

**Redirecting the American Dream: The Community College  
as a Democratizing Institution**

**Judith S. Eaton**

President

Council For Aid To Education

This manuscript is based on a presentation to the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community Colleges, Portland, Oregon, April 29, 1993. Judith Eaton is the author of *Colleges of Choice* (1988) and *The Unfinished Agenda* (1991). She has recently completed *Strengthening Collegiate Education in the Community College*, which will be released by Jossey-Bass in early 1994. The Council For Aid to Education is located at 51 Madison Avenue, Suite 2200, New York, NY 10010.

As I interpret it, the "Community College as a Democratizing Institution" refers to the *educational role* that the two-year college plays. It plays this role to fulfill a certain hope of our society. This hope has three parts: opportunity for everyone, a high likelihood of success for individuals who work hard and accept responsibility, and education as central to both the opportunity and the success. Focusing on the educational role in relation to this hope is a bit of a departure; we usually address "democratizing" by considering enrollment growth, access, low cost, and emphasizing the community college as a "people's college." We tend not to think programmatically when considering "democratizing."

In this context, three questions strike me as particularly important:

1. What are the various educational roles the community college has played in attempting to be a democratizing institution?
2. Have any of these roles been played successfully?
3. What educational role or roles make sense for the community college of the future—in light of its democratizing responsibility?

A primary purpose of this paper is to encourage all of us to think very seriously about the educational judgments we make every day. We are, after all, in charge of the roles we have community colleges play. The educational role is in our hands. We create it.

**Educational roles the community college has played  
in attempting to be a "Democratizing Institution"**

There are, in my view, three major roles the community

college has played: it has played a powerful *responsiveness* role; it has played a critical *education-for-work* role; and it has played a strong *pre-baccalaureate education* role by making the liberal arts available outside the four-year college and university environment. Each of these roles has been elaborated over the years into what I call three major visions of the community college. I am, for discussion purposes, sorting out these visions. In actual practice, parts of all of these visions are present in many community colleges. Parts of them permeate the thinking of all of us about what the community college should be. Together, they fuel the ongoing debate about what the community college is.

The three visions are also identified with important community college leaders: The community college educational role as "responsiveness" is Edmund Gleazer's vision; the community college educational role as education-for-work is Dale Parnell's vision; the community college educational role as pre-baccalaureate education is Arthur Cohen/Florence Brawer's vision.

The *responsiveness* role tries to meet the democratizing challenge by major investment in lifelong learning. Here education is not necessarily structured by degrees, sequential study, or specific time frames and credits. It involves focusing not only on cognitive development, but also on the social, personal, and professional development of students. It ensures that community desires are central to decisions about what the community colleges offers and does. This vision sees the community college as a true community learning center.

The *education-for-work* role tries to meet the challenge by serving "ordinary" people, those, in Dale Parnell's terms, who are neither academically talented nor baccalaureate-bound. It uses a value-added approach to excellence rather than a single standard of excellence tied to earning a baccalaureate. It de-emphasizes baccalaureate attainment and strongly supports "career education" culminating in an associate degree. It stresses closer ties with secondary education.

The *pre-baccalaureate* education role tries to meet the challenge by having the community college function primarily as a place for individual cognitive development in the disciplines or in interdisciplinary work. It offers structured educational experiences with a solid general education commitment. It ensures that the liberal arts are part of all community college experiences. It stresses close ties with four-year institutions as well as secondary schools.

In summary, examining the community college role is one way

to examine its democratizing potential. There has been no single role that all community colleges have used to be democratizing. Instead, three visions or roles of the community colleges have been used to meet this challenge.

#### **Have Any of These Roles Been Successful?**

There are at least two answers and three comments that are appropriate here. The two answers are: yes and no. The three comments are:

- Whether the various community college roles are perceived as successful depends on the *criteria* that you use to judge them.
- Whether you consider the community college successful depends on what you think *is important that the community college do*.
- There is disagreement *both* about the criteria for judgment and what it is important that community colleges do.

With regard to "yes" and "no" on community college success, over the years two criteria have emerged as critical to the evaluation of community college success: *participation* and *achievement*. Both criteria are generally applied to all three roles. Those who say "yes, the community college educational roles have contributed to democratizing" base their judgment on the criterion of *participation*—for all roles. They envision the community college as a site of trying and opportunity. They claim that, without the community college, millions would be without any educational opportunity at all. They point out that some students are successful and we should celebrate this. The community college is desirable because it really cares about personal development—it is student centered. If pressed to rank the roles, these people see the pre-baccalaureate role as least successful because it is least participatory. Individuals of this persuasion tend toward responsiveness and education-for-work as the preferred roles for the community college. Those who say "yes" have certain characteristics, also. They are likely to be community college practitioners and not researchers. They have a powerful emotional attachment to access and sometimes describe the community college in quasi-religious terms—as a "movement."

Those who say "no, the community college educational roles have *not* contributed to democratizing" base their judgment on the criterion of *achievement*—and claim it is not there for any of the roles. They see the community college as a site of broken dreams—not a site of trying and effort. They claim that too few students are successful—rather than celebrating that a few make

it. They point out that student learning is different from student centeredness and really caring about personal development is not enough. When addressing the roles, they see the responsiveness role as an academic cop-out. They are not convinced that education-for-work is a success. They *would* value the pre-baccalaureate role—if they believed it worked. Those who say "no" tend to be university-based researchers, more data-oriented than the "yes" people. They have no powerful attachment to access or to the notion of a "movement." Many have ideological bias—often a polite social Marxism that leads them to argue that the community college has purposely sought to deny high levels of achievement for its students because this would upset the social and economic order of things.

