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## Multiple Missions of Community Colleges: Conflicting or Complementary?

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### Introduction

From their beginnings in the early 1900s, community colleges have undergone a significant shift in their purpose and mission. Starting primarily as junior colleges with an emphasis on academics, the colleges are now complex institutions taking on a broad array of educational, social, and economic functions. Many community college advocates hail the comprehensiveness of these institutions, arguing that the ever-expanding mission meets a commitment to serve the changing needs of the community. But critics suggest that the colleges have abandoned missions that should form the foundation of a democratic society and have squandered effort and resources in an attempt to “be all things to all people.” Advocates of both sides of this controversy have compelling arguments. On the one hand, it seems logical that excellence can best be achieved with a precise focus and a clear sense of mission. Yet community colleges have strengths and resources that give them advantages in providing many of the functions that they have taken on. And in many cases, the colleges can use strengths and skills built up in one function to build a solid foundation for new activities.

We do not try to resolve this controversy. Rather, we have two objectives. Our first is to clarify some of the underlying assumptions and move us closer to a concrete analysis of the optimal set of missions for the colleges. Despite the passionate and long-standing controversy, little of the discussion is based on concrete evidence of the benefits or costs of combining missions and activities; most conclusions are based on logical arguments and inferences, rather than empirical data and information. Our second objective is to report preliminary findings from a national study of the missions of community colleges. This project involves

intensive fieldwork in ten community colleges and five public, regional universities, in five states. The project is designed to explore the extent to which the different functions and missions in the colleges are actually integrated or come into conflict.

### Conflicting Missions in Businesses and Educational Institutions

Critics in the 1980s decried the development of the “shopping mall high school” that was unclear about its mission. Currently, many reformers call for smaller high schools with a particular focus or theme. Career academies, in which the high school curriculum is organized around a particular occupational or educational theme, are growing all across the country. In New York City, career magnet schools, also organized around particular themes, are oversubscribed as parents and students look for alternatives to the large impersonal neighborhood comprehensive schools. Thus, current thinking in secondary schools suggests a move away from comprehensiveness.

But the same cannot be said for four-year colleges and universities. Although there has been a long-standing controversy about the conflict between research and teaching in postsecondary education, no one has questioned the comprehensiveness of the university. All of the most successful and selective universities are complex organizations made up of dozens of schools, research institutes, departments, and other sub-organizations. Universities and their faculty enter into contracts with corporations, engage in various types of technical assistance and consulting, work on pure research as well as practical technological development, conduct extension and mid-career education, and perform many other functions. Some of the functions are challenged on specific grounds, but no one has called for the dismantling of the comprehensive university or the wholesale shedding of functions in search of a university “core competency.”

In the business world, focussed and broader strategies are pursued both successfully and unsuccessfully. The interesting questions do not involve whether firms will combine or separate functions but rather the conditions under which they

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will pursue which strategy. In all organizations, there are centralizing and fragmenting forces. Certainly, under some circumstances some objectives can be advanced by either focussing or by taking on more functions. Moreover, some objectives or interests of different constituencies are served by one approach while others are best addressed by another.

## Community College Functions

In this section, we review some of the current arguments about the missions and functions of the colleges. These missions include academic education, occupational preparation, remedial education, customized training and other economic development activities, and community service.

**The Collegiate or Academic Function.** Many community college analysts and supporters still consider providing transferable liberal arts education as the core function of the colleges. Gradually, however, the primacy of this mission has been lost in the growth of a variety of additional educational and quasi-educational programs and services. Liberal arts enrollments and transfer rates began a steady decline during the 1960s and 70s as course offerings narrowed and the institutional goals of the community college and its relationships with external organizations began to reflect the college's vocational function (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Various studies marshal evidence for the negative impact of vocational education on transfer rates. Advocates of the academic function of community colleges state that emphasis on career programs has reduced transfer programs to introductory courses. Brint and Karabel (1989) think that this function has turned community colleges into vocational schools for low and middle class occupations, thus limiting students' opportunities for advancement. In this view, an institution established to "level up" disadvantaged segments of society has leveled down the critical literacy skills required for the degree programs.

