

Editor's Choice: The Significant Community College

Randall J. VanWagoner

Linda S. Bowman

Laurence D. Spraggs

American community colleges face a future marked by contrasts. Demand for services is increasing. Support from communities is strong. Business and industry leaders are increasingly turning to community colleges as their workforce providers. Large foundations are increasing their support. Projections for further growth challenge the projections for future resources. But demands for accountability continue to accelerate. And while as community college professionals we pride ourselves on being more responsive and more nimble than our four-year brethren and while we brag about our role as the gateway to opportunity for the underserved and underrepresented, we have to face the fact that our job is more challenging than ever. Graduation and retention rates are largely unimproved. The aging baby boomers and dynamic demographics of our communities are increasing the pressure on our models for workforce development. Our K-12 partners are struggling to address the new challenges of less prepared students and more transient families. In this complex environment, Barr and Tagg's (1995) *Change* article provided a direction during the past decade as community colleges engaged in the learning paradigm, a shift from faculty-to learner-centeredness. Community colleges are now more respected, better understood, and better positioned than at any other time in their history. But our challenges have risen with our status, and we must now impose a new paradigm upon ourselves.

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In her book, *Hesselbein on Leadership* (2000), Frances Hesselbein, former CEO of the Girl Scouts, encourages leaders to move their institutions to a level of *significance*, making an impact on their communities at a more fundamental level. Similarly, community colleges must move beyond traditional measures of learning to increasingly successful outcomes for all students. We must move from being community partners to being community decision-makers. We must move beyond parochial budget management to leveraging all community resources collaboratively. Rather than simply responding to calls for accountability, we must collect and use data that will help improve institutional performance and lead to greater understanding of our role and accomplishments. Partnerships, which have been our hallmark, must move to strategic alliances that not only respond to community needs but actually create the future. We can no longer settle for being wired technologically but must utilize technology to bridge the digital divide for our students and create the 21st century workforce. Our focus and efforts must drive our institutions to a place where the organizational climate and culture propel community colleges toward significance. And we must move beyond the generally positive feelings we enjoy to quantifiable support and allegiance from our many constituencies.

To a Significant Focus on Learning

Across the United States, college participation is increasing, with notable gains in the community college sector. Community colleges are a choice for students who want a personalized college experience—challenging but nurturing—regardless of their long-term academic goals. Community colleges are also a choice for students with degrees who are seeking more marketable skills. Increasingly, younger, more traditional-age students are choosing community colleges, or “reverse-transferring,” following a failed or disappointing university experience. Students turn to community colleges for basic skills brush-up or new skills acquisition. Across the broad spectrum of the community college mission, students are arriving on our campuses in greater numbers—a measure of our increasing success.

But how do we measure significance? The greater numbers arriving on our campuses also have greater needs. The students who start behind too often stay behind. In the significant community college, the number of students passing through the “in” door is not the important success measure—the number persisting to the graduation-transfer-employment door is of the greatest importance.



Our graduation rates are not acceptable, much as we try to explain them away by talking about the complexities of community college student intent. Community colleges serve as the gateway to higher education for minorities, students of color, and first-generation college students. We have been successful in attracting them into our institutions. Nevertheless, the graduation rates for these students lag behind those of the dominant culture, whose rates are also inadequate. Significant community colleges must attract and retain students. A significant community college is a college of choice for the underrepresented and underprepared as well as for a cross-section of talented, focused, prepared, and resourced people. Across this broad spectrum, the significant community college produces results. Community colleges must achieve significant results in student success. We know that choosing the right “entry portal” into higher education is a critical decision for students. We must demonstrate that we are the right decision for a broad group of students with differing needs.

To a Significant Role in the Community

Survey after survey finds that the public likes community colleges and sees their work as important but that it also struggles to articulate what community colleges do. Community colleges suffer from support that is a mile wide and an inch deep—a lack of commitment and passion required for real political clout. Community colleges are complex institutions with complex missions and therefore have struggled with developing a clear message to the public. In a recent study by Douglas Gould and Company (2004), commissioned by the Ford Foundation, the researchers tested messages and levels of understanding of and commitment to community colleges by the public. The results confirm what we already knew: our efforts to be everything to everybody have confused the public, at the same time that our breadth is seen as the key to opportunity.

