A FOCUSED CONVERSATION

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WHAT DID WE LEARN? WHAT DID WE DO? LOOKING BACK ON FOUR DECADES OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Prologue: Those were the days!

The year is 1958. Ed Gleaser has just replaced Jesse Bogue as executive director of the American Association of Junior colleges. Bogue had been the president of one of two private junior colleges in Vermont. I have my first teaching job in the other, a private, Methodist Church related, college for women. Our students come from homes that would have supported them at one of the five Ivy League sister colleges but their preparation and previous performance make them a better fit for our junior college. About half are in career programs and most will probably not transfer. For us, diversity means that we enroll more Catholic and Jewish students than Methodists. Three days before classes that fall, our thirteen faculty members gathered around a table in the library with our president and academic dean and talked for a half a day about who our students were and what we needed to do to help them succeed. Surely, no one has ever had a more glorious introduction to higher education

Meet Me in St Louis, Lou.. Um, Dennis

Now fast forward five years. New community colleges are being established in St. Louis, Dallas, Fort Worth, Cleveland, Kansas City and elsewhere, mostly by California transplants. I am the only dean of anything at the Forest Park Campus of the Junior College District of St. Louis, St. Louis County Missouri entering its first full year of

operation. We're operating a 4:00 to 10:00 pm program in Roosevelt High School in South St Louis. Most of our students are African American and many come from the nearby Pruitt Igoe Public Housing Project, one of the most notorious examples of bad public policy of the era.

One of my tasks is to visit high schools in our service area to recruit students. The first school I visit is Soldan, a very large entirely African American high school. For the first time in my life, mine is the only white face among 1500 gathered for an assembly. When I later learn that some African American students feel intimidated in the overwhelmingly white schools they are beginning to attend, I can relate. I have no memory of what I said, but students from Soldan start showing up in large numbers for our Summer trimester. Among them is the school valedictorian, who wants to get an early start on the engineering program he plans to pursue at the University of Missouri in the fall. As a new community college in temporary quarters, we take great pride in having him there even though he is, so to speak, just passing through. A week and a half later, his math teacher shows up in my office. After a few additional consultations to make certain , we discover to our dismay, that the very best students coming from St Louis black high schools are two years behind their counterparts from other city and suburban schools in mathematics preparation.

A quick trip to the Danforth Foundation brings a planning grant that allows us to visit other institutions in urban settings and to bring together a group of experts representing the different fields taught in our curriculum. We gather together the best ideas we can find and propose a one year transition program that we call the general curriculum, which the Danforth Foundation subsequently funds for a three year trial period. Our closest model came not from another community college, but from the general college of the University of Minnesota, an open access program dating to the 30s.

Our program enrolled cohorts taught by a five member faculty team headed by a counselor. The content included science, math, social science, and humanities. The program was <u>not</u> designed in any sense as remedial and those who completed it earned a

full year of college credit that could be applied toward the general education requirements for transfer or career programs. The program worked, but it was expensive. We were never able to accommodate as many cohorts as we needed. Our students liked it and faculty members were enthusiastic. When the grant expired, however, we began to make the compromises that over time reduced distinctions between the general curriculum and the rest of what we did. I like to think though that it made a difference not only for the students but also in the way faculty members thought about what they were doing and how they understood student achievement.

Even in night operation in a high school, we tried to create learning communities. We did not want to define what the students were doing as remediation. We integrated student services with the learning program. And we challenged students to be all they were capable of becoming. I learned two weeks ago of a new initiative in City University of New York Community Colleges called ASAP. It follows very similar principles in terms of block scheduling, learning communities, counseling, and academic support. It adds some exciting new emphases in the form of student financial assistance, tutoring, and an orientation toward degree completion. The moral here seems to be that we have known for some time more than we have been using in many colleges.

It was an exciting time to be in St Louis, Dennis. The Gateway Arch was going up, people marched in the streets for civil rights, our diverse faculty and administrators desegregated restaurants, hotels and social clubs, sometimes unknowingly, and we were building three urban campuses simultaneously. And Judy Garland thought she had it good!

COMMENTS BY DENNIS

The Right To Fail: You Didn't Have To Be A Citizen Or Speak English To Experience This One!

Let's transition to the early 80s. Community colleges are a vital force in almost every major city in the country. Established colleges in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Phoenix have built or are establishing new campuses aimed at catching up with the new colleges established during the 60s and 70s. Enrollments have mushroomed outpacing revenue growth. Many leaders interpret the community college mission as offering something for everyone regardless of levels of funding. Some talk about high attrition rates as evidence that community colleges are preserving high standards. Those who do not graduate or transfer are characterized as exercising their right to fail, a sort of perverse extension of Clark's "cooling out function.". To some of us, it seems as if community colleges are in danger of falling victim to their own success.

Some colleagues and I obtain a three-year grant from the National Institute for Education to study the effects of open access colleges on students and the effect of educationally and economically disadvantaged students on the college. For those days, we took a very unorthodox approach. We opted for a intensive engagement with a single college and we persuaded an anthropologist to take a leave from her department to teach and guide us in employing the methodology she had used successfully in her studies of Native American communities. We chose a strong community college for our study because its leaders were interested in working with us and its location near the boundaries of a major city made it a magnet for Chicano immigrants, who came to work in nearby agricultural fields.

Our large, interdisciplinary team spent the better part of two years in attending classes, observing student services and administrative meetings, and interviewing faculty. In one instance, we sent a Chicano graduate student through the admissions process incognito. He was able, speaking only Spanish and without providing any evidence that he understood a word of English, to register for a full load of classes and qualify for financial aid. The college taught no classes in Spanish. It did offer many levels of remedial and ESL classes. In those days before federal standards for progress, students could exhaust their entire financial aid eligibility without earning more than a small number of credits applicable to any degree.

