

Community Colleges in America: A Historical Perspective

by **Richard L. Drury**

from *Inquiry*, Volume 8, Number 1, Spring 2003

© Copyright 2003 Virginia Community College System

[Return to Contents Page](#)

Abstract

Drury traces the development of community colleges in America from their earliest days through modern times.

Historical Development

Community colleges in America, originally termed junior colleges or two-year colleges, have their roots dating back to the Morrill Act of 1862 (the Land Grant Act), which essentially expanded access into public higher education. This expansion allowed for the inclusion in colleges and universities a vast majority of individuals who had been denied access to or precluded from higher education for various reasons.

The second Morrill Act (1890) provided for the withholding of federal funds to those colleges that withheld student admission to land grant colleges based on race unless the states provided for separate institutions for minorities. This Act again allowed for the expansion of minorities being admitted into land grant colleges.

However, it was not until 1901 that the first junior college in America was founded. William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, was the major force behind its creation. Several leading university presidents, including Harper, began at this time to recognize that the first two years of college are not necessarily a part of university-level education. In fact, the president of the University of Missouri stated in 1896 that during the freshman and sophomore years of college, not only are students identical, but the character of the teaching is the same (Brint, 1989).

Harper, two years later, emphasized this same point in a speech to the National Education Association. In short, there was a movement that would focus universities on research rather than teaching, especially at the upper-division level and graduate schools. This movement caused many universities to purge the freshman and sophomore levels and avoid general education. In short, a university based on this paradigm would be an elitist model, the thinking behind it being greatly influenced by the German University or the pure-form university, which avoids having to deal with students who may be less intellectually able or prepared than their peers.

Along this model, a rationale was developed that the first two years of postsecondary education should be an

extension of the high school. This was the way German high schools were organized. In essence, the high school proposed by these early proponents would be a six-year institution.

In 1892, Harper divided the University of Chicago into a "junior college" and a "senior college," thereby creating an organizational separation. He went further by introducing the associate's degree for graduates of the junior division. The design of this degreed program was to eliminate all but the truly gifted for entry into the senior division, relegating the lower division to junior colleges (Cohen, 1996).

Harper's efforts at trying to get local high schools to offer college-level courses were not that successful until, in 1901, a friend and colleague of Harper's, J. Stanley Brown, principal of Joliet High School, introduced college-level courses into his high-school curriculum. The result was the establishment of the first independent public Junior College in America.

Growth of junior colleges was quite slow during the early years of the twentieth century. By 1910, there were only three public junior colleges; by 1914 there were 14 public junior colleges and 32 private junior colleges.

From 1907 to 1917, California passed various legislation authorizing California secondary schools to offer postsecondary courses and providing funding for independent regions for junior colleges. These districts had their own boards, budgets, and policies. But again it was the elitist motive from California's university administrators that influenced this legislation.

Several social forces contributed to the development of the community college. Cohen (1996) states that the most prominent forces behind this movement were the need for workers to be trained to operate the nation's expanding industries, the lengthened period of American adolescence, and the national drive towards social equality. Society perceived schooling as a means of upward mobility and contributing to society. More schooling was thought to be beneficial to society as a whole.

Additionally, there were other social, political, and economic factors that influenced the development of the two-year colleges in first part of the twentieth century. As mentioned, the elitist movement by university administrators greatly influenced the two-year college development. The fostering of social and cultural mobility for farm families, shopkeepers' children, and other workers influenced growth beyond the early movements in California, New York, and Illinois. There was also a sense of community pride in building these colleges and a sense of belonging and cultural development of the local citizens. There was a strong sentiment by community residents that college education should be available to all.

Religion played a significant role. More than half of all junior colleges from 1900 to 1916 were affiliated in one

way or another with church denominations. Populist political motives also played significant roles by fostering the local cultural enhancement capability of the local community.

Although some colleges offered vocational courses in these early days, most offered liberal arts courses that could be transferred to universities. College prep was the main focus, with little attention given to occupational training in these early years.

