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COMMUNITY COLLEGE TEACHING

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This chapter will provide educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers with understandings about community colleges, community college teaching, and community college faculty. To date, popular understandings of community colleges verge on the obsolete, not relevant to the actual behaviors and actions of these institutions. Also, within the scholarly domains, teaching in community colleges is either neglected or poorly conceptualized and thus not well understood. Finally, community college faculty until recently have been conflated with university faculty in the research literature or with high school teachers in the popular press. In order to illuminate the topic of community college teaching, I address community colleges as distinct institutions with specific identities and missions that separate them from other higher education institutions and from their past identities held in the public mind and in much of the scholarly literature. What then follows is a conception of community college faculty based upon recent research. Finally, community college teaching is then explained within the context of the institution and the faculty. I begin this chapter with a discussion of three key works on community college teaching and I develop my argument from the grounding of these three works.

Literacy in the Open-Access College (Richardson, Fisk, & Okun, 1983), The Academic Crisis of the Community College (McGrath & Spear, 1991), and Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges (Grubb, 1999) are the decades’ separated touchstones for framing a scholarly view of community college teaching over the past 20 years. These works have provided a line of argument about not only teaching, but also the community college and its institutional identity. These works serve as watershed markers for framing the institution and its faculty, but by the turn of the 21st century and up to the present, these works have become historical documents suggesting a perspective that no longer applies in full to community colleges.

Richardson, Fisk, and Okun (1983) recognize the changing and expanding student populations that inhabited the community college in the 1970s, basing their work on a field study of a community college in 1979. These student populations shaped both community college curriculum and instruction given that large numbers of students were not as academically prepared for college work as their predecessors. A significant portion of this population would today be classified as nontraditional and increasingly minority in identity status. Although Richardson et al. do not address the issue of minority students overtly, there is an implied indication that cultural differences are not adequately recognized by the community college under investigation. In the classroom, however, faculty have to alter their assumptions about both students and what constitutes the required curriculum. It is here that remediation has taken root for Richardson et al., not in special classes for weak academic performers, but in the mainstay of college
The Community College as a Distinctive Institution: Mission and Identity

Faculty at community colleges are customarily understood from an institutional perspective that is based upon traditional conceptions of the community college as a component of a tiered educational system (high school, community college, 4-year college, university). This conception places the community college either in the role of a junior college or a training school. This traditional conception highlights academic preparation, skills development, and sequential learning, and justifies the institution’s worth through proxies such as degree attainment, job placement, and percentages of students who transfer to a 4-year college or university.

Perhaps the predominant feature of this conception is its reliance upon curriculum to define the community college as a “comprehensive educational institution” with a wide array of offerings to meet the diverse needs of students (Cohen & Braver, 2003). This view suggests that the community college has a variety of educational functions, including training for jobs, preparation for university studies, community service, and remediation of academic deficiencies (Cross, 1985; J. Levin, 2007). This curricular orientation has been an additive one that enlarges the function of community colleges to include baccalaureate degrees, service learning, training for business and industry, and basic skills development (Dougherty & Baia, 2000; Floyd, Skolnik, & Walker, 2004; J. Levin, 2001; Rouche, Ely, & Rouche, 2001). The prevailing judgment is that this multiplex of curricula is highly functional (Bailey & Morest, 2004).

The implications for faculty and especially for community college teaching, however, are seldom articulated and certainly not investigated in research. The closest the scholarship on community colleges moves to these implications is the work on “the learning college” where there is at least acknowledgment of the new student populations and by implication the variety of programs offered for these new populations (Tagg, 2003). But there is little acknowledgment that with a plethora of programs and its diverse curricular orientation the community college and its faculty face staggering dilemmas which include the development, management, and governance of curricula, the evaluation and improvement of instruction, and faculty workloads and workload equity, among other matters.

