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The Organizational Efficiency of Multiple Missions for Community Colleges

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Community colleges are complex institutions serving a multitude of constituencies with dozens of programs and activities. Comprehensiveness has flourished since the 1970s, as the colleges steadily adopted more missions, and many community college advocates argue that the constant expansion of activities is a natural outcome of the community-based function of the colleges. But during the past two decades, academics and researchers have almost universally condemned the comprehensive model. Even some community college insiders have suggested that these institutions cannot accomplish their goals by trying to be all things to all people.

Despite this backdrop of criticism, the accretion of activities continues unabated. The list of community college missions now goes well beyond the core degree-granting programs. Activities now include developmental education, adult basic education, English as a second language, education and training for welfare recipients and others facing barriers to employment, customized training for specific companies, preparation of students for industry certification exams, noncredit instruction in a bewildering plethora of areas (including purely avocational interests), small business development, and even economic forecasting.

This Brief is based on case studies conducted by researchers at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) between August 1998 and November 1999, at eight community colleges in five states: two colleges in each, California, Texas, and Florida, one in Massachusetts, and one in New York.

We intentionally sought more than one community college in Florida, Texas, and California because these states alone enroll over one-third of all community college students in the country. We used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and college catalogues to find community colleges that were comprehensive.

The primary source of data for this study was interviews with administrators, faculty, and some students at each institution. In total, 271 individuals participated in the study, including 162 administrators (60%), 85 faculty (31%), and 24 students (9%).

Criticisms of the Multiple Missions Strategy

Advocates of the primacy of the transfer function have been among the most vocal opponents of the comprehensive approach. They argue that as community colleges evolved to meet a broader range of needs, the earlier emphasis on liberal education and transfer took a back seat to occupational education. Brint and Karabel (1989) think that this focus has turned community colleges into vocational schools for low and middle class occupations, thus limiting students' opportunities for advancement.

Other critics, however, object to the comprehensive model because it detracts from what they believe should be the main role and distinctive niche of community colleges—vocational education (Blocker, Plummer, & Richardson, 1965; Grubb, 1996; Leitzel & Clowes, 1991). Clowes and Levine (1989) argue that career education is the only viable core function for most community colleges.

Another argument against comprehensiveness is that community colleges simply cannot do everything well and therefore must choose a more limited set of objectives. Predicting growing fiscal pressures, Breneman and Nelson (1980) stated that the "most fundamental choice facing community colleges is whether to emphasize ... adult and continuing education and community services, or to emphasize transfer programs ... It may no longer be possible to have it both ways" (p. 114).

The Missions of Community Colleges

Our study focused on three categories of community college missions: core, vertical, and horizontal activities. The core is comprised of degree-granting programs that lead to an academic associate degree, transfer to a four-year college or university, or a terminal occupational degree or certificate. We consider remediation to be part of this core function since developmental education, in most colleges, is designed explicitly to prepare students to enter those degree-granting programs.

Outside of the core, community colleges expand vertically and horizontally. Vertical expansion, which involves reaching up and down into the traditional educational system, focuses on the traditional college-age student. Horizontal expansion, which involves reaching out to the community through a diversification of educational and other types of community-oriented services, expands a college's market niche and revenue streams. The horizontal mission includes not only activities in noncredit contract training and continuing education, but also the many grant and privately funded programs and centers run by the colleges, such as

small-business development centers, off-campus GED and ESL classes, and summer camps for children. Both expansion strategies increase the extent to which colleges are entrenched in their local and regional environments, strengthening ties to a broader cross-section of stakeholders.

Vertical Expansion

All of the colleges in our study had numerous programs to strengthen their relationships and connections with high schools and four-year colleges. Much of the vertical expansion occurs in programs enrolling high school students, including dual or concurrent enrollment programs and Tech-Prep. While Tech-Prep is aimed at streamlining technical education, dual enrollment is conceptualized much more broadly and encompasses a variety of programs enabling high school students to simultaneously enroll in high school and college.

Dual enrollment programs are growing rapidly; many colleges have enrolled hundreds of high school students, and, in some cases those enrollments have increased dramatically in just a few years. Staff at two of the colleges in our sample stated that dual enrollment students comprised over 10 percent of the credit student population. The program at one of our Florida sites partnered with 28 high schools and enrolled over 3,000 students. Dual enrollment attracts students who would otherwise go directly to a four-year college. Thus, these programs give community colleges the opportunity to increase their enrollments (FTE)—which forms the basis for state funding formulas—while at the same time marketing themselves early to high school students and building relationships with local schools and parents, yielding valuable political benefits.

