

Gateway to Opportunity?

A History of the Community College in the United States

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The phenomenal growth of the two-year colleges...has resulted in a category of uniquely American institutions that is not always well understood – either by the public or by the educational community itself.

- Leland L. Medsker and Dale Tillery, *Breaking the Access Barriers*, 1971

Since the early 1900s, the California Community Colleges have been a gateway to opportunity for millions of Californians...Access alone does open the door to higher education, but without success it is a door which too often leads to broken dreams and shattered promises. Too frequently it is forgotten that access without success does not equal opportunity.

- Commission for the Review of the California Master Plan, 1986

History sheds considerable light on this lingering ambivalence about Junior College education.

-Dale Tillery, *A Consideration of Issues Affecting California Public Junior Colleges*, 1965

Preface

The Institutionalization of Community Colleges

1. The State of the Union

At the dawn of the 21st century some 30 percent of American adults have earned a bachelors degree or higher. This is the highest percentage of Americans earning a higher education in this country's history; however, higher education is still not equally available for all American citizens and the returns to a college credential still brings differential earnings based on ethnicity, sex, and class. Access to institutions of higher education and the knowledge and economic returns of a college education is not for everyone. It continues to be restricted to a minority of the American population, although this educated minority has grown significantly over the past century.¹

¹ Brint & Karabel, *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* (Oxford, UK, 1989); Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York, 1994); W. Norton Grubb and Martin Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 158; Kent A. Phillippe and Leila Gonzalez Sullivan, *National Profile of Community Colleges: Trends & Statistics*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC, 2005), 70-73.

It took the United States almost two centuries to grant all citizens full political rights, but at the start of the 21st century not all citizens have equal access to the political process, nor equal claim on their political representatives. Centuries of social and political struggle have enabled a large minority of American citizens to gain a measure of economic, educational, and political success, but the sacred principles articulated in the *Declaration of Independence* have yet to become a reality for *all* citizens, let alone the millions of immigrants and foreigners living in this country: not all Americans are living free and equal in their pursuit of happiness, nor is the government (which was supposedly instituted *by and for* the people) equally responsive or just in protecting the rights and well being of *all* citizens.²

It is unclear whether social, political, and economic conditions will improve for the majority of Americans in the 21st century, especially given the global economic collapse of 2008-2009, although the administration of Barak Obama has made some hopeful signals on this front. Will most citizens have increased access to and success in higher education? Will most citizens have increased access to and participation in the political process? Will most citizens experience a more just and equitable distribution of income? Will most citizens be able to rely upon quality social services and safety nets, like public schooling, affordable health care, and retirement benefits? And how much access will immigrants have to participate in American society, higher education, and the political process?

Or, will the 21st century unveil a resurgent class structure in American society? Peter Drucker, an influential business scholar, predicted in the 1990s that a new elite class of “knowledge workers” was beginning to form. With higher education credentials and specialized technological skills, these knowledge workers would one day foment a “new class conflict” in America. According to Drucker, this new socio-political order would not only be inevitable, but

² Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy* (New York, 2005).

also “right and proper” because those citizens privileged enough to become educated “knowledge workers” deserved to rule. Drucker’s message was clear: American citizens must either scramble up the competitive ladder of success by earning college degrees and gaining technology oriented skills, or they shall rightfully fall beneath a new class of technocratic elites.³

Drucker’s version of the American Dream reformulates the mythic hope of meritocracy, but it turns this ideology of Americanism into a dystopic threat: better yourself or else! It also blames the victims who for many reasons cannot seem to grasp the American Dream. For those citizens of the United States who hold sacred the democratic principles outlined in *The Declaration of Independence*, this dark and foreboding prophecy of a new elite betrays the very hope this nation supposedly embodies.

In order to make an accurate assessment of future social, educational, and political possibilities, the past must be revisited and understood in order to contextualize the complexity of the present. But complex understandings of history rarely inform public policy in this country. Even when policy makers are aware of history, rarely does historical knowledge impact the political process through which public policy is fought over, negotiated, and compromised. As Deborah Stone has argued, the policy making process is about power and “the struggle over ideas,” as politicians rhetorically dance through the many political fires of competing interests. Policy makers seek to “control interpretations” by framing, or spinning, present problems under the rhetorical guise of what is legitimate, what is feasible, or what is good. But rarely do policy makers consider the historical complexity of how the past has created the present. In polarized and heated political debates, history is valued only to the extent that it can be fashioned into a political tool. This usually results in the denial of history and the creation of politicized “myths.”

