THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSION: HISTORY AND THEORY, 1930-2000

by

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The Institute for Community College Research was founded in 1983 to encourage research into questions related to the mission, financing, and outcomes of the community college. Incorporated in the Institute’s programs is a Dissertation Prize for graduate students. Dr. Kenneth M. Meier, at the time a student at The University of Arizona, is this year’s recipient of the prize.

This Working Paper is a brief summary of his dissertation. We have included the full list of the Works Cited from the dissertation to give the reader a better understanding of the nature of the larger work.

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Richard M. Romano, Director
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Rationale for the Study/Literature Review

Understanding historical context is essential for demystifying the community college mission and the discourses surrounding it. Historically, terms such as “community college mission” or “junior college philosophy” have been under-theorized by scholars. When practitioners employ them, they tend to be value-laden and embedded with so many assumptions as to be tautological.

The concepts of vision and mission constitute a kind of cognitive map for both understanding an organization and navigating it through the complex geography of broader organizational fields. Yet, community college mission discussions are notoriously imprecise. Categories and levels of analysis tend to elide differences of meaning or intent, depending on the theoretical stance, rhetorical strategy, or the professional or social interests of the observer or practitioner. Conflicts and confusions stemming from under-examined assumptions about the purposes and outcomes of the colleges among policy makers, scholars, observers, practitioners, and students are obscured by imprecise language and inconsistent taxonomies.

The community college historian John Frye asserts: “[The] definition of the two year college is not much clearer today than it was before 1940” (1991, p. 12). Elusiveness has its attractions. Generic or vague statements of purpose afford managers tactical flexibility and political cover. Ambiguous connections between organizational means and
ends provide leaders with greater discretion while limiting their accountability (Cohen, 1977; Davies, 1986). If policy makers and stakeholders are relatively satisfied with organizational performance, the utilitarian calculus of organizational and professional self-interest persuades faculty and administrators to avoid the constraints and expectations associated with unambiguous goals and measurable outcomes.

The present study employs the following heuristic for analyzing the junior-community college mission across four domains: 1) the publicly expressed philosophical mission(s) of the colleges; 2) the functional or operational mission articulated at the level of the formal curriculum and reflected in the professional identities and pedagogical commitments of faculty and administrators; 3) the summative or empirical mission expressed in the enacted curriculum and concrete, replicated organizational behavior, including the educational, fiscal and political decisions that shape institutional educational practices and short-term outcomes; and 4) the formative or social mission conceptualized as the long-term effects of more than one thousand public colleges on local communities, higher education, and American society in general.

The only attempted synthesis of a century of community college history is published by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC): America’s Community Colleges: The First Century (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994). The authors celebrate rather than critically analyze the movement. The book is ebullient about community college growth without paying much attention to the quality of its outcomes. One would never guess there is a critical literature of the colleges. The authors do make a significant point that has been inadequately theorized by community
college scholars: community colleges constitute the only sector of higher education to be called a movement” (Witt et al., 1994, p. xviii).

Brick (1964) provides a shrewd history of the American Association of Junior Colleges to 1960. He is one of the first community college historians to employ primary material and careful document analysis to explain community college history from a national perspective. Scattered throughout seventy-years of the *Junior-Community College Journal* are occasional historical vignettes by observers such a Robert Pedersen and George Vaughan. Pedersen’s analysis of small business and the early junior college (1988) connects one aspect of the mission to the economy in the early movement. Vaughan (1984a) makes an important contribution to the history of the mission by documenting interviews with six leaders in the community movement who analyze the central public policy events and decisions that played a critical role in forging the community college mission.” Utilizing secondary sources Tillery and Deegan (1985) develop a brief, schematic history of the community college mission from the founding of the first public junior college in 1901 through the fourth generation” comprehensive community college that reached maturity” by the 1980s.

Ratcliff (1987) makes a persuasive case that the first public junior colleges emerged as a result of broad social and economic forces spawned by the second industrial revolution and its aftermath. Interest group politics grounded in economic aspirations at the community level drove early junior college development rather than visionary leaders. In a later article, Ratcliff (1994) identifies seven streams” in the historical evolution of the comprehensive community college.
Dougherty (1994) employs historical analysis in conjunction with case-study materials to develop a “state-relativist” interpretation of leadership ideology and interests. He argues that a community of interest among educational policy makers and institutional leaders has been the driving force in shaping and even deforming the community college movement. Based on his reading of student transfer data, he makes policy arguments for eliminating the community college as an independent higher education sector.