There are other ways of viewing and understanding the community college which are distinct from the traditional conception. For one of these, I have used the term New World College (J. Levin, 2007), which is based upon behaviors and actions of community colleges that place them in a globalized and competitive economy. These institutions are components of the new liberalized world of economic global competition and decidedly distinct from their old world, or European generated universities, even those found in former European colonies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. In such an
environment, community colleges have decidedly multiple functions and institutional identities that align them with adroit businesses, in a condition that Gee and others call “fast capitalism” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). With multiple purposes that go beyond schooling or a junior college role, community colleges combine characteristics of social services agencies, training arm of business and industry, adult education center, rehabilitation center (think of prison education), and community developer among other roles. Furthermore, the expansion of mission that has led to the community college baccalaureate degree, the postbaccalaureate credential, and National Science Foundation research agent reshapes the junior college and training school beyond recognition. Colleges now have an exceedingly broad range of courses and programs, well beyond the scope anticipated before the 1980s, to include at one end educational services for the severely mentally and physically impaired and at the other partnerships with universities to offer master’s degrees on campus.

From this perspective, faculty are a new economy labor force. First, faculty are increasingly part time, contingent, rising from 41% of the total of all faculty in 1973 to 55% at the end of the 1970s and up to 60% by 1986 (Cohen & Brawer, 1989). By 2006, part-time faculty comprised 67% of all faculty in community colleges (J. Levin, 2007). Second, faculty are managed, both by college administrators and collective agreements, and furthermore consistent with recent scholarship on business and industry they are self-managed, aligned with a corporate ethos (Casey, 1995; Deem, 1998; J. Levin, 2007; Rhoades, 1998; Vallas, 1993). They are attached and dependent upon technology from computers for course preparation to e-mail for communication with students to online teaching support systems such as Blackboard (J. Levin et al., 2006). Additionally, a sizable portion of their information is controlled through their use of information technology. More significantly, their work is structured by technology (J. Levin et al., 2006), much the same as industrial workers and placing them in a “risk society” (Smith, 2001). Third, faculty work, teaching, is subject to the vagaries of economic competition, largely because the community college is funded one way or another by student enrollments, and faculty serve as the floor salespeople of course and programs that attract or repel students and thus finances for the institution. There is, thus, competition for students within the institution and across institutions, from both the public and the private sectors. There is also competition for the resources of those who could be or might be students from employers. The colleges must therefore compete to keep students from becoming employees and to entice nonstudents to become students. These conditions for faculty affect approaches to and practices of instruction.

Set beside these limiting and structuring conditions for faculty work and faculty identity are an assumed and often acclaimed condition of relative autonomy as well as increased authority for faculty in the directing of their institutions. The faculty role in institutional governance is arguably more advanced today than it was 20 years ago when the institution was viewed as highly bureaucratic and sometimes authoritarian (Birnbaum, 1988; Clark, 1987; Kater & Levin, 2005; White, 1998). Furthermore, there are indications that the proliferating use of electronic technologies in community colleges provides opportunities for faculty autonomy. But these assumptions and claims are not necessarily reflective of actual practice.

Faculty themselves reflect these competing conditions and considerably different judgments of faculty as autonomous agents or “worker bees,” and as well reflects the almost opposite views by faculty of their institutions (J. S. Levin, 2006). On the one hand, faculty view themselves as engaged in instruction and in program decisions; on the other hand, faculty perceive their influence as marginal in larger institutional decisions.

