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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, New Jersey's Middlesex County College (MCC) has placed an inordinate amount of attention and effort on the issue of student transfer to four-year institutions. Although attention to traditional academic goals is important, MCC's stated mission also addresses other important segments of the college's market. The college has a diverse population with diverse needs, but uses what marketers call "a homogeneous approach" to delivering services and measure success. Data provided by the college's Office of Research and Planning indicate that although the county's population has grown, enrollment has declined at the college, suggesting that it is not meeting the needs of some of the area residents. For example, all students regardless of educational objective must take college placement tests, discouraging students who want to simply upgrade job-related skills or take courses for personal growth. MCC must also make efforts to meet the needs of the area's diverse English as a Second-Language students. Because MCC's mission statement says that the college serves all individuals who can benefit from postsecondary learning, the college should consider more than graduation and retention rates and address ways that it can meet the changing needs of its diverse population. (HAA)

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# Is Middlesex County College Accomplishing its Mission?

Xenia P. Balabkins

Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University

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IS MIDDLESEX COUNTY COLLEGE ACCOMPLISHING ITS MISSION?

Xenia P. Balabkins

Princeton, Mid-Career Fellowship 1997

Over the course of the last few years, Middlesex County College has placed an inordinate amount of attention and effort on the issue of transfer to four year institutions. Articulation agreements have been worked on and signed with most of the four year colleges in New Jersey such as College of New Jersey, Montclair, Rider and Kean. Dual admissions programs have been instituted with Rutgers and N.J.I.T. assuring the student who takes the appropriate courses, maintains the needed grade point average, and graduates, that he/she will be admitted as a junior to that college. When students speak to counselors and advisors they are often cautioned about taking particular courses because "they won't transfer" The advertising often emphasizes the transferability of MCC credits

While I certainly applaud the attention to traditional academic goals, such as attaining a bachelor's degree, I am concerned that perhaps we have forgotten our mission statement and are neglecting the needs of other, equally important, segments of our market

An organization commits to a place in the market through its organizational mission (Evans 1995) The purpose of an organizational mission statement is to provide a shared sense of purpose, direction, and opportunity, answering questions such as "why do we exist?", "what should our business be?" and "who is our customer?" The mission of Middlesex County College as printed in the catalogue is as follows:

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Middlesex County College is a publicly-supported, comprehensive community college committed to serving all of those who can benefit from postsecondary learning opportunities. The College offers a wide range of curricula and programs that provide access to the educational process in a lifelong learning context for diverse populations within its service area. The College views the creation of an environment responsive to educational needs of the individual and the community as essential to the fulfillment of this mission.

To accomplish this mission eleven goals and fourteen objectives are also set forth.

To measure how successful an organization is in accomplishing its mission traditionally one looks at the objectives and determines whether or not they have been met. For the purposes of this paper however, I do not intend to evaluate each of the goals and objects specifically, rather I want to look at who our population is, how has it changed, what some of the needs may be. Does each student coming to Middlesex County College have the same needs or are they diverse? I submit that we have a diverse population with diverse needs, but we seem to be using what marketers call a homogeneous approach in delivering services and measuring success. The structure of the curricula and courses are the traditional structure and we measure success by the number of student that graduate.

The Office of Research and Planning at Middlesex County College has compiled some interesting statistical and demographic data regarding Middlesex County and Middlesex County College.

- Middlesex County Population  
1970 - 580,000                      1994 - 690,000
- Enrollment at MCC has declined in the last three years from a high of 5081 full-time (FT) and 7418 part-time (PT) students to a low of 4898 FT and 6680 PT students.
- Fewer than 35% FT and 17% PT students actually graduate.

As a result of these trends the administration has reactivated the enrollment management council to address these issues and develop a strategic plan.