As a prelude to a controversial case study of “vocationalization” in the Massachusetts community college system, Brint and Karabel (1989) offer a critical, historically informed “institutional-conflict analysis” of the origins, development and “hidden significance” of the vocational mission (Brint & Karabel, 1991). For Brint and Karabel, community colleges sort and track students along class lines, diverting students from liberal transfer education into less prestigious vocational programs. By diverting these students from collegiate to vocational education, community colleges acquire a secure market niche and modicum of influence within the organizational field of higher education. These activities further the professional interests of community college leaders.

A recent dissertation by a community college practitioner, Robert Pedersen (2000), is of particular note. First, it is one of only a small number of studies that attempts a comprehensive analysis of the early public junior college using primary documents. Second, it is exceptional because it makes a concerted effort to reconstruct the history of the junior college from the documentary evidence of selected colleges. Third, Pedersen is the first junior college historian to develop an analytical taxonomy of junior college types based on municipal structure: “Great City,” “Small City,” and “Small Town.” He
demonstrates the dangers of over generalizing the origins of local junior colleges from national-level studies and data.

John Frye (1992) examines the “vision of the public junior college” from 1900 to 1940. He exposes the irony of a national leadership that, while legitimizing and popularizing the junior college ideal among policy makers and university elites, was widely ignored in educational aspirations and practice by both local community college practitioners and students (1991, 1992). Early community college leaders developed a strategy to acquire social legitimacy and stability through the acquisition of new markets outside the traditional purview of higher education. They sought to popularize the concepts of terminal education and paraprofessional training in the junior college, while insisting on the democratic purposes of the movement.

Gregory Goodwin’s dissertation (1971) on the formation and development of community college ideology is a seminal, critical history of the movement told from the perspective of the most widely published leaders prior to the 1960s. His study remains unmatched in either its clarity or philosophical and political insight. Goodwin offers a penetrating analysis validated by immense research in the primary documents of the national movement. Goodwin describes a social and educational reform movement that was for many years “more of an idea than institution” (Goodwin, 1971, p. 189). For the junior college founders, the road to democracy and individual achievement was through the classroom. Junior college leaders and scholars focused on developing a strong social justification for the colleges rooted in traditional conceptions of individual achievement and social control through education (Goodwin, 1973; Frye, 1992).
Purpose of the Study

There is a significant omission in the literature concerning the historical origins of the community college and the social and educational forces that have shaped its mission. Rigorous historical studies are relatively rare in higher education. For community colleges, analytical histories are even less common (Ratliff, 1987; Frye, 1991, 1992). This study is a multidisciplinary historical analysis of the national junior-community college mission debate in the twentieth century. It combines fresh historical research with organization theory and consensus social movement theory to clarify and contextualize the community college mission and organizational behavior. The study explains the mission as an historically contingent social and educational process driven by a complex interaction of environmental pressures, institutional structure, organizational culture, and community and student demands.

Historians of the colleges note that the first junior colleges were established without clear missions or a plausible theoretical framework to rationalize their educational activities and social purposes (Frye, 1994; Pedersen, 2000). Growth in concern about the mission and identity of the community college parallels movement expansion. A common conception among community college scholars is that the colleges are non-traditional, non-specialized by design, and mandated to provide a comprehensive curriculum to their communities. The rub is what this means in either theory or practice. Openness, access, and responsiveness amount to a stance, perspective, or attitude, rather than constituting either a theory or a purposeful program differentiating a college from, say, a shopping mall or a theme park. The perennial focus on “inputs” by practitioners begs the question of what community colleges do with these inputs, or what their
measurable impact is on student, communities, and the nation (Breneman & Nelson, 1981; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Practitioners tend to focus on the ideas of openness, access, and responsiveness to community needs. Historically, there has been little consensus among practitioners, advocates, and academic researchers about the educational outcomes and social significance of the colleges. Practitioners and critics often speak past each other because they employ incommensurate units of analysis and possess conflicting or unexamined assumptions. As a result, these multiple lenses of analysis lead to multiple understandings (and misunderstandings) of the community college mission. This study analyzes how and why the junior college was transformed from a minor extension of secondary education to an expansive, ubiquitous national institution embracing a fungible, even amorphous, comprehensive mission.