Articulation with four-year colleges to facilitate transfer is the most common and the most logically considered part of the core activities of the college. But community colleges have also developed applied baccalaureate programs, which go considerably beyond traditional transfer and articulation policies. The applied baccalaureate is controversial—some presidents fear it could weaken the commitment to open access—but the movement is gaining momentum. The community college applied baccalaureate has been approved by the Florida legislature for development where no four-year alternatives exist. Several Canadian community colleges offer applied baccalaureate degrees, and advocates have formed the Community College Baccalaureate Association.

Honors programs were one of the most consistent upward expansion efforts of the colleges in our study; we found them at six of the eight colleges and under development at the remaining two. Averaging around 30 students on each campus, the honors programs were but a tiny portion of the enrollments in degree programs at the colleges. Nevertheless, they strengthen the collegiate image of the institution both internally and externally. Honors, dual-credit programs, and applied baccalaureate degrees are all designed to attract the growing numbers of students whose goal is a bachelor's degree and who tend to enroll directly in four-year schools.

Horizontal Expansion

Horizontal expansion—the development of programs outside of the core degree-granting areas—is much more significant than vertical expansion in terms of both numbers of students and revenues. Almost every community college we studied is aggressively developing its noncredit, continuing education, and contract training programs. Noncredit enrollments at some colleges often surpass credit enrollments. According to the National Household Education Survey (NHES), in 1995, over 5.4 million students were enrolled in job-related and personal development noncredit courses in two-year community colleges and public two-year vocational schools. During that year, about 7.2 million students were enrolled in for-credit courses in those institutions.

Core degree-granting programs are funded by state and local appropriations and by student tuition. Programs outside the core are funded by student tuition and fees, but also by grants and contracts both from the public and private sectors. Because the college has more discretion over revenues from noncredit activities than it does over regular state and local appropriations, the importance of these activities exceeds their contribution to college revenues. Discretionary funding can be used for capital investment or for entrepreneurial ventures. Further, contract training is often a viable source of equipment and facilities for community colleges. In addition, noncredit programs provide new populations of students. Whether the target population is welfare mothers or incumbent workers, these are potential recruiting opportunities for the credit programs. Another advantage of noncredit programs is that students can enroll even if they fail, or would fail, assessment tests.

With regard to vocational programs in particular, horizontal expansion may be more attractive to community colleges than expansion within the core programs because it maximizes curricular flexibility. College faculty and administrators cited red tape, time loss, and expense as reasons to avoid starting new degree programs. Certificate and continuing education programs require less scrutiny at the state level, and noncredit programs generally do not require state approval at all.

Community college presidents believe that horizontal programs bring important political benefits to the college. Contract training—specialized noncredit training for particular businesses—strengthens the college's support from important local- and state-level constituencies. When asked why the college put so much effort into noncredit workforce development programs even though they represented just over five percent of the school's budget, one vice president explained that these programs were the “public face” of the college in the community.

Causes of Mission Expansion

An understanding of the fiscal and political environment in which community colleges operate is the key to making sense of their expansion efforts. The majority of college revenue depends on enrollments, both from direct tuition payments and from state and

local reimbursements linked to enrollments. But the process that links enrollments and final revenue is highly political. Tuition levels and enrollment-based reimbursements are set, or at least approved, by state and local legislators. A key advantage of contracts with businesses, direct grants from federal or state governments or from private sources, and some noncredit fees is that the revenues do not interact with state or local legislatures.

Competition from other institutions is another cause of mission expansion. Many public four-year colleges have expanded their continuing education offerings, sometimes even offering full degrees, in an attempt to reach the adult and part-time students traditionally served by community colleges. For-profit companies offer short-term training, preparation for technical certifications, and full degrees at several levels.

Given the limited resources available to colleges, the resulting constant search for revenue, and the higher education regulatory environment, it is not surprising that almost all community colleges are eager to take on more activities and reluctant to shed old functions. Indeed, many community college experts and administrators have argued that a wide variety of program offerings under one roof is exactly what community college students need. These students often have ambiguous or unrealistic educational goals, and if properly guided, can take advantage of the varied offerings as their interests change and as they converge on goals that better match their interests and skills. Therefore, the argument goes, community colleges should further develop their comprehensive missions so that students have whatever support they need to move into gainful employment, regardless of whether that support involves general education, skills training, or student support services (Gleazer, 1980; Baker, 1999; Vaughan, 1985).

Additionally, new programs are believed to generate surpluses, and if the institution has excess capacity, the programs can be mounted at a low marginal cost. Even small surpluses can provide presidents with discretionary funds when most of the revenues from the core credit programs are tied up in faculty salaries and other fixed costs. As state funding becomes more uncertain, these alternative sources of revenue appear more attractive. Exploiting under- or un-served markets seems to be easier than increasing market share in mature markets.

Finally, community college administrators have much more flexibility when they operate outside the state-subsidized core activities. Thus, horizontal expansion can be used to explore new markets, try out new courses, and reach out to students for whom the traditional academic schedule is not convenient.

