



# Community College Education

Higher Education > Community College Education

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students (Boggs, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Gleazer, 1980; Spellman, 2007). Community colleges fulfill many curricular functions including preparation for transfer to four-year institutions, vocational training, continuing education, developmental or remedial education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Witt et al., 1994).

## Overview

### Importance of Community Colleges

Gleazer (1980) writes that "Community colleges and their progenitors, public junior colleges, were established to extend educational opportunity" (p. 7). Because of their role in expanding access to higher education for a diverse population of students, community colleges are often referred to as "people's colleges" or "democracy's colleges" (Boggs, 2004). Cohen and Brawer (2003) noted that "community colleges have led to notable changes in American education, especially by expanding access" (p. 26). Diener (1986) aptly summarized some of the changes as follows:

The community college and its faculty serve the widest range of student ages, abilities, and interests of any institution in American higher education. It represents the American-built opportunity for a greater variety of individuals to develop and cultivate their talents and skills more fully than any other educational institution (Diener, 1986, p. 16).

## Historical Development of Community Colleges

### The Junior College

The modern American community college has its roots in the junior college (Diener, 1986). Junior colleges were largely private two-year colleges that had a main mission of providing the first two years of general collegiate study (Diener, 1986). Thus, they essentially fulfilled a transfer function and were a stepping stone along the way to a four-year liberal arts degree. At the same time, they retained vestiges of the elitism of the English model of higher education after which the earlier American colleges were modeled (Diener, 1986). Researchers have asserted that junior colleges were extensions of the elite system of higher education, though only in the sense that the colleges were created to please

## Abstract

This article provides an overview of community colleges in the United States. Community colleges largely originated from private two-year junior colleges (Diener, 1986). They have served to expand access to higher education for previously underserved segments of the American population, such as nontraditional

"university elitists" and preserve those institutions by providing some advanced educational training to a growing population of high school graduates (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994).

While some scholars have argued that comprehensive community colleges are quite different from the junior colleges from which they evolved, others have insisted that the two types of institutions are actually not that different. For instance, Witt et al. (1994) stated that the "supposed dichotomy is not supported by fact" (p. 39). For instance, the authors indicated that from the beginning junior colleges also supported a terminal function where students could leave with an earned associate's degree. They also noted that practical courses in agriculture were taught at the first junior college in California (Witt et al., 1994). However, the authors also later indicated that even up to the 1920s "the most popular junior college curriculum was clearly university transfer" (Witt et al., 1994, p. 45). Moreover, nearly half of all junior colleges at that time offered no terminal degree option (Witt et al., 1994).

The junior college movement is believed to have originated at the University of Chicago in the 1890s, where university president William Rainey Harper divided the upper and lower divisions of the university and named the lower-division departments junior colleges (Witt et al., 1994). According to Witt et al. (1994), "Harper founded the greatest democratic movement in the history of American higher education" (p. 16). At first the junior college movement was concentrated in the Midwest (Witt et al., 1994). Then in the early twentieth century the movement spread to California. California was more amenable to the spread of the movement than, for instance, the eastern states, which already had a rich system of smaller four-year colleges (Witt et al., 1994). At that time most Californians did not have access to any form of higher education (Witt et al., 1994).

### Expansion to Community Colleges

As junior colleges grew and developed—and became more an institution of the people—they transformed into community colleges. Diener (1986) explains,

The junior college, at first a copy of a portion of the elitist university, began to widen its course offerings. It expanded its types of students served. The inclusion of vocational programs and daughters as well as sons of blue-collar workers began the transformation of the junior college to the community college (Diener, 1986, p. 12).

