

Community college image —by Hollywood

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*This qualitative study analyzes how the most recent community college film, *Evolution* (2001) depicts and portrays the image of a community college as interpreted by attending community college students. Previous community college research suggests that college choice, enrollment, and funding may be affected by perceived image. Image is greatly influenced by the pervasiveness of film. Whether film is accurate or not, it influences audiences and their understanding of a community college. To date, only one other study has been conducted that explores the community college image as represented in film (LaPaglia, 1994).*

Students enrolled in one of the nation's most noted community college systems (St. Louis Community College) participate in the study. The data is analyzed using the respected research methodology of content analysis. The research participants' analysis reveals their perception that professors are more concerned with research than teaching, and little time is devoted to students and assisting them with their educational needs. Furthermore, conflict and power struggles outside of the college appear to consume enormous amounts of a professor's time and energy. The results of the research indicate that film communicates the "reel" image of a community college and not the "real" image.

Background

Films, in general, are a pivotal information source for many viewing audiences. Since the invention of the magic lantern, films have had the ability to communicate ideas like no other mass medium (McClure, 1993). They offer a front row visual description of persons, ideas, and entities. In addition, films present a visual description of topics that may otherwise have been obscure due to a lack of knowledge. High-

er education films offer potential college bound students and current students an “insider” look at the college experience. Through films, “...students have access to a world of experience, information, and attitudes far wider than ever before possible” (McClure, 1993, pp. v–vi). Research offered by the Motion Picture Association (2003) says that those persons between the ages of 12–24 comprise some 50 percent of movie admissions. Broken down further, the largest age group attending movies is 16–20 because they see more than one film per month (Motion Picture Association, 2004). Interestingly, a study of college students reports that they spend only 4.3 hours per week reading books, newspapers, or magazines. In contrast, they devote 31.18 hours per week (over seven times as much) to movies, music, radio, and television (Kamalipour, Robinson, & Norman, 1998). Students enjoy the movie-going experience because it offers them a means of self-escape, assistance with self-development, and entertainment (Tesser, Millar, & Wu, 1987). In addition, Austin (1982) indicates that college students frequent movies because of “attitudinal dimensions” such as “...educational value, potential for social inquiry, and content and value...” (p. 211).

To date, films about higher education highlight the social aspects of college, which overshadow the academic benefits. Farber, Provenzo, and Holm (1994) claim, “...within the set of movies, classrooms are either settings of spectacle, including spectacle of dreadful dullness, or hardly worth showing at all” (p. 30). Relating specifically to community colleges, the media currently portrays community colleges as the “Rodney Dangerfields of higher education” (Hill, 2005).

Practitioners of higher education, if they do not already, need to care about their community college’s image as directed by Hollywood. They need to understand and respond to how their profession and institution is perceived by potential students, current students, and other interested parties who may fund the community college. Films have the ability to distort images, which may influence societal perceptions of higher education, specifically community colleges. Bottom line, audiences do not simply view a film and walk away untouched. Film is a pervasive information source, whether accurate or not, that influences audiences and their understanding of community colleges.

Research on image

The research is being conducted for two reasons. First, some research does suggest that “...elemental considerations of proximity, convenience, and cost...” affect a student’s decision to enroll at a particular college (Wilson, 1971, p. 626). Beyond elemental considerations is the perceived image of the college held by “social forces” (Grunde, 1976). These social forces include groups who can affect a student’s perceived image of a college such as parents, high school counselors, high school teachers, adult acquaintances, older siblings, and peer groups (Wilson, 1971). Additional research suggests that image has an effect on a student’s decision to enroll in college (Grunde, 1976) as well as which college to select (Wilson, 1971). Grunde (1976) contends that admission personnel need to be attuned to the social forces that drive student choice. A social group which holds a negative image of its local community college may noticeably influence how a student perceives the college.