The Community College Mission Problem

Some scholars describe the community college as “one of the greatest education success stories” of the twentieth century (Breneman & Nelson, 1981, p. 1; C. Kerr, 1985; O’Banion, 1989; Brint & Karabel, 1991; Griffith & Connor, 1994). In spite of the proclaimed success of community colleges, there is a history of ambiguity, even confusion, about the mission and purposes of the colleges (Eells, 1931a; Richardson & Leslie, 1980; Breneman & Nelson, 1981; McCarten, 1983; Cross, 1985; Vaughan, 1988, 1991a; Bogart, 1994; Bailey & Averianova, 1998; Grubb, 1999; Nora, 2000; J. Levin, 2000; Bragg, 2001a; Bailey & Morest, 2004). The “academic revolution” of the twentieth century defined a mission for the research university focused on the troika of research, teaching, and public service (Jencks & Riesman, 1968). There has never been a similar
degree of consensus among practitioners, policymakers, or university scholars in respect
to the community college mission (Blocker, Plummer & Richardson, 1965; Richardson &

One barrier to theoretical consensus is that scholars sometimes evaluate these
local, community-based organizations by the standards of selective universities such as
Berkeley and Yale (Breneman & Nelson, 1981; Frye, 1994; see also Brint & Karbel,
1989). Another challenge to theorizing the mission is the wide diversity of institutions,
communities, and state-level governance systems associated with the community college
sector of American higher education. Lack of consensus among practitioners and scholars
about social purposes and expected institutional outcomes challenges generalization
regarding the colleges. Finally, the volatility of the American social and economic
context dictates that community colleges tack and wend in response to the frequent and
sometimes conflicting gales directed at them from the state and local communities.

The Carnegie Commission observes that a variety of confounding variables
challenge attempts to codify the mission: “The roles of the community college are so
diverse as to be bewildering” (Olgivie & Raines, 1971, p. v). Others contend that flux,
change, and “multi-variance” are defining characteristics of the colleges (Blocker,
Plummer, & Richardson, 1965). Mutability is a frequently observed characteristic of the
mission: “Community colleges] change frequently, seeking new programs and clients”
(Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 37). Change and innovation may become ends in themselves
rather than the means of achieving a coherent social, educational, or institutional purpose,
since “community colleges do not even follow their own traditions” (Cohen & Brawer,
1996). As the colleges are buffeted by social change, they seek to buffer themselves by
engaging in ritualized planning focused on serving communities and new clienteles without providing much evidence of strategic direction (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Under-examined assumptions about the mission and social role of the colleges are common among practitioners. These include broadening the American democratic ethos, the influence of the colleges on American social and economic well-being, and the value-added to the life chances of their students (Reynolds, 1957; Gleazer, 1968; Parnell, 1985; Griffith & Connor, 1994). Mission discussions reflect a pervasive economic and technological optimism that have been part of the ideological fabric of the colleges since their inception (Goodwin, 1973; Frye, 1994). Institutional discourses dominated by the "rhetoric of innovation” and "management babble” obscure the social and historical forces that shape core educational processes and outcomes (Cohen, 1969a; R. Williams, 2002). Organizational change and outcomes may have more to do with external forces and the kinetics of cultural reproduction than any measurable effect of “visionary leadership” (J. Levin, 1998b).

While universal access, diversity, and untraditional practices may be truly American, confusion over the purposes and role of community colleges is also a consequence of their uncertain pedigree and purpose in higher education (Clark, 1960; Jencks & Riesman, 1968), their unwritten history (Frye, 1991, 1992), the “edginess” of their communitarian ethic (Vaughan, 1991a), and their “eagerness to expand into new markets” (Grubb, 1999, p. 7). Creating some order out of this intellectual chaos is the primary problem addressed in this study.
Research Questions

Multiple identities and multiple lenses of analysis lead to numerous understandings of the community college” (J. Levin, 1998a, p. 2). George Vaughan, a prominent community college historian, scholar, and former president, has admitted candidly that a clear definition of the institution still eludes him:

