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# Culture and Ideology in Keeping Transfer Commitment: Three Community Colleges

*Kathleen M. Shaw and Howard B. London*

Situated as they are between high schools and four-year colleges, community colleges are at the crossroads of social mobility in American society. The proportion of first-year, first-time students who enroll in public two-year colleges rose from 17% in 1955 to 44% in 1997; and as we enter a new century, the nation numbers more than 1,200 community colleges (Na-

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tional Center, 1997). Community colleges also enroll an increasing proportion of this nation's poor, working-class, and minority students. For these populations in particular, community colleges are often the first step toward acquiring one of our society's most effective, but by no means assured, tickets into the broad middle class: a bachelor's degree.

Although originally developed to deliver the equivalent of the first two years of a baccalaureate education (Dougherty, 1994), the mission of the community college is far from monolithic today. Indeed, there is a clear trend toward comprehensiveness in the community college mission (Bailey & Averianova, 1999). Most offer a remarkably varied curriculum, with different blends of vocational, career, adult education, remedial, agricultural, and liberal arts programs. Partnerships with industry and local and state governments have resulted in the development of relatively short-term, certificate-oriented training programs (Dougherty & Bakia, 2000), while financial pressures and opportunities have rendered this sector of education increasingly entrepreneurial (Grubb et al., 1997).

Indeed, as the sector's mission has diversified, so too has its student population. Not only are community college students more ethnically and racially diverse than they were a generation ago but these students are also more diverse in their educational and career aspirations, as well as in their levels of educational preparation. While scholars are still debating whether changes in the student population led to changes in educational mission or vice versa, what is clear is that, within this context, the traditional transfer function of the community college—that is, its role in providing a bridge to the four-year college and ultimately to the baccalaureate degree—has been declining in overall importance. Although the vast majority of community college students transferred to four-year institutions up until the late 1960s (Dougherty, 1994), in recent years the percentage of students who transfer has declined significantly, with estimates varying from about 20% to about 40% (Grubb, 1991, 1996).

Yet despite the decline of the transfer function and the general trend toward vocationalism and comprehensiveness in mission in the sector as a whole, some community colleges have resisted this trend, instead developing various approaches to maintaining the transfer function as their primary focus. Still others have adopted a comprehensive mission but have also continued to perform the transfer function effectively. However, we know little about how such colleges maintain their commitment to transfer despite considerable pressure to divert attention and resources away from this function.

In this paper, we use the concepts of ideology and culture to understand how some community colleges sustain the transfer function in the face of multiple challenges to that mission. With ethnographic data from three urban community colleges, we pose the following questions:

1. How do community colleges approach the transfer function in the face of pressures to diversify their mission and function?
2. How can we use the concepts of ideology and culture to understand variations in institutional approaches to transfer within this context?

Because community colleges are so varied in their purposes, histories, and cultures, such questions cannot be answered by exploring a single community college in-depth; nor can they be addressed by conducting another large, macro-level examination of the sector as a whole. Instead, scholars must combine the strengths of both approaches and do in-depth, micro-level examinations of multiple community colleges. This was our approach in conducting the research described in this paper. Drawing from a larger study of urban community colleges with high transfer rates, we portray community colleges that differ substantially in ideology and culture and examine how these differences lead to varying approaches to the transfer process.

### TRANSFER AS EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

The transfer function of the community college is an important area of inquiry for several reasons. First, the community college has increasingly become the portal through which poor and minority students enter the postsecondary educational arena. Two-year institutions enrolled 42.5% of African American college students in 1994, an increase of 17.4% since 1990. Enrollment of Hispanics in community colleges doubled between 1985 and 1994, so that 56.2% of all Hispanic students were enrolled in two-year institutions (Rendon & Garza, 1996). The trend is unmistakable: minorities are becoming increasingly concentrated in community colleges. Moreover, community college students are disproportionately drawn from poor and working-class backgrounds (Dougherty, 1994).

Second, a baccalaureate degree remains important in obtaining living-wage employment in this postindustrial economy (Seguino & Butler, 1998). There is some economic payback for as little as even one year of full-time college work (Kane & Rouse, 1995, 1999; Grubb, 1999a, 1999b), but there is a strong, positive, linear relationship between years of education and wages (Grubb, 1996, pp. 89–90). Moreover, data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (reported in Grubb, 1996) suggests that the baccalaureate has maintained or increased its earning potential when compared with sub-baccalaureate education. The differential in annual earnings between those with an associate's degree and those with a baccalaureate has remained the same for men between 1984 and 1990 and has increased for women. There exists an even greater differential in earnings over time when those with a baccalaureate are compared with those who completed two years of college but have no degree (Survey of Income and Participation,

reported in Grubb, 1996, p. 88). Labor market projections suggest that by 2006, almost 70% of new jobs will require workers with at least some postsecondary education; nearly half will require a bachelor's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998). Moreover, in every occupation, women with more years of education earn more than lower-skilled employees (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999, p. 19).

Others report that living-wage employment options for those without a four-year college degree are shrinking in urban areas (Gittell, Gross, & Holdaway, 1993; Seppanen, 1998). Meanwhile, options are increasing for college graduates—particularly those with well-honed technical skills. Within this context, access to the baccalaureate degree, while not the only pathway to economic self-sufficiency, promises to remain critically important.

