



LaGuardia Community College

Each and All: Creating a Sustainable American Higher Education System

By Dr. Gail O. Mellow, President, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

I. Introduction

We are all familiar with the old adage that we must understand our past lest we repeat its mistakes. Certainly an important lesson. But what are the prospects for taking charge of our future when we do not yet fully understand the present? My thesis today is that American Higher Education lives unwittingly in the past, and that “Taking Charge of Our Future” will require us to get a handle on the actual dimension of higher education today. We must locate ourselves firmly in the context of a world that is radically different from the one that created the current systems of American colleges and universities. Without a more honest depiction, and absent an ability to accurately define, appropriately measure and innovatively respond to reality, American higher education is not sustainable. When the hidden ways in which we are deeply connected are brought into view, the mutuality of our enterprises and the ways our destinies are intertwined will illuminate a path to a sustainable future. Like an ecologically threatened environment, we must come to grips with what is undermining our ability to grow a sound ecosystem.

How can we grow a sound higher education ecosystem? What are the requirements and principles that should guide us? Tonight I hope to serve as part cartographer, part navigator and part ecologist, as I share with you some of the compelling facts that have brought me to such urgency about our sustainability. I will propose that if we single out and concentrate our efforts in three areas -- pedagogy, measurements and funding mechanisms -- we can take charge of the formidable challenges that are already present and that will be with us for some time to come.

II. The Truth About American Higher Education

Let me begin with “The Truth About American Higher Education.” When we look at who we are and who we educate, many of us revert to the Carnegie classifications. But I want to argue that there are really only two distinct forms of American higher education. The first consists of those public or private colleges that select their incoming class each fall by recruiting and admitting those students who have a high probability of being able to complete their degrees.

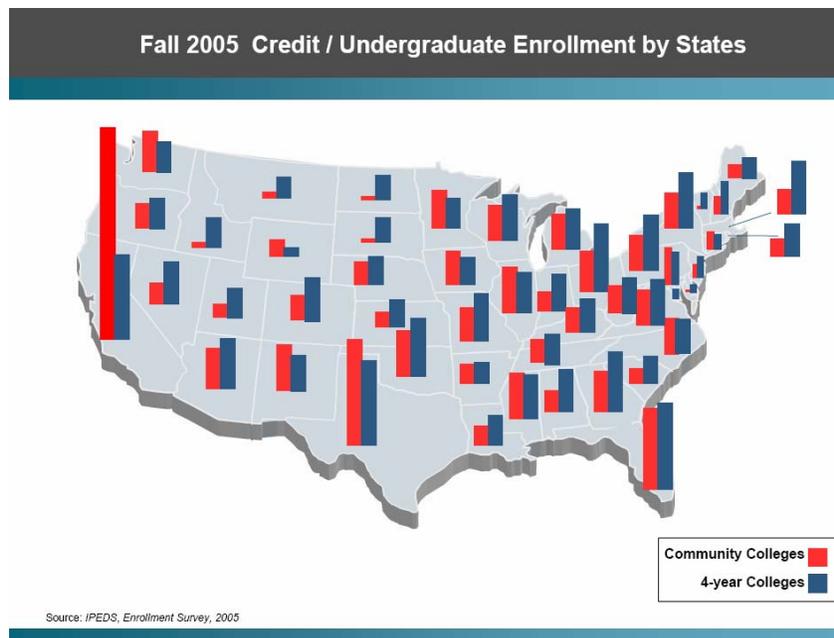


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The second group is community colleges. Community colleges embrace a radically inclusive student body. They don't select, but rather welcome all post-secondary students. The open-access community college is the only form of higher education that has its genesis in the U.S. The difference between colleges in these two categories – those that select and those that welcome -- is profound.

In our new book entitled *Minding the Dream: The American Community College*, which we are releasing at the conference, my co-author Dr. Cynthia Heelan writes that rather than selecting the “cream of the crop,” community colleges in America make cream.

So let's look at who we are – who goes to college in the U.S.? Looking only at credit students, you can see that over 6.5 million undergraduates attend community colleges, and just over 7 million attend four-year colleges. Community colleges therefore educate about 46% of all undergraduate college students. An additional 5 million students attend community colleges for non-credit education¹. But their impact is even greater.