More critically, another social force is media. What the media has to say about a community college’s image is oftentimes the image accepted by audiences. In fact, “No other public sector can represent a college as

broadly and immediately as the media” (Raisman, 2000, p. 21). Currently, films do suggest that higher education institutions are not academically-orientated (i.e., *How I Got Into College*, 1989; *Pumpkin*, 2001; *Orange County*, 2002). More often than not, “...it is the organization’s image, not necessarily its reality, that people respond to” (Kotler, 1982, p. 56). As a result, Kotler (1987) recommends that institutions of higher education initiate and conduct an *image study* to determine “...how the institution is perceived by its significant publics” (p. 125). This study correlates to an image study using film and its depictions of community colleges.

A second reason for conducting this research is that only one other study (LaPaglia, 1994) addresses community college films and how audiences make meaning about the college’s image. Other research explores community college image and how colleges can position themselves in the marketplace. However, none of the research explores how potential college students and current college students make meaning about community college image. In addition, most film studies about higher education focus on four-year institutions and not community colleges. Critically, it should be

noted that some movies filmed at four-year institutions stress the importance of admittance into a “regarded” university while the community college is either a source of laughter or never offered as a viable higher education option (i.e., *National Lampoon’s Animal House*, 1978; *Getting In*, 1988; *How I Got Into College*, 1989; *Rudy*, 1993; *PCU*, 1994; *Pumpkin*, 2001; *Orange County*, 2002; *Perfect Score*, 2004). Most film studies contain analysis by the researcher and do not include multiple voices or participants. Solely relying on a researcher’s interpretations can overlook the “...well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). Community college image affected by popular culture (i.e., film) is an area that lacks research, particularly from multiple voices.

Review of literature

Considering whether to attend a two-year community college or a four-year university is a question which challenges many high schoolers. Community colleges offer open-door admission, a low student/teacher ratio, and dedicated faculty who focus on teaching, not research. As a result, graduating high school students may find a

local community college meets their educational and social needs while at the same time preparing them academically to transfer to a four-year university. Currently, there are more than 1,100 community colleges in the United States, and they are respected for “...open access and equity, comprehensive program offerings, community-based philosophy, a commitment to teaching, and a commitment to life-long learning” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2004). In addition, students are embraced by an environment that fosters “social mobility” (Bryant, 2001) and the opportunity to grow academically, personally, and professionally.

The number of high school graduates is expected to increase nationally by 11 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005), which may have an effect on higher education enrollment. In addition, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) projects that between 2000 and 2013 total enrollment in degree-granting institutions (associate, baccalaureate, or higher degree) will increase by 19 percent. The age of students is the most critical factor influencing enrollment rates, as the number of traditional students

aged 18–24 is projected to increase (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Students may choose to attend a community college for personal improvement, to up-date work-related skills, or to transfer to a four-year institution (Cohen & Brawner, 1996). Sometimes, attending a community college is dictated by a student's economic status. Other times, the student's decision is driven by social and cultural influences.

Image, which is influenced by social and cultural variables, is intended to strengthen and communicate an organization's mission to varying publics (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1998). An institution's image is dependent on the public's perceptions of the college. The public's subjective perceptions may lead to selective distortion, because "...people have individual ways of processing sensory data" (Kotler, 1982, p. 60). For example, Savage (1989) contends that an open-admission policy, which is a positive attribute for community colleges and its students, may in fact convey that the college is academically "less" than a four-year university or "...not a real college" (p. 3).

Three variables affect the image of a college: "...public opinion, the communicators of public opinion (i.e., the media), and

the quality of the service provided by the college" (Hamilton & Hartstein, 1985, p. 57). Communication is essential since most outsiders have only limited knowledge of the inside of an organization such as a community college. Unfortunately, their knowledge may be largely erroneous.

