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Preface: Community Colleges: New Environments, New Directions

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Community  
Colleges:  
New  
Environments,  
New  
Directions

Since their inception, community colleges have been expected to serve a number of roles in American society. As the entryway to college for groups of people who would otherwise have been excluded from higher education, community colleges provide the first step on the ladder toward a baccalaureate degree. As higher education institutions that are uniquely linked to their local communities, community colleges are asked to address the educational and civic needs of a wide array of local citizens. And as the educational institutions most attuned to the needs of the local business community, they are charged with equipping their graduates with the skills needed to succeed in the economy. In short, community colleges, at least in their idealized form, should be functioning as a democratizing force in American society—providing access to education and training where it would not exist otherwise, increasing the ability of people to engage in the civic life of American society, and providing the skills and training needed to gain employment.

Whether community colleges ever lived up to these ideals has always been in question. Yet as community colleges enter the new millennium, they are encountering a set of forces that are making it increasingly difficult for them to maintain a commitment to the diverse and sometimes competing missions that have always characterized this sector of higher education. Both internal and external forces are converging to steer these institutions away from important aspects of their historic missions—most notably, academic preparation for transfer to the four-year sector. Instead, they are increasingly adopting a more singularly market-driven mission that focuses on providing the skills demanded by the local economy. As a result, an equity agenda, which for so long has been at the forefront of the rhetoric surrounding the community college,

has been eroded by a business model that emphasizes efficiency, outcomes, and the needs of employers.

This issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* is devoted to exploring the shift in both mission and function that is emerging among community colleges. By examining a series of important and interrelated developments in this sector of American higher education, we hope that this volume will inform scholars, community college leaders, and policy makers about the shifting and ever more complex economic, political, and social environment community colleges find themselves in.

## Community Colleges as an Area of Study

Community colleges deserve more attention than they usually receive for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that from a structural perspective, they are situated as a bridge between the K-12 educational sector and higher education. Community colleges admit students who are the products of local public school systems, and they feed their graduates to local employers and four-year colleges and universities. Thus, these institutions are in many ways a reflection of the quality of the K-12 system and can affect the quality and functioning of the four-year system as well.

Second, the community college sector has grown rapidly in the past half century. Between 1965 and 1997, the number of community college students increased 4.6-fold, while the number of students enrolled at four-year institutions increased 1.9 times (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Although the growth in all of higher education was extraordinary during this time period, the rise of community colleges signals a radical shift in the institutional makeup of American higher education.

As a result of this growth, community colleges are increasingly likely to serve as the entryway to postsecondary education for poor and minority students. Enrollments of Hispanics in community colleges tripled between 1976 and 1997, while African American enrollment increased 1.5 times during the same period. As of 1997, 56 percent of all Hispanic students and 42 percent of African American students were enrolled in two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The concentration of so many nontraditional students places a unique burden on community colleges and is in part a reflection of the stratification of this country's higher education sector. Indeed, many argue that stratification is increasing with emerging state policies requiring community colleges to be the sole deliverers of remediation in many state higher education systems. And the open-door policies that have characterized community colleges are being eroded by recent state and federal policies that are reducing access to community college for some populations. Clearly, this is a critical time in the history of community colleges in particular and in the history of American higher education more generally.

## An Overview of the Contents of This Issue

As Steven Brint points out in his retrospective essay on the state of community college research, many of the issues that are discussed in this volume of *The Annals* were evident to varying degrees in 1989, when he and Jerry Karabel published their seminal book, *The Diverted Dream*. However, Brint and Karabel could not have foreseen the ways in which a variety of forces would have emerged to create pressures on the community college that are different in both scope and intensity than those that existed in 1989.

This issue of *The Annals* examines the community college using three separate but interrelated themes. First, recent changes in federal policy are described and discussed in terms of both their effects on access to postsecondary education via the community college and the types of education that are available to individuals. Overall, recent federal policy has reduced access to postsecondary education for recipients of such programs as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and welfare (Temporary Aid to Needy Families). Equally important, however, is the fact that the type of education available through federal programs has shifted away from degree-granting programs and toward short-term, noncredit programs often designed to meet the immediate employment needs of local businesses.

The second theme represented in this volume focuses on broader societal factors that have contributed to the movement of community colleges away from their traditional academic mission. The market-driven philosophy that is becoming increasingly dominant emphasizes efficiency, profit, and strong ties with the business community. Several of our authors illustrate the ways in which this philosophy operates within specific institutions and point as well to the ways in which these pressures are unequally felt among community colleges.