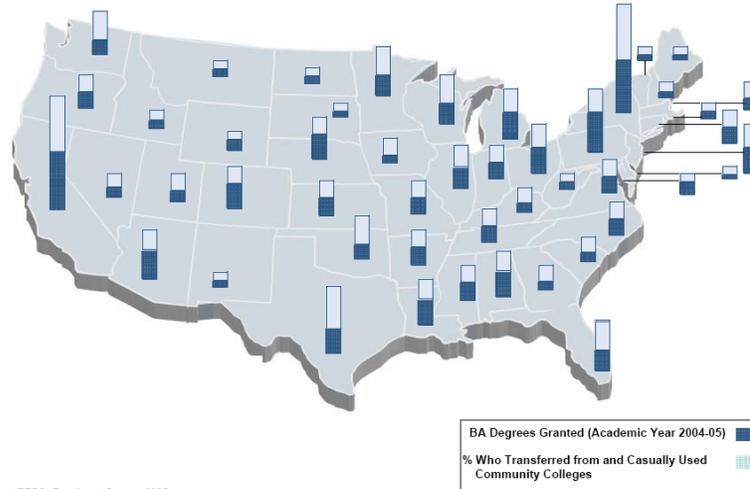


The next graph shows the number of students graduating annually with a baccalaureate degree, about 1.5 million students. But look at what happens if we subtract from these graduates the number who transferred from a community college – the number decreases by over 300,000. If we also subtract the students who used community colleges incidentally as well as “reverse” transfers (those who started in a 4 year college, returned to a community college, and subsequently completed a baccalaureate), the overall total of U.S. baccalaureate degrees would decrease by over 700,000². Even when we are looking solely at four-year college graduates, our higher education system would not function without the contribution of the community colleges.



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Total Baccalaureate Awards/Degrees Conferred by States
(Academic Year 2004-2005)



Community colleges are as fundamental to the higher education eco-system as clean air and water are to the environment. Yet the distinctive purpose of the American community college, this radical experiment in the democratization of higher education, is only imperfectly realized. While all of higher education grapples with graduation and retention rates, those struggles are nowhere more paramount than at community colleges. Nationally, while only about 60% of those students selected to complete a baccalaureate degree do so, less than 30% of the unselected community college students complete an associate's degree³.

If America is to realize the potential of her unique higher educational system, we have to come to a deeper understanding of the inter-connectedness of our students.

III. RISING STANDARDS - WHO SHOULD WE EDUCATE?

Here's the good news: With the advent of what has been termed the *Knowledge Era*, or the *Innovation Economy*, a college education is more important than ever before. We are all keenly aware that people in this economy must be highly educated to be both productively employed and to participate meaningfully in their communities. But this is also the bad news, because it means that in order for us to be of service to the people of our country, higher education has to do a better job. Colleges and universities must learn to not only effectively educate every student who enters our institutions, but we must recruit and succeed with a significantly larger swath of the adult population in America.



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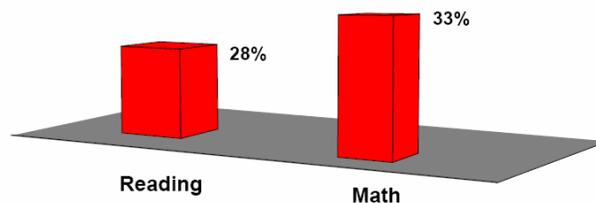
The image of “Taking Charge of Our Future” begins to cloud up when we juxtapose the need to educate more Americans to a higher level against the gaps in our educational pipeline and the increasing ability of other nations to educate their citizens³. The global race for influence, power, talent and money is intensifying. It is up to college and university presidents to equip our country with the educated citizenry that plays a fundamental role in American democracy, economy and culture.

I want to very briefly show a couple of data points of these trends. I have based my analysis on data first pulled together by the brilliant labor economist Dr. Andy Sum, of Northeastern University, and the equally brilliant Dr. Dennis Jones and Patrick Kelly of NCHEMS for the National Commission on Adult Literacy (although any mistakes in the interpretation are mine alone).

We still struggle with getting students ready for college.

- In 2003, 28 percent of 8th grade students scored below the basic reading level and 33 percent scored below the basic math level ⁵.

8th Grade Students Below Grade Level in 2003



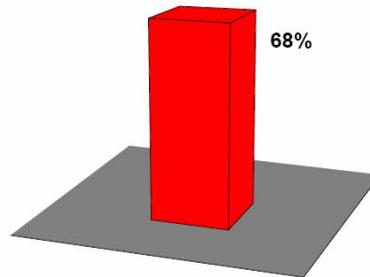
Source: U.S. Dept of Education, NCES, The Nation's Report Card, 2004

- Nationwide the overall high school graduation rate for the class of 2001 was 68 percent, with nearly one-third of all public high school students failing to graduate⁶. In New York City, only 40% of black males are graduating from high school⁷. This is unacceptable.