Image, as it pertains to not-for-profit organizations (i.e., community colleges) is defined by Kotler (1982) as the "...sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of an object" (p. 57). Currently, most community colleges do not have a solid image, because of the diverse programs (Cowles, 1991) the college offers to its highly segmented audience. Townsend (1986) believes that community colleges have developed in multiple directions, which challenges public relations practitioners to effectively communicate a college's mission. To date, community colleges have several institutional directions—comprehensive community college, academically oriented two-year college, community-based learning center, or postsecondary occupational training center (Townsend, 1986).

Evidence offered by Wilson (1971) indicates that potential college bound students often select a college based upon undoc-

umented claims and perceived image. Grunde (1976) presents similar findings and concludes that "...images and perceptions are most salient in determining who enrolls in a college and who doesn't..." (p. 24). Thus, image is a critical factor that can influence a student's decision to enroll. Admissions personnel need to be attuned to the perceived images potential college bound students hold of a community college in order to maintain healthy enrollment. "Admissions personnel, caught up in the day-to-day requirements of their profession, may not be fully aware of all the social dynamics behind the admissions process at their college, and particularly unaware of the image that prospective student have of their college" (Grunde, 1976).

A community college's image may also affect financial support. It is not uncommon business for colleges to receive monetary support from private or corporate donors. For this reason, "...a negative public image often tends to lead to financial pressures and restricted budgets" (Hinton, 1994, p. 2). Consequentially, enrollment and financial support are both contingent upon an accurate and a positive image of community colleges (Hamilton & Hartstein,

1985). Thus, "...an unclear, inaccurate, or negative image poses a considerable threat to any institution" (Cowles, 1991).

"Because of the tremendous mass audience, feature films possess enormous ability to mold, shape, and direct popular beliefs and attitudes" (Hinton, 1994, p. 2). Given the pervasive cultural influence of film on young audiences to shape opinions, administrators, admission personnel, and professors can use college-themed films to understand perceptions that students bring with them to the classroom. In addition, professors can use films to challenge their students to "...become self-conscious of *how* they know *what* they know" (Moore, 1991, p. 173). Those in education need to be concerned because film images have the ability to shape students' comprehension of schooling, specifically, the college experience. One way in which today's students learn to "...read, write, listen, speak, and make meaning of lives" (Aiex, 1988, p. 1) is through the integration of mass media. Students also learn and develop their "...knowledge, habits, skills, and concept development" (Kirkpatrick, Brown, Atkins, & Vance, 2001, p. 90) via the popular culture of film.

Methodology

This qualitative study analyzes how a Hollywood film depicts and portrays the image of a community college as interpreted by attending community college students. To identify the most recent community college film, the researcher did a computer search on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) using the key word search “community college.” The search yielded two movies, which were *Pumpkin* (2001) and *Evolution* (2001). *Pumpkin* (2001) was not selected for analysis, because the film takes place at a four-year university. However, one scene in the film condemns the community college for not being a respectable institution of higher learning. In this study, students enrolled in a major metropolitan area community college answered the proposed research question, “What does *Evolution* (2001) communicate about the community college image?”

Participants

Community college research participants are selected due to their availability and accessibility. Berg (2001) defines this as a convenience sample because the “...category of sample relies on available subjects” (p. 23). The participants are also asked to participate in the study be-

cause they are community college students and engaged in the college experience. Prior to attending college they were faced with preconceived notions about college. Possible questions that lingered for these students before entering institutions of higher education were “should I attend college, should I not attend college, which college should I attend, and what is college about?” Furthermore, undergraduate students bring rich data to the research, as they have recently chosen to engage in the higher education experience. More specifically, undergraduate students are defined as “coming of age” or “developing.” Hence, undergraduate students are more receptive to varying perspectives (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2001), expressing themselves through the ability to think “...reflectively, analytically, critically, synthetically, and evaluatively” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 1), and developing their own sense of identity through value and moral judgment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The undergraduate research participants are students enrolled in communication courses at a public two-year institution in St. Louis, Missouri. Age and nationality are not considered in the study. The college is