Why do even the community college‘s most articulate and intelligent leaders have difficulty explaining its Proteus-like characteristics? Why is it difficult to explain to the public in simple and understandable terms the twin towers of the community college philosophy: open access and comprehensiveness? (Vaughan, 1991a, p. 2)

The present study addresses Vaughan’s questions through an historical and sociological analysis of both the community college national mission debate and the movement’s organizational development since 1930. Practitioners view comprehensiveness and open access as foundation to the mission but have difficulty explaining the concepts clearly and succinctly. How have definitions of these terms evolved and changed in the last fifty years? Does the mission reflect the needs and desires of students, communities and faculty? What is the influence of environmental pressures emanating from globalization, technology, and contradictions within the American political economy in shaping the mission? Does the community college define its mission or is the mission thrust on it by forces external to the colleges?

Two additional questions guide the research and writing of the study: 1) What contributions can organizational and social movement theories make to clarify the mission problem? 2) What is the impact of the postindustrial environment and attendant social and economic change on the contemporary community college mission?
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

To theorize the historical development of the community college mission, the study connects consensus social movement theory (Lofland, 1989; McCarthy & Wolfson, 1992; Schwartz & Paul, 1992) with organization theory. Consensus movements are social mobilizations that enjoy broad public support and little organized opposition. Such movements tend to be nonpartisan, humanitarian, or educational. They are less characterized by “their publicly avowed ideologies” and more by “the social infrastructures and institutional resources that shaped their emergence” (Schwartz & Paul, 1992, p. 205). Consensus social movements reflect a tendency in modern societies toward “bureaucratization of social discontent” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 20).

From Leonard Koos (1924) to Edmund Gleazer, Jr. (1994b), national and local leaders have often described the junior-community college as an educational/social movement. Jesse Parker Bogue, perhaps the most influential leader of the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC), emphasized in his landmark defense of the community college ideal: “[T]he community college is not an institution. It is a movement” (1950a, pp. xx, 239). Only one scholarly study has touched on the theoretical implications of this statement for explaining community college leadership and organizational behavior (Twombley & Amey, 1999). No scholar has analyzed systematically the social movement quality of the colleges from an historical perspective.

As part of a multi-frame, multi-level analysis, this study examines the mission problem through the lens of open-systems organizational analysis with particular emphasis on resource dependency theory. Open-systems theorists argue that, no matter how formal or mechanistic its structure, an organization both influences and is influenced
by the environment (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1966; W. Scott, 1987; Morgan, 1997). A key to understanding organizational behavior is to study transactions with the environment; such study leads to a perspective that organizations are collections of shifting interest groups that develop goals and activities through a process of competition, cooperation, and negotiation among themselves and with the environment.

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) contextualize contingency theory by exploring and applying the concept of resource dependency. Organizations are neither autonomous nor completely rational. They are “quasi-markets” that struggle continuously for expanded, but still limited, autonomy because their constraints and opportunities are driven by influences emanating from broader organizational fields: “The key to organizational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. 2).

Institutional theory provides additional insight into the organizational behavior of the colleges. As explained by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), an institutional perspective examines the organization as part of a broader, networked organizational field in which organizations tend to emulate one another. This tendency towards “institutional isomorphism” pays benefits through increased social legitimacy and relatively stable revenue streams, providing the possibility for a more predictable institutional environment. Institutional theory pays attention to the historical and cultural contexts of organizational development and activity. The adaptation of mission behavior and organizational structure to the imperatives of the institutional environment is conceptualized as a method of acquiring legitimacy and increasing organizational influence by incorporating and modeling “best practices” within the organizational field: “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power...
and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150).

Methodology

The present study is deductive in logic and method in that it integrates several different, but related, theoretical positions to explain the organizational structure and mission behavior of community colleges within a temporal framework. This multi-level, multi-disciplinary study focuses on the community college mission debate as an avenue for deeper understanding of community college organizational behavior and the social significance of this educational sector.

The historical approach of the study requires an inductive frame of mind as well. The study utilizes “Grounded Theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a theoretical check to prevent social movement, institutional, and open-systems theories from overwhelming the integrity of the document analysis. Grounded theory is the closest of qualitative methodologies in higher education research to classical historical methods of content analysis and documentary criticism (see Barzun & Graff, 1985 on historical method & Weber, 1949, on methods of historical sociology).

