What Is the Purpose of the 21st Century Community College?
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By Terry O'Banion

For over 100 years, the community college has been evolving as one of the most effective institutions of higher education in addressing the social and economic needs of the nation. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was general agreement that the community college was a comprehensive college designed to serve the multiple needs of a diverse student body through a variety of programs, including developmental, transfer, vocational, general, and community education. In the past few decades, that purpose has been changing as the developmental, general, and community education programs have been weakened and sometimes discontinued. In today's community college, the primary focus of the institution has been narrowed to make transfer and workforce education the priority programs. But should transfer and workforce education be the primary purpose of the 21st century community college? We can find a partial answer if we just follow the money.

Follow the Money

Helping students complete the first few years of postsecondary education so they could transfer to a university was the original purpose for creating the community college; that purpose has been an essential tenet of the community college ever since and is likely to remain so far into the future. However, it is workforce education that has, in the last several decades, taken all the air out of the room on its way to becoming the primary mission of community colleges in the U.S.

In an article in the author's book, *13 Ideas That Are Transforming the Community College World* (O'Banion, 2019), James Jacobs and Jennifer Worth noted:

> As the new millennium got under way it became increasingly clear to community college leaders, policymakers, business and industry, and federal and state legislators that workforce development was not only a central mission of the community college; some saw it as a priority of the community college. When the majority of community college students are enrolled in workforce programs rather than liberal arts programs, and when workforce programs are funded extensively by state and federal agencies and by foundations over other community college programs, then it becomes even clearer where the priority is. (p. 179)

And "funded extensively" is the rub. Community college leaders across the nation are thrilled that the Biden administration is calling on their institutions to play a leading role in training the workforce of the future. They appreciate the benefits of having a First Lady who

is a working community college faculty member. It is clear that President Biden understands the central position of community colleges in sustaining U.S. economic vitality. All this positive attention on Democracy's Colleges is a heavy thumb on the scale of the workforce side of their mission, shifting weight from more cosmopolitan concerns about preparing students to make a good life to a fervent focus on making a good living. The amount of funds provided for job training in community colleges by the federal government in the last few years and the potential for additional funding under the current administration is staggering.

The following recent funding for workforce education are examples of the clear testimony that the federal government is doing more than making promises:

- The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant of $2 billion in 2008.
- The Expanding Community College Apprenticeships (ECCA) initiative launched in 2019 with funding of $20 million from the U.S. Department of Labor.
- The Strengthening Community College Training Grant of $45 million in 2020.
- Career and Technical Education State Grants of $1.35 billion in budget for 2022.

In his first speech to Congress on April 28, 2021, President Biden made free community colleges a key part of his national agenda. According to Jaschik (2021), "President Biden wants $109 billion for two-year colleges, $80 billion addition for Pell Grants, $62 billion for retention and completion efforts, and $39 billion for two free years at minority-serving institutions for most students" (para. 1).

Funding for workforce education is woven into the nation's defense policies, foreign policies, and social and economic policies. No aspect of higher education has been so fully embraced or supported with special acts as has workforce education. It is difficult to locate the total amount of allocations for workforce education since the first Morrill Act in 1862, but the U.S. government has been increasing its annual allocations in the last several decades. Anthony Carnevale and colleagues, in the 2015 report, *College Is Just the Beginning*, cited federal job training support at $18 billion and certifications, apprenticeships, and other workforce training support at $47 billion. Carnevale et al. also pointed out that, "The United States spends $1.1 trillion on formal and informal postsecondary workforce education and training annually" (p. 3) and that two-year colleges were spending $60 billion a year on workforce education. What is truly amazing is that these federal funds are less than the combined billions spent on workforce training by state and local agencies, grants from foundations, and contributions from business and industry.

In comparison, the support for liberal arts education through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts—the most visible federal programs to support liberal education—has been minimal. Both agencies fund annual projects at about $100 million a year.

So, What Is the Problem?

For thousands of years, human beings have failed to bridge the divide between workforce education and liberal education. Perhaps the argument about the value of liberal education versus workforce education began,

> Around a campfire at the mouth of Lascaux cave near what is today the village of Montignac in the Dordogne Valley of France, where some members of a Cro Magnon clan painted animals on the walls and other members ridiculed them for dabbling in

> “art” rather than dealing with the “real world” by training the young to sharpen spears and snare rabbits. The line between liberal education and workforce education probably appeared early in the evolution of the species, for it seems to reflect a division in human nature—heart versus head, nature versus nurture, right versus left, and doing versus being. (O’Banion & Miles, 2022, para. 2)

What if our inability today to agree on an integrated core of education that equally represents both liberal and workforce education is in our DNA, and we are genetically cursed to relive this division generation after generation?

