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Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Community College President in the 21st Century

Adam Morris
Crowder College, adammorris@crowder.edu

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Crowder College

Correspondence related to this article should be addressed to Dr. Adam A. Morris, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Crowder College, adammorris@crowder.edu

ABSTRACT

"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them" Albert Einstein. The quote by Albert Einstein indicates where community college presidents are in solving the issues facing their institutions. The 21st Century has brought new challenges and opportunities to college presidents. A college leader is no longer just concerned about academic matters. While there are significant challenges facing community college leaders, opportunities are available for them to make changes to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education.

"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them" Albert Einstein. The quote by Albert Einstein indicates where community college presidents are in solving the issues facing their institutions. The 21st Century has brought new challenges and opportunities to college presidents. A college leader is no longer just concerned about academic matters. Community college presidents have tried to respect the traditions, history and characteristics of the community college. They have experienced challenges in many areas especially financially (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community college presidents have had to learn how to accomplish more with less resources, compete with four-year institutions, and raise persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). While there are significant challenges facing community college leaders, opportunities are available for them to make changes to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education.

The leadership of the nation's community colleges has experienced unprecedented change in the last 20 years. According to Williams (1989) community college leader's success will be determined by their ability to complete the following tasks:
- successfully market their strengths;
- increase their enrollment bases;
- function in a fiscally responsible manner;
- and maintain strong leadership and a devoted faculty.

Expectations of community college presidents are increasing in regards to knowledge required to run a successful institution. A community college has become a complex organization with several constituents that it serve. The mission has had to change based on external factors affecting it. According to Bogart (1994) the community college's mission has been wide-ranging in nature which includes many areas:
- open access admission,
- a comprehensive curriculum,

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- a student-centered learning environment,
- a community-orientation to programming, and
- a significant role in regional economic development.

Community college presidents need to have experience in academic affairs, financial matters, governmental relations, and external fundraising (Brunen, 2012). They feel the pressure of state and local politics, and must navigate the political to make decisions that are best for their institution (Miller, Grover, Deggs, D'Amico, Kastinas, and Adair 2016). As the primary spokesperson for their institution, modern leaders must have the necessary skills to interact with the public on a continual basis. With more time expended addressing external issues, the president has become a public figure that has the public analyzing many of their decisions (Stinebeck & Wasser, 2006).

Community college leaders are leaving institutions at a significant rate causing a leadership gap (Leist & Travis, 2013). They are leaving for various reasons, however many of them are retiring at rapid pace. This trend will likely continue especially with many college leaders being a part of the "baby boomer" generation. "Research revealed that there is a lack of leadership or a leadership crisis that is happening in higher education. Academic leadership is becoming increasingly less attractive to individuals based on the amount of stress and lack of incentives to become an academic leader" page 53 (Morris, 2008). Presidents have provided leadership in a traditional fashion, but community colleges are dynamic requiring a leader to be versatile and able to adapt to a new 21st Century higher education landscape (Fox, 2008).

Challenges

Financial

Presidents are doing more with less resources to maintain academic quality in community colleges. Enrollments are declining causing a financial crisis for many institutions. With the lack of resources it makes it difficult to meet institutional objectives on a consistent basis. Presidents rely on the faculty, staff, and administration to go above and beyond the scope of their position in order to maintain a healthy institution (Hicks and Jones, 2011).

According to Flynn (2013) "Primary expenditures at a community college are for education and related expenses, including instructional costs such as faculty salaries and benefits, and student services such as admissions, registrar services, career counseling, financial aid administration and student organizations." As the funding for many community colleges continue to decrease by state, federal, and local entities, maintaining an adequate financial standing becomes increasingly more difficult (Flynn, 2013). The future does not look promising as it pertains to funding since higher education funding continues to be less of a priority (Flynn, 2013).

Presidents are tasked with difficult decisions as it pertains to the financial well-being of their institutions. With funding to be cut many decisions revolve around staffing. Some community colleges are offering early retirement incentives to try to reduce costs. Others are not filling positions after a retirement or resignation, and a few are making the tough decision to lay-off staff and faculty.

Cuts are not the only way an institution tries to improve their overall funding. Borrowing funds from the foundation or other external sources has been used to maintain budgets. Also, borrowing funds has led some presidents to use the additional funds to increase capacity with the hopes of generating additional revenue.

Technology

Students and faculty are utilizing wireless devices increasingly more. Today's student may be using up to six wireless devices when they are on campus. Smart phones, tablets, televisions, and other devices are able to connect to the internet. With institutions having an expectation to maintain a healthy wireless network, it is a daunting task to keep up with the technological advances. Community college presidents have been challenged with not only investing financial resources, but finding information technology professionals to maintain these complex systems. Educause Center for Analysis and Research reports a 2016 survey of 71,000+ students at 183 post-secondary schools of whom only eight percent disagreed that course technology "sharpens focus on learning activities or course materials" and just six percent disagreed that technology increases engagement in learning. 66 percent to 75+ percent report that technology has helped them join in group activities, ask instructors questions, and work on team projects (Brooks, 2016). Online education, wireless connectivity, and other technological advances have made technology a necessary component of the higher education landscape. Technology is increasing a rapid rate, with many experts stating technology doubles every two years. With this type of change happening community colleges must implement robust technology plans to maintain a high academic quality; however to maintain the quality level many resources have to be utilized.

