

Integrating Disadvantaged Students Academically and Socially into the Community College

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Since their inception, community colleges have changed the higher education landscape by educating millions of Americans. Community colleges are unique in their service to place as well as to person (Bogue, 1950; Zook, 1946). In 1947, the Truman Commission (President's Commission on Higher Education) formally defined the comprehensive mission of the community college as that of meeting local educational needs, stating, "Its dominant feature is its intimate relations to the life of the community it serves" (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, p. 5).

Throughout their history, community colleges have been expected to deliver on a number of complex and often competing missions (Bragg, 2001). The early community college was generally small and offered traditional programs to traditional students—young, college-bound white males. By the 1960s, vocational or career education surpassed the transfer function as the primary purpose of community colleges, amplifying the tension for these local institutions to balance multiple roles and intensifying their relationships with businesses (Eaton, 1994). In addition, the community college's open access mission attracted a wide range of students from diverse backgrounds and academic preparation.

The Open Door, Multiple Missions, and Disadvantaged Students

As time progressed, community colleges became increasingly more diverse in the students they served and in their mission functions. Always considered an institution for the people, community colleges responded to the changing demographics by offering a myriad of educational programs and services with a broad and sometimes challenging and contradictory set of intended outcomes. Clearly, in the first 100 years of their existence, American Community Colleges have approached the obligations imposed upon them by the principle of open access, but only in a quantitative sense.

There exists today an organizational and cultural shift that is taking place in community colleges. For the first time in the history of the American community college movement, community college educators have to do

what no previous generation of their peers had ever done before: educate a racially and culturally diverse student population of learners; educate students who are economically and academically disadvantaged; provide high quality, affordable and flexible education with declining fiscal resources; and respond to increasingly higher levels of accountability and public scrutiny.

Community colleges across the country are being challenged to resolve educational environments pregnant with achievement disparities and cultural differences between learners, and between learners and instructors. The documented gap in educational attainment between students from high socioeconomic levels and students who are poor, between White students and their African American and Hispanic peers requires that America's community colleges "Close the Gap" (McClenney, 2004). With increased demographic shifts and the concomitant demands for greater flexibility and accountability, community colleges struggle to hold on to their core values and missions while simultaneously finding ways to meet the needs of students and the communities served.

Given the growth in the enrollment of diverse and disadvantaged student populations and the increasingly wide achievement gaps between these students and their counterparts, community colleges have reconsidered the existing architecture of teaching and learning at their institutions and sought new paradigms for institutional transformation and accelerating student success for all learners.

The Learning College: From Teaching to Learning

The emergence of the Learning Paradigm and the Learning College in the mid-1990's provided a timely vehicle and opportunity for community colleges to improve and expand learning options for all constituent groups. Barr and Tagg's (1995) classic work, *From Teaching to Learning- A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*, served as a significant catalyst for launching the Learning College movement in the community college. They argued that a college exists to produce learning (the learning paradigm) rather than teaching (the instruction paradigm). O'Banion (1997) defined the Learning College concept with theoretical support from the basic tenets of the Learning Paradigm, especially the need for institutions to systematically define, assess and document outcomes for student learning. The Learning College challenged community colleges to transform their organizational cultures to become learning-centered institutions rather than teaching - centered institutions. O'Banion argued that "the Learning College places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners any way, any place, any time" (p. 3). He posited six key principles: 1). The

learning college creates substantive change in individual learners; 2). The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, assuming primary responsibility for their own choices; 3). The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible; 4) The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities; 5) The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners; and 6) The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

As Chancellor of The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) from 1998-2005, I embraced the Learning College movement and worked with a team of dedicated professionals to position CCBC as one of 12 Vanguard Learning Colleges in the United States and Canada in a five-year Learning College Project sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College. The purpose of the project was to assist community colleges in becoming more learning-centered by creating a network of 12 Vanguard Colleges strongly committed to the Learning College concept, whose efforts served as a basis for model programs and best practices (<http://www.league.org/league/projects/lcp/vanguard.htm>). We believed that these principles offered a unique and innovative way to expand and increase learning for “at promise” students.

The Learning College movement at CCBC was formalized in two iterations of our award-winning strategic plan, Learning**FIRST**. My ongoing research interests in multi-cultural and multi-cognitive learning strategies (see Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005) added to the theoretical focus of the effort with a commitment to close the achievement gap between White students and African American students in the next decade. For example, in the article, *Transforming Classroom Practice for African American Learners: Implications for the Learning Paradigm* (McPhail and McPhail, 1999), we argued that all learners deserve high quality instruction appropriately linked to their experiences and backgrounds. We demonstrated how the theory of culturally mediated instruction, as proposed by Hollins (1996), can extend the Learning Paradigm for students of color by emphasizing the relationship among culturally mediated cognition, culturally valued curriculum content, and culturally appropriate social discourse.

