-technical programs to acknowledge the growing reality of transfer in career as well as liberal arts areas…Integrating the liberal arts into occupational and technical programs brings a transferable college-level focus to these programs. The liberal arts and occupational courses can coexist comfortably as long as both types of programs are at the collegiate level.

The major challenge to this, as discussed above, is how to ensure that community college courses are held at the collegiate level when so many of its students are underprepared academically. In addition, it will take a willingness on the part of faculty to revise existing curricula to incorporate liberal education concepts which, in turn, may require that they formulate completely new pedagogical approaches, as well.

The last major hurdle community college students face in the transfer process is surviving at the four-year school after transferring. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors working against their favor, including lack of financial aid, being ill-equipped to handle the academic rigor of the senior institution, loss of credit hours during the transfer process, and lack of social and academic integration into the four-year school. Consequently, approximately 1/5 of all community college students who transfer leave higher education within one year of moving to the new school.

Community college students often experience what has been termed “transfer shock.” Faced with courses at a higher academic caliber than those to which they are accustomed, they often struggle to keep up with their fellow classmates and experience
feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Combined with their academic underpreparation, they often experience a dramatic decrease in grades which is sometimes sufficient cause for them to drop out or to be academically dismissed.

There are at least two reasons why community college transfer courses are not as rigorous as their university equivalents. First, Dougherty notes that prerequisites are not standard for many transfer community college courses, “with the result that students do not have to progress in their learning and can avoid difficult courses. As a result, transfer courses are often not up to university standards of instruction.” Secondly, surveys indicate that community college instructors have lower expectations of their students, an observation that is manifested in relatively undemanding assignments and other coursework, particularly the lack of writing assignments.

Then, too, four-year schools often fail to integrate transfer students into their community socially. We discussed above how important this is at the community college level, and it is just as important after transferring to a senior institution. Since many transfer students coming from the community college need to support themselves by working, they have less time to join student organizations; furthermore, many times these types of clubs and societies focus most of their attention on recruiting freshmen. Transfer students are also often unable to secure on-campus housing since preference is typically given to first-year students over upperclassmen. Again, the lack of on-campus housing is a major hindrance to the social integration of transfer students.

As is the case at all stages of the community college student’s academic career, financial aid can play a major factor in allowing the student to continue with his or her
Surprisingly, only 31% of community college students receive federal aid, primarily in the form of Pell Grants and Stafford Loans, compared to 51% of public four-year school students who receive some form of federal financial aid. Although community college tuition is on average a third of the cost of public four-year colleges ($2,402/year compared to $6,585/year), community college students are disproportionately poorer and come more often from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, the opportunity cost associated with their attending school, including the cost of living expenses and foregone earnings, is often times higher than it would be for a student attending a four-year school.

Credit loss is another major issue for many students who transfer from community colleges to four-year schools. Though many two-year schools have articulation agreements with senior institutions, the two-year schools ultimately have little control over determining which courses will transfer and which will not. Many times, vocational course credits do not transfer, and even academic courses must closely parallel the university courses for the students to be given credit for them. On top of this, students many times do not know in advance which credits will transfer due to lack of advising and poor communication on the part of community college faculty and administrators. Consequently, students end up unknowingly enrolling in courses that will not transfer to the senior school. Finally, universities often will limit to two years’ worth the number of credits they will accept for transfer, so that some students end up losing credit hours when they transfer. Likewise, universities are often stringent in terms of course sequencing and prerequisites and will award credit only for courses that meet their specific requirements.
No doubt, the potential for lost credits is a troubling issue and, coupled with other challenges facing transfer students, is sometimes enough to serve as the catalyst for their decision to drop out of school.

Clearly community college students face many obstacles along their journey to obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Considering the difficulties they have at maneuvering these three critical steps, and after studying and measuring the actual degree outcomes of community college students, Kevin Dougherty concludes that those aspiring to a four-year degree are actually placed at a disadvantage by starting their studies at a community college. However, he also finds that sub-baccalaureate students, those whose ultimate educational goal is less than a baccalaureate degree, fare better at community colleges than at four-year schools. Supporting Dougherty’s findings, Mariana Alfonso’s study of the NELS cohort also finds “that community colleges significantly reduce the probability of attaining a bachelor’s degree, as compared to four-year institutions.”

It is important to note that there is strong disagreement within the academic community as to the overall impact community college attendance has on baccalaureate attainment. Other scholars, such as Cecilia Rouse, conclude that the impact is less significant than what Dougherty suggests. Rouse takes a utilitarian viewpoint, asserting that any negative effects of having some students diverted from their four-year degree aspirations are outweighed by the benefit of students utilizing community colleges who would otherwise not pursue any form of postsecondary studies at all. In addition, she finds that proximity to a community college – or any school, for that matter – is a more significant determining factor than even tuition costs in a student’s decision to enroll in
school. In this respect, community colleges are fulfilling one of their primary missions by providing accessible education to all who seek it.

So why is such a discussion on the transfer process and vocational versus academic programming important? Is there a direct correlation between degree attainment and program choice to labor earnings? It is to this subject we will next turn.

Labor Market Returns to Community College Education

It is a widely accepted fact that, on average, bachelor degree holders earn more than workers holding an associate’s degree or less. In fact, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics information, the average annual wage for bachelor degree occupations in May 2007 was $62,083 compared to $43,287 for traditional community college occupations (defined as those for which the primary mode of entry into the workforce is either an associate’s degree or other vocational certificate). However, there is significant disagreement as to the labor market returns for students whose community college education terminates at the sub-baccalaureate level, with scholars disagreeing on the earnings benefits of various community college credentials.

In a seminal study on the subject, Thomas Kane and Cecilia Rouse analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72) and calculated that attending a community college raised earnings on average 10% even for those students who did not complete an associate’s degree. Likewise, Dave Marcotte and his colleagues found similar results when they undertook a follow-up study of the NLS-72 dataset, finding that community college students realized a 5-10% increase in earnings for every year of community college completed, regardless of whether an associate’s degree
was obtained. Interestingly, they also found that the wage gains benefited women more than men, with women realizing double the benefits than men among associate degree holders.49

In contrast to these findings, Norton Grubb analyzed data from the Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation and concluded that, while associate degree earners do realize substantial wage benefits relative to workers possessing only a high school diploma, there is no significant wage advantage to pursuing community college coursework if a credential is not obtained.50 As one explanation for this finding, he cites evidence of what he terms “program effects” (also sometimes referred to as “sheepskin effects”), which are the additional earnings benefits that accrue to completed coursework once a credential is conferred. In other words, his findings suggest that employers are likely to offer higher compensation to a worker who possesses a credential than they would to another worker who does not possess a credential, even if equal amounts of coursework have been completed.51

Scholars have also studied, at the sub-baccalaureate level, the impact of choice of major on earnings and have found wage benefits vary drastically depending on the field of study pursued. A recent study conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found community college students who fail to advance to a senior institution are still able to realize substantial wage gains by selecting high-return fields.52 For example, students concentrating in health-related tracks can realize up to 40% higher earnings than students who pursue studies in the humanities. Likewise, pursuing vocational or professional studies such as business management increases potential earnings by as much as 20%, while
students who concentrate in academic majors, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), typically earn less than students who concentrate in vocational programs. What these results suggest is that low-performing community college students might be well advised to pursue vocational programs if their probability of continuing on to obtain a baccalaureate degree is low.53

Gill and Leigh cite results that support the above findings.54 In their study using National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data, they calculated that students who enroll in terminal community college programs realize an average of a 38% wage increase over workers with only a high school diploma. Hispanic and Black men, particularly, appear to benefit from community college vocational programs, with Black men realizing a 45% increase in earnings. Interestingly, these results closely mirror the wage benefits seen by four-year college starters who ultimately withdraw prior to earning a baccalaureate degree.55

As well, Grubb found drastic differences between academic and vocational fields at the sub-baccalaureate level.56 He found that women on average realize higher wage earnings by majoring in fields like health and business management, while men see high wage returns in fields such as engineering, business management, and technical occupations. In contrast, holders of associate’s degrees in academic subjects typically realize relatively low returns, an observation he attributes to the degree’s ambiguous position within the labor market. He goes on to note the following:

Evidently, at the sub-baccalaureate level, it matters a great deal what field of study an individual enters. Some programs prepare their students for such poorly-paid occupations that there is no real economic advantage to attending a community college or technical institute…What remains unclear is whether students are well-
informed about these patterns, so that they can make well-informed choices among the occupational alternatives.\textsuperscript{57}

Considering the relatively low return to academic associate degrees, he argues that pursuing such degrees might be a poor economic investment for students who either choose not to continue on toward a baccalaureate degree or fail to transfer despite their initial intentions.

Based on these findings it would appear that at the sub-baccalaureate level, career and vocational programs provide the best potential for increased earnings in the labor market. Supporting these findings, the Gates Foundation study referenced above found that students who earned a certificate (usually requiring just one year of coursework) from a community college vocational program had wage premiums that were 27\% higher than students who left college without a credential. However, the wage increase was only 8\% higher for students earning an academic associate’s degree.\textsuperscript{58} Again, these results appear to indicate that, for students whose highest level of education is less than a baccalaureate degree, the greatest potential to raise earnings is found in the career-related programs.

