Thinking Like an Educator: U.S. Public Policy and The Role of Community Colleges in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This paper investigates the status and institutional commitments of community colleges in the twenty-first century. It argues that the Brown v. Bd. of Education legal opinion, which ended de jure racial segregation in U.S. public schools, provides a historical framework for understanding the origins and goals of open access community colleges, particularly in shaping these two-year schools' goals of "equality," "access," and "opportunity" into foundational ideals. This essay then considers how these goals have been recast in recent years to valorize narrower and less socially compelling objectives that include institutional "assessment," "outcomes-based learning," and student "success." By tracing and unpacking the shifting rhetorics and ideologies surrounding higher education, this paper seeks to develop an understanding of the role that community colleges and their constituents play in twenty-first century education.

Discussion

In recent years, public higher education has undergone unprecedented changes at an equally unprecedented rate, from greater reliance on contingent faculty, to the erosion of tenure, to greater limits on public financial support, to enrollment fluctuations, and to for-profit education ventures through "private-public" partnerships.¹ These changes, commonly linked together and described as the "challenges" facing higher education, have reverberated through almost all higher education settings and sectors -- big, small, public, private, for-profit, proprietary, residential, commuter, online-only. While all colleges grapple with a host of challenges barely foreseeable even ten years ago, many of these challenges have been felt acutely by community colleges, which have historically served the least advantaged students in the education sector. Unlike most of their four-year counterparts, community colleges' influence is a recent addition to the educational landscape, with most developing into a coherent system in

the 1960s and founded with social justice aims. As community colleges have obligated themselves to serving the least advantaged and most marginal cohorts of students, the time is ripe to consider why and to what extent these commitments have been subtly reshaped, re-envisioned, and realigned in the contemporary era of education policy and politics.

In sum, this paper sets out to investigate the changes and challenges surrounding twenty-first century education initiatives as they affect community colleges. To help think through the role community colleges have played in higher education, and to help bring some focus to their possible futures, several questions will animate this inquiry: What historical ideas about education served as the catalyst for the growth of community colleges? What historical and contemporary forces have shaped community colleges' visions and missions, and how have they done so? Does the community college educational paradigm, of which open access, affordability, and local availability are crucial components, have a future? If so, what is it? Community colleges have historically been one of the few viable options for the least advantaged and most marginal cohorts of students, especially those whose access to higher education has been curtailed by class and race-based exclusions. What, if anything, becomes of the institutional commitments to these cohorts? How might they be preserved, reshaped, re-envisioned into sustainable twenty-first century models? I suggest at the outset that the answers to these questions are highly consequential, given the numbers of students and resources as stake. As nearly half of students in postsecondary schools now enter community colleges, the goals associated with educating such a vast student cohort should be dynamic and historically relevant.

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3 The Community College Research Center reports that, "As of the 2012-2013 school year, 45% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in public two-year colleges, or approximately 7.7 million students. Approximately 3.1 million students were enrolled full-time, and approximately 4.6 million students were enrolled part-time." Available at http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html.
By way of introduction, I acknowledge the ways in which community colleges are an influential medium of higher education. Once viewed as serving a subset of the higher education sector, they have now become an integral component of it. Throughout this paper, I hope to illuminate why it might be that college administrators and faculty often see things from such divergent vantage points and why the various policy agendas of two-year colleges, when unmoored from a mission or vision that includes the insights of faculty themselves, results in confused perspectives, expectations, and theories about curricular innovation and learning strategies. This article hopes to pinpoint some ways to create shared aspirations between administrators, instructors, and students, with the goal of making education vibrant in the information age. In the end, I hope to open up questions about education politics in ways that engage with the day to day practices and policy choices of our schools.