In the most successful community colleges, business and industry training units work with local chambers of commerce and economic development groups to provide customized courses and training. But it is a significant community college to which the leadership of a community turns to ensure economic and workforce development. The significant community college is at the table when a community woos a new employer to relocate, when a business seeks assistance to find a prepared workforce, and when a city, county, or region devises its comprehensive growth and development plan.

Importantly, significant community colleges are at the table with the rest of higher education, communities, policymakers, and other leaders, designing and resourcing the statewide, regional, and national vision for higher education and its role in the economy. They are leaders themselves in articulating our educational, workforce, and economic values and devising the pathways by which these are achieved. More than just a partner or training provider, significant community colleges are economic drivers and essential community resources.

From Balanced Budgets to Leveraged Resources

As community college leaders, we pride ourselves on our ability to do more with less. We have responded valiantly to the declines in resources allocated to higher education in the past few years. Our faculty and staff have assumed additional responsibilities, increased their loads, and focused on how to cut costs. We pride ourselves on the fact that community colleges generally have smaller staffs and more streamlined bureaucracies than other higher education sectors. Community colleges are generally acknowledged as cost-reasonable educational alternatives for students and taxpayers.

But do community colleges generally leverage resources effectively? Community colleges are nonprofit entities and, therefore, balancing the budget is too often used as the definition of fiscal success. During healthy economic periods, resources like personnel and facilities are not utilized in the same way as in weak economic times. Experiencing substantial growth in the 1990s, many institutions used increases in revenue to add programs, personnel and, in some cases, facilities. Consequently, the past few years of substantial reductions in state aid have forced many colleges to examine the use of these resources in ways few administrators have ever experienced. What if these resources were examined through the same lens in good times as well as bad? To move beyond success, community college leaders will have to shift to determining effective resource allocation through research. What resources bring what outcomes? How can we rise above reactive budgeting and spending?

To go beyond success, community college budgets obviously must be balanced. But significance calls for going beyond allocating resources to leveraging them. When decision making is guided by the notion of balancing the budget in good economic periods, there is little or no external pressure to make difficult resource decisions. With state budget cuts, the

external trigger is suddenly requisite in order to make our facilities more efficient and to cut programs and staff, and often various budget components are reduced such as professional development or travel. Community colleges need data that demonstrate what it costs to effect success for students who are well-prepared versus those who are underprepared. We need to demonstrate what the public can and should expect for the investment they make.

The focus shifts to strategy, not serendipity, as student demand is balanced with efficient resource allocation. Colleges move to hybrid delivery of courses not because teaching resources are diminishing but as the result of intentional strategy to assure student access and success. The significant community college makes new modalities the learning signature of a community college education and serves as a broker of programs and services in the community. The significant community college, for example, does not create yet another welfare-to-work training program but enhances and complements existing programs in the community. Resources are not simply allocated but are collaboratively leveraged to create the maximum positive effect in the community.

Policymakers could maximize public resource impact by articulating fiscally prudent pathways to greater college participation. And community colleges must prove that the community college route leads to the greatest success for students.

From Accountability to Understanding

Over the past two decades, external accountability programs have increasingly defined community college success for the public. “Everybody likes accountability. Most people would like more accountability. Yet nobody’s quite sure what the word means, and it certainly means very different things to different people at different times” (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2002, p. 1). This quote by David Longanecker, Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) executive director, speaks to the complexities inherent in higher education accountability. Although many institutions share a few elements common to their role and mission, each institution views itself as unique and misunderstood by external publics. These perceptions exist as state-level accountability programs are enjoying all-time popularity among state legislators. According to a report from the National Center for Educational Accountability (Dougherty, 2003), state-level interest in

accountability is strong and growing. From 1997 to 2002, performance funding nearly doubled, from 10 to 19 programs; performance budgeting grew 69%, from 16 to 27 initiatives; and 39 states (78%) have performance reporting programs.