Recent Research on Community College Faculty and Teaching

Recent research that addresses faculty in community colleges (Burton, 2007; J. Levin et al., 2006) presents faculty from an organizational culture perspective in a similar vein as McGrath and Spear (1991) and other earlier scholars (London, 1978; Seidman, 1985) and as a labor force, distinctly different from previous scholarship which ignored this economic and social perspective. Community college faculty culture is closely tied to institutional mission, with emphasis upon open access, at least to entry to the institution, and upon teaching or student learning. Although Grubb (1999) and others indicate that the teaching focus of community college is not rationalized and validated, the behaviors of faculty do revolve around community college students and the teaching of students (J. Levin, 2001). Burton (2007) found that community college faculty had adopted and internalized the student-focused mission of her study college, and that their membership in the organization dictated conformity to the expectations and norms of the institution. Burton connects this integrative tendency to the cultural theoretical perspective of Martin and Meyerson where organizational members function in an environment of internal consistency, organizational consensus, and the denial of ambiguity (Martin & Meyerson, 1988). This culture arises from an institutional emphasis on teaching a wide range of students who present considerable challenge to faculty because of students’ varying levels of academic preparation and abilities. Faculty adapt teaching styles to this population and often individualize assignments. They are mindful of the level of rigor in their instruction and act to ensure that all students are able to complete their courses.

Community college faculty are connected to their program areas and to their institution, not on academic or intellectual grounds, but rather on practical and ideological ones. Burton (2007) found that faculty can be differentiated
by program, a finding not unlike that suggested in Levin et al. (2006). These differences are in the work areas of service and scholarship and not teaching. Faculty agree on the priorities of their work within programs, not necessarily across programs. Programs, then, become subcultures where consensus on nonteaching matters is evident. Yet, this program affiliation is not academic in nature nor is it theoretically grounded but rather practical. Furthermore, because of their close alignment with their understanding of institutional mission, faculty expressed strong sense of institutional loyalty (Burton, 2007).

Burton’s work, however, addresses only full-time faculty and the differences in work and in perceptions between full-time faculty and several categories of part-time faculty are substantial (J. Levin et al., 2006; Wagoner, 2004). Levin et al. (2006) note that there are segments of part-time faculty who do not aspire to full-time status at a community college, primarily because they have full-time employment elsewhere; they also indicate that there are large numbers of part-time faculty who are economically dependent upon community college employment. While organizational culture may be a critical factor for explaining the work and identity of full-time faculty, it is more than likely that an economic perspective is central to the understanding of part-time faculty. If the community college is viewed not so much from its traditional conception of a junior college but rather as a multipurpose institution, then part-time faculty are central, not peripheral, to the community college enterprise, particularly if much of that enterprise is economically oriented. Whether to generate revenue through student enrollments or by meeting the expressed needs of business and industry. Such centrality is based upon rationales of efficiency and effectiveness of institutional operations. With limited state funding, much less than 4-year colleges and universities, community colleges must operate more like a globalized business, competing for students based upon price. Part-time faculty, who serve as an inexpensive source of labor, are an economic necessity and they function to provide colleges with needed flexibility in reducing and expanding their labor force without making long-term commitments (J. Levin, 2001, 2007).

**Community College Teaching: Institutionally Bound**

Community college faculty view their students as capable, but as individuals who possess personal stressors characteristic of the community college student population that affect their academic performance, such as weak academic preparation and part-time enrollment. Community college students are likely to be a first-generation college student, financially independent, a single parent or responsible for dependents, enrolled on a part-time basis, and not well prepared academically. These characteristics are cited as negatively affecting how students perform in their classes (J. S. Levin, 2007). Given the open access nature of community colleges and the resulting wide range in academic abilities of their students, students in large numbers experience considerable struggle in their academic work in college. The effects of teaching students who need remedial instruction or personal attention are evident in the work and values of faculty. Faculty at the community college devote considerable time in supporting students, in creating new ways to reach students in their classes and in discussing their concerns about students with their colleagues.

In what follows, I use interview data from faculty and administrators at community colleges collected during the period of 2003–06 to characterize both the student population that I have referred to as “disadvantaged students” and the understandings and efforts of faculty who teach these populations. I suggest that teaching broadly conceived at the community college is institutionally bound, contextualized not only by the students who are taught, but also by the views and values of the faculty who teach these students.

