

Community Colleges May Be Losing Their Edge in Educating Adults

By CHARLENE R. NUNLEY

Too often, conversations and policy debates about higher education ignore a key group of students, the forgotten majority: adult, "nontraditional" learners.

Last year I joined 18 others — educators, policy experts, and business leaders — on Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's National Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Despite our varied backgrounds, conversations focused on the traditional 18- to 22-year-old students attending selective colleges and universities. I mean this not as a criticism, for our conversations were more inclusive than many that I have heard during my career in higher education. But it has become predictable that whenever I talk with members of broad-based groups about higher education, traditional students are the focus.

Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton, in their 1998 book, *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student*, note that traditional 18- to 22-year-old full-time undergraduate students residing on their campuses represent little more than 16 percent of the higher-education population in the United States. While not all of the remaining students would be classified as adult nontraditional students, the number making up that latter group is significant enough to warrant attention. (For example, in 2005 more than 12 million adults age 25 and older participated in credential or degree-granting programs at colleges and universities.)

When I became a community-college administrator in the late 70s, adult students were the center of every conversation at the campus. Community colleges were pretty much the only game in town for adults, and we spent many hours on campuses talking about how to make our programs and services "adult friendly," how to improve our offerings for veterans, and how to reach out to those we called returning students, typically women returning to college to continue their educations after having children or finding themselves divorced and without financial support. Our part-time enrollments soared, the average age of our students rose, and local employers asked us to train their workers in the emerging fields of computer software, information-systems management, and apprentice fields like plumbing and electricity.

Community colleges were the innovators. We were the ones ready to set aside traditional practices to serve our communities. We bragged about our adult students and their successes.

Community colleges have matured since then. But in doing so, have we lost some of our edge in the adult market? Are we keeping up with changes in the way adults pursue their education? Are we still the innovators, or are we becoming more bound by policies, procedures, and traditions?

A lot of my colleagues are probably saying: "No, wait. We're still the leaders in work-force development, in serving adult part-time students, in corporate training. We're still strong in noncredit continuing education." Granted, but data suggest that we are losing our adult credit students. The number of part-time students in the 25-to-39 age range enrolled for credit in public two-year colleges declined by 11 percent between 1995-96 and 2003-4, according to U.S. Department of Education data. At the same time, the number of those students enrolled in private, for-profit colleges increased by 253 percent. During the same period, those age 40 and older enrolled for credit in community colleges increased by 3.6 percent, while the same age group enrolled in private for-profit institutions increased by 376 percent. Although the enrollments at proprietary colleges are still relatively small compared to those of community colleges, for-profits are gaining rapidly, while community colleges are barely holding their ground.

Some might ask: So what? Why should we in community colleges care? If adult students' needs are being met and people are willing to pay the higher price at for-profits, let them go — our plates are full.

But our country's changing work force demands that we care. The baby boomers are starting to retire, and we can't replace the most highly educated work force in our nation's history by expanding education only for traditional students. We must raise more adult students to higher skill levels if our nation is going to remain competitive.

In his report "Hitting Home: Quality, Cost, and Access Challenges Confronting Higher Education Today," Travis Reindl, director of Making Opportunity Affordable, a program to improve college access and affordability supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education, estimates that we need 16 million more Americans to earn degrees by 2025 if we are to stay competitive with other leading developed nations. That's a 37-percent increase in productivity per year, estimates the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. The entire postsecondary-education system, not just community colleges, must increase its effectiveness in educating adults if we are to meet this burgeoning need.

We also aren't doing an adequate job in adult education for the populations that need it most: the least affluent and the least educated. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' 2004 report "Participation in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: 2000-2001," participation in adult education has grown steadily over the past three decades; however, those participating in adult credit and noncredit education are already more advantaged than those who are not. They are already employed, have higher income levels, and are more likely to have had some postsecondary education.

According to Peter J. Stokes, executive vice president of Eduventures, an education-research firm, more than 22 percent of prospective adult learners who choose not to enroll in college cite cost as an obstacle. It is these people for whom price matters, who can't afford to pay proprietary-school prices, and whom community colleges can reach best because of our pricing structure and our long experience in working with disadvantaged students.

So why aren't we growing at rates that rival those of our proprietary colleagues? First, in many institutions, our credit programs have become more traditional and less flexible over time. For example, as we have matured, we have put in place more procedures that slow down our ability to modify curricula and deliver content to our students. Some of those procedures are necessary to ensure quality, but others persist simply because "that's the way we do it here." Credit-transfer agreements and accreditation requirements undoubtedly drive some of these processes. Others we create on our own, and inertia and habit keep them in place.

Second, at many community colleges, the credit and continuing-education programs are substantially divided into a kind of credit side of the house and a noncredit side. The two sides may be neighbors who trade "hellos" now and then, but they usually aren't a family that shares resources that could improve each aspect of the institution. Full-time faculty members tend to be suspicious of the quality of noncredit offerings, and administrators of continuing-education programs are concerned that credit programs are unresponsive to the needs of adult students and the marketplace.

Third, according to some community-college leaders, credit programs tend to be supply driven, whereas proprietary schools tend to be demand driven. In other words, our approach to students is: "We know what you need. Come and take it." The proprietaries ask: "What do you need, and how can we design it best for you?" They tend to be more flexible in format and more often use distance learning, for example, and classes that blend distance and on-site learning to reduce the time adult students need to be on the campus. And they compress their courses into shorter time frames, as opposed to the traditional semesters of most credit programs. A demand-driven approach is not uncommon in continuing-education programs at community colleges but is less common in our credit programs, though some progress is being made.

Some people believe that more-flexible, demand-driven approaches and more alternative delivery methods compromise academic quality. But employers don't seem to see it that way. For example, more than 62 percent of the employers participating in Eduventures research (reported in its 2004 report, "Assessing Program Demand in Consumer Markets") indicated that the value of online learning is equal or superior to the value of classroom learning. The world in which our students' employers operate demands speed, responsiveness, and quality all at the same time. They and their adult workers have come to expect the same of postsecondary education.

Will America's community colleges continue their prominence in this market? To ensure that we will, community-college leaders need to step back and take an honest look at how

we are serving our adult students, particularly in our credit programs. Our history of service encourages me to believe that we can meet this growing need. We can prepare the adult work force of the future, but we have to stay innovative, responsive, and attuned to changes in how people work, learn, and educate themselves. We have to strengthen our outreach to groups that aren't currently well served. I believe in the power of community colleges. We need to re-energize that power to bring more adults into the postsecondary system. If America's community colleges decide to take on the challenge, nobody can do it better.

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