While these wage differentials are significant and seemingly impressive for the career-oriented programs, they should not overshadow the fact that a baccalaureate degree still provides even greater wage benefits than any of the community college’s terminal degrees or certificates. For example, students with an associate’s degree in a STEM field typically see an earnings increase of 50\% by continuing on to obtain their baccalaureate degree in the same field. Such a huge increase is indicative of the higher-level analytical skills employers are seeking—and expecting—in graduates.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, it is essential that community colleges identify and implement strategies for improving and strengthening their transfer function. With the vocational programs well established and highly popular among
students, the schools can afford to focus more energy on devising ways of increasing communications regarding their transfer services, providing more intensive counseling to potential transfer students, and better preparing their students for the academic rigors of a four-year school. At the minimum, writing assignments need to be incorporated as a standard grade component into all degree programs, both vocational and academic.

Additionally, the lack of financial aid presents a significant barrier to many students who aspire to a baccalaureate degree. Considering that nearly half of all first-time college students enter postsecondary education via a community college, federal aid policies need to be reexamined to determine if they are meeting the needs of modern community college students. Especially since community colleges enroll a disproportionately larger percentage of disadvantaged or low-income students, the lack of sufficient financial aid is cause for concern. As one of the few viable avenues to higher education, it is imperative that federal policy address students’ financial needs in order to secure their access to the valuable resources community colleges offer.

Finally, as noted by others, community colleges need to identify meaningful ways of integrating their students both socially and academically. For instance, it is important for schools to recognize the tendency for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds to select majors that are less challenging and in which they have a higher likelihood of earning a degree. This phenomenon likely stems from a number of factors, including their limited financial resources, but certainly also from a self-perception of not being able to manage the coursework of more difficult majors. Similarly, studies have found that race and gender have a strong correlation with the selection of majors, with women and minority groups less
often pursuing majors in the hard sciences. Schools should set a priority to combat this trend by encouraging their students to investigate all academic avenues available to them. This will require that schools provide clear and concise information to students on the academic requirements of various degree programs, including transfer prerequisites and minimum cumulative grade point averages, as well as graduation rates and post-graduation employment prospects.

Another strategy that has been used with relative success is to establish mentoring programs that pair an incoming student with an upperclassman with similar academic interests and social background. Ideally, the mentor is available to answer questions of the freshman and help guide him or her during the first year on campus. The mentor provides not only verbal encouragement but also, by providing a real-life “success story,” serves to validate the mentee’s self-confidence in pursuing his or her educational goals.

Other scholars have called for the need for more transparent information to be made available to students, and this is a goal that should be pursued aggressively by the schools. Only through clearly communicated and transparent information will students be able to make informed decisions regarding their educational and career options. Also, transfer and academic programs should not fall in the shadows of the well-publicized vocational programs, nor should the academic courses be subject to sub-collegiate standards. While there is, of course, the need for remedial programming, there should be set sequencing and prerequisites in the academic tracks that require students to progress in their learning and demonstrate measurable competencies and learning objectives before passing to the next level or course in the sequence.
Implementing these policy recommendations will require a commitment on the part of the schools to develop more in-depth outcome assessment models and, even more importantly, a fidelity to seeing that such analysis is carried out. However, in doing so they will strengthen their transfer function and, in turn, better serve those students for whom a baccalaureate degree is their ultimate goal. Particularly in light of the growing concentration on workforce development and contract training being advocated by local businesses and elected officials, a renewed focus on the collegiate function of the schools is especially critical at this point in time. The schools are already succeeding in providing an alternative pathway to viable employment within the labor market through their vocational programming, and there is no reason why the schools cannot fulfill all of their various missions at the highest level, including preparing their students for successful transfer to senior institutions. It is to the future direction of the schools that we next turn.
CHAPTER 3
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF THE FUTURE

As has been discussed in the preceding chapters, the modern community college faces tough criticisms, principally that by diverting its students into terminal, career-specific tracks, it is failing in its mission in providing an alternative pathway to the baccalaureate degree. Critics have called for the need to strengthen the collegiate function and increase the services that facilitate transfer to four-year institutions so that students who aspire to a baccalaureate degree receive adequate support to reach their educational goals. This debate has renewed relevance in light of the current economic situation and the associated increased focus on workforce development. With community colleges given a federal mandate to help stimulate local economic development by establishing and expanding partnerships within the business community, there is the potential for the transfer function to fall even further from the top of institutional priorities.

In July 2009 President Barack Obama proposed legislation to pump an estimated $12 billion into the community college system including funds allocated to developing and expanding existing partnerships between the schools and the local business community and other workforce development initiatives. With an already deep-rooted dichotomy existing between academic and vocational education tracks within the schools, placing additional emphasis on vocational programming increases the potential for this division to widen even further. This is problematic since vocational programs have historically been terminal in nature, with students earning applied associate’s degrees that are typically insufficient for transfer to four-year schools. As noted earlier, baccalaureate holders earn substantially
more in wages, so any strategy for revitalizing the economy that encourages students to pursue terminal applied associate’s degrees rather than baccalaureate degrees should be approached with some degree of caution.

As national economic priorities shift, some scholars have responded by advocating for schools to increase their offerings of “applied baccalaureates.” A fairly recent trend which emerged in the early 1990s, the applied baccalaureate extends the potential degree attainment of an applied associate degree holder to the baccalaureate level by merging specific vocational training with general education requirements. These scholars recognize the need to have a better educated citizenry that will be more strongly equipped to compete in the global marketplace and assert that providing the opportunity to increase the educational attainment of community college students, particularly adult learners already in the workforce, is not only sound educational policy but also good economic policy, too.

This chapter will explore some of the trends and policy options—such as the applied baccalaureate—that are emerging as scholars, administrators and policymakers contemplate the future direction of the community college system. Certainly, in light of current workforce development needs, vocational programming will continue to guide the track of community college programming initiatives. However, as many scholars have noted, changes in technology as well as growing globalization will require workers to possess a new skill set to compete in the “new knowledge economy.” Technological advances, in particular, will require a more educated workforce that possesses higher learning skills which are best acquired through a balanced and well-rounded curriculum that includes general education elements. Faced with perpetual financial constraints, however,
implementing such policies and innovations will require coordinated planning and foresight on the part of administrators and policymakers.

**Workforce Development**

Community colleges have long played a role in developing solutions to the local economic needs of the communities they serve. In fact, part of the stated mission of the American Association of Community Colleges is “promoting community colleges as the premier workforce development providers in America and influencing government and corporate funding policies to support the colleges in this key role.” Looking ahead to the future development and growth of the community college system, workforce development will continue to be an integral part of their mission in order to train a labor force that is able to keep up with the increasingly technological and global nature of the world economy.

Over the course of its history, the American economy has undergone several major shifts, from one based on agriculture from the founding of the country to the early twentieth century, to one based on manufacturing from the early twentieth century to the 1960s, and now to the current service-based economy that emerged during the 1970s and is still growing today. The present service-based economy has the distinction of being the first to rely heavily on advances in information systems technology, and, as a result, the term the “new knowledge economy” is often applied to it. Characterized by a workforce increasingly concentrated in the white-collar business, education, health care, and technology sectors, most positions in the new knowledge economy require some level of education past high school. For example, since the early 1980s, the manufacturing industry has shrunk by an estimated 5 million positions, primarily in low-skill areas. On the
other hand, high-skill manufacturing positions in areas such as engineering and research and development have actually expanded by as much as 37% between 1983 and 2002.6 Whereas a high school diploma used to be enough to gain entry into relatively high-wage, albeit low-skill positions, changes in technology have created an advantage for high-skilled positions which, in turn, has raised the level of training and education required to gain entry.7

Looking ahead, this trend is likely to continue with employers seeking workers with at least some college education. For example, a recent Washington Post article cited that in Maryland the number of “middle-skill jobs”—those requiring coursework beyond high school but less than a baccalaureate degree—will increase by 434,000 jobs by 2016. Many of these jobs will be in protective services such policing and fire prevention as well as nursing and information technology occupations.8 Dixie Sommers has also analyzed labor market projections through 2016 using data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Defining community college occupations as those whose “most significant education and training pathway to employment” is either an associate degree or postsecondary vocational award, she calculated that they comprised 9.1% of all jobs in 2006 and are anticipated to create an additional 13.8% of all new jobs between 2006 and 2016.9 Many of these new positions will open up due to economic growth as well as the need to fill positions left vacant by retiring Baby Boomers. Some of the areas that are expected to see the largest growth will be in the following categories: registered nurses, nursing aides, orderlies and attendants, licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses, automotive service technicians and mechanics. Interestingly, these “middle-skill” jobs are
expected to have the largest percentage growth, at 15.8%, compared to jobs requiring at least a baccalaureate degree and all occupations combined, 15.3% and 10.4% respectively.\textsuperscript{10}