a robust institution comprised of three campuses with a rich population of students, which offers more generalizability of the findings. The final data set is 46 community college students. Inter-rater reliability (Stemler, 2001) applies to the research because more than one participant codes the film. Inter-coder reliability is "...concerned with the assessment" or with the "agreement" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 148). Neuendorf (2002) indicates, "This criterion is concerned with whether coders agree as to the precise values assigned to a given variable. This is particularly appropriate to measures that are categorical (i.e., nominal), wherein each pair of coded measures is either a hit or a miss" (p. 149). Using the percent agreement formula, the inter-coder agreement in this study is above 88 percent. According to Weber (1985; 1990), this means "...consistency of shared understandings, or meanings" (p. 17).

Content analysis

Prior to the onset of the data collection, the research participants are exposed to qualitative research and trained in content analysis (i.e., recording and coding). Neuendorf (2002) contends that good coders are trained coders. Content analysis may

be accomplished by humans or by computer. *Human text* coding is used in this research project (Neuendorf, 2002) to provide the richest interpretation of the data. Computers do have some capabilities such as sorting, organizing, entering data, and producing word counts. However, computers do not analyze data; people do. Coding is the preferred analytical technique because it organizes data in a usable form. Berg (2001) contends that "An objective coding scheme must be applied to the notes or data" (p. 238). Open coding, which applies to this research allows for the "...most thorough analysis of the various concepts and categories" (Berg, 2001, p. 251). In addition, with open coding the data is "carefully and minutely read" without a single word or line being missed (Berg, 2001, p. 255). Thus, patterns emerge that uncover the rich data within the film scenes. Ultimately, the process provides plausible explanations to the research questions (Berg, 2001). Once a coding scheme is developed, the data is organized into themes, that is, coding frames. Using open coding and coding frames enables the researcher to compress many words of text into categories. Within the categories, patterns emerge that reveal "...activity, action, and meaning" (Berg, 2001, p. 239).

The research participants use the coding technique after they have viewed *Evolution* (2001) and simultaneously taken descriptive notes of scenes from the film. Upon coding completion, the researcher tallies each theme by means of an absolute frequency count. Absolute frequencies are used in the data analysis because they represent "...the number of incidents found in a sample" (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Krippendorff, 1980, p. 109) and communicate what meanings are perceived by the undergraduate students watching images of a community college in *Evolution* (2001). The analysis reveals the "...amount of attention or the degree to which an attitude or belief permeates a population" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 109). All themes and sub-themes are tallied by absolute frequencies.

Theme codes

Theme codes used in the research project were developed in a qualitative seminar course that analyzed Hollywood's depictions of college life. The researchers watched well over 50 college-themed films. As a result, emergent coding applies to this study because the categories are "...established following some preliminary examination of the data" (Stemler, 2001, p. 1).

The 25 themes include finances, admission to college, campus architecture, campus symbols, academic spaces/activities, student spaces, athletics, faculty members, trustees/donors, administration, campus climate, studying, social consciousness, relationships, students, critical events, parody, surprises/puzzles/contradictions, identity, emotional states, social class, social conformity, rules, colleges as organizations, and miscellaneous (Somers, Bain, Baumgart, Brune, Dawkins, Elliott, Mackin-Tucciarone, Muma, Rullman, Settle, Swyers, Turley, & Zacharias, 2002). The 25 themes are further divided into sub-themes. Data analysis from the research participants offers results from the top three themes with the highest frequencies.

Student participants respond in writing to the prompt, "Explain how the community college [Glen Canyon Community College] is depicted in the film [*Evolution*]." The written response is analyzed by counting concepts which entails grouping together concepts or ideas that assign meaning to the variables.

Analysis and conclusions

The themes with the highest frequency (in descending order) for Class 1 are *faculty member/*

other, relationships/conflict, and academic spaces/lab. The themes with the highest frequency (in descending order) for Class 2 are relationships/power, faculty member/other and relationships/conflict. Both classes analyze two identical themes of the top three but in a different rank order. For this reason, two of the three themes will be discussed in unison.