Training students for jobs has become the priority of the nation’s community colleges to the point that job training is rapidly becoming the mission of the community college. Intoxicated by the huge amounts of funding for preparing students for employment, community college leaders are expanding job training programs at lightning speed. And it is entirely appropriate that they do so because community colleges have the experience, philosophy, structures, partnerships, faculty, and locations to be the nation’s primary engine to prepare students for the workforce we need. Every community college leader understands and agrees that training the workforce is one of the most important roles played by the community college. The problem, however, is that if our education system is to prepare fully-educated citizens for a democracy—for a just society that supports equally the social and economic imperatives of the nation—a liberal education must be incorporated into job training programs, or a core of liberal education must be required of all students in such programs.

Is there any educator, parent, legislator, faith leader, entertainer, farmer, house cleaner, or industrialist who will contest the statement, “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life”? No one really disagrees with the common sense captured in this statement. All of us want an education for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors that will ensure that we are trained to engage in productive work and prepared to engage in a productive life. We understand intuitively that human beings do not live by bread alone, nor can life be enjoyed if there is no bread on the table. Workforce education is no longer in need of defense as it once was decades ago—just follow the money. But liberal education still needs defending, and desperately needs to be reformed and funded.

That the liberal arts help people expand their minds is a common enough expression to be a cliché, but look more closely at what that means, not as abstract platitude, but as meaningful practice. On the most fundamental level, individuals work in exchange for life’s necessities—food, shelter, clothing—for themselves and their dependents. Most would agree, however, that basic needs go much further than survival to include matters of the heart and mind, the essence of being human. A liberal education exposes individuals to ideas and opportunities that help them explore the human condition and examine a vast array of possibilities on their way toward identifying their own dreams, honing their own talents, and fulfilling their own potential. The value of a liberal education lies in its ability to help individuals achieve their full potential, a basic principle of American education.

The second major argument for liberal education is based on its necessity in preparing an informed citizenry to protect the basic tenets of a democracy. In a letter to Charles Yancey on January 6, 1816, Thomas Jefferson made his famous observation, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” (Looney, 2004, p. 328). Jefferson believed in the ability of the common person, through education, to make laws that would be fair to all and to implement those laws by governing fairly. This ideal is reflected throughout the Declaration of Independence and in the mission

and values of the University of Virginia, which he founded. The American educational system would not be doing its job serving the diverse needs of students to become fully functioning citizens in sustaining a democracy without teaching the values of liberal education.

A third argument for liberal education is that it plays an important role in helping students make initial decisions about careers and career changes later in life. The common wisdom is that most people will change careers at least seven times; however, there is a big difference between changing jobs and changing careers, and most researchers point out that there is no real consensus based on reliable data about the number of such changes. One job search specialist notes, "Today, the average person changes jobs ten to fifteen times (with an average of 12 job changes) during his or her career" (Doyle, 2020, para. 2), which means a good amount of time is spent changing employment.

Cappelli (2013) reminds us, though, that, "The trouble is nobody can predict where the jobs will be—not the employers, not the schools, not the government officials who are making such loud calls for vocational training" (para. 8). So, if we do not even know where the jobs will be, and if workers change jobs and careers a number of times, on what basis will these decisions be made? A sound immersion in liberal education can provide a foundation for dealing with such decisions.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) suggests that a liberal education is essential to preparing for and living a full life, for educating citizens for participation in a democracy, and for securing the necessary skills and attitudes required of a competent and globally competitive workforce (Schneider, 2014). Carol Geary Schneider (2014) eloquently addressed this challenge as she prepared AAC&U for its 100th anniversary in 2015:

> Across the entire centennial year, we will probe higher education's role in engaging students with the world's "grand challenges" and "wicked problems" and in helping create a more just and sustainable future for the United States and for societies around the globe. . . . Together, we will connect the equity imperative to the US talent development imperative and explore both "what works" and how to advance what works in order to better prepare twenty-first-century students for *work, life, and citizenship* [emphasis added]. (para. 3)

A Pathway Forward

For centuries, educators have struggled with attempts to reach the golden mean of helping students make a good living and live a good life, but they have usually done so by contrasting opposing forces—by making the case for one end of the continuum against the other. The arguments for an integrated education are usually framed in workforce education versus liberal education, hands versus heart, hard skills versus soft skills, or the skillful hand versus the cultured mind. The literature is full of these either/or arguments, although most thought leaders agree that what is needed is an integration of the two positions. In the end, there is strong agreement with the statement, "We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life."

