

America's Broken Promise

America's Broken Promise

Bridging the Community College
Achievement Gap

EDUARDO MARTÍ

Foreword by John Ebersole



HUDSON
WHITMAN

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*This book is dedicated to
Patricia, Julie, Emily, Jason, Jelani, Laila, Ruby and Rose.*



This book is also a tribute to Bernard Luskin, former Director of the Kellogg Community College Leadership Project, and Robert E. Kinsinger, former Vice President of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. These visionaries were instrumental in making the connection between the American Association of Community Colleges and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Their work was extremely influential in providing a credible foundation to the fledgling community college movement; they were also instrumental in molding the leaders who stewarded the growth of the movement. The Kellogg Foundation, there in the beginning, is still a strong supporter of our important schools.

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Acknowledgments

This book emanated from a compilation of my experiences as a community college faculty member, administrator and eventually president of three community colleges, Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges at the City University of New York and, lastly, as interim president of Bronx Community Colleges. Along my long career many have influenced and molded my thinking. From Joshua Smith, who as president of Borough of Manhattan Community College saved my administrative career, to Georgia McNeil, the Chair of the Board at my first presidency, who guided me as a young and inexperienced president, to Matthew Goldstein, who gave me the opportunity to lead Queensborough Community College and allowed me to witness first hand how one can transform a system, to James B. Milliken, who pulled me out of retirement to lead Bronx Community College, giving me the opportunity to capstone my career in a place that represents all the vicissitude that community colleges endure.

However, the students whom I taught and worked with were my best teachers. Listening to their needs, trying to help them meet their goals, and respecting their efforts to seek a better future for themselves is an impetus that cannot be ignored. It is my hope that this book helps future administrators and stakeholders to better the lot of the countless students who need our help.

Also, I want to thank, my friend and colleague, John Ebersole, who believed in this project and who was instrumental in bringing it to completion. Ms. Molly Gage, whose superb writing ability enabled me to polish my ideas and mold my words so as to make this a more readable work. And, thanks to Sue Petrie, publisher, who guided this project through its development.

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Foreword

John Ebersole

America's Broken Promise is not for those seeking further evidence of poor performance by our nation's 1,136 community colleges. It *is* for those who want a detailed explanation of the nuanced complexities that often place community colleges at odds with themselves. This book is neither hypercritical nor pollyannaish. And Dr. Eduardo Martí asks for no quarter by those who would hold him and his fellow CEOs even more accountable for results. Instead, he points to the actions and resources needed to meet the many expectations of the unique collection of critics surrounding community colleges.

With this book, Dr. Martí offers those of us who care about community colleges a complex portrait of these institutions—now serving more than half of America's 21 million college enrollees. And, he offers far more than a provocative title.

Dr. Martí's narrative follows the evolution of the community college as a bridge between secondary and tertiary education, and correctly sees its impact on both individual and community well-being and economic opportunity. He speaks passionately and

at length about “the promise” [of access] that is implied by our society as community colleges are positioned to serve as a starting point for all with a high school diploma or GED, regardless of college-readiness or the ability to pay (thanks to Pell Grants).

Readers should especially appreciate his thoughtful analysis of the problems created by open admission that are enhanced, often unrealistically, by the expectations that accompany. Having dealt with unready, unrealistic, and often, unhappy students himself, Martí provides a heartbreaking picture of what happens when good intent alone runs aground on the economics of higher education today.

As a fan of John Dewey, Martí sets forth his own beliefs in the importance of community colleges: “. . . blending pots [for assimilation] for New Americans,” helping immigrants learn a new language and lexicon, as well as an understanding of democracy as a system of national governance. Dr. Martí was a refugee from Castro’s Cuba, and knows firsthand the importance of the schools of and for democracy.

In the second half of his work, Dr. Martí engages directly with the politically sensitive issues of community college achievement (the “Broken” part of the promise), and graduation.

Long criticized for their poor graduation rates by politicians, tax payer groups, and fellow educators, Eduardo points out that over half of those entering the community college’s “open door” are not college ready and will require various forms of remediation. Additionally, he acquaints the lay reader to the “all things to all people” philosophy that has long plagued community college leaders seeking to boost graduation rates among students not necessarily intending to graduate.

By some estimates only one-third of a typical community college’s enrollment is made up of students seeking a degree. Many leave after sufficient exposure to a vocational subject to gain employment. Another third intend to complete their general

education requirements for a bachelor's degree (typically with significant tuition savings), and then transfer to a four-year school (without concern for graduation or a degree). Thus, only a final third look upon the associate degree as an objective in itself. Yet, to not "graduate" *all* of these degree seekers is measured as failure.

Rather than criticize his fellow presidents or suggest that their institutions are underperforming (what some may have read into his title), Dr. Martí points to the realities of un- or under-prepared students, and the differing expectations for the inexperienced and unfocused students with little clarity of purpose or motivation to succeed. These students will require a level of personalized attention few programs are staffed to provide.

In addition to outlining the consequences of a "broken promise" around academic achievement, he spells out ways by which institutions can come closer to fulfilling the achievement promise, by naming, facing, and resolving the institutional challenges which often get in the way.

