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EXCELLENCE AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSION

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Can we be equal and excellent too? John Gardner (1961) asked that question twenty-five years ago, and we are still searching for the answer. Some people contend that there is an inherent conflict between excellence and anything--be it goods or services--for the masses. Excellence presumably comes in small quantities; as soon as it is extended to "too many" people, it becomes mediocre or inferior.

The task of community colleges, however, is to extend education to the masses, and the challenge is to make that education excellent. Excellence in this context cannot be defined as a relative value, confined to the top 5 or 10 percent--and therein lies the rub.

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There is a strong desire in our society to rank-order values along a single dimension of quality. That tendency is especially prevalent today. When people set out to establish excellence in education, they seek comparative measures. The problem is that comparisons require a common or unidimensional measure.

Unidimensional measures of excellence make sense if the variable being measured is really unidimensional. Height, for example, is a unidimensional variable, and it makes sense to order people along a continuum from short to tall to tallest. Education is a multidimensional variable; it does not make sense to compare large research universities with small liberal arts colleges, rural campuses with urban, or selective colleges with open-door institutions.

People who attempt to rank the quality of colleges and universities by setting up a hierarchy are making two fallacious assumptions: The first is that institutions can be ordered along some simple dimension, i.e., that it makes sense to compare universities with community colleges. The second is that there is some agreement on which end of the distribution is "good." Is it "good" or "bad" to enroll disproportionate numbers of students with poor records of academic achievement? If access and the upgrading of the level of educational achievement of the state is the goal, then it is "good" to reach those most in need of education. If academic distinction for the institution is the goal, then excellence will more likely be enhanced by the selection of students who have already demonstrated academic excellence. Excellence, then, as a relative value, i.e., the "top 5 or 10 percent", is not a helpful concept when applied to

education because the assumptions can rarely be met.

Excellence as an absolute value may be more useful, but only if we can agree on the goals and the measures. Clearly the goals of community colleges differ from those of universities, and excellence is not the same in the two quite different types of institutions. But what about excellence for community colleges? Can that be defined?

Certainly it is not easy to define the purpose and mission of community colleges today--not nearly as easy as it was in the 1960s when community colleges were in high agreement on a common purpose and a national mission to open the doors of higher education to previously unserved segments of the population. Once the doors have been opened, however, and those previously unserved students are in attendance, what is the goal? Is it, for example, to retain students until they have completed some defined set of learning experiences that constitutes a "program" of study? Or is it to provide them with whatever educational experiences seem to serve their needs at the time? How important is retention, and what constitutes "reasonable progress" in a community college? Are community colleges failing in their task when up to 40 percent of the students in California community colleges complete fewer than two courses in two years? (Hunter and Sheldon, 1982). How important is the transfer function? Should community colleges be distressed that studies have shown that "not more than one in twenty enrollees completes a two-year program and transfers in the succeeding term?" (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.54). Community colleges are being judged on these traditional criteria. How appropriate are the criteria?

The answers to these questions depend heavily on what community colleges are trying to do. The easy way out of the goals problem is one that is used with reasonable success by most community colleges--to embrace comprehensiveness. The problem with the comprehensive mission is that carrying it out with excellence suggests that all five of the basic functions that constitute the comprehensive community college must be done well. The transfer program must prepare students just as well as the university does for upper division work. Vocational programs must prepare students for entry-level jobs, as well as advancement in their chosen occupations. Remedial programs must actually ameliorate past educational inequities and prepare students for citizenship, family life, cultural and aesthetic appreciations, and lifelong learning. Community education must respond appropriately to the educational needs of a wide range of people and organizations. Student personnel services must create and support an environment for the maximum development of students at any stage of life.

Can any college perform all of those functions with excellence--or even adequately in today's climate of scarce resources and heavy competition for students? Some people think not, and friends as well as critics of the community colleges are wondering out loud if the community colleges can be all things to all people. Are there some functions that should not be provided and some people who should not be served--at least not by a given community college?

The difficulty of the questions and the rising confusion about institutional purpose has college presidents worried. In a

recent survey, college presidents were asked to name the most critical issues facing their college today and over the next decade. Out of some twenty critical issues listed, the changing mission and purpose of their institution ranked second in importance among those issues that presidents of public colleges and universities thought their institution would be facing in the next ten years. Only "inflation and financial concerns" ranked higher (Duea, 1981).

