

**The Comprehensive Community College:
Who Took "Comprehensive" and "Community" Away?**

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I have been thinking for some time that we need to improve the status of continuing education and community services (CE/CS) in community colleges, in other education institutions, and among the general public. We have a problem: nobody seems to really value what it is we in this profession do. Top administrators pay lip service. Our own parent association, AACJC, touts "Building Communities" as the mission of the community college, which is what we in CE/CS do--that's really our mission within the community college--and yet the 2-year credit transfer programs seem to be the only "legitimate" part of the community college in the eyes of those associated with that part: faculty, administration, and trustees, and to some extent I'm afraid, community members.

Someone asked me once, "What's in it for us?" as we were talking about establishing an alternative high school on campus. It's true, we earn no state aid from these students' enrollments because it's a secondary program--the aid goes to the public school and we bill them for our costs of operating the program. It's true, we have precious little space on campus now--why crowd the "regular" program? It's true, we are not sure we want that kind of student on our campus. Won't dropouts on campus make the college look bad?

I'm afraid we've come to the point that we think first of whether a program can pay for itself, make a profit, or in some other way serve the college rather than thinking about truly being of service and providing high quality learning opportunities for people. There are people who did not succeed in the traditional setting for some reason. The fact is, there are people who are uneducated, illiterate, or functionally illiterate, who because of this condition do not function at an appropriate level nor contribute to society at an adequate level. Mainly, though, I am a continuing education administrator, and I believe that it is an obligation to provide service when a need is recognized. It's not just my job, it is my professional obligation to do so. I wish those responsible for the credit programs would appreciate that concept.

By the way, that alternative high school program is thriving thanks to a professional, dedicated, staff. I remember a meeting with public school superintendents where, after hearing a

description of our alternative high school, one of them said, "Gee, it sounds like what a high school should really be like and maybe will be in 10 years or so if we keep working at it." The students in the program are a delight; they are bright, young people who, for the most part, are progressing and value the opportunity for this experience. I'm told of one young woman who said, in effect, "I don't understand, this is school and I like it!" And isn't this enough? People are learning. We are having an impact on people's lives. Society will benefit. Isn't this part of our mission? Isn't it legitimate? No, I think I'm just a wild-eyed optimist in the eyes of the traditional academicians. The Alternative High School is OK they say; we'll tolerate it, but it's not a credit program so it's not really a college program. They'll accept the graduates in their academic programs if they can prove themselves worthy, I suppose.

We call ourselves "comprehensive" community colleges, and our presidents brag about the large number of people being served, including those in continuing education noncredit programs! But once they get past the opening remarks they dwell on the academic programs. They don't talk much about the many noncredit programs that are changing people's lives for the better. They don't talk much even about the vocational programs that have suffered in recent years as community colleges have tried to "legitimatize" them by making them more like the academic credit programs. The academic credit programs get top billing, get most of the dollars, and a lot of the recognition. It seems to me that it is hypocritical to call ourselves comprehensive when we don't really believe in many of the things we do through our continuing education and community service programs.

Reflecting on this problem, I wonder if the reason we don't fully appreciate our CE/CS programs is because we who work at community colleges judge an educational program on the basis of our experience with the formal education experience; i.e., we completed high school, went to college, graduate school, etc., and since that was our experience we have that model to go by. That may also be the case with community members who are college graduates. Then I also recognize that many academicians in the community college want to be like their senior college counterparts. As CE/CS has trouble being recognized within the community college, so does the community college have difficulty being recognized by the 4-year college. The old "junior" college image still exists, and I'm sure some 4-year college people look on community colleges as illegitimate.

The attitude among many students in arts and science programs is that their educational program is something they have

to get over with rather than a learning experience and accomplishment in which to enjoy, savor, thrive, exhaust their curiosity, and take pride. So much emphasis is placed on program completion and meeting time requirements that people forget about the learning to be accomplished. The attitude that they "have to be there" as they do in high school prevails, whereas in the CE/CS programs people are there because they want to be, so the learning is more meaningful. People actually learn because they want to, rather than because they have to. The learning outcomes are clearer, and students are happy to demonstrate their knowledge and competence.