The transition from mostly private junior colleges to mainly public community colleges progressed over time. In 1915-16 just 26 percent of all junior (two-year) colleges were public while the majority (74 percent) was private. By the late 1960s this statistic had reversed (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

The time that had the greatest impact on the transformation of the junior college to the community college was the era after World

War II that was witness to the GI Bill of Rights, the Civil Rights Movement, and the era of the baby boomers (Diener, 1986; Witt et al., 1994). It was during this time that the call was made to ensure access to some form of education for a greater number of the American people. The community college became America's "open door college," where veterans, women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, the poor, the disadvantaged, and those seeking additional or advanced vocational training could all pursue greater educational opportunity (Diener, 1986). The GI Bill, which provided a free college education to military veterans, became law in 1944 (Witt et al., 1994). By 1946 more than 40 percent of all students at junior colleges were war veterans. Overall, enrollments nearly doubled in just three years, growing from 251,290 in 1944 to half a million during the 1947 academic year (Witt et al., 1994). According to Witt et al. (1944), by the 1950s the colleges had experienced seven decades of almost continuous growth. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 also paved the way for increased enrollment of blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities at higher education institutions (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). However, the biggest expansion yet was to come when the baby boomers descended on the community colleges in the 1960s and brought with them "the greatest period of growth in community college history" (Witt et al., 1994, p. 162). Witt et al. (1944) indicate that during the 1960s what equated to one community or junior college a week was built in the United States to accommodate the unprecedented growth. Enrollments nearly quadrupled, coming to a total of nearly 2.5 million students at the end of the decade (Witt et al., 1994). Community colleges also moved into urban centers and came to exist in every state during the 1960s (AACC, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). As Gleazer (1980) explains, "For those who could not leave the community to go to college there was one within commuting distance" (p. 7).

While there is no clear indication of by whom or when the name "community college" was first mentioned, an article by Byron S. Hollinshead in 1936 urged the junior college to be more responsive to its community and become "a community college, meeting community needs" (Witt et al., 1994, p. 107). However, the 1947 Truman Commission report helped cement the new name into history (Witt et al., 1994). The Truman Commission was a federal commission appointed by U.S. president Harry S. Truman and was charged with developing a master plan to expand educational opportunities for the American citizenry (Witt et al., 1994). Following its work, the Truman Commission recommended the development of new two-year colleges and recommended these colleges be called community colleges (Witt et al., 1994).

### Further Insights

Gleazer (1980) explains, "Historically, the community college was based on the assumption that there were large numbers of people not served by existing institutions and the unserved were to be the clientele of these new colleges" (p. 7). One general

segment of the clientele was to be the average citizen. Witt et al. (1994) indicated that the colleges would be responsive and help meet the needs of average citizens in a fluctuating world. The colleges would also help to educate adults and offer "a practical solution to the problem of adults needing affordable postsecondary education close to home" (AACC, 2001, p. 103). It has been said that community colleges' success is rooted in their values of community responsiveness and access as well as creativity and a focus on student learning (AACC, 2001).

In terms of community colleges' highly held value of access, Cohen and Brawer (2003) stressed that "more than any other single factor, access depends on proximity" (p. 16). Community colleges have opened the doors of higher education to more individuals not just because of their open access policies but also because they are local, neighborhood institutions that have physically put higher education in the reach of people who otherwise would not have had proximity to it. Boggs (2004) explained that community colleges have "become the largest sector of higher education, representing nearly 1,200 regionally accredited institutions within commuting distance of over 90 percent of the population" (§ 1). Community colleges also facilitate access because of the lower tuitions that they charge (Bailey & Morest, 2006).

### Community College Students

As noted, adult students were to be part of the clientele of the new community colleges. Spellman (2007) noted that most community college students are adult or nontraditional students who are 24 years of age or older. Bailey and Morest (2006) further explained that the students at community colleges are more likely than those at four-year institutions to be older, part-time students from lower-income households who may have dependent children and be first-generation college students. Increasingly, students are immigrants or the children of immigrants (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Data indicate that 57 percent of community college students also work more than twenty hours per week (CCSSE, 2006). Despite the nontraditional clientele they largely serve, according to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2001), community colleges enroll about half of all first-time college freshmen.

As noted, the majority of community college students are enrolled part-time. It has been demonstrated that these students are less engaged in their educational experience than full-time community college students (CCSSE, 2006). For instance, part-time community college students appear to interact both inside and outside the classroom less often with faculty members than do full-time community college students. In general, community college students more often appear to engage in active and collaborative learning inside the classroom instead of outside it (CCSSE, 2006).

