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How Faculty, Families and Community Leaders Respond to Community College Reform

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SUMMARY

This study is an effort to understand the views of relatively under-studied stakeholders (full-time and adjunct faculty members, families of community college students and community leaders) on a variety of education reform ideas aimed at improving results and closing achievement gaps for community college students.

In particular, the study looks at reactions to reform ideas that have often, in recent years, been applied to K-12 education but less often to community colleges. These ideas include systematically measuring student achievement, using data to identify achievement gaps, crafting interventions to close those gaps, and carefully assessing progress.

We chose three diverse community college communities for this exploratory study. In each, we conducted focus groups and interviews, and found broad support for community colleges in general. All our respondents see the community college as a vital means for providing access to higher education for students who might otherwise not be able to attend. Faculty members are proud of their role in reaching out to these students; family members and community leaders have high praise for their local community colleges in terms of their service to diverse student populations, their accessibility and their responsiveness to community needs.

At the broadest level, then, everyone we talked to appreciated the importance of efforts aimed at improving the success of community college students, particularly those facing the greatest obstacles. When it comes to implementation, however, our research suggests several critical obstacles that reformers will need to work through, most notably the reservations and concerns of full-time faculty.

The full-time faculty members we interviewed feel that they are already overwhelmed with administrative duties, including, in many instances, greater demands to collect and use data—a common reform strategy. At this point, any initiative, no matter how well meaning, is going to meet with resistance from a faculty already inundated with administrative duties.

Full-time faculty members are also apprehensive about the talk of increasing student success and achievement. While they support this goal in the abstract, they worry that many of the obstacles to student success are things over which they, and their institutions, have little control. In their view, much of the mission of community colleges is to reach out to students who would not otherwise have a shot at higher education. But a great number of these students have so many distractions in their own lives (such as work and childcare) and such severe problems in academic preparation that it is almost certain some will not succeed. In their view, familiar slogans such as “all students can learn” don’t apply directly to the community college environment, and many are afraid they will be held to unreasonable standards of achievement.

This does not mean that full-time faculty members see no ways in which student outcomes can be improved. They, along with nearly all respondents we studied, see a need for *external* changes, such as providing more resources to community colleges or more financial and logistical support for struggling students. Most did not, however, believe that a significant restructuring of community colleges themselves is needed. We believe these results have significant implications for communications, institutional change and policy efforts associated with community college reform initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

In a series of studies of higher education since 1993, Public Agenda has consistently noted that when many leaders and elites speak about higher education, they seem to be envisioning the four-year institution that they attended, and much of what they say reflects this preconception. As a result, community colleges are sometimes left out of the dialogue, despite the fact that a major proportion of the nation's undergraduates attend a community college.

Initiatives are under way to shift that focus and to shine the spotlight on the nation's 1,157 community colleges. The goals of such initiatives include enhancing the achievement of community college students, especially those facing the greatest obstacles, helping all students have the best possible chance to achieve their dreams, and to strengthening the ability of community colleges to develop an educated citizenry and workforce.

How will such goals and strategies be accepted by critical stakeholders in and around the community colleges themselves? In this qualitative research project, we selected three diverse community colleges and in each case focused on relatively understudied—and potentially critical—stakeholders: full-time and part-time faculty, families of students and community leaders. Our aim was to form hypotheses on how these constituencies might respond to central elements of current reform ideas.

Overall, the focus groups and individual interviews indicated strong support for many reform ideas. But among some constituencies—particularly full-time faculty members—we also found concerns, questions and reservations. We believe that unless those hesitations are addressed, it will be difficult to realize the ambitious goals envisioned by those who aim to

improve results for the nation's community college students.

Methodology

The hypotheses presented in this report draw largely upon nine focus groups conducted at three diverse community colleges. One was in Virginia, serving a largely white rural population. Another was a large multi-campus urban college in Florida, with a student body that includes a substantial number of African American students. And the third was a midsize suburban college in Texas that and serves a diverse student body, including many students from immigrant families, and a large Hispanic population.

In each community, we conducted three two-hour focus groups: one each with full-time faculty, part-time faculty and family members of students. Faculty were recruited through lists provided by participating colleges; they were called randomly and invited to attend a research group in exchange for a stipend. To reach family members, we used student lists to call randomly selected student households. We again offered a stipend for taking part, and screened to ensure a demographic cross-section. A few family participants were themselves community college students.

