

# Reinventing the Community College Kenneth P. Walker

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Beyond the horizon lies the future of the community college. What will it be and how will it get there? One thing is certain -- the community college of the future will not be the community college of the past, just as major corporations have had to reinvent themselves to remain relevant and profitable in a changing world, so must America's community colleges. Yet, much of the literature on the future of the community college simply readdresses age-old issues and clothes them in modern day shibboleths. A major study on the future of the community college prepared by the American Association of Community Colleges ignores the reality of this issue.

To remain relevant in the twenty-first century the community college must prepare to do things it has never done before, not simply continue to do the same things differently. We must rethink the reasons for our existence, the competition and our attitude toward it, the complexity of the modern world which needs our services, the markets for our services, and the leadership which will determine the role of the community college in the twenty-first century. And, we must accept the premise that the community college cannot be reinvented through continuous improvement – it can be reinvented only through a fundamental change. Will today's community college leaders be bystanders on the pathway to the future, or will they take up the challenge of reinventing the community college?

The world of education is up for grabs. It might be likened to the "jump ball" of basketball. Who will reach the highest and take control of the ball? Competition from the private sector is growing rapidly. Private institutions that were once considered unworthy competitors are now accredited by regional accrediting associations and are qualifying for federal financial aid programs. Whether non-profit or for-profit, these institutions are grabbing for their share of the world of education in the twenty-first century. And, many of those schools which previously offered only certificates are now offering associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees, and even master's degrees.

Other challenges to the survival of the public community college in the twenty-first century will come from charter colleges, e-colleges, broker colleges and proprietary colleges operating as baccalaureate degree granting community colleges. The title "community college" will no longer be synonymous with two-year the college. The concept of the community college as "a climate to be created rather than an area to be served" will be redefined. As student demand for the baccalaureate degree increases, community colleges are in a natural position to serve that need by simply redefining the climate of the community college to include the baccalaureate degree. The community college of the future will not be defined as a two-year college. Rather, it will be defined as a college which is serving the needs of the community; and community will be defined as the climate which has been created for baccalaureate degree demand, access and cost. To cling to the belief that the community college is forever and always a two-year college will lead to its decline and disappearance from the educational scene.

Lest we in the public community college arena think we can glide to the future on cruise control, we must look at what has happened to the nation's private two-year junior and community colleges. The number of such institutions has declined by more than two hundred during the past fifty years. Many have simply closed their doors, but others have survived by changing from associate degree institutions to baccalaureate degree institutions.

With the vast accumulation of knowledge which continues to grow at a phenomenal rate, and with the changing demand for knowledge workers, the two-year associate degree will be inadequate for many jobs of the twenty-first century. This problem is compounded by the fact that an average of some fifty percent of students entering community colleges require some form of remedial education. Add this to the increasing knowledge that must be acquired, as well as the ability to do critical thinking and problem solving, and it becomes obvious that the two-year degree is quickly becoming inadequate.

The community college baccalaureate degree must become the answer to addressing these issues as well as the social and economic issues which an undereducated population will present for our nation. The community college

baccalaureate degree is morally right, socially right, economically right and politically right.

Expansion of the mission to include the baccalaureate degree, while retaining the open-door philosophy and local governance to assure responsiveness to local needs, is a logical option for solving the problems of rising demand, access and cost. This is not to suggest that the community colleges should be converted to State four-year colleges. To the contrary, it is essential that the local mission and governance of the community colleges be maintained. And this is not to suggest that all community colleges should or would even want to expand their missions. The opportunity and authority, however, should be available for those community colleges where the need exists.

The concept of the community college baccalaureate degree has taken root, and it will spread significantly in the next decade. Legislatures in Arizona, Hawaii, Arkansas, Utah and Florida have addressed this issue. As successful programs are implemented, others will follow.

It is important to note that the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools has appointed a Task Force on Baccalaureate Education in the Community College. According to the March 2000 newsletter of the association, the charge to the Task Force is to "...study the various ways in which quality baccalaureate education is currently provided in community college settings, study the forces behind extending the community college mission to include the offering of baccalaureate education, and recommend to the Commission the most appropriate and most effective strategy(ies) to follow in extending accreditation to baccalaureate education in community college settings. The Task Force should complete its work by February 2001, reporting to the Board of Trustees and to the 2001 annual meeting."

Evidence of the growing movement toward the community college baccalaureate degree can be seen in the newly formed Community College Baccalaureate Association. Though only a few months old, it already boasts eighteen members representing twelve states and one Canadian province. The Association will attempt to gather all published articles and legislation dealing with the community college baccalaureate degree, and will solicit copies of unpublished materials related to this

topic. It will host an annual conference to share information and develop ways to promote the community college baccalaureate degree.

Growing demand, rising costs and limited access make the community college baccalaureate degree logical and imperative. America cannot afford an undereducated population in the new economy. The community college baccalaureate degree is a reality and must be addressed when considering the future of higher education in America.

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