³ Peter F. Drucker, “The Age of Social Transformation,” *The Atlantic* (Nov 1994), 7, 10.

The history used by policy makers is almost always a quasi-fictional “political narrative” shaped to gain and legitimate power, thereby, securing social, political, and economic resources.⁴

Higher education policy in the U.S. rests on two politicized myths: *socio-economic meritocracy* and *equal access to higher education*. Yet upon close inspection of the historical record, neither narrative has much concrete validity. A look at the history of higher education in the U.S. and the changing dynamics of student access is a bleak tale until fairly recently. The historical record reveals some expansion of access and equity in terms of increasing amounts of post-secondary education for a broader swath of Americans, but inequality has remained constant: Traditionally underserved populations, like the economically disadvantaged and non-white ethnic/racial minorities, still struggle to achieve equality of opportunity in American society and its institutions of higher education. Financial returns for postsecondary degrees are still lower for women and non-white minorities because regional labor markets continue to perpetuate a long history of institutionalized discrimination. As the U.S. moves into a post-industrial “knowledge economy” in a highly globalized world, the issue of student access to higher education has become one of the most pressing political problems for those concerned with both socio-political equity and economic development. The educational and economic success of the student and the economic development of the nation have both become intertwined political issues. Can the U.S. keep its dominant economic position in the highly competitive world economy with only 30% of the American population holding bachelor’s degrees? If the majority of U.S. citizens lack a higher education, can the U.S. live up to its democratic principles and preserve its political institutions?

⁴ Robert Reich, “The Lost Art of Democratic Narrative,” *The New Republic* (March 2005); Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, revised ed. (New York, 2002): 1-54.

At the center of these questions is the policy issue of *access* to higher education. Who has access to what forms of higher education at what cost? For most Americans, access is restricted to the open-access, low-cost American community college. This institution enrolls around half of all first-time freshmen in the U.S. Most students who enroll in community colleges have the goal of transferring to a four-year college or university in order to earn a bachelors degree, but the vast majority of these students will never earn any degree. Community colleges have been praised for almost a century as an efficient way to handle the vast surge of Americans looking for access to higher education and as an economical path for social mobility. However, it is unclear *if* this institution actually helps students, let alone *how* it might help. Scholars have never been able to completely agree on the mission of the community college and, therefore, have never been able to adequately determine what it is the community college is supposed to do, not to mention how it is supposed to do it.

The “junior college,” later renamed the “community college” in the 1960s and 1970s, was originally designed to *limit* access to higher education in the name of social efficiency. But students and local communities had other ideas. Grass roots movements were inspired by the democratic rhetoric of Americanism and the promise made by junior college leaders, and many communities tried to refashion this institution as a tool for increased social mobility, community organization, and regional economic development. Thus, the community college, much like the country itself, was born of contradictions and continues to be an enigma. Contradictions have been sewn into the very fabric of what has become a celebrated, yet beleaguered, institution of higher education. For the past century this institution has been seen by many as a promise: The community college has represented a meritocratic ladder to college and to the middle-class.

But what has this institution actually done? What is it doing today? And what will it do in the future? Unraveling the institutional complexity and contradictions of the community college will be the central focus of this historical study. At the heart of this book are two current policy debates on the community college. The first is access to higher education as it relates to the American Dream of meritocracy and socio-political equality. This issue has been much discussed over the past century, especially in the wake of the mid-20th century Civil Rights movement. Has the community college offered increased access to higher education and social mobility, or has this “semi-higher” institution been just a diversion keeping the economically disadvantaged and ethnic minorities from realizing the American Dream? The second is more recent and this issue concerns the effectiveness of educational institutions. Many in the policy community have stopped focusing on the issue of access and are instead asking new questions. What are the institutional missions of the community college, and has it ever effectively fulfilled its complex educational and economic functions so as to justify public expenditures? While policy debates over access and equity have had a much documented history, the recent policy debate over institutional effectiveness has not received any historical attention, thus some historical contextualization is needed to better inform policy makers.