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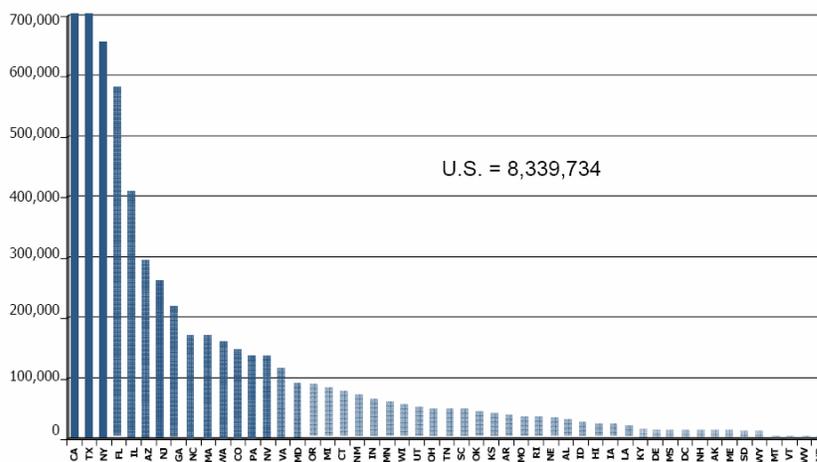
Nationwide 2001 High School Graduation Rate



Source: Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? Urban Institute, 2004

- There are also millions of adults older than traditional college age who need to be college-educated. The number of adults who speak English poorly or not at all is over 8 million, with differences very apparent by state⁸. About one in eight individuals living in the U.S. today is not native-born.

Number of Adults Who Speak Poor or No English by State in 2005



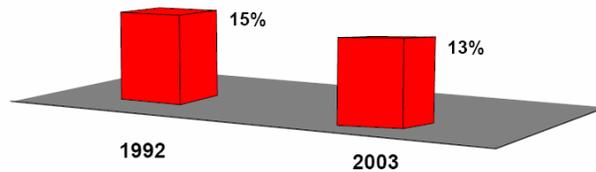
Source: D. Jones & P. Kelley, *Mounting Pressures Facing the U.S. Workforce*, 2007, p 19



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Even with the stakes so high, the U.S. Department of Education reports that between 1992 and 2003 the proportion of adults whose level of educated literacy was sufficient for them to compare the viewpoints of two different newspaper editorials declined from 15% to 13%⁹. I'm not talking here about having enough education to understand who is responsible for the sub-prime mortgage fiasco, or the implications of Merrill Lynch taking \$6.2 Billion in investments from the Singapore government, but just being literate enough to compare two different editorial points of view.

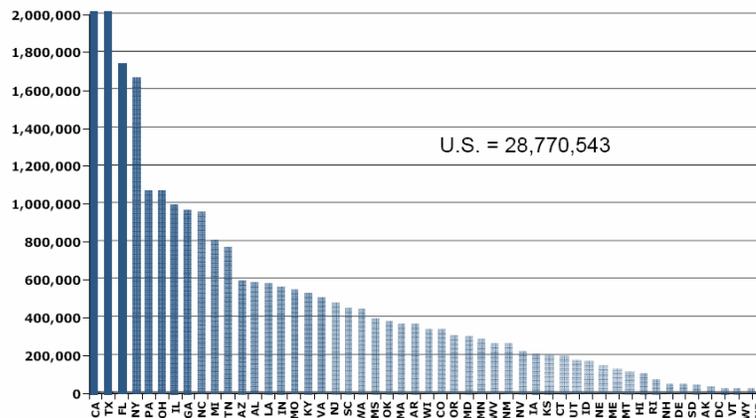
U.S. Adults' Ability to Compare Two Editorials



Source: *Twilight of the Book*, by Caleb Crain, *The New Yorker*, Dec 24 & 31, 2007 pp 134-139

The results of the lack of an education are all too clear. If you don't have a high school education, as almost 29 million Americans don't, you are very likely to be poor, unhealthy, and if male, incarcerated. We now jail over 1.5 million Americans, many more people than China or Russia.

