
Appreciating Community Colleges: “In Many Ways, the Best Education”

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Sitting in my car in a gloomy, gray downtown Minneapolis parking lot, I waited for my wife to come out of the library at the end of her shift. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of two squat figures making their slow, diagonal way across the pavement, and as they neared I recognized them: former students of my English as a Second Language class at Normandale Community College. Their height, about four-feet ten, put these refugees from the misery of communist Vietnam—now in their early sixties—at about my eye level, and their path took them right to my windshield.

I was happy when they brightened on seeing me through the glass and scurried around to the window on the

driver's side. Yes, they were fine, doing well, living in a better apartment, missing their friends at Normandale but still learning English daily. But they soon dismissed news of themselves and got to their real point, their real pride: their son. He had been at Normandale with them, a virtually new immigrant, had made rapid progress, taken to English, flourished through the basic college requirements, developed an interest in science, and moved on to the University of Minnesota at the start of his third year. There he had graduated with honors and now, to the joy of his parents, was admitted to medical school.

This was fitting news, I thought, because I had not forgotten about the

fate of his mother's brother, a doctor in Vietnam who, when the Communist authorities learned that he had graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris, had been summarily shot as a carrier of decadent Western influence. Now the son, living in a far-off city that could hardly be more different from Saigon, was in some measure alleviating the pain and bitterness.

My friends moved off to catch a bus, and I was left to wonder how many similar stories, perhaps far less dramatic but equally potent in their own way, illustrate the opportunities community colleges bring to citizens of and immigrants to this city, state, and country. I've taught at community colleges in Oregon, Michigan, and here in Minnesota for upward of twenty years, and I'm convinced that this remarkable resource is consistently undervalued by parents, politicians, students, and academics. In many ways, the best education is there rather than at the more prestigious, well-known universities and private colleges.

The United States has nearly 1,200 community colleges, almost 1,000 of them public institutions, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Minnesota has thirty-five community colleges, twenty-nine of them public. In 2001 almost 11 million students enrolled, about half for credit and the other half in "continuing education" classes. These figures represented about 45 percent of U. S. undergraduates. These are all impressive figures, and there are plenty more to quote, but community college presidents and boards still find themselves

trying to wake up legislators to their presence and value. They find themselves laboring to prove their worth to potential donors, academic societies, and community organizations. A lag exists here between perception and reality. Community colleges benefit everyone, but they especially benefit their two biggest populations—their students and their faculties.

Of the many benefits for students, here are three or four. First, who can match the variety of course offerings and academic pursuits? At Twin Cities community colleges alone you can take all the usual introductory courses leading to standard majors such as biology, English, physics, computer science, psychology, or French. But aside from these familiar subjects, you can try out apparel technology, law enforcement, vacuum technology, dental hygiene, nursing, radiologic technology, or pre-pharmacy among countless others. Credits from all these courses are transferable to any other MnSCU (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities) institution and to many others, some of the private, in Minnesota or surrounding states. And I won't do more than mention the monetary savings, but in the course of two years it adds up to many thousands of dollars.

If it's diversity you're looking for, where could you find a greater example than an urban (or even suburban, these days) community college? In your English composition class, you're likely to find students who are on a far different track than yours. They will come from backgrounds similar to, somewhat different from, and very different from

yours. Their parents' homes will be loaded with books and academic assumptions or they will be bereft of the signals associated with the drive to college. Your fellow students will range from the straight-A, always college-bound privileged suburbanite to the under-prepared ("differently prepared" as one recent communication from the Center for Teaching and Learning would have it) urban graduate who struggled through the last year of high school.

Where else can you see the range of ages found at a community college? That same composition class will likely be taken by eighteen-year-olds and thirty-five-year-olds; by carefree (or careless) uncertain youths and anxious but hopeful single mothers, following one of the best of all American traits—that's it's never too late to start anew; by diligent recent grads and re-training, laid-off factory workers. There might be one or two Somali taxi drivers just off from a few trips to the airport, or, especially in the evening, a housewife finally getting to take advantage of her kids' departure from the home by returning to school after twenty-five years.

So varied, so diverse (in many senses, not just in reference to race as we have almost exclusively and sadly come to see it these days) is the student population that everyone can find a comfortable sub-group. But at the same time, exposure to other types of people is so general, so consistent, so widespread that surely no one can spend much time at a community college and not find his range of acquaintances

broadened in four or five ways.

