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Challenges of Student Engagement in Community Colleges

Christine P. Nguyen

Student engagement is a major challenge faced by community college administrators. The impact of low student engagement on retention and graduation rates means community colleges across the nation have the opportunity to re-evaluate policies and practices that contribute to or hinder a student culture of engagement (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008; McClenney, 2007). Community colleges are host to a diverse student population including commuter students, non-traditional students, and students with a wide range of academic goals and academic preparedness. The diversity of this population provides a challenging environment in which to foster student engagement. The function and value of student affairs are often diminished on community college campuses with less emphasis on co-curricular student development. This article will review existing literature of challenges faced by community colleges and the role of student affairs in the unique environment of community colleges. The article will conclude with recommendations for developing institution-wide efforts to support student engagement and topics for further research.

Community colleges have often been viewed as educational pathways for students who would not otherwise have access to post-secondary education. Women, students of color, students from low-income households, single parents, displaced workers, adult learners, and students with disabilities have all been granted access to higher education through an open admission policy that has traditionally been the hallmark of the community college. Nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled at community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009). However, community colleges are frequently overlooked in discussions about higher education institutions. Most student affairs

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literature on student engagement issues has been primarily limited to research on traditional undergraduate students at four-year institutions and “minimal student engagement research has been conducted in community colleges” (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008, p. 514). President Obama unveiled plans in July 2009 for the American Graduation Initiative, a 10-year plan to invest in community colleges as worker-retraining sites for laid-off workers searching to learn new skills during the economic recession (Brandon, 2009). However, the renewed interest in community colleges for their potential to boost the economy has not translated to greater interest or research on student engagement at these institutions.

Lack of student engagement is a persistent cause for concern on community college campuses. Higher levels of student engagement are positively correlated with higher student retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1999), which have been identified as two additional concerns for community colleges. Kuh (2003) defined student engagement as “the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities” (p. 25). By Kuh’s definition, not only are students invested in the process of engagement, but institutions are also held accountable to implement policies and practices to “induce” (p. 25) students to engage. The lack of student engagement in community colleges is a problem that should be addressed on an institutional level as well as within the student culture. Community college leaders, administrators, and student affairs professionals can begin by considering the student populations they serve and the institutional structures that contribute to or hinder student engagement. Once these factors have been identified, colleges can begin to examine ways to develop practices that encourage student engagement, retention, and academic success. Levine et al. (2004) stated:

The biggest challenge community colleges face is fragmentation in our programs and isolation and divisiveness among both faculty members and administrators. We need to overcome those obstacles to give our students the liberal-arts education they deserve. None of the missions of community colleges, whether job training or a gentle transition to a higher degree, precludes the need to educate the whole person. (p. B10)

This sentiment echoes a struggle that most institutions continually face. However, in the community college context, the rift between faculty members and administrators may hinder successful implementation of policies and practices that are meant to enrich the student experience. Without joint support from faculty members and administrators, community colleges are unable to effectively educate the whole student. Stebleton and Schmidt, L. (2010) found that lack of institutional support for retention programs was a contributing factor to high attrition rates in community colleges. Bushong (2009) cited “annual attrition rates of nearly 50 percent, according to national data. Nearly 30 percent of students fail to make it to even their second semester” (para. 4). These alarming statistics demonstrate

the need for community colleges nationwide to re-evaluate practices to encourage student engagement, which in turn fosters student persistence.

Institutional Struggles with Student Engagement

Community colleges are convenient and accessible for students with a wide range of educational goals. Part-time students are particularly attracted to community colleges because they are more accessible to those who hold full-time jobs by offering night courses. But “[s]tudents who enroll part time are less engaged than their full-time peers, and more likely to drop out of college. This likelihood is high at community colleges, where close to two-thirds of students attend part time [sic]” (Gonzalez, 2009, para. 2). If two-thirds of the student population is at risk for being less engaged, that fraction of students is also at higher risk of not completing academic goals or remaining enrolled at all.