Finally, specific community college practices are critically examined in terms of how well they serve the academic and employment needs of students. Taking as a starting point the obvious and multiple limitations under which community colleges operate, the authors provide concrete suggestions designed to maintain these institutions' function as a path toward educational and economic self-sufficiency. Each of these three themes, and the articles that contribute to them, are described in more detail below.

### *Changes in federal policy*

Perhaps the most notable new aspect of the community college environment has emerged from recent federal policy. While education and training have traditionally enjoyed wide support among lawmakers and the general public as a reliable avenue toward economic self-sufficiency, in recent years, this support has eroded, particularly with regard to low-income populations. What has emerged instead is a work-first philosophy, which emphasizes rapid job placement as the strategy of choice in achieving stable employment, rather than a longer-term approach that incorporates education and training along with work experience.

The work-first philosophy has driven the development of two major pieces of federal legislation—welfare reform and WIA. As a result, among both welfare recipients and WIA clients, there is far less college attendance, and when access is available, it is most often to short-term training programs rather than to credit-bearing courses or those that would count toward a degree. Whereas the halls of community colleges once remained accessible to these most disadvantaged populations, a large portion of them cannot even walk through the doors anymore as a result of these policies, and those who pass through these doors walk down different corridors. [C]ommunity colleges are increasingly likely to serve as the entryway to postsecondary education for poor and minority students. [C]ommunity colleges are increasingly likely to serve as the entryway to postsecondary education for poor and minority students.

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The articles by Christopher Mazzeo, Sara Rab, and Susan Eachus; Jerry Jacobs and Sarah Winslow; and Kathleen Shaw and Sara Rab clearly document the effects of federal policy on access to education via the community college. This trio of articles stems from a collaborative study of welfare reform and community colleges in six states. In their analysis of state-level variation in the effects of welfare reform on access to college, Mazzeo, Rab, and Eachus illustrate the ways in which this policy generally reflects a movement away from the long-held belief that education and training represent the surest route toward economic self-sufficiency. While traditional policy analyses focus on political or institutional factors, Mazzeo, Rab, and Eachus's unique contribution is in illustrating the importance of ideology in the response of states to federal welfare policy. They examine the beliefs that key policy makers and implementing agencies hold about welfare recipients and the role of education and training in their lives. The authors also point to the roles of state officials, welfare advocates, and community colleges themselves in explaining how access of welfare recipients varies across states.

The article by Jacobs and Winslow complements the Mazzeo, Rab, and Eachus article by examining the impact of welfare reform on enrollment over time and across states. They compile a variety of evidence from a variety of sources, including federal statistics, state data, and community college enrollment records, and they conduct original analysis of three national data sets. While some discrepancies between data sources are evident, most of the evidence points to a decline in the

rate of enrollment in postsecondary education of welfare recipients. Moreover, some data suggest that young single mothers who might have been welfare recipients under Aid to Families with Dependent Children are less likely to enroll in higher education under Temporary Aid to Needy Families. Their results also indicate that welfare recipients in states with less favorable policies toward higher education are less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education. This underscores the conclusion that state-level variation in policies does matter in terms of affecting the chances to pursue additional education. Finally, Jacobs and Winslow illustrate that the type of education available to welfare recipients has shifted considerably. Whereas access to degree-granting programs existed to some degree prior to welfare reform, the analyses provided by Jacobs and Winslow illustrate that this is no longer the case for the vast majority of welfare recipients after the 1996 legislation was passed. Not only has access to postsecondary education been significantly reduced, but the education and training that is available is, for the most part, short term and non-degree granting.

This trend mirrors a growing trend in the federal government away from utilizing education as a means to improve the economic status of low-income populations. As the article by Shaw and Rab points out, this trend is encouraged and reinforced by WIA, which has eroded the federal government's historic commitment to the retraining of displaced and laid-off workers in favor of an emphasis on rapid job placement. As is the case with welfare reform, both the quantity and quality of education available to most WIA recipients has shifted toward shorter-term, non-credit-bearing training programs. This reduction in overall support for education and training, when coupled with the onerous reporting requirements instituted by the federal government, has greatly reduced the incentives for many community colleges to participate in the training and education of WIA clients. And when they do, their customer is increasingly seen as the local labor market—not community college students themselves. Thus, as Shaw and Rab illustrate with examples from several states, community colleges, which were once the major portal through which individuals could receive training and education funded by the federal government, are no longer functioning in this manner.