Community colleges are particularly attuned to changes in the economic landscape that would influence demand for both their programmatic offerings as well as their graduates in the marketplace. Community colleges are constantly seeking to identify high demand areas in the labor market with the purpose of starting programs or expanding existing programs in order to train workers to fill the demand. However, community colleges must be sensitive to market thresholds to avoid inadvertently saturating the market with more workers than the market can accommodate which, in turn, tends to suppress wages. If this does occur, especially in high-skill occupations, one method of increasing wages to commensurate levels is to raise the occupation’s credential requirements to the baccalaureate level, thus lowering the supply of qualified workers by excluding those who hold only an associate’s degree.\textsuperscript{11}

Another consideration for community colleges is the start-up and administrative cost involved in initiating a new program. Some new programs can cost upwards of a half-million dollars to launch.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, schools must be selective in determining which programs will provide a long-term benefit to the student in addition to considering the overall costs and projected shelf-life of such programs. As Leigh and Gill conclude in a recent study, the number of vocational courses offered at a school does not necessarily correlate with that school’s responsiveness to the local business community but, rather, fewer and more targeted offerings can be as effective.\textsuperscript{13}
Although individual community colleges need to be cognizant of local economic conditions and needs so as to maintain an appropriate balance of supply and demand, the story is different at the macro level. Interestingly, and in seeming defiance of the laws of supply and demand, national datasets indicate that wage advantages to having some college education compared to only a high school education has almost doubled over the last four decades, even as the number of workers pursuing postsecondary education has tripled. As Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues note, “This development is remarkable: usually when the supply of anything increases, its price goes down.”\textsuperscript{14} This finding further supports the projection that higher levels of training and education will be required to compete for the high-skill, high-wage jobs of the new economy.

While it is clear that there is a strong market for “middle-level” jobs and that community colleges are well positioned to provide the requisite training for workers seeking to fill these jobs, Hirschel Kasper notes two considerations which need to be taken into account when reviewing national labor projections.\textsuperscript{15} First, local economic needs do not always coincide with national labor market trends. Secondly, local labor market conditions can change very rapidly and unpredictably. “Consequently colleges may be better off developing more general courses that can strengthen students’ skills and give them the vocational flexibility should local conditions change or they decide to look beyond the local area.”\textsuperscript{16}

Kasper’s point about the need for flexibility extends to the students themselves. On average, workers change careers six times during a working lifetime. “Continuously changing job opportunities and requirements are the prime reasons that so much emphasis is
placed on basic transferable skills and flexibility.”

Changes in technology are helping to drive this trend, with technological innovations requiring the need to upgrade skills more often, making certain jobs obsolete, or creating new occupations where none before existed. Likewise, globalization is increasing the potential supply of workers in any given field, thus increasing competition for those jobs and raising new economic concerns related to offshoring. As Richard Romano and Donald Dellow note, “The kinds of jobs that are the most susceptible to offshoring are some of the very jobs that community colleges target for their technical and vocational graduates…The media are replete with examples of manufacturing processes, accounting operations, x-ray analyses, and other job activities that have been offshored.”

In the future, even more jobs have the potential to be moved offshore, as American graduates increasingly compete with foreign college workers who are likely to accept less compensation for the same type of work. Anthony Carnevale et al. highlight the long-term impact this may have on the national economy:

The potential for offshoring is not just about losing the postsecondary jobs in the United States; it’s also about capital flows and their effect on future jobs. The balance of capital flows in and out of the United States can leverage an invisible offshoring of college jobs if America loses its magnetic pull on global capital. The ability to attract and retain financial capital and focus investments on high-value-added jobs that generally require at least some college is just as important as keeping existing college jobs.

In order to contend in an increasingly global economy, our workers must be taught the types of high-level cognitive skills that will keep them competitive in the new knowledge economy. Furthermore, they are expected to possess “cross-cultural competencies” and
foreign language skills, identified in a recent study as the most important global skills employers seek when working in the global market.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Funding}

One objective becomes, then, ensuring that students, particularly those most at-risk such as low-income and minority students, are given equal opportunity to master these skills so they can compete for the occupations that require them. Unfortunately, many of the top performing minority and low-income high school students fail to move into the higher education system, in many cases because of funding issues.\textsuperscript{22} Community colleges are particularly susceptible to underfunding since they rely so heavily on state and local appropriations which can fluctuate based on conditions within the local economy. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, the average breakdown of revenue sources for community colleges is as follows: state funds (38%), local funds (21%), tuition and fees (17%), federal funds (15%), and “other” (9%).\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, it should be highlighted that since 1990 state appropriations have undergone a dramatic shift, with funds being redirected toward the Medicaid and prison systems and resulting in a 13% decrease to higher education. Likewise, federal funds have also shifted toward health care, social security and national defense programs.\textsuperscript{24}

The current federal funding formula which ties appropriations to the aid needs of individual students fails to account for many nontraditional student programs that are unique to community colleges. This especially hurts non-degree programs which tend to be those targeted at displaced workers and students needing to upgrade their skill sets in order to be competitive in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{25} Such programs include “customized work-oriented
courses that often need to be offered in bite-sized, nondegree chunks which are not eligible for federal subsidies and are funded, and then only partly, by a minority of states.\textsuperscript{26}

Furthermore, funding cuts hurt low-income and adult learners disproportionately since, in addition to requiring more financial aid, they often require additional services such as remedial courses, childcare services, and flexible schedules, all of which increase administrative costs.\textsuperscript{27}

In response to the funding challenges facing community colleges today, the Brookings Institute’s Metropolitan Policy Program issued a policy proposal in May 2009 for increasing federal investment in community colleges.\textsuperscript{28} Its four primary recommendations were: 1) the development of a national postsecondary goals and performance measurement system, 2) the doubling of current funding to $4 billion for improving campus infrastructure, technology, and expanding faculty payrolls in high demand areas, 3) the funding of innovative projects aimed at improving the quality of sub-baccalaureate education, and 4) development and improvement of student data systems that track performance and outcomes through graduation and placement into the labor market.

Many of these proposals were integrated into the Obama Administration’s American Graduation Initiative announced last year, an ambitious plan that placed a national spotlight on the role of community colleges in helping the country renew its standing as the most highly educated nation in the world. Wrapped up in the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act, the plan, unfortunately, proved to be too fiscally burdensome and was ultimately excluded from the final legislation passed in April 2010.
Nevertheless, it is informative to look at the bill’s major funding proposals to understand where federal priorities lie in regard to the community college.

American Graduation Initiative

In July 2009 President Barack Obama announced his American Graduation Initiative, part of an aggressive education agenda that called for the United States to once again be the global leader in producing college graduates by the year 2020. Community colleges were to play a critical role in this initiative, with a federal goal of increasing the number of community college graduates by five million students. To meet these targets, the legislation allocated a federal investment of $12 billion to be pumped into the community college system over the next decade.

Specifically, President Obama proposed the creation of several federally funded programs using funds recouped from streamlining the federal student loan program. One such program was the Community College Challenge Fund, a grant program intended to identify and expand upon proven strategies for increasing persistence and degree completion. Initiatives that would likely have benefited from the Fund included 1) those that concentrate on increasing partnerships between community colleges and local businesses through, for example, onsite contract training or internships and job placement programs, 2) dual enrollment programs between high schools and community colleges which have proven to be successful strategies for preparing secondary students for college-level studies, 3) programs that promote better coordination between community colleges and four-year schools to encourage higher rates of transfer, 4) programs intended to improve remedial and other forms of adult education, and 5) programs intended to improve
student services, including academic counseling, to ensure students are well informed of educational and career options.\textsuperscript{30}

In addition, the Administration pledged $2.5 billion in an attempt to leverage $10 billion to modernize community college campuses. Since many community colleges were built during the high expansion years of the 1960s and 1970s and have not been upgraded since, many will be unable to accommodate the anticipated enrollment surge in the coming years, nor are their facilities equipped to handle increasingly high-tech teaching methodologies. The American Association of Community Colleges estimates that approximately $100 billion are needed to upgrade and renovate existing facilities and for the costs of new construction.\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, Obama’s plan included a design for an “online skills laboratory” to benefit learners whose work or family obligations might not allow them to attend classes on campus during normal operating hours. Online courses developed by the Departments of Defense, Education and Labor were proposed to streamline and standardize certain courses which could be offered through one or more community colleges. With over 90% of community colleges offering online programs enrolling more than two million students each year, this initiative was designed to be easily integrated into existing curricula with the goal of serving an even larger student population looking for flexible scheduling.\textsuperscript{32}

These initiatives were part of a broader educational agenda that focused on reforming the existing federal financial aid program by expanding the Pell grants and Perkins loans programs, reforming the student loan process, modifying and streamlining the federal aid application process, and ensuring that unemployed workers do not lose their
unemployment benefits when choosing to return to school. Had the legislation passed, it would have been one of the largest reforms of federal higher educational policy to focus on community colleges. The Brookings Institute estimates that community colleges currently receive approximately $2 billion in federal appropriations a year. This figure is significantly lower than the amount of funding put toward public four-year schools, which is over $20 billion a year.\footnote{33} Considering that community colleges enroll a disproportionate number of disadvantaged and minority students, the Administration felt it was due time to correct such an egregious imbalance.