Given the political nature of college financing, it is misleading to focus on the direct costs and revenues associated with specific programs. An activity—even one that loses money—can have political benefits that generate revenue and resources, and result in a stronger financial position for the college as a whole. A college must not only provide a valuable service to its “customers”—current and potential students—but must also appeal to politicians, taxpayers, and influential constituencies such as business leaders and community

groups. By shedding programs, community colleges risk losing visible enrollments and political support in favor of an abstract goal of focused organizational efficiency, which, though logical, lacks definitive empirical measurement and evidence.

Mission Diversification and Integration

We found little knowledge sharing or integration across programs or missions; each tends to have its own faculty, facilities, and curricula. Even *within* the core, integration is difficult. While administrators for vocational, academic, and developmental education are often one and the same or closely connected, at the level of faculty and students, sharp distinctions are often present. Trade and technical programs were the least likely to be integrated with other core functions. But programs in professional areas, such as business administration and nursing, tended to be more integrated, particularly when their curricula called for a heavy emphasis on general education.

While integration between core missions is difficult and rare, integration between core and horizontal missions is almost unprecedented. Sharp divisions separate these missions in terms of faculty, administration, students, and facilities. Major differences between educational goals and modes of delivery make integration very difficult. Although the presidents of five of the eight colleges in our study had tried to integrate missions, most of their efforts were aimed at the administrative level, and their influence on the practices of faculty and students was difficult to trace. Rather than the efficient use of resources, programs tend to be duplicated. The impacts of program duplication are significant, as they set the stage for internal competition for students and resources.

The separation between horizontal and core college missions permeates all aspects of college governance. In California, New York, and Massachusetts, where unions were the strongest in this study, the colleges tended to do less in the way of contract and continuing education, or they maintained large physical and structural distances between college functions. In Florida and Texas, where national unions were not involved at the colleges we studied, faculty contract provisions had less influence on the coordination of missions. Nonetheless, faculty culture and traditional norms thwarted the integration of credit and noncredit activities.

Another obstacle to mission or program integration is that the interests and demands of the various constituencies may conflict. Eighteen-year-old students with baccalaureate aspirations might want a collegiate environment with semesters, liberal arts classes, and extra-curricular activities. Business leaders and older workers might want more focused technical or occupational preparation that is not wedded to semester schedules or collegiate educational norms. For these groups, extra-curricular activities and other trappings of college life are irrelevant. Community groups might want the colleges to concentrate on serving populations with serious educational, economic, and social problems, but these efforts probably will not contribute to, and may detract from, the focused technical preparation that

business wants, or the collegiate atmosphere sought by baccalaureate aspirants. Given these conflicting interests, it is not surprising that the colleges in effect segregate the services that they provide for their disparate student groups. There may be some benefits to more coordination, but presidents perceive that those benefits are outweighed by the difficulties of trying to serve many different objectives within a unified or integrated program.

Conclusion

Most community colleges actively and enthusiastically engage in both vertical and horizontal expansion—despite calls for sharper institutional focus. Our analysis suggests that such calls are likely to go unheeded. Given the limited resources available to community colleges, administrators must constantly search for revenue. Activities outside the core functions generate new enrollments and revenue—revenue over which administrators have considerable discretion. Moreover, such activities address the interests of influential constituencies, a crucial factor considering the political nature of the community college funding system. Shedding programs in search of greater focus risks alienating constituencies and reducing the overall resources available to the institution. Abandoning one constituency, for example the business community, may threaten the funding base of services for other groups, for example the traditional eighteen-year-old college students.

Furthermore, the potential benefits in increased efficiency of a more focused strategy have not been measured, and indeed probably cannot be measured definitively given current community college information systems. A more focused strategy, therefore, implies giving up students, revenues, and political support in favor of a plausible but unmeasured benefit in efficiency. It is hardly surprising that comprehensiveness continues unchecked.

It would seem to make sense for administrators and faculty to search for complementarities and synergies among missions and to try to find ways to integrate the varied activities, yet little integration occurs. Many functions that could be brought together, such as credit and noncredit instruction in the same fields, continue to be carried out independently. Our analysis suggests that strong forces discourage integration. If different activities serve different types of students, programs with very different characteristics may better serve those diverse student interests.

Clearly, before any significant policy changes designed to create more focused institutions can be seriously considered, we need better measures of the costs and benefits of focused versus comprehensive strategies. Some colleges have systems for tracking costs and revenues generated by particular programs, but these are the exceptions. In many cases, administrators are reluctant to make this type of information public, since such public knowledge can create political controversies and reduce operational flexibility. Unless researchers and educators develop better measures of the costs and tradeoffs involved with combining or separating the varied college activities, colleges will continue to evolve into even more complex institutions that house an expanding number of more or less independent activities.

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