Alicia Dowd's article on access and equity in the community college points to another major shift in the federal policy landscape—namely, changes in federal financial aid policy. Not only has the purchasing power of Pell Grants greatly decreased in recent years, but there is a clear trend toward loans, and away from grants, in financing community college education. Because community college students are most price sensitive, this trend has the clear potential to reduce access to education for the poorest students.

### *A sharp turn toward a market philosophy*

Dowd situates her analysis of federal financial aid policy within a larger context that takes into account other broad shifts in American higher education. She argues that a number of trends are converging to challenge, and ultimately shift, the community college mission away from its traditional commitment to providing access

to education that is the first step toward an associate's or bachelor's degree. In its place is an increasing focus on a market-driven mission which is more attuned to the needs of local industries than to the needs of individual students and whose success is measured in terms of economic, rather than educational, indicators. Of course, community colleges have always been attuned to their local context. Indeed, as Dougherty (1994) and Brint and Karabel (1989) have illustrated in their earlier work on community colleges, these institutions have a consistent need to be responsive to their local context, given the economic and political factors that affect them so directly. However, there is growing evidence that in the past quarter century, and in the past decade in particular, the needs of the business community, and economic concerns more generally, have become an increasingly prominent part of the landscape of community colleges. As a result, the historic commitment of community colleges to serve the needs of individual students, and the needs of the broader local community, has been eroded.

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What has driven these policy shifts? Several of our authors point to changes in dominant rhetoric and philosophy and suggest that these changes have important implications for community college mission and practice. Patti Gumpert's revealing interviews of community college presidents document these forces in action. Gumpert is in the unique position of having direct access to the experiences and reflections of the decision makers themselves. Her interviews suggest that there are two institutional logics that frame the response of community colleges to various environmental pressures. Until quite recently, the social institutional logic, which casts public higher education as primarily an educational enterprise, has guided the actions of community colleges. Yet her research suggests that an industry logic, which focuses on efficiency, profit, and strengthening the local economy, has become increasingly prominent in the past twenty-five years.

Gumpert's analysis is consistent with that of other authors represented in this volume. Dowd points to a movement toward a capitalist ideology and market-driven mission that focuses on competition and profitability; Shaw and Rab, as well as Mazzeo, Rab, and Eachus, point to a work-first philosophy that conceptualizes

students as prospective employees in the local labor market; and Grubb points to an erosion of the equity agenda. All of these analyses, although using slightly different terminology, are consistent in pointing to a shift away from educationally driven decision making and toward an economic model that emphasizes employment rather than education.

Yet Gumport's work suggests that despite the growing prominence of the industry logic and similar philosophies in the past quarter century, such frameworks do not wholly constrain the actions or decisions of community college presidents. Rather, they are still able to maintain a level of autonomy that allows them to respond to external pressures in a number of ways, although their scope of response has become more limited.

Kevin Dougherty's analysis of employer-focused training in community colleges also points to variability in the response of community colleges to external pressures. Dougherty's analysis is unusually thorough and convincing because he utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data in his analyses. Not surprisingly, he finds that there is a general trend in the direction of employer-focused training. However, this trend is neither wholly consistent nor uniform. Indeed, his research suggests that the demand varies by type of local employer, as well as by the size of the community colleges available and their proximity to business. For example, large manufacturers tend to utilize community colleges much more heavily than smaller employers in industries such as retail trade. Thus, both Dougherty and Gumport suggest that despite the presence of significant and sustained pressure from a variety of outside sources, these forces do not exert a uniform pressure on community colleges, nor does this sector respond to such pressures in a uniform manner. Rather, they exhibit a level of institutional agency that allows them at least some autonomy in their response to what are, admittedly, forceful external pressures to become more responsive to the business sector and decision-making frameworks that privilege economic concerns over educational issues.

### *Potential partial correctives*

Despite the evidence presented by Gumport and Dougherty that community colleges are not completely uniform in their response to the pressure to adopt a market philosophy, it is fair to say that the articles in this volume cast a generally critical eye on community colleges as an educational sector and on their potential to serve as the democratizing force that they have been purported to be. There is a firm consensus among the authors that community colleges are, overall, increasingly responsive to the industry and the business sector rather than to the students, or potential students, who might enroll in their courses. Furthermore, with the notable exception of Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, the authors would seem to be in general agreement that the increasing prominence of market philosophy and practice has had a negative effect on issues of access and equity. Indeed, this volume raises the important question of whether, and how, community colleges can serve the needs of this nation's most disadvantaged students.



