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The Community College as a "Liberation Laboratory:" Toward New Visions, Values and Vigor

Abstract

The lackluster manner in which the American high school is teaching students, combined with selective admission programs at a number of post-secondary institutions, combine to give the majority of American students an important option: the community college. Furthermore, the rising wave of conservatism and right wing ideology can best be countered if these two-year institutions became "liberation laboratories," and emphasized the humanities and social sciences, with emphasis on critical reading, critical writing and critical thinking. This paper outlines how such an emphasis, pedagogy and curriculum could be established at the nation's two-year institutions.

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While numbers are difficult to come by, an April 6, 1995 article discussed how the American Association of Community Colleges represents "more than 1,100 institutions and 10 million students across the country" (National Endowment for the Humanities Media Relations, 1995: 1). There is, however, another national entity called the American Association of Community and Junior College.

In December of 1991, a report by the American Council on Education reported that enrollment for higher education was still going up, but that lower-priced community and junior colleges were doing better than four-year schools. Bill Reinhard, a spokesman for the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, said "two-year college enrollment generally has gone up rapidly in periods of economic distress" (Korea Herald, 1991: 9).

Because the current job market requires advanced knowledge and skills, the chance to attend college is recognized as the gateway to this American dream. The nation's community colleges, which enroll more than five million students, are the core representation of this value. By offering students of limited means an opportunity to achieve a higher education, the community college provides a major new pathway to a college degree and to the nation's growing professional and managerial classes (Bissett, 1995: 36).

The roll of the community college in baccalaureate education is traditionally associated with the first two years of college. State policies and articulation agreements have focused on connecting a prescribed sequence of lower-division courses at the community

college with upper-division courses at four-year institutions (Kintzer & Wattenbarger, 1985). The underlying assumption of this focus is that students will follow a "two-plus-two" path, completing an associate's degree at the community college and then the bachelor's degree at a four-year institution (Palmer, Lugwig, & Stapleton, 1994).

In 1994 the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reported that of all Hispanic students in higher education, fifty-six percent were enrolled at a community college. Evidently, for many Latinos, the path to higher education at a university leads through a community college. Admission policies are much less restrictive at many community colleges, the average cost is half that of four-year institutions, and students with high school grade point averages too low for university admissions criteria can build up their GPA's at a community college (Menard, 1996).

Put another way:

Narrowly defined institutional self-interest must give way to a more enlightened broadly based view of the opportunities available to students. As an example, the spiraling cost of higher education in America makes the community college alternative increasingly attractive to families with modest means. It also is a route whereby less academically well-prepared students may find a foothold on the path to the bachelor's degree and beyond (Zuker, 1996: 68).

While the dreams of additional education and the "brass ring" might dance in the dreams of many, I believe that the community college is key because it can serve as the perfect "counter-elitist training laboratory." Bissett (1995) talks about how the community college is a bastion of educational equity for low-income students:

The community college mission and philosophy represent a drive for social equality and promote the goal of equal net welfare for all individuals. Built upon this egalitarian theory of justice, the two-year college illustrates the fair distribution of resources. Those people in greatest need of an education are afforded the opportunity. Social inequities are eliminated and the individuality of each member of society is recognized (Bissett, 1995: p. 36).

I call this a "liberation laboratory" for a number of reasons and, if an entity that is funded by the system has the potential to expose and perhaps prepare students for combating inequities, the community college, junior college, technical college is the perfect place, in my view. It provides an equal playing field for students, thereby eliminating the "classism" often found on four-year campuses. Put another way,

A major aspect of the community college's mission, known as the "open door" policy, originated with the passage of the GI Bill of Rights and was actualized in the 1960s when the "baby boomers" were entering higher education in record numbers. In essence, the community college mission removes academic, financial, social, and geographic barriers to achieving a college education and has its greatest impact on the disadvantaged. As such, the two year college has been

labeled the "people's college," "opportunity," and "democracy's college" as well as the "Ellis Island of higher education" (p.36).

As a student and scholar in the field of Black Studies, I also see this "liberation laboratory" to be more than just an enclave of students who have been, for whatever reason, cast aside; I see the potential for the mass revival of social conscience. Since the low-income are in a similar location seeking a similar goal, what better situation can there be for "consciousness-raising," as it were?

Henry (1994) gives an idea of the power of students on campus and how social trends can be drawn from and even created by student power, where he writes,

. . . [Curriculum has shifted from being what professors desire to teach to being what students desire to learn. Nowadays colleges have to hustle for students by truckling trendily. If the students want media-studies programs so they can fantasize about TV anchors, then media studies will abound. There are in any given year some 300,000 students enrolled in undergraduate communications courses (p.65).

Granted, the community college is more committed to the basics with the technical schools more committed to vocational education. But all of them have liberal arts, general studies and humanities departments. And these are the areas where we could interject such courses as ethnic studies, African American studies, women's studies, multicultural education, intercultural communication (such as the program I wrote and proposed to MATC's General Education department in 1987) or even a "social movements" curriculum. Such a training ground would prepare students more than just academically; to paraphrase Carter G. Woodson, "before students can be educated at four year schools, they must first be socially trained at two year institutions."

Presenters

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