We must take the time and put forth the effort to tell the story about the benefits of CE/CS programming, even if it means losing some productivity. We need to write the articles, take the photos, write the news releases, make the speeches, develop the public service announcements. We need to tell the story of the thousands of people we serve, how we contribute to the economy with business development programs and programs of training and retraining, how we meet the mandatory continuing education needs of the many occupations and professions, how we're helping to reduce illiteracy with our basic education programs and our language programs, how we give school dropouts a second chance, and how we make the major effort to strengthen and maintain our free enterprise system and our democratic way of life through enabling people to fulfill their civic responsibility. We're the ones who give hope to the undereducated and the unemployed through our responsive programs that help people make a living. We do it at low cost and with high quality. We give meaning to the slogan "learning is a lifelong process."

If we don't do this, we will continue to lack recognition, and when programs are reduced or cut, CE/CS will suffer, but even more important, the comprehensive community college will suffer, and people and society will suffer. Most of all, we must maintain the commitment to what we do, and we must continue to provide those quality services our CE/CS mission calls on us to provide. If we lose that commitment, all is lost and we become like them and CE/CS as we know it will cease to exist, and so will the "comprehensive" community college.

Counterpoint

Nancy Kothenbeutel

President, NCCSCE

I think you are absolutely right, Conrad; professionals in CS/CE don't get the respect they deserve. The difference between us is, I think we should be thrilled. Since its inception CS/CE has been the trend setter. We are the community in community college. We have consistently offered high quality programs that met both the needs of the community and of the individuals within it--our students. We have treated them both as valued customers upon whom our job depends. We have offered programs to all segments of the community and we have offered them at times and locations that are convenient. It is in great part this lack of respect and the resulting lack of visibility that has allowed us the latitude to continue the risk-taking, creative approaches that lead to effective intervention. I know at times it makes us feel as though we are not being taken seriously. I know we sometimes aren't looked at as having 'real' students. I am also painfully aware of the dangers of further funding cuts when we aren't touted as an integral part of the institution. Frankly, I'd rather take the risks than trade in our freedom for the bureaucracy that comes with being 'legitimate.'

You are right, too, that presidents give us lip service and then focus on traditional programs. Still, if imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, somebody must be paying attention to what we do. I remember when "traditional" programs were only available during the day and for full-time students. Now part-time and evening students are actively recruited. Some of these programs are even being offered off campus and in modules! That doesn't sound very revolutionary to you, because you've been doing it since you started in the field. I think, however, that it has been the CS/CE people 'pushing the envelope' that has served as a major force for movement of the traditional programs toward a more customer centered orientation. I will even go so far as to take at least some credit for the influx of nontraditional students into traditional programs. I think many of them started with us.

In many colleges across the country traditional programs have begun to model their delivery modes after those in CS/CE. Maybe they will even compete with us! That's good! It will motivate us to do even more. The National Council on Community Services and Continuing Education (NCCSCE), established in 1969, is one of the oldest councils of the American Association of Community Junior Colleges. As a profession, we are approaching

maturity. It would be easy for us to lean back and rest on our laurels. It would be easy, but it would be wrong. A part of our job is to reach out and set new limits and new standards. We have always been the first to start new programs, provide new services, and take new risks--in other words, to redefine "comprehensive" in the comprehensive community college. Most of the new efforts work--some of them don't. It's okay. We will keep trying. I like the role of gadfly. Naive though it may sound, I believe the public values quality programs that are easy to access. They want to get what they pay for, and with us, they do. We will continue to find ways to fund our programs just as we have in the past. Some of it will come through tuition. Some through grants and contracts. Regardless, we will have to stretch. We always have. Maybe that's just a part of being illegitimate. I still think the freedom is worth it.