

ACE SERIES ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES

RE-VISIONING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Positioning for Innovation

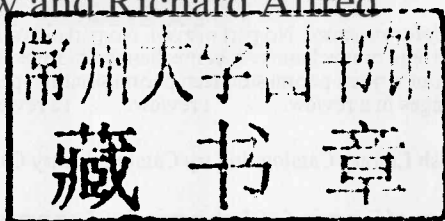


DEBBIE SYDOW AND RICHARD ALFRED

Re-visioning Community Colleges

Positioning for Innovation

Debbie Sydow and Richard Alfred



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First in the World: Community Colleges and America's Future, by J. Noah Brown
Student Success: From Boardrooms to Classrooms, by Vanessa Smith Morest

Re-Visioning Community Colleges

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SERIES

Community colleges currently enroll 6.5 million students in 1,200 institutions—one out of every two first-time students entering college and slightly less than one half of all undergraduate students in the nation. By 2016, they are projected to enroll 7.5 million students, many of whom will be minority, lower income, and underprepared for work and further education. They are the fastest-growing segment of higher education both in number of institutions and enrollment. Yet, remarkably, they are the least understood of postsecondary institutions in terms of literature and research describing their mission and role, organization and operations, and performance. This void invites quality scholarship on a segment of higher education in which interest is high and audiences are both substantial and growing. There is much in the higher education news about community colleges, but not the critical scholarship and analysis necessary to support and sustain dialogue about issues and challenges facing them.

The Community College Series is designed to produce and deliver books on current and emerging “hot topics” in community colleges, developed from a leader and managerial point of view. Our goal is to develop distinctive books on salient topics. Each book is expected to be practical and concise, provocative and engaging, and to address multiple dimensions of a topic. Most books are written by a single author—a college executive who brings expert and practical understanding to a topic; an academic or researcher who has a unique slant and bank of information to bring to a topic; a policy analyst or agency official who possesses critical insights into an issue; a think tank scholar who has the capacity to identify and examine a challenge or issue that is likely to confront community colleges in the future. To ensure practicality and different viewpoints,

authors are expected to solicit and present ideas from a variety of perspectives and to include examples or case studies on how institutions and leaders might deal with the topic from a strategic and operational perspective. Finally, to ensure that each book brings maximum value to the reading audience, authors are expected to present original research and use out-of-the-box thinking in manuscript development. Each book is expected to represent the very best thought on a topic at the time of publication.

Richard Alfred, Editor, Community College Series

Foreword

Karen A. Stout

Today's community colleges seem ideally positioned to respond to our country's increasing demand for postsecondary skills development and higher education for more people at multiple points throughout their lives. Yet resources are limited and out of proportion with what are required for our sector to produce reasonable success rates, especially given the increasing diversity in academic preparation and support needs of our students. Successfully addressing this challenge requires innovation beyond incremental improvement. It requires re-visioning, making this book, *Re-visioning Community Colleges*, a must-read for those of us in the midst of leading this essential transformational work.

Because of our promise for success, community colleges are being recognized at many levels. Private funders are investing significantly in our work. Policymakers believe that expanded support for many of our promising innovations will create new scalable, sustaining, and systems-changing solutions to the affordable delivery of higher education and skills training. These funders and policymakers believe, as Clayton Christensen and others describe in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Disruptive Innovation for Social Change" do, that the community college model is a "catalytic innovation—one that is dramatically changing the shape of higher education in the United States by expanding access to and redefining the goals for advanced study."

Re-visioning Community Colleges makes a timely case that while we have been historically successful at adopting innovations such as online learning, dual enrollment, workforce preparation, and remedial education, we have not been successful at bringing these innovations fully to scale. We are, therefore, in the midst of an "unfinished revolution." It is time, according to authors Debbie Sydow and Richard Alfred, for a "no-holds-barred" analysis

of the shape and future direction of community colleges, an analysis that despite our reluctance must focus on organizational redesign. As a sector, we must re-vision. As community colleges we must reimagine our futures. As community college leaders, we must lean into ambiguity, reject the status quo, and jump into action.

