

Community College Pop Culture Portrayals

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The hallowed halls of higher education are a fertile setting for novels, TV shows, and movies. A vast array of students, faculty, and administrators roam these fictional colleges and universities, creating the plots of many classic academic trials and tribulations. However, many scholars (Hawk & Hill, 2016; Hinton, 1994; LaPaglia, 1994; Reynolds, 2014; Tucciarone, 2007) have called into question the veracity of these portrayals and the potential effects of these fictional accounts of higher education on prospective students. Tucciarone (2007) argued that popular media functions as a source of information for unfamiliar situations and places. Yet the portrayals of institutions of higher education are often myopic in scope and subject matter: dating, athletics, and partying dominate the intercollegiate narratives.

Alternatively, the college landscape is often portrayed through the nostalgia-tinged lenses of elitism with settings resembling Ivy League institutions (Reynolds, 2014). Reynolds (2014) wrote, "The social overshadows the academic, and manifestations of institutional hierarchy viciously (mis)characterize role and purpose for institutions of higher education of differing types in ways that contain privileged messages about who institutions are for" (pp. 21–22). Indeed, the popular media's portrayals of the higher education landscape do not reflect the ever-evolving and expanding student population. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), 45% of all undergraduate students in the United States attend community colleges, that serve a diverse student population with a wide range of educational needs, but colleges and universities in popular culture rarely venture outside of the traditional social or sports tropes of teenagers. In fact, Hinton (1994) noted between 1960 and 1990 not a single film was made featuring nontraditional students at a community college. This lack of representation in film is interesting not only considering the number of nontraditional students who attend community colleges, but also due to the number of Hollywood figures who were educated in the community college system: George Lucas began at Modesto Junior College; body builder, actor, and politician Arnold Schwarzenegger started his academic career at Santa Monica College; and Tom Hanks, before transferring to Cal State Sacramento, attended Chabot College (Ross, 2016). However, since 2000, community colleges were introduced to the popular media's limelight—for better or worse. This literature review features popular portrayals of community colleges as the "punchline" for higher education and forming a community. It concludes with future directions for portrayals of community colleges in pop culture.

Popular Portrayals of Community Colleges: Higher Education's Punchline?

Very few studies (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009; Hawk & Hill, 2016; LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007) have focused specifically on popular media and community colleges. Indeed, this is reflective of the popular media's lack of focus on community college, but these portrayals do exist. However, it is unfortunate that these portrayals are often on the periphery or are the punchline of mean-spirited comedy calling into question the mental prowess of community college students (LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007). In her study of print, film, and television up to 1992, La Paglia (1994) found that community college students are represented as "mediocre, probably losers, and usually unsympathetic" (p. 6) or function as the center of "mean spirited images. . . [meant to] demean. . . devalue and declass" (p. 151). Although LaPaglia (1994) analyzed fiction up until 1992, her findings remained consistent after that period. For example, while *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant, Damon, & Affleck, 1997) predominantly takes place at MIT, Sean McGuire, Robin William's character, teaches at Bunker Hill Community College, which Keroes (2004) described as "the sort of institution considered a refuge for underprivileged students, those too poor or academically undernourished to gain admission to a more prestigious institution" (p.42). In one scene, in which a group of community college students listens to Sean McGuire lecturing about psychology, one female student is depicted chewing on her hair, and when a male

student is called upon to answer a question about trust, he responds, "Trust is uh, trust is life" (Van Sant et al., 1997). Even for those unfamiliar with the movies, this scene depicts community college students as apathetic, distracted, and lacking knowledge to answer a simple question. Yet, these poor portrayals seem to be universal in popular media even past the turn of the century. The sci-fi comedy *Evolution* (Reitman & Jakoby, 2001) featured community college professors more concerned with research than teaching (Tucciarone, 2007). In Rodney Atkins' (2006) song "These Are My People," he sang, "We got some discount knowledge at the junior college where we majored in beer and girls" (as cited in Hawk & Hill, 2016, p. 31). The lyrics insinuate an inferior source of education and the students' lack of focus toward academics (Hawk & Hill, 2016). In *Tosh.O* (Zabielski, McAdams, & Judge, 2012), host Daniel Tosh comments over internet videos. In one video, a younger community college student collides with an older female student on his skateboard, to which the host comments:

Just another day at community college where kids who can't get into a state school share a campus with old people who want to learn computers. . . Maybe this would not have happened, if you were not 45 years late to class. (Zabielski et al., 2012 as cited in Hawk & Hill, 2016, p. 31)