4. *The Community College: A Contradictory Institution*

There have been only four major historical-sociological case studies focused on the institutionalization of community colleges in the United States,⁵ although most of these studies have not directly used the theory of institutions as an analytical framework. These studies have mostly investigated the early formative stages of junior/community colleges in the early 20th century. Conceptually, these studies trace “communities of practice” that have become ritualized, institutionalized, reproduced, and contested through time, but most of these studies do not follow the community college from its origins in the 19th century to its contradictory state in the 21st century. Nor have many of these studies focused on how this institution has evolved in relation to external socio-political-economic environments.⁶

Only Brint and Karabel have attempted to trace the institutionalization of the community college into the later half of the 20th century. However, their study only went so far as the 1970s and 80s, and their focus on vocationalism precluded a larger analysis of the contested institutionalization of the community college in relation to other historical trends in the U.S. Brint and Karabel do not discuss racial segregation and the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, or the late twentieth century movement for educational standards and institutional evaluation. There is also a deeper methodological issue that has not been fully explored. To what extent do university scholars exercise (and continue to exercise) a primary power over defining, legitimizing, and reforming both institutional discourse and practice? The scholarly literature surrounding the community college (and the actual impact this literature has had on

⁵ Brint and Karabel, *The Diverted Dream* (see also: “Institutional Origins and Transformations: The Case of American Community Colleges”); John H. Frye, *The Vision of the Public Junior College, 1900 – 1940* (New York, 1992); Meier, *The Community College Mission*; David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, 1997). I do not include Dougherty’s *The Contradictory College* in this list because it includes no historical narrative and very little historical analysis; however, it does touch upon both the history and institutionalization of the community college.

⁶ On practice theory see: Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*; Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK, 1998).

practice) is perhaps the most revealing phenomenon defining this institution. Thus, the discourse of university scholars is the most important and immediate source for a history of the institutionalization process of the community college, but no one has historicized the past century of community college scholarship.

The American junior college turned community college will be used in this book as a case study for understanding the formation and historical evolution of a particular institution of higher education. This case study draws upon the seminal work of Brint and Karabel, and it seeks to extend their basic thesis, with modifications, into the 21st century. This study will seek to address the larger issues of access to higher education and social mobility, while also addressing the more particular issue of the institutional purposes, institutional effectiveness, the and social role of the community college. As already mentioned, this study will focus on the political assumptions about who has the right or power to define this institution's mission, who is responsible for enacting its roles, and how this institution is supposed to be valued and judged. And this study will try to address the much larger and more theoretical issue of whether or not particular human actors or groups have been able to control the contours of this institution.

The basic narrative of the institutionalization of the community college is a muddle of mixed motives and competing actors. It involves both external social control and internal organizational anarchy. While this institution was formed with clear purposes in mind, it became apparent early on that this institution was not operating as planned, nor was it efficient at achieving its stated missions. Between 1920 and 1940 junior college leaders went through an intense identity crisis as they debated both the purpose of junior colleges and the placement of these institutions between secondary and postsecondary education systems. Where junior colleges extended secondary schools or separate "junior" colleges? Were junior colleges

primarily supposed to prepare academically talented students for entry into a 4-year university or were they also supposed to train less talented vocationally-oriented students for local labor markets? And were junior colleges only responsive to universities and labor markets by training and credentialing post-secondary students, or was there also supposed to be responsiveness to local community needs, which might include non-credentialing purposes, like literacy classes, citizenship classes, and general community education classes? Arguably a measure of consensus over these questions among junior college leaders, federal and state educational authorities, and the general public did not congeal until the publication of the President's Commission on Higher Education report in 1947.