Observations of teaching methods in classes and review of course objectives and exams led us to conclude that faculty had adjusted to the wide range of student preparation they daily confronted by eliminating requirements for the type of reading and writing typically associated with college learning. One of the ways we checked this conclusion was by examining books that students sold back to the bookstore at the end of the semester. In a very high percentage of instances, we found no evidence that the books had ever been used.

We also visited advanced classes offered without prerequisites. We learned from the faculty that they avoided prerequisites so the minimum number of students required to satisfy district policies for not canceling the class remained until after the formal count for state reimbursement was taken. Teachers then announced the real writing requirements and many of the students withdrew. Those who remained were prepared to satisfy the requirements reasonably expected for an advanced course.

We learned something else from this study that was even more interesting. As part of our commitment to the college, we met each semester with anyone who was interested and provided a full and candid report of what we had seen and what we had learned. The president and senior administrators were always at these meetings. Many of the more junior faculty members with administrative assignments or aspirations attended as well. As fast as we reported some of the practices I have described, the college went to work in very imaginative ways to change them. Telling participants what you were observing was very unusual in that period. The prevailing belief was that if you told people what you were learning you would influence people in the setting and thus render invalid subsequent observations. Today we have a name for what we did then. We call it action research and the aim is to empower practitioners to improve their institutions by making them partners in the inquiry rather than subjects. I think the strategies being used in the Lumina "Achieving the Dream" project are quite similar.

In Literacy In The Open Access College, we argued for reforms in admission policies, testing and placement for incoming students, changes in approaches to remediation, standards for academic progress, and reforms in financial aid practices. Our report and recommendations made a lot of senior community college leaders very angry, but in the decade that followed most of the recommendations were addressed. We took away the idea, Dennis, that while community college professionals may resent criticism from outsiders, they don't let that stop them from solving problems that stand between their students and achievement.

COMMENTS BY DENNIS

Urban Community Colleges and Urban Universities: "Strangers in the Blight"

In 1985, Bud Hodgkinson published his brief monograph, "all one system." And policy leaders began to pay increased attention to the transition points between the different and often disjointed pieces of the education system. Thanks in large measure to the Ford Foundation, transfer and articulation between community colleges and universities received a share of the attention. While transfer rates for all community colleges hovered not much above 20 percent, there was special concern for urban settings where transfer rates were even lower in the inner city campuses on which African American and Latino students heavily depended.

Urban community colleges and urban universities share a common history and adjacent locations. Both were founded or significantly expanded during the 60s and 70s. Those who founded them expected they would work together to improve access and achievement for city residents. With help from the Ford Foundation, several of us set to better understand their achievements and issues. Our focus was on how urban community colleges and urban universities collaborated to help students attain the baccalaureate degree since we reasoned that equity for students underrepresented in higher education would remain elusive until they graduated with a four-year degree at rates similar to other students.

Our strategy was to visit pairs of institutions in eight different major cities. In each, we chose the one or two community colleges with the highest proportions of African-American and Latino students and the one or two public urban universities which by proximity should have been the logical target for many students who planned to transfer. We learned that in a majority of these cities, institutions that should have been close collaborators were, in fact, "strangers in the blight."

We quickly learn that the institutions had very different cultures. The universities were concerned about knowledge generation and saw research as their highest function. Their teaching approaches assumed independent learners and quality was a matter of inputs and who you kept out. The curriculum was sequential and controlled by faculty whose allegiance was to their discipline rather than their university. In contrast, community colleges were concerned about community needs and saw either teaching or welfare as their primary function. They understood that students needed support systems and they emphasized value-added notions of quality. The curriculum was heavily remedial and controlled by administrators. Faculty members were loyal to their students and their faculty unions.

These cultural differences played out in ways that helped to explain why collaboration was so often the exception rather than the rule. In one urban research university we visited, more than a quarter of the students were African American. We learned that the university was worried about its ability to recruit from suburbs and the rest of the state if it came to be perceived as a predominantly black institution. This university did not recruit from inner city high schools or community colleges. Instead, recruitment and articulation strategies were targeted on suburban and out state institutions.

In a different city, an almost exclusively African American community college offered very few advanced courses. More than 75 percent of the students were women and the college emphasized a wide range of welfare services designed to meet the needs of single parent families with young children and few other resources. This institution clearly

provided badly needed services to a very disadvantaged section of the city. Their focus was understandable, but it was hard to visualize how their results would ever improve equity. When we examined data for the district to which this college belonged, we found many instances where African American students, who lived close to this college would spend more than an hour on public transit to reach another college in the same district that had a reputation for transferring students to the state university.

In one of the most challenged rust belt cities, we visited another inner city community college. The president, a mathematician, insisted that students enroll in rigorous classes including math and science. Not only did this college have the highest transfer rate of any we visited, it also had the smallest gap between African American and other students. One thing that has not changed from that Vermont College experience is the impact concerned leaders can have in impressing on faculty and students the importance of academic achievement.

We also learned from this study that it is very difficult for urban community colleges and universities to collaborate closely in the absence of policies that set priorities and holds institutions accountable for achieving them. Too often, state coordinating or governing boards in our study were reluctant to adopt such policies because they did not want to risk alienating their influential university constituents. Some one needs to step up to the plate in each state to establish rules that promote effective transfer and articulation policies, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

Since then, many states have tried a considerable range of approaches. But, it seems to me, Dennis, that articulation remains a challenge where the success stories often reveal the ways in which the entire process remains plagued by differences in culture and curriculum, personnel changes among key actors, lack of clear student objectives and a host of other potentially, mischief causing details.