Chapter 3
Community Colleges in the United States

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Introduction

The community colleges in the United States serve an essential function. Standing between compulsory education and the postsecondary sector, they provide the first 2 years of college along with occupational training and developmental studies. They first opened 100 years ago as expansions of secondary schools in a few states and spread rapidly, supported mainly by public school districts along with universities preferring to concentrate on research and graduate studies. No longer adjunctive, they are now found in every state. Nearly 1,200 publicly supported community colleges provide liberal arts and occupational programs along with basic skills development and a variety of services to the community. They are defined as institutions regionally accredited to confer the associate’s degree as their highest award.

Community colleges had their greatest growth as postsecondary education expanded after World War II. High school graduation rates had risen to 55% and, since one of the major outcomes of schooling is the desire for more schooling, young people seeking entry to college put pressure on the universities. The latter were happy to have alternative institutions to which they could divert the petitioners they could not accommodate, especially those whose prior academic preparation had not qualified them for higher education. And because by the 1970s the community colleges had been organized within commuting distance of 95% of the nation’s population, they thrived on the students who were not admissible to universities in addition to those who could not afford to live away from home and pay the higher tuition charges. They also organized programs to prepare people for middle-level occupations, especially paraprofessional assistance and the technologies not taught in universities. Stemming from the colleges’ roots in the lower-school systems, they allowed open access to all but a few high-level technological programs that required prerequisite courses.

In any country, the growth of institutions that provide community college-type functions depends on national wealth, public outlook, and the availability of alternative systems of education. Countries that can afford to educate only a small percentage of their young people for more than a few years cannot support a widespread post-compulsory sector. Those without a general public belief in
allowing all learning opportunities. And those with well-developed private-sector apprenticeship systems have little need for school-based occupational education. The American community colleges have thrived in a nation with sufficient wealth and inclination to maintain easily accessible institutions for people regardless of age, and relatively few alternative paths to skilled occupations, regardless of age, ethnicity, or economic status.

Students, Faculty, and Instruction

The community colleges have become a mature system with few new institutions being built in the past 30 years. As with all educational structures, the colleges are responsive to demographics, expanding when the number of people of school age expands and contracting when it reduces. But because they accept students who have been out of school for many years, their enrollments can be maintained even when the number of 18-year-olds declines. From the early 1960s through the 1980s, between 50% and 55% of high school graduates were entering some postsecondary institution within a year of leaving high school. In 1999 that figure had increased to 63% and by 2005 it reached 67% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

In the community colleges, around 61% of the students attend part-time, taking one or two courses per term. The college programs are organized sequentially, but the students drop in and out as their personal circumstances dictate. Most are employed for 25–40 h per week; their median age is 23 years. Matriculation rates are highest in 13 states, where 6% or more of the population aged 18–44 attend. And the colleges enroll a high proportion of students from the bottom quintile in terms of family income; 26% versus 20% in the senior institutions.

Among the faculty 63% are part-timers. Nineteen percent hold a doctorate, 63% a master’s, and most others a bachelor’s degree, except for some instructors who have extensive experience in vocational fields. Union representation is high relative to other postsecondary sectors, with 361 contracts covering 140,000 instructors or 43% of the full-time faculty. More than half of those are located in just five states (Moriarty and Savarese, 2005). Women are at par with men among full-time faculty members; median age for all faculty is just under 50 years. The full-timers teach between 13 and 15 h per week and are paid on average US$50,000 per year, or US$5,000 per course. Their teaching overload classes adds around 10% to their salaries. The pay rate for part-time instructors is somewhat less: around US$3,000 per course. They have no security of employment and may be used to teach courses for which they have particular expertise but, more often, merely because they cost less. Most have other jobs, including operating their own businesses. Few instructors in any category have access to paraprofessional aides or teaching assistants.

Although most instructional practices follow the model of classroom teaching manifest in most other schools, the community colleges have sought instructional innovation to provide services to greater numbers of students more efficiently.