Fortunately, the question of mission for community colleges has stimulated a growing number of thoughtful articles in the literature. While none will answer the questions for any given college, they should spark discussion and illuminate the options available. Basically, there are five major themes or foci running through the current community college mission debate. They differ to some extent from the six groups that you have defined as the mission components of the Virginia Community College System. That is by design. My purpose here, as I see it, is to approach the mission question from the national perspective as it is revealed in the literature on community colleges. Thus my intension is not to find a solution for the Virginia Community Colleges, but rather to raise questions about all missions. I am the devil's advocate of this conference, hoping to highlight the problems of missions statements and to challenge your thinking.

The five missions I want to talk about this morning are really themes or foci that run through all community college mission debates. I shall identify them as follows: 1) the comprehensive focus, 2) the vertical focus, 3) the horizontal

focus, 4) the integrated focus, and 5) the remedial focus.

The Comprehensive Focus

The comprehensive mission is far and away the current favorite, and at the present time many of the other foci are proposed, not as alternatives to the comprehensive mission, but rather as priorities or improvements of a given area within the comprehensive mission. So strong is the commitment to the comprehensive mission that those who have been either bold enough or foolish enough to suggest the elimination or de-emphasis of one of the five original program functions of community colleges have found themselves almost immediately in the midst of heated controversy. Consider, for example, the reaction to the recommendation of the Brookings Report (Breneman and Nelson, 1981) that community colleges should de-emphasize the transfer function and leave the education of baccalaureate-bound students to four-year institutions. Or consider the reaction to Ed Gleazer's (1980) suggestion that it is time for community colleges to de-emphasize their association with higher education in favor of building stronger associations with the non-academic community. Community colleges are, like any other organization, nation, or person, hesitant to give up anything once gained, even if doing so might refocus resources on an area of greater potential strength.

Whether community colleges are going to have to give up the comprehensive mission remains in doubt, but there is little doubt that community colleges will have to define carefully their special niche in the learning society. Most of today's analysts

question the continuation of the comprehensive mission on the grounds that it spreads community college's resources too thin. Breneman and Nelson (1981) think the decision regarding mission will ultimately be settled on the basis of financial support, and they don't see enough financial support forthcoming to support the comprehensive mission. They label the comprehensive mission a gamble, observing that "the greatest risk of an unflinching commitment to the comprehensive mission is that sufficient financial support will not materialize, and the college will suffer across the board, becoming less competitive and less distinctive in all program areas" (p. 213).

Despite such warnings, most colleges resist strongly any talk of abandoning the comprehensive mission. And indeed it has some notable strengths. In the first place, the comprehensive mission has strong roots in the historical arguments for equal access to educational opportunity, namely that all potential students should be within commuting distance of the type of education that serves their needs. Furthermore, despite its complexity, it is easy to administer. Faculty will grumble but will understand a leader who allocates scarce resources with an even hand as long as every department is equally deprived. What they are less likely to understand is an out-and-out statement that vocational education or community education or transfer programs or whatever are going to get more money because they are the wave of the future for the college. There are community colleges that have enunciated clear priorities quite successfully, but the battle is never easy if it means giving up some function that already has incumbents. The comprehensive mission is enormously power-

ful; it is attractive to most community college educators; it avoids the controversy of setting priorities, and it has become part of the community college tradition. It is mostly outside researchers and analysts who are warning that in the long run, community colleges will have to set priorities in order to use scarce resources where they will do the most good.

The Vertical Focus

The vertical focus is generally conceded to be the most prestigious and most easily understood model. Firmly anchored in traditional concepts of what a college should be, it places the community college between the high school and four-year college as an essential part of the formal educational system. Basically, the vertical focus calls for establishing relationships with high schools to assure that recent high school graduates are prepared for college level work and for articulating with four-year institutions their requirements for transfers.

There is now considerable activity, both within community colleges and outside, for strengthening the vertical focus. Indeed, some of the most powerful voices in higher education are more supportive of the vertical focus than of any other. There is the prestigious Carnegie Foundation, deploring the discontinuity of American education and calling for "an effective progression from elementary school through high school through college" (Hechinger, 1981, p. 128). The University of California task group studying retention and transfer is urging more articulation and communication with community colleges in

the hope of greater continuity through the system (Kissler, 1980). Dozens of examples could be cited of concern in high places for the breakdown in the vertical transition of students through the formal school system. The widespread conclusion is that better articulation between high schools and colleges is a high priority and that community colleges have a major obligation to establish smooth connections to enhance the flow of more students through the system.