**The Students**

Out of the 6.5 million community college students who are classified as credit- or degree-seeking students and the approximately 3 million or more who are classified as noncredit students, there is a hierarchy of disadvantaged populations (J. S. Levin, 2007). There are those who attend community colleges distinct from a university as a choice because of costs, not because of their academic credentials. There are those who attend community college because their programs such as radiology, nursing, and dental hygiene are offered only at the community college in their state or region. These students are high academic achievers and compete to gain entry to their programs. Both groups form an elite student body at the community college. But there are thousands, millions of other students who arrive at community colleges in a variety of conditions and for numerous needs. These needs include remediation of high school and college-level deficiencies, the gaining of English language competency, the acquisition of a job skill, the entry to a trade, the learning of a computer skill, and the gaining of strategies to cope with daily life.

These students include large numbers of disadvantaged populations: disadvantaged by economic status, by family background, by racial and ethnic status, and by educational background. The dean of the program describes the Adult Basic Education students in an Arizona community college:

[O]ur students . . . are by definition educationally disadvantaged. Most of them are . . . working on the low end of the economic scale. Many of them are parents. There are . . . a disenfranchised political constituency or a weak political constituency: poor, undereducated, disengaged, working on the periphery of the economic industry, and wanting something
else for themselves and their family. (Dean, Adult Basic Education, 2003)

An instructor of Basic Education at a Chicago community college explains that large numbers of students in his college have disadvantaged backgrounds:

We have 60,000 students a year [at this college] ... [The people who enter [our program] by definition are people who have never finished high school. Overwhelmingly, they are people born and raised in Chicago. I have some immigrants for various reasons either didn't graduate from high school or their records were destroyed or they can't get them, because they're refugees or whatever. ... People drop out of high school or they never finish. They drop out for a million different reasons. Usually it has to do with kids that are poor; their friends are into drugs; they want to go out and play; there is alcoholism or a drug problem in the family; they have to go to work; they are pregnant. (Basic Education instructor, 2004)

On a more advanced level of student, the dean of professional programs, such as business and health programs, at a Texas college describes a sizable portion of these program students as "nontraditional" students:

Nontraditional students in our program areas are older ... They're going to be non-Anglo, generally first generation college students ... with not a lot of college prep in their background ... had difficulty in high school or ... not a history of academic success in their families or even in their neighborhoods. No role models generally.

The president of a Washington State community college identifies one element of this disadvantaged of nontraditional students by describing how the state funds students:

I think funding drives how we treat students and how we follow students and how we ensure their success. ... The high school dropouts, the high school completers, the GED folks, the ABE and ESL folks and the way they're funded is totally different than the way that we're funded for the majority of our students, ... And what that causes us to do is ... treat students differently. So the ESL students, because we don't get any outside funding, are crammed into classrooms of 40. (Washington State community college president, 2004)

Community colleges enroll large numbers of students in such programs as basic skills or high school completion, and particularly in precollege or remedial courses. Indeed, in some states, such as Colorado, remedial education at the postsecondary level is offered only at the community college. This is explained by the president of a Colorado community college:

We do have lots of students in basic skills ... 56% of recent high school graduates from the Denver schools need basic skills. ... Now, we're going to get ... a lot of the students ... who didn't graduate. ... That's a big population ... [T]he remediation [if needed] must be done by the community colleges ... [The universities] have to contract with us essentially to do the basic skills. So it's their student, but we do the basic skills. (Colorado community college president, 2004)

This diversity of academic backgrounds and in many cases lack of academic preparation in such areas as English and mathematics becomes a point of frustration for some faculty, particularly faculty who teach students in college-level courses. A new full-time mathematics instructor at a Texas college characterizes her students as well as her own efforts at teaching, which have not realized her goals for them:

The students here ... there's a wide range. I guess my big disappointment is ... their lack of motivation. When I came last year ... I started doing group projects in math, and I really think that's a good way to learn. ... I'm the only [instructor] doing it, so what they would do is just drop my class and go into somebody else's classes. ... Now my name is ... stigmatized so they don't even sign up for my class. And so this semester I'm not even teaching a college algebra class. Because what they [the students] want is the traditional teacher who's going to lecture and give three tests and a final exam and not even assign homework. (Becky, mathematics faculty, 2003)