Although the American Graduation Initiative was ultimately too expensive to pass approval by Congress, key provisions of the initiative were integrated into the final bill signed by the President. Specifically, a program called the Community College and Career Training Grant Program will receive $2 billion through 2014 “to fund training and education programs at community colleges and other institutions that serve the needs of [Trade Adjustment Assistance]-eligible workers.”\footnote{34} Each state will receive at least $2.5 million with grants awarded on a competitive basis. As well, an additional $2.55 billion will be allocated over the next ten years to Minority-Serving Institutions, and the bill ensures adequate funding of and annually adjusted increases to the Pell Grant program through 2018.\footnote{35}

In summary, community colleges are poised to play a critical role in revitalizing the American economy and preparing the country’s workforce to compete in an ever-growing global marketplace. The new knowledge economy requires higher level thinking and analytical skills which, in turn, are creating an increasing number of jobs that require higher
levels of education. Unless our nation’s higher educational system identifies new ways of increasing educational opportunities, the country will lag behind other industrialized nations in filling the jobs being created in emerging fields such as nano- and biotechnology. The federal government, however, feels confident that community colleges are aptly suited to fill this role in training students with the requisite skills to compete in the more technical, skills-oriented marketplace of tomorrow.

*Applied Baccalaureate*

Because of their unique relationship with the business community, community colleges are in a special position to be at the forefront of emerging fields. However, just as technology continues to develop and progress so, too, do the skills required to utilize the technology. Therefore, many of the areas in which community colleges will find a niche to grow and expand are ones that will also require their students to have higher level analytical skills and credentials that will allow them to move on to advanced levels of education. For example, in high-technology fields such as nursing, engineering and information technology, students are already expected to demonstrate increased competencies in subjects such as math and science. Also, to secure some of the most lucrative jobs in these fields, students will be expected to continue with their education to at least a baccalaureate level. With many of the Applied Associate’s degrees terminal in design, this presents a significant problem to the continued growth and development of the nation’s workforce.

One response to this dilemma is a growing trend that attempts to merge the two tracks in what are referred to as “applied baccalaureate” degrees. These are four-year degrees that allow students with an applied associate’s degree in areas such as nursing or
business to transfer to a four-year school and complete the general education requirements
in their junior and senior years in order to graduate with a bachelor’s degree. Presently, 39
states have at least one school that offers such a degree, and in a few states the community
colleges themselves have been authorized to confer the degree (commonly referred to as a
Community College Baccalaureate). It is clearly a growing trend and one that will
undoubtedly be at the forefront of future educational initiatives which focus on workforce
development.

As defined by Barbara Townsend, Debra Bragg and Collin Ruud, the applied
baccalaureate is “a bachelor’s degree designed to incorporate applied associate courses and
degrees once considered as ‘terminal’ or non-baccalaureate level while providing students
with the higher-order thinking skills and technical knowledge and skills so desired in
today’s job market.” They also describe the three main models: career ladder, inverse (or
upside down), and management ladder. The career ladder model requires the student,
during the junior and senior years, to enroll in additional upper-level courses within the
student’s chosen technical major which is generally well articulated to a specific applied
associate’s degree. These baccalaureate degrees are often titled Bachelor of Applied
Science or Bachelor of Applied Technology. The inverse, or upside down, model requires
the student to enroll in general education courses during the junior and senior years, with
courses taken during the associate’s program fulfilling the specific requirements of the
student’s chosen major. These degrees are typically called Bachelor of General Studies,
Bachelor of Professional Studies, or Bachelor of Applied Studies. Finally, the management
ladder is offered for students who are looking to prepare for entry into a managerial position.\textsuperscript{39}

There are several different approaches to administering the applied baccalaureate degree, although the most common approach is for the degree to be granted by a traditional baccalaureate institution through a well articulated “2+2” program with a community college. Under this model students typically utilize the facilities of the community college such as classrooms, laboratories and learning centers, and community college instructors often serve as adjunct faculty members for the baccalaureate program.\textsuperscript{40} In some instances, several baccalaureate-granting schools will collectively form a “University Center” on a community college campus designed to provide university courses toward a baccalaureate degree.\textsuperscript{41} Such arrangements are particularly beneficial to adult students unable to transfer to a more distant campus due to work and family obligations. More recently, a few states have authorized the community colleges themselves to grant the baccalaureate degree. In Florida, for instance, community colleges approved as baccalaureate-granting institutions have actually been integrated as member schools into the Florida State University System.\textsuperscript{42}

Because of their relative newness, there is not much in the literature studying the impact of these degree programs on educational attainment. There were a few small studies conducted during the 1990s which focused on individual state systems offering various forms of an applied baccalaureate degree and compared graduation rates of traditional transfer students to students transferring into the four-year state system with a technical associate’s degree. In Missouri, for example, 63\% of traditional transfer students (those transferring with an Associate of Arts degree) persisted through graduation to obtain a
baccalaureate degree compared to 54% of students who transferred into the university with either an Associate of Science or Associate of Applied Science degree.\textsuperscript{43} However, the cohort examined consisted of only 972 students from one graduation year, 1995-1996. Additional studies of larger datasets would be necessary before drawing wider conclusions as to the impact of offering applied baccalaureate degrees on graduation rates.

It should also be noted that this concept is not without controversy. On the one hand, supporters of the applied baccalaureate degree point to its democratizing effect of expanding higher education to a greater number of students in fields not currently served by the existing higher educational system. Likewise, many of the students served by such degree programs are adult learners who would otherwise not have the opportunity to continue their education through traditional modes of college study. On the other hand, critics contend that the applied baccalaureate undermines the value of the traditional baccalaureate degree and degrades its worth in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{44} As a relatively new phenomenon, time is sure to be the true test of the value of the degree in the global economy.

Summary

In a recent article, Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues noted, “The emergence of postsecondary institutions as the primary workforce development institutions outside the labor market is evident in the gradual but relentless movement toward vocational, occupational, and professional education in postsecondary programs.”\textsuperscript{45} They go on to cite statistics highlighting the relatively small percentage of credentials conferred in liberal arts and sciences, humanities, and general studies. Specifically, only 42,106 of almost 1.4
million bachelor’s degrees, less than 20% of master’s degrees, and less than 40% of doctoral degrees were awarded in academic fields in 2004.\textsuperscript{46} Statistics such as these make clear that the demands of the new economy will continue exerting pressure on educators to focus postsecondary curricula on applied subjects to best prepare a workforce trained in the technologies of tomorrow. In response, community college administrators will have to be even more creative and flexible with regard to administering their programs to ensure that their students are also taught the “soft skills” that will be required to compete in an ever-growing global marketplace.

The applied baccalaureate degree offers increased flexibility by offering another avenue for students to obtain a four-year baccalaureate degree. However, community colleges may need time to find the best format for offering it. The Community College Baccalaureate is rapidly expanding in certain states such as Florida; however, in other states only traditional baccalaureate-granting schools are permitted to confer the degree. In yet other states, branch campuses of state universities have begun to offer baccalaureate degrees in a select number of specialized majors that typically correlate with the needs of the local economy. As more institutions delve into the realm of the applied baccalaureate degree, successful programs will emerge that can be used as a model for others. Likewise, additional scholarly studies will help to identify successful strategies for implementing and administering the degrees and also provide further insight into their effect on degree persistence and labor market returns.

Finally, much of the future success of the community college system is contingent on adequate funding. Community colleges are at the mercy of states and localities which
provide almost 60% of their funding. Despite the myriad resources they provide to the local communities they serve, they are often the first to see their budgets cut when other priorities come to the fore. The federal government is to be commended for acknowledging the wide funding disparity between community colleges and other public educational institutions and for attempting to commit the resources that will begin to close this gap. However, with the American Graduation Initiative “dying on the vine,” the community colleges and their supporters will need to continue fighting to secure the funds needed to sustain their mission into the future. Considering the importance they serve to so many, let us hope for a continued discourse as loud and strong as it is today.
CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY: READING AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

One of the modern challenges facing community colleges is the growing diversity of their student populations. Community colleges have historically enrolled greater percentages of minority students than their four-year school counterparts, but as immigration rates have reached unprecedented levels in recent years, the schools are now dealing with an even more diverse student population with varying needs and aspirations. Many of these new immigrants are of Hispanic descent with diverse national origins, hailing from such regions as the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America. Through sheer numbers as well as growing activism and student involvement on campus, their presence is leaving an indelible mark on the college communities they enter.