In addition to holding focus group discussions, we talked to 12 community leaders distributed among the sites. Several of these leaders were also members of their local community college board of trustees. Because these community leaders were sometimes recommended to us by community college administrators, they may have been more knowledgeable and enthusiastic about community colleges than is typical, which probably had both advantages and disadvantages for the research.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted in February and March 2005. Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics

underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. While they do not produce results that can be generalized with the precision and reliability of a quantitative survey, they can raise strong hypotheses and insights about the views of different groups that can be invaluable to communications, policy development and further research.

FULL-TIME FACULTY: OVERWHELMED AND SKEPTICAL

Any effort to close achievement gaps for community college students must, of course, rely heavily on full-time faculty. Although they may not teach all of the courses at the colleges, they are influential in setting the direction of policy and shaping curriculum. Administrators and legislators can make any decisions they want, but it is the faculty members who are on the front lines of actual student learning. Their resistance to reform would in effect be a veto of the initiative, their enthusiastic commitment a major factor in success. Because of their critical role, and because the focus groups with them were particularly rich, our report focuses on full-time faculty more than on other groups.

Probably the most common issue for these faculty members is the sense of being overwhelmed. The causes differ slightly from campus to campus, but in general, they report that their collegiate environments have changed dramatically since they have been teaching, to the point where they are increasingly overburdened and (in their view) underpaid in their work.

More Adjuncts Mean More Administrative Duties

One issue that we heard a lot about is the greater reliance on adjuncts. In the view of full-time faculty, community colleges have expanded their reach by hiring more part-time faculty members. This, in turn, has left the full-time faculty members with a much

greater share of administrative work. One faculty member said:

About 10 or 12 years ago, the administration got a strange idea—at least it is strange to me—that we ought to have more adjuncts than we have full-time faculty. That's fine, except that the adjuncts don't go to any meetings, and they don't attend any of these administrative needs, which makes the full-time faculty have to do double and triple time in that area. It's been very imposing on a lot of people.

Others complained about stagnant salaries or increasing workloads:

It's very hard to recruit good teachers since starting salaries are not competitive—and that's not just with outside business, but with high schools.

I've recently realized that with the increased cost of living, I'm making less money than I did 20 years ago while doing more work—especially when I take into account my online and administrative duties.

The full-time faculty doesn't grow. We have the same number of English teachers we had when the college first opened, when it was a fourth of the students that we have now.

As a result, many of the full-time faculty members we spoke with felt totally overburdened, and concerns about growing administrative duties topped their list of complaints.

Less Time for Advising

The increase in the number of adjunct faculty members has placed an additional strain on the advising system. Our community college faculty members see student advising as particularly important, especially given the diverse character of community college students. Here again it is hard for adjuncts to pull their weight, and the burden falls on the full-time faculty members. Several faculty members complained of having huge numbers of

advisees and being unable to work with them (especially given the varied schedules of the students).

Dangers of Data Dumping

One of the tenets of many education reform efforts these days is to engender a “culture of evidence” and data-based decision making. But for many of our full-time faculty respondents, even the word *data* evoked groans, and others literally cringed when the topic came up.

The response from many of the faculty members we spoke to is that the push for additional data is just one more example of the general administrative overload previously noted. One described a tug-of-war between faculty and administration on this subject, with the administration sending out data and faculty not even reading it:

We receive data often from institutional research or from the administration on many topics: enrollment rates, room usage, retention, student success. Recently the administrators sent word through our deans that they know if we *open* the data we are sent in e-mail and that we are expected to open these e-mails and read them.

The problem is not only with the amount of data that gets sent out. Faculty members are often confused about what they are supposed to do with the information they receive. In the eyes of several respondents, the data is just thrown out there with no indication of what to do about it or how it relates to their work in the classroom.

I don't know how to respond to the information. If enrollment is not meeting expectations, if students are dropping, if African American and Hispanic students make one letter grade lower than Caucasian students, what am I to do? Am I responsible?

Other faculty members complain about the data itself, that it is either just the "same old, same old" or that it is manipulated for political purposes.

Some of the data we've known for 10 years. Yet nothing was done back then. Now we're looking at it again today. We're supposed to come up with a plan, but I'm like, "We came up with a plan 10 years ago."

Some of the decisions that we've even had made around here had to do with the data that was collected. But you can skew it by picking out something that supports your position. They pick something and say, "Oh, this will solve this problem." They don't look at the general information and say, "How important is it?" Used to be, the philosophy was, "If it's not broke, don't fix it." Now, the philosophy seems to be, "If it's not broke, by golly, I'm going to break it, because I've got to make that name for myself." That's where the data is coming in. That's why I think everybody is so tired of looking at data. Somebody is picking out one portion of the data that suits themselves and using it to benefit themselves instead of student learning.

