Contemporary community colleges: presidential perspectives

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In this article, the researchers describe a qualitative interview study in which three current presidents of community colleges in Florida shared their beliefs and perspectives regarding contemporary issues affecting the community college as an institution of higher education. The Florida Community College System, with its network of 28 community colleges, is considered a model community college system in the United States.

Introduction

"The community college is uniquely American" (Albertson & Wattenbarger, 1998, p. 1). The American community college, the most important higher education innovation of the twentieth century (Lombardi, 1975; Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck & Suppiger, 1994), originated with the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901 (Cohen and Brawer, 2003). Starting primarily as junior colleges with an emphasis on academics—and both the premise and promise of higher education for everyone—community colleges are now complex institutions taking on a broad array of educational, social, and economic functions (Bailey & Averianova, 1998). The various curricular functions of the community college usually include academic transfer preparation, vocational-technical education, continuing education, remedial or developmental education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

"Since the early 1980s, community colleges have grown in number, size, and organizational complexity" (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002, p. 573). Currently, the American Association of Community Colleges estimates that there are approximately 1,200 community colleges in the United States, with the estimate increasing to 1,600 institutions, if the count includes branch campuses. According to Striplin (2000, para. 1), "approximately 50 percent of all students who enter postsecondary education enroll in community colleges."

Community colleges serve a diverse group of students who have a wide range of personal and professional needs and goals (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000), and it is expected that the population of students who choose to enroll at community colleges will continue to increase and mirror the increasing diversity of American society (O'Rourke, 1997; Williams, 2002). Contemporary community colleges provide an on-ramp to access for over 10 million students annually (Phillippe, 2000), and numerous forces—a rapidly globalizing economy, an insatiable demand for information and technical education, shrinking public resources—are aligning to catapult community colleges to the center of federal and state educational policy agendas (Townsend & Twombly, 2001). Given these societal forces, "maintaining the educated workforce needed to meet the increasingly complex needs of the students and institutions" (Schuetz, 2002, para. 2) has

become a key and emerging challenge for community colleges.

Vaughan and Weisman (1998) contended that "in many ways the community college presidency is more complicated today than in the 1960s and 1970s" (p. 12), "if for no other reason than American society is more complicated today than in the past" (p. 17). O'Rourke (1997) stressed, "The administrative skills needed to maintain and improve a system are not necessarily the same as those which were required to establish it" (para. 2). Contemporary community college presidents are being challenged "to be visionaries, fundraisers, managers, mentors, arbitrators, economic developers, and, above all, public servants" (Kubala, 1999, p. 183).

"The [community college] president is the person on campus who has the forum, resources, and prestige to influence significantly the campus climate" (Vaughan, 1996, p. 152). Vaughan continued, saying "The president's role is ultimately one of educational leader" (p. 156), with Dassance and Evans (2004) asserting that "today's community college president needs to find a point of balance that supports external visibility as the executive leader alongside internal recognition as the academic leader of the institution" (para. 2). "Using data from a 1986 study, Vaughan (1989) reported that 50% of community college presidents held the CAO position immediately prior to becoming president" (as cited by Cejda, McKenney, & Burley, 2001, para. 12).

Community colleges are "undergoing radical and unremitting change, resulting in the consequent need—even demand—for a renewal in leadership" (Sullivan, 2001, p. 559), and a critical issue facing the contemporary community college is a nationwide sense of crisis in community college leadership (Sullivan, 2003). "The educators who helped establish the country's two-year colleges in the 1960s and 1970s are retiring in record numbers" (Miles, 2002, p. 19). Those who perceive the impending leadership transition as a crisis warn that programs that train community college leaders for years have been dwindling (Evelyn, 2001) and that community college leadership is in peril (Shults, 2001). Baker (2002) characterized the need to replace community college leaders as a changing of the guard and cautioned that the resulting vacancies in experienced presidents, senior administrators, and faculty leaders must be filled thoughtfully and strategically to ensure institutional stability and vitality.

Description of the study

The purpose of the study is to gain insight into beliefs and perspectives of selected Florida community college presidents regarding contemporary issues affecting community colleges. Six key inquiries guide the study's purpose and focus:

1. **Career path**
- Briefly describe your education and training. Please share your career path. What were the jobs that led you to this one?

2. **Philosophy**
- Please provide your general philosophy of administration as it pertains to your specific role and function as president of your community college.
- Do you perceive your position in a two-year community college as different from what you might expect in a four-year university? Why did you choose to work in a community college?

3. **Institutional mission**
- What do you perceive as the historical mission of the community college? What is its current mission? Do you perceive a different mission in its future place in American higher education?
- How do you see the community college changing over the next five years? What can it do to prepare for such changes?

4. **Leadership**
- What do you think are the core skills for the effective twenty-first century community college president?
- Do you perceive a leadership crisis (in faculty, administration or both) in the community college over the next several years? If yes, to what do you attribute this crisis? How do you think the higher education community has responded to the crisis?