To respond to these external drivers of accountability, institutions must make accountability an inherent and important component of the internal organizational culture. We must hold ourselves accountable first. Moving from success (as defined in the “old” way) to significance (as defined by student achievement) requires community colleges to reinvent their organizations, their measures, and their indicators.

The significant community college must go beyond our current reactive stance and collect information in meaningful ways. Richard Alfred (2000) notes that significant colleges make assessment and accountability strategic weapons to create a competitive advantage. Not only can a strategic approach to information management and assessment assist with internal operational effectiveness, it can help college leaders clearly communicate the contributions and needs of the organization to key stakeholders. Employing more strategic approaches to data collection and application allows a college to understand itself better, to pursue continuous improvement more successfully, and to communicate its accomplishments externally as well. Institutions can exceed the current success standard of compliance and move accountability to more significant and meaningful measures: job entry, individual goal attainment, learning, and effectiveness. Consequently, the unique societal role of community colleges will not only be understood but will also be respected.

From Partnerships to Alliances

Community colleges have gained much attention—and praise—in the past decade for forming partnerships to carry out important educational objectives. Partnerships with workforce development boards, chambers of commerce, and economic development councils are part of this success and have served the community well for decades. This partnership structure has provided the community with services and the colleges with enrollment.

Significant colleges not only embrace the concept of alliances but take partnership to another level. We turn to our friends and to our critics and competitors to move our institutions—and our communities—forward. Alliances go beyond partnerships in that all entities share responsibility,



resources, and vision. The impact on the community is more profound and visible through alliances. A college-community alliance forms around jointly perceived community needs. With an alliance, the partners identify community needs and then create solutions that may efficiently share resources, facilities, or personnel. Partnerships are elevated to alliances when we intertwine resources and leverage creativity. This type of alliance has produced entities like joint-use collaborative libraries and sharing personnel, facilities, and other costs to the benefit of the whole community. Communities rally around projects like parks and recreation spaces, middle colleges, performance venues, and museums. In alliance facilities, the lines blur between students and community participants as they interact and exchange ideas, services, and benefits. Significant community colleges view themselves as part of a series of networks that use alliances to accelerate and magnify their impact on the community. Leveraging the resources and capabilities of multiple organizations, alliances advance community or statewide agendas—agendas that work to the advantage of students and of the greater community. The initial payback to the institution for forming alliances will be, in part, the same as for partnership development: increased enrollment. Alliances create better communities which tap into the strength of their multiple institutions and decrease unnecessarily duplicated resources. Alliances create seamless services. And, ultimately, alliances pay off in political clout and community support for our essential institutions.

From Available Technology to Increasing Learning

Community colleges have been quick to adopt uses of computer technology. We have been early adopters, sprinkling labs throughout our facilities and personal computers throughout our classrooms. This enhancement of instruction fits well with the community colleges' focus on learning. We have encouraged our faculty to leave PowerPoint®, abandon the overhead and slide projectors, and help students acclimate to technology across the curriculum.

But we are at a point where simply having technology available is no longer adequate. We must move quickly to using technology to increase learning in profound ways. Community college faculty have seen numerous creative uses for computer technology in the classroom. Faculty have embraced writing classes held in computer labs, computers in science labs to collect data, and practice opportunities in learning labs to help the

underprepared student. When the Internet became available, community colleges created many of the first virtual campuses with online learning opportunities for students. Parallel to the classroom use of technology, many community colleges accelerated the development of their technology infrastructure at least as quickly as the rest of higher education. And while we have been pioneers, we have not always been acknowledged for our innovations, due in part to the lack of research and data that clearly demonstrate the impact of technology on learning. Community colleges must collect the facts to tell the story of our successes and our needs.

Faculty have rapidly come to expect increasingly advanced technology for their offices and classrooms. The cost of the systems necessary for the support of this advanced technology—in terms of equipment, personnel, training, and opportunities foregone—has become an issue in community colleges. Unfortunately, computer technology is often found on the budget block. Many colleges have an aging computer infrastructure, and issues of access for students have created a digital divide—even among campuses in the same system. The availability of technology on a campus is touted as an indicator of success but, on deeper investigation, the quality of the technology, the networking infrastructure, and even the availability of software are often lacking. Conversely, some campuses have up-to-date equipment lying idle, a mismatch with faculty interest and training. The proliferation of computer labs on a campus must be examined to ensure that technology is a strategy, not a poorly utilized institutional liability.