### Community College Curriculum & Instruction

In terms of the education they provide, comprehensive community colleges serve a three-prong mission:

- Prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions.
- Provide vocational training.
- Serve the community through continuing education efforts (Witt et al., 1994).

In addition to these three major curricular functions, there are two other main curricular functions of community colleges: developmental education and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In general, academic transfer enables students to fulfill the lower-division coursework they need to enter the upper divisions of a four-year institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Meanwhile, vocational-technical education deals with occupational, career, and technical studies. Radio repair and secretarial services were earlier courses taught in these areas of study. Next, continuing education is generally geared to individuals who are primarily no longer students and wish to take classes for personal development. At the same time, developmental education, or remedial education, has become more important with the rise in the number of students who were poorly prepared for advanced study while in secondary school (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Finally, community service reflects, for instance, different short courses, workshops, and noncredit courses offered for the benefit of the local communities (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Community college instructors have traditionally dedicated little time to research and scholarship and have instead focused on teaching. Class size also tends to be small (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). While these conditions seem to provide a favorable environment for student learning, researchers were not convinced; they wanted a better assessment of community college education. Five benchmarks of effective educational practice at community colleges were developed as part of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (McClenney, 2004). Established in 2001, the CCSSE helps to assess community college student engagement with purposeful educational practices (McClenney, 2004). The five benchmarks are as follows:

- Active and collaborative learning: Occurs when students are active participants in their educational experience (for example, they have opportunities to think about what they are learning and apply it) and collaborate with others in their learning efforts
- Student effort: Reflects the amount of time students dedicate to their educational experience
- Academic challenge: encompasses "challenging intellectual and creative work" (§ 12)
- Student-faculty interaction: Reflects the amount of meaningful contact students have with faculty members
- Support for learners: Materializes not only in the presence of academic and career services to support students but also in a general commitment to student success that permeates campus (McClenney, 2004).

## Serving the Community

Community colleges have been recognized for their responsiveness to their communities (AACC, 2001). Their responsiveness has clearly materialized in their curricular offerings. For example, in 2000, thousands of community colleges began offering high-tech coursework to meet a growing demand for this type of education (Burnett, 2000). A joint survey between the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and ACT in 1999 showed that community college students' main reason for enrollment was to strengthen their workplace skills in technology and computers ("Survey," 2000). Nontraditional students, especially, are looking to community colleges to update computer skills, and employability, in a poor economy (Jesnek, 2012). Also, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, hundreds of community colleges began offering degrees and certificate programs in homeland security. Some have even built facilities dedicated to training in the area as well (Gilroy, 2005). Finally, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that "as tuition at four-year institutions nears prohibitive levels for some students, and the demands of the global economy become more pressing, community colleges increasingly are focusing on producing creative thinkers as well as skilled workers" (Ashburn, 2006, p. 6). At some community colleges these trends have led to the creation of honors programs, which began to take off at the colleges during the 1990s (Ashburn, 2006). In addition to honors programs, some community colleges also have other types of special educational programs for students. Service-learning has been promoted as part of community college education since 1994, and about half of all community colleges offer it as part of their curriculum (AACC, 2001, as cited in Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). Service learning fulfills two aspects of the community college mission: educating students and serving the local community (Weglarz & Seybert, 2004).

## Dual Enrollment

Community colleges are also actively involved in easing the transition from high school to college through their participation in dual enrollment programs. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics on trends in dual enrollment during the 2002-03 academic year, a greater percentage of public two-year institutions had students taking courses in dual-enrollment programs than either public or private four-year institutions (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005). Overall, 93 percent of public two-year institutions had students enrolled in dual enrollment classes as compared with 64 with of public four-year institutions and 29 percent of private four-year institutions (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005).

In terms of educational success in community college, Bailey and Morest (2006) noted that transfer and degree completion rates at community colleges have remained low. Rosenbaum, Redline, and Stephan (2007) more strongly indicated that community colleges have "shockingly low degree-completion rates" (p. 49). This can in part be attributed to the characteristics of community college students themselves, who face a dizzying array of academic, occupational, and personal struggles (Bailey & Morest, 2006). A national study found that only 34 percent of students

who begin community college with degree aspirations succeed in obtaining any sort of degree credential within the eight years after high school (Rosenbaum, Redline & Stephan, 2007).

