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How Community College Faculty View Institutional Mission: An Analysis of National Survey Data

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Most comprehensive two-year colleges are incredibly complex, with a multitude of courses, programs, certificates, degree and non-degree offerings in everything from basic literacy to automotive repair to college-level calculus. The existence of such diverse programs is a source of both strength and weakness and the focus of much heated debate (Dougherty, 1994; Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Much of the expansion of community college functions over the past two decades has been in the areas of basic and adult education and community-service activities built around non-credit courses—generating additional arguments over the role of community colleges.

Open access to all has long been a cherished principle underlying the community college philosophy. Further, since community colleges are typically funded on the basis of student enrollments, catering to new groups of students is a matter of fiscal survival. Since this means that these institutions serve a highly diverse group of students—many of whom enter without a clear notion of what they want—a multiple set of offerings provides more “shopping” opportunities for students (Grubb, 1996). Similarly, as employers demand workers with specialized skills, colleges have offered customized training, sometimes at the employer’s location, designed to meet the needs of the employer. Although the reasons for the development of multiple missions are many and complex, the willingness of community colleges to perform a multitude of types of tasks signals their flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.

An alternative view is that the many tasks undertaken by community colleges lead to a lack of clear purpose. The result, according to this view, is a less-effective institution that does not serve any group

of students as well as it might. Implicit in this argument is the belief that organizations need clear goals to be effective, that multiple missions fracture resources and energy. The ways the various missions have developed have also created separate and isolated groups of faculty and students—perhaps to the detriment of institutional effectiveness.

Despite the continuing debate, there is little systematic evidence on what community college practitioners believe their role is. A generalizable statistical portrait of faculty attitudes would provide the opportunity to understand the views of a large and diverse group of individuals. However, no existing national data are up to this task: the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty, conducted every few years, does not contain any questions pertaining to institutional mission. Thus, the goal of the research on which this Brief is based is to provide quantitative evidence on this topic. A unique national survey of over 1,700 individuals in 92 institutions conducted by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) and RAND in 1995-1996 was used to present for the first time a systematic picture of faculty attitudes toward mission priorities.

The main questions to be answered were:

- What do faculty think the current mission priorities of their institution are?
- What do faculty think the mission priorities of their institution should be?
- What differences are there between types of faculty in their perceptions of current mission priorities?
- What differences are there between types of faculty in ideal mission priorities?

In answering these questions, we also provide some evidence on the extent to which institutions and faculty are involved in “new” initiatives such as tech-prep, co-op, and school-to-work programs.

Findings

Several things are striking about the results of the survey. Community colleges are truly comprehensive in the sense that, on average, faculty cannot agree on one mission. Faculty are relatively evenly split between workplace preparation (28.1%) and transfer (27.1%) as the two most important current missions of community colleges. Most faculty clearly believe

training in basic skills is the third most important current mission (16.2%), followed by community service as a distant fourth (6.2%). An interesting point about these overall results is the very low rank given to the increasingly growing community-service activities.

How do faculty perceptions of current mission diverge from faculty views of the *ideal* mission? Overall, the ranking is similar to the ranking of current missions; that is, faculty would rank workplace preparation and transfer higher than basic skills and community service. Ideally, in the opinion of faculty, workplace preparation and transfer would receive more emphasis than they currently do, and basic skill training would receive less emphasis than it currently does. Slightly more than 33 percent of all faculty think workplace skills should be the college's primary mission, compared to 28.1 percent who say it is the current primary mission. These results suggest that faculty overall want greater emphasis on the traditional functions of community colleges and believe that too much emphasis is placed on community service and basic skills.

How views of mission differ across types of faculty. One would expect that faculty from different disciplines would have contrasting views on institutional mission. Not surprisingly, vocational faculty (47.5%) are considerably more likely than academic faculty (21.4%) to believe that the first mission of their institution should be workplace preparation. It is also no surprise that 36.8 percent of the academic faculty rate the transfer function as the ideal top priority for their institution, compared to just 13.7 percent of vocational faculty.

