

Rethinking the Role of Community Colleges: A Public Conversation

by Stephen J. Handel

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE DIVERSE institutions with a variety of academic strengths that serve a multitude of educational needs. Yet, as open admission institutions, community colleges are rarely viewed as “destinations of choice” by students, parents, counselors and other educators. The College Board’s Community College Advisory Panel (CCAP), a committee of influential community college leaders, has initiated a public policy effort to turn this perception around.

A Difficult Conversation

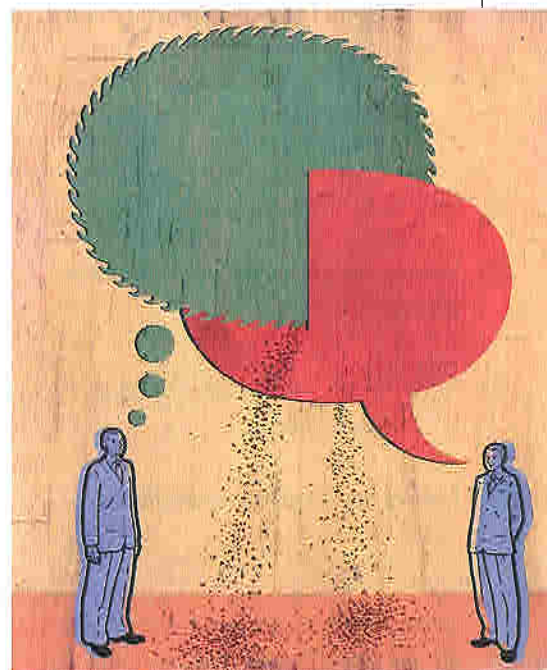
With the broadest mission — educating students with the widest variations in academic preparation and educational goals — community colleges are the least well-funded and, in some circles, the least well-regarded of all postsecondary education institutions. As one community college president expressed it: “We are asked to do the most with the least.”

It is well known that community colleges are the least well-supported higher education institutions (a fact that politicians grasp all too quickly, not always appreciating that doing something well inexpensively is not quite the same thing as doing it cheaply). But the idea that community colleges are not as well respected as their four-year institution counterparts is a far more difficult conversation. Along with the persistent stereotype that community colleges are simply extensions of high school, a significant proportion of high school students believe that they do not need to be prepared academically to perform well at a community college. Moreover, far too many high school counselors consider their local community college a last resort and rarely consider a two-year institution for their well-prepared students, even

if it might be a good educational fit for many of them. At the other end of the educational spectrum, officials at four-year institutions often restrict the number of credits a community college student may transfer to their institution or apply towards a baccalaureate degree. Finally, during my tenure at a large, highly selective institution, there was an ingrained belief on the part of some faculty that community college transfer students were unprepared to tackle upper-level courses.

These notions are simply that: Top-of-the-head beliefs whose veracity is often grounded in anecdote and institutional chauvinism. Certainly they are not subjected to the scrutiny normally associated with higher education. Yet misperceptions that linger drain into the river of common parlance and damage the reputation of a system that enrolls nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States. This is not to say that community colleges are perfect. Rather, it suggests that we must examine more carefully the gaps — in perception or in reality — that serve to undermine the effectiveness of community colleges and the students that they serve.

With college costs on the rise and growth in federal and state support for higher education uncertain, low-cost community colleges will play an increasingly important role in providing not only access to millions of students who would not otherwise attend college, but also to middle-class students whose parents are being priced out of many four-year colleges and universities. If this role were not important enough, experts argue that community colleges will be the vanguard from which the United States will remain competitive internationally. In the coming



decades, as the nation responds to global competition necessitating the need for a more educated workforce — especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics — community colleges will be at the forefront of this societal recasting of intellect, skill and commitment.

Igniting a Dialogue

Given that the world is changing and that community colleges are needed to meet these new global challenges, the College Board’s initiative, *Destinations of Choice: A Re-examination of Community Colleges in American Life*, is igniting a public dialogue about the role of community colleges and identifying strategies that enhance the role of these institutions in advancing student success.

As a first step, CCAP members and

4 KEY CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

- 1 Rising costs
- 2 Focus on student access over student success
- 3 Mismatch between demands and resources
- 4 Need to monitor outcomes

Source: National Commission on Community Colleges

staff from the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives are engaging educators from all segments of American education, in venues around the country, about their perceptions of community colleges. This fact-finding is essential because their views play an important role in how community colleges are perceived and, in turn, how these institutions are supported at the federal, state and local levels.

In addition to speaking with education leaders, College Board staff are reviewing research that sheds light on the effectiveness of American higher education and, in particular, how well community colleges are linked to K-12 schools and four-year institutions. This work has resulted in working papers that address what we believe to be among the most important issues facing community colleges. These

papers focus on several topics including, how community colleges are perceived (or misperceived) by policymakers and the public (*Close, Easy, and Cheap: Perceptions and Misperceptions of America's Community Colleges*); the unintended consequences of community colleges' emphasis on "second chances," (*Second Chances are Good, but First Chances are Better*); the misaligned promise of course and program articulation (*Articulation: The Currency of Transfer?*); and a review of student transfer rates and how they divert us from a greater focus on baccalaureate completion (*It's Not a Math Problem: Why Focusing on Transfer Rates Diverts Us from Promoting Baccalaureate Completion for Community College Students*). All are available for review at www.collegeboard.org/communitycolleges. Not intended as definitive statements by CCAP and the College Board, these documents are working papers designed to evoke a conversation among all educators about the place of community colleges in the 21st century.

A Central Role

Community colleges, regardless of their standing in the minds of policymakers, are extolled in communities throughout the country as places of authentic learning and real concern for the people they serve. As one member of CCAP remarked, "The political elites are only now coming to appreciate what most of America has known for a very long time — community colleges are at the center of intellectual and cultural life in cities and towns across this nation."

Still, these institutions face challenges that must be addressed if community colleges are to remain a vibrant and

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influential postsecondary segment. The National Commission on Community Colleges, in its recently released report, described four issues that will test the future of these colleges: rising costs, a focus on student access over student success, a mismatch between the demands placed on community colleges and the resources provided to tackle them, and a need to monitor outcomes more effectively. Addressing these concerns, the report states, will take the combined efforts of federal, state and community college leaders from around the country.

This is good advice. The College Board and CCAP, through its *Destinations of Choice* initiative, will continue to raise the visibility of community colleges, demonstrating not only the challenges these institutions face, but declaring in forums and venues nationally the inestimable contributions they make to our country's economic, cultural and academic life.



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