Introduction

Almost 50 years ago, I entered the complicated world of community colleges with little intention of staying in the field. I was trained as a biology researcher and had no interest whatsoever in pedagogy. The teaching job I received at Borough of Manhattan Community College gave me a way to feed my small children, but I saw it as a mere opportunity, a steppingstone to what I considered a “real job” at a “real university.”

But something unexpected happened along the way.

The year was 1966. Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation was opening doors previously shut tight to ethnic minorities and women. The City University of New York was beginning to establish an open admissions policy whereby all students with a high school diploma were accepted regardless of their academic performance in high school. Suddenly, every high school graduate found a place to study among the colleges of the City University. The most underprivileged and sometimes the most underprepared found a place in the system’s community colleges. The open admissions policy at CUNY appealed to my deep sense of social justice. The only requirement of students was a willingness to learn.

As the open door policy was put into effect, the colleges were thrown into an entirely new sphere. There was chaotic growth in

enrollment, and a need to rapidly change the curriculum to adapt to new populations; numerous debates ensued about how to maintain standards while facing the influx of underprepared students, and vigorous disagreements took place about developmental education and remedial education. The problem of how to provide high quality, robust education to the underprepared was, and continues to be, a challenge of enormous complexity. The new avenues open for study and knowledge formation were intoxicating to a young researcher. I may have started my community college tenure as a dubious teacher, but I quickly became a convert.

My love affair with the mission of community colleges sustained me through 12 years of teaching and 28 years as a community college president. Now, with the clarity of vision provided by the wisdom of age, I offer the words in this book to a new generation of teachers and administrators. We must find ways to ensure that community college students enjoy the opportunity of access to higher education, but we also need to make every effort to ensure that our students succeed.

I believe this quest to be not only for the benefit of individual students but for the public good. In fact, I believe that education is the basis of a functioning democracy. Our population must be better educated to become good citizens. Without a solid understanding of historical context, without the ability to think critically, without the ability to communicate effectively, people can be manipulated, governments can cease to be responsive to the needs of those it represents, and demagogues can thrive. Therefore, universal, high quality, effective education is a matter of national importance. In addition, in our global economy, the younger generations must prepare themselves to meet challenges posed by a rapidly changing and interconnected workforce. A high school education is just not enough. Our population must be better trained so as to be both productive citizens and thoughtful workers.



Community colleges have been called America's Colleges because our leaders, administrators, and teachers believe that opportunities are limited only by one's persistence. Although we hold that all students, given time and resources, can be educated, we have not always made good on fulfilling this egalitarian aim. Questions about our community colleges persist today: can our institutions deliver on our critical mission? Are we the very best schools to educate and train our population? Perhaps most importantly, are we raising expectations of a vulnerable population without a real possibility of providing a pathway to success?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, we cannot answer any of these questions conclusively. In a report issued in May 2014, while 57 percent of students attending a public 4-year, degree-granting institution graduated in 6 years, only 20 percent of first-time full-time students pursuing an associate's degree or certificate at a public 2-year institution completed said degree in 3 years. (Kena et al., 2014). Notwithstanding the students (and their numbers are not nominal) who choose to attend a community college to take only one or two courses or who transfer out to a 4-year college before graduation, an 80 percent non-completion rate is universally unacceptable.



This book takes a practitioner's view of community colleges and offers an informed opinion of what is necessary to transform our schools and fulfill the community college promise to provide our students a path to a better life. It explores the origins and evolution of community colleges. It explains how these institutions evolved from institutions created to fulfill the dreams of individuals to better themselves, to institutions needed by local

communities to prepare an educated and well-trained workforce. It explores how community colleges shifted from junior colleges and finishing schools to first provide a bridge between high school and 4-year colleges, and to then provide a bridge between post-secondary school and professional work. It describes how these colleges became an important component of local economies and how they became attuned to business community needs.

The book also explores the role of the federal government in the development of these colleges. The federal government has, since 1947, been instrumental in developing the national network of low-cost, accessible, local 2-year colleges. The involvement is grounded in the federal government's designation of community colleges as the institutions where America's workforce is trained (and often retrained), where underprepared youth can find a way into productive employment without incurring a crushing debt, where poor and underprepared ethnic minorities can begin along the pathway to the middle class, and where all who seek a post-secondary education can find it. Today, the federal government is more involved than ever before in making our schools both accessible and affordable.

Additionally, this book explores the current public awareness of the community college sector and explains how renewed interest—often expressed by the federal government—has placed a bright spotlight on outcomes, sometimes overshadowing the promise of opportunities. Although the attention is generally welcome, it has revealed the harsh reality that community college performances are less than effective. The book delves into the root causes of the failure to make good on the colleges' institutional promise. Without apology, the book exposes the difficulties presented by the sector's lack of selectivity; it shows the complexity of teaching *all* students who depend on community colleges to access a postsecondary education; and it points to the severe lack of academic and student support services that make

the colleges' job so difficult. Deep examination provides insight into why graduation rates are so low and why success rates are typically so dismal.