The Faculty: Teaching and Instructional Strategies

The mathematics instructor described above is typical of those who teach at the community college with the expectation that there is a homogenous group of students, mostly traditional students, who have continued their education from high school and who have sufficient academic background to engage in college-level work. This view is consistent with that expressed in earlier literature on community college students and faculty (McGrath & Spear, 1991; Seidman, 1985). Other faculty, who have considerable experience with diverse and disadvantaged student populations, view their students in a more developmental way, recognizing that college teaching is far more than a one dimensional activity. A North Carolina instructor in the Adult High School and Adult Basic Education programs depicts his complex relationship with his students:

Our students are as diverse as the phone book. There are times when as an instructor and as a human being I want to do everything on Earth for them. There are other times when I would like to strangle them and make them completely disappear. Most of them have had challenges all of their life. Most of them have no encouragement at home. A lot have been told all their lives that they're nobody and nothing and they will never amount to anything. So they've been put down. I try to be honest with my students ... They appreciate that. If they have done well, I tell them that but I don't sugar coat it. I don't make them think that they've ... gone beyond the limits. ... I always worry about the ones that drop out. They come for a while and then they drop out and we never hear from them.
again. I often wonder what happens to them. (Bill, Adult High School and Adult Basic Education faculty, 2003)

In recognizing the characteristics and backgrounds of community college students, faculty even in high-profile and prestigious programs, such as nursing, develop strategies not only to teach students, but also to ensure that students persist. A faculty member in a California community college nursing program describes her work as certainly more than classroom instruction:

My teaching assignment pretty much all those years has been fundamentals, so I have contact with first-semester students, teaching fundamentals. I do lecture and clinical rotations and geriatrics, lecturing and clinical. And I have an evolving role with some grant monies that is now developed into a position that we call the RN career coordinator, which embodies mostly those “and other duties as indicated.” . . . In the career coordinator role, I go out and talk to high school at times, some of the health academies, which is at high school level . . . . Anybody that calls the front office that has a question about getting into nursing, entering our program, they'll give them my e-mail or my phone number and I discuss their educational plans with them, course of study, bachelor’s versus associate’s degree. And some of that has arisen out of many years of contact with first-semester students, then beginning to identify that “maybe this isn’t for me.” I think that’s a waste that should happen earlier in their educational process. So that’s part of where that has come as well as recognizing the shortage and we want to get people who are eligible and no one should tell them that they can’t do it because they aren’t good in math. So I also talk at career day annually for the high school really promoting nursing. I also in that position do tutoring, because we have recognized that our students often struggle when they hit the rigor of a program and so many have difficulty asking for assistance, and so I kind of actively recruit people to tutor. . . . I’ve started to develop consultation forms, referral forms, so as other faculty identify a student, they give them a form where they’re supposed to come see me. If they don’t, I don’t hunt them down. But if they do, then I just tell them the whole point is so that we can help you be successful—trying to decrease our attrition rates. (Jennifer, nursing faculty, 2003)

Experienced faculty who work with student populations who are first-generation college students and oftentimes minority students recognize that their college experiences need to be structured and monitored. In the case of a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) program, where this population is a rarity and when enrolled students customarily encounter difficulties, faculty develop strategies and tactics to enhance student learning, including their persistence in the program.

So our mission is really to . . . form a community, not just of engineering students, but of science, math, engineering, [where they] have a central place, where they can go and identify with one another, form study groups with one another, work on projects together and also have something that they’re doing that’s challenging that they get recognition for . . . . [A] lot of these students will succeed . . . . if they end up getting recognized for [their work]. Recognition seems to be a good motivator and that’s really our mission—academic success among the students and retention. (Liz, physical science instructor, Bakersfield College)

But persistence is not all that concerns community college faculty. In facing students who are disadvantaged, faculty project a state of empathy, or a condition of “caring.” Faculty’s views of students reflect not only a characterization of institutional identity, but also an explanation of the purposes and goals of teaching. Bill, a faculty member at a North Carolina community college, typifies this condition of “caring”:

Sometimes I feel, when I get up in the morning and I have my class to look forward to and I’m happy and I’m upbeat and I come to work, sometimes I think about if I were in their shoes, that in some of their shoes, I probably would not even bother. Because they don’t have that much to really look forward to, you know they don’t have that much encouragement . . . . When I do their final grade, I consider how they’ve worked on their paper; their letting me help them; their sharing knowledge with other students; their being accommodating with other people, their kindness, their sticking with it.