The most effective implementation of the vertical function is underway at Miami-Dade Community College. What has become known as the "Miami-Dade system" is spreading rapidly throughout the country. Miami-Dade has many arrows to its bow, and without question they are a comprehensive community college. Nevertheless, the current priorities of Miami-Dade are clearly cast in the direction of traditional academic values and standards while preserving the concept of the open door (McCabe, 1981). The gems in their computerized crown involve an individualized monitoring system for making sure that students are making satisfactory progress in their courses of study (Anandam, 1981; Kelly, 1981), a system for articulating transfer requirements with each of the four-year institutions in Florida (Harper, Herrig, Kelly, and Schinoff, 1981), a special program for academically superior students (Robertson and Thomas, 1981), and most recently a program of research and conversions with Dade County high schools to improve student preparation prior to their entry into postsecondary education (Losak, Schwartz, and Morris, 1982).

I doubt if in the history of the community college movement

there has ever been as much attention given to traditional academic standards as there has been in the last four or five years. Attention, of course, almost always goes to areas perceived as neglected, and there is widespread agreement throughout the nation that traditional academic values have been neglected. The point is that the vertical position of the community colleges between the high schools and four year institutions is being vigorously reasserted, and it constitutes one major focus for the community college of the 1980s.

The Horizontal Focus

The horizontal focus has strong roots in the community college movement. It reaches out to develop linkages with the community rather than building linkages within the formal educational establishment. This focus has been most vigorously articulated by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. Although Ed Gleazer, the former president, and Dale Parnell, the current president, would establish their linkages in somewhat different places, the leadership of both men is concerned with reaching out to embrace new partners in education. Ed Gleazer (1980) sees community colleges as the hub of all education going on in the community, serving people of all ages throughout their lifetimes and helping the community solve problems and build a better community through education. He urges community colleges to provide the leadership for assessing community needs and for convening and coordinating educational services for the community.

Gleazer upset many in the community college movement by making

a choice between horizontal and vertical emphases. In his book, Values, Vision, and Vitality (1980), he raised the question of whether it might not be time for the community colleges to de-emphasize their identification with higher education and even to reconsider their use of the term "college." "It may get in the way of what really needs to be done in the community" (p.5), he said.

Although many regard Gleazer's horizontal focus as idealistic and too radical for implementation in the 1980s, I suggest that it should not be dismissed too quickly. In the first place, as every educator knows only too well, the pool of traditional college students has just started its downward slide, and traditional students will be increasingly scarce for the rest of the decade. This means that traditional four-year colleges, that were once content to leave low-achieving students to the community colleges, are going to reassert their "right" to go after any student who is able to spend full time in residence on the campuses that many four-year colleges must maintain. Unless community colleges can establish a competitive transfer program and can keep costs significantly below those of four-year institutions, they could ultimately lose the fight for the baccalaureate-bound market.

The second reason the horizontal focus could emerge stronger than ever as we enter the "information age" is that community colleges are far ahead of traditional four-year colleges in capitalizing on the rich and only partially tapped adult part-time market. Community colleges are ideally suited, philosophically and geographically, to serve lifelong learners

with jobs, families, and roots in the local communities. Furthermore, the less cumbersome faculty committee system of community colleges makes them able to respond quickly and appropriately to cooperative educational ventures with other providers of education. The rising interest of business and industry in human resource development makes corporate education the most actively growing educational activity in the nation. Community colleges appear to have the inside track on alliances with business, and Dale Parnell and the current AACJC Board are pushing hard for national legislation to strengthen this particular form of horizontal extension (Parnell, 1982).

The evidence is just beginning to pile up that students are using community colleges in a strikingly different manner than most traditionalists think, and most of the current student usage patterns are creating pressures toward the horizontal focus. Almost two-thirds of all community college students are studying part-time, and the typical load is one course per semester. Most of today's community college students do not fit the vertical focus very well; they are not coming directly from high school, nor do most plan to go on to a four-year college. In fact, the authors of the Statewide Longitudinal Study of California Community Colleges found that few students enrolled in or even identified with any "program" of study. They concluded that "It is obvious that California community colleges are neither 'two-year transfer institutions' nor 'two-year vocational education institutions,' but something very different" (Hunter and Sheldon, 1981, p.3-11).

