

CELEBRATIONS

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The View from Here: What's Ahead for Teaching and Learning in Community Colleges

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This is a special year for America's community colleges.

In 1901, the doors opened at Joliet Junior College in Illinois, beginning a community-responsive movement that has opened access to higher education to the most diverse student body in history. Community colleges are a uniquely American invention, and we are celebrating our centennial this year, in 2001—100 years of educational opportunity.

Let me remind everyone what we are all about. Ellen Noonkester was one of five children growing up in poverty. She dropped out of school one week shy of her 8th grade graduation after attending 36 different schools. Her family told her she would never amount to anything. Ellen left home at age 18 and did housekeeping to pay for cosmetology school. She was a hairdresser for 12 years. But she wanted to prove her family wrong and show she was not a loser. Ellen enrolled at Palomar College as a returning student when I was president of that institution. She became president of Phi Theta Kappa, president of the student government, and student trustee. She received her A.A. degree in paralegal studies and served as a deputy court clerk at Vista Superior Court. She is the first in her family to attend college.

Ken Grossman was a student in my freshman chemistry classes at Butte College, a community college in northern California. Ken was an academically bright student who was working his way through college in a bicycle repair shop. He was a student with a dream—Ken wanted to open

a microbrewery. This was 1970, and there were not many microbreweries around. But Ken pursued his dream, taking my chemistry classes, microbiology, and welding. Ken finally scraped enough money together to buy an old dairy and took apart the stainless steel components to weld together Sierra Nevada Brewery. The beer connoisseurs in the audience may recognize that Sierra Nevada is today one of the most successful microbreweries in America. Ken was chosen as the 2000 alumnus of the year by the Community College League of California because of his success and because he gives back to his community.

Craig Venter hated high school and, as a result, did very poorly. But that was okay with Craig because he was going to be a professional surfer—a true California kid. Then Craig got his draft notice and was sent to Vietnam during the height of the conflict. While in Vietnam, Craig served as a medical corpsman. Because of that experience, he decided that he wanted to become a medical doctor when he finished his tour of duty. Upon his return to the States, Craig found that his poor high school grades prevented him from being accepted to any university. Anywhere else in the world, that would have been the end of the story for Craig Venter's education. But America's community colleges were there. Craig entered the College of San Mateo in California and eventually did get that medical degree. Here is the genius behind the mapping of the human genome. Imagine what we would have lost had community colleges not been there to give Craig Venter a second chance.

These are just a few stories. There are more than 10 million stories to be told every term in America's community colleges. I invite you to let me know about some of the student successes at your college.

Our 1200 community college campuses are located within commuting distance of more than 90 percent of the population of the United States. And a growing number of the colleges are making learning even more accessible by delivering courses through distance education.

Think about what it would be like if we did not have community colleges. As in the Jimmy Stewart movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, we would see significant changes. Nurses, paramedics, EMTs, firefighters, and police officers would disappear or would not receive the level of education that they do today. Opportunity for higher education and a better quality of life would be denied to more than 10 million people each term. Businesses in our communities

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would not be able to form partnerships with the most responsive of educational institutions to prepare and develop their workforces.

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Community colleges have broken with higher education tradition to go their own way—like the senior citizen who was driving down the highway when his cell phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, be careful. I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on Route 280." Herman responded, "It's not just one car; it's hundreds of them!" Herman was going his own way, and we go our own way in the community colleges. Sometimes policymakers don't understand us, but our way is really the right way.

Here are the four enduring values that separate us from other institutions of higher education:

Access

Community colleges provide access to higher education for the most diverse student body in history. It is diversity in every respect: age, ethnicity, degree of preparedness, socioeconomic status, disability, and even the goals the students have. Some come to our institutions wanting to transfer to earn a baccalaureate degree, others to prepare for a career, and still others just to take a single course.

Community Responsiveness

Community colleges are the educational institutions most responsive to the needs of their communities, providing vocational education programs needed by the community, contract education for employees of local businesses, and community service courses for the benefit of members of the community.