From a theoretical perspective, it is crucial that we begin to understand not just whether, but how some community colleges have successfully maintained their commitment to transfer in the face of external pressures to diversify their missions (Lond & Shaw, 1996). Indeed, the overall trend toward diversification has not occurred without conflict or controversy. A decades-old debate still rages about whether these institutions promote social mobility or perpetuate inequality. A spate of critical educational researchers have recently asserted that these colleges sort students into educational and career tracks that “cool out” the ambitions of poor and working-class students (e.g., Clark, 1960; Brint & Karabel, 1989; London, 1978; Nora, 1993; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Valadez, 1999; Zwerling, 1976, 1992), or erect insurmountable roadblocks to continued academic achievement, such as ineffective remediation or a “watering down” of the academic content of courses (e.g., McGrath & Spear, 1991; Shaw, 1997, 2000b). Research by Dougherty (1994), Grubb (1991), and others has consistently shown that the chances of attaining a baccalaureate degree are significantly reduced when students begin their postsecondary education at a community college.<sup>1</sup> This disadvantage is particularly emphasized for poor and minority students, who are disproportionately represented in both the community college sector and in remedial education courses (National Center, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> It is notoriously difficult to obtain accurate measures of transfer rates, and there is no clear consensus in the field about which measure is most accurate. Perhaps the most widely used formula for calculating transfer rates is the Transfer Assembly Project, which has compiled transfer statistics on about one-quarter of all public community colleges. Its formulation is “all students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college-credit units, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at the university [any four-year institution] within four years after college entry” (Cohen, 1991). This formula is problematic for a number of reasons (Grubb, 1991, 1996), but it does allow for a stable base of comparison across institutions.

Yet these critiques do not go unchallenged. Advocates for the community college suggest that these institutions—particularly in their comprehensive missions—serve an important and valid function within the larger structure of the American educational system. Some take issue with the transfer research, focusing instead on the increase in access to postsecondary education that community colleges provide rather than on the outcomes of this access (Medsker, 1960; Eaton, 1988). Others argue that these colleges serve the economic needs of both the individual students and the broader economy by training mid-level workers (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Kane & Rouse, 1999; Grubb, 1996), while still others describe community colleges as a “safety valve” that allows four-year institutions to retain their elite status (Gleazer, 1968; Traub, 1995).

#### CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY: TOOLS FOR INTERPRETING COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRACTICE AND POLICY

As these debates illustrate, the lack of consensus on the appropriate purpose and function of the community college is striking. As a result, community colleges can be seen as existing in what Anne Swidler (1986) describes as an “unsettled period” (p. 279). During such times, previously unquestioned beliefs are publicly debated and ideology emerges as a potent organizing force. As the original academic, transfer-oriented mission of the community college has eroded, its purpose and very reason for existence can no longer be taken for granted (Bailey & Averianova, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 1996). In the contest for institutional purpose, each college’s unique set of educational practices has become increasingly aligned with either a dominant ideological stance or with competing ideological stances that pervade its culture (Swidler, 1986, p. 278).

One way to understand community college practice and policy during an unsettled period is to examine the culture and ideology of individual institutions. The concept of culture is slippery. It is employed to describe an array of phenomena, and its meaning has changed over time (Bocock, 1996). Although the term is used most commonly to describe a set of beliefs or values, some recent theorists have instead begun describing it as “the set of practices by which meanings are produced and exchanged within a group” (Bocock, 1996, p. 153). Culture, in other words, is not the “shared values and meanings” themselves, but the process through which these values and meanings become understood and shared. Hence, the structure of social arrangements determines the meanings assigned to them (Patillo-McCoy, 1998). As Swidler (1986) points out, “We use culture to explain why different groups behave differently in the same structural situation” (p. 277; emphasis mine).

Culture and ideology are intimately related to each other. Ideology may be defined as either an unconscious (Mannheim, 1936, as cited in Sewell,

1985) or as a highly articulated, self-conscious (Geertz, 1973; Musolf, 1992) belief system that aspires to offer a unified answer to problems, or to organize social action. According to this definition, ideology underlies culture, in that it helps to formulate the structure, or “cultural tool kit” (Swidler, 1986, p. 276), from which appropriate strategies of action are derived. The culture of an institution, then, reflects the ideology which drives it, since both the formal and informal rules and customs are derived within an ideological framework that provides a way of looking at the world and explaining it.

Ann Swidler’s outline of the connection between ideology, culture, and action is useful in explaining the role of ideology in developing new social policy or procedures. In periods of social transformation (like the rapidly changing role of the community college in American society and the radical change in its student population since the 1960s), ideology is particularly effective in helping to establish new policies or procedures (Swidler, 1986, p. 278). Especially when intersecting with complex organizations or systems, ideology acts as a lens through which specific policies and procedures—e.g., culture—are developed and enacted. Shaw (1997) illustrates this principle in a study of remediation practices among several of the colleges included in the broader study. The lens of ideology encourages actors to focus on particular strategies of action and also rules out other types of action. An examination of ideology, then, is critically important when examining educational policy and practice, since the ways of framing a particular issue through discourse directly influence how eventual policies are enacted and interpreted (see also Fligstein, 1996).

### METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

In this paper, we are interested in examining how institutional culture and ideology are reflected in transfer practices and policies. Specifically, we conduct a comparative analysis of approaches to transfer in three community colleges and examine the ideological underpinnings of these particular sets of practices (culture).

We drew our data from a larger study of eight urban community colleges, selected for their commitment to the transfer function. We defined this commitment as high transfer rates compared to other urban community colleges<sup>2</sup> plus formal and informal policies and practices supporting transfer. With the exception of these similarities, the three colleges discussed in this paper are remarkably different in size, geographic location, age of

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen (1992) indicates that the average transfer rate among urban community colleges hovers around 12%. Using Cohen’s formula, we identified eight urban community colleges whose transfer rates were at least double the average for this type of institution.

**TABLE 1**  
**COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHARACTERISTICS**

<i>College</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Size</i>	<i>Student Ethnic and Racial Mix</i>	<i>Transfer Rate</i>
Standard College	Large midwestern city	60 years	16,500	<u>46% non-white:</u> 12% African American 23% Hispanic 11% Asian	28%
Border College	Medium-sized southwestern city	12 years	6,600	<u>64% non-white:</u> 6% African American 57% Hispanic 1% Asian	41%
City College	Large western city	30 years	27,700	<u>69% non-white:</u> 8% African American 18% Hispanic 43% Asian	26%

students, and racial/ethnic mix. Table 1 displays a summary of pertinent characteristics of the three community colleges examined in this paper.

We recruited ethnographers with advanced training in sociology, education, or anthropology locally at each site. They conducted field work on a half-time basis during the academic years 1994–1995 and 1995–1996, resulting in approximately 500 hours of field work per institution. As project directors, we provided them with general guidelines, including a series of interview and observational protocols and guiding research questions. However, they also followed leads peculiar to their own institutions. The research protocol followed a grounded theory format (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in that research questions evolved and were adjusted according to close and continuous analysis of the data. The project directors developed the overarching research protocol, developed individual interview templates, monitored and coordinated the field work of the ethnographers with regular written and spoken feedback to each ethnographer, held frequent face-to-face research team meetings, conducted intensive site visits, and analyzed the data. The ethnographers collected data from many sources and used a variety of techniques, including formal and informal interviews of students, faculty, staff, and administrators; observations of students in both formal (classroom) and informal (e.g., cafeteria, library) settings; observations of faculty in both formal (classroom) and informal (social) settings; and ob-



servations of staff and administrators in formal settings (staff meetings). The ethnographers also attended an array of institution-wide events, such as freshman orientation, cultural festivals, and college recruitment events. They collected a wide variety of historical and archival documents, including student newspapers, course catalogs, mission statements, syllabi, and accreditation reports. In addition, institutional research officers in each college provided a variety of quantitative data reports.

Over 2,000 data elements (interviews, observations, and documents) have been gathered from the community colleges and have been analyzed using HyperResearch (1991), a content analysis program for qualitative researchers. After developing a coding scheme based on what was learned in the field and gleaned from the literature, the projects directors conducted individual and cross-institutional analyses.

From these data emerge the portraits of three community colleges—here called Standard College, Border College, and City College. These colleges were chosen to highlight the ways in which differences in ideology are related to markedly different cultural practices—“strategies of action”—in maintaining the transfer function. For each, we describe the institution’s unique ideology of education. We then trace the influence of this ideology on the institutional culture as embodied by its approach to transfer. None of these institutions is monolithic in its approach to education. Surely not every student, faculty member, and administrator fully embraces the dominant ideology at their institution, nor did we find complete acceptance of the multitude of practices and policies flowing from that ideology. Yet by identifying the dominant and, in some cases, competing ideologies guiding each institution’s educational practices, we can begin to trace how ideologies played out in institutional culture and in the meanings that students, faculty, and administrators assigned to those ideologies.

### **STANDARD COLLEGE: PROVIDING AN OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED**

Standard College displays a remarkably consistent ideology of the community college’s role in students’ attempts to become upwardly mobile. Here, students are responsible for their own success; and the college, strongly oriented toward high academic standards, exists to provide an opportunity to succeed. Administrators, faculty, and even students widely share this belief system. Moreover, Standard has historically been focused on an academic mission and clings fiercely to its transfer-oriented objectives despite significant pressure from external forces to diversify both its curriculum and its mission.

Standard is in a large midwestern city which has many two-year institutions in its city-wide community college system. Standard, among the oldest of these colleges, has been housed in an old high school for much of its

60-year history but recently moved to a sparkling new facility, complete with a six-story, glass-covered library unofficially called the “Pyramid of Learning.” It attracts students who are interested in a high-standards, transfer-oriented institutional culture.

While Standard is within the city limits, its campus is in a working- and lower-middle class neighborhood, surrounded by small but well-kept houses. This setting gives it a suburban rather than an urban feeling. The college is rather small for an urban community college, enrolling 16,500 students, about 50% of whom are non-white. Hispanics, the largest minority group, constitute about 23% of the student population. (See Table 1.)