The Integrated Focus

The term "integrated focus" may be used to contrast Arthur Cohen's proposal for a general education focus with the horizontal and vertical foci already discussed.~ Cohen is proposing major attention to linkages within the college rather than external linkages either vertically or horizontally. Cohen's intent is to make liberal arts and the humanities an important part of the learning experience of all learners, be they transfer, career, compensatory, or community education students. The trend that distresses Cohen most in community college education is the collapse of the sequential curriculum. He believes that a community college education should contain a "sequence of intended learnings" in which "sequence" is defined as "a pattern of progression that has some rationale, order, and deliberate arrangement" and "intended learnings" have outcomes that are defined in advance (Cohen, 1981, p.35). He takes a dim view of the community college that "purports to serve up anything that anyone in the community wants" (p.36).

Cohen's focus advocates a program of studies that calls for a reconceptualization of all five of the traditional functions of the community college. His integrated focus would place liberal education for the informed citizen at the hub of career, compensatory, collegiate, and community education. Community colleges would not only guarantee the availability of liberal education to all students at any time in their lives, but would require it lest, as Cohen says, "the gulf between social classes in America be accentuated as members of the elite group learn to control their environment, while the lower classes are given

career education and training in the basic skills" (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.327).

The Remedial Focus

Finally, a proposed focus for community colleges recommended by the Carnegie Council in 1979 has received little discussion and has generally been met with little enthusiasm by community colleges. I don't find it especially surprising that community colleges failed to respond to the Carnegie proposal that community colleges assume "residual responsibility for youth." Clark Kerr and the members of his council tried to address the real and growing youth problem in the United States by suggesting that community colleges develop a comprehensive set of "youth service functions" which would include guidance, job preparation, job placement, referral to other community agencies for help with legal and medical advice, apprenticeships, and almost any other type of service needed by young people to help them become responsible and productive citizens. In this remedial focus, the community colleges would be identified as "full service institutions for the young."

There are many problems with the proposal which, to its credit, does tackle a problem in serious need of attention. First and foremost is the fact that community colleges have not been rewarded in the past for their social concern. Indeed, they are quite likely to have been the targets of sometimes vicious criticism for enrolling disproportionate numbers of minorities, for recruiting students with poor academic skills, for poor retention of students, for failure to provide upper division

transfers to four-year institutions, for preserving the social class structure, and a host of other charges related to their present remedial role. Having been burned in the past for their handling of a problem that no one yet knows how to deal with, it is unlikely that they are going to move more heavily into remedial functions in the future.

A second major flaw in the Carnegie proposal is that almost no college wants to be identified these days as the "institution for youth" which is a declining population and quite opposite from the direction in which most community colleges are currently moving. Community colleges, more than any other type of institution, are becoming institutions for adults.

While it seems unlikely that community colleges are going to adopt a mission of remediation, it seems equally unlikely that they are going to give up the remedial function. Nevertheless, remedial education is currently under attack as never before in the history of community colleges by legislators, the general public, and frequently by educators, who claim that remediation is not a legitimate collegiate function.

If community colleges are to maintain their concern for improving the options of the educationally disadvantaged, they are going to have to be prepared to fight hard battles in the long-term interest of a public that seems increasingly indifferent. Whether community colleges are dedicated enough and noble enough to put their own reputations on the line as advocates for those with no voice in today's press for educational excellence remains to be seen. If remedial education remains a mission of community colleges, hard battles lie ahead.

In conclusion, the 1980s will present difficult choices for community colleges. The comprehensive mission which has served as the flag around which community colleges could derive strength and identity is not as strong or as clear nationwide as it was ten to twenty years ago. While current criticism regarding lack of quality is directed largely at slippage on the vertical dimension, fidelity to the comprehensive mission will require new efforts to establish standards and quality across all programs. That, as many people have pointed out, will be a gamble as long as resources remain limited. Shoring up one program necessarily results in at least temporary neglect of some other function. The yo-yo syndrome could be the result. The transfer function receives attention until criticism becomes strong over failures in the community education program. Resources diverted to that program for a few years permits criticism to arise over the failure of vocational programs to keep up with the changing times. And so it goes. The result is that community colleges are perpetually defending themselves against criticism, constantly putting out fires instead of getting on with establishing their own identity and moving toward quality in the goals they set for themselves. Your commitment to the comprehensive mission is admirable, but it will take hard work, and you will be called upon to defend your distinction between "being all things to all people" and finding the appropriate market niche for the Virginia College System (Virginia College System, 1985).

