

An Updated
List of

THE TOP TEN REASONS WHY COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE AMERICA'S PREMIER INSTITUTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

DR. KATHERINE BOSWELL
Director
Center for Community College Policy
at the Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado

This is the fourth in a series of Occasional Papers that the New Jersey Council of County Colleges publishes on topics important to community colleges throughout the state and nationally.

The Council was fortunate to have Dr. Katherine Boswell as the keynote speaker at its Fall 2000 Community College Trustee Education Conference. She delivered this address, *An Updated List of the Top Ten Reasons Why Community Colleges Are America's Premier Institutions for the 21st Century*, a revised version of a speech her former boss, Dr. Kay McClenney, once gave at a national conference.

As the director of the Center for Community College Policy at the Education Commission of the States, Dr. Boswell works with community colleges and state policymakers across the country to identify best practices and strategic policy issues at the state level. The goal of the Center is to explore policies that encourage effective and innovative community colleges, and to work with policymakers to help them make better use of their community colleges as part of state postsecondary education systems.

These ten important points reinforce so much we in the New Jersey community college sector strive for – affordability, advocacy, workforce development and public acceptance.

Additional copies of this speech are available upon request from the Council office.

Dr. Lawrence A. Nespoli, President
New Jersey Council of County Colleges, July 2001

In spite of the challenges and pitfalls of frequent travel, one of the best parts of my job is the opportunity to get out and meet with the people who are at the heart of the community college enterprise at the state and local levels. It gives a fresh perspective to the real-life impacts of the policy battles we engage in at the Education Commission of the States.

From the earliest times in our nation's history, the decision was made that education would be a local enterprise, that there would be no federal Ministry of Education with the power to control or mandate a national education curriculum.

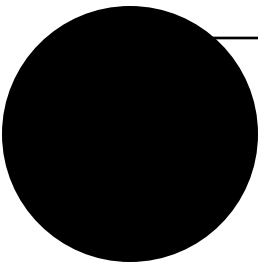
However, about 35 years ago a group of governors recognized that while education may be a local responsibility,

a need existed for an education policy clearinghouse so that states didn't recreate the wheel when considering new initiatives. The Education Commission of the States was the outcome of that effort. Forty-nine of the 50 states joined the compact and it was deliberately placed in Denver so it would be a long way from the Washington beltway to avoid what they saw as an undue focus on or influence from the federal government.

Each year, a governor from an alternating political party chairs the organization. The ECS vice-chair is a legislator from the opposing party. We provide a range of services to state-level education policymakers. For instance, if the Governor of New Jersey is considering initiating a new policy initiative, or perhaps an Assembly committee may be interested in how other states handle articulation and transfer issues between two- and four-year institutions, they call upon ECS and within a 24-hour turn around, we provide information on how other states deal with the issue including results of research studies, model legislation, or promising practices that policymakers might consider. We cover the range of education issues from early childhood through university graduate education.

Over the years at ECS, community colleges were ignored or pretty much in the shadow of K-12 systems or four-year colleges and universities just like they are in the rest of the education world. Then in 1996, the Metropolitan Life Foundation asked ECS to undertake a two-year project to examine the state policy frameworks that support two-year colleges. We were totally unprepared by the level of unmet need and interest on the part of state policymakers. We were besieged by requests for information and technical assistance. With the encouragement of many state leaders, we succeeded in getting a grant from the U.S. Department of Education and in July 1999 established the Center for Community College Policy, which I direct.

Among other things, the Center operates a Web site (www.communitycollegepolicy.org) that includes a state-by-state description of the history and governance of each state's community college system. The Web site also features a new legislative database that tracks state-by-state legislation that impacts community colleges, and 50 state databases that compare dual/concurrent enrollment and articulation and transfer policies across the nation. We publish a series of policy papers on issues confronting community colleges, and have just released a new national study on how states fund their



community colleges. We conduct research and organize workshops and conferences to bring state policymakers together with community college leaders on critical issues facing two-year colleges.

But now to the message. I went around and around about what would be useful to you as trustees. As I was reviewing my files, I came across a speech given by my very good friend and former boss, Dr. Kay McClenney, that she gave five years ago at a national conference. The speech was titled *The Top Ten Reasons Why Community Colleges Are America's Premier Institutions for the 21st Century*. The title really resonated with me, and so with apologies and acknowledgements of appreciation to both David Letterman and to Kay, tonight I'd like to give you *An Updated List of the Top Ten Reasons Why Community Colleges Are America's Premier Institutions for the 21st Century*.

