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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are democracy's colleges in the sense that the humanistic, inclusive, and flexible ideas at their core are democratic in tone and substance. Although these core ideas have not changed over time, the external pressures that shape program emphases, organizational structures, and community relations have. These forces include the private sector's escalating demands for better trained, higher skilled employees; the impact of new technologies; the reduction of state financial support; public concern over the cost of a college education; public concern about the integrity of higher education; the movement to establish national goals and academic standards for the K-12 system; the apparent tattering of the civic fabric of American communities; and the necessity of community colleges to prove that they are worthy postsecondary institutions. Although colleges' responses to these pressures have varied, three distinct models of responses have emerged: the niche model, which maintains that colleges can no longer be all things to all people and must develop their market niche; the steady-as-you-go model, which holds the belief that the current set of environmental forces are little different than other pressures that the colleges have had to deal with; and the managing-the-fury-model, which views the pressures as threatening and believes that change is a mandate, not an option. Contains 14 references. (HAA)

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# THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## *A PERSPECTIVE*

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James R. Mahoney  
American Association of Community Colleges  
1997 February

*The genius of the community college is that it is the only established national system that is open to all adult Americans who want to advance their education, increase their occupational skills, enrich their intellectual and cultural life. It is the only established national system that serves as both springboard and safety net for the inevitable millions who wish to move upward as well as those who missed earlier opportunities and are ready to try anew.*

### **Democracy's Open Door**

Community colleges are democracy's colleges. A bold statement, one that feels like a boast, an over-statement, an exaggeration designed to create a clear distance between these colleges and others in the national scheme of American higher education. It's the kind of "brook-no-argument" declarative that comes, in part, from a braggart who sometimes is uncertain of his place or one who has been pummeled in the past for not measuring up to traditional models. It is a way of showing uniqueness and value. In this case, the declaration is not empty. Community colleges are democracy's colleges.

At the heart of the community college is a set of ideas. The ideas are democratic in tone and substance. They are humanistic, inclusive, and flexible. They include these beliefs:

- All citizens should have the opportunity to develop their native capacities as fully as possible.
- These opportunities should be of high quality and cover a range of programs that reflects the particular interests of the colleges' communities and the goals of the students who enroll in them.
- These opportunities should be affordable and accessible geographically.
- Colleges should offer program scheduling compatible with those of students.
- Colleges are community assets with responsibilities for contributing to the intellectual, social, civic, and economic health of the communities they serve.
- They are dynamic organizations that adapt to (and lead in some instances) changes in the communities.

These tenets are the core of the American community college. They have not changed in decades and they are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. What has changed, however, are the external pressures that shape the mutable characteristics of the colleges; that is, the forces that alter their program emphases, their organizational structures, their particular relationships with their communities, and their connections with various other important entities in the communities.

In the last several years these external forces have triggered considerable debate and a flood of recommendations aimed at what the colleges should be, what they should be doing, and how they should be doing it. Among these forces are workplace demands, technology, reduction of support monies, public concerns about college costs and integrity, national standards movements at the K-12 levels, civic and social problems in communities, and the place of community colleges in the national higher education scheme. Details on each of these forces are offered below.

## I. External Forces

### **The private sector's escalating demand for better trained, higher skilled employees**

The sector's chorus is consistent. It wants employees who can think, problem-solve, work effectively in teams as well as perform independently, and adapt quickly to new processes and to new equipment. It wants employees who are literate, effective communicators, committed to lifelong learning, productive early in their employment, and comfortable with technology. By implication, the sector suggests that it is not getting such employees now. It has become common place for an employer to state that for too many positions only one in ten (or more) candidates is qualified. The situation helps explain the national movement to establish skill standards across related industries, the set of worker-readiness measures that have been developed in the last few years, and industry's support for national academic standards. It has been reported that the private sector spends more than \$30 billion annually (nearly as much as the federal government spends on higher education) to prepare its workforce and to retrain employees. A more effective public training and education enterprise would help it reduce these costs, the private sector argues. The sharply upward trend of business partnerships with both K-12

education systems and postsecondary institutions is fueled by industry's interest in reducing its own education and training expenses and to make it more ready, sooner, to compete in the global economy.