However, several articles in this volume point to ways in which community colleges can improve their ability to respond to the needs of students and, in doing so, continue to be responsive to their historic mission. First, Norton Grubb examines the noncredit sector of community college courses in an attempt to explore how altering them in specific ways might better fulfill what he refers to as the equity agenda. Unlike most of the other authors in this volume, Grubb does not focus most of his attention on the external pressure and contextual factors that have shifted the community college mission. Rather, his article examines specific practices within the noncredit arm of the community college.

Grubb considers how noncredit education could be restructured to better serve the needs of students as well. This emphasis on community college curricula and its importance in achieving educational equity is an important but often overlooked dimension in studies of these institutions. While highly critical of the current state of noncredit education, Grubb contends that it is here to stay and thus it is important to determine how to improve its contribution to students' educational chances.

Like Grubb, Regina Deil-Amen and James Rosenbaum focus their attention on a concrete element of the community college—in this instance, the advising structure and, more specifically, the relationship between community colleges and the business sector in the job placement process. Whereas other authors in the volume underscore the dominance of business over educational considerations, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum suggest that stronger linkages between education and the business sector would actually enhance the educational goals of community colleges. While community colleges engage in ever-increasing amounts of employment-related education and training, the authors argue that this sector stops short of providing the services and linkages needed to ensure that students actually obtain adequate employment. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum suggest that the practices of proprietary institutions are also more effective in providing advising services to their students. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's article is invaluable because it examines in detail some of the important weaknesses that exist in community colleges. Moreover, they illustrate how the failure to provide more concrete linkages to the employment sector further disadvantages community college students who choose to acquire their employment training through these institutions.

## Summary

As Steven Brint points out in his provocative article regarding the state of the literature on community colleges since the publication of *The Diverted Dream*, many of the trends that were on the horizon more than a decade ago have now become an integral part of the community college landscape. Brint and Karabel's argument that community colleges reinforce, rather than ameliorate, existing social inequalities has been generally confirmed, as in the case of transfer rates that continue to be much lower than the transfer aspirations of students and whose economic effects

are exacerbated by the increasing premium placed on the baccalaureate degree. Low rates of economic return for most academic programs offered by community colleges also persist, and community colleges continue to enroll a disproportionate number of low-income students. Their original skepticism regarding vocational programs has been tempered to a significant degree by emerging analyses suggesting that selective vocational programs produce higher economic outcomes than many academically oriented programs at the associate's degree level. Yet, on balance, Brint and Karabel's original analysis regarding the role of community colleges in reproducing existing social inequalities remains convincing.

However, Brint and Karabel could not have foreseen all that has happened in the past quarter century. They did not, for example, foresee the seismic shift in the federal government's approach to the education and training of low-income and displaced workers—a shift that would so completely emphasize work rather than education as the path to long-term economic self-sufficiency. The shift in federal financial aid away from grants and toward loans has also had a chilling effect on community college enrollment and completion and has further challenged the ability of community colleges to serve this nation's most disadvantaged populations.

Nor could they have completely predicted the increasingly close relationship that has developed between community colleges and the employment sector. Through a series of complex economic, political, and social factors, community colleges are being pressured to act as the training arm of the employment sector to the increasing exclusion of other possible functions. And while these institutions are not passive in their response to such pressures, still, the pressure is real and growing, and many community colleges—perhaps most—have begun to de-emphasize their academic missions and, in particular, their historical commitment to serving as the first step toward the baccalaureate degree.

As Grubb argues, the equity agenda that has driven at least the rhetoric, if not the reality, of community colleges has eroded. An emphasis on education as the central mission of these institutions is being replaced with a market philosophy that emphasizes short-term, employer-driven training. Moreover, for those who are most disadvantaged—welfare recipients, those who have lost their jobs and are seeking retraining under the federal WIA, those needing financial aid—access to even short-term training is being eroded.

This volume of *The Annals*, when taken as a whole, provides several lenses through which to view contemporary community colleges as they respond to an emerging set of challenges. The degree to which community colleges either reinforce or ameliorate existing social inequalities remains an open question. It is our hope that the articles contained within this volume provoke discussion and debate about a critically important sector of the American educational system.

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