**Foundational Principles: Equality and Access Across Constituencies**

One need only peruse databases housing recent scholarship about community colleges to see the shape taken of topics at the center of contemporary debates. There is much attention paid to pedagogy, to be sure; to assessment and retention; to ways of addressing the needs of "at risk" students; to the influence of personal character traits like persistence and their relationship to student success. These varied topics suggest that community colleges are vibrant places, but they also show how priorities centered on "success" and academic "outcomes" pervade scholarship and presumably, institutional thinking as much as or more than questions about

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4 A recent search in the ERIC database, using the keyword "community college," revealed that developmental education, online education, and issues concerning student engagement were the among the most written about topics.

pedagogy, instructional techniques, and educational content. One is struck by the prevalence of quantitative analysis and by the underrepresentation of articles examining philosophical perspectives on community college education. In their variety, these writings also suggest the multiplicity of goals that community colleges seek to achieve and bear the vestiges of their historical emphasis on education as a means of upward class mobility.

As a starting point for understanding the community college mission, it is worth pointing out that community colleges have sought to provide access to education in the broadest means possible. The movement to expand two-year schools in the 1960s arose in the aftermath of legal and social justice movements that viewed removing educational barriers and eradicating poverty as key predicates to racial and economic equality. Thus, as questions of educational access arose in the middle of the twentieth century, they were largely framed in hortatory language and originated in legal rather than educational discourse. The legal theory of “equal educational opportunity” became a foundational doctrine through which the aspiration for upward class mobility and the absence of barriers to it was captured. In 1973, Mark Yudof, then a professor at the University of Texas School of Law, devised a rather abstract definition of equal opportunity; others, like Wilbur J. Cohen, then-Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education, 

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9 Yudof saw equal opportunity as a trilogy that could be grouped in terms of access, treatment, and outcomes. For example, "equal educational opportunity means that each child must have equal access to scholarly resources; absent a showing of a compelling state interest, equal dollars or equal facilities and services must be provided to each pupil the same. The next definition--the most familiar if not the most traditional--demands nondiscriminatory treatment for all public school students, regardless of race. The third definition of equal educational opportunity focuses on the effectiveness of the resources and processes of schooling." “Equal Opportunity and the Courts,” 51 Tex. L. Rev. 411, 412 (1973).
provided an even broader definition of the term.\textsuperscript{10} The inability to say more concretely what equal opportunity meant lead some to contend that equal educational opportunity, as it had been developed by scholars, represented a fluid, ambiguous concept and as such, provided little in the way of guidance to educators about what kinds of educational priorities should underwrite the aims of inclusivity. James Liebman complained that equal opportunity theorists were imprecise in describing which specific educational opportunities the term should encompass.\textsuperscript{11} Tracy Miller looked at judicial history and extrapolated from it roughly three interpretations of equal opportunity vis a vis educational access: For Miller, "open access" occurs when schools admit students "through a nondiscriminatory admissions process"; "effective access" happens when students gain admission "to institutions likely to lead to graduation and completion of a degree program"; and "real access" is "access to the kinds of educational opportunities that will provide the greatest social and economic opportunity."\textsuperscript{12} Miller's categorizations, coupled with Leibman's observation and Yudof's early work, suggest that equal opportunity cannot be boiled down to a single meaning or be easily quantified. In fact, their observations illustrate how the many perspectives towards what the term means created, and continues to create, a level of uncertainty about how to apply and how to meet equal opportunity in educational settings, especially in schools such as community colleges that express a commitment to access as a goal. In addition, Miller's categorizations (and those that precede her) provide a useful framework for discerning

\textsuperscript{10} For Cohen, equal education opportunity meant that "society should make it possible for each individual to have the opportunity to maximize his or her in-born capabilities, and this must involve, in addition to access to superior schools, the protection and promotion of the individual's health, and the provision for meaningful work and income within society, if that person is capable of working, and a basic minimum income for those who cannot work." "Defining Equal Educational Opportunity," 61 Geo. L. J 845, 849 (1973). For additional (and even earlier) commentary on the meaning of equal educational opportunity, see Bowles, (1968). "Towards Equality of Educational Opportunity," 38 Harv. Educ. Rev., 89, pp. 95-98.


