

Integrating the Mission: Why At-Risk Students Fall Through the Cracks
Dennis McGrath, Community College of Philadelphia

I've had the opportunity in recent years to study a number of K-16 educational reform efforts, reflected in my book *The Collaborative Advantage*. This research has given me a different perspective on the role of the community college within the broader educational system.

Community colleges are nexus institutions, linking the world of K-12 with higher education, and connecting to the local community by providing job training, workforce development, and access to post-secondary opportunities. The history of community colleges can most generously be read as a continuing set of efforts to realize the democratic prospects of their unique structural position while responding to an ever more powerful set of cross-cutting social and economic pressures.

The modern community college developed during the 1945-75 period of expansion that Menand has termed the academy's "Golden Age." This is when the old junior college transformed into the contemporary comprehensive community college. The community college grew in two ways: an explosion in the number of institutions and an expansion of the mission to include transfer, vocational and career education, adult continuing education, community service, and remedial/developmental.

A useful way to think about this is in terms of the size and shape of higher education. Community colleges were part of the transformation of the size of higher education into a modern, democratic, mass system. However, the shape stayed the same, with the community college providing another layer in the existing educational stratification

system that students had to navigate, which contributes to the continuing achievement gap.

I'm sure that during the course of the conference we'll hear a number of insightful explanations of the limitations of the community college. A simple one I'll offer here is that multiple missions stress limited time, attention and resources. With multiple missions comes mission conflict and something loses priority. One way to see this is to ask why the Lumina Foundation had to prod community colleges to focus on equity and achievement with the "Achieving the Dream" initiative? Why do community colleges, given their traditional concern with access and equity, need an external stakeholder to provide a sufficient sense of urgency? Part of answer is the organizational consequences of mission conflict. Structurally, each mission became an organizational unit with its own administrative structure of deans, program directors, and staff, and community colleges have great difficulty in building organizational links among them.

The two major examples are workforce development and remediation. Given our limited time I will briefly try to illustrate the issue with reference to workforce development. In the 1980s there was a large increase in contract training offered through noncredit instructional units that were separate from the traditional for-credit academic and occupational instruction. Over time many of these units turned into large workforce development centers, but the success of contract training has not been match with a parallel focus on equity and opportunity. Community colleges have done a poor job of creating curricular ladders linking non-credit training and ABE programs to their credit, degree programs. The consequence is that many students remain trapped in limited-training programs. As Deborah Bragg and Jim Jacobs have convincingly shown,

community colleges have tended to emphasize the “new vocationalism” of preparation for high-tech jobs over the equity agenda focus on low-income workers who begin in basic education and non-credit training programs.

The Weakening of the Liberal Arts: The Loss of Curricular Alignment and the Erosion of Classroom Practices
Dennis McGrath, Community College of Philadelphia

When I wrote *The Academic Crisis of the Community College* I felt the best way to understand the trajectory of academics and curriculum in the community college was by focusing on the Liberal Arts. During the growth period of the 1960s-70s the liberal arts/general education curriculum, and the liberal arts faculty who taught it, established the “collegiate” dimension of the community college and helped legitimate them within higher education.

In order for the general education program and the liberal arts course credits to be transferable to traditional four-year institutions, the coursework had to reflect the academic standards and content required of students pursuing the BA. This requirement of at least minimum curricular articulation created transfer pathways for students between two and four-year institutions (though they have never been adequate), thereby positioning the newly developing community college sector as “collegiate.”

The fundamental curricular distinction at this time was between the transfer or university parallel program, what Cohen and Brawer call the “collegiate function” and career/vocational programs. This distinction established a powerful moral position and cultural meaning to the liberal arts. Liberal education was *the* model of collegiate level reading, writing, and expression, as well as the pedagogical practices that should

characterize the classroom. While community colleges began to offer an increasingly wide range of certificate, degree, and adult education programs, the liberal arts were the moral and cultural center of the institutions. Liberal education offered an image of intellectual life that countered the early conception of the community college as a “high school with ash trays,” or an expanded “voc/tech school.” Liberal education, with its well-established set of pedagogical practices and well-articulated mission of self-cultivation and social purpose, also imposed substantive demands on administrators, faculty and students alike regarding the intellectual standards and academic content of coursework.

During this period, the transfer/university parallel program provided a structured, sequential curriculum for students to follow. This curricular structure helped insure the centrality and intellectual coherence of the liberal arts. It also produced a learning community of liberal arts faculty working with students who declared an intent to continue their education by selecting a university parallel program. The quality of teaching and learning were supported by the fact that faculty and students were in at least rough agreement about the nature and purpose of the liberal arts coursework and the pedagogical practices that constituted the classroom.

The demographic composition of the faculty began to change during the growth period of the 1970s. Many of the liberal arts faculty were drawn from the high schools, but many also came directly from the universities, as graduate students who completed their Masters degrees or were ABD looked to the community colleges for employment. The “university parallel” curriculum helped anchor the new faculty in the collegiate realm, and encouraged them to maintain ties to their disciplines. Despite their growing

detachment from traditional research, faculty members teaching American History, English Literature, Art History or Sociology courses know what the appropriate content, texts, and assignments for their courses should be. Whether they were teaching in a recently converted high school building, a temporary trailer in a field behind the college, or a newly built campus, the liberal arts faculty had a cultural model and moral purpose for their efforts. The tradition of liberal education gave them a sense that they participated in collegiate education and were part of a larger intellectual community with shared pedagogical aims.