Number of Adults with a High School Diploma or Less in Families with Incomes Below a Living Wage



Source: D. Jones & P. Kelley, *Mounting Pressures Facing the U.S. Workforce*, 2007, p 21

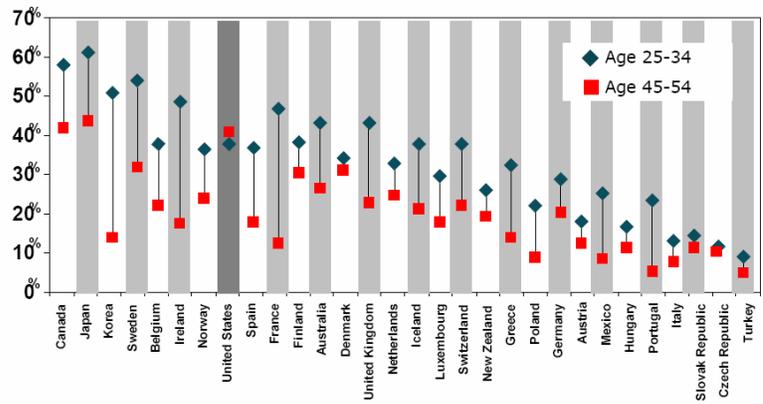
By State in 2005



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Those are the achievement gaps on the national front, and comparing ourselves internationally is no rosier. America still has the best educated workforce in the world, but not for long. When the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of countries that is essentially made up of the thirty wealthiest countries in the world, measures the percentage of adults with at least an associate's degree, we rank 8th. Note in particular that the U.S. is the only country where people of my generation are more educated than those of younger generations. Any edge we used to have because of education is rapidly slipping away¹¹.

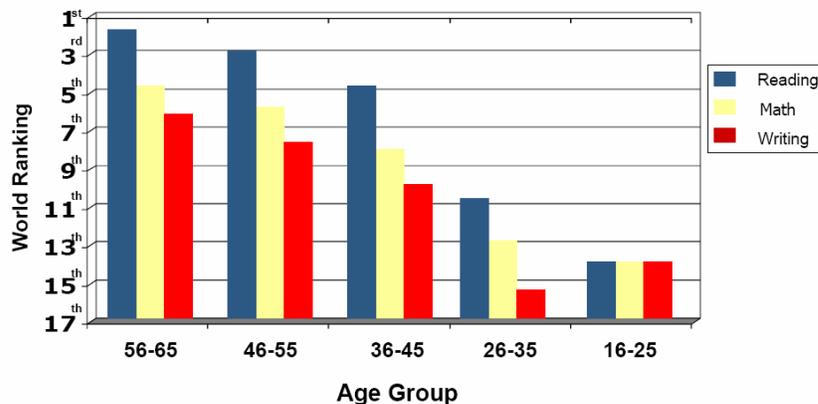
Differences in College Attainment Between Younger and Older Adults
(U.S. and OECD Countries, 2004)



Source: D. Jones & P. Kelley, *Mounting Pressures Facing the U.S. Workforce, 2007*, p 3

The same thing is seen in the International Adult Literacy Survey, where scores that correspond roughly to reading, writing, and mathematics show the decreasing relative ranking of Americans by generation¹².

International Adult Literacy Survey



Source: A. Sum, I. Kirsch & R. Taggart, *Robert (2002), The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality*, p 16



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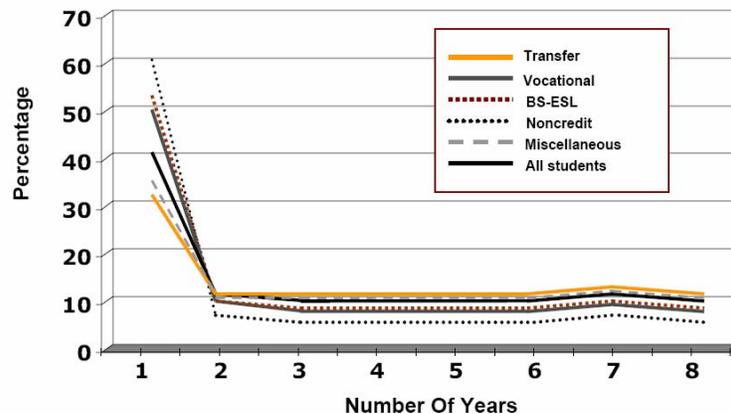
Community colleges are the only post-secondary system that will be, as my co-author Dr. Cynthia Heelan says, the pinch-hitter for the gaps in the K-12 system, and the clean-up batter for American business and industry. Let's be crystal clear - it is in this system where hope lies to address the gaps I've just outlined. Community colleges accept those with high school diplomas but less-than-high-school skills, as well as those with GEDs who come back to school months or years after not graduating from high school. And the extraordinary thing is community colleges are successful with the students who by any statistical category such as race, ethnicity, lack of academic preparedness, poverty, child-bearing, or immigration status are not only the hardest-to-serve, but the least likely to succeed.