Standard’s institutional history and resulting mission figure prominently in its commitment to a traditional academic mission. Founded in 1934 as one of three junior colleges, Standard is under consistent pressure from the system’s governing board to become more comprehensive in its course offerings and degree programs. The college has responded by developing some continuing education and vocational/technical programs. However, these programs are physically segregated in the old high school facility, while the academic programs are housed in the new facility. In this and many other ways, the college sends a clear signal that its primary purpose is to provide traditional, high-quality, transfer-oriented academic programs. The mission statement is quite explicit: “Our priority is the college credit program, but [Standard] also offers a variety of educational and cultural programs to meet the needs of its community.” Thus, while the college has responded to external pressure to become a more comprehensive community college, it nevertheless asserts the primacy of its historic academic mission.

As one faculty member observed, “I think [Standard] more than any of the other colleges, still sees [itself] as a school which is geared toward transfer.” Standard’s people refer, only half in jest, to Standard as “The Harvard of the Community Colleges.” According to our data, those at Standard perceive their ideology as opposed to that of the city-wide system. The faculty is mature and stable, many of them graduates of doctoral programs offered by elite four-year universities in the area. One faculty member hired in the early sixties perceptively noted: “You hire all these people who understand a university, and they vaguely understand that a junior college is the first two years of college.”

This ideology affects institutional culture in many ways. First, it is manifested in the institution’s formal academic policies. In general, Standard’s approach to providing a quality education does not include much flexibility. In fact, both faculty and administrators consistently equate strict adherence to rules with high standards and quality education. When we interviewed Standard’s president, he responded to a question about the institution’s commitment to high standards by comparing Standard to other community colleges:

Now there's a couple of colleges that enroll twenty percent of their students in late registration. That means you forfeit the first week of school. What right do you have to do that? . . . Where's academic standards? Out the window. . . [At Standard], the kid can go back home and say "Gee they wouldn't let me in. The class had already met." That's exactly what I want them to say.

This approach captures how ideology (underlying beliefs) is reflected in concrete institutional practices (culture). Late registration is a common problem at most community colleges, dealt with in a variety of ways. However, Standard's method for handling late registration reflects its ideology about the purposes of education, as articulated by its president, and the role of his community college in providing it.

Faculty members, too, seem to equate high standards with some degree of inflexibility, a fact which many Standard students view positively. One student described her English professor: "She has rules, but I like that because you learn. You have to do it her way, but you learn." Another student asserted that the Standard faculty "push you. . . I think most teachers want you to be your best."

Standard's approach to education is based on an individualistic ideology, in which education is what happens in the classroom only, and the college is viewed as a level playing field in which all students are allotted an equal chance at success. Although faculty members are expected to keep office hours consistently—and do—the emphasis is on providing academic assistance only. They believe that accommodating cultural or economic issues that might impact students' academic performance will open a Pandora's box of endless exceptions and special cases, resulting in lowered standards for academic performance that would be a disservice to all students.

Because of this ideology, faculty consistently value academic work and communicate to their students that it takes priority over all other obligations. They make relatively little effort to accommodate other demands on students' lives. One faculty member at Standard reported listening to one student describe his struggle to combine academic work with his other responsibilities as a father and an employee. This teacher had sympathetically but firmly advised the student: "You have to sacrifice weekends, children, wife, family . . ." Such exhortations by faculty and administrators are common at this institution. They illustrate the underlying standards-based ideology that drives both formal and informal institutional practice.

The level of commitment expected of students, when coupled with the external demands on their time, inevitably leads to a certain amount of failure, withdrawal, or disengagement—common phenomena at most urban community colleges. What sets Standard College apart, however, is that its ideology frames its interpretation of this failure. While faculty and ad-

ministrators clearly perceive students' lives as complicated, they nevertheless explain failure by personal, rather than structural, causes. For instance, one faculty member commented: "Although there are many variables that affect academic performance, the fact is that most students who earn poor grades just do not study enough." Another faculty member, asked in an interview how she responds to requests for extensions or other modifications of class requirements, said, "I don't. If they're in the class, then they have to do the work." Here, students—particularly their motivation and their resourcefulness—are explicitly held responsible for their performance in college. Other factors, such as the quality of teaching, financial difficulties, or previous poor schooling, do not enter the equation.

Standard's expectation-based, individualistic ideology results in an approach to transfer that depends on student initiative. Students who do well academically are expected to transfer; perhaps as a result of this assumption, students receive little explicit counseling about how to adapt to a four-year institution. As one counselor asserts, students are "going to survive [transfer] because they're getting a good background here. They're getting a quality education." Successful transfer, then, is seen to depend primarily on Standard's high academic standards, which result in strong academic performance.

Reflecting this emphasis on the academic and curricular and aspects of the transfer process, Standard provides relatively few support services for students intending to transfer. The "nuts and bolts" of transfer are not perceived as particularly important. For example, while it is clearly committed to its emphasis on academic programs leading to transfer, Standard College does not have a transfer center. Instead, students interested in transfer are directed to the general counseling office where counselors provide transfer information. Moreover, students report that they generally find out about transfer by chance, through their own research, or from other students; faculty do not tell students about transfer counseling. One of our ethnographers reported on a conversation with a Standard student about transfer:

I asked if he knows which classes he is taking now will count for transfer to these schools. He says he doesn't know. He hasn't met with the advisors yet. I ask if he was aware that they existed, and he said, "I am now." But he hadn't heard about them before [this interview]. I asked him how he knew which classes to take to fulfill the requirements of his degree and he said he "looked in the catalogue."

