Fulfilling Institutional Missions through the Administration of Community Education Programs at American Community Colleges

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how community education programs are perceived and administrated to help American community colleges fulfill institutional missions in the 21st century. A phenomenological approach was methodologically employed for this qualitative study. The findings of this research were drawn from the lived experiences of ten seasoned leaders from five community colleges, revealing that community education programs had been positively perceived as the integral mechanism in the American community college contexts. Entrepreneurship was the term that best captured how community education was administrated; with the flexibility to take action on community requests, every aspect of the practice of community education involved being calculating, weighing cost-effectiveness, and building partnerships to better utilize internal and external resources to respond to community needs. These results have important implications for leaders and administrators working in this area of community college offerings, as well as for policy makers.

Keywords: community college; community education; institutional mission; leadership; America; programming; administration

1. Introduction

Community colleges in the United States are known for their historical function as a distinctive educational invention to respond to the increasing demand of the society for more skilled men and women and for advanced educational opportunities (Deegan, Tillery, & Associates, 1985). Since the establishment of Joliet Junior College in 1901 as the first, the community colleges in the United States have provided various educational programs and services to people who otherwise would not have had the opportunities to pursue higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This new model of educational institutions has democratized American higher education because of the grassroots origin of standing for open admissions, geographic proximity, and financial affordability to their potential students (Dougherty, 1994).

Historically, transfer, career, and community education programs are the core programs provided by the American community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003): the first emphasizes the academic credit circulation ties with the four-year colleges and universities, and the second aims to provide vocational and technical trainings. The last one, community education, is viewed as the broadest among the three (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Vaughan, 2000): it is a program that focuses on college-community interaction, and helps to

utilize community resources to create an environment in which the community educates itself (McGuire, 1988). In other words, American community colleges have had stronger focuses on developing and providing the kind of education that community members want and need (Boone & Vaughan, 1993; Gleazer Jr., 1974; Harlacher, 1969; McGuire, 1988).

However, community education is also regarded as the most complicated of the core missions (Baker, 1994; Bergquist, 1998; Cohen & Brawer, 2003) due to its various forms, including adult education, continuing education, lifelong learning, community services, community-based education, and contract training. With a large array of programs with various subjects, it is not rare to see community education programs overlapping with the American community college's career education function since economic development is an important issue and need for many community residents. Reduced resources caused by shrinking public funding and economic recession in recent years may also have forced community colleges to abandon their educational commitment of developing a democratic society (Ayers, 2005), because market-driven programs are skyrocketing and overpowering. How community education programs are implemented deserve more attention.

Given the breadth and complexity of the practice of community education, it begs the question of how community colleges respond to community needs through their community education programs. As the studies cited so far are mainly descriptive and anecdotal (for example, Baker, 1994; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; McGuire, 1988), there is a need for empirical research to further understand how the concept of community education is reflected in practice. The purpose of this study is to examine how community education programs are perceived and administrated to help American community colleges fulfill institutional missions in the 21st century. The primary questions guiding this study were:

1. How do community college leaders perceive the college mission of serving community needs?
2. How community education programs at community colleges are administered to serve community needs?

2. Recent Empirical Studies

Issues focusing on academic and vocational purposes of community college missions have dominated the areas of research (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Although still limited, the concept of community education has gained some national attention. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) conducted a national survey in 2001 to identify the scope of the practice of community programs and services in community colleges (Phinney, Schoen, & Hause, 2002). Survey respondents demonstrated a strong level of community college engagement in a wide variety of programs and services designed to reflect the diverse needs of their communities and commitment to improving the quality of life in the communities; the authors concluded that community colleges play an important role in their communities in encouraging community development and lifelong learning.

The emphasis of meeting community needs was also highlighted in another national survey conducted by Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown (2002). When asking community college administrators to rate a series of external issues based on a Likert scale, 88% of the respondents (910) who answered the question rated meeting community needs important or very important. In addition, in an open-ended question, respondents indicated that addressing community needs for not only workforce and economic development but also for building cooperative relationships with local organizations was one of the current primary areas of emphasis within their institutions' mission. The findings from these two national surveys affirm the notion raised by Boone and Vaughan (1993) back in the early 90s: community colleges should play a role in improving the practice of community education and in repositioning themselves as catalyst, leader, convener, or participant when dealing with community problems and concerns.