It is almost miraculous that, while almost none of their students are keyed up to win the game, faculty and staff at the community colleges help so many to the finish line. The successes, and the transformation of lives, are compelling. It is the magnitude of students' success that keeps community college faculty going. I think of students who were once washing floors, or sleeping on couches in family homes, or driving taxis, who are now computer programmers or CPA's or even the first female Chief Executive Officer of the Bolsa de Valores, the Dominican Republic's capital market exchange. Community colleges radically changed their lives from ones of grinding poverty to the middle class and beyond.

But community colleges don't create these minor miracles for enough students. Community colleges are successful with less than 50% of high school graduates who need remediation to achieve high school level skills.

Look at this chart created by Ria Sengupta and Christopher Jepsen of the Public Policy Institute of California of all credit, non-credit, GED, Adult Basic Education and skills training students in the California Community College system¹³. No matter who they are, there is a precipitous drop off after the first semester, and a devastating one after the first year.

Percent Retained Between First and Last Terms in California
(1997 Cohort)



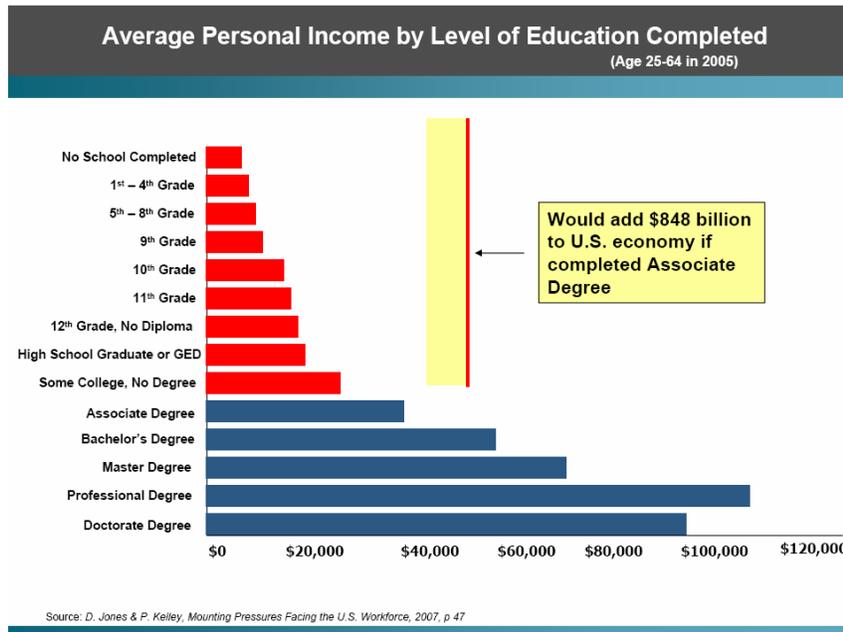
Source: R. Sengupta & C. Jepsen, C. California's Community College Students, 2006, p 16



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I conclude from these data that our system of American education is broken in many places. America is slipping in our ability to effectively participate in the leadership of the world. These are sobering facts, but they also point to a tremendous opportunity if we collectively address these concerns.

Here is our leverage point. If we committed ourselves to having those without a basic education complete an associate’s degree, the United States’ citizens would gain \$848 Billion in personal income. This graph, then, shows us who should be in college. If American higher education increased its effectiveness with those we currently serve, and added these individuals who should be in college but are not, our future would be assured. I want to talk about the three things we need to do to achieve this future: improve our pedagogy, reconfigure our metrics, and reform our funding practices.



IV. NEED FOR CHANGED PEDAGOGY

Katie Haycock, Director of The Education Trust, told me a great story in a wild car ride we shared after being snowed-in at a conference in New Hampshire, both of us trying to make a plane in Boston (neither of us did!). She had given almost 100 talks that year to teachers across the country, where she showed the Education Trust’s data that demonstrates rather stark differences in student success by college, after equalizing for variables such as campus size, students’ race/ethnicity, or socio-economic status. What amazed her – and then me – was that when she asked her audiences to identify the reasons for these differences, no one, not one of the several hundred educators said “maybe the teaching was better.” This is one of the critical unexamined issues in higher education. If we are to better



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serve the students we currently have, as well as educate the much larger group of post-secondary students who need to participate and succeed in college, we must develop better pedagogy.