His ability to “think about if I were in their shoes” connects him empathetically to these students and structures his professional relationship with them as a “caring” person.

Previous research on faculty and teaching in community colleges did not focus on faculty’s views and characterizations
of students. Thus the condition of “caring” noted here was
not a central or even identified characteristic of faculty. As well, the approach of faculty in propping up or guiding stu-
dents was omitted in examinations of faculty.

Teaching, then, is a contingent behavior: the variable is
not the curriculum as much as the student population.

[My students are a reentry student, female, most of them. I’d say 30% to 50%, are coming off of welfare, in job training, trying to make their life better. . . . I do have some of the tra-
ditional 18- to 24-year-olds, trying to find what they want to
do with their life, but predominately that is my student; hard
working, trying to make something of themselves. (Michael,
Business faculty, Bakersfield College)

[We refer to them as underprepared students. They are of-
ten times reading below grade level. If we look at our reading
classes in the way we have them geared right now, we have
two levels of reading. The highest-level students . . . are
probably reading at the eleventh- or twelfth-grade level. The
level underneath is reading at the ninth- to tenth-grade level,
and the level below that technically would be seventh and
eighth grade. (Susan, Developmental Education faculty,
Bakersfield College)

I used to think that there was nothing more fragile than the
ego of a first grader, until I came up here [to the college] and
then I realized that their ego is as fragile as a first grader times
however many years they’ve been out of school . . . [We] do
have some students who are brain damaged and they are
repeating lessons over and over again. [With] my elementary
background, because as an elementary person you are taught
not only your subject, but how students learn. I am used to
goin to the nth detail as far as explaining something . . . I
think the students certainly appreciate that I will do anything
that I can to make sure that they understand whatever concept
they’re working on. (Stephanie, Basic Skills faculty,
Bakersfield College)

They are not good language learners so they do have trouble
getting jobs, because of their poor communication skills . . .
[We have] people from just about everywhere; we have a
growing number of Africans that are moving to Seattle from
Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia. I met a couple yesterday from
West Africa, and then Chinese from here and there, still lots
of Vietnamese who are related to people who have been here
since 1975 and 1978, which is when the Vietnamese came.
Cambodians who have also been here since the late 1970s,
[and] people related to them. [There are] laid-off workers . . .
coming back to school after losing jobs. . . . Sometimes they
come to get retrained and they get retested and some realize
their English is good enough to send them to college classes.
Some of them do OK in college classes, but others went to
work before their English was really very well developed.
Their reading was terrible . . . [Other] people who were making
$23 or $24 an hour doing fairly mental jobs, custodial
jobs, worked at the company long enough . . . and suddenly
their jobs go back to the countries where they came from.
What are they going to do now? They are 48 years old;
they’ve got a mortgage; they are trying to send their kids to
the University of Washington; and they lose their jobs. (Joyce,
Adult Basic Education and ESL faculty, Edmonds Community
College)

We get students that are illiterate in their own language and
we get students that have bachelor’s [and] master’s. We get
doctors, lawyers, veterinarians. We get a wide variety. (Cari,
ESL faculty, Mountain View College, Texas)

[The students I have mostly have missed their opportunity. I
now teach basic math. . . . Most of the students I get are
scared and apprehensive about math and their ability to do it.
. . . So I see it as an interesting challenge to put them at ease
and make them see how math makes sense and basically help
to give them the confidence to continue with math . . . [The]
age range is everything from the typical community college
age range from 16 to 60 or older. (Dan, former Mathematics
and Physics faculty member; currently Instructional Design
and Development faculty, Pima Community College, Arizona)

