

Shaping a Focused Academic Mission Statement

Author: *Evis Morales and Inez Barragan*

University: California State University, Sacramento

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Instructor: Dr. Rosemary Papalewis

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California 's community colleges' (herein CCC) comprehensive mission statements may be limiting the statewide transfer rate to a compelling average of 25%-27% (San Mateo CCC District, 2003), and consequently impairing potential students from transitioning into four-year institutions. Inaction or inattention to the matter will leave the existing structure with continued low transfer rates. This dilemma affects all students in the CCC system, but is of particular importance for ethnic minorities because they represent a majority in CCC (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2003).

Guided by Section 66010.4 (Official California Legislative Information, 2003) of the state's educational code, CCC mission statements primarily emphasize academic and vocational functions. Focusing on academic advancement (transfer) as a primary function and vocational training second, has positive equity ramifications on three dimensions: social, economic, and political.

From a social stance, there are immense benefits to having highly educated individuals with a greater lifetime earning potential, community and government involvement (Commission for the review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1986). Secondly, from an economic aspect, Monk-Turner (1998) contends that educational investment in a 4-year degree has a far greater return on income and occupational status than does a community college degree, thus, determining one's adult socio-economic status. Lastly, from a political perspective, an educated citizen has a higher capacity for complex thought, analysis, and the value of democratic participation concerning issues and the greater well being of society (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002).

A shift in focus affects all stakeholders, including students (transfer & vocational), educational leaders, businesses, and four-year institutions with a vested interest in the community college. As intended, CCC have a social contract to serve underrepresented ethnic minorities (URM) with diverse educational needs. An academic focus could drive services towards transfer objectives and place more attention on transfer curriculum and course articulation, hence benefiting potential transfers students and abbreviating linkages between CCC and four-year institutions. However, de-emphasizing vocational training may dilute current programs preparing students with the skills in demand to enter California 's workforce. In weighing these options, it should be recognized that the globalization of tomorrow's workforce will demand more highly skilled workers and increase wage disparity (Hom, 2001).

Higher education leadership has the professional responsibility of facilitating success, promoting equity, and moreover, should be guided by ethical values and ideals expressed in mission statements and held high in professional codes of conduct. These codes of ethics tend to address gender, racial and other forms of discrimination, yet categorically, fail to acknowledge poverty. For instance, in recent years, as financial aid dollars have dwindled, the amount of student debt has increased, thus amplifying the number one institutional barrier – money.

California 's higher education leaders should then ask themselves these questions: What is the definition of student success within higher education? And, is the true mission of CCC in the realm of higher education or in workforce preparation? Given the workforce demands of California and socio-economic disparities among various groups, is now the time to expand the role of CCC as a 'natural' conduit to the baccalaureate degree for non-traditional students? Furthermore, professional-accountability should align the institutions with WASC accreditation standards that are moving in a student first direction (WASC, 2003).

Immediate impact of such change may mean that the business sector is affected by short-term shortage of a skilled labor force. Conversely, in the long-run, industry and four-year institutions may benefit concomitantly. For the business sector, the shift may trigger an increase of highly competitive and diverse entrepreneurial leaders, able to meet future domestic and global demands. As for four-year institutions, a transfer focus may lead to (1) increased application and enrollment of minority students and (2) an opportunity to potentially increase diversity at the advanced degree level (masters or doctorate).

Establishing the preference for the advancement of CCC in this new capacity would begin by modifying mission statements to focus on academics with the goal of increasing the number of minorities transferring to four-year schools. As a starting

point, this is essential because mission statements guide the values and everyday practices of institutions leading to success or failure of programs and services (Hamrick, Evans & Shuh, 2002).

Within this sphere of change, a range of options might include (1) expanding the role of four-year institutions to admit under-qualified URM freshmen contingent on completion of a carefully planned and focused short-term coursework to improve college competency prior to enrollment, thus lessening the potential for deviation, failure or truancy; (2) intervening in the academic progress of URM students earlier, preferably beginning in the 8th grade, creating 'pre-college academy' programs, offering mentorship, counseling and tutorials leading to higher education achievement; and finally, (3) to accommodate non-traditional students entering college later in life, the lowering by four-year institutions of their tuition rates or the acceptance of BOGG-like grants. These options would make college more affordable for the working poor, thus bypassing the need to save money by attending a community college first.

Other alternatives could include: (1) allowing CCC to choose a mission statement based on regional educational options, and (2) integrating general education transfer requirements into vocational training, thereby leaving the student to choose the better between entering the workforce or transferring to a four-year university.

Transformation of this magnitude may require legislative language in the existing educational code and input from all stakeholders, including advisory organizations such as California 's Postsecondary Commission (CPEC). Inclusive measures assure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to voice their concerns and set priorities to any adjustments. Analyzing these options using Mill's Harm Principle, one can easily assess that the societal benefits of empowering CCC to increase their transfer rate to four-year programs, far outweigh the potential harm to vocational students. In fact, one might argue that, if more vocational students learned of the advantages of earning an advanced degree related to their industry or field, many would choose this option. From this perspective, one can also evaluate this option from a Utilitarian perspective, in that increasing the potential number of CCC students advancing to completion of the baccalaureate degree will ultimately generate the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people -the growing number of the working-poor in California.

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