

# Academe Online

## Putting the Community Back into the College

*Tying community college curricula to the demands of corporate boardrooms will not solve our country's problems.*

By David F. Ayers

Standing high atop the Pyramid of the Sun, I gazed at the Avenue of the Dead far below. It was an astonishing site: a mountainous pyramid, an ancient avenue, and a city of mysterious temples decorated with elaborate renderings of Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and other pre-Columbian deities. Among the grandest early civilizations in the hemisphere, Teotihuacán impresses even the most seasoned traveler. For a small-town teenager, who only days before had boarded an airplane for the first time so he could trace the footsteps of ancient Teotihuacanos, Aztecs, and Spanish conquerors, this was the adventure of a lifetime. That was my first trip to Mexico, with my community college Spanish class, in 1989. It was such a powerful experience that as soon as I transferred to a university, I enrolled in an archeology class and eventually completed a baccalaureate in Spanish. In the years following graduation, I lived and worked in Mexico and did graduate studies in Spanish and education.



[Watch David Ayers talking about community colleges.](#)

Then, as a Spanish instructor at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina, I returned the favor by introducing hundreds of community college students to the Spanish language and its many cultures. Like most community college faculty, I have responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom: I also coordinated courses in English for speakers of other languages, served on task forces helping to orient new immigrants to the community, and volunteered as an interpreter for the Red Cross and local law enforcement.

I am just one of millions of Americans whose lives are richer because of community colleges. I no longer teach at a community college, but I still believe in the core values of these institutions: open access and commitment to students. Indeed, the community college is accessible to almost every adult in the nation. Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics are compelling: 90 percent of Americans live within twenty-five miles of one of the 1,269 community college campuses scattered across the nation. Nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States attend a community college. Most of those are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Many are first-generation college students. Community colleges serve a disproportionate share of undergraduates from cultural and ethnic minority communities: 52 percent of American Indian, 52 percent of Hispanic, 45 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander, and 42 percent of black undergraduates attend a community college.

Many of these students are adults who work, live, or have families in the area. As Arthur Cohen, a professor emeritus in higher education at the University of California, Los Angeles, famously argues, for these students the choice often “is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing.” But if the community college is the primary institution granting access to these students, what exactly is it enabling them to access?

### Evolution of the Community College

American popular culture currently defines the community college as a job-training center, a site of remedial education, or a vocational institution. But it has not always been so. Most education historians trace the origins of the community college back to Joliet Junior College, established in 1901 to offer the first two years of collegiate education. After students completed the curriculum at Joliet, they could go on to earn their baccalaureates at a senior institution, such as the nearby University of Chicago.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the term “community college” was used to describe a few of these innovative institutions, but it was not widely used until it was endorsed by the Truman Commission in a 1947 report titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*. The Truman Commission envisioned a national system of two-year colleges, available free of charge to qualified students. The commission also envisaged higher education as a primary means of creating a more democratic society, promoting international understanding and

cooperation, and applying creativity and scholarship to solve social problems and manage public affairs. The report captured a dominant national discourse of postwar America, emphasizing that the ultimate beneficiary of higher education was a free and democratic society: when one American learned, all benefited. Higher education was, in other words, a public good.

In the decades following the publication of this report, communities across the nation established hundreds of community colleges. In the 1960s, for example, 497 communities established community colleges, according to *The National Profile of Community Colleges*. Students who aspired to a bachelor's degree arrived at the institutions' "open doors" by the thousands. Many leaders from politics, business, industry, and education urged community colleges to focus on terminal degrees in vocational fields. But in *The Contradictory College*, sociologist Kevin Dougherty demonstrates that students—particularly members of minority communities—insisted on collegiate opportunities. By the 1970s, the community college responded to local needs through an extended range of programs and services as varied as career education, academic advising, developmental education, community education, transfer and liberal education, vocational education, and general education. Nonetheless, in most states, the associate's degree as a first step toward the baccalaureate remained the institutional focus.

## Economic Objectives

The priorities for community colleges have shifted in recent years. Today, the emphasis is on vocational education and job training. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both focused on economic rationales for the community college. The latter's Community College Initiative, for example, was to be administered by the Department of Labor instead of the Department of Education. It was an artifact of economic policy, not of educational priorities. This shift from democratic to economic goals has substantially altered the community college mission, creating a harsh contrast between the vision of the Truman Commission report and today's emphasis on workforce development. For the commission, the community college would undergird the nation's democratic infrastructure. Today's rhetoric situates the community college within a national strategy for economic development. International understanding and cooperation were priorities of the midcentury community college, but global competitiveness is paramount today. As state agricultural economies declined in the latter half of the twentieth century, community colleges transformed farmworkers into plumbers, carpenters, electricians, and machinists who could build infrastructure according to local plans. Today, politicians lump community colleges into packages of incentives designed to attract external investment. Labor is often tailored to corporate demands.