Significance in the use of technology is evidenced by an institution's demonstrable use of technology to enhance learning. A significant institution has created online courses that meet every objective that is met in a face-to-face class and has documented the improvement in student learning. Technology is not proliferated at a significant institution; it is planned for in a way that includes replacement costs and cost of ownership for the future. New technology is adopted with forethought, testing, and planning. Therefore, a significant institution sets standards that result in efficiency, economy, and equal access for all. Further, graduates from a significant community college understand and utilize technology as an integrated tool that assures their participation as tech-savvy citizens who play a significant role in our emerging technocracy.



From a Traditional to a Transcendent Culture

The culture of an organization directs its structure and decision making. While the culture of community colleges differs from that of the university, it still is a driving force for what we do and how we do it. The community college culture is one that by its nature is student centered, given the emphasis on learning over research. However, in the movement to the learning paradigm in the last decade, many community colleges have been challenged to examine if they really are student centered. Some have been successful. But in other institutions, the cultural jargon has inspired the creation of learning-centered teams and titles, but the fundamental operation of the college has not changed. As we continue to serve our students and their communities, we must move to a point where the learning paradigm is embedded in the culture and where we move beyond lip service to a transcendent culture of student success as the unarguable first priority.

Traditionally, community college faculty come to our institutions with master's degree preparation and a focus on teaching. We have not required an interest in analysis of our own performance as an organization. This situation is changing (Meyer, 2004), and some community college faculty are coming to our institutions not only because they believe in the mission and want to focus on students but also because they can bring their research skills to a setting where research is needed to ensure that student outcomes are being achieved and that institutional promise is being fulfilled. These faculty will assist significant community colleges in changing the organizational culture to embrace reflection and improvement. In addition, they will advance the important work of assuring graduate success in the workplace, in four-year institutions, and in communities.

Instead of result-oriented research regarding the outcomes of our efforts, many colleges currently conduct formal and informal studies to gauge the overall climate on campus. The internal focus of these surveys does not help the college move forward with its mission. Often, these surveys provide results that suggest that things on campus are generally positive. The administration then announces and affirms that the college is a good place to work and has a healthy campus climate. However, these positive perceptions, while creating comfort levels, may also mask the underlying self-interests and self-satisfaction that can go undetected and drag an organization into stagnation. Things being routine and predictable may easily be interpreted as a positive climate.

A significant organization, on the other hand, has a vibrant organizational culture. The focus of a significant community college is more on the underlying culture. It goes beyond positive perceptions to a pervasive passion for mission and accomplishment. Employees striving to go beyond serving students to amazing them symbolize organizational culture in a significant community college. A vibrant culture manifests itself in a demonstrable effect that all employees consider themselves ambassadors of the college. They seek to connect the college and community in their external interactions. Consequently, the members of the college community leverage the reputation of the institution as an integral community asset. Self-interest and self-satisfaction are replaced with self-reflection and significant improvement.

As members of a community college with a transcendent organizational culture, we must turn our academic dialogue on ourselves. We must examine the learning paradigm in a critical fashion. The transcendent community college studies its assumptions, its goals, and its results and imbeds the learning paradigm into the organizational culture in a meaningful and lasting way.

Key Indicators of Success and Significance

The following comparison of key indicators helps to clarify the relationship between what is meant by success and significance. These indicators serve as a conceptual guide to researchers and practitioners seeking to move community colleges toward significance.