As this student's description of gathering information about transfer shows, the success of transfer at Standard depends primarily on a student's ability and desire to track down the information he or she will need to gain admission into a four-year institution. Again, these cultural practices are

consistent with an overarching ideology which emphasizes student initiative and responsibility. While Standard certainly recognizes barriers to transfer, it focuses primarily on logistical barrier. Transfer counseling, when it occurs, consists of helping students to fill out applications and financial aid forms. Little discussion regarding the more symbolic, less tangible aspects of transfer occurs, such as a student's changing level of self-esteem, identity, or life dreams.

### **BORDER COLLEGE: STUDENT-CENTERED MULTICULTURALISM**

Like Standard, Border College is characterized by a unified ideology and mission, yet it is very different from Standard. Border couples a much more holistic approach to education in general and students in particular with a firm commitment to multiculturalism. These dual values comprise the defining elements of Border's ideology, shaping its culture and how it approaches transfer. In contrast to Standard College, Border College actively works to embrace and accommodate all aspects of students' lives, including work, family, and issues of racial and ethnic identity. It displays a deeply held sense of responsibility for student well-being that extends from high-level administrators to faculty to support staff.

Border College is young compared to most community colleges. Founded in 1985 as a response to grass-roots political action by the Mexican-American population in its medium-sized city, Border enrolls fewer than 7,000 students. As the newest of three district community colleges, Border serves a predominantly Mexican-American population from the city, as well as Anglo students from surrounding counties.

The college's ideology has remained clear and consistent since its founding; indeed, nearly all of the original "core faculty" are still teaching at the college, although presidents have changed frequently. Faculty and staff speak with great fervor about Border's mission to serve the poor and undereducated Mexican-American population of the city. One faculty member explained:

People aren't here just for a job. I think a lot of times it's because a lot of the people that work here come from the same area of town. If you look who's around here—the counselors . . . the Vice President—these are people who grew up in this area. I come from the west side, another staff member comes from the west side. We have an affiliation to this area. When we talk to a student, "Hey, that's my neighbor, that's my sister, that's somebody I grew up with."

As a result of the faculty's personal commitment and connection, Border's ideology results in a culture built upon student needs. As one counselor remembers, "We didn't create a structure and then say, 'Okay, what we're

going to do is fit the students into this structure that was created.' No. When we started [Border College], I think that we let the students develop the structure." Remarkably, this ideology has survived unusual administrative instability; it has had seven presidents in the past decade. That the nurturing, collective ideology of Border persists suggests that it is held widely across categories of people and is bottom-up, rather than top-down. One faculty member described the college's response to the revolving-door presidency in this way:

We've had 5-6 administrators in the last eight years and every one of them has been different. . . . The administration might change; but I think, at the basic level, people that are providing the service are still very much in tune with the students. . . . If a president feels that we're going to pursue economic development right now, that's fine; we can go ahead and do that. But that doesn't mean that we're going to pursue economic development at the expense of the students. And I think that is one thing we have never lost sight of. It is the commitment to the student.

The student-centered ideology that distinguishes Border College is closely related to another strongly held value: namely, a firm belief in the importance of recognizing and honoring students' racial and ethnic identities. Faculty and administrators frequently discuss negative racial and ethnic stereotypes explicitly with their students, both in and outside of the classroom. Indeed, developing an understanding both of one's cultural heritage and also of the ways this heritage is devalued within the dominant American culture is considered a critical part of the educational process at this college. As one long-time Border administrator asserts, "You have to know who you are and feel comfortable with that before you can truly move on to do other types of things. I truly believe that you have to look at your background . . . and have an understanding of what you want to do in the long run." Many faculty members speak of nourishing a critical consciousness for their students that allows them to understand social inequity and use this knowledge to their advantage. One states: "It is very important to promote an awareness of their culture among students. This gives [students] a better understanding of who they are and how they are related to the bigger picture and how they could use this knowledge to help them succeed."

This student-focused, ethnocentric ideology emerges in formal elements of Border's culture, most notably in curriculum structure, pedagogy, and the type and intensity of counseling services. In contrast to the other two colleges described in this paper, Border is self-consciously proactive in its attempt to empower students and develop their sense of educational possibility. In particular, both faculty and administrators see the array of difficulties impeding social mobility for poor and minority students as integral to developing students' potential. As a result these issues are addressed ex-

plicity in and outside of the classroom. A Border administrator describes mobility as a process of changing cultures: "The student population that we are dealing with is carrying with them cultural baggage. They have one foot planted in tradition and the other foot is in the other culture . . . I want them to feel comfortable with that and bring them [family members] on campus." The college sponsors many Mexican American cultural events, health screenings, and the frequent speaking of Spanish both in and outside of the classroom as part of its deliberate policy of breaking down barriers between students' home culture and the culture of the school.

The college's ideology also affects its approach to transfer. It frames transfer as a complex process that encompasses the logistical elements of moving between colleges but also includes psychosocial aspects. Faculty, staff, and administrators pay particular attention to the issues of self-image, self-esteem, and changing relationships with family members that may arise from social mobility. One administrator speaks of the transfer process in this way: "I'm trying to establish some kind of cultural connection so that the students, no matter if they are African American, White, or Mexican, can feel proud about their culture whatever that is. Two of the key questions you have to address are: 'Where am I headed?' and 'Why am I headed that way?'"