Like Harry Truman, President Barack Obama has explicitly recognized community colleges. His administration has invigorated the drive for access to community college education through its financial aid policies. Writing for *Forbes* in February 2008, Jill Biden, a veteran community college professor and the wife of Vice President Joe Biden, [promoted community colleges](#) as a "best kept secret." Like the two prior administrations, however, the Obama White House tends to see the community college primarily as a job-training site and an arm of economic policy. Speaking at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, on July 14, 2009, Obama [emphasized corporate needs](#) as a driver of community college curricula: "We'll put colleges and employers together to create programs that match curricula in the classroom with the needs of the boardroom. . . . We know that the most successful community colleges are those that partner with the private sector. We want to encourage more companies to work with schools to build these types of relationships."

Certainly job training is essential in a period of low employment, and community colleges can and should help Americans achieve prosperity, engage in meaningful work, and achieve their productive potential. Indeed, no institution is better adapted to meet this goal than the community college. The community college is an ideal vocational education center because of its ability to expedite programs; its extensive geographic distribution across rural, suburban, and urban America; and its mission to serve local constituents of varying means, abilities, and motivations. At the same time, while corporate leaders may have a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they seek in workers, they have no privileged understanding of student interests, abilities, or goals. Corporate boards often do not meet in the communities where their employees work, and more often than not they lack even a basic appreciation of the cultural, health, and environmental needs of local communities.

Many Americans continue to experience economic hardship. Unemployment is high, especially among the working class. I do not want to discount the current economic crisis, but tethering community college education to the needs of corporate boards is not the solution. It is a mistake to put corporate CEOs effectively in charge of community college curricula. If corporate boards inform courses of study, then opportunity for working-class and

minority students is restricted to the skills and dispositions associated with corporate profits. The resulting programs distract communities from their own interests and focus them instead on those of corporate boards and the anonymous shareholders they represent. Instead of preparing skilled entrepreneurs and engaged citizens who can provide local leadership, the community college induces dependence on multinational corporations—in direct contradiction to American ideals of self-reliance and resourcefulness. Once again, providing access is not enough. And the question remains: access to what?

## Different Priorities

A high priority for the community college should be to produce local leaders who can help communities take charge of their own destinies. In the midst of today's complex, contradictory, and global social processes, communities need to negotiate change in ways that benefit them—not just a multinational business. College education usually emerges as the most obvious means of preparing an informed and engaged public. It is not reasonable to expect that all Americans will attend college, but everyone should have the opportunity to pursue a higher education, and the community college makes collegiate education available for millions. Helping communities determine their own futures might take the form of other educational programs as well, including literacy education not only of the conventional sort but also in areas of technology, media, economics and personal finance, politics, and health and wellness.

Pressing issues from climate change to economic dysfunction to epidemics such as obesity and early-onset diabetes saturate the media. Communities deal with their local impact on a daily basis, but how well do communities understand these issues? How many community members think critically about media reports, and how many take the news at face value? How well do community members understand the science behind climate change, for example? As a local and accessible educational institution, the community college can help communities make sense of current events, situate them within a global context, and consider their local impact. In their 1997 book *Community Leadership through Community-Based Programming*, Professor Emeritus Edgar J. Boone and his colleagues at North Carolina State University show how community colleges have helped localities overcome problems such as water quality, financial illiteracy, and malnutrition. Engaged in community-based learning, cities, towns, and local organizations refused to accommodate a future conjured up by corporate America or distant politicians. Instead they explored the global, political, and economic processes that affected their jobs, families, health, and environment. More important, perhaps, they worked through their differences and found a democratic resolution to their problems. With his experience as a community organizer, President Obama can appreciate the need to restore hope, self-determination, and resourcefulness to America's communities. Yet compared to the Truman administration's *Higher Education for American Democracy*, Obama's goals for community colleges are unacceptably meek. He should renew the Truman Commission's emphasis on using community colleges to create a more democratic society, international understanding, and the democratic resolution of issues of public concern.

Once again, to what do 11.7 million students and adult learners gain access when they arrive at the community college's open doors? Is it only job training? Will they simply learn to take their place in a global economy shaped by corporate interests? For me, that was not the case. For me, the community college was first a place to explore new worlds and develop democratic leadership skills. While I know I am fortunate, I do not believe I am unique. America's community colleges are full of potential leaders. Their education should not be focused on or determined by the needs of corporate boards.

*David F. Ayers is associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He studies cultural political economy and higher education, with an emphasis on the community college. His e-mail address is [dfayers@uncg.edu](mailto:dfayers@uncg.edu).*

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