Let me use an analogy. When manufacturing in America began to face stiff competition from around the world, their first line of defense was to go to the shop floor to learn how to change processes to lessen costs and improve quality. This happened when front line staff used their hard-won experiential wisdom to create new systems and innovations. American manufacturing became much more viable, although still subject to the intense competition from a global market.

Like these manufacturers, we have to improve our traditional way of teaching college students. Faculty are on the shop floor. Faculty in the classroom are the only ones who can undertake this prerequisite to improving student success. As leaders, we have to push for greater investment in faculty's ability to innovate in the classroom. If we do, community college faculty will emerge as leaders of pedagogical initiatives.

At LaGuardia Community College, my beloved institution in metropolitan New York City, we serve over 50,000 credit and non-credit students of enormous diversity. Over two-third's of our students were not born in the U.S., and they hail from over 160 different countries and speak 110 languages in addition to English.

We graduate almost twice the national average of students, even though our immigrant and NY city educated students come to college with severe academic deficits. Our successful students go everywhere – Vassar, Columbia, Swarthmore, Georgetown. The absolute magnitude of achievement – where our students started vs. where they end up – is part of the uniquely American story of opportunity and success.

How do we do this? LaGuardia has made major investments of time and money in providing sustained, systemic, faculty-led professional development programs. Our faculty have created pedagogical innovations, which incorporate technology in order to serve our adult, minority and immigrant students. Through investing their time and creativity, our faculty have developed new structures such as first-year academies, student technology mentors, ePortfolios and digital stories. By using narrative, faculty are able to weave the lives of our students into the fabric of the curriculum. We have data to confirm that these newly created pedagogical strategies advance deep, reflective learning. A 2004 Hesburgh award confirmed their excellence.

There is no better way to give you a sense of their achievement than to show you. Here is a 7 minute video that gives some sense of the challenges of new students, the on-going innovation of faculty, and the results that can be obtained when an entire college strives to provide a deep educational experience:

VIDEO PRESENTED



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I hope you were able to get a tiny sense of what it will take to really educate those who need to be in our colleges right now. The faculty you saw in the video are in the audience, so you can talk to them during the conference.

While I find the work of our faculty inspiring, I know that LaGuardia faculty have opportunities that most community college faculty don't. Our professional development programs flourish in part because we have been able to attract a steady stream of grant funding. Not all community colleges can do this. Moreover, as part of the City University of New York, our faculty are held to the same requirements for credentials and scholarship as our sister four-year colleges, have a high rate of pay relative to other community college faculty, and are given time for their research. The result is an extraordinary faculty. But we still fall short. The wonderful techniques described in the film have not yet crafted a distinctive pedagogy that enables all adult basic skills students to achieve the academic level you just saw.

Pedagogical innovations are key to educational success. But is it not realistic to expect faculty to be able to develop new teaching techniques until we change how American higher education is measured and funded.

V. NEED FOR NEW METRICS – THE MIS-MEASURE OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

We use out-dated methods of evaluating college success. The single federal measure of American community colleges – the IPEDS (the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System)-- asks us to presume that all students are just like those attending Princeton - first time and full time. IPEDS assumes everyone is a credit student, requiring no remediation, who enrolls full time for their entire academic career. All of those assumptions are false. It harkens back to a historical conception of college-going students that is no longer true. Community colleges are not just the junior version of four-year colleges. To understand community college success – or lack thereof – we must find a new way of measuring outcomes. Everyone wants to look at graduation statistics – and I do, too. But without other measures it subverts the real contribution of a community college.

For example, right now, we now count as college students those with high school diplomas who do not have high-school skills, and then criticize community colleges when those students do not graduate in three years. How about thanking them for only taking a year to teach students what they were unable to master in their twelve previous years of education? Since community colleges welcome everyone and therefore are coping with students with a very mixed bag of intellectual and social skills, accurate measures have to assess progress towards the ultimate goal of graduation.