3. Methodology

A phenomenological approach was employed for this qualitative study. Phenomenological inquiries focus on how people describe and experience things/feelings through their senses (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). Because the nature of this study was to look at how community college leaders perceive the mission of meeting community needs, phenomenology was an appropriate approach to understand the essences of the practice of community education programs through the lived experiences of the participating community college leaders.

The participants for this study were drawn from community college presidents and their senior administrators who hold leadership positions in the units of Community Education Program, Community Services, and the like in a Midwest state in the United States; only community colleges that had both presidents and directors of community education programs serving in the positions for at least three years were chosen. This "criterion sampling" (Miles & Huberman, in Creswell, 1998) strategy increased the likelihood that all potential participants had relevant experiences and knowledge of the studied phenomenon. Final participants were selected depending on their geographical locations, enrollments, and demographic distribution of the service areas. As a result, presidents and directors of community education programs from 3 urban and 2 rural community colleges were selected. All were Caucasians; all of the presidents were male; three of the directors were female; the average years in the position when interviews took place were 10.7 years for presidents and 7.4 years for directors.

Interviews underwent based on an open-ended, semi-structured protocol, and were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and the recordings were transcribed immediately after the interviews were done for data analysis purposes.

4. Site Descriptions and Their Contexts

Site description briefings are reported one by one in this section to provide contextual information of the practice of community education programs at each participating site.

4.1. Site 1: Timberland College

4.1.1. Background

Timberland College is a rural community college serving an economically depressed region and has struggled with financial difficulties in the past few years. Both President Turner and Dean Thompson of Instruction have worked at the College for over 10 years. They both agree that the existence of Timberland College is very critical to the community: the College is the primary provider of higher education and the leader and catalyst of local economic development. They observe a strong interdependence between the college and its service area, leading to extensive collaborations for providing educational opportunities and services to meet community needs. Due to restraining budgetary support from the state and local governments, President Turner emphasizes the use of Timberland College's primary mission – providing educational programs, as the guideline to prioritize various demands requested by the residents. Dean Thompson consents that he always makes sure his programs are consistent with the mission of Timberland College.

4.1.2. Community Education at Timberland

The magnitude of the community education programs at Timberland College is small and these programs must have an academic value, meaning that students could take such classes as part of their degree plans. Despite limited offerings, President Turner emphasizes that community education is a viable and valuable part of the community college mission. Had not there been recent budget difficulties, more non-

credit community education programs would be provided since there were interests from the surrounding communities.

President Turner and Dean Thompson both spoke a great deal from their experiences regarding Timberland College's relationship with other agencies. President Turner did not use "competitor" or "competition" to refer to other community agencies that also provided learning opportunities, indicating that as leader of the College, he tended to look at the overall region as one entity rather than competitors in order to make much use of the monetary and non-monetary resources they could get. On the other hand, Dean Thompson identified higher education institutions in the neighboring state as competitors, indicating that it was critical for him to recruit students into Timberland's academic programs.

4.2. Site 2: Midway Community College
4.2.1. Background

Midway Community College, located in the heart of a multiple-county area, is one of the leading higher education institutions in the region and is a primary corporate training agency thereof. Dr. Ryan Marshall has served as the president of the College for twelve years; not as seasoned as the president, Ms. Angela Moore has only worked at the College for four years as the Programming Coordinator for the Continuing and Workforce Development Center. They both stress that Midway Community College has established a tradition in maintaining accessibility to its overall service population and a close relationship with key community people, such as chambers of commerce, economic development groups and etc.