A Clear Focus on Student Learning

Community college faculty, staff, and administrators care about the success of their students. Our colleges have a record of success in both career and transfer programs. When I was president of Palomar College, I took great delight in telling audiences in my community that the students who transferred from Palomar to the campuses of the California State University achieved a higher grade point average after transfer and persisted to degree at a higher rate than the students who started at the university. This always came as a great shock to these audiences. They knew that many of the students at Palomar were not eligible to be admitted to the university directly from high school, yet they outperformed the university students after their time at Palomar.

The people in this audience know how that can happen. Class sizes in the freshman and sophomore years are more reasonable at a community college. When I was a freshman at Ohio State many years ago, I was in classes with 400 or so other students. Community colleges do not employ teaching assistants; instead, the classes are staffed with fully qualified faculty members. When I was a senior at Ohio State, I was employed as a teaching assistant for freshman chemistry laboratory and recitation sections, answering student questions and explaining what the lecture professor really meant. I thought I was pretty good, but I was not a fully qualified faculty member. Community college faculty and staff focus on student learning and success, and the colleges provide comprehensive student services.

At the April 2001 AACC convention in Chicago, one of our distinguished alumni, Bruce Merrifield, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, told an audience of 2,000 community college leaders that his teachers at Pasadena City College were better than those he had at the very well-known research university to which he transferred. This is not an uncommon story; I am sure you have heard similar stories from your former students. It should be no surprise to anyone here why the Learning College movement got its start in community colleges.

Resourcefulness/Entrepreneurial Spirit/ Creativeness/ Innovativeness

I believe that community colleges have this value because we traditionally have had fewer resources than other sectors of higher education. We have to be creative to fulfill our missions. Community colleges form partnerships with other educational institutions, government, business, and industry to provide facilities and programs for our students and our communities. This innovative spirit extends into the classroom where innovative faculty like you create new environments and methods to improve student learning, and into student support areas where college staff creatively work to support student success.

We need to be aware of threats to these core values of America's community colleges. In order to protect access, we need to keep student costs as low as possible. About half of our students are first-generation students, and many are in need of financial assistance to complete their education and make their dreams come true.

AACC tracks and tries to shape federal financial aid policies. We are concerned, for example, when we see loans increasingly being used in the place of grants. I am a first-generation college student myself, and I remember very clearly the day that I told my father that I wanted to go to college. We lived in a blue-collar community, and it was expected that I would enter the workforce after high school. Neither of my parents had completed high school; college was a foreign concept. I remember my father asking me how much college would cost, and when I found out and told him, he responded by saying that I was dreaming—but he helped me make that dream come true by helping me get a summer job in the rubber parts factory where he worked. The only thing that my parents ever borrowed money for was to buy their house; if they could have found a way to do that without borrowing money, they would have done so. If I had gone to my father that day saying we would have to borrow money, that would likely have been the end of my hopes for higher education. We need to remember that about half of our community college students are in those same shoes. AACC is working very hard to preserve and improve need-based financial aid programs for our students.

Challenges to remedial education can effectively limit access to the underprepared. If you have not read Bob McCabe's new book, *No One to Waste*, I recommend it. It provides a compelling case for the societal importance of these programs. The book is available from the Community College Press.

We need to be careful about judging the capabilities of students based upon past performance. One of Abraham Lincoln's teachers is known to have said, "He is a daydreamer and asks foolish questions." One of Woodrow Wilson's teachers observed, "Woodrow is ten years old and is just beginning to read and write. He shows signs of improving, but you must not set your sights too high for him." One of Albert Einstein's teachers said, "Albert is a poor student. He is mentally slow, unsociable, and is always daydreaming. He is spoiling it for the rest of the class. It would be in the best interests of all if he were removed from school at once." Every student deserves our respect and our best efforts.

There are also capacity challenges to access. What Clark Kerr calls Tidal Wave II is headed toward higher education. These are the children of the baby boomers and new immigrants, including high percentages of underrepresented and disadvantaged students. This increase in the traditional college-going-age population is going to test our physical ability to accommodate the demand for community college services.