Although urban community colleges in traditional gateway cities such as Miami, Los Angeles and New York City have long enrolled high proportions of minority students, it is a relatively newer phenomenon in smaller colleges situated in the “heartland” of the country. As the geographic distribution of minority populations, particularly Hispanic groups, shifts away from traditional destination areas and toward the secondary cities and suburbs, community colleges are faced with the challenge of how best to integrate these students into their communities. Researchers have long noted the assimilating role of community colleges, and to this end these institutions have been designated the great responsibility to educate, engage, and prepare students of all backgrounds to be productive members of their local communities as both scholars and citizens.
When discussing their long-term effects, of key importance is the role of the “rising second generation,” a demographic that is already experiencing growing influence. It has been estimated that by 2020, the number of second-generation Latinos—children of Latino immigrants—enrolled in U.S. schools will double, while the number entering the labor force will triple.¹ As this segment of the population comes of age, they will have a huge impact on the communities in which they live and work. The existing body of literature has shown that this generation is substantially bilingual, is likely to achieve higher levels of education, and is expected to earn more than their parents’ generation. Many of these second generation students, perhaps the first in their families to attend college, will look to the community colleges as their port of entry into the higher education system.

Obviously, then, how the schools accommodate and respond to this growing population is of tremendous import, not only at the individual level but also as it exerts influence on the larger community. In particular, for communities where Hispanic growth rates are the highest, immediate demands are placed on schools, community service groups, and health care systems, many of which are unaccustomed to dealing with the increased volume and unique issues immigrant populations present. Language differences, particularly, place additional burdens on schools where teachers might not be adequately trained to cope with large student populations that are not English proficient. In Maryland, for example, enrollment in adult English as a Second Language courses at Montgomery County Community College rose by 58% in 2003, yet the county was able to accommodate only about a quarter of the demand for such classes.²
As a case study, Reading Area Community College (RACC) in Reading, Berks County, Pennsylvania, will be examined. Reading is a small city of approximately 80,000 residents located in the southeastern corner of the state. With the city’s population gradually shifting to majority Hispanic, RACC serves a very diverse area.\(^3\) It is no surprise, then, that minority students comprise almost 32% of the student body, 18% of which is Hispanic.\(^4\) By using RACC as a test case, important questions are raised which have applicability for other small community colleges experiencing similar changes in their student demographics.

*The Changing Face of Reading*

Situated approximately 120 miles from New York City, 150 miles from Washington, D.C., and 60 miles from Philadelphia, Reading is an old industrial town which has experienced an immense transformation over the past several decades. Traditionally a blue-collar, European immigrant community, in recent years the city has become a destination for immigrants of Hispanic heritage. In fact, between 1980 and 1990, the city’s Hispanic population grew by almost 100% to comprise nearly 20% of all city residents.\(^5\) Since then, the Hispanic population has grown even further, so that the most recent estimate places Hispanics in the majority, at 52.1% of the total population.\(^6\) While most of Reading’s Hispanic population hails from Puerto Rico, Reading has also attracted a significant number of residents of Mexican and Dominican heritage.

Reading is an attractive location for those seeking a lower cost of living and more affordable housing. In 2006, the average home in Reading was valued at $73,000.\(^7\) At the same time, however, the relatively low cost of living and housing has attracted mainly
poorer residents, typically of minority and/or immigrant background. In a study conducted in 2000, it was found that the city housed 37% of the county’s low-income families, many of whom were concentrated in densely packed neighborhoods where housing was dilapidated and falling into disrepair. Furthermore, Hispanics tend to be spatially segregated, concentrated within the city while the rest of the surrounding county is predominantly white. The dissimilarity rating from the 2000 Census, which describes the proportion Hispanics would need to relocate to another neighborhood in order to be distributed across the metro area similarly as non-Hispanic whites, was 71.8% (where “0%” reflects absolute integration and “100%” reflects absolute segregation). For African-Americans, this rating was only 59.4%. When combining such factors as poor housing conditions, spatial segregation of minority groups, and high crime rates, the city of Reading—and particularly its Hispanic citizens—have hefty challenges to overcome.

Despite this somewhat bleak picture, Reading administrators have been working hard to increase opportunities for its disadvantaged citizens. Situated at the entrance to the city as one crosses over the Schuylkill River, Reading Area Community College is one of the city’s great successes. For nearly forty years, it has brought educational opportunity to its constituents, fostered the arts and other cultural activities, partnered with local businesses to spur economic activity in the area, and worked with community groups to expand community and economic development. However, it continues to face tough challenges in light of tightening budgets, increasing enrollments, and a graduation rate hovering in the single digits. With its resources utilized appropriately, the college has the potential to be a tremendous tool for lifting the socio-economic status of many of the city’s
This chapter will survey the school and its program offerings to determine effective strategies for serving a diverse student population and identify areas where expanded services or policy revisions may be warranted.

**Reading Area Community College**

Founded in 1971 and sponsored by the Berks County Commissioners, the college is a cornerstone of the city and surrounding community. It was originally founded under the auspices of the Reading School District and enrolled a class of 265 students during its inaugural year. Today, RACC enrolls approximately 5,200 students in its degree and certificate programs and serves an additional 25,000 students annually through its non-degree Workforce and Economic Development/Community Education division. With the expansion of its services and offerings, it has also grown to serve a very diverse population of students.

Following the demographic trend of community colleges nationwide, of the school’s degree and/or certificate students 65% are female and 35% are male. Likewise, most attend on a part-time basis, with 65% enrolled part-time and 35% enrolled full-time. The school also tends to enroll a relatively high percentage of students who are older than the traditional school-aged population: 41% of students are aged 25 or older compared to 59% of students who are under the age of 25. Finally, the school enrolls a relatively large proportion of minority students. White students comprise 59% of the student body, with Hispanic/Latino students comprising 18% (defined as persons “of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race”),
African Americans 11%, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 2%, American Indian/Alaskan Native 1%, and unknown 10%.  

**Degree Offerings**

RACC offers a total of 37 programs leading to an Associate’s degree. These programs are categorized as either transfer programs, those leading to an Associate of Arts or Science degree eligible for transfer to a four-year baccalaureate granting school, or career programs, those leading to an Associate of Applied Science degree which is typically terminal and designed for immediate entry into the workforce. Most of the transfer programs are concentrated in the social sciences and liberal studies subject areas but also include majors such as Accounting, Business Administration, Communications, Computer Information Systems, Elementary and Secondary Education, Pre-Law/Public Administration, Psychology and Social Work. The career programs are fairly concentrated in the Business division but also include majors such as Culinary Arts, Medical Laboratory Technician, Nursing, Electric Utility Technology, HVAC and Refrigeration, Mechatronics Engineering Technology, Nanoscience Technology, Law Enforcement Administration, and Early Childhood Education.

For the 2008-2009 school year, 339 students successfully graduated from the degree programs. Interestingly, the health professions career majors graduated the most students, with 48 students completing the Nursing program and 12 students completing the program in Respiratory Care. Other high yield programs included Law Enforcement Administration, with 39 students completing the Associate of Applied Science degree, and the liberal arts
programs, with 64 students completing an Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts or Associate of General Studies degree.

All of the degree offerings require students to complete a specific number of general education hours. For the Associate of Arts programs, 33 general education credits are required; for the Associate of Science program, 39 are required; for the Associate of General Studies program, 23 are required; and for the Associate of Applied Science programs, 20 are required. In addition, the school has integrated the use of a competency-based education model into its general education curriculum which defines a set list of core competencies expected of all of its graduates. These include: 1) communication skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, 2) awareness and sensitivity skills, which seek to instill respect for and understanding of diverse cultures and their impact on the global community, 3) critical thinking skills, 4) problem solving skills, 5) study skills, including “self-directed learning,” 6) mathematical skills, 7) information technology skills, including appropriate use of computer technology and demonstrated ability to access and retrieve electronic information via the Internet and other electronic sources, and 8) information literacy skills, including the ability to process, integrate and evaluate multiple sources to draw appropriate conclusions.

Student Services and Support Programs

For both transfer and career students, RACC offers a number of programs and student services designed to facilitate the transition to four-year colleges and provide needed support to at-risk and/or disadvantaged students. The Center for Academic Success (CAS) provides a number of services including career and educational counseling, guidance
on the transfer process, and support to individuals with disabilities. When freshman first enter RACC, they are required to meet with an advisor in the Advising Center after taking standard placement tests. The advisor’s role is to help the entering student acclimate to the college’s academic environment and propose and help prepare a path of studies for the first year. Once the student has decided on a major, the student is assigned a faculty advisor who specializes in the student’s chosen discipline.18

Likewise, all freshmen students are required to complete the College Success Strategies Orientation course which “is designed to be a guide to higher education at Reading Area Community College (RACC). It affords students the opportunity to evaluate their goals and commitment to higher education early in their undergraduate experience. Emphasis is placed on the student's academic and personal development in the college environment.”19 Studies have shown that freshman seminars of this kind can bolster persistence by teaching students basic strategies such as time management and study skills and providing an orientation to administrative components of the college.20

The Transfer Center, part of the CAS, houses two counselors to assist prospective transfer students by providing relevant information on the admissions procedures and requirements of senior institutions as well as the transferability of specific RACC courses. The Transfer Center also hosts a semi-annual Transfer Fair and coordinates on-campus visits by admissions representatives from regional four-year schools.21 The Transfer Center website posts listings of course equivalencies that articulate with many of the regional four-year schools.22 While this may be a helpful reference guide for some students, for others it could present a daunting amount of information to decipher, especially since many of the
provided links simply redirect the user to the senior schools’ websites, all of which are unique in design and format.