This aversion to data streams coming to them from on high was a common thread at two of the colleges where there was already a large emphasis on data collection. Clearly, this creates troubling possibilities for how reform efforts that stress data are likely to be received by a group that is key to reform's success.

At the third college, faculty seemed less inundated with data and, perhaps as a result, appeared more receptive to it. It was noteworthy, however, that when asked what *type* of data they would want, they did not talk about the kind reformers often focus on, such as disaggregated achievement data. Instead, they spoke of knowing more about the courses students had already taken and how they had done in those courses. Unfortunately, the college's privacy policies forbade them from having this information, yet this was exactly what they thought would be truly helpful to them in the classroom. There was also recognition in this group that some kinds of data may be more

useful for *administrators* to be tracking and other kinds may be of greater benefit to *faculty*.

Problems in Student Achievement: Whose Fault?

We also found evidence of a broader concern with the implementation of certain reform goals, in particular that of closing achievement gaps. This is a lofty goal that, in our view, is shared at the theoretical level by all of the community college faculty members we interviewed. But when it comes to *implementation*, these same faculty members have serious questions and concerns. They feel that the goal may ignore the realities and challenges they face on a daily level and that faculty members will be held to artificial standards of success and failure.

It is noteworthy that our focus group facilitators never suggested that faculty *should* be held accountable for student achievement. Rather, this defensive line of thinking emerged organically in reaction to discussion of various reform goals and strategies concerned with closing achievement gaps. Specifically, there are several reasons community college faculty members feel they should not be held strictly accountable for every aspect of student achievement at their institutions.

Lack of Control

Several respondents stressed the idea that many of the problems with student achievement were really caused by things over which individual faculty members, and in many cases the institutions themselves, had little or no control. One faculty member expressed her frustration this way:

Our problem is a population problem with the geographic, demographic, economic problem. It's not a failure on the part of anybody here at this college.

Specifically, the faculty members stressed that their students had families, were single parents, were working full-time or did not speak English. They posited that these factors have an enormous

influence on achievement but do not lend themselves to any obvious solution, certainly not on their part. Indeed, several faculty members thought it was a miracle that the students were doing as well as they are:

Many problems would be solved if our students had more money. They have to work, so they cannot attend class or do homework. They can't afford a computer or child care or a reliable car. They are the only caretakers of their children or their parents. It is a miracle these students can go on every day and that they still care so much about achieving a higher education, which they see as the key out of poverty.

Problems with Student Preparation, Motivation and Attitude

Many of our respondents told stories about the increasing difficulty of working with the students who actually show up in their classes. Community college faculty members expect that many of their students will need remedial classes; this is part of the standard operation of their institutions. But they complain of students who are not ready even for remedial community college work, some of whom are illiterate in any language, and others who barely speak or write English.

They also stressed the motivation problems they see in some of their students. At one community college, the faculty noted that some students were enrolled in school because it is cheaper to pay tuition and remain eligible for health insurance under their parents' coverage than it is to buy health insurance on the open market. Other faculty members stressed the difficulty of maintaining discipline in their college classes. One faculty member said that she had to use "equestrian training techniques" to bring order to the classroom:

One thing I see is lack of perseverance, unrealistic expectations, high dropout rates. Students come to class totally unprepared. They try to balance jobs and family pressures, taking maybe two classes when they don't even have

time for one class. I teach foreign languages, so you'd think that the Hispanics who attend our class would excel. Some do; some just don't do the work and they fail.

No matter what is on the syllabus, a lot of them don't read it. Even if they do, there's always a student that wants to be made an exception to attendance requirements.

Today, more students seem to think that by just showing up, whether they do the work or not, they should pass the class. They don't understand how much is involved in getting that passing grade. They say, "But I came every day."

The common theme of all these concerns is that community colleges and especially faculty members cannot be held responsible for the achievement problems of students who aren't prepared or motivated to do college work.

Lack of Clear Standards for Success

Moreover, faculty members stressed that success is extremely hard to quantify because the students themselves do not necessarily have the same goals that most indicators measure. Thus, for example, the fact that students did not complete a course or a program did not mean they had not learned anything. To put it another way, they felt that most objective measures of student success are based on the completion of programs and courses, but many of their students don't really measure the value of a community college education based upon these criteria.

If the focus is the students, they should be asking what the students' goals are. But that isn't how success is measured by the administration. They want to use some administrative-defined formula for success. Our students don't always meet that. But they still feel successful.

