20 Years of Best Practices: 2014 Community College Futures Assembly Raises Questions on 2020 Community Colleges

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Since 1995, the Community College Futures Assembly has served as a national independent policy think tank for identifying critical issues facing community colleges and recognizing exemplary programs nationwide. Convening annually in January in Orlando, Florida, the assembly provides an interactive learning environment where tough questions are raised, critical issues are discussed, and policy implications are vetted. The focus for 2014 Community College Futures Assembly was the future direction of community colleges, highlighting decision makers' views on the approaching challenges. This paper provides a brief analysis of the 2020 community college, focusing on several emerging themes including student centered learning, increasing competition, and the link between degrees and jobs.

Since community colleges' founding stage, these institutions have aimed to provide college access to the local community and to advocate for educational equity. Morest (2006) indicated that community colleges diversified in achieving the educational equity agenda. Some colleges centered on faculty pedagogy and its influence on students. Lundberg's (2014) study showed that student engagement with faculty members significantly predicted student development at many levels. Some other colleges focused on learning experience and indicated that students' learning should be understood on a case-by-case basis. Contextualization was defined as "an instructional approach connecting foundational skills and college-level content" (Perin, 2011, p. 268), and it could greatly promote student achievement.

At the institutional level, one of the most outstanding trends is increasing competition. Besides general competition among peer colleges on a local and national level, many face increasing competition in online education and credentialing. While online education offers an

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alternative method to expand education accessibility, it makes many community colleges lose their advantages of location in the community. It also became more and more popular for business and industry to assume the accreditation role, as opposed to the traditional national and regional accrediting boards (Bailey & Morest, 2006).

Finally, as an effective tool of economic growth, workforce development has always been a vital task for community colleges. With the increasing workforce gap, community college educators will need to address this upcoming trend and to develop a prepared and competent workforce. Though some researchers and practitioners expressed concerns that the *vocationalization* of community colleges would only provide students with immediate jobs but not long-term education and professional attainment (Bailey & Morest, 2006), unemployment and undereducation of workers were perceived as urgent issues that could further undermine local and national economies (Daniels, 2011). Business, industry, and community colleges responded promptly to tackle the problem by establishing partnerships in customizing training programs to meet the demands of the labor market (O'Rear, 2011). Community colleges are at the front line of recognizing strategic alliances that promote community and economic development for the nation.

2014 COMMUNITY COLLEGE FUTURES ASSEMBLY RESEARCH RESULTS

The 20th annual Community College Futures Assembly was themed, "Back to the Future," with specific emphasis on the role of community college leaders in addressing the future direction of community colleges. Throughout the 2014 assembly, collaborative discussions occurred that focused on identifying critical issues facing community colleges in the next decade. Due to the ambiguous nature of predicting the future, we decided to keep the research questions broad to avoid confining participants' responses: "What are the most critical issues for instructional program and services, planning governance and finance, and workforce development, respectively, in 2020?"

These questions were researched through a mixed methods approach with focus groups and a quantitative survey during the assembly. First, about 30 attendees were divided into three focus groups to discuss critical issues facing community colleges in a 90-minute session. Each collaborative group (instructional program and services; planning, governance and finance; and workforce development) consisted of a balanced mix of governing board members, trustees, executive officers, presidents, provosts, and other administrators. The results from the focus group discussion were used to create items for the quantitative survey. During the awards luncheon on Tuesday, participants used Turning Point Clicker technology as the Personal Response System to vote anonymously.

In the instructional program and services group, the focus group members were instructed to formulate their answers based upon critical issues facing community colleges in 2020. There was considerable discussion of the need for student success. Another point of discussion was utilizing technology in supporting effective teaching and learning. Finally, there was more discussion regarding curriculum and program design, focusing on student characteristics at community colleges. Six themes emerged for critical issues in 2020 and were voted by participants including "alternate credentialing" (28%, $n = 21$, $N = 76$); "hybrid/blended/flipped classrooms" (26%); "competency based education" (20%); "disappearance of developmental

education" (13%); "student support for online students" (9%); and "a la carte educational opportunities" (4%).

The members of the planning, governance, and finance focus group started with developmental education and how it affected performance funding at their institution. It was also interesting that "increasing competition" was brought up by the group. These themes were used to create the voting items. Of the participants whose votes registered, the most critical issues for planning, governance, and finance in 2020 were listed as: "greater competition" (31%, $n = 23$, $N = 75$); "data management" (19%); "quality of online courses" (17%); "technology" (16%); "mission creep" (11%); and "policies" (7%).

In the third focus group, workforce development, the members emphasized that graduates' employment rate had always been one of the critical issues. With more partnership with industry, contextualizing students' experience appeared to be significant. The members reached consensus that community colleges should strive to make their graduates "employed, debt-free, and certified" as "a workforce to be proud of." Additionally, many community colleges also began to actively seek out partnerships with high schools in addressing student access and college preparedness, aiming to build a seamless transition for high school graduates. The most critical issues for workforce development in 2020 were identified as "K–12 partnerships" (32%, $n = 24$, $N = 76$); "bridging technology gap" (26%); "funding" (14%); "creating new links/paths" (14%); "legislature" (12%); and "leveraging media relations for community college campaign" (1%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRACTICE

With a reduction in governmental allocation to higher education institutions and the demand on colleges to ensure a quality student experience, postsecondary institutions are forced to react to a changing education landscape. In particular, community colleges are learning to meet local economic needs while balancing the demand to compete on a national level. In order to better compete among education institutions, community colleges have been continuously attempting to understand the best practices in the field as well as to predict future educational trends. Based upon the research at 2014 Community College Futures Assembly, several themes emerged regarding what these colleges are facing currently and what they expect to endure in the next six years. These research-based themes included student-centered learning, competing among scarce resources, and directly linking degrees to jobs.

Rogers (1983) described student centered learning as a process in which the learners not only choose what to learn but also choose how and why that topic is learned. When students are empowered with sense of responsibility and activity in their learning process, they become the center of their education and illustrate a greater ability to persist through the educational pipeline (Cannon, 2000). Administrators and faculty are witnessing students desiring more control of their educational experience. As indicated by the research that a future trend in community colleges will be alternate credentialing, students have become more of a sophisticated consumer of various educational providers, and the 2020 community colleges will need to learn how to adapt to engage students who no longer passively progress through their educational pursuits.

In order to compete both locally and nationally with a continuous scarcity of resources, community college presidents, administrators, and trustee members expressed attention to performance-based funding. Currently, 25 states already have some form of performance-

based funding (number of degrees awarded, course completion), and five states are transitioning   115
to a performance model (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Despite the rapid
increase of performance-based funding at community colleges, it is not clear if performance-
based funding leads to improved rates of retention, completion of developmental education, and
graduation rates. As community colleges prepare for their future educational climate, stake-
holders are forced to deal with increased pressure to focus on student outcomes.   120

In the area of workforce development, research from 2014 Community College Futures
Assembly illustrated that community colleges of the future will need to develop and ensure a
more direct pipeline from degrees to employment. In order to ensure these educational institu-
tions are developing qualified potential employees, community colleges need to reinforce the
needs in developing workforce skills such as mathematics. A concern that emerged through the   125
assembly research was the need to effectively increase and foster partnerships between commu-
nity college and K–12 institutions, especially in the area of developmental education. Given that
less than a quarter of students enrolled in developmental math courses earn a degree (Silva &
White, 2013), community colleges and K–12 are charged with assisting in creating better
prepared postsecondary students.   130

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