The CAS also houses a Tutoring Lab, which offers free tutoring to all RACC students in basic skills and freshman level courses, and a Career Services office that provides resume critiquing, career exploration and interviewing workshops, and a number of career development courses such as “Career Decision Making,” “Resume Writing and Interviewing,” and “Professionalism on the Job.” In addition, the center coordinates the school’s cooperative education program which links students with local employers to obtain on-the-job experience while applying skills learned in the classroom. College fairs and on-campus recruiting programs are also coordinated by the Career Services office and are free and open to all students and alumni.

An option available to full-time RACC students is the opportunity to cross register for courses at some of the area’s four-year schools—Alvernia University, Albright College, Kutztown University, and Penn State Berks—while paying RACC’s tuition rate. This arrangement allows RACC students the chance to “test drive” schools to which they might be considering transferring or to earn upper division credit for a baccalaureate program they are planning on pursuing. While students are limited to cross registering for only one course per semester, it is a valuable opportunity for those who choose to participate.

Consistent with a growing trend on many community college campuses, RACC offers an Honors Program that provides its students the opportunity to pursue “exploratory learning, collaborative activities, hands-on projects, interdisciplinary themes, and primary research.” To be eligible for the Honors Program, students must have earned at least eight
credits hours in college-level (i.e. non-remedial) courses with a minimum grade point average of 3.25. Alternatively, students having graduated in the top 10% of their high school class or who score at least 1100 on the SAT are also eligible to enroll in Honors courses.26

To address the need for easier and more transparent articulation of general education credits between the state’s community colleges and universities, Pennsylvania’s Department of Education created the “Academic Passport.”27 Holders of the Passport are guaranteed admission to any of the fourteen universities comprising the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) and, as importantly, are assured that up to 45 of any earned general education credits will be applied to meet the receiving university’s general education requirements. Any additional credits are then applied to the student’s chosen major or counted as electives. To be eligible for the Passport, students need to hold an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree from a Pennsylvania community college, have graduated with a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.0, and have earned at least 30 credits in liberal arts courses.28 In 2001 the PASSHE extended the Passport program to create the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team Awards Program. Awardees, chosen by their community colleges, are guaranteed admission as well as a full tuition waiver to the PASSHE university of their choice.29

Interestingly, other states have also been experimenting with guaranteed admissions for community college transfer students.30 In Virginia, community college graduates are offered guaranteed admission to any of the universities or colleges within the commonwealth, assuming specific grade point averages are met. The requirements vary
from school to school, with the most selective schools such as the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary requiring a minimum grade point average of 3.4 and 3.6, respectively. Tennessee and Arizona are also testing new guaranteed admissions programs which benefit not only the community colleges but also the receiving schools which are seeing their student bodies diversify tremendously from the arrangement. While such arrangements are in many ways extremely positive, experiences in California do portend possible problems down the road should budgetary or capacity needs escalate. Both the California State University and University of California have for many years offered guaranteed admission to community college graduates meeting specific transfer requirements, but due to budget cuts and increases in enrollments, the California State University announced a temporary freeze on transfer admissions that will likely continue through 2011.\textsuperscript{31}

Overall, RACC is doing a respectable job in fostering and promoting its transfer function. The most current student transfer-out rate, defined as “the percentage of the full-time, first-time students who transferred to another institution,” is 24\%.\textsuperscript{32} While this intuitively may seem low, it takes into account only students considered “full-time, first-time” students. In other words, of all of the students who began their postsecondary studies at RACC on a full-time basis in Fall 2005, 24\% had transferred to another institution by Fall 2008. When compared to other area community colleges, RACC is on par in terms of transferring its students: at Harrisburg Area Community College, the rate is 15\%; at Montgomery County Community College – Blue Bell Campus the rate is 28\%; at
Montgomery County Community College – West Campus, the rate is 22%; and at Delaware County Community College, the rate is 27%.

In addition to student services aimed at increasing transfer success, there are programs designed specifically to target at-risk students. The Keystone Education Yields Success—or KEYS—program is for current and prospective students who are already enrolled in the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance program. The KEYS program provides students with academic support such as tutoring, career counseling, financial aid assistance, and other support services intended to encourage degree completion such as childcare services, transportation, clothing, books and supplies, and even car purchases. A similar program is the Advantage Program, a federally funded initiative that helps disadvantaged students attain higher education by providing a range of academic support services. Advantage participants must meet certain eligibility criteria, such as qualifying for a Pell grant, being a first-generation college student or GED recipient, or possessing a physical or learning disability. Benefits of the program include personal, academic and career counseling, tutoring services, discounted entry to cultural events, free trips to visit four-year schools, and consideration for scholarships.

To help high school students jump start their college education, RACC offers two dual-enrollment programs. The Head-Start to College Program allows high school students the opportunity to enroll in RACC courses and attend classes on the college campus. To be eligible, students must test at the college level on placement exams and have an admissions interview. The dual-enrollment program is similar, but classes are taught at area high schools to students who meet minimum score requirements on state standardized tests and
obtain a recommendation from a guidance counselor. “For students who had not really thought about attending college after high school, these programs help to bridge this gap. Students get to experience college and it allows them to make a gradual transition to college.”

Between the 2007–2008 and 2008-2009 academic years, the programs’ enrollments jumped from 1,400 to 1,880 students with 31 RACC courses presently offered on high school campuses.

With 65% of its student body attending on a part-time basis, flexible course scheduling is paramount. To address this need, RACC offers two distance learning options: online courses which are conducted via the Internet using a web-based course management system, and telecourses which employ the use of recorded content viewed by students via DVDs. For students attending courses on campus, the school offers a childcare facility, thus easing their ability to juggle school and family obligations.

As discussed in previous chapters, financial aid plays a very significant role in allowing many students to continue with their studies. As a case in point, during the 2007-2008 academic year, 74% of full-time, first-time RACC students enrolled in a degree or certificate program received some form of financial aid. The majority of aid, approximately 70%, was awarded in the form of grants with the rest of aid awards covered by loans. Moreover, during the 2008-2009 academic year, RACC students qualified for approximately $6.85 million in Pell grants. To further assist students with the financial burdens of attending college, the Foundation for Reading Area Community College was founded in 1981. The Foundation solicits funds within the local business community and uses the funds raised to offer a number of scholarships and also provide educational
resources such as library and classroom materials.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, RACC offers an Unemployment Policy which allows laid off workers to enroll in one semester of courses entirely tuition free.\textsuperscript{44}

**Workforce Development Programs**

As mentioned above, the city of Reading has historically relied on manufacturing as its core economic base. With the gradual decline in the manufacturing sector nationwide, Reading’s economy has experienced a comparable deterioration. Over the past several years, the city’s unemployment rate has crept up to over 10\%, leaving many workers looking to upgrade their skills or to pursue an entirely different occupation altogether.\textsuperscript{45} To address the weakening state of the area’s key industries, the Berks County Workforce Investment Board was established in 1999 to identify opportunities for the local business community to innovate and create jobs that will grow with the changing needs of the new economy. Out of this venture was born the Schmidt Training and Technology Center, an alliance between the Workforce Investment Board and RACC to offer customized training programs that focus on the technologies and skills most desired in the new marketplace.\textsuperscript{46}

Programs offered at the Schmidt Training and Technology Center (STTC) are administered through RACC’s Workforce and Economic Development/Community Education division. Among the training areas covered are 1) manufacturing technology, 2) senior leadership, 3) information technology, and 4) workplace readiness.\textsuperscript{47} One of the most exciting initiatives has been the addition of *mechatronics* to the STTC curriculum. Workers trained in mechatronics—which is “a combination of mechanical systems, electrical systems, controls systems and computer technology, which are integrated to
perform some facet of manufacturing”—are highly desired by the area’s manufacturing firms. RACC worked with trade union representatives from the Organization for Machine Automation and Control to secure grant funding to launch a certificate program in mechatronics in 2006. Between its launch in 2006 and the spring of 2009, approximately 250 workers participated in mechatronics training, many of whom enrolled via their companies’ tuition assistance programs. Credits obtained through the certificate program are eligible to be applied toward the Associate of Applied Science degree in Mechatronics Engineering Technology, first offered in 2008.

Another high-tech field that is sure to grow in the future is the area of nanotechnology. In partnership with the Pennsylvania State University Nanofabrication Manufacturing Technology Program, RACC offers an Associate of Applied Science degree in NanoTechnology which includes a capstone semester at Penn State’s main campus. The A.A.S. degree trains students for a variety of occupations in fields ranging from biotechnology, automation, robotics, and information systems.

As the school continues to concentrate its efforts in identifying areas of high market growth and employers’ training needs, it also recognizes the importance of offering its students the opportunity to continue with their education beyond the community college. As today’s marketplace expands and continuously adjusts to new technologies, the flexibility enjoyed by a worker possessing a baccalaureate degree compared to a terminal associate’s degree is increasingly desirable. Seeing the need for this flexibility, RACC has entered into articulation agreements with several four-year schools to offer its students the
option of transferring credits earned in selected Associate of Applied Science degrees to baccalaureate programs.

