

The Ethics of Rationing Education in the California Community Colleges

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The California Master Plan for Education identifies the purpose of the California Community Colleges as serving all adults who can benefit from instruction. The combination of open access and low fees makes adult participation in community colleges in California among the highest in the nation (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In spite of this stated purpose, during times of economic downturn, budget cuts, sudden fee increases, and enrollment caps imposed by the legislature force community colleges to deny access to thousands of students who could benefit from instruction. Decisions must often be made quickly with little time for advanced planning, such as during the sudden budget cuts of 2003/04 that resulted in the loss of 57,292 full-time equivalent credit students and 10,538 full-time equivalent non-credit students statewide (Chancellor's Office, 2005). The "open door" to the community college has often been closed to many students because of restricted offerings, low registration priority, or lack of classes offered at times when they could attend (McCurdy, 1994). The ethical dilemma facing community college leaders in these times is how to choose who will be served and who will not be served, essentially deciding how to ration education.

In making decisions, community college leaders are guided by the *California Education Code* that states, "The California Community Colleges shall, as a primary mission, offer academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level for both younger and older students, including those persons returning to school" (California Education Code 66010, 1377). Another primary mission is to "advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous work force improvement" (California Education Code 66010, 1377). Other "essential and important" functions include remedial instruction, English as a second language, adult non-credit instruction, and services that support student success. In addition, the code states that "The provision of community services courses and programs is an authorized function of the community colleges so long as their provision is compatible with an institution's ability to meet its obligations and primary mission" (California Education Code 66010, 1377).

In making ethical choices about which classes and services to offer, and which to reduce or eliminate, community college leaders must consider the claimants to their services. Transfer students depend on community colleges as their pathway to the baccalaureate degree; cutting academic courses will reduce their chances of transferring or completing degrees. Academically under-prepared students depend on community colleges for remediation; eliminating those classes or services may end their college or career aspirations entirely. Vocational students seeking certificates or occupational degrees need the community college to pursue career goals, leading to jobs in such fields as nursing, police work, or auto mechanics. Eliminating vocational classes will reduce their chances for productive livelihoods. Working adults re-entering the community college to upgrade skills contribute to the economic vitality of California through continuous workforce development. Cutting the classes that they need will impact their upward mobility and dampen the economy. Many immigrants, both documented and undocumented, need to learn English; eliminating English as a Second Language (ESL) classes might prevent them from getting a toehold in American society. Low-income seniors and marginalized adults in need of basic life skills enroll in non-credit classes; reducing those classes could materially affect their quality of life. A significant number of community members, some with bachelor's degrees, enroll in a variety of classes, often for personal enrichment; eliminating those classes might anger and alienate the very folks who pay the taxes to support the college. All of these groups have a claim to be served, and community college educators must be conscious of and responsive to the needs of all of them.

A community college leader faced with making these difficult choices might apply several different ethical approaches while maintaining a firm grasp on the political and financial realities of the situation. She would strive to uphold her duty to "provide and protect student access to the educational resources of the community college" (ACCCA Statement of Ethics, n.d.).

Using an Ethic of Justice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001), the leader would follow the spirit of the law by preserving classes that address the primary mission, especially transfer, vocational, workforce development classes, and preserving classes that serve essential and important functions, including remediation, non-credit, and ESL classes. She might advocate reducing "enrichment" offerings as well as community services programs such as lecture series, art gallery shows, or museum exhibits. She would ask the college community to support an aggressive program of cost-cutting and enrollment management to preserve as many classes as possible because full-time equivalent students (FTES) generate the revenue upon which the college depends, and keeping the college solvent benefits everyone. She would ask that every course be evaluated during schedule development with the goals of increasing enrollment efficiency, maintaining a schedule that serves both traditional and non-traditional students, and preserving high-need, high-viability programs while phasing out low-need, low-viability programs.

Arguing from the Ethic of Critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001), the leader would understand that students who access higher education through the community college are more likely to represent lower socioeconomic groups, people of color, less academically-prepared students, and first-generation college students than those who attend four-year colleges (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinback, 2005). She would advocate to preserve those programs and services that help students

overcome social and economic barriers, such as the tutorial center, *Puente*, or programs for migrant farm children. She would strive to preserve as many ESL classes as possible, believing that the ability to speak English will help immigrants resist exploitation and oppression. She would ask for a cost-benefit analysis of support services to identify and maintain those that are making the most difference.

Embracing an Ethic of Care (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001), the leader would listen to the voices and stories of students. She would be moved by the plight of the undocumented immigrant, the needs of the frail elderly, and the predicament of the single mom. She would build consensus around which programs are most essential in the lives of students and seek creative ways to share the burden of the cuts. She might even propose a temporary freeze to salaries and benefits of employees, feeling that it is better to make sacrifices internally than to deny services to those who need them. She would advocate for creative cost savings measures that show compassion for the least fortunate.

In the end, the ethical community college leader will make difficult choices about which students will be served and which will not. She cannot avoid making those decisions, but using the ethics of justice, critique, and care, she encourages dialogue and fosters creative solutions so that the community college can continue to fulfill its essential missions.

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