4.2.2. Community Education at Midway

Ms. Moore uses ideas of marketing management into her programming process, indicating a mindset of entrepreneurship. In her work, she constantly calculates whether or not a program would be marketable and profitable, because her unit must be self-supporting. When encountering the circumstances where the College has to decline requests from the community, Ms. Moore and President Marshall both perceive that being honest with them regarding the college's limitations is important. Ms. Moore also refers those requests to other competitors for prompt and appropriate assistance since she believes channeling people is a way to help them with their needs, as well.

4.3. Site 3: Bridge College
4.3.1. Background

Bridge College is an urban comprehensive community college serving people living in a metropolitan city. It offers programs in areas of university transfer, technical, and lifelong learning programs. Dr. Mark Baker has served his presidency for over five years; as the chief executive officer of the college, he believes that community colleges are critical to the community and local economic development. Ms. Jill Bayer is the Director and Coordinator for Community Education Programs at Bridge, with the primary responsibility to bring together the non-credit courses to the community and lifelong learners, and to offer programs that could advance people's skill sets. She has enjoyed the privilege of helping community residents out through her work. These two leaders realize that the various innovative responses the college could provide to the residents solidify the closeness of the college-community relationship.

4.3.2. Community Education at Bridge

President Baker acknowledges that community education programs play a very specific role in providing specific products and services that will meet different needs of the stakeholders in the community. In accordance, Ms. Bayer believes that her unit bridges gaps in areas where academic programs have limited

coverage and links every aspect of college missions together. Organizationally after some recent restructuring, Ms. Bayer now reports to the Executive Dean of Continuing Education, and the Dean reports to the president of the College. Ms. Bayer affirms such a reporting line is a good arrangement since it is important for the college president and other senior administrators to know that her unit exists and functions well. President Baker agrees that as a leader, he has to be sensitive to the performance of every unit.

Ms. Bayer stresses that it is critical to take into account whether a program has been offered somewhere else and the set-up cost in the programming process. Because her unit is expected to be able to give money back to the college, she realizes that she has to run it like a business. To President Baker, community education programs is indeed the business side of the community college administration; however, as long as his staff keeps being responsive and respectful to the community without over-expanding themselves, Bridge College as a whole could maintain integrity as an education institution.

President Baker also used neither "competition" nor "competitor" to describe other organizations in the community. Instead, he used "peer" to refer to other higher education institutions in the region. However, he and Ms. Bayer are both well aware of the importance of knowing what other organizations are doing in order to maintain institutional uniqueness and to reduce program redundancy. Besides external organizations, Ms. Bayer makes particular efforts to establish collaborative relationships with the academic programs at Bridge College. She believes it is a way to share campus resources and to reduce the disconnection between credit and non-credit programs.

4.4. Site 4: Lake Community College
4.4.1. Background

Lake Community College, located in a rural town, has been a place that supports learning to all. According to a community survey, over 80% of the population in its service area has had some type of contact with the College. The College resides in Lake City, to where a significant number of people have migrated from other parts of the State and many of those new residents are white-collar, well-educated retirees. President John Gates and Director Sandy Goodman of the Continuing and Extended Education Program have been in their current positions for at least 5 years. They see the College as the regional leader in cultural and personal enrichment. They also agree that the community residents talk about the college being their college, showing a solid ownership that helps the College work more closely with the community.

4.4.2. Community Education at Lake

Ms. Goodman is very vocal towards how the mission of her unit aligns with the institutional mission. She is confident that her unit contributes to fulfilling the institutional mission of providing responsive and proactive learning opportunities to the community. She firmly believes that to be successful in community education is to pay attention to the core of institutional mission and to be a competent college representative to the service areas.

Ms. Goodman reports to the Vice President of Lifelong and Professional Development, and manages her office as a self-contained unit that allows a great deal of entrepreneurship when reaching out to the community. She perceives her unit as a college-like entity, in terms of the magnitude and variety of tasks that the community education programs have to accomplish. She also values the internal connection with academic programs, such as jointly offering a course or recruiting academic faculty to be instructors of her unit, and thinks that the distance between credit and non-credit programs has been shortened because of her efforts.

Both President Gates and Ms. Goodman realize that Lake Community College is not the only place people could go for educational opportunities, especially for continuing education and non-credit

community education programs. Therefore, they spoke a great concern of constantly trying to identify what other regional education providers have been doing.