- 1980 - 1990 's increase change in ethnic population in Middlesex County  
African American 39%. Asian 26.5%. Hispanic 7.5%. White 1%
- Ethnic Distribution of Middlesex County College Enrollments

African American	10.7%
Asian	15
Hispanic	14.6
White	59

- The overall composition of the new student by age has stayed about the same - FT 60% less than 19, 31% between 19 - 25, and 9% over 25; PT 14% under 19, 32% between 19 - 25, and 54% over 25.
- Minority student population has shown the following pattern as far as percentage of student body:
 

Asian	1991 - 13%	/	1995 - 15%
Hispanic	1991 - 11%	/	1995 - 14.6%
African American	1991 - 10.5%	/	1995 - 10.7%

- Educational Objectives at Middlesex County College

	FT	PT
Career Degree	18%	40%
Job related courses	2	4
Transfer Degree	41	28
Personal Growth	2	6.8

The percentages did not change significantly from 1991 to 1995.

- Educational Plans

	FT	PT
Less than 2 yr. degree	1.5%	5%
2 yr. degree	13	25
4 yr. degree or more	86	70

This data supports the fact that our population is diverse and has diverse needs. The fact that our enrollment has declined while the population of the county has increased is cause for concern and is being examined by the enrollment management council. If we look at the situation from a marketing perspective it suggests that we are not meeting the needs of our diverse market. This is not to say that Middlesex County College has done nothing at all to meet the students' needs. On the contrary, there have been a number of creative measures taken, but more needs to be done.

I am confident that the Enrollment Management Council will examine many areas and issues, however, as I suggested at the beginning, the use of a homogeneous approach to delivery of services and measuring success needs to be addressed.

For example, regardless of the purposes for attending the college, all students must take the college placement tests to determine whether or not the student needs

remediation. The student then must complete all of the courses the test has indicated are necessary. It should be noted that 80% of the student body needs to remediate in at least one area and 34% need remediation in at least four areas. This is fine for the traditional student, and in fact is important for a successful academic career, but what about the segment of the market who only wants to upgrade job related skills or is simply taking courses for personal growth and interest. The prospect now of having to take remedial courses, and for part-timers this could mean only remedial courses, is daunting and discouraging. Perhaps the reason the percentages of students in these two categories are low is not that the market segment is small, but rather that college policies discourage them.

A colleague in the English Department gave another example. The structure of remedial courses is such that even if a student may need remediation in only one skill unit, having passed the other ones, he must retake the entire course - discouraging and viewed as a waste of time and money by the student. This is also true for mathematics classes.

With the increase of immigrants in Middlesex County, the English as Second Language Department has grown significantly. Here again we need to look at the diverse needs of this population. First of all there are many that are literate in their own language and in fact have a university degree and now need to improve their skills in English so that they can work. They may have a medical degree and while they may not be able to practice medicine here they are interested in working in a related field. Unfortunately there is no mechanism by which they can begin taking related courses, without first

completing ESL courses and often remedial English courses. These students feel that by the time they get to the courses they are interested in they will be old and gray and so they leave.

On the other hand, there are students who not only do not speak English, but they cannot read or write in their native language. It would seem to me that the approach and the time needed in an ESL class would be different for these students than for the ones who already have some knowledge of grammar.

Our mission statement does not say that we serve only those students that want to graduate and transfer, rather it includes "all those who can benefit from postsecondary learning". In evaluating our success we need to consider more than graduation and retention. While these factors are certainly important to the academic environment, attention should be given to some of the reasons that students do not come back or do not graduate. If a student does not come back because the school did not meet a particular need and left unhappy, the reason needs to be learned and, if appropriate, remedied. If on the other hand, the student left because the purpose for attendance was accomplished, this needs to be acknowledged somehow in the statistics. For example, if a foreign student came to learn English and take some business and computer courses and then went back without completing a degree, got a job using both skills, would this be considered successful accomplishment of our mission? I submit that it is.

In conclusion, I by no means am suggesting that academic standards be lowered. Rather we need to look at our diverse segments and address ways that we can meet the changing needs. Market research needs to be done to see what the needs are in the

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community. We cannot continue using a homogeneous approach to reach diverse segment. We need to get creative in the delivery of our services and expand the way we measure success.

It should be noted that since I started thinking about this topic the administration at Middlesex County College has hired a marketing consulting to address these issues. They will be looking at how the college is perceived by the community, how students view the college, and what the needs are of the community. I look forward to reading their findings and recommendations.

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