the various ways in which equal educational opportunity doctrine has been construed at all educational levels. Her analysis further reminds us that in the aftermath of the United States Supreme Court's *Brown v. Bd. of Education* opinion, questions about opportunity and access as educational goals were often situated in a legal framework. Educators themselves were often essential advocates in these debates, as were the students whose education was being contested, providing a crucial point of intersection between legal, educational, and local communities. These developing synergies that came to the forefront in *Brown*, I would argue, deserve attention, but I further contend that *Brown*'s effect on the rhetorics of education are of particular interest and relevance to how and why community colleges evolved as they did. While *Brown* was not the first or last court case to shape public policy debates about the role of education in American culture, its unique national resonance and social justice aims lay the foundation for discourses of access and opportunity.

At first glance, *Brown* might seem remote from community colleges' educational agendas as both a temporal and practical matter. But *Brown*, decided in 1954, appeared barely a decade before community colleges developed as a coherent system of education. As *Brown* made clear, the goal of ensuring educational access was to circumvent the social isolation and eventual professional disadvantages engendered by racially segregated learning environments. To this extent, the opinion was important because it established the practical benefits educational access produced. Yet another legacy of *Brown* was the recognition that segregated education affected black children's sense of self; to this extent, the court recognized that education produced hard-to-quantify affective benefits. Thus, in delving into the psychological consequences of unequal educational endeavors, the court signaled the extent to which the law was willing to protect the

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13 See, for example, the *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) opinion and the school busing cases of the 1970s.
idea that schools needed to set their priorities toward addressing students' needs at the individual, cultural, and social level. I call attention to these legal interventions because they provide a context for understanding the social and political ideologies that informed education policy in the mid-twentieth century. It is against this backdrop of concerns, and within this environment of legal interest in schooling, that community colleges originated and formed their missions.

Indeed, in their landmark work, The American Community College, Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer remind us that the historical origins of these priorities operated on two levels. As Cohen's and Brawer's work describes it, concerns about "access" and "opportunity" were couched in terms of the "social equality" that schools were expected to produce. This shift in priorities, on the one hand, signaled a more restrictive view of community colleges' missions, as questions of equality became rooted in notions of individual uplift. For example, the question governing community colleges' missions at the time was not, as the authors put it, "'what knowledge is of most worth?'" but "'what knowledge yields the greatest tangible benefit to individuals or society?'" (pgs. 1-2). This early focus on the less abstract questions of what counts as knowledge and what one does with it in favor of questions about the practical effects of education for both the student and community suggests goals that begin to diminish the ideals of "access" and "opportunity." Community colleges, it seems, were important sites of knowledge production and were important for their contributions to the self and others. But they were also designed to produce something of concrete social value -- the self-sufficient citizen.

On the other hand, as the authors go on to remind us, community colleges, specifically, were developed as a collective means to solve social problems, engendered by the post-Brown belief that education had a unique ameliorative effect where inequality was pervasive. To accomplish this goal, community colleges were afforded a certain level of flexibility when it
came to achieving their aims. Within this context, Cohen and Brawer note that "the community colleges thrived on . . . new responsibilities because they had no traditions to defend, no alumni to question their role, no autonomous professional staff to be moved aside, no statements of philosophy that would militate against their taking on responsibility for everything" (pg. 3).

Cohen's and Brawer's description points to the unique status of community colleges at their inception: they could be institutions with liberatory ideals because they were able to exercise self-regulation and self-sovereignty in terms of their day to day practices and underlying ideologies. But they were also designed to be cognizant of progressive social and political ideals, encompassed in their commitment to providing access and opportunity. Importantly, though, what is absent in both views of education are priorities organized around assessment, outcomes, learning objectives, and more generally, quantitative paradigms of success. Indeed, it would appear that regimes of quantification were what community colleges were formed against.