Faculty are not without agency in shaping curriculum to
fit learning needs of students. They can be deliberate with
their instructional approaches and goals:

First of all you have to decide what you’re going to try to do
in this class . . . The thing that makes me want to teach is the
fact that I can help people understand the topic. And when
you teach the canned curriculum . . . or the industry hype . . .
you are really on shaky ground and I know it from the training
that I received [from industry] and I also understand what
people really need to be able to do. (Bill, Computer Electronics
and Networks faculty, Edmonds Community College, Washington)

Well, I am a person that believes in setting goals, individual
goals. And . . . there is a link between goals and values, atti-
uides, and steps. So if you design a plan, you have a series of
steps that you can use. One step is a small step, or an action,
and it links with the next step and on and so. This is one way
[students] can participate in their own motivation to succeed
if they do something and they succeed in doing it, and they
accomplish certain skills and concepts. Then they feel like
that they are progressing, because they have to have that feel-
ing to stay with you. Or else, if they don’t have that feeling,
you don’t see them in about a month or so and then they have
to be dropped. (Evelyn, GED Preparation faculty, Johnston
Community College, North Carolina)

The Condition of Teaching
in the Community College

Community colleges as institutions and the teaching within
these institutions are clearly distinct from other sectors of
education. Both student characteristics and institutional
context—history, culture, missions, purposes, and organiza-
tion—separate the community college from other educational
institutions. With a workforce comprised of 67% part-time or contingent faculty, the community
college cannot be compared to an institution where disciplinary
units staffed by professors with tenure are the institution’s
core, both in production and in curricular decisions. With
a student population of not only diverse abilities but dis-
tinctly different motivations and goals, the community
college is arguably a marginal higher education institution, even though it is decidedly a postsecondary institution. Yet, there is considerable higher-level skill and intellectual development under way including such areas as academic university transfer programs, health sciences programs, engineering and technology programs, and recently, teaching education programs. Both student population and curricular orientation of programs and course offerings point to a highly differentiated faculty body at the community college and disparate approaches to student learning. This does not mean that there is wide variation in classroom instruction. Grubb noted in his observations that there was a bland and uninspiring sameness in most classes he and his associates visited (Grubb, 1999), yet classroom dynamics and presentation of course material may not be where community college teaching has its effects on student learning. Indeed, it may be that the personal interactions between students and faculty, between students and the institution, and between students and students are more pertinent factors of student learning. As noted by several faculty who identify motivation or connectedness as the critical factor, without that factor students leave, do not persist, or flounder.

My present research (Hernandez & Levin, 2007; J. S. Levin, 2007) brings the student and student identity more to the center of community college purposes and by implication to teaching. Indeed, student learning is not simply the consequence of classroom instruction or other forms of instruction. Rather, student learning in the community college relies upon the co-construction of educational experiences—invoking joint endeavors between students and institutional officials (faculty, administrators, and staff). The co-construction of educational experiences refers to the continuous assistance that students receive while they attend the institution and the ability of institutional agents to make accessible the college culture to students. Without receiving academic and social support through organizational services, such as counseling and mentoring, students, because of their social and academic backgrounds as first-generation and/or economically disadvantaged, are unable to understand and activate the academic culture of the institution. The formation of social networks and reciprocal relationships that characterize the process of co-construction of educational experiences allows students to acknowledge their capabilities and to identify what kind of resources (e.g., time, money, and effort) they can invest in order to gain from college. As described by students, developmental outcomes such as gaining self-confidence, developing academic and work skills, and achieving social mobility are the result of a commitment shared by the students and the institutional agents. These developmental outcomes, ignored by previous scholars who address teaching (Grubb, 1999; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Richardson et al., 1983), are fundamental to the purposes and mission of the community college. These, no doubt, are the appropriate ends of teaching in the community college.