There are serious problems facing community colleges, and this book does not shy away from revealing them. But there are also many promising practices at community colleges, and this book leverages them to illustrate the various alternatives to improving student (and institutional) outcomes. To that end, this book addresses new and effective approaches to using pedagogy and student support services to improve completion and graduation rates. It shows how relying on a diverse funding stream, from both government and private philanthropy, for example, can provide stable funding for our schools. These approaches and the others that I explain here should be taken as evidence of the further evolution of community colleges. Our institutions are places where individual aspirations can be fulfilled, but they are also places that substantively contribute to the nation's well-being.



As a long-term practitioner, I believe that the future of community colleges is bright. Public awareness, businesses, and philanthropic organizations have begun to substantively concentrate their efforts on community colleges. I hope that this comprehensive attention will ultimately result in producing a new kind of institution—one that is squarely centered on student success; one that considers the failure of any student equivalent to an institutional failure; and one that sees itself as intricately connected to the needs of the local community. An educated population is our best defense for a functioning democracy and for a thriving economy. Our colleges will continue to play an important role to these ends.

I wrote this book in the hope that present and future practitioners will benefit from the mistakes that I've made and the

successes that I've helped facilitate during my presidencies. I also wanted to write in a way that provides members of the public a plain language insight into the workings of these important institutions. Accordingly, in this book, I explore how I have transformed institutions from places where students are merely provided with opportunities, to places where students' aspirations are turned to success.

Chapter 1

The Perils of the Promise

The Early Years

Although the America's College Promise Act indicates that community colleges are more important to America's postsecondary education system than ever before, the institutions often underperform and underwhelm students'—and society's—expectations. Today's community college leaders, administrators, faculty members, and policymakers work incredibly hard, but they struggle to define effective missions, accurately identify the needs of students, and devise appropriate measures of achievement. Consequently, systematic solutions that can solve the institution's problems have yet to appear. Now that the Obama administration has deemed community colleges crucial to preparing America's global workforce, it is time to revisit, redefine, and reinforce the promise community colleges extend to their students and their communities.

Most community college leaders, administrators, faculty members, and policymakers take pride in knowing that community colleges are the *only* postsecondary institutions that promise to educate and prepare *all* interested Americans for future degrees and professions. The promise, however laudable, puts community colleges on the line: our schools must meet the needs of students with widely divergent academic abilities and professional goals, with an

extraordinary array of social challenges, and with sometimes excruciating financial obstacles. Unsurprisingly, our schools too often fail.

As a 30-year veteran of community college administrative affairs, I know that we can only serve our students by mending our historic institutional promise. We must therefore develop the strategies that will enable us to *effectively* educate *all* students. To begin this work, we must establish a clear and candid accounting of the institution's crucial place in American education. We must accurately identify the stubborn problems that continue to hold back our schools. We must avoid the empty assurance of piecemeal approaches and partial solutions. Above all, we must develop experiential and competency-based models for learning and technology-enabled pedagogy that will equip community college students for educational and professional success.

I believe in the vitality—in fact, the primacy—of community colleges. I also believe that we, as leaders, administrators, faculty members, and policymakers, must adopt a more comprehensive, practical, and participatory approach to our institutional practices. Today we must work to consolidate our import and invigorate the promise that makes America's community colleges so vital.



To redefine the expectations of what an American community college can and should be, we turn first to our students. Unlike other postsecondary institutions, our colleges are characterized by the hyperlocal needs of our communities. This necessary attention to locality means that community colleges not only differ from more traditional postsecondary schools but also differ, and sometimes radically, from other community colleges. When it comes to our institutions, there simply is no one-size-fits-all: a community college like Valencia in Orlando will tailor its offerings to students seeking professional skills in tourism and vacation-related indus-

tries; meanwhile, a college like Fort Peak in Montana responds to the needs of a large Native American population and students who care deeply about language and cultural preservation.

Devising solutions to teach and support diverse community college students is a complicated task. Yet the colleges often face the very same obstacles when working to meet student need. First, there are challenges associated with inadequate preparation. Public community colleges accept anyone with a high school degree, so classrooms are filled with students with dramatically different experiences and intellectual abilities. This creates a heterogeneous classroom environment that is made the more challenging by students who believe that community college is a step down from a “real” college (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). Such a perception is fueled by the too-general assumption that community colleges offer inferior educational and professional opportunities. It is also reinforced by a potentially pointless five-hour placement exam that determines incoming students’ skills in writing, reading, and computational ability. A January 2014 report from the Community College Research Center revealed that as many as 68 percent of students routinely place in at least one remedial course.

Second, there are the challenges associated with scarce financial resources. To put it plainly, many community college students lack the funds to attend *any* postsecondary school. Without substantial monetary support, few incoming community college students will achieve the success they dream of and strive for. Further, because most community college students must pay for at least some remedial studies, they often begin their postsecondary education with a debt in preparation *and* a debt of dollars. Students will pay for remedial courses with federal and state financial aid, but doing so eats up money that would be far better spent on more advanced coursework.

At Bronx Community College (BCC), where I’ve served as interim president for the 2014–15 academic year, we boast

low tuitions of less than \$3000 per year. However, even despite the relatively small number, many of our students simply cannot afford to pay. In the fall 2015 semester alone, 1584 students had outstanding bills that prevented them from registering for the spring 2015 semester and completing the associate's degree in June. We were able to buoy 1000 students through private grants, but we just couldn't help the others. Over and over again, we find that these students—the ones who do not believe that they can achieve their goals and who cannot find enough material help to do so—give up their dreams of education.