Perhaps the most interesting findings are for basic skills and community service. While it is true that career and vocational disciplines are more likely to give top ranking to workforce preparation, and that those teaching academic disciplines stress transfer, *both* groups give community-service functions (which are usually built around noncredit courses) the lowest priority and view basic instruction as a necessary evil. However, many more academic and vocational faculty, but particularly the former, believe basic skills should be given a priority of 1 or 2 in contrast to the number who believe it currently is ranked this high. This may reflect the fact that some regular faculty are likely to teach basic skills classes (in core subjects), and that they are concerned about the academic skills of students taking academic classes.

Similarly, academic and vocational faculty are largely in agreement over the low priority that should be accorded to community-service activities—the faculty do not view their colleges as community development agencies. The rift between schooling and service has been accentuated in recent years by the creation of what some have called “shadow

colleges”—corporate service centers, JTPA units, or one-stop welfare-to-work offices that now carry out some community-service tasks (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Jacobs & Teahan, 1997). At a minimum, the results suggest the respondents' collective skepticism toward the community-service function, and this suggests a potential resistance to a widening of the role of community colleges in this area. Indeed, occupational and academic faculty may find themselves on one side of a bifurcated institution.

Faculty satisfaction with institutional mission or philosophy. Overall, faculty are satisfied with their college's mission, though only about ten percent are very satisfied. There are relatively few differences between vocational and academic faculty in terms of satisfaction with mission, with the exception that six percent of academic faculty rate themselves very dissatisfied, compared to only about four percent of vocational faculty. Both academic and vocational faculty are more likely to be satisfied with the institutional mission than developmental and other faculty. While full-time faculty are more likely than part-time faculty to be very satisfied with the institution's mission, part-time status does not appear to have any statistically significant independent effect on overall satisfaction with mission, controlling for other factors.

Faculty knowledge of and participation in new or expanded activities. The survey asked faculty to indicate if their college had contract training, tech prep, school-to-work, or co-op—initiatives that are on the cutting edge of community college activities and their developing missions. They were also asked if they were personally involved in these activities. Overall, based at least on faculty awareness of the activities, tech prep and contract training are the most common of these new initiatives. In our sample, 77 percent of all respondents believe that their institution has contract training, 85 percent believe it has tech prep, 62 percent believe it has a state or federal school-to-work program, and 66 percent believe it has a co-op program.

However, the considerable variation in the respondents' answers is revealing. For example, if one decides that only half of a college's faculty have to agree that the college has contract training for us to classify the school as having the activity, more than 90 percent of the institutions in our sample have it. But if one decides that 90 percent of the faculty have to agree for the school to be so classified, then only 28 percent of the schools in our sample would be classified as having contract training. If only half of a college's faculty have to agree that their school has tech prep for us to classify the school as having it, 98 percent of the schools have it. But if 90 percent of the faculty have to agree for the school to be so classified, only 45 percent have tech prep. Similarly

with school-to-work initiatives: If only half the faculty have to agree that their school has school-to-work programs or activities, 75 percent of the colleges have it. But if 90 percent have to agree, only 11 percent have school-to-work activities.

The level of faculty involvement in these newer initiatives is low, although, as expected, vocational faculty have a statistically significant higher level of involvement than academic faculty. Defining “involvement” as moderate or a great deal, only six percent of all faculty in our sample are involved in contract training, eight percent in tech prep, seven percent in co-op, and only three percent are involved in school-to-work programs. If we limit attention to those institutions in which more than 90 percent of the faculty from that school agree that the activity exists, the participation rates rise somewhat, although the numbers are still strikingly small—only in the case of tech prep and co-op are more than ten percent of the faculty involved.

Finally, we examine the differences in perceptions of mission between faculty who are involved in these new initiatives and those who are not (where, again, “involvement” is defined as moderately or greatly involved). Surprisingly, differences are small and statistically insignificant between those involved and those who are not. The biggest difference is among faculty involved in contract training and school-to-work activities: Faculty who are involved in these two activities are less likely than other faculty to believe that the transfer mission is a priority, and they rate both workplace and basic skills as more important than transfer. This points to another possible flashpoint within community colleges, between traditional college faculty and those active in continuing education and community service.