Border vigorously promotes transfer, actively encouraging students to think past the two-year degree. While most community colleges host "transfer days" during which representatives from four-year institutions come to speak with interested community college students, Border College has designated transfer counselors who manage an extensive and intensive transfer orientation. It sponsors "Education Express," a series of full-day field trips to area colleges. The college provides transportation, overnight facilities when needed, and opportunities for students to meet and talk with four-year students and faculty. Border considers this activity critical because, in the words of one counselor, "it allows the student[s] to see themselves at the university, to see themselves in that context."

In fact, at Border College, transfer is framed as both a political and educational response to decades of discrimination against Mexican Americans which left them in low-paying, low-skilled jobs. Indeed, although the city-wide community college system has urged Border to become more vocational, its faculty and staff have resisted this pressure, siding instead with the Mexican American community's desire to obtain higher-paying, higher-skilled employment for their children. "I think," said one of Border's original faculty members, "that the faculty sought more for our students. Not that vocational programs aren't good . . . [but] our faculty saw more potential in them than simply going into a two-year program, than simply providing them with the skills needed to go into a work environment."

Border's ideological commitment to approaching education in a holistic, student-centered manner, when combined with a mission to improve the life chances of its Mexican American students, has resulted in a collegiate culture that is nurturing, proactive, and intensely focused on transfer as an explicit means of subverting the ethnically stratified educational and economic structure of the city. Here, transfer is symbolic of something much larger than two-plus-two agreements.

### CITY COLLEGE: AN INTRICATE WEB OF SUPPORT

The remarkable top-to-bottom consistency of ideology seen in both Standard and Border Colleges is quite likely an anomaly. Ideology and culture are seldom monolithic. It is far more likely for an institution to have internal factions that emphasize or contest different aspects of its culture (Swidler, 1986). This phenomenon is particularly apparent at City College, which most closely approximates the "comprehensive community college" model that has emerged across the nation in the last twenty-five years. In fact, this college's programmatic approach to the educational experience is the direct result of competing ideologies that exist under the umbrella of large, comprehensive community colleges. Unlike the other two colleges described above, City College does not display a unifying culture; rather, it is comprised of multiple ideologies that result in various subcultures and a relatively piecemeal approach to education. This relatively high level of decentralization has led to an array of services and programs which have developed as different groups within the college attempt to play out their ideological vision of education through specific elements of institutional culture. As a result, there are many opportunities for students to "connect" to the colleges in meaningful ways.

This degree of relative disorganization is due in part to the extraordinary diversity which characterizes this type of institution. Like many large comprehensive community colleges, City College is in many ways defined by its diversity. City College enrolls over 30,000 students in its credit division alone, and from 30,000–50,000 noncredit students. Seventy percent of the student population have minority status, many of them immigrants from Mexico, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Over half of the college's faculty of 1,600 are women; 35% are nonwhite. Fifty-eight percent of its 38 administrators are minority, including the college's chancellor.

City College's curriculum is also diverse, a fact which sets this type of college apart from the other two colleges described in this paper. In contrast to the more traditional academically oriented Standard and Border, City College offers a broad-ranging curriculum which includes transfer-oriented courses in the liberal arts but also a plethora of technical/voca-



tional courses of study leading to a terminal associate's degree, and relatively narrowly focused job training and retraining programs.

At City College, with its extreme diversity of students and curriculum, no single distinct pathway leads students from entrance to transfer. Rather, faculty and administrators perceive a seemingly endless array of avenues which may lead to success. However, they consistently see successful travel on these pathways as dependent upon a certain measure of student initiative which, when combined with the appropriate support service, will guide the student toward his or her idea of "success." An administrator at City College, asked about why students succeed, articulated this view:

I think we have, by and large, a very dedicated and good teaching faculty here. I think we have counselors that really care about their students, and I think we have a diversity of counselors, particularly in the student services that help develop special programs like the African American Achievement, the African American Retention, Latino Retention, Latino Service Center, the Re-Entry Program for women, the Women's Center . . . . There's a whole menu of services. . . . [But] I think by and large our students are really persistent. They succeed oftentimes in spite of us, not because of us. . . . I think anybody who tells you that they're doing all this stuff—they have a false sense of importance.

In his description of the college, this administrator lists the necessary college-based ingredients for student success: teachers, lots of support services, and supportive counselors. But he qualifies this "whole menu of services." If effective at all, it succeeds only because "our students are really persistent." In this way, he describes an ideology and its resulting set of cultural practices which presume that a combination of student initiative and a vast array of student support programs will lead to student success.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the significant bureaucracy present at large comprehensive institutions like this one, this type of community college can provide ways for faculty, administrators, and support staff to take an entrepreneurial approach to their work. The plethora of student programs and services, both academic and support-oriented, currently sponsored by City College result from the institution's culture. For example, the college makes a consistent, significant financial commitment to student support services by employing over 60 full-time counselors—at least five times the number employed by other institutions of similar size in our study. Moreover, it provides resources for a large number of student-led activities and organizations. Students savvy enough to seek them out (or lucky enough to stumble upon them) encounter "pockets of connection" that arise from the efforts of individual faculty, for example, to create drama groups, to sponsor student literary magazines and poetry "slams," as well as from the formally organized academic and support programs.