**The Vocational Function.** A growing number of policy makers and business leaders look to occupational education at the community college as a key site for building the workforce for the next century. Indeed, Clowes and Levine (1989) argue that career education is the only viable core function for most community colleges.

Strong financial pressures push the colleges towards an emphasis on the vocational mission. Microsoft Corporation and Apple have expressed interest in helping community colleges meet employers' demands for workforce training in information technology. Other companies have unveiled similar programs recently in an effort to help fill a nationwide shortage of workers with computer skills. Community colleges have increasingly turned to

workforce development as state funding and academic enrollments have leveled off or declined. Moreover, an emphasis on training to enhance the competitiveness of the state's economy has proved to be a convincing argument in state capitals. Because of the growing role of community colleges in training workers, serving business needs, and broadening access to higher education through vocational education, some states are considering granting community colleges the right to offer four-year baccalaureate degrees in vocational programs.

**Contract Education and other Economic Development Activities.** Expansion of community colleges' functioning into business areas, which Dougherty and Bakia (1999) call "the new economic role" of the community college, further challenges the original mission of this institution. Grubb and his colleagues (1997) contend that these new functions, which he refers to as the entrepreneurial college, are potentially in conflict with the functions of the traditional college because the traditional commitment to quality of teaching, to equity and nontraditional students, and to a range of academic as well as occupational offerings are less important in the entrepreneurial college (Grubb, Badway, Bell, Bragg, & Russman, 1997). Contract training is also a drain on resources, as only 42 percent of the total revenues received by colleges for contract education comes from the employers, while the remainder is taken primarily from state and local funding and student tuition (Lynch, Palmer, & Grubb, 1991).

Moreover, contract education is isolated from regular vocational programs, does not involve regular community college faculty (Lynch, Palmer, & Grubb, 1991; Jacobs, 1992), and is mainly focused on the needs of business rather than education. Yet some community college personnel suggest that contract training and other non-credit functions enhance the credit programs (Jacobs & Teahen, 1997).

**Remediation.** Remedial education is an increasingly important function of community colleges. Studies on the scope of remediation indicate that anywhere from 25 and 78 percent of entering community college students are in need of basic skills instruction (Grubb & Kalman, 1994). This trend is likely to increase as four-year colleges and universities, struggling to cut costs, drop the task of remediation and leave it to two-year colleges. State and urban public college systems in Florida, California, Massachusetts, Georgia, Texas, Virginia and New York City are considering or have begun to implement policies that would locate all remediation within community colleges (Shaw, 1997). Cohen and Brawer (1996) point out that community colleges are the only postsecondary institutions willing to continue to provide this increasingly necessary function.

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**Community Service.** Controversy surrounds the community service function. Unfortunately, participants in this controversy are often unclear about their conceptions of this function. In some cases, community service might involve providing space for activities or teaching fitness and purely avocational courses. In other cases, it appears that authors see all activities outside of the core degree-granting courses as falling into a community service category. One particularly controversial area concerns using the college's facilities, staff, and resources to address a variety of social problems.

Some commentators contend that the community college should take a wide and aggressive view of its activities, seeking a variety of ways to serve the community. But others believe that this function conflicts with the basic educational mission. Cohen and Braver (1975) argue that, "The colleges would do better to accept the idea of no growth and use the time to improve what they have. The repeated calls for a 'new mission' are a debilitating diversion" (p. 164). Similarly, the Committee for Economic Development (1994) stated that "schools . . . should not be asked to solve all our nation's social ills and cultural problems. State and community agencies, not the school, should pay and provide needed social services" (p. 2).

Even advocates of a broader social role for the colleges, such as O'Banion and Gillett-Karam (1997), recognize the lack of reliable sources of funding for social service activities, and that faculty are already overwhelmed with dealing with underprepared students. Since present resources are not even sufficient to support present priorities, without new sources of funding, it will be difficult to expand much into activities that address community needs.