At the same time this bulge in the traditional college-age students is about to enter higher education, we are experiencing an increased need for lifelong learning. The new economy requires continued learning throughout life to keep skills up to date. Shortly after I arrived in Washington, D.C., there was a story in the *Baltimore Sun* about a Ph.D. physicist who was taking computer classes at a Baltimore area community college. This may have been news for the *Baltimore Sun*, but it was not a surprise to those of us in community colleges. Twenty-eight percent of noncredit community college students and increasing numbers of credit students have B.A. degrees or higher. Our community colleges are being referred to as the new graduate schools. Will we have the capacity to accommodate Tidal Wave II plus the need for lifelong learning?

We need to advocate for increased state investment in community college facilities, faculty, and staff. There is some encouraging news from North Carolina, where voters passed the largest bond issue in its history with \$600 million going to community colleges, and from California, where voters approved lowering the threshold for voter approval of local bonds to 55 percent rather than a two-thirds supermajority. Last month, the Los Angeles Community College District passed a \$1.25-billion bond facilities issue. The question is whether the voters will continue to be generous if the economic downturn continues.

We will also need to learn a lot more about how to raise private funds successfully. Remember the tourist who was invited to see the magnificent Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv. The visitor was impressed that Israel had named the auditorium after the famous German writer Thomas Mann. His host corrected him. The hall was actually named for Frederick Mann of Philadelphia. “Oh,” said the visitor. “What did he write?” “A check,” his host replied. We all need to be looking for the Frederick Manns out there to help our colleges.

Our community colleges face some additional challenges. Many of us were employed during the great growth period of the community colleges in the 1960s and are approaching retirement. We will soon be facing a significant turnover of faculty and leaders of the nation’s community colleges. This projected turnover presents a window of opportunity to diversify faculty and leadership, but it is also a challenge. It is important for new faculty and leaders to understand and defend the community college mission and core values. AACC is working now to partner with other organizations to develop initiatives to help prepare community college leaders of the future.

One of the most important things you can do as model teachers is to help orient new faculty members to the mission and values of your college. As faculty leaders, you can also model a sense of civility that will shape the culture of your college. According to noted organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley, when colleges and universities have problems, they circle the wagons—and then shoot inward. Every college lives through stresses and strains, but instead of negative and destructive criticism, think about what a difference it would make if people expressed appreciation to colleagues who are working to correct problems and to those who work directly with students to guide them through imperfect systems.

We all share the good fortune of being educators. There is no other profession that can do so much to inspire others. Before her tragic death in the *Challenger* explosion, Christa McAuliffe was asked whether she was ready to forsake teaching for the exciting job of an astronaut. She responded, “Although the astronauts are reaching for the stars, I touch the future. I teach.”

All of us have been affected by teachers. When people are asked about the most influential people in their lives, other than parents, a teacher is most commonly mentioned. Like you, I have had my share of good teachers and not-so-good

teachers, and I have learned from all of them—sometimes what *not* to do in my own teaching.

America’s community colleges have often been called upon to meet the needs of a changing society, and our institutions are once again the most likely solution to a growing challenge.

The Digital Divide is a new social divide by income, race, and geography. Only 7 to 10 percent of Hispanics and African Americans in inner cities and rural areas have access to technology and the Internet. At the same time, Congress approved an additional 195,000 H1B visas to bring people from other nations to fill some of the highest-paying jobs in our country.

Community colleges, with our strategic locations in rural and inner-city areas, and with our diverse student bodies, are positioned to help bridge this new societal divide. Already, there is evidence that community colleges are making a contribution. The Faces of the Future study conducted last year revealed that community colleges provided a major contribution to student growth in computer skills, especially for single parents and first-generation college students.

However, our students struggle. The cost of a computer is one of the top five problems associated with taking courses at our community colleges. We need to do what we can to provide access to computer laboratories when they are not otherwise scheduled.

Of course, our community colleges themselves struggle for resources needed to upgrade computer equipment and software for our classrooms and laboratories. Even more serious is the problem that colleges are having recruiting and retaining faculty in computer science and information technologies. The answer to these problems may lie in strategic partnerships with the information technology industry to provide knowledgeable adjunct faculty and to help colleges maintain up-to-date equipment and software.