The degree to which individual faculty and administrators convey a sense of responsibility for student success varies enormously at this institution; again, their comments do not reflect a consistent ideology, except insofar as they embrace the program-oriented approach to education offered by City College. At one end of the continuum are individuals like a Filipino student counselor, who believes that everyone at the college has a responsibility to “love them [students], nurture them, cultivate them, educate them.” At the other end of the continuum is the rather hands-off approach taken by this administrator:

I clear the path. I don't try to eliminate any of their responsibilities, but I do try to make it clear what their responsibilities are. Matriculation is a partnership between the college and the student. It's an equal partnership. If we can ensure that we're doing everything we can to make information available to students, to make staff available, and to give them all the information, then it's their responsibility to make some decisions. . . . I constantly work with counseling, admissions and records, testing, to do just that—to improve this process and find whatever activities we can to support students in their decision-making. [But] ultimately it is their decision.

This administrator frames her role as one of removing barriers so that students can “make some decisions.” The extensive network of support services helps ensure that students have access to relevant information. Therefore, while “taking care” of students is not her personal responsibility, she can nevertheless rest assured that someone else—those in support services in particular—is attending to student needs. This belief arises not only from the college's consistent investment in an extensive network of support services but also from the strongly held ideology that support services are an integral part of the college's responsibility to its students.

How do the ideology and culture of an institution like City College play out in its approach to transfer? As might be expected, the college has developed a network of programs and workshops to address the varying needs of prospective transfer students. These include but are not limited to:

1. The Transfer Center, which offers counseling, workshops, drop-in sessions with university representatives, references, applications and other informational materials, and sets up college fairs (e.g., Black College Day or Transfer Day).
2. The Student Outreach Services program at State University (pseudonym), which sends four student volunteers into classrooms to speak to students about transfer and to answer basic questions, offers drop-in hours, and does telephone follow-up.
3. The Educational Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) office for low-income students. This office provides a more accessible form of counseling to students by assigning students an individual counselor, whom the student must see at least once a semester.

4. A writing project which offers disadvantaged students peer tutoring on their writing, extra counseling services with one counselor, help in writing personal essays for applications, and a field trip to State University to see what the university is like.

5. The Counseling Department, which offers counseling to develop educational plans and, depending on the counselor, more proactive attempts to encourage transfer.

6. The Articulation Office, which works with four-year colleges and universities to develop articulation agreements for specific majors and for course-to-course equivalency.

This array of services reflects a significant financial commitment to transfer, as well as the assumption of its underlying ideology: Support services are the way to achieve successful transfer. In addition, the college's approach suggests that transfer is a complicated process with a myriad of course requirements and application procedures that students must master to successfully transfer. Although City, unlike Border, does not directly encourage students to address the symbolic, less tangible aspects of the transfer process, its extensive network of counselors does provide students with opportunities to do so if they desire. Moreover, in a parallel to City's programmatic, menu-driven approach to serving students' needs, its approach to transfer combines responsibility for informing students about possible choices with the belief that students themselves should drive the transfer experience.

A transfer counselor discusses transfer within the context of how students decide which four-year institution they would like to attend. City College is close to a rich network of large, public four-year universities and many private institutions, both large and small. However, most of the students that transfer from City attend State, a nearby public university which, while respectable, is significantly less selective and prestigious than many other area colleges and universities. The counselor says:

There's nothing wrong with [State]. I have a lot of friends at [State] and I think they do a great job with what they have to work with. My thing is not so much [State]. It's a matter of how do you choose where you want to go and do you know all your choices? Our job is to basically show you the entire menu before you order. You might love cheeseburgers, and I say, "Well, just consider this other thing on the menu—and if you go back to ordering cheeseburgers, God bless you. Enjoy your cheeseburger." But we didn't do our job if we just tell people that cheeseburgers are the only thing on the menu.

In the context of the service-oriented approach to addressing students' transfer needs, this counselor's statement reveals an ideology that views student autonomy as primary but nevertheless sees institutional support as necessary in the transfer process. Although the institution has not created a

seamless web of services, enough students are able to find their way into a “pocket of connection” that transfer becomes possible for many.

### DISCUSSION: CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY IN THE TRANSFER PROCESS

Each of the three colleges described in this paper define and address transfer in strikingly different ways. As Swidler (1986) points out, organizations “may share common aspirations, while remaining profoundly different in the way their culture organizes their overall behavior” (p. 275). As this analysis shows, these three colleges illustrate her point. All three value the transfer function, but for different reasons, as determined by their ideologies. As a result, the cultural aspects of each college—in this instance, the formal and informal ways in which they approach the transfer function—reflect their underlying ideologies. Indeed, the ways in which education in general, and transfer in particular, are framed by ideology and acted upon by culture vary significantly among the three institutions. Moreover, these institutions provide compelling examples of the ways in which ideology as an explicit belief system shapes the cultural practices of institutions functioning in unsettled periods. During such times, individuals or organizations use ideology to responsively establish “new styles or strategies of action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 276).