Third, and probably most devastatingly, there are the challenges that are woven into the social fabric of our students' lives. I saw these difficulties myself nearly fifty years ago as a young biology instructor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. At the time, I thought I was a pretty good teacher. These were the late sixties, way before the advent of experiential learning, cohort-based problem-solving methods, technology-aided instruction and other more contemporary pedagogical techniques. At that time, a good teacher was someone who could keep the students engaged, who could cover all the material in the syllabus, and who could provide well-crafted multiple choice questions that the majority of students answered correctly. Let me repeat, I thought I was a pretty good teacher.

Then I faced a situation in which I realized I just could not measure up to the need. "Adam," an African American student who was doing well in my course, stopped coming to class. When he reappeared, I asked him to stay and talk. I assumed that something was going on at home, a pretty common situation among my students. I asked Adam about his absences and lectured him about the importance of attending class. At first he was annoyed, but eventually he actually looked hurt by my tirade. Finally, he stopped me midsentence. After some awkward

hesitation, he came out with it: he had to skip class because his traveling buddy was sick.

I don't like to admit it now, but at the time I almost laughed. What kind of excuse was this? Why would he skip class because of his buddy? Then he told me that he needed to go to school with a friend because going from Harlem into Manhattan meant going through "hostile" territory. When I suddenly realized what he meant, I also realized that his struggle for an education went way beyond trying to get good grades. For Adam, like for a lot of my students, it was a matter of life and death. Even though I actually *was* a good teacher, I never figured out how to help Adam. He simply stopped coming to class.

I wish I could say that things have changed for the better, but community college students still work to overcome so much. A recent student at Bronx Community College provided a stark reminder of the radical student need our institutions strive, but often fail, to meet. Kalief Browder came to Bronx after being held at Rikers Island for three years without bail. Although charges were dropped and Kalief was eventually released, he was obviously deeply scarred from his experience. At BCC, he struggled to find his footing. But he worked hard and gained his high school equivalency diploma in Future Now, a BCC program for formerly incarcerated students. By the spring of 2015, Kalief had declared a liberal arts major and boasted a GPA of 3.562. Unfortunately, but probably unsurprisingly, Kalief's success was not enough to sustain him. He committed suicide in the summer of 2015. The BCC worked hard to meet Kalief's needs, but his life and premature death remind us that we have yet to provide a safety net with which to catch our most vulnerable students.

Students like Adam and Kalief, and administrations like Queensborough and Bronx Community College illustrate the simple fact that community college students are different. To reach

these students, our institutions need to recognize that we serve a far more vulnerable population than is or even can be served at other postsecondary institutions. We must also recognize, and often over and over again, that as community college leaders, administrators, faculty members, and policymakers, we have to be sensitive to our students' education goals, but also to their sometimes desperate need to improve their financial and social situations.



Our students' challenges help to outline the contours of the needs our institutions strive to meet, and the numbers support the illustration. The American Association of Community Colleges 2015 Fact Sheet tells us that in 2013, students seeking undergraduate education at community colleges made up 46 percent of all students seeking postsecondary education. The students differ markedly from students entering traditional 4-year schools: 72 percent are aid-seeking students, 62 percent are full-time students who also work full- or part-time, and 36 percent are the first generation in their families to attend college (AACC 2015 Fact Sheet). Beyond each student's personal hopes and dreams, their collective numbers indicate that the success of *these* students—students who seek but who cannot always find success in postsecondary school—is absolutely crucial to America's continued social and economic vitality.



Of course, many at community colleges readily recognize the impossible position our institutions occupy. We must meet students' complicated needs, accommodate ever larger numbers of students (AACC, 2015), ensure competitively high curricular standards (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), provide evidence of

materially improved retention rates, and spend fewer dollars to meet our goals. It is no wonder that community colleges fall short on delivering their educational promise (Abrum & Roksa, 2011; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). However, when community colleges fail, it reveals as much about the extremely complicated role of education in achieving some semblance of the American dream as it does about the institution.

The current federal administration appears to recognize this, too. In the 2015 State of the Union Address, President Obama argued that community colleges are at the frontlines in fighting for education equality and educating America's global workforce (Reed, 2013). To support the institution's import, President Obama envisions spending 60 billion dollars to make the first two years of community college "as free and universal in America as high school is today." The money would make community colleges more accessible and would help enact the American Graduation Initiative to produce 5 million more postsecondary graduates. The practical application of President Obama's proposal is impossible to predict, but the proposal shines a national light on both the contemporary struggle of community colleges and their undeniable importance. With their open-door admissions policies, unbelievably passionate teaching force, and incredibly dedicated administrators and leaders, community colleges continue to offer one of the last avenues whereby every student can theoretically achieve the financial security and well-being virtually promised by a good education and exposure to opportunity.