Speaking of keeping up with technology—at a recent computer industry exposition, an IT executive reportedly remarked, “If the auto industry had kept up with technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving \$25 cars that got 1,000 miles per gallon.” To which an auto industry executive replied, “Yes, but would you want your car to crash twice a day?” Then the airbag system would say, “Are you sure?” before going off.

We need to leverage support for technology for our institutions by working with technology companies and foundations. AACC is already doing this in partnership with Microsoft; 63 of our community colleges have received \$40 million in competitive grants so far through the AACC/Microsoft Working Connections project. We are also providing institutional discounts for hardware and software through a partnership with the California Community College Foundation.

Community colleges also need to help meet the challenge of public school reform and teacher preparation and development. In the next 10 years, America will need to hire more than 2.5 million new teachers. Past experience shows that teacher quality is often compromised in response to teacher demand. We cannot afford to allow further erosion of quality. Instead, this projected need for new teachers should be viewed as an unequalled opportunity to transform the quality of teaching in America.

Research studies over the last two decades give us clear and convincing evidence that the single most powerful factor in student achievement gain is the quality of the teacher. It is probably the element more important than all of the others combined. And the quality of teachers must improve if we are to adapt effectively to a new economy that depends far more than ever on the acquisition, analysis, synthesis, communication, and application of knowledge.

Community colleges need to help meet this challenge by forming partnerships with public schools and university colleges of education.

Alternative certification programs have been approved in Texas, Arizona, and Florida, in which people with baccalaureate degrees are entering special programs in community colleges to certify them as teachers.

One of the most rapidly growing phenomena in community colleges is concurrent enrollment. Concurrent enrollment provides high school students with access to specialized courses that otherwise would not be available to them. It is a method of extending and enriching a limited high school curriculum.

Community colleges can also help public schools by providing professional development for teachers, especially

in the areas of effective use of technology in teaching and learning. I encourage you to become active in promoting partnerships with K-12 in your colleges.

The values and the spirit of the community college movement must exist in every department in every one of our institutions. Now, more than ever, community is a climate to be created.

Community colleges have transformed higher education in the United States by making it accessible and convenient. Our colleges changed the way education is delivered by bringing opportunities for learning into communities rather than expecting students to “go away to college.” We developed class schedules and support programs that accommodated the needs of part-time and nontraditional students, opening access to millions of learners. However, as community colleges enter our second century, we find ourselves in a world in which distance, schedules, and geographic service areas have lost much of their significance. Today’s students can take advantage of learning opportunities any time and any place through asynchronous delivery.

We now exist in a world of competition. Virtual colleges and online universities are aggressively recruiting students, aiming to beat us at our own game of making learning convenient. It is a time in which community colleges must remain true to their core values and maintain high quality in their programs and services. Community colleges cannot afford to lose the flexibility and responsiveness that have distinguished the movement.

The values and the spirit of the community college movement must exist in every department in every one of our institutions. Now, more than ever, community is a climate to be created. Our continued success depends upon the strength of the partnerships that we create and whether our unique institutions remain true to their core values of access, community responsiveness, resourcefulness, and a clear focus on student learning. We must make institutional decisions and plans based upon their impact on student learning, must demonstrate accountability for student learning outcomes. We must prepare our students to succeed in an increasingly global and multicultural society. We need to retain confidence in what we do. To achieve, we need confidence, like that of the little girl who told her teacher she was drawing a picture of God. Her teacher responded, “But no one knows what God looks like.” The

little girl replied, "They will when I get through." That's the kind of confidence we will need as we meet the challenges of the future.

Thanks to all of you for what you do every day to advance educational opportunity for students in your communities and to provide leadership for our community colleges. I invite you to help me keep the passion alive for the community college movement.

Remarks presented at the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence, Austin, Texas, May 28, 2001. George Boggs was the inaugural Suanne Davis Roueche NISOD Endowment Distinguished Lecturer.