Unlike four-year colleges, community colleges are rooted in a specific location. They should be measured on how well the education they provide contributes to the local and regional economy and community. Community colleges might be measured by



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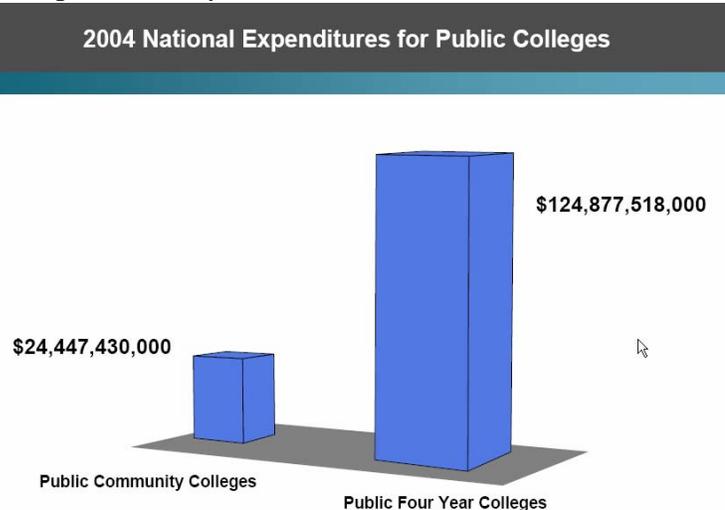
changes in a community's salaries, new business starts, new jobs, or increases in employee health insurance and retirement benefits associated with education. Community colleges might also be measured by advances in literacy or critical thinking, or by increases in their adult students' involvement in their children's school, or in civic engagement. This doesn't imply a backing away from the standard of graduation with an associate's degree, but it realistically incorporates the progressive reality of education that seeks to move adults ahead step-by-step. Let's learn to measure what matters in this context, for these people. It does matter if a community college moves an adult from reading at the 5th to the 9th grade level, or learns how to compute percentages, or develops the capacity for the intellectual problem solving necessary to get and keep a job. It's not enough, and we cannot stop without trying to move everyone completing an associate's degree, but each step is a real improvement for the individual and our social world.

Declaring the associate's degree as a minimal academic requirement implies significant changes in the current system. We need a radical reframing of federal IPEDs and Pell grant eligibility. All forms of adult education, not just K-12, must expressly link their achievement to the number of adult students who enter and succeed in college. This has significant implications for GED, adult basic skills, literacy, English as a Second Language and workplace learning education.

Community colleges are increasingly pivotal in America's role in globalization, and the integration of immigrants into the American society and economy. We must be measured by who our students are as they come in to study, what happens to them, and their subsequent success in local communities. Until those measures are also included in common assessments, we will always mis-measure the true impact of the community college.

VI. NEED FOR NEW FINANCING STRUCTURES

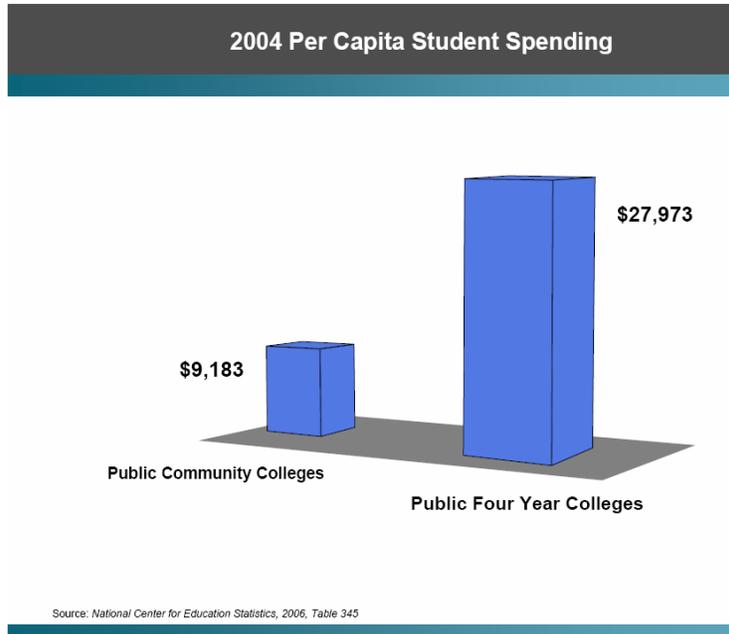
More important than how we are measured, however, is how we are funded. In 2004, national expenditures for public two year colleges were \$24.4 billion (\$24,447,430,000)¹⁴. This is less than 20% of the \$124.8 billion (\$124,877,518,000) expended by public four-year colleges and universities. The disparity is shocking. American community colleges, despite enrolling almost half of all undergraduate students, spend 80% less than their public four-year sisters.