Thanks in part to the federal administration's attention, community colleges play a big part in the conversation about American postsecondary education. Theorists and practitioners who have long informed community college development have taken active notice. Walter Bumphus, George Boggs, Gail Mellow, Eduardo Padron, Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins, in particular, have continued to uncover new paths for

community college infrastructure and curricula. The zeitgeist argues that the time is right—now—to investigate the historical context that has informed the institution's current challenges, to redefine the community college mission and its potential for positive change, to call attention to solutions, and most importantly, to reinforce the community college's vital work as a contributor to a global workforce and an instrument of democracy.



The birth and development of community colleges are rather vividly reflected in the college's contemporary promise and problems. As is the case today, the idea of community colleges was underwritten by a call for broader access to education and opportunity. This call drew on John Dewey's belief in the necessity of participatory education to found and promote participatory democracy. According to Dewey's theories, limiting admittance to education limits social discourse and, in turn, limits possible engagement with and within society. Early community colleges were built in part on the belief that access constituted an aspirational democratic promise.

While the appeal to access catapulted the community college to an important place in American education, it also deepened institutional responsibility and accountability for student achievement. Most education historians are well aware that the demands associated with both the necessity and desirability to educate more, and more kinds of, students created many of the difficulties that persist today. I believe, and I am hardly alone (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Bensimon, 2007; Dowd & Tong, 2007), that the wide gap between access and achievement is the most intransigent problem facing community colleges today. However, the tension is not only as old as the community college's first iteration, it serves

in important ways as the engine by which community colleges continue to develop.



Looking back, we can see the many ways in which the tension gained traction. The schools that paved the way to later community colleges took root in the popular foment for education that began in America in the mid-nineteenth century and took a wide hold in the late 1890s. Previously, America did not possess any conceivable *system* of higher education; instead, it mostly possessed the disparate colleges that were founded in the late seventeenth century to serve the uniform cohort of white, wealthy, male elite (Brint & Karabel, 1989). When in the mid-to-late nineteenth century a collective desire galvanized for a broader education base, a more formalized system began to be imagined (Veysey, 1965). The motivation was prompted in part by a “turning point” in the 1890s, when general society began to believe that a degree in higher education could signal specialized preparation and function as a sought-after commodity in the burgeoning American marketplace (Veysey, 1965, p. 264).

The demand called for a more comprehensive effort toward institutional development, and the beginnings of development helped to fuel the demand. Although community colleges were not yet identifiable in this system’s initial—and initially haphazard—form, the schools that helped to cast the model for the more democratic, more socially egalitarian, and more socially engaged agenda that would come to characterize later community colleges began to proliferate after the passage of the Morrill Acts.

The Morrill Act of 1862 is usually situated as a watershed in the development of public education. It *was* a landmark, and especially on the road leading to community colleges. After

all, it signaled one of the first major instances of federal aid intervention in higher education. Perhaps more importantly, it nodded toward the democratic impetus behind higher education's expansion (Thelin, 2011). The legislation was pushed by Vermont Senator Justin Morrill, gained traction during the Civil War, and was signed by Abraham Lincoln in July of 1862. By gifting 30,000 acres of federal land to each state to sell in order to finance the development of institutions devoted to "agriculture and the mechanic arts," the first Morrill Act reflected a substantive national desire and need for a more comprehensive, more *accessible* system of higher education (Hilgard, 1882; Land-Grant College Act, 1862). The second Morrill Act passed in 1890. It targeted former Confederate states and sought to make institutions similarly focused on agriculture and mechanics available to African Americans and former slaves.

The acts set a stage on which a system of higher education, and later, a system of community colleges, could play out. Ideally, by providing more access for more students, such a system would encourage the formation of institutions and student populations that markedly and meaningfully differed from the exclusively white, wealthy, male elite educated at America's earliest colleges (Diener, 1986). While the first Morrill Act cannot be reasonably considered to have come close to opening higher education to all American families, the act succeeded in laying out both the plans and the rhetoric by which a more egalitarian mission of American higher education could be sketched.

The acts brought about other changes, as well. For example, the acts helped set a different tone for higher education classrooms. Early American classrooms often overwhelmingly (and unsurprisingly, given early Americans' pedigrees) relied on a conservative European and particularly English pedagogical approach (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958), as was recapitulated at Harvard and the College of William and Mary. The style was grounded not

in knowledge production but in knowledge transmission (Diener, 1986). When classrooms began to diversify, faculty members began to opt out of the traditional, classically oriented curricula and teaching styles and embrace a more practical, mechanical, and ultimately vocational focus (Diener, 1986).

The acts also helped to more firmly embed the theme of democratization into America's educational institutions (Vaughan, 1986). This was the result of the first act's intent and its language. The latter explicitly articulated the promotion of "the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life" (Land-Grant College Act, 1862). Its words reflected a desire to construct a system of education that emphasized upward mobility in America's otherwise rigidly stratified society. This is the reason for the symbolic and sometimes-aggrandized role the acts play in conversations about the systematization of American higher education (Thelin, 2011).