This shared sense of mission and purpose among liberal arts faculty was critical in orienting them to the dramatic changes in the student population brought by open admissions. While long-term teachers may have been startled and dismayed about the rapid change in students from the earlier “junior college” days, many newer faculty saw the students who were now entering their classrooms through open access programs as an extraordinary opportunity. The policy of open access offered faculty a chance to participate in a great democratic experiment, and provided them the opportunity to work with students who had long been excluded from educational opportunities. Many faculty members in the early years did not know quite what to do with their students, but they had a clear sense of why it was important that their students succeed, and that the liberal arts/general education curriculum was the route to the baccalaureate.

As the rapidly growing community college opened doors to higher education, the liberal arts emerged as critical to achieving access and opportunity for nontraditional and marginalized students. Once students were admitted, the liberal arts classroom was the principal battleground on which the democratic struggle for access and opportunity was

fought. As Pat Cross and Art Cohen noted, the new students surging into community colleges were primarily nontraditional students, ethnic minorities and low income students, many of whom had previously dropped out of high school, graduated in the lower half of their class, or were returning to school after a long absence. Many of the poor and working class students and students of color who enter community colleges come from chronically failing schools, with little access to qualified teachers, and poor instruction in language arts, mathematics, and science. Because of this, they come with inadequate academic preparation, poor study habits, and unclear educational goals. Many enter college, in my friend Laura Rendon's words, "wounded," from a long set of negative experiences during their prior schooling and with little validation from family or friends. For these students, "achieving the dream" of academic success hinges on their ability to develop college level skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and the faculty's ability to provide support and encouragement.

However, while liberal education played a central role in the development of the new community college sector, the sources of its weakness today is, in retrospect, evident from the beginning. This has occurred for a number of reasons. I'll briefly discuss two of them here:

Changes in Student Coursetaking: Liberal arts courses, which had made up seventy-five percent of the curriculum in the pre-1970s junior college, dropped, and then stabilized at just over fifty percent since the 1970s. At the same time, occupational enrollments, which were only thirteen percent in 1965, rose steadily throughout the 1970's. By the mid-1970s, Grubb and Lazerson placed the figure at around 50 percent. As community colleges assumed an ever more important training role in local economies,

the traditional liberal arts seemed to many leaders to be increasingly marginal to mission of these institutions. Also, for many community college leaders, terminal vocational programs were considered the most effective response to the academic limitations of the new students who entered through the open admission process.

An associated change in enrollment patterns was a breakdown in the earlier distinction between “transfer” and “career/vocational” curricula. Despite what policymakers and educational leaders intend, students use institutions in their own ways. In recent decades student coursetaking has blurred the old distinction between the “university parallel/transfer” program and “terminal” career programs. In many institutions students are as or more likely to transfer to four-year institutions from career programs than those in general studies or liberal arts programs.

Loss of the Core Curriculum: Liberal arts courses in the community college have stabilized at a little over 50 percent of the curriculum. However, even the most careful studies that “count credits” taken by students and the distribution of courses in the curriculum miss the most critical change. While liberal arts courses remain predominant, they have lost their cultural status in two-year institutions. This, in large part, is due to the loss of structured, sequential curricula.

The trend in all of higher education is toward a diminished core curriculum and a greater emphasis on student choice. However, this trend plays out in ways that are particularly harmful in the community college. Since the early 1990s, studies find that students rarely follow the institutionally prescribed associate degree path. As Cliff Adelman’s work has shown, even among students who transfer and ultimately earn a baccalaureate degree, only about one-half follow the prescribed pattern of two years at

the community college to fulfill requirements for an associate degree, followed by two years at a baccalaureate institution.

The episodic use of the community college has contributed to the collapse of sequential, structured curricula in general education and the liberal arts, while the loss of the core curricula has undermined student commitment to a coherent program of study. Beginning in the 1970s, community colleges developed the “general studies” degree. This program is distinctive in its extreme flexibility. It does not require students to take courses for which other courses are a prerequisite and permits almost any combination of courses that a student might take. Because of their flexibility, general studies programs, as my colleague Dick Richardson noted in the 1980’s, became the dumping ground for students who were undecided about their course of study, for late registrants, and for students with weak academic backgrounds who were unable to gain admission to select curricula. In many institutions, including my own, there has also been the loss of the second level course in the discipline. As a result, liberal arts courses are not linked to one another, or to other parts of the curricula. In consequence, they become isolated courses for “tourists” who are not necessarily interested in the tour. This curricular trend has had a profound affect on both students and faculty.

For students, the liberal arts remain the first (and frequently the last) experience of serious and significant academic work. Given the poor quality of the high schools that many students come from, the liberal arts play a critical role. The reading and writing that students do in literature, history, science, and social science courses, and the quantitative work they do in mathematics courses, are often the first time that they get to experience themselves as students engaged in important intellectual activity. However,

given the current disordered state of the curriculum, students have few opportunities to build on what they've learned or to see interconnections among their studies. They also have little chance to deeply immerse themselves in a discipline so as to understand the questions it asks and the intellectual traditions it draws upon.

The loss of a structured core curriculum has had an equally profound affect on the liberal arts faculty. Without sequential courses it is difficult to work with the same group of students long enough to develop any sense of a learning community. It is equally difficult to engage students in their disciplines when faculty continually have the sense of always "starting at the beginning" since they cannot assume any shared background knowledge among the students in their courses. Ironically, today it is often the career faculty in areas such as nursing, allied health, business, and computer science who are able to develop a sense of community among students who pass through a set of prescribed courses.