5. Major Issues

- Identify four major issues/problems in today's community college. How are you addressing these major issues/problems at your specific institution?

- Diversity means different things to different people. Define diversity and the role it should play, if any, in community college education.

- What are your views on the open door policy of the community college? What specific support and/or remediation services does your institution provide for the underprepared student?

6. Summary

- Please provide any additional closing comments that you would like to share regarding contemporary issues in the community college.

Preliminary steps in the research study entailed the following: (a) reviewing the community college literature, (b) identifying the specific goals of the research study, (c) developing the interview protocol, (d) securing approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida, (e) identifying participants, (f) scheduling interviews, and (g) securing informed consent for each participant. The authors chose a semi-structured interview protocol that consists of questions in six key areas based on a review of existing literature on the community college.

In-depth interviews, which lasted approximately two hours each, were scheduled in either June or July, 2004, and were held in the president's office, at a time convenient for each participant. The interview protocol and schedule of questions were provided in advance with an informed consent letter. The community college presidents were not obligated to answer any question. The individually audio-taped interviews were transcribed by the co-authors. The transcriptions, done independently by each researcher, were analyzed for similar phrases, patterns, ideas, and themes. The researchers drew conclusions and then jointly revisited the summarized data to compare derived congruence in interpretation. Study participants provided member checks on data accuracy, thereby validating research interpretations drawn from the data.

Five community college presidents were contacted about the possibility of participating in the study, and three current presidents of Florida community colleges participated in the semi-structured interviews, where the questions and order of presentation were determined by the researchers. The average number of years of higher education experience among the presidents was roughly 28 years. The average time served at their current institutions was 6.7 years. Hereafter, the interviewees will be referred to as President 1, President 2, and President 3, respectively, based upon the chronological order in which they were interviewed.

Findings

Six dominant themes emerged from the analyzed data:

The career path of the contemporary community college president need not follow the traditional pathway to the presidency.

The career paths of the participants vary. President 1 moved through the ranks as counselor, director, dean, chief affairs officer, provost, and then president. President 2 began his career as a high school teacher, held two administrative positions, became president of a community college outside Florida, served for 8 years, then assumed his present position. President 3 served as a high school teacher, adjunct university faculty member, full-time university faculty member, held three administrative positions, and then became president.

Collaboration is the key to successful administration in the community college.

The respondents shaped the discourse by sharing comments that converge along the lines of collaboration with faculty, staff, and all community college-related personnel. A theme of diversity, with authentic inclusion, resonates as the presidents refer to the importance of making everyone (particularly faculty and staff) feel a part of the institution, its administration, and successes. For example, President 1 remarked, "I believe in having involvement from everyone—especially faculty, not just administrators—in the leadership function." President 2 agreed, stating that his administrative philosophy required, "use of collaborative work, trusting people who are followers, engaging people on what is possible and then exploring horizons." Finally, President 3 said, "My responsibility is to create situations where [all college personnel] can work together to maximize the potential and success of the institution. That is the key to success." Consistent references to a collective *we*, rather than *I, the leader*, highlight the value that each president places on and in all community college personnel—whether administration, faculty, staff, or other personnel. Valuing faculty members and recognizing their voices is a key component in successful community college administration.

The open door, open access policy is a consistent mission, but other missions are evolving.

In reference to the institutional mission, all presidents indicate that the open door policy is core to the community college mission, but that the mission is evolving in other ways. For example, interview data includes the following comments:

- "The common core still exists that a community college has an open door policy, is student-focused (a caring institute) and has a strong emphasis on teaching and learning."

- "The mission of the community college has been consistent throughout the years. It has been to provide access to outstanding learning experiences."
- "The core mission of a comprehensive community college is always to provide the first two years of the baccalaureate degree and to provide educational opportunities for all students."

Regarding evolving missions for the community college, responses include the following:

- "The mission has broadened throughout the years to include occupational programs, community outreach, corporate training, dual enrollment, and four-year degrees."
- "We need to close the gap with minority achievement. Over the next 10 years, demand for higher education will accelerate at a rate not seen since the early 1960s. Universities are not prepared for this. There will be a lot of pressure put on the community college."
- "The concentration at this institution is the AA degree. I believe that the mission will change. I expect that there will be future focus on expanding the curriculum and the baccalaureate degree."

The community college president is the public face and voice of the institution

The interviewees share the belief that the president is the spokesperson for the institution, although each supports decision-making based on collaborative input. Respondents stress that the president must be able to speak to a variety of audiences, internal (e.g., faculty, staff, administration, and students) and external to the institution. Furthermore, they believe that the community college president has to don different hats for different audiences and cultures—political, academic, and business. The respondents agree that the successful community college president must respond to community needs, and, as the leader of the institution, have a strong sense of self.

Major issues for the community college include authentic assessment, funding, multiple missions, and student diversity.