The discussion about success tends to encompass all the community college roles—and there is little agreement. Those who find the community college successful find it uniformly so. Similarly, those who find it unsuccessful find it uniformly so. We are left with different views of what the community college does and different judgments about its success. We have little basis for judging success in the future, at least until we have some shared understandings and expectations about the community college role. Answering the second question is difficult—and does not help us much with the challenge of community colleges as democratizing institutions.

**What Educational Role(s) Make Sense for the Future—  
For Meeting the Democratizing Challenge?**

To answer this, I offer three points. First, we need to attend to *how* we look at the community college role. Second, I argue that the role that makes the most sense to meet the democratizing challenge is the community college as a collegiate institution. Third, we need a powerful action agenda for any future role. Attending to how we look at the community college role means being willing to challenge a fundamental assumption: that all of what community colleges do now contributes to the democratizing function. We need to let go of the past—at least to the point of insisting uncritically that all of what we do is effective. We need to treat educational role decisions with a fresh sense of urgency and be willing to go back to first principles. This calls for a fundamental rethinking of the community college.

The society around us is changing dramatically—yet we continue to think in timid and wallflower-like ways. Consider, for example, the restructuring of the business world and the "reinventing" of government. Those who are so engaged believe

they have a compelling agenda for fundamental change. Whether or not they do—and they will be successful—is not clear.

Nonetheless, the scale of their efforts alone challenges the community college and all of higher education to reexamine purpose with a similar sense of urgency and concern.

Second, the best way for the community college to fulfill its democratizing function is through a variant of the pre-baccalaureate role; what I call for is a renewed commitment to the *collegiate* dimension of the community college. The collegiate community college, for me, has four characteristics:

- Structured sequential liberal arts and career education offerings dominate the curriculum.
- Emphasis is on college-level work.
- The campus environment strongly encourages students to pursue education beyond the community college and it is not content with the associate degree.
- The community college is a full partner with other higher education institutions, enabling students to transfer with ease.

The two-year college defining its educational role in this way has the greatest chance to be a successful democratizing institution. Recall the three aspects of hope with which I began—opportunity, success through hard work, and education as central to both. The collegiate community college provides the most opportunity; gives students the most for their hard work—the most in educational, social, and economic mobility; and makes education truly central.

A future community college educational role that stresses the *college* in "community college" is most desirable. I want to replace course taking as the primary educational experience of community college students with structured, sequential education or degrees. I want to replace the plethora of precollegiate courses and diluted academic expectations in "college-level" courses with genuine college-level courses. I want to replace a campus environment that is intentionally nondirective and shortsighted about students' educational goals with emphasis on long-range educational goals, especially the baccalaureate. I want to replace our ambiguity of identity as a collegiate institution to the four-year world with a clarification of purpose that, in turn, leads to two-year/four-year relationships that produce transfer with ease. If moving toward a collegiate educational role to respond to the democratizing challenge is undesirable to some, they are challenged to articulate alternatives. For example, they might develop a vocational

education role that they truly believe fulfills this challenge with the community college functioning as site of school-to-work transition, apprenticeship, and national service. The problem here is that this is a secondary school agenda, not a college agenda. Or, the community college could take on more and more developmental and remedial work to meet community needs. This, too, would not be a college agenda but a social service agenda. In both instances, these institutions should cease to call themselves "colleges."

Finally, after picking an educational role, an action agenda is essential.

1. Campaigning for *understanding* of the educational role and to build support at all levels for the community college is essential. Community college educators need to stop hiding behind a "they just don't understand us" mentality and *create* understanding. We cannot succeed without being understood—it is essential to acceptance.

2. Go to work on community college *financing* for this educational role: institutional support for community colleges needs a major overhaul. We need to move away from full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment-driven budgets. We need to move toward multi-year budgeting to sustain ourselves in recessionary times. We need a financing strategy that acknowledges the primacy of state, not local, support. With regard to students, we need to establish the priority of grant funding for access and move away from the over-reliance on loans.

3. Stop being afraid of *accountability* for this educational role: We need to develop institutional effectiveness indicators, track students, and collect data to document achievement and student learning gains. We need to take the accountability initiative—rather than continuing to soft-pedal this issue.

4. Build a tradition of community college *scholarship* for this educational role: Let us commit ourselves to the primacy of faculty. They are the national experts at teaching and learning. We can and should be leaders in lower division undergraduate education.

5. Find a way to *continue the discussion* about this educational role.

#### **Summary**

The community college has sought to be a "democratizing institution" through three major educational roles over the years: a responsiveness role, an education-to-work role, and a pre-baccalaureate role. The community college is considered

successful in carrying out these roles when using participation as the primary criterion for success. The community college is not considered particularly successful in carrying out any of these roles when the criterion is achievement. For the future, I urge a major commitment to fresh thinking about community college roles. I advocate a renewed commitment to the collegiate purpose—as I defined it—of the community college as most desirable educational role if the community college wishes to honor its commitment as a democratizing institution. Finally, whatever the decision about educational role, this needs to be accompanied by an action agenda that pays attention to community college identity, financing, accountability, scholarship, and ongoing discussion of purpose.

Copyright 1993 by the National Council on Community Services & Continuing Education. Permission is given to copy any article provided credit is given and the copies are not intended for sale.