In 1947 *Higher Education for American Democracy* seemed to not only legitimate junior colleges by arguing that half of the American population could benefit from two years of postsecondary schooling, but the report also seemed to sanction a broad comprehensive mission for these institutions by suggesting a new name, and thereby, a new institutional identity: the Community College. Up until the publication of this report, junior college leaders had debated whether the primary function of the institution was to keep its traditional mission as a conduit for student transfers to 4-year universities, or whether it should adopt new missions like offering terminal occupational and semiprofessional programs. Most junior college leaders lent towards the latter of these two options because it would increase the legitimacy of the institution within already established systems of secondary and postsecondary education. There were also calls for expanding the institutional mission to incorporate adult education, like literacy and citizenship classes, and also programs that would meet diverse local needs.

However, not everyone at the time saw the community college in such lofty, democratic, and egalitarian terms. From the start, university officials promoted junior colleges because of

their value as a “screening service” to divert many postsecondary students away from the selective and resource limited universities. State legislators also promoted junior colleges as a less expensive form of higher education for the masses that would allow for cost-effective means to democratize access to higher education, while also creating an institution that would filter out the unprepared or disadvantaged majority from actually earning a college degree. The University of California, Berkeley sociologist Burton R. Clark famously called this the “cooling out” process.⁷

Clark’s thesis was famously extended into an internationally acclaimed book published in 1989, Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel’s *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900 – 1985*. Brint and Karabel argued that the educational system in the U.S. has always been a “hierarchically differentiated” system that has been structurally connected to the labor market and class structure. But the American educational system has also been relatively “open” and democratic, especially in the 20th century, and most Americans have seen it as a “ladder of opportunity” and “upward mobility.” The institution of community colleges offered an “egalitarian promise,” but at the same time it also reflected the “constraints” of the capitalist economic system in which it was embedded. Part of the reality of that system is an optimistic society that generates more “ambition” than its can structurally satisfy, which creates a need for an elaborate and often “hidden” tracking system to channel students into occupationally appropriate avenues largely based on their socio-economic origins.⁸

From its beginnings the community college has had the contradictory function of opening higher education to larger numbers of students from all socio-economic backgrounds while at the

⁷ Burton R. Clark, *The Open Door College: A Case Study* (New York, 1960).

⁸ Brint and Karabel, *The Diverted Dream*, 5-19, 56, 59, 91, 205-32.

same time operating within a “highly stratified” economic and educational system, which created a need to “select and sort students.” This “cooling-out function” (or “the diversion effect”) caused ever increasing numbers of lower SES students in higher education to be diverted into more “modest positions” at the lower end of the labor market. As Burton Clark once admitted, “for large numbers failure is inevitable and *structured*.” Brint and Karabel argued that not only do community colleges help “transmit inequalities” through their sorting function, but they also “contribute to the legitimization of these inequalities” by upholding meritocratic rhetoric that often blames the victim for failing to succeed in an structurally rigged class-system: “The very real contribution that the community college has made to the expansion of opportunities for some individuals does not, however, mean that its *aggregate* effect has been a democratizing one. On the contrary, the two-year institution has accentuated rather than reduced existing patterns of social inequality.”⁹

The majority of students who enrolled in junior colleges during the first half of the 20th century were middle class high school graduates looking to earn their bachelor’s degree and enter a white collar profession. Working class high school students either dropped out of high school early to get a job, or they waited until earning their high school diploma to enter the work force. Very few working class students entered junior colleges. However, the point of Brint and Karabel remains substantial: junior college leaders in conjunction with community business leaders actively tried to manipulate junior college student aspirations by engineering more and more occupationally oriented terminal programs. They also encouraged this route more passively by neglecting a pedagogically appropriate curriculum and adequate student support services geared toward less academically prepared students. Many junior college students tended to either drop out or settle for a terminal occupational certificate. By 1970s, around 75

⁹ Ibid., 56, 59, 91, 205-32.

percent of low achieving students would drop out during their first year in urban community colleges. Critics also pointed out that it was not an accident that the lowest achieving students in both secondary and postsecondary schools have historically been, and continue to be, the economically disadvantaged, ethnic/racialized minorities, immigrants, the disabled, and dislocated low-skilled workers.