Table 1
Comparison of Success and Significance Indicators

Success	Significance
<i>Enrollment</i>	
FTE is increasing	Community colleges are region's college of choice
Community colleges are gateway for minorities	Minority graduation rates are same as those of dominant culture
Satisfying student expectations	Raising student expectations
<i>Community Role</i>	
General support and good feelings	Political clout
Community colleges provide business and industry training	Community colleges as workforce and economic development driver
Community colleges as community partner	Community colleges as essential community resource

Table 1 (continued)
Comparison of Success and Significance Indicators

Success	Significance
<i>Resources</i>	
Budgets are balanced	Resources are leveraged
Resource decisions are based on how much money is available	Resource decisions are focused on advancing the mission and stewardship of community assets in both good and bad times
Resource decisions are driven primarily by external funding constraints	Resource decisions involve substantial mission-driven re-allocations based on research data
<i>Accountability</i>	
Accountability often viewed in defensive posture as we remain "the best kept secret"	Accountability used as strategic weapon to celebrate and promote college role in society
Accountability viewed as necessary compliance	Accountability viewed as useful decision-making tool and as an inherent component of organizational cultures
Accountability data forms are completed	Accountability data address useful and formative questions through strategic framework of critical indicators
<i>Alliances</i>	
Community colleges have program partners	Programs jointly developed with community
Joint-use facilities	Intertwined resources
Stronger enrollment	Stronger communities
<i>Technology</i>	
Technology is available	Technology enhances learning
Technology is purchased and proliferated	Technology is planned and integrated
Technology is used in classrooms	Graduates are leaders in technocracy
<i>Culture</i>	
Community colleges strive to serve students	Community colleges strive to amaze students
Culture of comfort	Culture of excitement
Students, faculty, and staff are satisfied with the college environment	Students, faculty, and staff are ambassadors promoting the college in the community

Toward Significance

Community colleges are poised for the move to significance. Numerous factors create this imperative: increasingly scarce public resources, a growing educational divide, increasing accountability, growing public dissatisfaction with institutions of all kinds, increasing population diversity, and changing employment opportunities.

The new significant community college must attract and retain the most qualified faculty: those who are dedicated to access and success, who understand assessment of student outcomes and accountability, and who embrace their partnership with K-12 and their significant role in K-16 and beyond. The significant community college cannot afford to accept lower graduation rates for minorities or for any groups but instead must figure out new strategies and support systems that break the cycle of students who enter the front door but exit the back—without the skills or credentials or dreams they sought.

This new institution must be a significant partner in charting the future of communities, of regions, of this nation, and of the world. The significant community college and its leaders must be at the policy table, determining how communities will increase the participation of all citizens in the new economy and begin to close the educational, digital, and economic divide. Our institutions will serve as critical partners to four-year colleges and universities, providing well-qualified transfer students from all backgrounds and cultures. Significant community colleges will move beyond responsiveness to engaging in the design of their communities' future.

The significant community college will not struggle alone, competing for scarce resources with other societal institutions but will participate in designing the allocation of resources. This collaboration will result in each student receiving the most appropriate education for his or her needs at any given time. These institutions will use technology not only as a tool for learning, but they will acknowledge and promote the worldwide changes that technology has brought about and will prepare students to assume leadership in that world.

Faculty, staff, and communities of significant community colleges will welcome accountability, imposing their own systems of analysis, change, and responsiveness. They will continually seek to understand how students learn and what promotes and impedes success. And they will find ways to accommodate students from different backgrounds who



are differently-prepared and differently-abled. Faculty and staff will understand their role not only in their own institutions and communities but also in the grand scheme of workforce and economic development.

The move from success to significance will not be easy. Community college leaders will have to think differently, act differently, and respond differently to their environments. Nevertheless, the parts are there. Community colleges have long attracted leaders within their organizations who want to make a difference, who rise above the traditional culture, and who share a vision for the future. There has never been a better time or a greater need for community colleges to assume their significant role in creating the future.

The lingering questions for community colleges are these: Can we overcome good as the enemy of great? Can we fulfill this significant role? We must. Using this simple framework, we have new criteria to aspire to and can begin a new growth curve at the height of success. Community colleges are the right institutions at the right time, if we make the critical move to significance.

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Randall VanWagoner is vice president for educational services at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, NE. rvanwagoner@mccneb.edu

Linda Bowman is president of the Community College of Aurora in Aurora, CO. Linda.Bowman@ccaaurora.edu

Laurence Spraggs is president of Broome Community College in Binghamton, NY. president@sunybroome.edu

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