A note on this overstated symbolism: despite general claims to the contrary (claims usually resting on a belief that early immigrants to America's shores equally benefited from democratic ideologies), social plasticity was not underwritten in early America (Thernstrom, 1964). It was certainly and emphatically *not* underwritten at the earliest American colleges, which educated a very particular group of men. The Morrill Acts worked to situate education, and specifically higher education (Ratcliff, 1994), as a tool by which an American dream of a more practically democratic, upwardly mobile sort could be conceived. The opportunity offered by the promise of wider access to higher education (and the related promise of a far more expansive common-school education) was at least initially a hard-won testament to the growing national belief in equitable attainment and an important contributor to the conception of the American dream (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Of course, neither the first nor second Morrill Act resulted in a sudden outbreak in construction of universities, colleges, or

community colleges. The acts did not prompt the more explicitly democratic-minded and community-based educational agenda that characterized later community colleges. The acts merely helped to invite a larger chunk of the American population to participate in the possibilities of higher education's still relatively obscure promise. In this capacity, the acts serve as an ideal frame through which to view the growing belief during the late nineteenth century that education could serve as a meaningful and potentially desirable avenue to American participatory adulthood. They can also be seen as helping to drive the momentum for the educational infrastructure that would be more meaningfully constructed at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond.



By the turn of the twentieth century, Americans collectively placed a much greater emphasis on accessing education in general and on accessing higher education in particular (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The numbers of students seeking higher education reflect the growing aspiration: according to Ratcliff (1994), at the beginning of the century, 4 percent of American young people sought higher education; by the end of the 1920s, the percentage had risen to 12 percent. It followed that more interest resulted in a jump in increasingly diverse students. Although still certainly “remarkably homogenous” by today’s standards (Veysey, 1965, p. 271), the students seeking higher education began to consist not just of the white, wealthy, male classes, and not just of the Morrill Act’s industrial classes, but also of the women who started their search for an educative home in higher education, and—although far less often—of the immigrants who sought refuge on American shores and the former slaves and their descendants who sought an education equal to whites (Veysey, 1965, p. 271).

The consistent inflow of new and (moderately) different students, more than any particular external force, mandated the institutional expansion that left a permanent mark on America's nascent education system. Consequent to increasing interest and increasing enrollees, tertiary institutions in particular began to grow and proliferate at a faster and more far-reaching pace than secondary education (Ratcliff, 1994). The counterintuitive development laid the foundation for structural reactivity. In fact, the characterization of the American system of education as vulnerably *reactive* rather than advantageously *proactive* persists today, and for good reason (Ratcliff, 1987). The task of preparing students for the rigors of higher education fell (and still often falls) most heavily—and most inefficiently—on the shoulders of the higher education institutions themselves. It was and is the responsibility of these institutions to provide remedial courses for unprepared students, to develop standards necessary for success, and to communicate those standards to secondary schools (Ratcliff, 1994).

Consequent to this inefficient alignment, a gap opened up that substantively separated secondary and tertiary levels of education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958). The gap also constituted an opportunity; one that the relatively new institution of the proto-community college could bridge and fill. We might argue that the unsteady and irregular beginnings of the broader standardization and systematization of American education made just such an institution necessary (Cohen, 2001).

From the start, community colleges were totally unlike private and land-grant institutions. The latter two institution types found it necessary, although not necessarily ideal, to reach back to secondary schools to better define the success of their own institutions. The former were originally perceived and created as *already* placing one foot in secondary education and one foot in higher education. Unlike more traditional institutions, the institutions

that would set the standard for today's community colleges were, in idea if not in practice, both proactive and connective.



All educational institutions in the early twentieth century—from junior high schools to high schools to early community colleges to colleges and universities—operated in a state of flux. Early community colleges were junior colleges (Vaughan, 1986) and were especially fluid, in part because of the intermediary role they sought to serve (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Junior colleges developed in tandem with junior high schools, also “conceptualized and initiated” during this time period (Beach, 2011, p. 6). But junior colleges and junior high schools shared more in common than an adjective. The two institutions were structurally and conceptually connected: both were usually housed in high schools or on high school campuses (Koos, 1924), and both were originally conceived as steppingstones to high school or college.

Consequently, junior colleges operated in a connective capacity, reaching out from the public-school system (Beach, 2011; Eells, 1931; Koos, 1924) toward the baccalaureate degree. Leonard Koos (1924), a classic junior college researcher, famously described this divisive-yet-connective role as “isthmian” (p. 16). Junior colleges, wrote Koos, connected “the mainland of elementary and secondary education with the peninsula of professional and advanced academic training” (p. 16). Today, a better term might be “liminal.” Indicative of a literal threshold, the liminal status of junior colleges *should* have allowed the institution to act as a doorway through which students could exit secondary school and enter more traditional, more rigorous institutions of higher education. Junior colleges were thereby conceived as *both* an extension of secondary schooling *and* an anteroom for more tra-

ditional higher education schooling. They were an endpoint *and* a possible pathway to traditional 4-year institutions and degrees.

The flexibility built into their beginnings ensured that junior colleges could offer an entrance through which students could access various educational opportunities. However, in practice, the flexibility was a liability. The institution's doubled focus not only called into question its organizational identity, it aligned the institution more convincingly with secondary schools than with traditional 4-year institutions. In many ways, the alignment was purposeful. Junior colleges' early advocates and first architects, men like Henry P. Tappen, Alexis Lange, and William Rainey Harper, imagined a German approach to American higher education. In their view, junior colleges served as insulating institutions that protected the traditional university's "emphasis on scholarship, faculty specialization, and research" (Diener, 1986, p. 4). Analogous to secondary schools and positioned as "upward extensions" (Koos, 1924, p. 5), junior colleges provided an educational path that offset the pressure on universities to provide for the unprepared.