It is clear that the community college of this era that was able to "take responsibility for everything" was, consequently, a place that was beholden to only the most local interests and constituents.

Along with the notion that "access" and "equality" and "opportunity" were worthwhile educational goals, Cohen's and Brawer's description seems unrecognizable a mere half-century later. What produced these shifts in goals and institutional emphases and why? Theories ranged from those who argued, as has K. Patricia Cross, that "community colleges were entering a 'less exuberant' phase of maturity in the late seventies and early eighties, a period during which the community college mission became the subject of considerable debate and concern" (pg. 209).15 For Cross, this lack of exuberance was due to a stagnated vision of their role in society. Others, such as Thomas Bailey and Irina Averianova, argued that community colleges' successful futures

15 See, for example, *Journal of Higher Education*, (March/April 1989). v60 n2.
would be contingent on embracing a more expansive sense of mission. Or as they put it, "additional missions and activities will successfully be carried out by community colleges when they are functionally associated with the core activities of the college, and can thus be carried out more efficiently than by other organizations" (pg. 1).\footnote{See, for example, "Multiple Missions of Community Colleges: Conflicting or Complementary?" Community Coll. Research Center. Oct., 1998.} Taken together, these writings suggest that community colleges had entered an era of institutional decline and that their diminished status and flagging sense of purpose could be overcome by tailoring their visions and drawing on their unique status in the community. By following these paths and absorbing new education conventions, the authors indicate, local colleges could thrive once again. Yet educational elites also seem to concur that the mission itself was something in need of reevaluation and realignment.

**Contemporary Concerns: The Politics of Learning Outcomes and Assessment**

While all of these explanations for community colleges' shifting emphases seem persuasive, I would argue that they both paradoxically point to and yet miss something important about the politics of education, and more specifically, about the politics that drive decisions about funding and curricular control. College missions, as analysis presented elsewhere in this paper has indicated, are context dependent. They engage with and respond to the political sensibilities of the current moment. By the late 1980s, ideas emanating from *Brown* about access and equality were at best temporally remote and at worst disparaged in U.S. education policy. Education politics, like U.S. politics in general, entered a neoliberal phase, where an emphasis on protecting global capitalism supplanted ideas about social justice and equality.\footnote{For a sustained example of this argument, see Duggan, L. (2003). *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.} In his book,
Fear and Learning in America, John Kuhn\textsuperscript{18} takes issues with the premises of the Reagan administration's 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report, a document that painted such an alarming picture of U.S. education systems that it is credited with inspiring the education reform movements that developed in its wake. Kuhn uses the report as a launching pad to evaluate the history of trends in testing and reform in America's secondary schools. His analysis is suggestive of a reformist trend that bubbled up, first in the secondary schools, especially those serving marginalized communities, and then into community colleges. His analysis further suggests that these trends are specific to certain segments of education: those schools publicly funded and serving marginal communities are more likely to face intense scrutiny, as are the teachers in them, than private and elite institutions. The bifurcated nature of this scrutiny suggests something politically crucial: When education becomes beholden to (neo)liberal ideologies, those perceived to be most capable of self-regulation and self-governing become most able to exercise autonomy. And, as Kuhn's gesture towards such Reagan-era education doctrines indicates, these ideas have as much in common with state political ideologies as they do with education policy.

Thus, rather than looking at community colleges only from the standpoint of an education paradigm, it might be helpful to think about how the status, organization, and governing principles of two-year schools intersects with theories of politics and state action. In some ways, the dilemmas facing community colleges are reminiscent of those outlined by political theorist James C. Scott in his book \textit{Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed}.\textsuperscript{19} Scott argues that modern statecraft is an exercise in tackling the problem of "legibility"; that is, public policy choices exemplify the state's attempt to organize

\textsuperscript{18} Kuhn, J. (2014).
\textsuperscript{19} Scott, J. (1998).
and make more efficient its bureaucratic functions by reshaping its subjects and their practices into knowable, standardized formations. These converted goals became evident in diverse sets of circumstances, from modes of agriculture, to urban planning, taxation, and of course, education. The problem with state ideologies that come from such a limited point of view, as Scott reveals, is that "formal schemes of order are untenable without some elements of the practical knowledge that they tend to dismiss" (pg. 7).