Faculty member/other

The absolute frequency of faculty members acting in an “other” capacity in *Evolution* (2001) occurs 101 times as noted by Class 1 and 61 times as noted by Class 2. Faculty members at a community college are characterized as “other” if they are engaged in any activity other than teaching and spending contact-time with students. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACU) (2004), an instructor’s primary responsibility is teaching rather than conducting research. Faculty members acting in an “other” capacity is the foundation of the film’s plot. The only time a faculty member is shown teaching in the classroom occurs within moments of the opening scene.

With a strong desire to have a professional title other than “community college professor,” former Pentagon employee,

Professor Kane and aspiring adjunct, Professor Block, tirelessly engage in research. The professors conduct research on a meteor that landed in Glen Canyon, Arizona. Using the community college’s lab, Professor Kane studies a sample from the meteor and learns that the cells are evolving. Eager to share the information with Professor Block, Professor Kane interrupts him while coaching a volleyball game (another example of faculty acting in an “other” capacity). The professors continue their research initiatives throughout the remainder of the film, while battling with the government over ownership rights to the meteor discovery and ultimate destruction of the alien creatures.

There are four noted incidents in *Evolution* (2001), which depict Professors Kane and Block engaged in contact time with students. Contact time with students occurs within moments of the opening scene. Professor Kane enters his biology class, and he informs his students that they all received A’s on their papers. His announcement is followed by his saying, “My standards are nowhere near where they used to be” (*Evolution*, 2001). The next professor/student contact occurs between Professor Block and his female

student Nadine. Needing to earn a better science grade, Nadine attempts to use her sexual appeal on Professor Block to give her a higher grade. According to her beauty pageant agent, she needs a high grade to impress the judges at the Miss Arizona Beauty Pageant. In the third example of student contact, Professors Kane and Block take Kane's students on a field trip to the meteor site. The professors spend more time studying the meteor and the cavern than teaching the students. In fact, the only communication Professor Kane has with his students is when he tells them not to eat the mushrooms located on the cavern floor. The last example of professor/student contact occurs at the end the film when Professors Kane and Block along with Dr. Reid from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and several of Professor Kane's biology students are trying to discover how to eliminate the alien creatures while brainstorming in the community college lab. At the same time, students engage in outlandish antics on campus as they celebrate the end of the world. They guzzle beer, dance around a trash can engulfed in flames, and seek sexual attention. One female student carries a sign which reads, "I don't want to die a virgin." Taking a break from the celebration, two

of Professor Kane's students are present when the scientists discover how to destroy the aliens. In fact, the students announce where the elimination chemical can be found—Head & Shoulders shampoo.

Relationships/conflict

Class 1 reports an absolute frequency of 76 incidents of relationships in conflict, and Class 2 reports an absolute frequency of 58 conflicts, defined as a competitive or opposing action which sometimes can lead to a fight. The relationships in conflict are external to the community college. The primary relationship in conflict occurs between Professors Kane and Block and a United States government official—General Russell Woodman. As a former pentagon research employee, Professor Kane is familiar with General Woodman; they treat each other with a tone of disgust. Conflict occurs when the two men compete over who found the meteor and who will destroy the creatures that are threatening to overrun Arizona and ultimately take over the United States. The conflict heightens when General Woodman breaks into the lab at the community college and steals the files, samples, and DNA sequences belonging to Professors Kane and Block.

Academic spaces/lab and relationships/power

Class 1 and Class 2 report a different third theme. Class 1 reports an absolute frequency of 67 academic spaces/lab and Class 2 reports an absolute frequency of 74 relationships/power. Academic spaces/lab refers to the lab located at Glen Canyon Community College used by Professors Kane and Block to conduct research on samples taken from the meteor. The lab is also where the professors discover that the liquid taken from the meteor is growing, turning into cells, and ultimately dividing. In the final scene of the film Professors Kane and Block and Dr. Reid return to the community college lab to brainstorm how to destroy the creatures. Using the Periodic Table of Elements, Professor Kane finds the answer—selenium.