4.5. Site 5: Novelty Community College

4.5.1. Background

Novelty Community College provides learning opportunities to residents living in the suburban areas outside of a metropolitan city. It is one of the largest community colleges in the state, and its programs and activities are delivered at many locations. Dr. Andy Newton, the President of Novelty, has been in this position for 25 years and he sees the role of a community college president as the connection between the college and community leaders. Dr. Tim Nobles, also a long serving senior administrator, is the Dean of Continuing and Community Education. His job responsibility is to oversee the operation of non-degree continuing education and to interact with other people on campus and at the community centers.

President Newton and Dean Nobles both have witnessed during their long tenures the evolution of an institutional culture of striving to engage capable partners to advance the offerings of the college and to stay connected with the surrounding communities. In concert with President Newton, Dean Nobles also discerns that if the community is changing, the college has to change accordingly in order to meet new needs of the community. These two leaders' articulation of the college-community relationship suggest that the College is more dependent upon its community than vice versa.

4.5.2. Community Education at Novelty

President Newton believes that community program is indeed critical to every aspect of the core institutional missions, including education, enrichment, and economic development. However, he also realizes that community education has been seen as a second-class citizen within most organizations, and not viewed as important as the degree credit program. Therefore, he has envisioned community education programs at Novelty taking on the important entrepreneur role of providing and facilitating different levels of learning to fill in the space that the degree credit programs would not.

Neither President Newton nor Dean Nobles raised any concern over competitors in the region. On the contrary, they said a lot about the collaborative relationships Novelty has formed with various agencies. Both leaders understand that the College do not have enough capacity to solely meet community demands, therefore, they commit to share responsibilities with other agencies. Given the disconnection with the academic degree-credit programs, Dean Noble's unit has also started to collaborate with the academic side of the house.

5. Addressing Research Questions

This empirical study provided data leading to a systematic understanding of community education programs in modern American community colleges. The findings reaffirmed that community education programs nurture and sustain community colleges' ties with their surrounding environments, given their flexibility to provide offerings that are less bound by institutional rules. The following summarizes discoveries of this research guided by research questions.

5.1. How do community college leaders perceive the college mission of serving community needs?

This question is analyzed through the interviewees' understanding of the contexts of their institutions and their relationship to the community. All participants in this study spoke positively of the institutional mission of serving community needs and regarded it as the core mission of every community college. However, adopting the comprehensive community college model has caused these leaders, especially the

presidents, difficulties in prioritizing different needs requested by the community. The data suggested that presidents critically reflected on which needs they tried to serve, and confessed that they could not always treat every request equally, particularly in the face of fiscal difficulties. To cope with the dilemma, the college leaders have developed a diplomatic rationalization to not accept all that is being asked of them, indicating that institutional missions and priorities come before the commitment of serving community needs at least through community education.

Across all sites, there is no difference in community college leaders' perception of serving community needs: both presidents and program directors regarded serving the needs requested from their service areas important and the core institutional mission. However, the presidents tended to consider what it meant to serve needs and how to balance multiple purposes of the college in a more serious manner; their director counterparts seemed to treat them as something natural and without too much reflection. Examples of quotes from two program directors: "*our college is a community college, and we are to meet community needs; we go out into the community*" and "*we are here to serve the people, to help.*" It is possible that role differences result in different levels of understanding of college missions. Since presidents are more involved in institutional mission framing and goal setting, they present a macro understanding of the college's mission of serving community needs. It would be more challenging for community education directors, perhaps, to question the centrality of the mission component that is the purpose for their units and job descriptions.

5.2. How community education programs at community colleges are administered to serve community needs?

This question was largely answered based on program directors' responses because they had more direct first-hand experiences than the presidents. However, collectively, participants from the five community colleges provided sufficient information to understand the practice of community education programs in American community colleges. This section is made up of four overarching segments contributing to understanding practice of community education programs at community colleges.