Students are not the only part-time population on community college campuses; part-time faculty are also prevalent at these institutions and “[t]he reality is that both part-time faculty and part-time students are less engaged with the college,” (McClenney, as cited in Schmidt, P., 2008, p. A1). Part-time faculty also account for about two-thirds of the teaching staff at community colleges and students who took courses taught by part-time faculty “were less likely to return for their sophomore years” (Schmidt, P., 2008, p. A1). Umbach [as cited in Schmidt, P., 2008] found that “compared with full-time faculty members, part-timers advised students less frequently, used active teaching techniques less often, spent less time preparing for class, and were less likely to participate in teaching workshops” (p. A1). Community college administrators will struggle to engage students when they are taking classes with disengaged faculty. Students may have trouble seeking out a part-time faculty member for help outside of the class if they do not have an office on campus or are on other campuses. Students may also be less inclined to engage with an institution if they perceive that a faculty member does not spend adequate time to prepare for or facilitate class using engaging practices. Student focus groups showed that out of the students who did remain enrolled, “a relationship with an instructor or staff member was the main reason many students had chosen to stay in college” (Gonzalez, 2009, para. 8). With community colleges so dependent on part-time instructors who are less engaged, students have fewer opportunities to connect with instructors and develop key relationships that could result in increased levels of persistence or engagement in college.

The Role of Student Affairs in the Community College

Along with reports of low levels of student engagement, consideration of student populations and the lack of visible institutional support could easily lead to diminished roles for student affairs practitioners at community colleges. Community

college students “expressed the most dissatisfaction with student services such as career counseling, job placement, financial-aid advising, and credit-transfer assistance” (Evelyn, 2003, p. A36). Also, “[r]esearchers found that most students... identified faculty members as the best source of academic advising, with friends, family, and other students coming in second.... Only 10 percent of students relied on academic advisers who were not faculty members” (Ashburn, 2006, p. A1). However, Ashburn (2007) stated: “[S]tudents have consistently rated academic advising as the most important service community colleges can provide. Yet a third of students continue to say that they rarely or never use advising” (p. A30). One explanation for this discrepancy is recognizing that academic advising offices might not function on timelines that are accessible for part-time or students enrolled in evening classes. As noted earlier, two-thirds of community college students are part-time; half of those part-time students are also employed full-time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009). Academic advising offices are only open during the day, as is the case with most student services offices, so students who are unable to come to campus until the evening have little opportunity to use their services. These students might see faculty members as better sources of academic advising because they have more personal contact with faculty members in class than they do with staff academic advisors. The gap between perceived need of services and use of services could also be attributed to the culture of the institution when serving students. One student stated that academic advisors at her institution “don’t seem like they are there to help the students, they’re there to do a job” (Evelyn, 2003, p. A36). Staff members can visibly demonstrate they have the desire to assist students by creating a positive and welcoming atmosphere in their office to increase students’ comfort level in seeking academic advising or other student services offices.

Whitt et al. [as cited in Stebleton & Schmidt, L., 2010] stated that “practitioners can act as a vital bridge between student affairs and academic affairs to promote student persistence and retention in a community college setting” (p. 79). Research shows that students have identified faculty members as those they turn to for academic advising; therefore, student affairs practitioners must work to navigate the differences between administration and faculty. Creating a functional professional relationship across student and academic affairs is essential to creating a campus environment that encourages student engagement and student success. Stebleton and Schmidt, L. (2010) recognized that “[s]tudent affairs practitioners who work directly with community college students face a range of ongoing challenges, including how to engage and retain students” (p. 79). Two surprisingly positive findings from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) were that students of color “reported higher levels of interaction with their professors and better use of academic advising and other student services than did white students” (Evelyn, 2003, p. A36), and that “students who are academically underprepared are generally more engaged than academically prepared

ones. Underprepared students are much more likely to take advantage of student services like tutoring, skills-development labs, and computer labs” (Ashburn, 2007, p. A30). The use of student services by students of color and academically underprepared students is a positive sign that some community college campuses have motivated employees who provide appropriate services and resources for students. This level of engagement with campus services allows these students to build connections with student affairs professionals.

Suggestions for Developing a Connected Community
College: An Institution-Wide Effort

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE, 2009) defined “connected colleges” as institutions that “effectively connect with their students and encourage them to build the relationships – with faculty, staff, other students – that are essential to student success” (p. 3). These “connected colleges” are able to communicate through their policies and practices that they believe in student success and “demonstrate that everyone on campus is committed to facilitating that success” (CCCSE, 2009, p. 3). Community colleges need to foster what McClenney and Greene (2005) called a “culture of engagement” where faculty, staff, and students alike are committed to connect with each other and the educational experience so that students are presented with an environment that is conducive to learning (p. 5).