Concluding Thoughts

The debate over the appropriate mission of community colleges continues. Can a single institution effectively and successfully combine vocational and occupational training with college-level academic courses, basic literacy, and community education? Institutions serving just one of these purposes might be more focused and therefore better able to serve students and employers. Tackling multiple missions possibly overloads administrators and faculty, results in a lack of focus, and spreads resources thin. On the other hand, the fact that community colleges have evolved to perform many of these functions simultaneously suggests a responsiveness to community needs (Vaughan, 1988), with emphases on different functions varying quite appropriately according to the needs of each local community.

In principle, one could conduct a study of the

relationship between community college mission and institutional effectiveness, assuming outcome measures were available and reliable. One approach would be to examine variation in systems across the country—some states, for example, include associate’s degree programs at four-year institutions and maintain separate technical schools, while most use a comprehensive community college model. Is there a difference in effectiveness if institutions are organized one way or another? Alternatively, one could examine all comprehensive community colleges and determine if measures of effectiveness are related to the degree to which they pursue multiple missions or the degree to which institutional priorities are clear. Are the most effective schools those focused on only one mission? Can we pinpoint strategies that enable a college to be successful across multiple missions, and if so, what are the enabling conditions? No such study has been done and, given the current state of outcomes indicators, is unlikely to be possible in any systematic fashion in the near future. Yet over the next decade, the debate over the appropriate mission of the community college is likely to continue and sharpen.

The survey evidence presented here, based on the responses of a large number of faculty, suggests a number of possible problems for community colleges as they continue to expand community-service and noncredit activities. Both academic and vocational faculty rate community service as the fourth most important activity, and they consider basic skill preparation a necessary evil. There are also divisions with respect to the appropriate academic and occupational emphasis. This picture is consistent with the view of community college faculty as “independent islands” operating with relatively little communication among themselves, caused to a large extent by the fact that they teach in different programs that are funded in different ways (Grubb & Kraskouskas, 1992; Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Dougherty, 1994). In particular:

- faculty downplay basic skills and continuing education activities, suggesting that they see growth in this area as a diversion from the mainly collegiate functions that have traditionally been the focus of college activities;
- a significant minority of faculty feel more emphasis should be given to basic skills, perhaps reflecting a frustration with the inadequate skill levels of students who enroll in community colleges;
- faculty are evenly split between transfer and workplace training on both the current mission of their institution and what the mission should be;
- there is sizable disagreement among faculty within an institution as to both what the current mission is and what the mission should be;

- only one in ten faculty are very satisfied with the current mission of their institution, and instructors in basic skills, instructors in continuing education, and part-timers are particularly dissatisfied;
- participation in new initiatives is low, but is generally unrelated to views on mission, with the important exception that instructors active in contract training and school-to-work view basic skills as more important than the transfer function.

Although the national survey data used in this paper allow us to paint perhaps the first systematic picture of faculty views on institutional mission, it has obvious limitations. The NCRVE/RAND survey was not designed explicitly to examine the issue, and therefore the data available are limited to three somewhat restrictive items. Ideally, one would administer a more detailed survey, backed up by institutional case studies. What is needed is an attempt to take the next step and assess the consequences of faculty disagreements over mission and of a lack of clarity at the institutional level as to whether a single as opposed to multiple missions has beneficial or deleterious effects on outcomes for students and employers.

Having made this qualification, the results presented in this study are cause for concern over the continuing expansion of community college noncredit activities, particularly of the community-service variety, but also in basic and remedial education. It appears that many faculty are not supportive of this move. The marginalization of these activities in relation to the traditional academic and vocational missions, with a different faculty that is often housed in separate centers, is problematic and may increasingly lead to disputes over the allocation of scarce resources. There is a sense from the data presented here that the development of ever more new activities has resulted in fragmentation of purpose and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Several developments suggest that the debate over mission will continue to be important to the major clients of community colleges—students, employers, and states. First, changes in the economy that entail a greater need for retraining and short-term skill updating for adults imply a continuation of the trend towards these kinds of activities and away from more formally structured degree programs. This change has been reflected in recent federal and state policy initiatives stressing the need for connections between K-12 schools, community colleges, and the workplace through tech prep, co-op, and other programs (Brewer & Gray, 1997). Moreover, given changing student demographics (potential students at community colleges will be disproportionately poor, minority,

and immigrant), demand for noncredit activities is likely to continue to grow. Colleges may need to figure out ways to integrate regular full-time faculty into these activities and programs. ❁

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