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We can look at this another way. Per capita spending, that is the amount of money we expend on average annually to educate each student, is also strikingly different. Public community colleges spending averages \$9,183 per student, while spending for 4-year public college students averages \$27,973 a year.¹⁵ Thus we spend almost three times more to educate each 4-year college student than we do for each community college student. We are therefore funding those students most prepared to go to college at rates well above those who need the highest level of support.



For me, the conclusion is clear. To create a sustainable system of higher education, to recruit a much larger group of adults who should be in college, and to create the pedagogical innovations necessary to be much more successful with current and future students, we have to lessen the funding disparities. The financial data I just presented under-counts the way in which community colleges are financially hobbled, because their faculty teach many more classes each semester than faculty at four-year colleges, usually twice as many. Community colleges also have a much lower percentage of classes taught by full-time faculty, and they have so few support staff as to be ridiculous. With a very small amount of an infusion of public dollars, a very positive return on investment could be achieved because of community colleges' foundational relationship to all of American higher education.

Re-envisioning the American higher education system will not be cheap. I need to tell no one in this audience that we have been losing the battle for public funding of higher education. The new message I want to bring is that we have to reform the funding structures internally at the same time as we fight for all the money we truly need. Since we have to educate more adults to higher standards than every before, the substantive re-thinking of the funding mechanisms and distributions of dollars in higher education will be profound. It will not be achieved with minor dollar increases in Pell grants.



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VII. TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

We must stop giving community colleges straw and expecting spun gold. The fact is that what happens to community colleges affects all of higher education. As higher education leaders, we have allowed the baccalaureate and community college systems to develop separately and unequally, with tenuous points of integration and inadequate financial support. Higher education funding and quality assessment is still premised on what are now nostalgic memories of traditional-aged, upper-middle class college students. Unless we let go of this myth and realistically face the modern demographics of the U.S. college population—who goes and who should go to college—the relevance and status of American higher education in a competitive, global education market will erode. I began this talk by declaring that community colleges are as fundamental to the complex higher education eco-system as clean air and water are fundamental to our environment. I want to leave you with a sense of urgency. If we do not recognize the failing systems of education in the United States – at every level – and do nothing to buttress the pivotal role of community colleges, our system is not sustainable over the long term.

I close with a quote from Mieko Nishimizu of the World Bank who said, “Discriminating issues that shape the future are all fundamentally global. We belong to one inescapable network of mutuality...We are tied, indeed, in a single fabric of destiny on Planet Earth.”¹⁶

So it is in recognition of our single fabric of destiny that I ask you to join with me in creating a *sustainable* system of American higher education. I exhort the American Council on Education, its new president and its membership, to begin to walk a path that is informed by the facts of our future, not the dreams of our past.

Our students, our communities and our country are depending upon us.



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Footnotes

1. Calculated from The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Enrollment Survey, 2005
2. Calculated from The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Completion Survey, 2005
3. *Minding the Dream: The American Community College*, Gail Mellow and Cynthia Heelan, forthcoming.
4. *America's Perfect Storm – 3 Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*. Irwin Kirsch, Henry Braun, Kentaro Yamamoto, Andrew Sum, January, 2007, Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service.
5. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card Mathematics Highlights 2003*, NCES 2004-451, Washington, DC: 2004, Figure 4, p. 8
6. *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't?* Urban Institute, 2004, retrieved January 11, 2005, <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410934>.
7. Sen, Rinku, (2006). *A Positive Future for Black Boys: Building the Movement*; The Schott Foundation for Public Education, Cambridge, MA.
8. Jones, Dennis and Kelly, Patrick (2007) *Mounting Pressures Facing The U.S. Workforce and the Increasing Need For Adult Education and Literacy*. May. Prepared for the National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York, NY. p 19.
9. *Twilight of the Book*, by Caleb Crain, *The New Yorker*, Dec 24 & 31, 2007, pp 134-139.
10. Jones & Kelly, pg. 21
11. Jones & Kelly, pg. 3
12. Sum, Andrew; Kirsch, Irwin, Taggart, Robert (2002), *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality: Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective*, Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, pg 16.
13. Sengupta, R, & Jepsen, C. (2006). *California's community college students*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, pg 16.
14. *Annual Almanac of Higher Education*. (2005). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved December 12, 2005, from <http://chronicle.com/free/almanac/2005/>.
15. National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *Table 345. Current-fund expenditures per full-time equivalent student in degree-granting institutions by type and control of institutions: Selected years, 1970–71 to 2000–01*. Retrieved December 14, 2006, from www.nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=75.
16. as quoted in Senge, Peter, (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*, pg 342