In 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was founded, at a critical time in the evolution of junior colleges. Today, this organization is the American Association of Community Colleges and is the national organization for community colleges in America. The early years brought wide differences between those members favoring transfer programs and those promoting vocational training. Yet the biggest problems facing junior colleges in the early 1920s were those of image recognition, lack of respect from senior colleges and universities, and reconciliation of vision among members.

The early leaders of the AAJC, Leonard Koos and Walter Eells, were perhaps the most strategic-thinking leaders of the time. Both developed successful strategies to sell the concepts of terminal vocational education to academically oriented junior-college administrators, faculty, and students. These strategies included the promotion of intelligence testing and guidance counseling as a means of channeling students into vocational training programs, or as Koos labeled it "semi-professional training." Koos also was among the first to promote the use of standardized aptitude tests as a means of tracking students into vocational training. Of course, this vocational training is terminal education whereby students would essentially terminate their studies upon completion of the two-year program. Alexis Lange, Dean of the School of Education at the University of California, stated during this time that the junior college could not make preparation for the university its excuse for being (Brint, 1989).

The founding of the Associations' *Junior College Journal* in 1930 provided a crucial forum for promoting vocational curricula (Brint, 1989). Eells was the first editor of the journal, which made it easier for the inclusion of vocational training materials.

Junior college development was given greater impetus in 1932 by a report prepared by the Carnegie Foundation. The report studied higher education in California with the purpose of determining the desirability of transforming two-year colleges and teachers' colleges into four-year institutions. The conclusions drawn from the report focused on the differing functions of institutions of higher education; the state university (California) had an effective monopoly on research and training for the higher professions; the state colleges concentrated on preparing graduates for mid-professions, such as teaching; and the junior colleges focused on training for the general education of the masses, semi-professions, and vocational training (Brint, 1989). This report provided legitimacy to the junior college.

The Great Depression marked a great boom in junior college enrollment. This was caused primarily by young adults unable to find work coupled with significant increases in high school graduates. From 1929 to 1939, enrollment jumped from 56,000 to 150,000 (Brint, 1989). With college education perceived since the 1920s as the avenue for social and economic upward mobility, social attitudes, too, played a major role in expansion of the junior colleges.

During this same time period, the AAJC membership was forming a consensus relative to curriculum. The concept of a two-track curriculum was gaining momentum; transfer and terminal tracks would be established. However, there still were a great many views on the real purpose of the community college.

Another significant debate concerned the proper organizational place for junior colleges. Are they part of higher education or part of secondary education? In the end, the proponents for alignment with higher education won. Walter Eells favored a "6-3-3-2" grade level plan in which the junior college would be considered part of higher education. This ignited further debate during the 1930s and was quite offensive to those advocates seeing the junior college as a capstone to secondary education. Eells' proposed link to higher education finally won out, based on the argument that if the junior college was to succeed in the American cultural and political context, then it needed to be linked to higher education.

The 1930s also witnessed the forming of vocational education and guidance functions within the junior college. Principal John W. Habeson of Pasadena Junior College took the initiative to hire full-time guidance counselors, including two full-time deans for guidance. Pasadena also built strong cooperative relationships with businesses. Habeson also established advisory committees, consisting of local businessmen, on vocational needs.

During this same time period, William Snyder of Los Angeles Junior College instituted surveys of employers to determine business needs for vocational education. Chicago area colleges provided programs for occupational placement. A. J. Cloud of San Francisco Junior College initiated efforts oriented to other than student interest groups in the community. In fact, it has been suggested that Cloud was the first to coin the term "community college." This term ultimately became the descriptor for community colleges.

In 1944, Congress passed the GI Bill of Rights, which provided financial assistance for veterans of World War II. This law did much to break down the social and economic barriers to higher education in America. Under this law, 2.2 million veterans attended college (American Association of Community Colleges, 1997).

James Bryant Conant, former President of Harvard, in the early 1950s became a vocal proponent of the community college. However, it is argued that Conant's compassion was not for the two-year colleges as much as it was to protect the elitist approach, which viewed the research university as properly available only to a select few. Equal opportunity did not exist at the university level, except for the select few. Education of the masses would be

through two-year institutions. And these institutions should be viewed as terminal colleges, according to Conant.

