

The Golden Age of Community Colleges

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BY

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There is a myth, perpetuated by those of us who worked in community colleges at that time, that the decade of the 1960s was the golden age of the community college movement. It was an exhilarating time for community colleges. A new college opened its doors almost weekly. Enrollments doubled in many of these new colleges each year. Colleges competed for the architects Caudill, Rowlett, and Scott, or Perkins and Will to design the most attractive facilities. We had plenty of students, plenty of money, plenty of faculty, and plenty of energy. Everyone was innovative. Everything seemed to work.

Of such stuff myths are made, and it is easy to remember the 1960s as the Golden Age of Community Colleges. But not so. The Golden Age of Community Colleges is just beginning. In our over 88 years of history, community colleges have never been so important, so innovative, so essential, so *golden* as they are now—at the end of one decade and at the beginning of a new decade that will lead us into a new century.

As community colleges gear up for the 1990s, this will be the time remembered in the future as the Golden Age of Community Colleges. For in the decade of the 1980s, we not only survived, we prevailed and prepared the way for the golden age of the 1990s.

We survived Proposition 13 in California and all of its clones. We survived the increasing competition for students from the universities and the propri-

etary institutions. We survived the unionization of our faculties and our staffs. We survived the increasing role of the states and the decreasing support of the federal government. We survived numerous attempts to scale back our missions. We survived the over 30 national reports and the over 250 state reports lamenting the decline of education in America.

We not only survived in the 1980s, but Oh! how we did prevail. During this last decade:

- We became senior partners in the national higher education community. Our people served as presidents and on the boards of most of the national higher education organizations—American Council on Education, American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, National Science Foundation, WICHE, National Endowment for the Humanities, FIPSE, The College Board, Business

Higher Education Forum, American College Testing Program, and dozens of others. Never again will community colleges be excluded from the centers of power in planning and executing the national agenda for higher education.

- We learned to adapt computers and other advanced technologies for improved teaching, learning, and institutional management in ways that created envy in some of our colleagues in four-year colleges and universities. Our innovative faculty and staff adapted existing programs and created new programs in concert with IBM, Apple, Digital, AT&T, Honeywell, Bull, and dozens of other technological giants. Never again will community colleges be left out of the network to experiment with and apply the latest technology to improve education.
- We formed new alliances with international corporations, regional industries, state universities, and local governments. Our people led the way in seeking out these partners to create new opportunities for students, revitalize communities, and address national and local social issues. Never again will community colleges be excluded as key partners in the continuing rejuvenation of the republic.
- We reached far beyond the confines of our geographical districts to Moscow, Beijing, Singapore, London, Rome, Tokyo, and hundreds of other cities around the world. Our people became world citizens spreading their ideas as new-age missionaries to help developing countries and industrial countries adapt the cre-

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ative programs of this American social invention. Never again will community colleges be seen as parochial institutions interested only in the problems of their geographical districts.

- We responded to the national call for economic renewal and increased productivity. Our people worked with senators, governors, and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to pass legislation, to form partnerships, and to design programs to keep America working and to keep America competitive. Never again will community colleges be excluded from the White House, the state houses, and the boardrooms of the captains of industry.
- We recruited minorities and women in unprecedented numbers as students and staff. Our people allocated special resources, mentored promising leaders, and established affirmative action guidelines to ensure a diversity of students and staff reflective of the population at large. Although the final goal of equity is yet to be achieved, never again will community colleges be insensitive to the rich diversity of the populations they serve.

These phenomena and others in the 1980s certainly suggest the emergence of a Golden Age for the Community College. That does not mean, of course, that the decade was problem free. There were horrific problems in the 1980s, some of which could torpedo the community college of the future if allowed to persist: the vocationalization of the curriculum, the over-dependence on part-time faculty, the lack of resources, the control of boards of trustees by faculty or single-issue politicians, and increasing state control, to name only a few of the thornier issues.

But compared to the mythological golden age of the 1960s and any other decade in its history, the Golden Age of

the Community College is just beginning—at the end of the 1980s for all the accomplishments of the decade, and at the beginning of the 1990s, for all the opportunities to come.

If we are very lucky in the coming decade, some guest commentator will write a polemic for the *Trustee Quarterly* in the year 2000 on a plane ride from Chicago to Orange County, as I have done, touting the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s as the *true* golden age of the community college, and, if I am lucky, I just might be that guest commentator. ■

“Commentary” is a regular feature of the Trustee Quarterly in which noted observers of the community colleges share their special perspective on issues of importance to lay education board members.

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