Enrollment and Retention

Enrollment has been on the decline for many community colleges. This especially true for rural community colleges (Hicks and Jones, 2011). As the United States came out of the recession many would be students decided to enter the work-force or attend a four-year institution. With many community colleges relying on enrollment tuition to be a major contributor to their revenue, it has caused many institutions to aggressively recruit students. Very few private community colleges and public community colleges are accustomed to getting the majority of their funding from external sources. Recruitment strategies are a fairly new concept to a two-year institution. Enrollment management has primarily been something four-year institutions focused on, not a community college.

Strategic enrollment management plans have included athletic programming in community colleges as they try to reach diverse groups of students (Morris, Modica, & Miller, 2010). Many institutions have added athletic teams to bolster their overall enrollment. While athletics will have an initial cost the long-term goal would be to attract students to the institution that normally would not attend.

Retention of students has also become a priority. Community colleges have a diverse population they serve. This population consists of non-traditional students, veterans, displaced workers, and traditional age students. With such a large demographic to reach it is difficult to maintain a

retention program that is able to address all the needs. Some demographics of community college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017) include:

- average age of 28 years
- median age of 24 years
- 36 percent are first generation college students
- 17 percent are single parents
- 41 percent are part-time students and employed full-time
- 32 percent are part-time students and employed part-time
- 12 percent are students with disabilities
- four percent are Veterans.
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Opportunities

Can move quickly and adapt to change

According to Ramsden (1998), "Leadership is seizing opportunities and realizing them in practice" (p. 94). Leadership is about always changing and adapting to the institutional environment. (Ramsden, 1998). Community college presidents realize their environment is changing on continual basis. Changes can be made quickly and those decisions may have to be made independent of others. Community colleges have the ability to strengthen the nation's workforce and many state, local, and government entities are investing in community college education and work-force training. Presidents at these institutions are able to implement these changes without the bureaucracy that many four-year institutions encounter. New academic programs can generate revenue by reaching a specific student stakeholder group. American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) indicates that 43 percent of U.S. undergraduates attend community colleges with a total enrollment of 11.8 million students in credit and noncredit programs (AACC 2010). The number of students attending community colleges is expected to increase, creating opportunities for presidents to adapt to their changing environment.

Can be entrepreneurial in generating revenue

"Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It's time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future." President Barack Obama, White House Summit on Community Colleges (2011).

Auxiliary services, new programs, non-credit, and other revenue generating opportunities exist for the community college. Auxiliary services, like the bookstore can provide an institution an avenue in generating income. This income could be from merchandise, office supplies, food, and textbooks.

Numerous community colleges have a bookstore on campus. Traditionally bookstores have been a good revenue source as it pertains to auxiliary revenue. While some colleges outsource their bookstore, many have decided to keep them in order to generate revenue. They usually receive a

percentage of textbook sales, merchandise, and food. This can add up to millions of dollars in additional revenue by having a bookstore.

Non-credit programs are increasing in popularity for community colleges. Non-credit programs include areas such as transport training, industry specific training, and community education programming. The programs are designed to meet various community as well as industry needs and can be implemented quickly. These partnerships can build effective bridges from non-credit to credit-bearing coursework for students (Condon, 2014). Organizations such as the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) have established standards and guidelines to assist community colleges in transcripting non-credit activities into credit (Condon, 2014). Also, non-credit programs typically do not require oversight from accreditation bodies and can be offered at various locations such as a manufacturing facility.

Community colleges are teaching institutions

Community colleges typically have a culture of being a teaching institution with service and research not being a component of faculty member's job responsibilities (Palmer, 2015). Faculty and staff "find the community college a personally satisfying environment" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 82). Faculty are focused on providing a high quality atmosphere to students in the classroom, which attracts students to two-year institutions. Faculty are motivated by their students and will choose careers in community colleges over four-year institutions because of the ability to focus the majority of their time on academic instruction (Latz & Rediger, 2015). Presidents use these feature to attract students by promoting the ability to take general education courses by faculty committed to the classroom. Additionally, the career and technology programs are taught by faculty that have had careers in industry allowing them to provide a classroom experience that closely resembles real-world working environment. However, teaching or attending a two-year institution has been referred to by some four-year institutions as inferior. The perception of faculty in these institutions is changing because the focus can be on teaching (Twombly & Townsen, 2008). Many community colleges have removed the word "Junior" from their title thus giving the perception they are not inferior to their four-year counterparts. With the perception changing presidents can use to their advantage by stressing the teaching benefits and features of the community college.

The challenges and opportunities facing a community college president are vast. Each leader must decide what their internal strengths and weaknesses are in order to understand the potential opportunities and challenges they may encounter. The challenges include many areas such as financial, technology, and enrollment and retention. Challenges will likely continue for the next decade as financial pressures continue to plaque community colleges. Opportunities are available to community college presidents based on the ability for these institutions to react quickly and capitalize on revenue streams unique to the mission of a two-year institution. The 21st Century president will need to continue to seek these opportunities to provide innovative thinking to lead these institutions to success.

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