

# Community Colleges and Democracy as Problem Solving

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Public community college systems were the creation of state legislation. The colleges grew in number, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, because state and federal governments appropriated funds for campus construction and student financial aid. Community colleges provided educational opportunities to any adult deemed capable of college work, without regard to the student's race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, or income. In this respect, the community college was the institutional down payment on a promise to expand democracy beyond the political realm through education. Over the next 50 years, the enrollment of millions of new students represented an important step toward realizing a fuller democracy.

However, this investment has not kept pace with growing enrollment. A May 2016 report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities confirmed what many community college leaders have known for years: state support for public higher education has not kept pace with enrollment growth since the Great Recession of 2007–2009 (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). More specifically, these researchers found that, "Forty-five states ... are spending less per student in the 2015–16 school year than they did before the recession..." (p. 2). This faltering commitment to public higher education is occurring at a time when the need for a more effective system of state colleges and universities is greater than ever.

## The Private Good and Public Good Rationales

When appropriations are being negotiated by state legislators and policymakers, considerations of both "private good" and "public good" play a large role in determining who should bear the cost of a higher education. Historian David Labaree (2016) recently published a piece on the topic titled "Learning to Love the Bomb: The Cold War Brings the Best of Times to Higher Education," which I highly recommend to readers.

The private good rationale maintains that the benefits accruing from postsecondary public education flow primarily to those directly involved in the enterprise: the students. Therefore, state legislators adhering to the private good rationale believe students should bear most of the costs associated with acquiring their education. Perhaps the best evidence to justify this rationale is the data affirming the positive individual economic consequences of attaining a college degree (e.g., Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Compared to students who do not complete their degree program, students who obtain an associate's degree or bachelor's degree enjoy higher incomes over a lifetime.

There is a tendency to see the private good rationale as a perspective that has taken hold only recently. This leads some of us in the academy to pine for "a return to the good old days" (Labaree, 2016, p. 114) when the public good rationale was widely accepted by Americans. However, as Labaree explains, until World War II, most

Americans accepted the private good rationale. From colonial times right up through the middle of the 20th century, parents sent their children to small private colleges and, later, larger state universities, so they could enter a profession or secure a future in the middle class.

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The public good rationale maintains that the primary beneficiary of public postsecondary education is society at large. This view was endorsed by the public during and following World War II. It's important to remember that with the onset of World War II, the federal government's role in higher education expanded quickly. Military leaders turned to research universities to develop new armaments, and these institutions became "the central site for military research and development" (Labaree, 2016, p. 108). After World War II, federal funding was extended to other national priorities such as scientific research in agriculture and medicine. The federal government's support of higher education expanded again with the enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of

1944 (the GI Bill of Rights, or GI Bill), which supported veterans as they transitioned back to civilian life. After World War II, millions of veterans used the GI Bill to pay for college. Strong federal support for research and student financial aid continued for approximately 30 years (from the 1940s to the 1970s).

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This high level of federal support for postsecondary education is what Labaree (2016) referred to as the “golden age” of American higher education. During this “golden age” postsecondary institutions benefited from high levels of federal investment in part grounded in a prevalent ideology of the time that only America’s research universities and colleges could produce the technology and workforce needed to counter the threat of Communism. The advantages of the “golden age” flowed to institutions throughout American higher education. The GI Bill of 1944, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 all provided new resources that lead to enrollment growth and campus construction in all sectors of higher education, including community colleges. The first years of the “golden age” were also energized, again ideologically, by the work of President Harry Truman’s Commission on Higher Education (the Truman Commission) and its multi-volume report, setting a course for American higher education for the next 60 years (President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947).

As envisioned by the Truman Commission, the community college became an essential institution in the American higher education hierarchy. Its mission was to provide adults with access to a comprehensive two-year curriculum, including terminal vocational programs, transfer programs, and adult education programs. These programs would help “remove economic and geographic barriers to educational opportunity” (p. 67). However, the Truman Commission’s vision of the future went beyond this. The Commission’s report stated that colleges and universities also needed to educate young people so they could achieve a “fuller realization of democracy” (p. 8). Although the Truman Commission was focused on the future, its members had vivid memories of how one of the great democracies in Europe, Germany, had degenerated into a brutal totalitarian regime. This history showed that democratic institutions were fallible and their failure could be catastrophic.

