Encouraging Scholarship at the Community College

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The year 2001 marked a milestone in the history of the community college and invited another look at what has become so significant a segment of American higher education. A little over a century ago, the president of the University of Chicago, William R. Harper, and the high school superintendent of Joliet Township in Illinois, J. Stanley Brown, established what is now regarded as the first junior college: a program offering the initial two academic years to local high school graduates who sought an inexpensive alternative to attending an out-of-town university (Gilroy 7). The idea caught hold with astonishing speed. In a few years, two-year colleges were created in a number of other states, foremost among them California and Wisconsin, where legislatures quickly mandated procedures and budgets to regulate and support them. Almost as quickly, the concept of the community college came to stand for a democratic institution offering equal educational opportunities to a vast number of people who up to then had found access to an academic career severely restricted. But almost from the beginning, the original focus on academic instruction changed. Though Wisconsin, for example, saw the emerging junior colleges as extensions of its universities (8), other states treated them as bridges between secondary schools and four-year colleges and funded them as a continuation of high school. Later, some of these colleges added job training programs to their curricula as the need arose, as it did during the Great Depression.

Although community colleges are a comparatively recent development in American higher education, they make up its largest segment. Today more than 50% of undergraduates attend a two-year college (Phillippe 15). Many students, both full- and part-time, still enter these institutions as low-cost stepping stones to four-year university programs and ultimately graduate programs. Others enroll in summer courses, transferring credit to their home institutions, while holding down temporary jobs to help finance the next academic year. A substantial percentage of community college students, recent high school graduates as well as returning students of all ages and backgrounds, take advantage of two-year college curricula for remedial and occupational training and as a means of enhancing employment opportunities. But many, especially older returnees, come simply for personal enrichment. It is this blend of the traditional and nontraditional, of students from all age groups, nationalities, races, socioeconomic segments, and cultures, that makes teaching at a community college so challenging and rewarding.

Diversity of students and of their needs is reflected in the varied and often ambivalent roles the nation’s 1,600 two-year colleges have assumed in the communities they serve. The colleges see themselves often as a continuation of local high schools, providing remedial training for students not wishing or not sufficiently prepared to enter four-year universities, or sometimes as places for job preparation and adult education. Others present themselves above all as the first stage in the university system, offering introductory core courses that may lead to further, specialized study. Most try to fulfill all these functions simultaneously. Critics charge that, as a result, the system as a whole is without the clear definition and mission that American universities have. There is, however, one common trait: unlike the administrations of four-year institutions, community college administrations generally place emphasis on teaching, not on research and publishing.

The ambiguity that characterizes the entire system holds true also for the faculty of two-year colleges. The approximately 300,000 full- and part-time faculty members lack a distinctive collective self-perception...
comparable to that of their colleagues at four-year institutions. They are generally selected not for their scholarly pursuits and achievements but rather for teaching experience or potential. At the same time, while an MA or its equivalent is usually required, there is an increasing demand for full-time instructors with a PhD and the research training it involves. Thus many faculty members at two-year institutions have an academic background similar to that of their colleagues at four-year colleges and universities, though at the great majority of community colleges scholarly activity is neither expected nor rewarded. Faculty members who wish to pursue research, publish, attend conferences, and otherwise further their intellectual growth frequently do so with limited institutional support, while carrying heavy teaching loads and taking part in curricular planning, extracurricular activities, and community service projects. As a result of these demands, instructors can become divorced from their research fields, a trend that may engender frustration and teaching fatigue and compromise the quality of instruction that faculty members offer their students.

The disproportionally large percentage of part-time faculty members has long been recognized. They taught 45.4% of course sections in English and 49.1% of course sections in foreign languages in community college departments that responded to the 1999 MLA staffing survey (Laurence 56, table 2). Part-time instructors, many of whom teach at two or more institutions, have even fewer opportunities than their full-time colleagues to expand their intellectual horizons—opportunities needed to recharge enthusiasm and intellectual vitality in teachers whose interaction with students should never become routine but remain engaged and challenging.

Recently there have been encouraging signs that some two-year colleges may be recognizing the need to support the intellectual development of their faculty members. Collin County Community College in north Texas has begun to award reading grants to faculty members who demonstrate a desire to keep current in their academic disciplines, regardless of their teaching fields (though the college does not offer reassigned time in the semester in which a grant is received). The Community College of Philadelphia offers minigrants for summer reading. Each year, Chaffey College in California selects a faculty lecturer, who is given course release to research, write, present, and publish a paper on a topic of his or her choice. These signs are promising, but they tend to be exceptions: community colleges that further their faculty's intellectual life in such concrete ways are still few. Most remain satisfied with offering an annual or semiannual development day with activities that range from conveying pedagogical tools and tips to learning new technologies and engaging in team-building exercises after the corporate model. Some two-year institutions give sabbaticals to longtime regular faculty members, a few even at full salary, but such leaves must generally be used to serve the college or to enhance the recipients' classroom performance, not their personal fields of academic interest. It is a rare two-year college that allocates the funds to support scholarly growth outright.