In many ways, *Re-visioning Community Colleges* is an excellent companion to the recently released report of the American Association of Community Colleges 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges titled *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future*. The book's authors reinforce the clarion call of the 21st-Century Commission report for community college leaders to mobilize collectively to carry out the transformation agenda from the inside, one college at a time, but in unison as a sector. Just as the 21st-Century report is a call for colleges to redesign, reinvent, and reset, *Re-visioning Community Colleges* offers a compelling case to reexamine who we are, how we do business, and the results we deliver. Sydow and Alfred warn that the 21st-Century report is not a guidebook for future success, cautioning that "the Commission's recommendations must be seen as remedial, a catch up step for an enterprise producing outputs short of stakeholder expectations." I agree that we must go beyond the report to revitalize our colleges and that there is no exact prescription for moving forward because of the varying nature of our community colleges. I believe, though, that insights gained from reading *Re-visioning Community Colleges* combined with adopting the 21st-Century Commission report recommendations will offer practitioners possibilities for developing a pathway forward for building the capacity for change and innovation at their individual colleges.

In equally important ways, *Re-visioning Community Colleges* offers a new and valuable comprehensive account of the development of community colleges, cast in the context of today's challenges. Declaring that "community college leaders would be wise to take a lesson from history," the authors effectively frame the multiple paradoxes we face as leaders of community colleges. In a counterintuitive way, the authors challenge us to learn from the successes of the past even though these successes present a predisposition to incremental rather than disruptive innovation.

The authors urge today's leaders to look at our current state through the lens of competing paradoxes—growth and reduction, abundance and scarcity, continuity and change, access and success, tradition and innovation, competition and collaboration, convergence and divergence—and to understand that the choices we make as leaders in managing these contradictions will shape our colleges. There are at least two important takeaways in this discussion of paradox. First, the accretion model of curricular growth used at most of our campuses is not sustainable. We need strategic, demand-driven academic programming. Second, we have sophisticated models to respond to

market needs to add new programs. However, we don't have robust models for doing program cost analyses, performance measurement, and other business practices that are required for us to be innovative, high-performing organizations. As a community college leader and practitioner, I found this chapter on managing paradox and building organizational capacity for change and innovation most engaging. It convinced me that despite our reluctance, we must begin to focus on full organizational redesign and not wait for incremental interventions to take hold on our campuses.

The authors build on this case for managing contradictions by dedicating a full chapter to highlighting ideas and practices of the most provocative thinkers and practitioners in today's community colleges. This chapter includes important practical examples of disruptive innovations in action. The examples can be studied and replicated at many of our colleges.

Finally, *Re-visioning Community Colleges* will also inform the recent rethinking of the design of community college leadership programs of all types. I agree with the authors' observation that our sector's "attachment to stability, to the status quo, is reinforced by leader's training and experience." To move forward with disruptive innovation, our leadership programs must focus more on managing and leading organizational redesign and on supporting leaders in managing through contradictions. *Re-visioning Community Colleges* is a must-read for those of us building our own internal leadership academies. It will be an assigned reading in our program at Montgomery because of its excellent accounting of the community college history and the case it makes that our unique characteristics, historically described as vulnerabilities, constitute fertile ground for future and necessary innovation.

I applaud Debbie Sydow and Richard Alfred for taking on this work at such an important time in the development of our colleges. They paint an important and new multidimensional picture of the community college organizational life cycle from our period of growth to a period of deepening maturity and stability to the present period of required renewal. *Re-visioning Community Colleges* makes a compelling and must-read case that addressing our challenges and renewing our organizations for relevancy will require innovation and disruptive innovation, well beyond the incremental improvements that many of us are now adopting. The book starts by asking the question: "Are community colleges an industry on the threshold of restructuring?" I finished the book convinced and motivated to be a force for change and restructuring rather than face a certain decline that our students and our country cannot afford.