Consequently, the authors of the Truman Commission’s Report stated, “democracy is much more than a set of political processes” (p. 11). Moreover, they continued, “when the democratic spirit is deep and strong in a society, its expression is not limited to the sphere of government; it animates every phase of living: economic and social and personal as well as political” (p. 14). Colleges and universities were charged, therefore, with helping students develop their, “... self-discipline and self-reliance... ethical principles as a guide for conduct... sensitivity to injustice and inequality... [and] the spirit of democratic compromise and cooperation” (p. 10).

## The Community College of the Future

Labaree observed that with the end of the Cold War, the potential for individual and private gain has again become the dominant rationale for pursuing a college education. Today, colleges and universities market their programs based on the anticipated return on investment. Students and legislatures also assess programs using this criterion. Not surprisingly, the declining interest in the public good as an end of higher education is matched by a declining confidence in public institutions (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Employment has become precarious, income inequality is increasing, and state and federal governments appear unable to arrest these developments. Government just does not work for many Americans. Although the nation came together after 9/11, that feeling of shared public purpose is now lost. As Daniel Rodgers (2011) wrote, we live in an age of fracture.

In this environment, community colleges have come under pressure to become more effective in educating and credentialing adult learners. Leading researchers have called upon community colleges to adopt guided pathways models that

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would streamline students' progress and thus improve notoriously low graduation rates (e.g., Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). At the same time, others argue that community colleges must promote educational equity and become more effective in serving students from all communities (e.g., Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Both objectives are critically important, yet, we seem to lack the shared sense of purpose that might lead to solutions accommodating both objectives.

Xavier de Souza Briggs, a sociologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (now working for the Ford Foundation), conducted research that revealed how communities can successfully address large, complex social problems with innovations that go outside traditional cultures, organizations, and government regulations. This approach, described by Briggs (2008), is well worth considering as a possible model to tackle major problems that are usually assigned to specific institutions but in fact are rooted in the social and economic history of the community (e.g., low completion rates and inequities in education).

Briggs (2008) found that when community leaders in large cities tackled complex social problems they did much more than utilize existing institutions and political processes. Leaders came together to form new "stable coalitions" and then carried out the coalition's objectives through "implementation-focused alliances" (p. 12). These coalitions and alliances moved forward because of their ability to collaborate and forge new compromises. In the process, they created a new collective "civil capacity" that helped to secure the solutions developed (p. 13). This work did not follow traditional public policy

or private-sector methods yet led to unique hybrid coalitions, alliances, methods, and solutions. In this way, communities made significant progress in managing urban growth (in Salt Lake City) and restructuring key aspects of the economy (in Pittsburgh). Briggs identified this approach as "democracy as problem solving" (p. 8). This term captured the sense of participants that their work was not strictly political, economic, or social. It transcended these disciplinary boundaries and was the work of a healthy democratic community.

To be sure, state and federal governments will continue to shape the future of community college education. Policymakers will continue to make decisions regarding the subsidization and regulation of community colleges based, at least in part, on the competing values reflected in the public good and private good rationales. The role of the state in public higher education will always be debated. The significance of Briggs' findings, however, is that this work invites us to step forward into a new era, one not constrained by the binary thinking of the public and private benefits of higher education. This approach, if implemented by visionary community college leaders, could offer new innovative strategies to solve complex social problems reflected on campus in the form of low completion rates and educational inequities. Perhaps more importantly, however, when the Truman's Commission's Report is brought into conversation with Briggs' (2008) *Democracy as Problem Solving*, we have the beginnings of a new justification to help strengthen a community's civil capacity. Democracy as problem solving can do more than help secure solutions to problems ignored by the private good rationale. It carries the potential for helping faculty, staff, students and community members develop a new democratic spirit, a spirit that if nurtured and supported could lead to a fuller realization of democracy for all.

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