The vertical focus has the advantage of legitimacy in the eyes of most people--legislators, educators (especially those in

four-year colleges and universities), and the general public. But that more stereotyped version of a "real college" can also be a disadvantage when community colleges must compete with four-year colleges on their terms. When community colleges were established, and especially during the great growth decade of the 1960s, four-year institutions were delighted to leave the new populations who were generally less well-prepared academically to the community colleges. That situation is changing dramatically, and four-year institutions will be tough competitors in the 1980s and 90s for baccalaureate-bound students. The Virginia Community Colleges appear to have the support of the Commonwealth in their mission to provide upward mobility for a broad spectrum of the population. Nevertheless, the community college role in university-parallel education will come under increasing attack as the traditional student population decreases over the next decade. To maintain the place of the community colleges in the mainline formal educational system will take hard work and a dedication to excellence in traditional academic education.

The horizontal focus has the advantage of tapping into the most rapidly growing population of learners, namely part-time adult learners. That population will continue to expand throughout the 1980s and 90s, not only in numbers, but also in demand for education services. Most adults are location-bound and four-year residential campuses have a difficult time competing in this market. The problems in the horizontal focus are 1) that it may come close to the comprehensive focus in spreading resources too thin, 2) that there is a great deal of work to be done in selling the concept to the general public--and to many community

colleges faculties, and 3) that nationally, the current move away from local control and funding is counterproductive to establishing the community relationships that are essential for success. Nevertheless, for community colleges dedicated to establishing the necessary relationships in the community and selling the concept to students, taxpayers, and local business and community agencies, the horizontal focus seems a viable focus for the 1980s.

The integrated focus also has a lot of "selling" to do to gain understanding and acceptance. It may, however, be a "sleeper" with more potential for the future than is apparent now. Job skills are changing so rapidly and many are of such a specific nature that some industries are saying that what they want colleges to do is to provide a general educational background, and to develop the capacity in workers to continue to learn new job demands as they come along. Such industries are convinced that they will have to teach the specifics on the job, and many industrial programs are growing at a rate that far exceeds even the Golden Age of growth for higher education in the 1960s.

There are at present many calls for greater cooperation between community colleges and industry. If that "cooperation" should take the form of greater differentiation between the education offered by colleges and the training offered by industry, then the integrated focus would be an appropriate role for community colleges. If, on the other hand, "cooperation" takes the form of jointly developed and taught programs, then the viability of the horizontal focus is strengthened.

Job-related education is not, however, the major argument used by advocates of the integrated focus. There was once considerable hope among underemployed humanities faculties that more mature adult learners would have a greater appreciation of liberal education than would traditional college students. That hope has not yet been turned into college enrollments; adults appear just as interested in career education as younger students. There is, however, the argument that there would be an adult market for general education if colleges taught it as a truly integrated educational experience rather than as preparation for academic majors. The Virginia Community College focus on community service taps into the community's need for cultural enrichment and personal development for citizens from all walks of life.

Finally, the remedial focus may continue to be a part of the program of every open door college, but the major focus of very few. Although there is brave talk about improving the high schools to the point where remediation is no longer needed, most community college students are not coming directly from high school, and even if high schools improve their teaching of the basic skills greatly over the next decade, there will still be a great deal of "catching up" to do. So far, remediation has been an accepted part of the community college mission, but funding and the survival of remedial programs is now under attack, and community colleges will have to fight if they wish to preserve this function.

These then are the choices: 1) to remain with the comprehensive mission and gamble that it can be done well--less of a

gamble for large institutions or statewide systems than for smaller colleges, 2) to work hard on improving the vertical focus and gamble that community colleges can compete with four-year institutions for the baccalaureate-bound student, 3) to define a community-based horizontal mission and gamble that constituents and the community can be convinced to support and lobby for that function, 4) to tackle the integrated focus and gamble that industry and society really do want liberally educated workers and citizens, 5) to fight for the survival of remedial programs and gamble that confidence can be won and that the community college will receive the major portion of funds marked for remedial services.

No mission definition is guaranteed success in the 1980s and 90s, but it seems clear that no college will 'succeed' by settling for mediocrity across the board or by letting some of the five traditional programs of the comprehensive mission slide into disrepute through neglect and lack of attention to standards of performance for both faculty and students.

To be quite honest, I don't have a favorite proposal for the mission question. It seems to me that the definition of mission is the single most important issue facing community colleges. Bringing people together to consider the alternatives is the best way I can think of to address the problem. You have your work cut out for you.

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