5.2.1. Distinctiveness of the programs and their ties to institutional mission

According to this empirical study, community education at community colleges is operated by the units like Community Education, Continuing Education, Workforce Development, Extended Education, and so on. In terms of course offerings, these units typically focus on non-credit, short-term, skill-based, and enrichment courses that are requested directly from the community. They are also expected to be self-supporting. In addition, community education programs in community colleges are perceived by their leaders as community-based and learner-centered.

Based on the data, even though the program orientations were different, leaders all believed their current community education practices were ones that could best respond to community needs without hurting the survival of the institution. They also perceived what their units provided was complementary to the credit programs and their services undoubtedly linked every aspect of institutional mission together.

5.2.2. Organizational structure of the community education unit

Where the unit is located in the organizational chart and what the reporting line looks like imply how an institution positions the unit and where leaders' frustration with internal politics come from. Among the five participating community education program directors, 2 held a deanship and the remaining 3 were titled either director or coordinator of the programs. Of the three non-dean directors, one directly reported to the Vice President of Lifelong and Professional Development, one reported to the Executive Dean of Continuing Education housed under the President's Office, and the last was jointly supervised under two units. Except at Timberland College, directors of community education programs at the participating sites

specified that financially, they were self-supporting and did not receive the same kinds of budgetary resources as their academic counterparts did.

The distribution of unit structures suggests that each community college situates its community education programs differently, depending on the contexts of the institution and the visions of its leaders. For example, Ms. Bayer's office is the only one among the five that was not associated with any instructional program and was housed under the President's Office. She said, "*it's working out very well… We're now, we know we have a line on the agenda every month with the executive cabinet… [President Baker] sees the value that we bring non-credit courses to college.*" She clearly believed that her work has been better valued partially due to the college president's endorsement. Midway Community College presents another example: Ms. Moore reported to two different units, one on the degree side and the other on the non-degree corporate side; she thought it was odd working for two departments that had very different cultures:

> *There's been found conflicts… [and] it slows us down… Sometimes it makes [my unit] a little bit harder to get our ideas across to what we figure is important… There's a competing priorities to what other people think that are important.*

To Ms. Moore, internal politics negatively affected the effectiveness and efficiency of her programs, and it was a result of how her unit was placed on the organizational chart.

5.2.3. Programming process

Across sites, community college leaders, especially program directors, applied a similar programming process: a) identify a need and then b) evaluate whether or not to turn the need into a program: if the answer is no, then the process stops; if yes, then start determining content, recruiting instructors, and advertising the new program. Although the process was similar, the leaders assessed each step differently, depending on the contexts of each unit and college. For example, people determined the magnitude of a need differently: Mr. Nobles estimated possible enrollment numbers while other program directors evaluated the need based on whether or not the request had been or could be served by other providers in the area.

A critical element that is related to program planning is the consideration of cost-effectiveness. Due to being defined as a self-contained and self-supporting unit, community education program directors were extremely concerned about whether any new initiation was sustainable, especially when there was a substantial set-up cost involved. "*I have to run [my programs] like a business, or at least break even [on cost]*," shared by Ms. Bayer. Similar comments were made by Ms. Goodman and Dean Nobles.

5.2.4. Relationship with other agencies

Two kinds of relationships were identified in this study: competition and collaboration. Most informants referred to other entities in the community providing similar services as competitors. For example, Dean Thompson at Timberland named universities in the neighboring state as competitors since they were recruiting students mostly from the same population. However, according to these informants, competitors could also potentially be collaborators. All mentioned that if their institutions and programs could not provide the services requested by the community, they would refer constituents to other providers as alternates. Through such process, a new collaborative relationship is formed, which is more important to the community as a whole since it allows for community resources to be more united and coordinated by connecting different educational providers. All participants agreed that they could not be everything to everyone, so it was necessary to partner with other agencies in order to broadly serve community needs.

Such partnerships could easily be found in continuing education courses when the college worked with local industries to train future employees.