I don't think success can be defined. I'm part of the Student Success Committee. We spent about five hours trying to define student success. We

couldn't come up with it because different students have different objectives. One student who was taking my class didn't want the credit. She signed up for the course because she was trying to study for an exam. My class would prepare her for the exam. She didn't care about the class. She failed. You'd say that my student failed my class. But her objective was not to pass to my class. How can I define success for that student? I can't.

Failure Can Be Okay, Too

Our faculty members also mentioned that for college students, at least, failure is not always a bad thing. One group spent quite a bit of time emphasizing the importance of failure in learning.

Failure is also learning. You've got to look at failure as a process of learning. You cannot learn, in my opinion, without failing.

With this failure thing, if you look at the people who have failed over the time in history, it's their failure that made them successful. You look at Einstein, you look at Michael Jordan. Failure is not a bad thing.

Cynicism about Motives

A few of our respondents see a darker motive behind initiatives to improve achievement at the community college level. These respondents feel such efforts are often more about boosting reputations or revenues rather than creating a more educated citizenry and workforce.

We used to talk about academics. Nobody talks about academics anymore. It's always how many students you can get through the program. Not what they were like when they got out of the program, what kind of job they got out of the program, but how many you can herd through the program.

I agree the concern about retention comes from the administration, because everything in the college is funded based on graduating students. It is not funded on the number that we enroll, it's the number that we graduate. The more dropouts we

have, the more people who start and don't finish, the worse we look. Then we don't get as much funding. I would assume from an administrative point the goal is to pass these people and get them through a two-year program.

All Students Can Learn? Yes, But . . .

As a result of these concerns, many respondents felt that the goals embodied in such slogans as “all students can learn” or “no child left behind” don't apply very well to the community college setting. They feel that students have been pushed through the K–12 system and then dumped in the community colleges, and now the community colleges are asked to remedy previously existing problems. As one faculty member said with considerable frustration, “No child left behind? Some of them should have been.”

More specifically, many of our respondents said there are students who are not realistically able to do college work and that it is unfair to expect community colleges to be able to solve their problems.

The whole quote is: “All children can learn *given the right circumstances*,” which is a very big caveat.

All children can learn? Let's emphasize “can.” Not all students will, but all students can. Maybe what they learn is that if they don't work, they're going to fail.

Absolutely all children can learn. All of us can learn. It never ends until the day we die, but it doesn't happen instantaneously. There are so many years of patterning that occurred before we get them that are bad patterns, weak patterns, and it's very difficult sometimes to overcome those at a college level.

Several of our faculty members expressed the view that there are many people in community colleges who should not be there at all. In effect, they are saying that what the community colleges need is not more retention, but less.

Can all students learn? All students could perhaps get to a high school reading level. I'm not so sure it would apply as much to college. I don't think all people can be a college-educated professional. I think about a fourth of our students either through laziness or just through—I don't mean this in a vicious way—inherent inability to do the work shouldn't be there. . . . We do actually admit students that are autistic and students that are probably dealing with mild to moderate mental impairments. I'm sure some of them are managing to pass, but I wonder if we are doing them any service by fostering some false hope that they're going to go and be a doctor or lawyer or get an MBA. Some of these kids just can't do that; I feel bad for them.

Although these full-time faculty members are proud of what they do and are committed to helping their students learn, they are, as we have seen, not immediately prepared to endorse all the concepts and strategies articulated by community college reformers.

A Note on the General Public's Views on Student Success

The concerns of full-time faculty are familiar to observers of the discussions about K–12 education. Looking at what Public Agenda has learned about this debate in the K–12 setting can offer a useful perspective on the community college scene—or at least raise some important questions.

Like their colleagues in the community colleges, teachers and administrators in the K–12 system have pointed to the challenges they face in teaching an increasingly diverse population of students. In our focus groups with K–12 teachers, there are endless comments about students who move from school to school or suffer from poor environments. Above all, we hear about lack of support from the parents. The teachers frequently say that it is unfair for them to be held accountable for the educational achievement of their students. Teaching, in their view, has to be a partnership between the school and the parent, and when the parent is AWOL, the school can hardly do its job.

On the other side, many school reformers say that teachers and principals use the demographics of their students as an excuse for their own poor performance. They point out that some inner-city programs do succeed and call on other systems to produce better results.

The same debate can be waged at the community college level. On the one hand, community colleges clearly do have achievement gaps. Studies show that barely half of community college students seeking a degree actually earn one or transfer to another degree-granting institution within eight years. At the same time, community colleges do face some of the unique challenges mentioned by the faculty members we interviewed.