Keeping current in a specific academic discipline is as crucial for community college faculty members as it is for their university colleagues. All undergraduate students, not merely those in four-year institutions, are entitled to courses taught by intellectually exciting and enthusiastic instructors aware of innovative pedagogy as well as of new ideas and developments in the subjects they teach. An integral part of classroom effectiveness is the satisfaction instructors derive from ongoing work outside class: staying abreast of current developments and publications in their disciplines, which may or may not lie in their teaching area; participating in conferences that involve intellectual exchanges with colleagues and having sufficient time for substantive research. This satisfaction can go a long way toward alleviating the high burnout rate among instructors required to teach a minimum of five courses (generally without teaching assistants), serve on numerous task forces, and participate in community activities. More important, it ensures that our students will leave us better prepared, either for their careers or for transfer to other educational institutions.

Two-year colleges, and the communities they serve, can do much to further their faculty members' intellectual growth. Such support might begin with an instructor's department and extend all the way to the national level. Even departments with limited financial resources can encourage faculty members to attend regional events that sustain their professional and intellectual awareness and can allow them time to pursue scholarly interests outside the classroom. English faculty members at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida, for example, are reassigned from one course each semester as a "professional assignment," during which time they may, among other things, work on projects connected to their personal academic interests. Other departments have created
regional interinstitutional faculty retreats and forums, some of them simple brown-bag lunches, that bring together instructors from colleges and universities and facilitate an exchange of ideas and discussions of scholarly pursuits. English departments of the twenty-three colleges that compose the Virginia community college system hold biennial meetings so members can present papers to a group of peers. Institutions as a whole should, as much as possible, provide budget support and reassigned time for faculty members who wish to participate in national conferences, pursue advanced degrees, and seek to further their academic careers in other ways. Faculty senates can help establish programs that benefit members wishing to enhance their scholarly standing. Such programs are often faculty-generated and -financed, but some colleges have taken steps to set aside funds for supporting their instructors’ intellectual advancement. At Salt Lake Community College, the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center organizes brown-bag forums, presents speakers, offers grants, and provides a faculty development library. The center has a director who has 90% reassigned time, and codirectors focus on international studies, technology, teaching communities, and teaching improvement. The Virginia community college system has a Chancellor’s Fellowship that encourages faculty study in doctoral programs around the state. The system also gives research grants allowing faculty members a semester free from teaching in order to conduct studies in the area of their academic interest.

By definition, community colleges are answerable to the communities that support them. But the community can do more than fund a college: it can help define the college’s role and mission as an institution of higher education. Faculty members should be accorded recognition as scholars by effective promotion and public acknowledgment. Texas’s Collin County, for example, celebrates and promotes the academic accomplishments of its community college and the college’s instructors with articles in local papers and even with film clips shown in area movie theaters. Florida’s Santa Fe Community College has established a professional development fund from joint donations by its president and the community, with an endowment goal of $100,000, to aid instructors studying toward advanced degrees, while a separate fund finances faculty attendance at professional seminars and meetings, public speakers, publication of journals, and other creative and scholarly activities.

As one might expect, state support of community college faculties is as disparate as the states themselves. California, for example, has mandated funds for faculty development, which colleges can distribute according to a previously submitted plan. The Texas Association of Community Colleges provides a statewide network called Starlink that produces interactive video conferences for faculty development in community and technical colleges.

College instructors can also look to national and professional organizations for scholarly and financial support. The National Endowment for the Humanities provides Focus Grants for faculty reassigned time in institutions that, like most two-year colleges, do not provide it to their instructors. The Modern Language Association, through its Committee on Community Colleges, has taken the initiative to recognize English and foreign language community college faculty members as fellow scholars. At the 2000 MLA convention the committee organized a three-session forum, “What’s Happening to the Humanities?,” that modeled integration of scholars by including speakers from all postsecondary institutional types. Like their peers from four-year institutions, community college faculty members coordinate and participate in MLA convention sessions on every variety of topic; write articles for PMLA, Profession, and the ADE Bulletin and ADFL Bulletin; and sit on MLA committees. They are thus provided a platform for voicing their particular professional and academic ideas and concerns. The National Council of Teachers of English has a constituent organization, the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), that highlights in the NCTE convention program sessions that focus on the community college and hosts an annual breakfast at the convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The NCTE also publishes a quarterly journal, Teaching English in the Two-Year College (TETYC). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) hosts a special interest group for community colleges. The Community College Humanities Association sponsors national and regional conferences and publishes the Community College Humanities Review.

Unfortunately, given the size of the two-year college system, the number of college faculty members who belong to national professional associations is still small. Reaching out to chairs, deans, presidents, and boards of directors, groups like the MLA, NCTE, ACTFL, and the American associations of teachers of
French (AATF), German (AATG), Spanish (AATS), and Slavic and East European Languages (ATSEEL) can be instrumental in increasing awareness that community college instructors are scholars as well as teachers, with all this entails: membership and participation in scholarly organizations, research in their respective academic fields, presentation of papers, publications, and thus a wider professional recognition among their colleagues nationwide.

This awareness requires a serious commitment on the part of the individual college and its community to support to the best of their ability the academic activities of instructors. At stake, in the end, are our students. They have the right to an education by engaged, informed, intellectually vital faculty members: teachers who are stimulating because they are up-to-date scholars with broad cultural perspectives. Our students should not have to settle for less.

Works Cited