Reason 10: Community colleges still care about what the public cares about.

Clark Kerr, the great scholar of American education, once said that the invention of the two-year community college was the greatest innovation of twentieth-century American higher education. The late Ernest Boyer said that if community colleges did not exist, Americans would urgently need to invent them.

The fact is that community colleges are the embodiment of the American dream. Sometimes called "people's colleges," or "democracy's colleges," they represent, as President Clinton once said, "the very best of America... and where we need to go as a country with all our institutions – community-based, flexible, committed to quality and opportunity for everyone."

Despite the increasing cynicism of the post-Watergate era, our community colleges are still committed to the basic values that the American people cherish. Public opinion polls indicate that cannot be said of most other public institutions.

Reason 9: Community colleges are responsive to state needs and are on the cutting edge of issues that concern policymakers.

Two years ago, ECS conducted a survey of the governors to find out their views on how they think higher education needs to be transformed to meet states' needs

in the 21st Century. To our surprise, there were clear and very significant differences in the attitudes of the governors regarding community colleges and other higher education community members. Sixty-nine percent of the governors found community and technical colleges to be responsive or very responsive to meeting state needs.

The National Education Association is just now undertaking a similar survey, complete with focus groups of legislative leaders in every state. Sandra Ruppert, who is leading the study, recently said that although the results aren't complete yet, it is very clear that legislative leaders across the nation are very high on community colleges.

She said she was really surprised at the way that community colleges are now being perceived by state policymakers.*

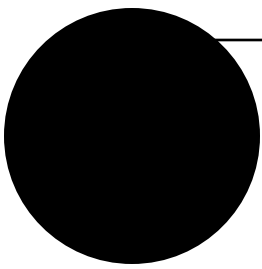
"Community colleges are the embodiment of the American dream."

I'm not. Look at the issues policymakers care about – welfare reform, economic development, relationships with K-12, lifelong learning, using state resources efficiently by delivering education via technology – community colleges are at the forefront of every one of these issues.

Reason 8: Community colleges continue to provide access to higher education at an affordable cost.

Most of us are familiar with the U.S. Department of Labor statistics that project that 80 percent of all the jobs in the new economy will require some postsecondary education, but less than a baccalaureate degree. Well the American public believes it, too. In a recent public opinion poll, 86 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "High school graduates should go to college so they'll have better job prospects." But 45 percent agreed with the statement, "There are many people who are qualified to go to college but don't have the opportunity."

* **Editor's Note:** Subsequent to Dr. Boswell delivering this keynote address to Council members in Fall 2000, the NEA issued its final report (*Where We Go From Here: Higher Education in the New Millennium*) in which it concluded "legislators consider the public two-year sector to be the most responsive overall to state education and training needs."



The good news is that nationwide, community colleges provide access to higher education at a substantially lower cost than four-year colleges and universities. According to a recent ETS study in 1997-98, the average tuition and fees at community colleges across the U.S. was \$1,582. The comparable figure at four-year colleges was \$6,329. The report goes on to state that trends show that the gap is widening. The increase in tuition and fees at community colleges between 1977 and 1998 was 67 percent compared to 90 percent at four-year institutions.

Reason 7: Community colleges focus on teaching and learning – of all students, not just the gifted and talented.

I've always considered it the highest of ironies, that at our great universities, the institution's highest reward to outstanding faculty members is to cut back on their teaching load and take them out of the classroom and away from students. Many university undergraduate students can get through the first three years of their undergraduate education without ever seeing a tenured full professor. Ivy League schools love to tout their rates of retention and graduation. But who wouldn't succeed with that type of student?

When it comes to value-added, compare the contributions of our open-door community colleges that take students at whatever level they are at, and help them fulfill their educational goals. Nationwide, somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of all community college students require some remedial support, and yet they succeed, and in many states the data show that when those students transfer they do better than native university students. And recent data from Cliff Adelman at the U.S. Department of Education show that, while it may take them a bit longer, community college students who transfer eventually complete baccalaureate degrees at a higher rate than students who start at a university.

We cannot fail to acknowledge our community college faculty who are master teachers and who are in the classroom because that's where they want to be.

Reason 6: Community colleges provide a phenomenal return on investment to the state.

Community colleges are more efficient, cost less and provide a great return on the investment of public

monies. Many of you may have attended the recent Association of Community College Trustees conference in Nashville and heard about the unveiling of a new economic impact model that ACCT has commissioned.