Where does the public come out on this debate? In the case of K–12, the public has tended to side with the school reformers who want “no excuses.” In the surveys we have conducted over the years, public schools generally get low grades for performance, and majorities of parents say that all children can indeed learn given the right kind of education.

When it comes to higher education, however, the public has a different perspective. In our studies, colleges and universities get much better marks from the public than do K–12 systems. One difference is that *when it comes to higher education, people see responsibility and accountability shifting from the school to the individual student*. In the Public Agenda study *Great Expectations*, for instance, 88% of the general public said that the benefit a student gets from attending college depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in, while only 11% said that the benefit depends on the quality of the college.¹ In the

¹ *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education; a Report by Public Agenda*. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, p. 16. In this study, we specifically told our respondents to answer the questions about higher education in terms of both four-year and two-year institutions.

eyes of the public, in other words, success in college tends to be very much about the students' motivation and responsibility falls on students when they do not succeed.

This is also apparent when we look at what people say about college dropouts. In *Great Expectations*, we asked survey respondents who they think is responsible when students drop out of college. The biggest group of respondents—47%—pointed at students themselves for their inability to keep up with the work. Another 38% blamed the high schools for poor preparation. Only a minuscule 10% held the colleges accountable for not doing more to help the students. Students come to college, in other words, precisely to grow up and learn to take responsibility for their educational success.²

This suggests that the public may be sympathetic to the position of many full-time community college faculty members that not all students will succeed because not all are ready or able to do so, at least at a given point in time. This is not to say that reform should not focus on classrooms and teachers. It simply points to positions and perceptions about student success that need to be taken into account.

One caveat should be added. *Great Expectations* did not distinguish between community colleges and four-year institutions when asking respondents for their opinions. So we do not know with precision if the public's perceptions about community colleges and their students would be more similar to the K–12 data (schools are primarily responsible for student success) or the general higher education data (students are primarily responsible for their own success). This could be valuable to pinpoint through future research.

² *Great Expectations*, p. 17.

ADJUNCT FACULTY: OUT OF THE LOOP

We also spoke to part-time or adjunct faculty members at all three of the community colleges. In talking about students, they shared many of the views of their full-time colleagues, so we will not repeat everything we learned from them. However, a few critical differences came up in our discussions with adjunct faculty members. While some of these may appear obvious, we feel they have important implications for community college reform and are therefore worth discussing.

No Typical Adjuncts

The first thing we noted was the enormous diversity of the adjunct faculty. In contrast with the full-timers, who have a certain amount in common, there is no typical adjunct faculty member. Some of the adjuncts we interviewed were full-time professionals in their own field who taught a course or two at the community college on an overtime basis. We met, for example, a full-time paramedic who taught EMT and several nurses who taught nursing. These faculty members were aligned primarily with their own profession rather than with their secondary work at the community colleges. Some of our other respondents were full-time/part-time faculty, making a living by teaching a number of adjunct courses at several institutions. Other respondents were truly part-time, teaching a course or two while engaging in other activities, such as raising a family.

A Disconnected Constituency

Perhaps the main characteristic that the adjunct faculty had in common is that most had only a limited connection to the community college itself. In contrast with the full-time faculty members, who had strong views about the administration of the institution, the adjuncts seldom spoke about institutional policy. Likewise, the full-timers had a sense of the history of their institutions, while the adjunct faculty members had a much more atomistic approach to the

community colleges where they worked. As one adjunct faculty member said:

I come in here three days a week for 50 minutes in the morning, and then I am back in the car and out of there. I don't know how you would get me to get engaged in what you are talking about.

This is not to say that adjunct faculty do not care about their students—not at all—just that they are less connected to their institutions than their full-time counterparts. Instead, their concerns were much more specific and localized to their individual tasks. Some talked about being treated with less respect by students or of having less flexibility in choosing texts. Support was an issue for some, and the full-time faculty were also concerned about the lack of support for adjuncts. One full-time faculty member said:

Adjuncts even have trouble getting to use the photocopier unless some of the full-timers are around. They have no support at all. I really feel bad for them.

While adjunct faculty did have some complaints, ironically, their level of morale often seemed higher than what we saw among the full-time teachers. As a rule, they seemed to love to teach, but their level of disconnection makes it questionable how readily they could be recruited to the cause of education reform.



FAMILIES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: GRATITUDE AND APPRECIATION

We talked to a number of family members associated with all three of our community colleges. For these families, the community college was a godsend, making an otherwise unachievable higher education accessible.