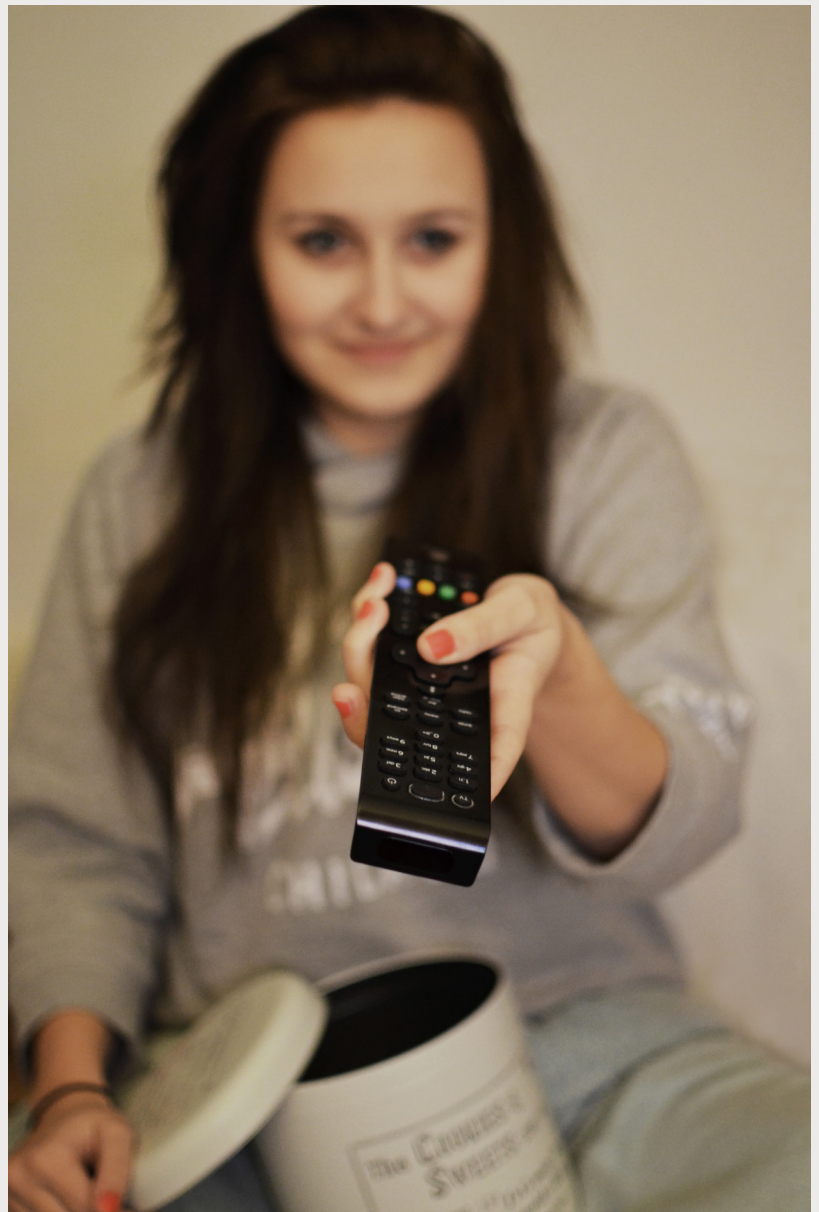
The commentary is mean spirited to all demographics, mocking the intelligence of traditionally aged students at community college, while simultaneously denigrating nontraditional students' sense of belonging at community college (Hawk & Hill, 2016). While Bourke and colleagues (2009) argued popular media's negative portrayals of community colleges were relegated to students' lack of motivation, these recent examples from popular media demonstrate a broader repertoire of ridicule, targeting multiple facets of community college (i.e. the students' intelligence, the professors, and the institutions).

Popular Portrayals of Community Colleges: Forming a Community

Contrary to the previous examples, *Community* (Harmon, Russo, & Russo, 2009) and *Larry Crowne* (Hanks & Vardalos, 2011) represent more positive portrayals of community colleges. These portrayals defy common conventions, taking the community college from the periphery and placing it as the center of the story. *Community*, a long-running sitcom TV-show, walks a fine line between mockery and satire. Fain (2012) argued, "The show. . . poke[s] fun at common conventions at community colleges: turf battles between departments, overly ambitious administrators, underprepared students and relentless budget-cutting." In addition, *Community* features a cast of characters representing a range of ages, races, and educational experiences (Fain, 2012). These characters more accurately reflect the actual student population of community college students, illustrating its growing diversity. Further, the emphasis of the show is on the daily lives of the students as they build relationships within a close-knit study group of traditional and nontraditional students (Hawk & Hill, 2016). While often implementing a farcical spin (e.g., playing paintball to win early class registration), the show features the struggles of community college students to balance academics and life.

In *Larry Crowne*, Tom Hanks plays the titular character, a military veteran who is laid off for not having a degree. He enrolls in community college, where he takes Julia Roberts' speech class and another class in economics. Similar to *Community*, the movie features a wide range of characters from different races and different backgrounds as traditional and nontraditional students build friendships and a community both inside and outside the classroom. In particular, Hanks' character is taken under the social wing of younger and hipper student, Talia. However, the portrayals of the professors are problematic in *Larry Crowne*. While the economics professor, played by George Takei, embodies the stereotypical arrogant and self-absorbed professor (Reynolds, 2014), his character counters the lack of rigor or inferior status of community college academics. Julia Roberts' character begins as an apathetic and possibly alcoholic educator who believes she is too good for community college but evolves into a dedicated professor.

Although a quirky sitcom and rom-com may not seem like viable reflections of the actuality of community college, beyond the comedic and dramatic effects of *Community* and *Larry Crowne* exists a message of personal and academic opportunity to earn a college degree, especially for nontraditional students (Tucciarone, 2007). Furthermore, these two stories feature nontraditional students taking a second chance on achieving success in life, highlighting the positive aspects of community college (Hawk & Hill, 2016). The physical buildings of the institu-



tions in *Community* and *Larry Crowne* also look like community colleges instead of the Ivy League institutions in most feature films. These shows demonstrate a progression of the portrayal of community colleges from ridicule to societal relevance.

Future Directions

As mentioned previously, the amount of research on popular media and community college is limited. In more specific terms, Tucciarone's (2007) and Hawk and Hill's (2016) data were collected from community college students who were familiar with these types of institutions, allowing them to analyze media portrayals more accurate in comparison to the actuality of attending a community college. However, it would be beneficial to expand the current sample to include those who are not familiar with community college, such as prospective college students in high school or first-generation students, as they may be more influenced by popular media's portrayals (Hawk & Hill, 2016). The mission of community colleges is offer open-access and cost-effective way to earn a college education. Therefore, it is important to remain vigilant in studying and analyzing current trends in popular culture in order to counteract the misrepresentation of the mission and benefits of enrolling at a community college.



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