Class 2 reports 74 incidents of relationships/power in *Evolution* (2001). Similar to relationships in conflict, the primary relationship involves a power struggle, which occurs between Professors Kane and Block and General Woodman. Desiring full credit for the discovery and elimination of the creatures, General Woodman takes Professors Kane and Block to court seeking the judgment that they be denied further access to the

meteor site. General Woodman uses Professor Kane's less-than-favorable military background as leverage to convince the judge that he should be denied access to the site. The audience learns that in his search to find a vaccine for napalm exposure, Professor Kane's vaccine made Army personnel very ill. Those who received the vaccine termed it the "Kane Madness."

Community college concept

To gain a fuller description of how the community college is depicted in the film *Evolution* (2001), the research participants respond to the prompt, "Explain how the community college is depicted in the film." The written response is analyzed by counting concepts. Counting concepts is the most sophisticated analysis (Berg, 2001), because it entails grouping together concepts or ideas that assign meaning to the variables. Both classes analyze the concept of research and contend that Professors Kane and Block appear intelligent and research driven. However, their drive as researchers has a negative effect on their teaching and interactions with their students.

In general, the student participants conclude "second rate school" to describe the community college as depicted in the

film *Evolution* (2001). Classes are portrayed as easy, professors are more concerned with their research initiatives than teaching, college administrators are absent, and students are at liberty to do as they please. Condescending remarks about the community college are laced throughout the film. For example, during the court proceedings between General Woodman and Professors Kane and Block, the General says, “The facilities at Glen Canyon Community College are a joke” (*Evolution*, 2001). Professors Kane and Block also condemn the community college. They view the meteor discovery as their “ticket” out of the community college. Professor Kane feels he has been exiled in Arizona for five years, and the meteor discovery is “pass” to leave. Professor Block shares similar feelings. He desires the notoriety because he wants to win the Nobel prize and receive an honorary doctorate. After General Woodman gains approval from Arizona’s governor to blast the creatures to death, the General tells Professors Kane and Block that “This science project is over” (*Evolution*, 2001). In the end, the professors receive credit for the discovery and ultimate destruction of the alien creatures. The film ends with Professors Kane and Block doing a television commercial for Head & Shoul-

ders shampoo, the product that contains the alien elimination chemical.

Recommendations

This research study suggests that community colleges continue to be portrayed as low quality institutions of higher education. The research participants’ analyses of the film *Evolution* (2001) reveal that professors are more concerned with research than teaching. Little time is devoted to students and assisting them with their educational needs. Furthermore, conflict and power struggles outside of the institution consume enormous amounts of a professor’s time and energy, which would be better spent teaching, interacting with students, updating course curricula, and improving their job skills. The research participants comment that Professors Kane and Block appear intelligent and research driven, both positive attributes, especially for someone who teaches others. However, the students do not associate research as a positive attribute, possibly because research does not have a “personal” effect on learning and success.

Both community colleges and films have durable staying power, yet movies on community college campuses depict the image that community colleges are “second rate” institutions

of higher education. In reality, community colleges offer a popular and a cost-effective way to obtain two years of college. The nurturing environment of a community college features faculty dedicated to teaching, which gives students the chance to flourish academically. In addition, students can engage in social activities, which provide personal growth. Professors and administrators should capitalize on the slanted image of colleges in films because the contexts and contents can challenge students to think critically and

evaluate the situations presented. Clearly, "...college leaders need to be aware of how decisions about institutional features either support or detract from intended images" (Savage, 1989, p. 9). Like film, other media does little to promote within the culture at large the "positives" of the community college experience. Instead of being victim to the media, educators should use it to communicate the "real" image of community colleges while challenging the inaccurate "reel" image.

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