Karen A. Stout, President,
Montgomery County Community College (Pennsylvania)

Acknowledgments

As lead author, acknowledgment and appreciation is first extended to Richard Alfred. In the summer of 2009 when I accepted a call to serve on the National Advisory Panel for the Community College Series, the decision was motivated by a long-standing interest in expanding the body of research-based literature available to community college leaders. As a veteran administrator, I know from experience that ongoing engagement with literature that critically analyzes extant issues in the higher education industry staves off ennui and improves job performance. In his capacity as chair of the National Advisory Panel, Dick urged me, challenged me, and ultimately convinced me to be among the authors contributing to the Series. Then he convinced me to serve as coauthor. The opportunity to coauthor a book with Dick Alfred was one not to be missed—a bold checkmark on my career bucket list. In an email note to my coauthor at an early stage of conceptualizing *Re-visioning Community Colleges*, I confessed to feeling like a sprinter who unwittingly finds herself lagging behind in a cross-country race, wondering if she has the stamina to cross the finish line. The iterative process of research, conceptualization, synthesis, writing, and revision of a full-length book requires different “muscles” and skills than those that I routinely exercise as a college president. Refocusing my own lens through the research and writing that went into this book has been both a humbling and an exhilarating experience, an experience that I would heartily recommend to my colleagues.

For enthusiastically supporting and encouraging my work on this book, I am forever indebted to the Onondaga Community College Board of Trustees: Chair Margaret “Meg” O’Connell, Donald Mawhinney Jr., Dr. Gary Livent, Connie Whitton, Steve Aiello, Allen Naples, Melanie Littlejohn, Dr. Donna DeSiato, and Student Trustee Patrick Caulken. Risk tolerance is indicative of a healthy and innovative organization, and trustees had no qualms about

putting the institution “out there” as a case study. Onondaga faculty, staff, and students give life and character to the institution and to the vignette presented in the book. I am thankful to all of them for allowing me the privilege of serving in the role of president for twelve years, for it was from that vantage point that I formed many of the opinions and insights advanced in *Re-visioning*. The research underlying strategic planning efforts at Onondaga dovetailed perfectly with the questions and concepts explored in *Re-visioning*. Accordingly, appreciation is extended to Nicole Schlater, assistant to the president, and Agatha Awuah, vice president of institutional planning, assessment, and research. Nicole was a pitch-perfect sounding board and a rigorous editor throughout every phase of the writing process. Nancy Martone and Julie Hart in the president’s office at Onondaga managed to maintain a perpetually pleasant and productive work environment. All of these individual and collective contributions added considerable value to the final manuscript.

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Debbie Sydow
Richard Alfred
July 2012

Contents

Foreword	ix
<i>Karen A. Stout</i>	
Acknowledgments	xiii
On the Threshold of Restructuring	1
1 Breaking Barriers, Boundaries, and Beliefs	11
2 Paradox of the Present	41
3 Organizing for Innovation	65
4 Shape of the Future	101
Epilogue: Perspective and a Change in Focus	117
Index	137

On the Threshold of Restructuring

The core educational mission of colleges and universities is more important than ever—to the future of individuals, employers, and society. Increasingly complex problems in all sectors require that individuals continue to build new knowledge and skills throughout their lives. Despite the presence of over seven thousand higher education providers in the United States, the nation has lost its position as leader in the percentage of its population that has attained a degree, and the gap between the number of graduates and the projected need remains a concern. At the same time that wages and job opportunities for individuals without a college degree continue to decline, the costs of enrolling in college have pushed student loan debt to an all-time high of over one trillion dollars.¹ The current trajectory is not sustainable.