### **Underlying Issues and Assumptions: A Framework for Analyzing the Conflicting-Missions Controversy**

One of the most common arguments is that new functions will draw resources away from the traditional core activities of the colleges. But community colleges often introduce new programs or functions precisely because they are expected to generate new resources. Many non-credit programs draw on special state or federal funds, for example, for skill upgrading for particular companies. These resources do not come out of the funds available for core activities. Thus, the participation of a Texas college in "Smart Jobs" and "Skills Development" programs generated over \$10 million. Several colleges that we visited have received federal resources to fund advanced technology centers, tech prep programs, and job training for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, if the colleges are involved in high-profile activities that are perceived

to make the state's labor force more competitive, state legislatures may be willing to provide more base funding.

New roles may actually generate surpluses, increasing resources available for the core activities. Indeed, many focussed programs at universities—such as executive education programs at business schools—are explicitly designed to generate surpluses to support less marketable educational functions. A new function may absorb resources in the short term, but generate a surplus or at least pay its own way sometime in the future.

Therefore, the expansion of institutional missions and functions, even in an era of public fiscal restraint, does not necessarily imply that traditional activities will lose resources. Role-proliferation reduces resources available for each role only if resources are fixed or if the new roles require cross-subsidization from the traditional roles. This is an empirical question; despite the extensive discussions about the dangers of role proliferation, we know of no systematic attempt to measure the effects of particular community college functions on the resources available for other functions.

In addition to financial resources, intangible resources could also be spread too thin if the colleges take on many functions. Managerial attention is one important example. If presidents are focussing on building up the economic development functions, they have less time to spend on enhancing the transfer programs.

A similarly intangible factor has to do with clashes between institutional cultures. The interests of businesses are not the same as society's interest in having a broadly educated population. The culture of education presumably promotes inquiry, imagination, skepticism, and a search for a deeper understanding of society, while a business culture emphasizes skills necessary to achieve results.

Critics of the growth of remediation and community service activities in community colleges make a further point. If a college is particularly associated with programs for students with serious educational problems, other students may have trouble seeing it as a site of educational excellence, and employers may be skeptical about the skills and abilities of graduates. Thus, perceptions about some activities may influence how the entire institution is seen, even if there is little concrete relationship between the activities.

Although added functions generate additional revenue and can actually increase the resources available for core activities, this does not necessarily justify taking on new activities. New functions that pay for themselves could also be carried out by other organizations. Activities that can create surpluses would be particular targets for competitors. For example, if a community college is using surpluses

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from customized training to pay expenses for degree programs, then a private firm would have a strong incentive to provide the training without using it to cross-subsidize other activities and therefore charge a lower price.

In the long run, additional missions and activities will successfully be carried out by community colleges, not necessarily because they can generate surpluses, but because they are functionally associated with the core activities of the college, and can therefore be carried out by the colleges more efficiently than by other organizations. That is, successful efforts at expanding missions will probably be built on complementarities or economies of scope between core college functions—teaching academic and vocational courses—and other activities. Below we review the arguments for complementarities.

***Integration of academic and vocational education.*** Advocates of integration argue that it could strengthen both the academic and vocational missions of the colleges. Integration can be done either at the program level or at the course level. Program integration is the easiest to do and involves primarily having occupational students take core academic courses that meet requirements for the academic/transfer students. Course-level integration, which is much more ambitious, is based on the idea that both academic and occupational instruction can be more effective if they are carried out together. Occupational students can better understand the academic material if it is learned in the context provided by the occupational setting. Typical approaches involve interdisciplinary courses or explicit pairing of specific academic and vocational courses. Our own fieldwork has found very few examples of course-level integration.

***Integration of remediation with core academic and vocational programs education.*** If remediation is best accomplished as a stand-alone function, taught in the abstract without a specific context, then it may be most efficiently carried out by specialized organizations. But if deficiencies in basic skills can be more effectively addressed within the context of broad, coherent programs of study, then it may be important to keep remediation within community colleges. But our research suggests that this type of integrated instruction in remediation is rare—indeed, we have found only a few examples of it in the five colleges that we have visited so far. It should be noted, however, that legislative regulations in many states require students to complete developmental courses before they are eligible to enroll in any regular credit course. On the other hand, for most of the colleges, remediation programs are a main source of student enrollment. Of course, if students are not prepared for college-level work, something must be done to help

them get up to an appropriate level. Nonetheless, it has been proved that segregation of remedial education from the professional or degree-oriented content will significantly decrease motivation of most of the students and will result in higher drop-out rates.