While virtually all educational sectors are increasingly under pressure to adopt a business model that construes education in terms of a consumer transaction rather than an educational experience, this binary idea regarding the purpose of schools might be especially problematic because it underestimates the nature of the tension among education stakeholders, especially teaching faculty. In Scott's terms, one way to better understand this tension is to think about those stakeholders directly responsible for delivering education as possessing "local knowledge" and those stakeholders advancing change though lacking direct familiarity with education processes are, in his terms, "thinking like a state." Within this framework, Scott's book throws into relief another aspect of public two-year education in particular: The extent to which community colleges at the administrative level adopt a state-like perspective towards educational objectives.

In exposing the tension between "local knowledge and practices on one hand and state administrative routines on the other" (pg. 24), Scott explains how and why powerful entities like the state take on totalizing qualities. He is careful to note throughout his book that these "schemes" are undertaken with the good intention of improving the human condition, but by their methodology, they wind up "transforming population, space, and nature under [the state's] jurisdiction into the closed system that offers no surprises and that can best be observed and
controlled" (pg. 82). In other words, the result of state action is no transformation at all, but a reductive and stagnated bureaucratization of those things that fall within the state's purview. Under these circumstances, the state winds up exercising its power to limit, curtail, oppress and quantify rather than expand, include, liberate and envision.

In Scott's critique of this limited state vision, a paradox emerges: While striving to improve human circumstances, the state has inevitably made them worse by foreclosing opportunities to envision social progress. One could argue that his analysis overlaps with many of the debates surrounding contemporary higher education. That is, contemporary higher education is fraught with the tensions and conflicts that Scott identifies as commensurate with liberal statecraft. These attributes largely inhere in the technocratic vision of education held by policymakers and the educators against whom these visions are presented. His analysis also suggests a shift in the purpose of education, not only in terms of access and equality, but in terms of the potential of education to produce a free people capable of democratic participation.

The imprint of Scott's theory appears in a variety of different education contexts. One of the most potent examples manifests in the way in which liberal state ideologies in the contemporary moment seek to privatize responsibility. To "see" like the state today, in an educational sense, means to hold individual schools and individual students accountable for their own successes and failures, regardless of the social, political or economic impediments to that success. The politics of this viewpoint appear in both scholarly and popular accounts of education success and failure. The sources from which these paradigms emerge seem quite diffuse. For example, Debbie Epstein, writing in a British context, argues that the failure of progressive educators to engage with the notion of accountability has left political conservatives to appropriate and redeploy the term in ways that are undemocratic and contrary to progressive
ideals. Other scholars interested in a U.S. context argue that as accountability is increasingly measured by student achievement on standardized test, the stakes increase for educators. As they go on to note, this shift inaugurates its own politics, as "educator effectiveness has been measured to suggest that the traditional model of professional accountability is shifting to a political accountability model" (pg. 60), one that more heavily relies on methodologies that draw from the field of economics rather than education. In addition, other scholars look at the politics of education by interrogating the nexus between "state political culture" and the educational outcomes produced in that state. In all of these scenarios, political power dynamics have shifted the emphasis about who and what should control educational decisions away from the "local" knowledge of educators and towards more data-driven, remote, and centralized forms of assessment that by their very terms are abstract and impersonal.