“Community college leaders need to be aware of who they are serving, and must make meaningful efforts to continuously define their student markets and to make certain that their programs are in alignment with those being demanded” (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005, Implications for Practice, para. 1). In order to facilitate this vision of collaborative efforts in and out of the classroom, institutions must recognize the unique characteristics of community colleges that can be challenging to navigate when building a culture of engagement. “Theories and applications developed in a four-year university context are typically not an ideal match for retention comparisons at the community college” (Stebbleton & Schmidt, L., 2010, p. 79). There are several major community colleges characteristics that hinder the ability to apply theories or models developed for four-year institutions. Most community colleges are non-residential based communities. Community college students also often fulfill multiple roles in their lives (e.g., parent, caretaker, and/or employee) in addition to their student role and therefore have less time on campus to engage in building community or attend events outside of class time. Lastly, the scope of the community college mission encompasses students who meet one or more of the generally accepted common factors contributing to students who are “at risk” for attrition, such as part-time students, first-generation students, and students of color. By taking these characteristics into consideration, administrators can become equipped to face the challenge of finding alternative

and creative ways to engage students.

There are several straightforward ways that institutions could work toward closing the gap between perceived need for services and actual need of services. One option suggested by the CCCSE report (2009) is to incorporate the use of some student services into coursework or making their use mandatory for all first-time students to: attend orientation and advising sessions prior to registration, career counseling appointments, and class assignments that involve résumé writing. Additionally, “[c]olleges can provide support services at times convenient to part-time students or integrate services into required course work. They can also link study-skills courses with developmental courses so that part-time students who need remediation will be more likely to succeed” (Gonzalez, 2009, para. 5). All of these approaches would aid in bridging the gap and encourage students to engage with the student affairs offices that could be pivotal in their success at the community college. Although some institutional groups may initially resist change, altering the operational hours of student services offices to better support student needs could have a great impact on the engagement and success of part-time students. Stebleton and Schmidt, L. (2010) acknowledged the need for an existing foundation of commitment before engagement or retention programs can succeed. “Program success entails identifying a select group of faculty members and student affairs practitioners willing to invest extra time and energy into new ways to connect with students” (Stebleton & Schmidt, L., 2010, p. 92). If key players at the institution are unwilling to make the commitment and fully support these programs, they are likely to fail.

Community colleges could also look into newer forms of engagement such as online tutoring. As opposed to online orientation, which has been criticized by students in focus groups, “[o]nline tutoring...is simply another mechanism for delivering the same service provided by face-to-face tutoring; it involves a one-on-one connection with a real person, facilitated by technology” (CCCSE, 2009, p. 10). Using a variety of new technology to engage students could be both innovative and effective for certain populations. However, institutions should be aware of their demographic by employing online strategies or other engagement programs that require a certain amount of tech-savvy to navigate. They cannot use these media exclusively or they risk alienating core groups of students who may not have access to or knowledge of these technologies.

Collaboration and support across the institution, as previously stated, could be the most important factor in developing sustainable programs to engage students at community colleges. For example, at Invers Hill Community College, where administrators are making great strides to further engage the student population, “[c]ounselors, instructional faculty from a variety of disciplines, and several student affairs practitioners each teach a section of OC [an orientation course]” (Stebleton

& Schmidt, L., 2010, p. 92). By integrating different facets of the educational system into one cohesive team, this institution made it possible to open up dialogue across differences and reframe student engagement as the priority. The commitment to nurturing student engagement needs to be reflected from the top down, in the “day-to-day culture, lexicon, and mission of the institution” (Stebbleton & Schmidt, L., 2010, p. 93). Financial support from senior administration is also essential in establishing these programs. “Educational leaders recognize that it is cost effective in the long run to spend money on retention efforts that will help students meet their goals” (Stebbleton & Schmidt, L., 2010, p. 92). If students are succeeding in accomplishing their educational goals due to the effort and money spent to develop engagement and retention programs, community college leaders need to be transparent about their costs and benefits so the rest of the institution’s community will be able to support those decisions.

Future Research and Scholarship

Considering the evolving landscape of the community college mission and the current economy, community college administrators are constantly faced with the challenge of finding new ways to efficiently adapt to a rapidly changing environment. They have seen student engagement, retention, and success as persistent areas of concern for their institutions. Student affairs divisions at community colleges have the opportunity to collaborate with faculty members to serve student needs. Future research or scholarship on student engagement in community colleges would raise greater awareness of the need to develop sustainable practices to engage a diverse population of students in their academic environment. Continued implementation and careful analysis of the CCSSE results could reveal trends and additional points of concern for community college leaders to address when considering student engagement and retention. Scholars and researchers can also begin to adapt student engagement theories based on community college students and redefine student engagement from its exclusive grounding in traditional, four-year institutional context to the community college environment. By building a foundation of literature and research on community college students, student affairs practitioners and faculty members can learn more about the students they serve and implement better practices to ensure student engagement and success.

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