Despite the transfer mission remaining a primary emphasis for most community colleges throughout the 20th century, the apparent manipulation of institutional purposes by community college leaders, state governments, and the business community has remained constant, if not intensified. Recent scholarship on the community college has demonstrated that community college administrators have increasingly adopted an ideological stance of neo-liberal corporatism over the last couple of decades, which has directed them to focus on efficiency, productivity, and marketplace needs. This has led to a much larger array of occupationally oriented terminal programs. Some have claimed that these occupational offerings may be crowding out academic transfer-oriented programs, and leading away from an institutional climate focused on *higher* education.

A look at the history of higher education in the U.S. and the changing dynamics of student access does reveal some expansion of access and equity in terms of increasing amounts of post-secondary education for a broader swath of Americans. However, traditionally underserved populations like the economically disadvantaged and many ethnic/racial minorities still struggle to achieve equality of opportunity in American society and its systems of higher education. As the U.S. moves into a post-industrial “knowledge economy” in a highly globalized world, the issue of unequal student access to higher education remains a prominent and pressing political problem, and it has recently become intertwined with the issue of

outcomes in terms of the educational and economic success of the student and the economic development of the nation. However, the policy community seems more preoccupied with the politicized issue of institutional accountability so as to justify public expenditures in a fiscally constrained economic environment. But policy makers must not lose sight of the equally important issue of access and social mobility because the United States remains an inequitable class-based society.

The open access mission of the community college was forged in an environment of socio-political inequality, educational elitism, and restricted educational and financial resources. Community colleges were designed to be under-funded and marginalized institutions in hierarchical state systems of education. While access in community colleges was open to all, no provisions were made to ensure the success of students in community colleges, nor access to the more advanced and economically rewarding levels of the higher education system. In fact, it was assumed that a great many students enrolled in community colleges would be drawn away from higher education and redirected to terminal, lower-status and lower-paid vocational careers. Now that more and more students are clamoring for a university education because of economic conditions that heavily reward university credentials, the notion of community colleges as holding pens for the underprivileged has been questioned, and new policies are being promoted in order to make state systems of higher education more equitable and just.

Community colleges hold immense promise if they can overcome their historical legacy and be re-institutionalized with clearer missions, the proper staffing, and adequate financial resources. However, the path dependent nature of institutions and the limited rationality and power of institutional actors make these social structures incredibly resistant to change. Can an institution which was “born subordinate” as the lower-level holding pen for the university

overcome its own legacy and develop into an effective, meritocratic, and democratizing institution? This study will not provide easy answers because none exist. Instead, this book will try to illuminate the parameters of this question by unfolding the historical trajectory of this institution in all its complexity.¹⁰

This book will examine the institutionalization process of the community college in the United States over the 20th century by providing a historical narrative of the formation of this institution by a diverse set of actors, including professors of higher education, educational administrators, state officials, local communities, community college faculty, and students. How was this educational institution formed, by whom, for what purposes, and how has it evolved over the past century? Attention will also be paid to the social, political, economical, and organizational ecology surrounding community colleges in order to demonstrate how this institution and its changing missions have been shaped by its environment. Part three will try to explore all of these issues in the more localized context of a single state. California created some of the earliest junior colleges and it was the first state to create a community college system. It has led the way in expanding access and in formulating institutional accountability measures. California also represents a cautionary tale of how constrained fiscal resources can cripple both increased student access and increased institutional efficiency.

Second, this study will explore and contextualize two major policy debates over the community college: equitable access to higher education and the institutional effectiveness of community colleges. Has the community college enabled greater access to and success in higher education over the 20th century and has it done so effectively? Finally, this book will try to address the complex issues of institutional identity and institutional change. On the one hand, social institutions are stable structures that resist the control of rational agents, and they seem to

¹⁰ Brint and Karabel, "Institutional Origins and Transformations," 349.

slowly adapt to internal and environmental conditions through an incremental process. However, there is also evidence that rapid changes can occur to institutions over short periods of time due to external shocks caused by the social, political, and economic environment. The conclusion of this book will address three final questions in relation to contemporary policy makers, community college administrators, and community college faculty. How has the community college changed over the past century and how much of that change was due to the rational decisions of human actors? What can we do to make the community college more equitable and efficient?