

# point of view

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

**M**y introduction to what we now call community colleges came more than 46 years ago. The basketball coach at my local college made the opportunity possible. Even though I was president of the National Honor Society in my high school, no one ever talked to me about college. No one from my family had ever gone to college, so tradition did not come into play.

The experience of going to college opened the world to me, and transfer to the “flagship” university came easily. After graduation and two years of K-12 work, I was back in my local college as a faculty member within weeks of completing a master’s degree. Now, looking back after 40 years, I marvel at the explosion of community colleges after that transition in 1963. Less than eight years later, I became the youngest college president in the country. That was a magic time when we could fund any good idea. I am unaware of any situation in America today where that would be possible.

In those heady years, community-college leaders developed career programs to meet local and regional needs, and made a huge difference in the lives of millions of our citizens. Even the emergence

of developmental education was fueled by the hope that a day would come when it would no longer be necessary to provide remediation. Community colleges readily embraced the notions of economic development and work-force development as a way to assist in community development. Inevitably, questions arose about whether or not community colleges could be all things to all people.



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Now, at a time when many community colleges are celebrating 40 years of service, we hear calls for accountability, productivity and doing more with less. Unfortunately, the calls come when there has never been a bigger mismatch between the skills people have and those required in a new century. These calls also come at a time when states are facing large deficits. To say the least, it is a pivotal time for community colleges around the country. The gap

between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is growing, and the latter group is steadily growing. Since the primary pathway for so many minorities is through community colleges, there has never been a time when these institutions were so important in our society.

Much to my chagrin, the need for remediation did not go away. More than ever before, it is time for colleges to make it Job One. Otherwise, we will not level the playing field for the minority students who increasingly are the “face” of the work force. The renewed focus on learning and student engagement can provide the impetus for breakthrough activity in student success. Outreach to adult basic education, English-as-a-second-language and general educational development programs will be important to establish the needed pathway or pipeline.

It will also be important to acknowledge that graduation and transfer rates matter. We should not be afraid to look at the data and then strive to improve.

Community-college work has never been more challenging and important. I think I need to find a way to remain engaged in work that is so crucial to a healthy future. ▲