The pathway forward to solving the dilemma and bridging the divide has been stated clearly for decades. In its landmark report *Building Communities: A New Vision for a New Century* (1988), the American Association of Community Colleges said:

> The aim of a community college education must be not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to take them beyond their narrow interests, broaden their perspectives, and enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose. . . . The community college, more than any other higher education institution, should overcome departmental narrowness by integrating technical and career studies with the liberal arts. (pp. 26-27)

Although AAC&U focuses its mission as an advocate of liberal education, the association recognized in its 2010 report *The Quality Imperative* the need for an education that bridges liberal education and workforce education:

> A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else . . . . It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others. (p. 3)

In the 2016 monograph *Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life*, the author proposed an Essential Education for all students as a way to bridge the divide between workforce and liberal education. Published as a guide for faculty and college leaders, the monograph included a brief history of workforce education and of general education, made a case for an Essential Education, and proposed seven pathways faculty could use to create an Essential Education for all students. The author also proposed that moving forward the terms "workforce education," "liberal education," and its corollary "general education," commonly used in community colleges as a substitute for liberal education (although historically they have different meanings), be deleted from this conversation because those terms have become a bit pejorative. Instead, the author suggested that we begin using the term "Essential Education" to describe an integrated and cohesive education that will bridge the divide between workforce education and liberal education (O'Banion, 2016).

An Essential Education is defined as an integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and workforce education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life (O'Banion, 2016). The goal is to design a new curriculum of Essential Education for all students, whether career- or transfer-oriented, that will provide a core experience, limited in scope, that will integrate key elements from liberal education and workforce education. Students who complete this core experience should be much better equipped to pursue career and/or transfer goals to success and completion. By requiring this core experience for all students as the initial college experience, the stress and uncertainty of choosing majors, programs, and courses will be diminished considerably. The common curriculum will help unify faculty work, student support services, curriculum alignment with secondary schools and universities, and assessment processes.

The current cafeteria model of a buffet of courses, in which students are required to choose one course from many options, will no longer dominate course offerings. In an ongoing national study of general education requirements in the nation's community colleges, the author and his colleague Cindy Miles found that in large community colleges the mandatory number of courses to meet requirements for general education ranged from 8 to 13, and the total number of course offerings to meet the requirements ranged from 49 to 390. In a California community college, the catalog includes four different sets of requirements for general education degrees—already confusing for students. In the college's general education requirements of six courses, students must choose from among 217 different courses (one course from 46 in natural sciences; one from 47 in social and behavioral

sciences; one from 79 in art, humanities, and culture; and so on). In an Ohio community college, to meet a three-course general education requirement, students must choose one course from 46 different courses in the arts and humanities, one course from 36 in the social sciences, and one course from 48 in math and science. It is quite clear that the reform of general education has been ignored in the recent scramble to reform practice to improve student success.

In contradiction to our deeply ingrained American love of freedom and choice, research in cognitive and behavioral science has repeatedly demonstrated that having too many choices is detrimental to decision making and even happiness (Iyengar, 2011; Schwartz, 2004). Schwartz notes how the following three key psychological factors negatively affect students when confronting confusing course selections*:* paradox of choice (having an excess of good options to choose from causes stress and inhibits decision-making rather than inducing happiness and satisfaction), analysis paralysis (stagnation in decision-making stemming from overanalyzing a surfeit of data), and anticipated regret (a prospective sense of regret that one might feel if they make a wrong choice). Consider the stress on students required to choose two courses from a list of 167!

In *The Shapeless River* (Scott-Clayton, 2011), an evocative and evidentiary review of how the high-choice, low-structure curriculum model in many community colleges thwarts student decisions and progress, Judith Scott-Clayton of the Community College Research Center observed, "for many students at community colleges, finding a path to degree completion is the equivalent of navigating a river on a dark night" (p. 1). She underscored how it particularly affects vulnerable populations: "This unstructured complexity may be the most daunting for disadvantaged students—particularly first-generation college students" (p. 14).