At CCBC we also identified the need to improve the outcomes of our developmental education programs, particularly for students of color. Under the umbrella of our strategic plan, LearningFirst, a five-part strategy was

implemented beginning with a comprehensive professional development program enabling faculty and staff to expand their understanding of the effects of race and culture on teaching and learning, and to explore methods to facilitate learning in a more culturally responsive environment. Using the concept of mastery learning, the faculty and staff created a structured learning environment which addressed academic preparation through a variety of instructional delivery methods appropriate to diverse learning styles, including contextualized small group instruction and learning communities. Personalized academic and student support services were incorporated into student learning plans based on a comprehensive assessment of motivation and attitude along with basic skills, study skills, and metacognition. All developmental reading students enrolled in a student success orientation course, Student Success Centers provided tutoring and computer-aided instruction, and a peer mentoring program helped students navigate the academic community. To this end, we created an atmosphere in which pedagogy and the role of culture in learning were broadly discussed within safe zones for students, faculty and staff, and explored initiatives which celebrated diversity and promoted continuous improvement (McKusick and McPhail, 2004).

Getting and Sustaining Results: What Community Colleges Can Do

In practice, integrating disadvantaged students academically and socially into the community colleges requires rethinking the classroom and campus environments – the curriculum, instruction, support services and student services, policies and procedures– to establish a pluralistic framework for learning which begins with access. Ideally, the integration process will be embedded in the culture of the college, where programs and services provide more flexible, customizable content with learning activities that are accessible and applicable to students with a variety of backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities. Students will develop academic skills and problem-solving skills along with the attitudes and practices associated with success in college and a strong sense of self-efficacy. In community colleges, the learning environment should add value to the students’ experiences and provide opportunities for them to expand their social skills in order to successfully navigate through the learning environment.

Integrating disadvantaged students academically and socially requires colleges to demonstrate evidence of curriculum changes that reflect a multicultural perspective in content and materials, and instructional pedagogy that stimulates and promotes diverse learning options for all learners. Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking

process of groups and individuals. A college that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates diversity with equity offers lifelong learning benefits for ALL students.

Community colleges that successfully integrate disadvantaged students academically and socially into their campuses provide opportunities for success beyond open access. Community colleges interested in success for all students can influence the achievement of students in several strategic ways:

- Conduct a strategic assessment of programs and services that are already in place at the college.
- Commence the journey toward becoming a more learning-centered college; integrate Learning College principles into strategic planning and budgeting processes, programs, policies and procedures.
- Utilize culturally responsive approaches to teaching that recognize the indigenous cognitive and affective strengths students bring with them to the learning environment and build upon those strengths.
- Change policies and procedures that send uninviting messages to students.
- Empower students to view themselves as academically able and engaged in their own learning process.
- Establish high achievement expectations and encourage academic and social efficacy.
- Work with K-12 systems and community organizations to promote higher education as a priority.
- Incorporate learning about diversity with equity into faculty and staff development programs.
- Create learning environments that provide usable, expedient, and constructive corrective feedback that will encourage continuous improvement.

Admittedly, there is considerable literature on each of these approaches; however, there is no clear indicator for how these strategies will play out in the midst of what may be the most tumultuous time in the life of our nation and our community colleges. Integrating disadvantaged students academically and socially into the community colleges demands a new advocacy from those of us who believe in the mission of the community college as an instrument for social change and individual transformation.

A national strategy that shows promise for this type of systemic change is the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative (AtD). AtD is a multi-year national effort to help more community college students succeed (<http://www.achievingthedream.org/default.tp>). The initiative is

particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. AtD works on multiple fronts, including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement and public policy. It emphasizes the use of data to drive change. The major focus of the initiative is the early identification of at-risk students and the provision of research-based interventions to help them stay in school and graduate. Colleges involved in the AtD work develop a set of indicators that they use to more effectively track student performance and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. With over eighty institutions participating in the AtD initiative, the colleges can also learn from the experiences of others in the network. Preliminary evaluation indicates that the AtD framework is proving to be more than a mechanism for closing the performance gap between students of color and their counterparts. Rather, AtD is demonstrating efficacy in improving instruction, delivery of services and organizational culture over various domains.

Conclusion

Community colleges are engaged in a variety of efforts to facilitate the integration of disadvantaged students academically and socially into their learning environments. Successful efforts, whether institution-wide or in the individual classroom, place a strong emphasis on consciously building upon the diverse needs of the student population. Studies conducted to examine the effectiveness of these efforts indicate a positive contribution to retaining disadvantaged students in the learning environment. However, the struggle to integrate disadvantaged students into community colleges not only continues, but seems to be intensifying on many fronts. Therefore, it behooves educators to study these issues in depth, to consider the “promising practices” and “best practices” available in the field, and to act proactively. The goal must be a shared vision around a student success agenda that achieves learning outcomes for students of color, especially African American and Hispanics, at rates comparable to their enrollment projections at our institutions.

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