Meeting a Diversity of Needs

The stories we heard reflected the diversity of community college students. Many families told us of "traditional" students who just were not ready for a four-year college experience but were having wonderful experiences at the local community college. One man said:

My daughter is 19. This is her first year in the community college. She graduated from high school with honors. She always said, "As soon as I get old enough, I'm leaving. I'm going somewhere else to school." As it got close to the time to leave, she wanted to stay close to home. It was between the community college and the university, and she visited both schools and decided on the community college. She really likes it here.

Others spoke of students whose career goals were being well served by the community college—through certificate programs, for example. Finally, many of the stories we heard were about students who chose the local community college as a second chance. For one reason or another, the path from high school senior to four-year college freshman was not a possibility for these students. The community college provided another path—an opportunity to participate in higher education despite the obstacles. There was the constant theme of people being able to attend college because of the flexibility and accessibility of the community college.

The thing was, my niece had a tragic loss. Her dad passed away. He was murdered. She had to be out of [high] school. She was going to have to stay an extra year. She was not happy about that. She wanted to graduate on time. So she did her GED and was able to go to the community college, and she is on time now.

Our daughter was at the university and had a horrible experience with a roommate. She got an illness and all this stuff. She managed to limp through to the middle of the spring semester, and then we withdrew her. She decided, eventually, after a year and a half out of school, that she was going to have to have education to get anywhere. The community college was her buffer to come back in. She's four semesters or so now and is pleased.

Another parent talked about a child with disabilities for whom college was possible only because of the convenience and support of the community college.

Helping Family Members Achieve Their Dreams

The theme was pervasive among this group of respondents that community colleges really are a way for their children, spouses and siblings to achieve their dreams. And they were willing to help in the ways they could. They talked about a number of things, large and small, that they did to support their family members in getting through their college studies: watching the kids, providing room and board, offering moral support, even demanding that they finish school.

My younger one found herself with a baby, and the daddy decided he wasn't cut out to be a parent. We said she could come back and live at home—as long as she gets back into more credits and finishes her associate's degree off. We think it's that important to her and the grandbaby, for their long-term future.

I live with my daughter. There's just the two of us. Morally and financially I'm there all the way with her. I help her to do the proofreading when she does reports and stuff like that.

I'm there to support her, all the time. She talks to me about school. We've got the kids, and I just keep the kids away from her when she starts studying.

COMMUNITY LEADERS: "IF IT AIN'T BROKE, WHY FIX IT?"

We also interviewed a dozen community leaders distributed among the three communities, including local employers, K-12 superintendents and community college board members, among others. As noted in the methodology section, these respondents were sometimes recommended to us by community college administrators. As such, several are probably especially knowledgeable about, and perhaps predisposed toward, the colleges.

"All I Can Say Is, 'Wow'"

Given the fact that a number of the community leaders we spoke with had specific cooperative ties to the community colleges (for instance, they were involved with workforce development collaborations), we expected to hear some positive evaluations. Still, we were struck by the strongly favorable views they expressed. In earlier projects, we interviewed numerous community leaders about local four-year institutions, and while these institutions are also popular, we heard an even higher-level of enthusiasm about the community colleges. As one person said, "All I can say is, 'Wow, wow, wow!' They are a premier institution in the state and have taken the lead on a number of initiatives."

Two factors particularly impressed our community leaders. The first was the degree to which the community college in their area had made education a possibility for students who would never have been able to go to college otherwise.

They are a community institution in the broadest sense. They make it easy for people whose families have not traditionally received higher education or technical training to advance in a

way that would be impossible without a community college. These folks don't come from cultures where it is expected that they will engage in post-high school training of any sort, and I would say that that is a very valuable service that community colleges provide.

They open their doors to thousands of students who couldn't go to college otherwise.

Second, our leadership respondents gave community colleges high marks for their flexibility and responsiveness to community and, especially, employer needs. They universally praised their local community college for working creatively and quickly to develop new and innovative programs to meet emerging demands. (In our interviews with other community leaders regarding four-year institutions, the respondents frequently commented on how slow they were to respond to needs. As one of our respondents said in an earlier project, it is like "turning the *Titanic*.")

The community college has a great relationship with employers. They are always looking for opportunities to teach classes for local industries that have a specific need.

They have responded extremely well to the needs of my industry, and I know they have done equally well with the auto industry and the semiconductor industry.

The community college has been quick to respond to workforce needs and to facilitate a development of a response to those needs.

The Achievement Gap: External Causes, External Solutions

Our respondents were also very much concerned with the problems that community colleges face. However, they were nearly unanimous in saying that the main problems the community colleges faced were external. Over and over again, we heard that the community colleges are doing extremely well under very difficult conditions. Only one of the respondents

we interviewed stressed the need for greater internal changes in the community college itself.