The emergence of land grant colleges after the Morrill Act of 1862 and the emergence of community colleges at the turn of the twentieth century represented an “innovation” in the higher education industry designed to address one of its first major challenges—expanding access to higher education in response to growing public demand and to industry needs for increasingly skilled workers. As community colleges and, indeed, the higher education industry as a whole struggle to navigate the high-stakes economic and political landscape of the twenty-first century, we have set out to explore current and emerging trends in the ways that community colleges—diverse and frequently enigmatic institutions—are, or could, adapt, innovate, and recreate themselves to meet the educational challenges of our day. Enormously successful in terms of their impact on expanding access to higher education, community colleges possess attributes that are uniquely aligned with the changing needs of students, communities, and employers. Yet they are besieged by challenges that may compromise the principles upon which they were established. Chief among them is a disjuncture between demand,

resources, and accountability that has brought community colleges to the threshold of restructuring. This disjuncture is not a passing phenomenon. It will defy quick fixes or easy resolution. For this reason, the time is right for a “no-holds-barred” analysis of the shape and direction of community colleges in a landscape of dramatic and unstoppable change.

Re-visioning seeks to portray what future success will look like for community colleges. Its objective is to present an unblemished view of current circumstances and conditions—both environmentally and institutionally—and then to adjust the lens to bring into focus what will likely occur in the distance of a decade or two. Predicting the future in a turbulent landscape is a tricky, even daunting, endeavor. For this reason, we have relied on colleagues to sharpen our view of the blurry outer reaches of the future. The ideas and insights of some of today’s leading thinkers and practitioners appear throughout the book.

WHY NOW?

With domestic and global economies in disarray, the labor market in transition, and resources becoming increasingly austere, this is precisely the time to use lessons from our industry’s past and the wisdom of contemporary leaders and scholars to chart a future course. This is, to be sure, a critical juncture for community colleges. On the downside, widespread funding cuts precipitated by the 2008 financial collapse and subsequent recession have exacerbated problems brought about by historic underfunding. And the recent enrollment boom—driven in part by the financial crisis and shifting demographics—is slowing. On the upside, community colleges have evolved into prominent players in the nation’s effort to address and resolve issues of economic instability and global competitiveness. New resources are being invested, particularly in workforce training and initiatives designed to support improved college completion rates, by foundations (the Gates Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and Ford Foundation) as well as by corporations (Microsoft), government agencies (Department of Labor, Department of Education, and the National Science Foundation), and non-governmental entities. Multiple drivers are carrying community colleges in a fast-moving current of change, but the course and the destination have yet to be clearly determined.

Now is the time to re-vision, not only because the challenges facing our colleges are significant but also because the opportunities ahead are infinite. The changing economic and political climate presents new prospects as colleges seek to align programs and services with emerging needs. Consider the potential of:

- new programming in response to shifting industry demands and the emergence of new industries, such as alternative energies;
- new knowledge about what has worked and what has not relative to learning and completion;
- new students emerging from dramatic demographic shifts;
- new technologies that will profoundly impact and indelibly transform teaching and learning.²

This transformation can be left to powerful environmental forces already reshaping America's institutions, or it can be executed inside our colleges and carried out as part of a mission that fundamentally distinguishes community colleges from other higher-education providers. There really is no choice—we must carry out this transformation agenda from inside. And we can start by re-visioning who we are, how we do business, and the results we will deliver.

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Past as Prologue

The rapid growth of higher education and of community colleges over the last three decades has created unprecedented opportunity for access. Opportunity has not been matched, however, by a corresponding increase in the number of learners earning postsecondary credentials,³ and the average time it takes to complete a degree is increasing. Among students starting at four-year institutions, only 34 percent finish a bachelor's degree in four years and barely two-thirds (64 percent) finish within six years.⁴ The statistics for community colleges are even worse. For newly entering students planning to obtain a degree, only 34 percent complete any degree within eight years of entering college.⁵ In fact, many leave without qualifications: no degrees and often no credits.

As community colleges strive to meet the growing demand for postsecondary education and to improve completion rates, a glance back at their early vision can be instructive in developing a better understanding of how past and present conditions serve as a prologue to the future. The literature offers limited empirical evidence of the factors that helped and hindered the early development of community colleges. The challenges facing our colleges have been well documented, but only a handful of studies contribute to our understanding of the evolution, successes, and failures of community colleges. Very little research of consequence is in print, despite the fact that community colleges now enroll approximately 44 percent of all undergraduate students in the United States.⁶