Not only must instructors adhere to mechanized versions of what constitutes pedagogical effectiveness, recent writings suggest that students themselves bear responsibility for creating the conditions for their own success and failure, despite personal histories that include social, political, and economic inequality. These narratives appear to have developed as part of the pushback against assessment models that place the blame on educators for student underachievement. In an effort to rationalize how and why students continue to underachieve academically, despite programming and support services meant to address differential outcomes,

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21 See Piro and Mullen, (2013), who contend that, "In its most dispassionate interpretation, accountability is construed as a simple accounting or explanation of an event – one in which there is not an expectation or culpability implied. On the other extreme, accountability is swiftly becoming synonymous with dissatisfaction, punishment, or high-stakes consequences." "Outputs as Educator Effectiveness in the United States: Shifting towards Political Accountability." *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, v8 n2 pp. 59-77.
a whole field of literature has developed. A recent book by journalist Paul Tough\textsuperscript{23} pins the problems of educational underperformance on students' lack of character traits that lead to success. Writings like Tough's, which appear to redirect the educational focus by shifting the emphasis to students' lack of accountability and irresponsibleness, make the notion of educational progress less a matter of structure and institution, and more a concern of individual disposition, personality defects, and a lack of cultural conditioning.

I aim not to dismiss the validity of some of the above claims with respect to teacher accountability and student affect. Of course, inadequate instruction and students' own lack of motivation impede teaching and learning. But this scholarship demonstrates the extent to which political concerns that are neither student-centered nor institution-centered often are part of the core dilemmas with which schools must contend. Thus, these political agendas often have less to do with education and more to do with ideologies that aim to relocate resources and power away from communities in the name of "progress." In Paolo Freire's canonical text about education reform, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, the author points directly to the harms produced by these kinds of educational imperatives. Freire reminds readers that critical pedagogies, rather than managerial philosophies and technical solutions, are the key to developing students' sense of agency. According to Freire,\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{quote}
Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (pg. 34)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} See Freire, P. (1972).
In other words, Freire's contribution to education theory lies in his realization that education has two potentials that exist in tension: it can either equip students with the ambition to resist and challenge the conditions of their oppression, or it can continue to be a technology that produces passive instruments for the ruling class. In this context, some skepticism about what drives outcome and assessment-based rationales might be in order.

**Conclusion**

I believe education at every age and level is an unqualified good, unassailably beneficial to the individual and to society and the world. I believe it is as important an indicator of a society’s state of health as nutrition and housing. I entered full employment as an academic late in life. What have I learned since I began teaching at the University of Essex more than ten years ago? That something has gone wrong with the way the universities are being run. Above all, I have learned that not everything that is valuable can be measured.

Marina Warner, "Learning My Lesson."\(^{25}\)

As Warner's passage illustrates, questions about the meaning of education in the twenty-first century extend across institutions, geographies, and cultures. This paper has examined how, in the context of U.S institutions, education policy in the last fifty years has reshaped priorities away from dismantling systems of inequality to a preoccupation with assessment and outcomes. These institutional shifts, which originate in state politics, appear to situate contemporary education on a post-equality landscape. Warner’s epigram also reminds us that educational visions are at their core social visions; they are cultivated by and cannot be separated from larger questions about equality in the larger culture.

By way of a conclusion, I suggest that while this shift in priorities may seem to address the lingering effects of systems of inequality, they force education policymakers to ignore the ongoing ways in which persistent systems of inequality shape outcomes before students even enter the classroom. Thus, these means of educational improvement are also problematic.

because they perceive solutions to lie at the institutional rather than at the societal or cultural level. That is, with the right rubric or assessment plan, students cannot help but "succeed." I contend that we should remain skeptical of narratives that leave the impression that something called "success" can operate as a useful educational goal or mandate. Community colleges are not only a venue of education, they are a form of it as well: They are places of learning, of cultural confrontations, of accepting all students in a way that is risk-taking rather than risk-averse, and at the institutional level, they speak to the idea that education contains a collective good as well as an individual one. In the end, given the growing ranks of the educationally and economically disenfranchised in the United States, it is worth examining what kinds of policies and politics exacerbate the tendency to ignore community colleges' uniqueness.

**References**