In 1946, Jesse R. Bogue became the executive secretary of the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) and began to promote the term "community college." Later, he published a book entitled *The Community College*, which was the vehicle that popularized the name.

The Truman Commission Report in 1947 called for the establishment of a network of public community colleges that would charge little or no tuition, provide cultural centers, serve the local areas in which they served, and offer a comprehensive curriculum. The Commission, in essence, called for equality of opportunity for all and for a massive expansion of higher education in America.

In 1960, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation announced a series of grants to be used to establish university centers to train and educate community college leaders. This important step in the evolution of the community college helped to lend credence to the community college effort. The comprehensive community college model was created.

Then in the 1960s, an enrollment surge occurred and the community colleges grew more rapidly than any other segment in higher education. The World War II baby-boom generation became of age and sparked this surge. Community colleges expanded during this time at the rate of one new college per week (Cohen, 1996).

During the 1970s, community colleges continued rapid enrollments going from 1.6 million students to more than 4.5 million in 1980 (Brint, 1989). By the late 1970's, community colleges had become predominantly vocational institutions. Transfer- oriented student enrollments declined. Economic-development activities were initiated under the premise that high technology would spur job opportunities for students.

The 1980s marked a predominance of specialized training, customized training, and highly vocational-oriented programs. It has been successfully argued that this focus was by design with community colleges carving out a market niche to better compete against the four-year institutions (Brint, 1989). In 1988, the *Report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges* defined the term "community" not only as geographical location but also a climate for learning.

There are nearly 1,100 community colleges in America, enrolling more than 10 million students annually. The community colleges enroll 44% of the undergraduate students and 50% of the incoming freshmen. Nearly 47% of minority students enroll in these colleges due primarily to their open door policy, accessibility, and the focus on students and teaching (American Association of Community Colleges, 1998).

America's community colleges have a rich heritage. These institutions have and will continue to provide the

opportunity for higher education to all Americans. They will provide the opportunity for many to live the American Dream.

References

American Association of Community Colleges (www.aacc.nche.edu).

The American Association of Community Colleges is a national voice for two-year associate degree granting institutions. Formed in 1920 and located in the National Center for Higher Education in Washington, D.C., AACC works with other higher education associations, the federal government, Congress, and other national associations that represent the public and private sectors to promote the goals of community colleges and higher education.

Brint, Steven and Jerome Karabel (1989). *The diverted dream: community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Explores the growth and transformation of the American junior college. Discusses the forces that brought the two-year college into being, recent year transformation factors, and to what degree the colleges play major roles in society as a whole.

Cohen, A. (1995). *Projecting the future of community colleges* (ERIC Document Reproduction Center No. ED 388 351). An excellent source on projected enrollments, demographics, economics, and public attitudes in forecasting the status of American community colleges.

Cohen, Arthur M. and Florence B. Brawer (1996). *The American community college* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. This classic work provides up-to-date information and a comprehensive analysis of the most recent findings on the American community college. Cohen is the Director of the ERIC Clearing House for Community Colleges at UCLA. Brawer is research director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges.

Drury, Richard L. (1999). *Entrepreneurship education in the virginia community college system*. (ERIC Documentation Reproduction Service No. JC 010515). Doctoral dissertation on entrepreneurship education in Virginia's Community College System. All 23 colleges in the VCCS were surveyed with the purpose of answering two research questions: 1) What is being offered by the colleges in entrepreneurship and small-business management credit courses? and 2) Is there a demand from students for these types of programs? Conclusive evidence is offered that the VCCS colleges are not offering what the market is demanding.

Richard L. Drury, D.A., is an Associate Professor of Management and the Assistant Division Chair for Management, Marketing, Finance and Real Estate at Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus. He is the former Director for Small Business Programs at George Mason University, a Small Business Institute Director, and is currently pursuing promoting entrepreneurship and small-business management curricula in community colleges.

[Return to Contents Page](#)