Respondents point to the importance of assessment (of students, faculty, staff, and programs) as key to determining what's working and what's not. All of the respondents in the study highlight funding—fiscal constraints, costs, and money—as problematic for the contemporary community college. President 1 stated, "There will be a continuous challenge with the funding of community colleges and state and public support." President 2 agreed saying, "The cost for doing [all that] we do may create a problem." President 3 candidly

remarked, "To be successful, the college must have money to carry out its mission." Two of the three respondents in the study identify the multiple and evolving mission phenomenon—the community college's attempt to be all things to all people—as a major issue and one that needs clarification sooner rather than later. Finally, all of the respondents agree that increased diversity in the student body—e.g., age differences, academic and physical ability, gender, language barriers, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—is a challenge for the community college.

Contemporary problems and concerns in the community college mirror the diversity in the institution's varied and evolving mission

Respondents' closing comments differ regarding contemporary issues in the community college, although the responses are student-centered. President 1 echoes Vaughan's (2001) recommendation that university professors and incumbent community college presidents collaborate to provide flexible and relevant professional development and/or graduate programs for a committed pool of faculty, who are aspiring community college leaders. He states that, "There needs to be stronger graduate programs related to student personnel. [We also need] more publishing and literature on the community college in higher education, including relevant information for practitioners." Presi-

dent 2 asserts, "There is no lack of challenges—the development of new technology, creative management, student engagement, staff diversity, relationships with part-time employees, including faculty, the demand for four-year degrees and the creation and maintenance of knowledge-workers." President 2 closes with a rhetorical query: "How do we ensure access and better success among our students?" Finally, President 3 offers closing comments rooted in the spirit of the community college: "Community colleges are great institutions. These institutions demand the best. We need individuals who want to work in them, and who embrace the community college philosophy. Many students come to us because we are their only hope. It is important that we not only establish high standards for these students, but that we assist them in any way possible."

Conclusions and recommendations

The qualitative study reported here examines the beliefs and perspectives of current Florida community college presidents regarding contemporary issues affecting community colleges. All presidents hold doctorate degrees. While each has taken a different pathway to the presidency, Presidents 1 and 3 followed a more traditional route than that of President 2.

The presidents stress that collaboration and servant leadership are vital to institutional effective-

ness, and they espouse a common philosophy that everyone has an important role to fill in the overall success of the institution. The presidents highlight the importance of valuing faculty and staff in an engaged and collaborative relationship. The three presidents emphasized the synergy that develops from recognizing, utilizing, and integrating individual contributions into a collective entity that drives the overall success of the institution.

The notion of the community college as an inclusive institution prevails in the respondents' comments. All believe that the open door, open access policy is a consistent part of the community college mission. Pragmatically, however, the presidents are reticent to assert their abilities to do all things for all people without adequate funding and support for faculty, staff and learners. The common view is that the community college should still offer the first two years of the four-year degree, but the interviewees predict that the institution will have a larger role in the delivery of baccalaureate degrees as societal and student demands for the degree increase.

The respondents characterize the community college president as needing to be the consummate public speaker, who must be able to speak to varying audiences in a variety of settings. The presidents fully acknowledge the need for a renewal in community college leaders and leadership—given impending retirements—and pinpoint the concept of "growing your own" from within the ranks of experienced faculty as a viable avenue toward leadership renewal.

The need for accurate and authentic assessment measures (not only for students, but as indicators for faculty and staff), diversity in the student body, adequate funding, and mission clarity topped the presidents' list of major issues in the community college. The need to raise the achievement level among racial and ethnic minority students is also mentioned, but the presidents are quick to point out that diversity takes many forms beyond race and ethnicity. The presidents articulate other concerns about contemporary problems in the community college that are as diverse as the institution's multiple missions. Their closing comments, however, share an underlying focus on creating an educational environment in the community college that focuses on servant leadership and student-centeredness.

Overall, the three current presidents of community colleges in Florida affirm their desire to be inclusive and to be all things to all students. These presidents caution, however, that myriad stressors on resources—human (i.e., faculty and staff), physical, and fiscal—pose continual challenges to realizing this ideal.

The strength of the current study is found in its identification of beliefs and perspectives that current community college presidents use in their leadership positions.

One limitation of this study is that it lacks a gender perspective, as all presidents who consented to participation are male. At the same time, however, such a limitation extends an opportunity for subsequent research in which perspectives can be compared by gender. Also, the study was restricted to those Florida community colleges in which the interviewee was personally known to at least one of the researchers and/or was president of an institution in geographic proximity. Although an effort was made to select a more diverse and representative sample of the Florida community college system, the authors confined the participants to those presidents who agreed to participate within the study's approved timeline. An important strength of this study is the anticipation that its findings can be used to further additional research, as well as assist other presidents in the community college system as they deal with the myriad contemporary problems and issues in the community college.

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