## **The impact of technology**

The rapid development and advancement of technology has been both a blessing and a curse for colleges and universities. The blessing is that it has allowed institutions to create more efficient management systems, design effective accountability and tracking programs, improve internal and external communications, reduce or eliminate instructor-led repetitive learning exercises, and customize student services functions, among others. Technology has expanded the colleges' capability to reach new markets (through distance learning) and to make learning more accessible at times convenient to students. It has made faculty and colleges more accessible to students. At its best, it has facilitated advances in pedagogy that assists students to learn better, quicker, and in more depth. The curse is that it costs money--lots of money. And it is not a static, one-time cost. Purchase, installation, maintenance, training, and related costs are a constant and steadily increasing strain on institutions' budgets. Keeping up with what sometimes appears to be daily improvements in hardware and software creates personnel and budget tensions that are now part of the everyday existence of colleges. Some colleges are not able financially to keep up; others make extraordinary efforts to keep up; those that are on the front edge of the curve expend large portions of their assets in the effort. The urgency to keep pace is undeniable. The pressure comes from many sources: the drive of each college to be viewed as a progressive institution; the growing number of students who enter the community college already with experiences that include creative uses of technology; the growing facility of the general public with technology in the home, workplace, and the community; the demand of transfer institutions, accrediting and licensing bodies, business, state authorities, and other stakeholders in the system that students be technologically literate; and the sometimes misguided sense that "doing more with less" means technology bears more of the responsibility for achieving the work of the institutions.



## **The reduction of state public monies to support the colleges**

State revenues for community colleges have decreased from 50.1 percent of the colleges' operating budgets in 1980 to 39.0 percent in 1994. State pressures to fund health care and criminal justice systems have been primarily responsible for declines in community college financing. Local support dollars have remained relatively stable during this period at approximately 17 percent, and tuition contributions to college revenue have risen from 15 percent in 1980 to 20.5 percent in 1994. The federal grants program (Pell Grants) added another 10.5 percent in 1994 (from 5.0 percent in 1983--1980 data is not available for this item), and other sources of income remained approximately the same at about 10.7 percent during this period. Other federal support sources declined from 6.7 percent in 1980 to 5.1 percent in 1994 (National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS data files, 1996). Also, overall enrollment declines in the community colleges since 1993 have reduced the dollars available to them. The percentage shifts in finance sources as well as the reductions in total support have forced the colleges to reexamine the way they conduct business and to interact more creatively with existing revenue sources to ensure that further reductions are not imminent.

## **Public concern about the cost of a college education**

In constant 1995-96 dollars, annual tuition and fees costs for a public community college rose between 1976-77 and 1995-96 by 62 percent, from \$768 to \$1,245. In the same period, these costs in public four-year colleges increased by 70 percent, from \$1,673 to \$2,848. In independent four-year colleges, the increase was 78 percent during this 17-year period, from \$6,873 to \$12,239 (National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1996). One of the consequences of this cost escalation is that students who rely on loans to finance all or part of their education, find themselves at graduation with significant debts.

Further exacerbating the attention these costs have generated are the press stories of college graduates who cannot read at a basic, functioning level, who cannot find work because they are inadequately prepared, and who take an extraordinary number of years to complete their degrees, during which time they may be continuously supported by public monies.

An additional public concern centers on the large numbers of community college students (and four-year college students) who require remediation in math or reading or writing or all three before they are ready to enter academic courses. In fall 1995, for example, 41 percent (943,000) of all first-time freshmen in American public community colleges were enrolled in remedial courses, with 20 percent in reading programs, 25 percent in writing, and 34 percent in mathematics. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than half of the community colleges reported that enrollments in these programs had increased in the last five years and 40 percent said the numbers were about the same for this period. (*Remedial Education at Higher Education Institutions in Fall 1995*)

Given the funding shifts noted above, it is clear why tuition and fees charges have increased in the community colleges—falling state revenues have to be offset somewhere. A similar explanation can be given for the public four-year colleges that are also supported by state monies. Further, it is clear that it costs more to educate a student today than it did seventeen years ago. Generally, the American public understands and supports increases in the cost of education, believing that the value of these opportunities is well worth the costs. But the extraordinary increases (particularly the size of the raw costs of a private four-year college education) have moved the public to begin to scrutinize the colleges. The public (all the publics—parents, boards of trustees, city and county governments, state legislatures, and the federal government) have begun to require that all these institutions be accountable for the funds they spend. The colleges are increasingly required to show (to prove) that their efforts and the funds they spend to support them result in student graduates who are literate and employable, at the least.

### **Public concern about the integrity of higher education**

As is noted above, the advancing tuition and fees costs, with an increased availability of federal loan monies beginning a decade ago, led students to borrow at a very high level. In taking the loans, students promised to repay them over a specific period of time at a rate below that charged by commercial sources. In 1991 the national press reported that \$2.9 billion of these loans were in default. During the three year period 1990-1992, twenty-six public community colleges had loan default rates of 25 percent or higher, a few of them reaching over the 50 percent mark. The national loan apparatus was such that responsibility for ensuring repayment fell to the borrower. Institutions were not as careful as they might have been in processing applications and tracking students who received loans. In fact, some



postsecondary education and training organizations created what were essentially temporary training operations that were designed to generate a stream of this easy money with little intention of returning service to students. While the U.S. Department of Education has been successful in recovering a large percentage of these monies, the impression left on the public was strongly negative.