While the position advocated by men like Tappen, Lange, and Harper emphasized access, it emphasized the inferior nature of that access. Lange of the University of California–Berkeley and Harper of the University of Chicago developed junior colleges as important contributors to secondary and tertiary education, but both men viewed junior colleges as more intimately connected with secondary schools. Lange, for example, supported terminal programs and technical subjects and wanted junior colleges to function as the 13th and 14th grades of a high school education. The purpose of a junior college in his view was to act as the "continuation and culmination of secondary education" (Lange, 1917). It should not be occupied with the higher-education goals of more aspirational entrants: "the junior college will function adequately

only if its first concern is with those *who will go no farther*, if it meets local needs efficiently, if it enables thousands and tens of thousands to round out their general education” (p. 471–72, emphasis added).

Harper, for his part, established a junior college at the University of Chicago, influenced Stephens College in Missouri, and established Joliet Junior College, the first and oldest community college, as an addition to a high school program in Illinois (Vaughan, 1982). He advocated and developed a similarly encompassing but similarly subordinate role for the junior college, describing its benefits as varied but as ultimately ancillary to what was offered at more traditional institutions. Junior colleges were to meet the needs of students who did not want to continue their studies; were to prompt students who would not otherwise do so to engage in some higher education work; were to enable professional schools to raise their standards; were to prompt high schools to raise *their* standards; and possibly most importantly, were to take the pressure off of institutions that did not possess the resources to educate students through the junior and senior years of higher education (Eells, 1931).

The early but firm association with secondary schools ensured that the attributes that made the junior college institution so ductile conferred on the institution a rigidly *subordinate* position in American higher education. After all, it is not easy or intuitive to understand how an institution, even a proactive one, can hold a close association with the secondary level of education *and* offer, compete or partner with the kind of education available at the tertiary level. The junior college's position spoke to its foundationally unique and ultimately riven role: born in the gap between secondary and higher education, the institutions were tasked with a contradictory duty to be all things to all potential students, a duty for which today's community colleges are still accountable.



That junior colleges sought to educate a diverse student body to both go further *and* to “go no further,” two clearly different and seemingly incompatible mandates, merely points to the earliest iteration of the tension between access and achievement that remains the contemporary community college’s hallmark. From the critical perspective of sociologists Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel (1989), the tension is wholly negative. Brint and Karabel famously cite Burton Clark’s watershed article (1960) to describe the junior college’s inherent inability to fulfill both mandates—to provide access and facilitate achievement equally—as the junior college’s “cooling-out” function.

While the institutions helped to shore up a national ethos about America as the land of opportunity, they simultaneously suggested that in this land opportunity is limited—both in terms of content and availability. That early junior colleges labored to educate students to both go further and to go no further, to privilege both transfer-oriented programs for interested, viable students, and capstone programs for secondary school, serves as apt illustration of the competing pressures that fostered all future development.

Perhaps surprisingly, not just *in spite of* these competing pressures and conceptual contradictions but *because* of them, junior colleges thrived. In the early years of the twentieth century, the schools carved out a crucial niche: unlike more traditional options, the institutions could offer students much more obvious continuity with secondary school, much wider access to elements of higher education, and the much more obvious benefit of locality. These core advantages made the colleges indispensable to the communities in which they operated, even in the early twentieth century. It was, after all, the junior colleges that met the needs of America’s industrial boom after World War I, (Witt,

Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994, p. 44). The ability to offer flexible educational opportunities ensured that the colleges experienced dramatic population and institutional growth. By 1930, Harper's Joliet Junior College, founded in 1901 and routinely recognized as the first junior college, was joined by 449 such institutions (Eells, 1931, p. 70).



The growth provided early justification for the institution. It also exacerbated its internal contradictions. The institution's hyperlocal focus, in particular, which contributed to its dramatic expansion, gave rise to an uneven and disconnected evolution (Beach, 2011). Junior colleges were able to answer to very particular regional needs, but doing so reinforced an institutional insularity that separated the colleges not only from traditional tertiary institutions but from other junior colleges, too.

In fact, the hyperlocality that characterized the earliest institutions (and that we still prize so highly today) obstructed the broader systematization of the junior college sector (Dougherty, 1994). The institutions did not have to rely on the interrelatedness or unification (usually prompted and promoted by regional associations) that characterized other tertiary institutions (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958). However, without the benefit of this kind of unification, junior colleges were hindered from developing a powerful voice about matters related to faculty, administration, students, accountability measures, funding, or anything else that impacted operation and growth.

This began to change in the 1920s, when the colleges gained an association, the American Association of Junior Colleges, now named the American Association of Community Colleges (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994). At this point in time, the institutions also gained more widely applicable accredi-

tation standards by the American Council on Education (Eells, 1931). The AACC spoke specifically to the issues of the junior college's disjunction by providing a unifying description of organizational identity in 1922. According to the association:

The junior college is an institution offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade [. . .] that may [. . .] develop a different type of curriculum suited to the larger and ever-changing civic, social, religious, and vocational needs of the entire community in which the college is located (Eells, 1931, p. 162).