Standard and Border colleges share an important similarity in that they both display clearly dominant and widely shared ideologies. While the ideologies themselves are in many ways antithetical to one another, the consistency with which they enact their ideologies in both their everyday practices and formal rules is strikingly similar. For example, Standard College and Border College have both been able to maintain an emphasis on academically oriented curricula and transfer despite strong pressure (internal or external) to become more comprehensive or vocationalized. Although Standard’s school district has forced it to offer a more comprehensive curriculum, it has physically segregated nonacademic programs in a separate (and inferior) building, thereby sending a strong message about the primacy of its academic mission. Similarly, Border College has fiercely protected its transfer-oriented curriculum and student services department, despite the instability caused by its “revolving door” presidency and increasingly powerful district and state mandates.

Standard has achieved its ideological consistency in a top-down fashion through the vision of a longstanding president, while Border’s mission remains in place as a result of the dedication of rank-and-file faculty, staff, and administrators. The different methods through which each has maintained its commitment to transfer may result in part from each institution’s age. Little more than a decade old, Border College has not only been able to retain most of its founding faculty, administrators, and staff but also to

help them avoid the burn-out and fatigue that so often characterize employees of large public K-12 or postsecondary educational institutions. Because a relatively large number of individuals remain fiercely committed to the college and its mission, it can maintain its ideological consistency through informal mechanisms.

In contrast, Standard College is over 60 years old. Few if any founding members of the college remain, nor is its culture infused with the level of political zeal that characterizes Border. Rather, Standard has developed strong, consistent, formal mechanisms to protect its institutional culture and the ideological consistency that drives it. At Standard, the president's leadership is critical to maintaining its adherence to the transfer mission. Yet as these examples show, both colleges have maintained their dominant ideologies despite consistent pressure to become more vocational.

In some respects, the function of ideology and culture is most complex at City College. This institution does not display a dominant ideology, except for its approach to education in a programmatic rather than holistic manner, resulting in a complex set of services designed to meet the needs of most students. In this way and in many others, City College may serve as an important model. Its broad-ranging, comprehensive mission and the lack of a dominant ideology is most likely the rule rather than the exception among community colleges. Hence, the process of identifying the ideology or ideologies that drive institutional practice requires particular attention to the plethora of activities in which it engages and to the meanings assigned them by various members of the college community.

City College's relatively less organized approach to education both reflects and supports the different subcultures that exist within this college. Yet this decentralization and the conflict which sometimes emerges have resulted in an array of services and programs which develop as different factions within the college attempt to play out their vision of education, resulting in many opportunities for students to "connect" to these colleges in meaningful ways. The resulting programs and services are the mechanism by which transfer-oriented students find their way through the maze of articulation agreements, application deadlines, and financial aid forms. City College's dedication of significant resources for transfer-oriented services, along with a relatively high level of faculty and administrator autonomy, have fostered its ability to maintain a focus on transfer while pursuing other educational goals as well.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community colleges exist as contested terrain. Factions both within this sector of public education and outside of it debate the purpose and, in some cases, even the existence of these institutions. In particular, community col-

leges operate in a context of multiple pressures to move toward a more comprehensive mission. This focus reduces the importance of transfer as a legitimate institutional goal. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of poor, working-class, and minority students continue to enroll in these colleges. Many of these students see the community college as their first step toward a bachelor's degree. For better or worse, community colleges continue to stand at the crossroads of social and educational mobility in American society. As a result, it is critically important to explore how these institutions construct and enact policies and procedures that affect the life chances of students who attend them.

Approaches to transfer vary significantly among community colleges, influenced in part by the unique ideological profile and set of institutional cultures that define and guide both formal and informal institutional practices. Indeed, the case studies provided in this paper suggest that a commitment to transfer can be nourished at both large and small community colleges, and by relative newcomers as well as by institutions that are over 60 years old.

This paper also suggests the particular importance of examining how transfer is defined and understood within individual community colleges. While scholars generally agree that transfer can be a difficult process (e.g., Olivas, 1979; Turner, 1992; Dougherty, 1987; Rendon & Garza, 1996), transfer is an under-theorized phenomenon. Much of the research on transfer describes bureaucratic or structural elements of either the community college, the receiving institution, or the articulation between the two sectors (e.g., Turner, 1992; Nora, 1987, 1990). Other researchers examine the effect of various background characteristics—such as prior schooling, race, and gender—on the likelihood of transfer (Lee & Frank, 1990). Such studies most often recommend improving the transfer process by clarifying institutional policies and procedures, creating information and support networks for students, or creating better articulation agreements.

While these steps are all important in facilitating transfer, they suggest a procedural orientation which conceals the symbolic and cultural aspects of the transfer process. This paper suggests that transfer can be an extraordinarily complex process through which a student must negotiate the specific culture and ideology of a community college if he or she is to achieve educational mobility via transfer (London & Shaw, 1996). Hence, although the procedural aspects of the transfer process are important, exploration must continue into its symbolic nature—that is, its meaning in the culture and ideology of the community college itself, as well as in the life of the student, his or her family and friends, and the educational structure of this society. By conducting in-depth, comparative analyses of community colleges using extensive qualitative data, this study reveals the enormous complexity of community colleges as sites of ideology and culture, and argues for con-

tinued exploration of the ways in which they can maintain a commitment to providing the opportunity for real educational mobility via transfer.

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