The experience motivated a concerted move by the U.S. Department of Education to establish a comprehensive national accountability system for all of higher education. Its intentions were expressed in the regulations contained in the Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1992. While the Department can not exert unilateral control over higher education (since it is not a ministry of education and because the U.S. Constitution gives the states the controlling hand over schools and colleges), it can regulate how the substantial federal contribution to these institutions will be administered. (In 1997 federal budget, for example, the total of federal monies available to higher education was approximately \$35 billion, with about one-third of the total relegated to student assistance.)

The regulations attached to the new higher education reauthorization law attempted to strengthen the relationship among the three authorities that ensure excellence in the American higher education system: the U.S. Department of Education, the regional accrediting bodies, and state offices. The 1992 regulations focused on building state capacities for reviewing and assessing the colleges and universities in their jurisdictions by creating and funding the operation of State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPRE). The SPREs were to be guided in their reviews by specific sets of standards identified in the new regulations. Colleges and universities not meeting the standards would be ineligible for federal monies. Regional accrediting bodies were also pressed to include in their review procedures examinations of the capacity of institutions to manage federal monies, particularly monies emerging from federal student loan and grant programs. The Department of Education itself was to build its own resources to track more completely and accurately the expenditure of these monies.

Eventually, the SPRE program dissolved, mostly because of the hue and cry generated by the postsecondary community who argued generally that the program interfered with and diminished the historically successful quality checks characterized by independent peer review approaches. The impact of the SPRE controversy can be clearly seen today. It is visible, for example, in new emphases on student outcome and institutional effectiveness measures that each state and accrediting bodies have developed for their review processes.

## **The nearly decade-long movement to establish national goals and academic standards for the K-12 system.**

Triggered by the National Education Summit (1989), six national goals were created as a response to an earlier federal study that stated the "...educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." (*A National At Risk*, 1983) Among other disturbing data, this study reported: 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate, with 13 percent of U.S. teenagers and up to 40 percent of minority adolescents also functionally illiterate; and for 17 consecutive years, the average test scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) fell. The SAT is a national normed test that colleges and universities use to help select entering students. Also, student performance on international achievement tests ranked far down the list of both developed and developing nations. The 1989 Summit goals were not universally adopted and applied in the states, but they were reshaped and sharpened in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994. In the Act, the goals are offered as guideposts which local and state jurisdictions might use either in whole or in part to shape school improvement. The Act came with monies to assist states and local schools to adapt the goals locally. At this time, all but one state has used federal monies to make improvements in their systems. The adaptations vary from one state to another.

Two years before the Act was made law, four federal agencies awarded contracts to various national groups to develop discipline-specific and industry-specific skills standards for national use. Most of this work has been completed at this time. None of the standards have been uniformly accepted (the carefully guarded right of state and local jurisdictions to control education has consistently interfered with national standards adoption), but their existence and the availability of federal monies to support innovation have had significant impact in many schools. In general, community colleges have not played an active role in these improvements, but many of the colleges are beginning to recognize that advancements at the K-12 level will have important ramifications for them in the very near future. Also, innovations at the lower levels in pedagogy, use of technology, instructional content, and other areas will push the colleges to change the ways they have conducted their business. Student expectations and experiences will be different and higher.

## **The civic fabric of American communities appears to be tattered**

A number of important indicators of community health reveal critical problems. American communities are still plagued by conflict arising out of various prejudices--racial, ethnic, religious, sexual preference, socio-economic, and others. Highly publicized malfeasance of public office holders, community and business leaders, and other individuals with high public profiles has created a general cynicism about officials of all sorts, feeding an irreverence for authority and encouraging a degree of incivility among people at all levels. It has created apathy especially among the young that discourages their participation in the political process; for example, only 38.5 percent of registered 18-20 year olds voted in the 1992 presidential election and only 16.5 percent of this group voted in the 1994 Congressional elections (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, pp 20-243, No. 459 Voting - Age Population, Percent Reporting Registered, and Voted: 1980-1994). Crime in American cities, in classrooms, and in work places has also contributed to the image of disorder in communities. Because they are significant community resources, community colleges are compelled to respond in some imaginative ways to the resolution of these negative conditions. Finding appropriate roles in these matters puts special pressure on the colleges.

## **Community colleges have always had to prove that they were worthy postsecondary institutions**

Because they are different and young, because they are democratic and welcome everyone who wants the opportunity, community colleges have been viewed as "second cousins" in the higher education community. Further, because the great majority of national and state leaders, those who control college financing, traditionally have been four-year college and university graduates, their biases lean toward the institutions they know. Most do not know community colleges. The result is that community colleges have had to adopt the typical behavior of the second best; they have had to work harder (and smarter) to prove in demonstrable terms and detail that what they achieve is remarkable and valuable. The recent endorsement and support of community colleges by the President of the United States, his cabinet officials, government leaders, and others are gratifying and

astounding. But in the eyes of many, the colleges remain institutions that must show continuously that they are worthy of regard.