The definition provided by the AACC, and the emphasis on a "strictly college-grade education" reflected a growing desire to unwind the junior college's associations with secondary schools. Of course, even at this early date, the die had already been cast. Junior colleges were already viewed as subordinate to traditional institutions of higher education. The secondary status was a direct reflection of the institution's bifurcated mandate to educate students to both go no further *and* to go further. Although early on, the junior college claimed an "isthmian," "intermediary," and "transitional" function, its "second-class status" became more entrenched as the institution continued to expand (Zwerling, 1974).

The unifying focus provided by the AACC and its efforts to align curricular standards with collegiate-level work turned out to be the opening salvo in a battle that administrators, faculty members, and policymakers would fight on various fronts throughout the twentieth century. What enabled the earliest junior colleges to serve as a bridge—their liminal status, their implicit promise of wider access, their offer of continuity and locality—was a burden in comparison to more selective, more advanced, and more urbane traditional schools (Beach, 2011). During the Great Depression

and beyond, junior colleges fulfilled Lange and Harper's vision by expanding dramatically to meet local need. But in so doing, the institution continued to mark out an ever more clearly inferior institutional position (Beach, 2011; Reed, 2013). As the sector grew, junior colleges only marginally competed or partnered with traditional institutions. They seemed relegated to merely "improv[ing] upon" higher education's "structures and efficiency" (Ratcliff, 1987, p. 151).



Up to the 1950s, the position of the junior college as outside higher education became more entrenched. This was helped by a renewed focus on vocational and occupational training subsequent to the Great Depression. When huge numbers of unemployed workers sought relative refuge in educational institutions during and after the Great Depression, they landed in junior colleges (Dougherty, 1994). Traditional 4-year universities were out of geographic and economic reach for nearly everyone, but thanks to convenient locations and low tuitions, junior colleges were the most logical and most immediately responsive institutions. Junior colleges again met communities' deep needs, but this time, the institutions met that need through ongoing education and job training. Enrollment rates at traditional universities declined during this time period, but enrollment rates at junior colleges steadily increased (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994).

The junior college niche continued to expand, but because it depended on vocational and terminal curricula, it continued to be controversial. As temporarily unemployed workers gained entrance to community colleges, the transfer option that junior colleges also provided (which made the most obvious case for the institution's "collegiate-grade" status) became less popular (Witt,

Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994). With every social crisis, junior colleges proved more vital to their communities, but that vitality began to be defined emphatically away from an ability to act as a conduit to traditional tertiary institutions. Instead, the junior college niche focused on its ability to provide continuing education and job preparation.

In place of the uncomfortable alignment with secondary schooling, junior colleges were more and more often aligned (and no more comfortably) with vocational and occupational training. Administrators who ensured that their colleges met their communities' needs found that the institution itself was more stubbornly relegated to that outsider niche. The Great Depression and the New Deal's state-specific inauguration of emergency junior college centers through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration helped to cement the position (Greenleaf, 1936).

Of course, the position was welcomed by some and eschewed by others. Walter Eells heralded the new focus (1931), calling junior colleges "the people's college" and describing them as full of "potential vigor and vitality" (p. 34). But the efforts of prominent AACC members like Eells and Koos to invest junior colleges with more vocational offerings were also considered dilutive, contributing to the persistently difficult alignment with traditional 4-year schools. The pushback was really nothing new: in fact, it repeated the pushback against junior colleges' association with secondary schools and reflected the old suspicion that the education conferred by junior colleges was inferior and "a subversion of equality of opportunity" compared to the education offered by more traditional 4-year institutions (Dougherty, 1994, p. 29–30).

However mixed this reception, the effort to integrate vocational and occupational elements into junior college curricula gained substantive support through federal measures, particularly after the results of the Commission of Seven report on California's expansive junior college system. Compiled by the

Carnegie Foundation, the report recommended a hierarchical rationalization for American tertiary education. Specifically, the report recommended that junior college administrators focus their efforts on the majority of students who would *not* transfer on to 4-year institutions rather than on the minority of students who would make the transfer. The report proposed that the majority of junior colleges should reorient their admissions processes and curriculum to reflect the increasing necessity of vocational training and terminal degrees (Brint & Karabel, 1989).



Up to this point, we have seen that the tensions that helped birth junior colleges in the early twentieth century also sustained and strengthened their development. The irony indicates that junior colleges *depended* on the competing mandates that defined them. Rather than solve its competing pressures—between secondary and tertiary schools, between vocational and transfer-oriented foci, between access and achievement—social crises like World War I, the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, and World War II solidified them. As the colleges occupied more federal and social attention in the latter half of the twentieth century, their vitality to the American system of education became even clearer.



During and after the 1950s, the competing tensions and pressures that defined junior colleges were enveloped by the G.I. Bill of Rights and the Truman Commission's Report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*. As a consequence, the institution of the junior college was endowed with a new name and was beholden to a federally approved legacy that continues to unfold in complicated ways today (Beach, 2011).