Several mentioned that the community college was hampered by lack of funding:

The community college is the poor stepchild. The K-12 and state universities get resources at the expense of the community college.

The biggest detriment is the physical accommodations. Because of a lack of funds, they haven't been able to expand their facilities.

We asked our respondents why they thought some community college students were not completing their programs. These community leaders typically responded in the same way as the faculty: that often this was the fault of external factors and that the community college was doing a heroic job.

If the kids have a problem, the problem is not so much the school as their own social and financial situation. The community college is as proactive as any institution I have worked with. They address and anticipate problems. To their credit, their enrollment is greater than they can handle.

The main obstacle is that of the students who come to the community college; almost 7 out of 10 need to be remediated, and that takes away resources from other priorities.

My opinion is that problems with retention are more driven by the person that is attending the community college rather than the college itself. The world is a lot different from when the community college didn't have to deal with things such as single-parent families. It is a whole different dynamic now, so the problems are more on the student side.

Perceptions of Faculty

Community college faculty members also are well received by the community leaders we interviewed.

Those who are familiar with college operations (including the board members) usually say that faculty morale is high, although a few of our leadership respondents were concerned about faculty salaries, as part of a general apprehension about budget cuts and inadequate funding.

There was a gap, in fact, between impressions of faculty morale among the leaders (generally positive) and the concerns that the faculty members themselves expressed in frank and confidential interviews. This supports a contention that we make in our conclusion—that faculty goodwill and support cannot be taken for granted.

Don't Change Too Much

As is clear from what we have said above, community colleges have a favorable image, at least among the leaders who were part of our project. But this positive evaluation does not necessarily translate into support for efforts to change or reform community colleges themselves. While our respondents would surely agree that community colleges can do a better job, they tended to see changing external factors as the main priorities. Indeed, at least one of our respondents was worried that reform efforts could lead community colleges to lose their traditional focus:

They are an important part of our community, and everyone appreciates what they have done. So I don't think we should get into the mentality that "we have a problem here and now we have to solve it." Let's first see if there is a problem. I don't want to see their traditional mission change.

IMPLICATIONS

What does all of this suggest for community college reform efforts aimed at improving results and closing achievement gaps for community college students?

Although community colleges may not always be a priority for many educational reformers, researchers and policymakers, at the local level they are playing a vital role and have a strong reputation. Faculty members pride themselves on their ability to provide education for students who might otherwise be shut out of higher education. Family members and community leaders are firm in their support and gratitude.

All of this would suggest that any effort to address the achievement gap would be met with enthusiastic support from everyone involved. While there is certainly broad support for this goal in theory, this research also suggests some challenges that will have to be addressed to make this goal a reality.

As noted earlier, an in-depth qualitative study such as this one has both advantages and disadvantages in comparison to a broad-based quantitative one. These results are best viewed as strong hypotheses—worthy of serious consideration, testing and refinement over time. That said, the results of our interviews suggest some important implications and questions for reform.

- *Strong support for the mission of community colleges.* We heard universally high praise among our respondents regarding the importance of the role community colleges play and the educational opportunities they provide, opportunities that are inexpensive, close to home and practical. They also praised the way the colleges worked hard to meet their community's needs.

- *How to help students succeed.* Efforts to provide more support for community college students (in terms of childcare, financial aid, tutoring and so on) would likely appeal to many of the community college faculty, local leaders and immediate family members of students we spoke with. Across all these groups we heard broad recognition of the many obstacles that community college students face and therefore suspect that efforts to help students overcome those obstacles would tend to garner support.

On the other hand, given our earlier *Great Expectations* study (see page 6) measures that focus on the life issues of students might make less sense to the general public overall because of the feeling that college level students should take a good deal of responsibility for their own motivation and learning. This conclusion is consistent with two focus groups we conducted for another project subsequent to those discussed in this study. These groups consisted of a cross-section of members of the general public, along with a few community college students and faculty members. Participants were presented with several alternative approaches to improving results for community college students and asked to prioritize them. One focused on academics and the classroom experience, another emphasized making sure students are ready for college level work in the first place, and yet another addressed the many obstacles students face in their personal lives. The majority view in each of these groups was to focus on enriching the academic and classroom experience, while addressing students' external obstacles elicited the least interest.