Specifically, students who successfully complete the A.A.S. degree in Mechatronics Engineering have the option of transferring to Penn State Berks, a branch campus of the state university located in suburban Reading, to pursue a B.S. degree in Electromechanical Engineering Technology, or they may transfer to Purdue University’s Calumet campus in Indiana to pursue a B.S. in Mechatronics Engineering Technology. Likewise, RACC’s A.A.S. degree in NanoTechnology is configured as a “2+2+2” program, with students earning up to 13 credits while still in high school through the Dual Enrollment or Head Start to College programs. Students then complete three semesters of courses at RACC’s campus with the capstone semester of the A.A.S. degree at Penn State’s main campus. Students who elect to pursue a baccalaureate degree have the option of transferring their A.A.S. credits toward either a B.S. in Industrial Technology with a concentration in Nanofabrication Manufacturing Technology at Millersville University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, or a B.S. in General Science with a concentration in Nanoscience at Penn State Berks campus.

Cultural and Community Education

Over and above the degree and training offerings already discussed, RACC provides invaluable community services. The school serves an important cultural and community function by sponsoring programs ranging from art education to English classes for non-native speakers. A sampling of such programs include the Meet the Artist Series, created in 1978, which features monthly exhibitions on campus of local artists in the
community; 21st Century Community Learning Centers, an after-school program that targets at-risk elementary and middle school-aged children within the local community; the Adult Basic Education Program, which offers free classes for adults in basic math and reading skills; the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program, also free of charge, for non-native English speaking adults; and the Even Start Family Literacy program, a collaboration between RACC and the Reading School District for low-income families with children aged three to seven years old which provides children with early childhood education programs and parents with English and parenting classes. Finally, the Miller Theatre for Performing Arts, opened in 2007, provides a state-of-the-art venue for theater, music, and dance performances that are open to the general public.

Summary and Conclusions

The impact RACC has on its students is evident in the biographies of student contributors to the school’s Legacy student journal. In just one volume (from Spring 2008), one gets a snapshot of the students who are benefiting from the education and resources RACC provides despite their unique aspirations and backgrounds:

Abby is a full-time RACC student in her sophomore year. She plans to earn her degree in June 2008 and continue on in music business and performance…Kevin is a full-time student at RACC planning to graduate in 2008. He plans to pursue a career in civil engineering…Mike will be graduating from RACC in June, earning an Associate of Arts in Anthropology. He will be attending Kutztown University in the Fall of 2008 and plans on a double major in Anthropology and General Psychology…Jennifer is currently a non-traditional student at RACC, splitting time between work and the classroom. She plans to continue at RACC for her Associate's Degree in Anthropology before continuing on at a university for her Bachelor's Degree…Dawn will be moving on to earn a degree in Comparative Literature and possibly Classical Studies. She says, “I have no career goal other than to continue to learn and to see where that leads me!”…Chad plans to continue part-time as a
sophomore at RACC and hopes to complete his degree by 2009-2010. He then plans to transfer [to] Cedar Crest College to complete a B.A. in History and then a Master's Degree…Sheryl is a full-time student at RACC planning to earn her degree and graduate in 2009. She then plans to continue her education at a four year college or university…Jacki is a second-year, part-time student who hopes to go on to become an accountant after graduation…Chelsea will be attending Reading Area Community College until next fall when she hopes to finish the transfer program in psychology. She hopes to graduate after the spring term in 2009 and then transfer to a four-year college pursuing a career in aiding individuals in their challenges with eating disorders [sic].

But for all of the students who are able to fulfill their dreams of becoming an engineer, a counselor, or an accountant, there are just as many who fail to attain their educational goals. RACC’s graduation rate is currently calculated at 7%, an abysmal figure that would be indefensible except for the fact that it counts only students enrolled on a “full-time, first-time” basis. Therefore, it does not capture students who matriculate as part-time students or those who start their studies elsewhere before transferring to RACC. Nor does this rate take into account the many students who transfer to a four-year school prior to earning an associate’s degree or who enroll never intending to obtain a credential. In fact, only 30% of the school’s student body was considered as “full-time, first-time students” in 2008. Nevertheless, a 7% graduation rate ranks it third lowest in the state among public two-year colleges. Clearly, increasing the graduation rate of its students should be made a top priority by the school’s administrators. Implementing assessment tools that evaluate and track students’ progress from matriculation through graduation, transfer, and entry into the workforce will give administrators a better understanding of the pitfalls students experience along the way that may lead to attrition as well as the programs and strategies that are successful in encouraging persistence.
The school should also take greater strides to diversify its student population to better reflect the demographics of the area it serves. Although almost a third of the student body is categorized as minority, the city of Reading is over 50% Hispanic while the Hispanic student body on campus is only 18%. In order to serve the most at-risk and disadvantaged citizens, RACC recruiters should focus their attention on recruiting Hispanic and other minority students to the campus. Not only will increasing the educational attainment of the city’s residents boost the economic vitality of the city, but RACC may become eligible for Hispanic-Serving Institution designation—defined as those schools whose Hispanic enrollment is at least 25% of their total student enrollment—which would qualify the school for additional federal funding.59

RACC should be commended for taking steps that encourage and support students to persist in their studies. The KEYS and Advantage programs provide the additional support services, such as one-on-one academic and career counseling, which have been shown to increase persistence among at-risk students. Also, their dual-enrollment and other community outreach programs target at-risk students early on in their schooling to lay a strong academic foundation. For students who may be the first in their families to attend college, having this kind of exposure before they enter college gives them a better understanding of what will be expected of them once they become college students.

Furthermore, RACC has instituted an academic model that integrates core competencies into all of its degree programs, both transfer and career, thus ensuring that all graduates are taught the broad-based skills employers expect in the modern workplace. Through its Mechatronics and NanoTechnology transfer agreements, the school has
demonstrated a commitment to expanding academic opportunities in emerging fields while also providing its students with educational options that extend beyond their time at RACC. As noted in the previous chapter, having this kind of flexibility is critical to raising the economic status of community college students since the most lucrative careers will increasingly require higher level skills and education. The school should continue to seek out and identify potential transfer opportunities in other traditional career tracks.

Finally, the contribution the school makes to the local community in the form of outreach services, workforce development and training, cultural programming, and economic development cannot be ignored. For almost forty years, it has been an integral part of the city and the cultural identity of the local community. In his February 2010 State of the City report, Reading Mayor Thomas McMahon summarized the pride and perseverance of the city’s residents and the role RACC is likely to serve in helping the city turn itself around to more prosperous times:

Civic pride; it is too easy to be a naysayer especially when the economic and jobs environment are so challenging. But we have a great community, great history and I believe an even greater future…We have the resources in educational facilities…One being the technology center at RACC… it should be bursting at the seams with students making themselves ready for the new economy… in renewable energy sources, in health care advances and innovative manufacturing technology to keep us competitive…So as we begin a new year, and a new decade, let’s [sic] count our blessings, face our challenges head on, and begin to take control of our destiny.60

As the city continues to diversify, RACC will play an important role in providing programs that encourage civic engagement, promote leadership development, and educate and train its citizens for tomorrow’s workforce. For second generation Hispanics growing up in the city, these resources will be particularly important in realizing increased affluence and
social mobility as their generation matures. As the only viable college option for many of these children, it is a community resource that must be protected and maintained not only for them but for the greater good of the city and all its residents.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The American community college has historically played an important role in providing a means for upward social mobility among lower socio-economic groups by offering an affordable and accessible path to a four-year baccalaureate degree. Over the years, it has evolved from its original conception as a “junior” college to the community college of today, which employs a multipurpose model and serves a diverse student population with varied expectations. Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues aptly sum up the state of the modern community college system:

As the community college adapts to meet core mission goals of market responsiveness and upward mobility, its attachment to localism and open admissions comes into conflict. The simultaneous growth of the noncredit shadow curriculum, the postsecondary system, and the bachelor’s degree is dawning as “the age of and” in community colleges: they must strive to be loyal to democratic and meritocratic values, to be both global and locally responsive, to be internally coherent and externally responsive, to be providers of occupational liberal arts and professional curricula, and to be governed by community-based university and corporate systems. The result is an increasingly complex identity, an effect typical of globally responsive institutions.¹

As the country now jockeys for position in a new era of globalization, the community college is assuming new roles and additional responsibilities to prepare a citizenry qualified to compete in the international marketplace.

 Particularly in light of federal initiatives and partnerships between community colleges and the business community, the community college system continues to expand its focus on workforce development in an effort to restore a middle class once sustained by the now declining manufacturing sector. This shift in focus has generated criticisms that
the community college has become a “contradictory college,” unable to effectively administer both academic and vocational training. The main objective of this study was to determine whether, with so much emphasis turning to applied and specialized training, the community college will remain a viable pathway to a four-year baccalaureate degree for students for whom the community college is their only means of entering the higher education system. Ironically, precisely because of the economic downturn the country is currently experiencing, the community college is undergoing a modern renaissance, with enrollments surging and more students—including those who likely would not have considered the school only a few years earlier—looking to the community college as a practical means of gaining access to higher education.