Besides working closely with external agencies, community education program directors also made efforts to build internal collaborative relationships with other units on campus, especially with the degree programs. Such relationships were built primarily to share faculty expertise and campus facilities. Additionally, Ms. Goodman and Ms. Bayer confirmed that working with the other side of the house helped their academic counterparts to understand and value non-credit community education programs more.

6. Discussion

Participants in this study all spoke positively of the college mission of serving community needs and they regarded it as the core mission of every community college. More importantly, the data suggested that with restrained resources and multiple missions to fulfill, community college leaders could not always treat every mission within their comprehensive community college framework equally, and they had to prioritize the multiple needs of the community or even at least sometimes decline certain requests. Although community college leaders were continuously committed to the universal mission of serving community needs, they apparently had started to develop a diplomatic understanding of not accepting all that was being asked of them. Besides reflecting on institutional limitations to serve all the needs requested by the community, participants of this study raised the critical task of building partnerships with other community agencies to advance institutional capacity to meet community needs.

Entrepreneurship is the term that best captured the practice of community education programs at community colleges. According to the definition of Carton, Hofer, and Meeks (1998, in Anderson, 2002), an entrepreneur is a person or a team that identifies opportunities, gathers useful and necessary resources, and is responsible for the performance of their decision and the organization. The data of the study showed that community college leaders administered their community education programs by establishing partnerships internally and externally in order to better utilize community sources for the purposes of meeting community needs; these findings fit the characteristics that Carton at el. defined. All in all, with the flexibility to take action on community requests, every aspect of the work in community education programs is being calculating, weighing cost-effectiveness, assessing true needs of the community, and finding the appropriate resources to respond to them. The synergy created from the process and through the partnerships with different agencies seemingly adds sufficient affirmation of community colleges' historical reputation as the community's colleges.

Guided by the data analyzed and answers to the primary research questions of this study, as well as followed by phenomenological inquiry guidelines (Creswell, 1998), I   defined community education as following to provide a systematic understanding of this type of program in the contemporary community college setting:

> *Grounded in the commitment to serving community needs and nurtured by college-community collaboration, community education in community colleges is a type of program that is primarily non-credit and short-term personal enrichment and professional training courses for community members of all ages to meet their various learning needs, a platform for college leaders to fulfill institutional social responsibilities, and a democratic and grassroots approach to open access to education for the public good.*

7. Conclusion: Implications for Practice and Policy

This study provided substantial empirical evidence related to the administration of community education programs for the purposes of meeting community needs to fulfill the institutional missions of

American community colleges. These results have important implications for leaders and administrators working in this area of community college offerings, as well as for policy makers.

As workforce development and entrepreneurship gain more momentum in community colleges, fueled by growing requests from local business and state legislatures, more and more community education programs are partnering with different industries to advance their capacity to meet community needs. The five community colleges in this study had different but all successful partnerships with various agencies, and their experiences offered valuable lessons to other colleges that were establishing partnerships with industries. More specifically, how colleges turn local competitors to potential collaborators provides other colleges valuable insights on a better utilization of overall community resources.

This study also informs community college presidents about the need to re-evaluate and re-position their mission statements when society is changing and the colleges are being asked by communities to be more involved in community affairs. In the case of community education programs, some program directors in the study advocated that presidential support was valuable in increasing the visibility of their units among other credit programs. This represents an effective strategy that can be adapted by other community college leaders to resolve the tension between credit and noncredit programs.

This study informs policy-makers about the need to provide more incentives to reward good practice of community education programs in order to recognize the important work that they are doing. Special grants provided by federal or state governments, research organizations, community initiatives, and other community-based agencies should be made available to the community education programs, which are in need of financial support to start new programs if institutional funds cannot be shifted adequately. Additionally, this study urges policy makers to start using a demographic approach in decision-making and policy development. The variety of community education programs indicates that the audience is made up of people from different age groups. Particularly when numbers of retirees and immigrants are increasing and the demographic composition is changing, policy makers need to be more alert to the target population being served. This study shows that community education programs have the flexibility to respond to community needs, suggesting community agencies and policy makers could designate community education programs to activate and execute social welfare policies and programs that benefit not only the target population but also the community as whole.

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