Guiding Students Through the Cafeteria

Academic advising is the second most important function in the community college. If it is not conducted with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness, the most important function in the college—instruction—will fail to reach its aims. The purpose of advising is to help students select a program of study to meet their life and vocational goals. "As such, academic advising is a central and important activity in the process of education. . . . few student personnel functions occur as often or affect so many students" (O'Banion, 1972, p. 62).

The 2018 national report on the power of advising in community colleges by the Center for Community College Student Engagement noted, "Students and faculty consistently report that advising is the most important student service that colleges offer" (p. 1). While everyone agrees on the value of academic advising, there is little agreement on how to correct the primary barrier to effective advising that has been the elephant in the room for many decades: the impractical ratio of advisors to students. With high numbers of part-time students, community colleges traditionally have impossibly high student-to-advisor ratios, with advisors typically serving 1,000 students each (Marcus, 2012). One advisor stated plainly, "Our caseloads . . . are still too large to really be able to follow up with students. . . . In a perfect world, we'd have three times the number of advisors" (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic has turned up the heat on advisors and counselors, adding remote services and rising mental health challenges to the profusion of student needs. Confusing or seemingly irrelevant course requirements do not help the situation.

There is promise of improving advising among colleges riding the wave of guided pathways reforms sweeping the country, like those from the Tennessee system as cataloged by the Community College Research Center (Jenkins et al., 2018). Some colleges are reassigning general academic advisors to focus on students in a single meta-major and provide more personal and specific academic/career guidance. A few have moved to a caseload model, where students have a consistent, assigned academic advisor throughout their stay at the college. Others are hiring a new class of paraprofessionals called student success navigators or coaches to shoulder part of the advisor's outreach and engagement duties. But these movements frequently face institutional resistance and mark slow progress compared to student needs. As former Community College Research Center director Thomas Bailey (2017) noted, "redesigning advising is one of the most challenging parts of colleges' guided pathways work" (p. 12). If colleges committed to creating an Essential Education, a common core of courses or learning experiences that bridge the divide between workforce education and liberal education, academic advising would be streamlined for first-term students and advisors. But first there must be agreement on an Essential Education.

An Essential Education for All Students

There are plenty of clues to the most important elements in liberal education and workforce education that all students need. In the lists of outcomes and objectives created by advocates from each side, four stand out on most such lists: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, and communication. These knowledge sets, or skills, cut across the liberal education and workforce education divide and begin to frame a core of integrated learning valuable to every student. These four arenas of learning could be designed fresh by educators as a required curriculum:

- Critical Thinking 101
- Problem Solving 101
- Collaboration and Teamwork 101
- Communication 101

The four areas could be taught as standalone courses for three semester credits each or combined into a learning community of 12 credits. Some educators will combine problem solving and critical thinking into one course. Educators who favor this core course approach will, of course, want to explore additional courses to add to the core. These additional areas of essential learning might include diversity, global awareness, and information technology, which often show up on lists of essential skills. The purpose here is not to determine which courses should be included in an essential core, to begin the really hard work of outlining the content to be included in each course, or to suggest the teaching approaches that might be most effective. The purpose here is to suggest an approach to a new construct, maybe a new model, that bridges liberal education and workforce education.

This construct of basic core courses reflects the changes that have occurred in the very nature of work. The current knowledge economy demands different skills, different ways of working, and different expectations from employees than the old agrarian and industrial models required. In today's workplace, assembly lines may employ robots and supply chain management may run on sophisticated software, but these tools don't appear on their own; people develop them to improve efficiencies and address challenges. These innovative individuals must have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, approach and solve problems creatively, and respond to change with flexibility—and to do all this extremely well and, quite possibly, under great pressure. By blending the best from liberal education and workforce education, educators are urged to

create a new set of core courses or competencies that are essential for all students, regardless of their ultimate goals.

If faculty from liberal education and from workforce education can agree on the common elements of core learning experiences and construct content and teaching strategies that apply to those core learning experiences, we stand a good chance of creating an integrated curriculum that will reflect the purpose of the 21st century community college, which is to help our students make a good living and live a good life. If we fail to create this kind of Essential Education, the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.

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Terry O'Banion is Senior Professor of Practice, Kansas State University, and President Emeritus, League for Innovation in the Community College.

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