

The Future of Community Colleges in Our Country
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Community colleges remain a vital part of American Education. President Obama has recognized the importance of this institution by considering Martha J. Kanter for the top secondary education position in the nation. Kanter is the head of the Foothill–De Anza Community College District in Silicon Valley in the Golden State. This is, according to the records, the first time that a community college administrator has been considered for a top post in education (Field, 2009).

This essay will pretend to give the state of affairs of community colleges, a brief historical background on community colleges, a review of the place they have achieved in the history of American education, and the future of their vision and mission that will continue to create equality and intellectual quality, and contributing with a better prepared and needed labor force.

By educating our communities and tailoring education to the underserved, community colleges have been of great service to entire communities. Frequently, they put into practice the philosophy of building better communities through learning. Economically more accessible than universities, they have excellent faculty bodies, faculty who are not only passionate about teaching but also dedicated to benefiting students on all levels. Community colleges admit a diverse student body, faculty, and staff, not only referring to minorities, but to handicapped and students of all ages. Their marketing has been consistently inclusive rather than exclusive. There is a history of community colleges addressing the working labor force. The strategy of working with local business, national and international corporations, and government and nonprofits to place students has enriched their students' education with on-the-job experience. Most community college students work part-time or hourly jobs. The community college allows these students to have flexibility with their college courses. Older students who are coming back into the labor force may have specific goals in the skills they need to obtain for a job or promotion. Traditional students benefit from a two-year high-quality education as preparation for a baccalaureate degree. Community colleges not only attend to the traditional and the outstanding students but are sensitive to the needs of, and tailor their curricula to, the greater population and students who take online courses.

To give a historical perspective on community colleges, I would like to refer to an article in the *Canadian Vocational Journal* (May 1979) by D. Prokopec. He outlined the same ideas on the historical roots and purposes of the community college and its development in the United States and clearly described its purposes: preparation for advanced study, occupational education, general education, guidance services, continuing education, and community services.

In the late nineteenth century, the concept of remedial education from private schools came to include sporadic efforts for inclusiveness. However, these were some of the originating ideas that formed community colleges' idealistic missions, first known as junior colleges that

expanded in the 1960s and 1970s. Their inception also raised criticism from elitists, universities, and four-year colleges, who regarded community colleges as remedial education and as inferior since they did not measure up to the academic model of prestigious four-year colleges and universities. Community college students were perceived as having poor skills and study habits. Faculty were perceived as lacking PhDs or as having received their degrees from second-rate institutions or as not pursuing independent scholarship. Mainstream critics, on the other hand, were supportive of the direction of community colleges but believed they could do a better job by serving the needs of less-advantaged students. Finally, structural critics argued that community colleges were part of a stratified system of higher education that reproduced the race, class, and gender inequalities that are part of the larger society (Rosenbaun, 2006).

Rosenbaun, a professor of sociology education and social policy and a research fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, explained the dynamic process of learning. He and two other authors discovered in their research how much the community college had contributed to revolutionary changes in American society by providing opportunities to disadvantaged groups. The dramatic increase in enrollment in institutes of higher education is largely the result of the growth of a relatively new institution, namely, the community college. This minor institution, with its modest and humble beginnings as a junior college, considered unimportant and enrolling only a small portion of college students, is now becoming a comprehensive institution greatly increased in size and importance by serving a broad segment of the community. University enrollment has doubled since 1965. Enrollment in community colleges has increased fivefold. Today, almost half of all new college students are in community colleges (Rosenbaun, 2006). *Community College of Research and Practice* (March 2009) published an article by T.A. Tollefson with the following data:

In the fall of 2006, there were 1,045 community colleges out of a total of 4,314 postsecondary institutions in the U.S., or 24.2% of the total. Community college students by the fall of 2006, likewise, had increased in number to 6.2 million, out of 15.2 million undergraduates and a total of 17.8 million undergraduate and graduate students, representing 40.8% of undergraduate and 34.8% of all undergraduate and graduate college and university students in America (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2008). (Tollefson, 2009, p. 387)

Community colleges were designed around idealistic goals: increasing college access; being a primary source of opportunity for ethnic minorities, immigrants, and low-income students; and offering resources for students who attend poor high schools and/or who did poorly in high school. Besides preparing students to transfer to a four-year college, community colleges also offer certificates and associate's degrees in occupational fields, as well as a wide range of noncredit classes, training activities, and community services. Obviously, the rapid increase in community colleges' enrollment has created new problems. A great percentage of community college students do not graduate or do not transfer to a university. However, the idea that people who are more educated will be able to make better informed decisions increases the education of society in general.

Community colleges should not be seen as separate from other parts of postsecondary education. They have been misunderstood as two-year colleges and perceived only in functional

ways—as vocational, collegiate, and remedial, etc. Community colleges in America are now very visible and highly respected institutions of higher education. More than 1,000 community colleges in all 50 states now comprise nearly 25 percent of all colleges and universities in the United States, with over 6.5 million students, or about 45 percent of all college students (Tollefson, 2009, p. 386). Community colleges are, in fact, a significant part of the full historical unfolding of educational institutions in the United States and should be considered academic institutions.

The first effort in terms of legislation was the Caminetti Act, the first state legislation in California authorizing state funding to help public high schools create junior college extensions. It was adopted by California General Assembly in 1907, but the governor vetoed the bill and it never became law (Witt et al., 1994). California also became the first state to pass a law that authorized state funding of public junior colleges, when it adopted the Ballard Act in 1917. (Tollefson, 2009, p. 388)

It was not until then that the junior college received funding from the State of California. Then, other states followed through with similar legislation. Despite extraordinarily large differences across the nation in proportional funding sources, particularly among tuition and state and local government funding percentages, community colleges have found ways to obtain the necessary levels of support from all sources (Tollefson, 2009, p. 391). However, funding may continue to be a serious problem for community colleges given the state of the U.S. economy. Community colleges may have to increase tuition because state and other sources of funding decrease. The lack of sustainability may not advance their mission to provide access to higher education and may not be able to support “student success programs.” However, community colleges will continue to grow. They will continue to change, perhaps sharply, due to their diffused institutional missions and high responsiveness to prevailing economic, social, and political environments. Class distribution and employment stability of the U.S. population are being transformed by technology and the global economy. Businesses close or move abroad, and class inequality has been increasing. Community colleges are stepping up to the efforts at job preparation and economic development (Ballantine, 2008). Immigration, even though challenged, brings more people who require acculturation and preparation for high-skill jobs.

Community colleges may not be the panacea for underserved populations. There are more serious and chronic problems coming from poor elementary and secondary schools that will have to be closely examined. Educational and political institutions may have to work hard to stop the decline in education in general. Beyond remedial education, which is increasing due to the troubled U.S. status of elementary and secondary schools, community colleges also offer preparation for highly technical careers, for which there is a high demand, such as nursing and radiology. Teaching may change dramatically if the technology education revolution or demand for more distance education opportunities takes place aggressively. However, technologically facilitated education may not be a solution for less prepared students who need a lot of hands-on contact with teachers.

Community colleges are now an American classic and will keep changing, adding new missions and reviewing old ones. The inclusiveness of their mission will continue to keep

community colleges as a very important and perhaps nontraditional institution, but with a high impact on American education because of their broad and comprehensive modern approach to education. They will continue to be challenged by receiving funds from state and private sources that will affect their sustainability and, of course, maintain a futuristic approach to the implementation of curricula that will prepare students for careers for the twenty-first century. In fact, community colleges have demonstrated their functional ability in terms of future jobs preparedness and their assertive approach to new methodologies and trends in education.

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