OK, students miss out on "collegiate" atmosphere, fraternity houses, the broad lawns and Greek columns, the bonding of dormitory life, and homecoming football games. But they can get all this in two years if they still want it even after they've grown up a little, and in the meantime they rub elbows with the *hoi polloi*. Just as important, the vast majority of their instructors are full-time, permanent employees (not temporary, not adjunct) who practice their professions in practical ways and who are not hobbled by the weight of "publish or perish" or burdened by the sword of tenure above their quaking heads. The excellent contract under which community college faculty work in Minnesota includes a clause that ensures that 70 percent of all course credits must be taught by full-timers, thereby avoiding the lamentable fate of other states, in which the percentage of adjuncts is well over half. Furthermore, the instructors are not graduate teaching assistants or research professors for whom classes are an unwelcome time-waster away from the lab or library.

A student at a community college can take comfort in knowing that the instructor of apparel technology may well sew wedding dresses, that the nursing instructor still practices at a nearby clinic, that the photography instructor bolsters his income in the summer by taking nature photos for a local magazine. That is, especially for those students for whom the community college is not just a beginning but an end (with an A.A. degree), the instruc-

tors are actually doing, not just teaching, and doing what the students aspire to do themselves.

These instructors, just by being themselves, are models for all students—especially for those under-prepared or “affirmative action” students. After all, some of the instructors’ backgrounds are not dissimilar to their own. Besides a wide range of systematic help (writing center, “student success” center, special orientation, college preparatory classes), these students see before them daily (in the form of instructors and fellow students) people who have taken what may have been a less-than-promising start and turned it into a success, something exciting, and who are excited to pass along their skills.

If I feel positive about the opportunities available for community college students (even as I recognize that many fail even to begin to tap into these opportunities), I feel equally positive about conditions under which the faculty work. Of course, teachers complain. That’s one of the things they do most: class size, pay, benefits, schedule, workload. And who wouldn’t tire of teaching French II for the twenty-fifth time? But I try never to forget the many advantages we have over our colleagues at the universities and colleges around us.

The remarkable independence is one such advantage. Instructors order books to suit their own approach (and the bookstore manager can testify to the confusion this can create at the start of each term), devise their own syllabus (within usually broad depart-

mental guidelines), and assess and grade with their own system. Tinkering from above is extremely rare, and pressure from the politically correct thankfully equally so. Yes, we have our tired exemplars of ’60s radicalism and maybe even a few who have yet to realize their rapidly increasing irrelevance, but students largely see through it all. That most English instructors, for example, take the easy path and count racial beans when assigning authors does not mean that all do so. And those who don’t do so can carry on without harassment.

It is true that college-wide we suffer from the painfully cloying campaigns now becoming clichés. Need I remind you? This kind of thing: “Each of us is unique, and we each celebrate a combination of physical, cultural, and personal qualities that make us who we are.” Yearly we are exhorted by the purveyors of orthodoxy, by our self-declared moral betters, to “celebrate” tolerance, ability, spirituality, race, gender, sexuality, generation and age, and so on (whatever those words mean). Year by year these campus-wide and system-wide offices must continue to justify their existence.

It’s all tiresome, but you can mostly ignore it as much as the students do. And you can get on with your work: teaching classes, meeting students in your office, improving curriculum, grading and planning. To walk down the faculty hall of a community college is to see instructors meeting with students, more students waiting in the hall, other instructors bent over desks

marking papers or “talking” with students via Internet. Though some faculty take the “caring” watchword too much to heart and move into the cloying, most simply try to accommodate students and to take them seriously.

So, if you’re not familiar with this resource at our doorsteps, take a drive someday to your local community college, park in that big lot made for commuter students, have a look at the variety of people you see and don’t forget that this variety you’re seeing as only skin-deep is much greater under

the surface. Then stick around till the evening and observe the even greater variety that passes through the main door for night classes. Diversity works not just in one or two directions but in every direction; everyone, no matter their background, can do with meeting people unlike themselves and in considering their lives. When that high school senior you know is pondering the immediate future, urge him or her to consider this slighted resource as very likely the best first step to academic and vocational success. ■