***Coordination between degree programs, customized training, and technical assistance.*** Community colleges may be particularly well prepared to provide technical assistance if those substantive areas are already included in core degree programs. We have found examples in which the colleges have drawn on expertise from their core programs to design customized training. In a few cases, the core faculty also teach in these programs; in a few others, customized programs are actually organized as degree-granting programs and are formally incorporated into the core activities of the college. But customized training, for the most part, remains a small and separate activity. In our sample, it accounts for well under five percent of the college's revenues and usually has little to do with the degree programs. In many cases, the colleges must find teaching staff for the programs outside of their permanent faculty. Thus, in most cases, the most important overlap between the customized programs and the regular college offerings comes through the joint use of buildings and equipment.

***Relationships with local businesses and other institutions.*** When community colleges develop relationships with local businesses through customized training or other activities, those relationships may also be useful for other activities. These might include support, internships and job placement for the regular degree programs. Although we found examples of all of these types of activities, political support was the most important benefit. Engaging in politically popular activities such as workforce development can build political support for all of the college's functions. Since community colleges are funded primarily by state and local funds, this form of political cross-subsidization may be more important than economic cross-subsidization. Indeed, in one case in Texas, with the strong and active support of local businesses, a college was able to double its local tax support. Through its work with a large regional company, a college in New England was able to convince the state legislature to purchase an extra building and provide on-going funding for maintenance and operations. That building has now become the base for several credit and non-credit programs designed to serve local and regional businesses.

***Student recruitment and demand.*** Students who get to know the colleges through one function, such as customized training or welfare programs, may be more likely to enroll in the college's other programs. Moreover, many college students enter school without

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a clear idea about what they want to do. A comprehensive institution gives students a chance to explore a variety of options. One college in Florida with a large welfare program was able to recruit many of the graduates of that program into their regular degree programs. In Texas, three-quarters of the students who completed a customized training program in computers ended up in the degree program. Continuing and adult education has always been emphasized by community college practitioners as a powerful way for recruitment through exposing nontraditional student populations and their families to college opportunities.

**Orientation towards a more competitive educational market.** Over the last few years, more private firms have looked to the educational marketplace for business opportunities. Although it is not clear yet exactly what impact this will have on community colleges, they already face new competitors. In response, the colleges that we visited have made their core programs more flexible and convenient. Awareness of the competitive educational market underlines the thrust of many colleges to change the culture of the institution towards a customer orientation. However, this move away from a traditional delivery of educational services often meets the opposition of the full-time tenured faculty.

## Conclusion

Responding to educational needs often ignored by other institutions, community colleges have been profoundly transformed. Yet they still provide educational opportunity and access for minorities and other disadvantaged groups. They have developed and extended their vocational function because both employers and students look to them to provide the range of skills needed in the labor market. They provide remedial education because the clientele they serve is the most likely to lack the basic literacy skills necessary both for academic and vocational education. As publicly funded institutions, they are expected to provide a variety of community services. They also need to develop entrepreneurial functions in search of new revenues to make up for increasingly scarce state resources. These functions of community colleges define its unprecedented social and economic significance. No other institution has demonstrated so much flexibility in adapting to the community's needs.

Community colleges are probably not going to significantly restrict their activities. There is too much enthusiasm and political support for many of their new functions, and the trend in the last decades has clearly been towards comprehensiveness. But even within the broad framework of comprehensiveness, each institution needs to decide how to focus its efforts. Within the context of one institution, these functions

are in conflict if they are based on insufficient resources or are not properly integrated, and our research so far reveals that few colleges have achieved anywhere close to the potential for integrating their diverse activities. As a result, they are not taking advantage of possible complementarities and economies of scope.

So far, much of the discussion about community college missions has been based on logical arguments and speculation. Words such as "could" and "may" dominate the controversy. Few analysts have documented the benefits or disadvantages of combining a variety of activities or have been able to show the extent to which these activities are integrated or not. To be sure, researchers and administrators face difficult data and methodological problems. Nevertheless, it is only with this type of information and analysis that the colleges will be able to arrive at a clear understanding of the most effective and appropriate mix of activities and functions. ❄

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