Grounded theory, which posits a relative theoretical agnosticism, is useful for a qualitative educational researcher who desires to acquire new, unexpected insights from documentary analysis, interviews, and observations. Grounded theory is appropriate for historical inquiry because it carefully and systematically categorizes and codes the data, employs —theoretical memos” to develop new insights, and applies the “constant comparative method” as a tool of analysis (Tesch, 1990).
The primary historical data source is *The Community College Journal* (formerly the *Junior College Journal*). I read cover-to-cover every issue of the *Journal* from issue number one in 1930 to 2000. As I moved through decades of the *Journal*, I created my own database on my laptop with a note and code for each significant article. More than five hundred critical *Journal* articles were photocopied, heavily annotated, coded, and cross-referenced in a legal size file cabinet to support this project and future research.

The research questions and conceptual framework were the basis for the initial system of descriptive codes. I moved the data analysis to a more integrated and comprehensive system of “pattern coding” as the interpretive framework and the data gathering and analysis become more focused (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial categorization of data sets was accomplished through an “open coding” and “purposive sampling” system that became more specific as the connections among data sets and to existing or emerging theory become clearer (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 45-47). A preliminary code was given to each category of documents; codes proliferated quickly until the patterns imposed by theory generation and critical analysis began to force them back into a more integrated system as described by Tesch (1990).

For the purposes of the present study, the writing of “theoretical memos” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110) is the most important element of the grounded theory method and the primary vehicle for data analysis. The memos ran concurrently with the entire research project. A disciplined, consistent effort at maintaining these memos provides the “paper trail” for documenting and justifying the method and outcomes of the study. The memos were also essential for generating the “core categories” (“or interpretive perspectives”) that constitute the elements of theory and presentation as advised by Tesch
(1990, p. 84). For the case study of educational reform at Miami-Dade College, I followed the direction of Robert K. Yin (1994) on effective applied social research methods and good practice in case study research.

Significant Findings

The study makes the following contributions to community college and higher education Scholarship: 1) provides the first comprehensive history of the junior-community college mission in the twentieth century; 2) develops the first multi-level, multidisciplinary analysis of community college mission behavior synthesizing the historical record with sociological analysis, organization and institutional theory, and consensus social movement theory; 3) identifies the precise origins of the idea of the comprehensive mission in the junior college experience of the Depression and World War II; 4) explains how and why the public junior college broke away from secondary education control and attempted to establish itself as an institution of, but not necessarily within, the stratified higher education system; 5) modifies traditional narratives on the mission impact of the G.I. Bill and Truman Commission; 6) extends insights from Frye (1994) and Pedersen (2000) through new research to discover an Evangelical Christian social mission that structured the comprehensive mission in subtle but profound ways; 7) describes and analyzes a covert racialized mission” that contradicted the democratic and egalitarian ethos of the junior-community college movement; 8) calls into question critical discourses regarding the relative influence and relationship of the collegiate and vocational functions; 9) theorizes the community college as a consensus social movement; 10) revises and provides significant nuances for the works of academic critics such as Clark (1960), Brint and Karabel (1989), and Dougherty (1994) based on analysis
of historical data and examination of overlooked historical documents; 10) contextualizes the historical, social and educational origins of the “new managerial” and the “new economic development” models; 11) provides a fresh, critical examination of community college organizational behavior and outcomes; 12) calls into question the degree to which contemporary community college mission initiatives represent significant breaks with past practice; 13) outlines the process of institutionalizing and professionalizing the comprehensive mission; 14) demonstrates that students, faculty, and communities are potent influences on the mission in times of change; 15) connects postindustrial “hyper-turbulence” (Cameron & Tschirhart, 1992) to the ideal of the “Learning College” (O’Banion, 1997).

Conclusions

The community college is by historical and organizational design a provisionally institutionalized entity within the national higher education system. Mission drift results from competing pulls along the vertical axis of the mission connecting it to K-16 public education and the horizontal axis connecting it to communities, labor markets and business. Tied to the vagaries of economic and social change account for perennial mission drift. Calls for greater mission coherence have limited influence in the face of these social, economic and educational influences on the mission. Such demands may even run counter to the need for political alliances, and acquisition of resources. Shifting institutional attention from inputs to outcomes is a strategy for achieving greater mission focus.
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