## II. Management Models

The pressures, then, on community colleges are formidable: varied, complex, and insistent. While the strength of each force may vary from one location to another, each is present in all communities. The colleges cannot ignore them; they must respond in some clear fashion, at least to those that appear to demand a response. And the colleges have responded, not in one fashion, but in a variety of ways--as might be expected from institutions that take their particular identities from the differing communities they serve. Their responses to these environmental pressures fit along a wide spectrum, from an institutional introspectiveness (shrinking array of programs and services) to a complete redesign of the institution. Three distinct response models have emerged from the charged and changed climate in which community colleges exist today. Abstracts of each model appear below.

**The niche model**— The central perspective of this model is that the community college can no longer be all things to all people. It cannot continue to compulsively respond to all community demands for programs and services. Adequate funds to support a comprehensive agenda are no longer available and it is unlikely that they ever will be again. If community colleges do not rein in their efforts, their survival will be uncertain.

This model argues for three central activities: a critical, objective examination of the college mission, its policies, programs, and operations; a study of the essential needs of the local community; and a thorough review of current and potential resources. A clear niche—more limited and more specific than what exists now—should emerge for the college. The niche would be supported by a narrower mission for the college. Programs and services not provided by the college would be handled by: out-sourcing particular functions, collaborating with other colleges and universities in the state to distribute specialized programs, partnering with various public and private sector organizations, sharing staff, applying technology, and making referrals to other service and program providers. Assessment and adaptation of the special niche the college establishes for itself would be a continuous process. This is a “fall back and consolidate” approach, one that may require the college to narrow the open access door that has been the cornerstone of the American community college for the past several decades.

**The steady-as-you-go model**— The central stance of this model is a confident one, buttressed by successive years of successfully providing high quality programs and services that meet community needs. Its foundation is a belief that the environmental forces that currently impact the colleges are little different in kind or intensity than other pressures that the colleges have had to deal with in the past. The colleges capably responded to the earlier pressures and, with the same kind of intelligence and diligence, they can manage the new pressures. In fact, this model embraces challenges and excitedly adapts its programs and services, confident that the colleges' collective wisdom and energy is equal to any new demands. New pressures do not disorient these colleges nor lead them to consider dramatic changes in their basic personalities or missions. Their challenge is to adapt to new forces in the environment while maintaining their special identities as community colleges. Key to this approach is controlled change and improvement accomplished through a variety of official mechanisms: established institutional review schedules, purposeful involvement of the entire college community (administration, professional staff, faculty, students, and support personnel), constant connections with community groups (public and private sectors, schools, social and civic groups, and others), interaction with four-year colleges and universities, and interchanges with state legislators and agencies, among others. The model is built upon strength and its behaviors are designed to maintain that strength.

**The managing-the-fury model**— This model views the environment as a threatening, dangerous one, that, if not confronted with great energy and dedication, will either consume the colleges or place the control of them in other hands. Change is not an option in this model; it is a mandate. Public accountability is paramount. The principle mechanism for managing the fury is institutional effectiveness; that is, a full arsenal of policies, procedures and goals designed to prove with convincing detail the value they add to their students and communities. These details include evidence of the cost-effective management of the colleges, reality-based outcome measures of student learning taken at different points while the student is engaged in learning, proof of student success in the workplace over time as well as performance in the four-year colleges and universities for those who transfer from the community college, and measures of the contributions of the colleges to the economic, social, civic, and political well-being of the community. The model turns the traditional effectiveness focus from input measures (number of students, graduation numbers, transfer and employment records, class sizes, faculty degrees, etc.) to outcome measures. It centers on what actually happens as the result of the colleges' work. The apex of the system is the student and everything the college does is aimed at creating a setting that enhances student learning. This refocus requires significant redesigns of administrative structures, pedagogy, ser-

vices, mission statements, relationships both within the college and without, and assessment approaches, among others. It requires more consistent and open communications with the community and the development of longitudinal information to assist the college with guidance on what it is doing well and what refinements must be made.

Because they are community-serving institutions, funded in part by community monies, community colleges are affected more than any other type of postsecondary institution in the U.S. by the unusual turmoil in the present environment. Most colleges view the circumstances as evidence that "things are not quite what they ought to be" and are dedicating themselves to reshaping their efforts to respond to public concerns. The specific approach each college takes falls somewhere along the spectrum described above, but most have adopted the "steady-as-you-go" model, adjusting their historically successful designs to satisfy the powerful demands of accountability and effectiveness. Most, however, hold faithfully to the democratic core of community colleges, the open access, opportunity with excellence center of their philosophy. Without this core, the community college would lose its identity.

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