ACCT hired a team of world-class economists out of the World Bank, who have developed a very complex

“Community colleges are efficient, cost less and provide a great return on the investment of public monies.”

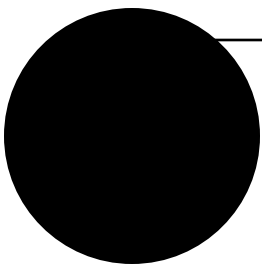
and comprehensive model that allows colleges and their communities to put a very specific dollar value on the economic impact of particular colleges.

Preliminary findings are very impressive and exciting. This has the potential to be a very useful tool in explaining the value of community colleges to state and local officials, in very bottom line terms that they will understand.

Reason 5: Community colleges are places where diversity is embraced and where every individual can have a second chance.

Community college students tend to be more racially and ethnically diverse. They are far less likely to be dependent upon their parents and are far more likely to work full- or part-time and to have their own dependents. Nationwide, 84 percent of all community college students work full- or part-time. About half of all community college students are first-generation college students, where neither parent has any post-secondary education. Only 9 percent of community college students have a parent with a post-baccalaureate degree.

Why does this matter? Because America itself is changing, and is becoming far more diverse. In 1996, 28 percent of all U.S. children were Asian, Black or Hispanic. By 2015, 43 percent of all children under the age of 17 will be children of color. And these students are far more likely to find their way to community colleges, because community colleges are far more likely to be student oriented, where students can find the support they need to succeed. As Kay McClenney said, “In the midst of all the opportunity for division, America needs



places where difference works; where diversity is a strength, not a problem; where value is placed not just on tolerance but affirmation.”

I believe community colleges are just such places.

Reason 4: Community colleges are entrepreneurial and quick on their feet.

The best community colleges are by their very nature entrepreneurial and fast on their feet. They have to be to survive. Good community colleges respond quickly to the needs of their communities with academic programs or customized training that meets specific needs. And the community in turn has a sense of ownership of the college.

When the half-life of an engineering degree is now projected to be something like seven years, and knowledge and changes wrought by technology are impacting every field, it is critical that our colleges and universities be closely tied to business and industry so that academic programs can reflect the real needs of the changing workplace. Community colleges have a long tradition of business advisory committees that help keep education current. Continuing education divisions at community colleges are able to respond to changing needs of the workforce within weeks or even days.

While higher education may have controlled access to information for the past 500 years because universities tended to be the source of books and any development of new knowledge, today’s information revolution has brought instant and almost unlimited information to the fingertips of every Web surfer. It is a new world, and it will only be responsive institutions that survive.

Reason 3: Community college workforce training and education is relevant and closely tied to the real world needs of business and industry.

Closely related to the previous issue, is the value and relevance of the workforce training and education done by community colleges. I am not arguing against the value of a liberal education, and creation of a thoughtful well-educated citizenry. But I’ve never understood how the idea of a well-educated citizenry is mutually exclusive with a well prepared student who can go out into the world and get a real job. Public polls suggest that the vast majority of students and parents come to higher

education because they are seeking opportunities to prepare for good jobs.

While we probably will never compete with university law or medical schools for the prestige or political support provided by distinguished alumni, I would suggest to you that few community colleges have really drawn upon the significant political support and clout that can be brought to bear by business and industry who recognize the important role played by community colleges in educating and preparing a trained and globally competitive workforce.

Reason 2: Community colleges are an integral and essential part of their communities.

I am quite certain that the educational world as we know it is going to change significantly over the next two decades. With the technology revolution and the weakening of traditional accreditation processes, higher education is unlikely to maintain its traditional monopoly. I predict that many institutions will be unable to compete with the potential new educational providers, say a consortium of Microsoft, Stanford University and Disney, as an example.

Nonetheless, I am also convinced that the community college, that focuses on the “community” in its title and is responsive to all the varied needs of that community, will be well positioned to not only survive but flourish in this competitive and changing educational future.

Reason 1: Community College People.

Trustees who give their time, means and leadership – presidents who so often make personal sacrifices for the sake of their institutions – your state association leaders who give their time and energy to fight for better funding and laws to benefit your colleges – and let us not forget the community college students whose courage and determination to improve their own lives are such inspirations to all of us across New Jersey and the nation. These community college people are the number one reason why community colleges are America’s premier institutions for the 21st century.