## Issues

### Vocational Technical Programs

One current issue in community college education is the decreasing terminal function of vocational-technical programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The original intent of these programs was to train students to enter certain skilled occupations and fields after graduation (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). However, more and more vocational-technical students are transferring to four-year institutions to pursue advanced coursework in similar fields (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). At the same time, the number of students transferring to four-year institutions after academic transfer or collegiate preparation is declining because the students enrolling are more often not dedicated to a certain line of study and may, for instance, just be taking courses for personal interest (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

### Remedial Education

Another current issue is the increasing remedial function of the community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). According to Bailey and Morest (2006), "College access has become fundamental to economic opportunity in the United States" (p. 1). However, access to college is only one part of the equity agenda that community colleges help carry out. The concept of equity in higher education has also come to reflect that educators hope to ensure that students are adequately prepared for postsecondary education and to ensure that students have an equal chance at succeeding once enrolled in college (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Community colleges have directly engaged in preparing students for college-level work through their developmental studies programs. Estimates show that about half of the students who enter various community colleges are not prepared for college-level work (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Community colleges help to bring the academic skills of these students up to standard (Bailey & Morest, 2006).

### Bachelor's Degrees

In contrast to the increasing remedial function, some community colleges across the country offer bachelor's degrees (Troumpoucis, 2004). These degree programs are either offered independently by the community college or jointly with a four-year institution. More than one hundred community colleges offered the bachelor's degree as of 2004 (Troumpoucis, 2004). Some say that this effort on the part of community colleges is responsive to community needs and will bring higher education opportunities to more students, especially nontraditional students who may not be able to travel to a four-year institution to pursue an advanced degree (Troumpoucis, 2004). Others argue that the move may soften the mission of community colleges and the value of the two-year degree (Troumpoucis, 2004). The bachelor's degrees that community colleges offer tend to be in

vocational areas, such as auto body design. Some have labeled these types of bachelor's degrees the "applied baccalaureate degree" ("History Marches Forward," 2005, p. 1).

### Financial Concerns

Community colleges are also facing financial difficulties. According to Boggs (2004), "Community college leaders are struggling to meet accelerating demand with declining public resources" (p. 13). There is increased enrollment pressure on the colleges due to several factors. For instance, not only is the population of high school graduates in the United States increasing, but more of them are choosing to attend college and turning to community college as a more cost-efficient way to start their college careers (Boggs, 2004). In the meantime, community colleges are facing severe cuts in the state and local funds upon which they rely (Boggs, 2004; Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Community colleges count on public funding more than any other segment of the higher education community (Boggs, 2004). On average, community colleges nationally receive about 60 percent of their operating funds from state and local sources while 35 percent of public four-year institutions' funds come from these sources (Boggs, 2004).

### Terms & Concepts

**Baby Boomers:** The populous generation born after World War II between 1946 and 1964 (Wattenberg, 1986).

**Dual Enrollment:** Also referred to as "dual credit," "concurrent enrollment," "joint enrollment." Occurs when students take college-level courses and earn college credit while still in high school (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005).

**First-Generation College Students:** Students who are the first in their immediate families to attend college.

**First-Time College Freshmen:** Students who enter college without any previous enrollment at another higher education institution; these students may enter college directly after high school.

**Nontraditional Students:** Students who exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: lack of a standard high school diploma, delayed college enrollment, part-time college enrollment, financial independence, and full-time employment. Nontraditional students may also have dependents other than a spouse (for example, children or relatives) and may be single parents (Horn, 1996).

**Remedial Education:** Raising skills or knowledge of various subjects or fields to acceptable levels (Barnhart & Stein, 1962).

**Service-Learning:** "A teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (NSLC, n.d.).

**Student Engagement:** "The amount of time and energy that students invest in meaningful educational practices" (McClenney, 2004, p. 7).

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Dr. Marlene Clapp has nearly nine years of experience in the higher education field. She completed her undergraduate work at the College of William and Mary and also holds a master's degree from Virginia Tech. She earned her doctorate in higher education administration from Boston College in 2005 and works as a higher education researcher .

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