- *Dramatic institutional change not viewed as a priority.* We did not see indications of a consensus—among faculty, leaders or families—that community colleges themselves need to be somehow dramatically restructured. In contrast with what we hear about K–12, which often

involves suggestions for significant internal changes, our respondents appeared much more interested in providing additional support so that community colleges can do more of what they already do. This does not mean that the case for significant institutional change cannot be made, just that it has not been made as of yet and could be a challenging task—especially in light of the views of full-time faculty members (see next bullet).

- *Full-time faculty concerns and resistances need to be addressed.* Full-time faculty is a particularly important group to pay attention to. Community college faculty members are in a position to effectively assist or block efforts to close achievement gaps, but as of now they have significant reservations and hesitations about several potential components of reform. Among the questions that we anticipate community college faculty members will raise (at least in private) about certain key reform ideas as they become better known on their campuses:
 - Will the new initiatives take up a great deal of my time on top of everything else I am expected to do?
 - Will I be held accountable for poor student performance caused by issues over which I have no control?
 - Will data coming from the initiative be new, relevant and easy to use?
 - Will efforts to improve retention be accomplished by improving student performance or by lowering standards so as to generate better statistics? And is the focus on retention really meaningful in the first place?
 - How much of this is truly about students and how much is about change for change's sake, grandstanding or revenue streams?

These questions and resistances point to the importance of careful communication and earnest engagement with full-time faculty members, early in the process and throughout. Their concerns need to be carefully understood. (While we provide clues in this report as to those concerns, there are likely to be variations on different campuses.) And full-time faculty members need to develop a sense of ownership for reform; its success must become their own.

- *Handle data with care.* Because education (at every level) has historically paid too little attention to tracking student progress and basing decisions on reasonable evidence, reformers have increasingly stressed the importance of data; this is an understandable and necessary development. However, it is important that the pendulum not swing too far to the other extreme, to the extent that data become overwhelming and disconnected from meaningful decision making, which must, in the real world, include values, judgment and timeliness as well as hard evidence. Our research suggests that many full-time faculty members may not trust or appreciate the data they have been receiving in recent years, and this should be taken as a general message to manage the collection and distribution of data carefully, so that the results remain meaningful and useful to those who will be expected to work with them.
- *Adjunct faculty difficult to engage.* Any effort to improve the achievement of community college students must deal with the fact that a large percentage of community college classes are taught by adjunct faculty who have little tangible attachment to the institutions at which they teach. They are not necessarily opposed to the college's goals and programs, but their primary connections are elsewhere. They will be a difficult audience to harness to the cause simply because of their diversity and decentralization.

- *Preparing students to succeed.* We did not talk directly to students, but we certainly heard a great deal about them. Faculty members specifically talked about students who were unprepared both academically and attitudinally. That is, some students do not have the fundamental knowledge and skills to succeed, while others do not have the requisite attitudes—like motivation, discipline and high expectations for themselves and their learning. An implication of this may be that such critical areas as developmental coursework, advising and K–12 partnerships should focus on both academic and “attitudinal” preparation for community college success.

These are a few of what appear to us to be the more important implications that this research raises for community college reform on behalf of the nation’s community colleges and their students. We hope that they lead to useful discussion that will enable more community college students to succeed.



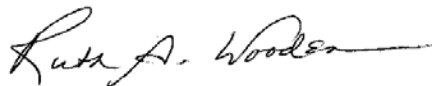
Afterword

by Ruth A. Wooden, President, Public Agenda

Since its ground breaking study, *First Things First*, Public Agenda has conducted a wide range of studies on the American education system, from pre-school to higher education. This is, however, the first time we have had an opportunity to look specifically at community colleges. That alone tells us something; despite their importance in providing access to higher education for a vast proportion of the nation's students, community colleges are one of the least studied and least understood elements of our nation's educational system.

With generous support from Lumina Foundation for Education, Public Agenda conducted this qualitative research to learn more about several groups that are relatively under-studied and yet can have a profound impact on the success of community college reform: faculty, families of students and community leaders. We hope the observations raised in this study will be useful to anyone who cares about improving results for the nation's community college students.

The study offers hypotheses and insights about several key stakeholder groups in the community college world. If we had to highlight one area, we would point in particular to what it suggests regarding the hesitations of full-time faculty members. While highly dedicated, they are also heavily burdened by mounting administrative duties, and they appear skeptical of what might lie behind notions such as "all students can succeed" and "data-driven change." What comes through the research especially is a need for better communication and engagement between community college faculty and those who seek to upgrade the performance of these critical institutions. We hope this small study will be a useful aid to that dialogue.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruth A. Wooden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich, and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning web site www.publicagenda.org offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recently recognized by Library Journal as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

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