Because of the resurgence in popularity of the schools, this is an exciting time for community colleges. The renewed interest in the schools has afforded them the opportunity to lobby for their interests to their, albeit limited, success. However, community college advocates should move prudently to ensure that the excitement and momentum generated by their movement promotes policy changes that have first taken into account the lessons that can be gleaned from the school’s century-long history. By studying the history of the school’s development and evolution, policymakers and administrators have the opportunity to learn from past experience the strategies that may be best applied to meet the needs of tomorrow’s community college students. Such an historical perspective is needed to understand the underlying purpose and mission of community colleges and the role they have played in providing an alternate pathway to the middle class so that all constituents are best served.
First, primary criticisms of the community college need to be closely examined, such as Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel’s claim that the schools’ focus on vocational programming has the negative effect of diverting students into terminal programs that offer limited mobility and opportunity for advancement. After having studied the development of vocational programming in the schools, they contend that school officials have gradually developed institutionalized mechanisms that sort students into either vocational or academic tracks based on presumed characteristics, including the likelihood of success in each respective program. The most obvious way to correct this bias is to weaken the distinction between “academic vs. vocational” by introducing more general education elements into the vocational programs, thus strengthening their collegiate integrity. Many schools are already beginning to move in this direction, particularly by offering applied associate degrees that can be transferred to baccalaureate programs in high-technology fields. Schools should continue to identify areas in which to merge academic and vocational training to ensure all graduates, regardless of major, are prepared with the high-level skills employers seek.

Another key criticism is that students entering community colleges are less likely to achieve their goals of attaining baccalaureate degrees than students entering directly into four-year colleges. By identifying and addressing the features of the current community college model seen as being responsible for generating this outcome, school administrators will be better able to integrate their students into the college community and, in turn, foster an environment more conducive to student learning. Specifically, schools need to offer their students opportunity for meaningful social interaction with both faculty and classmates. One strategy that has proven to be successful in a number of community
college settings is to implement the “learning community” model. Under such a system, specific courses are linked together in “course clusters,” with students of similar interests and majors enrolling together for a sequence of courses. With faculty members collaborating on curriculum development, such an arrangement fosters an interdisciplinary approach and cultivates camaraderie with fellow classmates, all of which keeps students engaged in their studies. This is particularly important for schools that enroll a high percentage of part-time learners whose time on campus is often limited to scheduled class time.

Furthermore, academic integration is integral to a student’s success in the community college. At-risk and disadvantaged students, particularly, often require more hands-on support than other students. Schools should be especially cognizant of their special needs and the potential obstacles that might impede their success in school. A proven strategy used by some schools involves mentoring programs that pair an incoming freshman student with an upper-level student with similar academic interests and backgrounds. Such programs give new students a supportive resource for asking questions and advice and from whom to learn strategies for succeeding in their new academic environment.

Since the potential for attrition is higher at community colleges than at four-year schools, it is imperative that two-year schools facilitate transfer opportunities as much as possible by engaging students to learn about the transfer process from the first day they step onto campus. One way of achieving higher transfer rates is to make the process as transparent as possible to students, many of whom may be the first in their families to
attend college and, therefore, likely do not have a frame of reference to guide them. To better promote their transfer function, schools should consider housing a Transfer Center on campus, offer transferring workshops and seminars periodically throughout the school year, and clearly communicate courses that articulate with baccalaureate programs. Moreover, some states have been experimenting with guaranteed admissions for its community college transfer students. Though budgetary and size restrictions may ultimately override such programs, streamlining the transfer process in such a way is sure to have a positive impact on the number of students successfully moving on to four-year schools.

Furthermore, schools have a responsibility to communicate with students not only regarding the administrative procedures for transferring, but to also educate them on the academic requirements and rigor of specific degree programs. Similarly, students may not be well advised on the applicability of various academic majors to occupations in the marketplace, including the projected earnings and advancement opportunities of occupations. To better inform students of their options, required orientation courses should include coursework that surveys the various programs offered by the school and how their graduates have applied their education to the marketplace. Alumni guest speakers, for example, would be able to provide current students with a first-hand perspective on how they are using their degrees. Although this type of information is often offered in the school’s Career Services office, the dissemination of such information often depends on students proactively seeking it themselves. By requiring all entering students to participate in an orientation course – which many schools currently do anyway – and including
information on degree and career options early on in the student’s academic career, students will be better informed of their choices and can become better advocates for themselves.

Reading Area Community College provides an informative case study on what one school is currently doing to meet the needs of its diverse student population. Serving a diverse student body almost a third of which are minority students, RACC provides numerous support programs over and above its basic program offerings that are designed to assist disadvantaged students with additional tools to help them to adapt and excel in their studies. Specifically, the KEYS and Advantage programs, eligible to low-income students, provide access to academic and career counseling, tutoring services, scholarships, and other support services. Furthermore, dual-enrollment programs expose high-achieving high school students to the academic standards and expectations of college-level coursework, giving them a foot up when they begin their college studies. Many of these students may otherwise not consider college as an option were it not for this early introduction while still in high school.

Finally, the school’s workforce development programs offer a wide range of students the opportunity to learn new skills or expand existing skills that are highly desired by local and regional employers. For students interested in extending their education to the baccalaureate level, the school has worked to identify transfer opportunities that will allow students to advance in their chosen fields to obtain bachelor’s degrees. Not only does this arrangement benefit the students who realize the added wage gains and occupational flexibility that accompany holding a baccalaureate degree, but it is also helping to revive the local economy, particularly the manufacturing industry.
To return, then, to the original research question that underscores this study, “How should the community college system evolve to meet the needs of the new economy while balancing its fidelities to its interested stakeholders, particularly those students for whom a community college offers the only viable pathway to a baccalaureate degree?” The key to answering the school’s critics and restoring the community college to its standing as a serious academic institution is to ensure a structured liberal arts-focused curriculum and academic standards consistent with other collegiate institutions. As enrollments increase and more students consider the community college as a practical starting point to their college careers, standards will likely rise under increased student pressure for challenging coursework. This can be seen even now in the fact that many more colleges are offering Honors Programs, and there is a growing trend toward increased assessment and accountability.

Assessment of student learning outcomes must be a principal part of each school’s educational philosophy. In its accreditation standards the Middle States Commission on Higher Education describes the role of institutional assessment of student learning as demonstrating, “at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.” By setting defined learning goals and performance measures, schools can identify the most effective strategies for student learning as well as areas that warrant modification or improvement. Such assessment tools should, whenever possible, track student progress from matriculation through entry into the job market so as to attain a longitudinal perspective of the school’s educational effectiveness.
As well, connecting with students at an early age through dual-enrollment programs or other community outreach programs is an effective method of introducing the college system to students who otherwise may not consider higher education to be within their reach. Community colleges should continue to aggressively promote these types of programs within the high schools, particularly in school districts that enroll a higher percentage of underprivileged students. However, the onus cannot be placed only on the community college. All levels of the educational system need to take responsibility for ensuring students are given the support needed to persist toward their degree goals. The K-12 system, particularly, needs to ensure that its graduates are equipped with basic math and reading skills so that students choosing to move onto postsecondary schooling are not placed at a disadvantage by having to first enroll in remedial courses. So long as the number of students enrolled in remedial classes remains where it is today, the community college will be unable to shed its stigma as a “second-class” college.

Finally, sufficient funding will likely remain a perpetual concern for the schools, both in terms of available financial aid for students and institutional budgetary needs. Fortunately, students received some much needed goods news with the recent passage of the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act which guarantees annual increases to Pell grants which will be fixed to the Consumer Price Index. On the other hand, the colleges experienced a disappointing blow with the elimination of the American Graduation Initiative. With both enrollments and deferred maintenance growing, the schools will be feeling a pinch in future years on how to accommodate a growing student body with aging classrooms and other facilities. For schools which rely so heavily on local
and state proceeds, the prospect does not look bright in this regard. However, the increased interest in community colleges, including the attention given them from the current Administration, is helping to validate their importance within the higher educational system which, hopefully, will ensure their continued financial support for years to come.

Since the beginning of the community college’s history, the school has adapted and adjusted to the changing needs of its students and the broader environment in which it functions. Today, as the United States enters a new era in the nation’s history, the community college is once again being called upon to respond to changes in the social and economic reality of the country. Driven by advances in technology and increasing globalization, American workers will be required to have greater flexibility, more sophisticated skill sets and have an understanding of and respect for diverse cultures. The community college, traditionally attracting students of varied backgrounds and experiences, is aptly suited to take on the task of educating a diverse population with disparate goals and aspirations. However, as administrators look ahead to this exciting time, they must bear in mind the lessons that can be gleaned by reflecting on past experience. Only by studying the past will they be able to ensure the school remains a viable pathway to the educational aspirations of all its students.
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