

Community Colleges as Cultural Texts: A Conceptual Overview

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Overview

Community colleges are positioned to play a critical role in the process of upward mobility in American society. While higher education traditionally has been the realm of the white and middle class, over the past 30 years the poor, the working-class, and ethnic and racial minorities have enjoyed increased access to postsecondary education, largely through the doors of community colleges. Despite the “open-door” accessibility of these institutions, the question of whether community colleges enhance the social mobility of working-class and minority students remains an open one. In recent years, a spate of critical educational researchers has asserted that these colleges sort students into educational and career tracks that “cool out” the ambitions of working-class students (e.g., Brint & Karabel, 1989; Nora, 1993; Zwerling, 1989; Rhoads and Valadez, 1996). Yet current research by critical scholars has also uncovered community colleges whose cultures and educational practices are aimed at transforming students into active, empowered participants in the educational process (Shaw, 1997; Rhoads & Solorzano, 1995; Shaw and London, 1995).

The contradictory and often paradoxical nature of this research suggests that making generalizations about the community-college sector as a whole is perhaps misguided (Dougherty, 1994). In fact, organizational, programmatic and cultural differences exist not only within the sector as a whole, but also within individual community colleges, and even among specific compo-

nents of individual colleges. However, our knowledge of the inner workings of community colleges remains rudimentary, in large part due to the macro-level, often quantitative analyses that have dominated research on these institutions. This work, while important, is not enough. Clearly, our understanding of community colleges needs to progress past the sweeping portraits that have been drawn of them thus far.

This book is designed to take an important step toward developing a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of community colleges. We approach this task by using critical qualitative frameworks to examine, through a variety of lenses, the elements of community college culture that contribute to the stratification of students' opportunities. The broad question of how these institutions address the challenges inherent in their diverse missions and student populations is explored using site-specific qualitative analyses of the cultures of these institutions. This type of analysis does not disregard the influence of either internal or external structural factors. However, it is based on the premise that if we are to more fully understand how inequality is both reproduced and overcome, we must examine the interaction of individuals within the social and organizational context of the institution (Giddens, 1978; Tierney, 1993).

Rhetoric and Research on the Community College

Defenders of community colleges have described these institutions as the "people's colleges" or "democracy's colleges." Community colleges have indeed opened their doors to a broad range of the populace, resulting in a student population that is more heavily working-class, minority and female than that of four-year institutions. For example, 22 percent of community college students are minority, compared with 18 percent in four-year schools; 10 percent have family incomes below \$15,000, compared with 6 percent in four-year schools; and 37 percent of the students are more than 30 years of age, compared with 25 percent in four-year schools (Dougherty, 1994).

The diverse students attending community colleges bring with them an array of experiences and attitudes which distinguish them from more traditional students and may place them at odds with the values and mores embodied by these institutions (Weis, 1985; London, 1978; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Differences in cultural capital—cultural knowledge, skills, norms, and linguistic facilities (Bourdieu, 1973)—are seen among members of various minority and ethnic groups as well as among people of different social classes and subcultures. When such students do not possess the cultural capital valued by the dominant culture, they may attempt to adopt dominant values, which are often reflected in the culture of institutions such as community colleges. However, they may also develop an oppositional culture which directly challenges the legitimacy of the dominant culture.

The idea of resistance to institutional culture is reflected in Paul Willis' (1977) ethnographic study of English working class boys, and also in the theoretical advances posed by Henry Giroux (1983). Giroux considers resistance to be a sociopolitical response to an educational system that has failed minority and other oppressed students. This resistant and oppositional behavior is not easily characterized, but is rooted in the students' explanations of their behavior. In the end, the rejection of the ideology of the dominant culture leads to students' acceptance of their own social class position, ensures their economic fate, and contributes to the reproduction of the class structure. More recently, research on students in public schools (e.g., Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard and Lintz, 1996) suggests a theoretical middle ground of sorts, in which students do not entirely resist the dominant cultural norms. Instead, these students choose to adapt to them in selected situations for their own benefit, while maintaining a critical stance toward such norms in general.

Community colleges have been criticized for failing to acknowledge or adapt to the diversity in their student populations, resulting in stubbornly low transfer rates and consistently high dropout rates. While numerous sociological and structural analyses effectively highlight the general failure of community colleges to contribute to social mobility (e.g., Dougherty, 1994; Brint & Karabel, 1988; Richardson & Bender, 1987), few do so at a cultural and phenomenological level. As their focus is largely structural, these studies capture the meta-level processes contributing to social inequality; however, they fail to examine the lived experiences and interactions that make up the culture of these institutions.

Yet in recent years a number of scholars have begun to use interpretive frameworks to examine community college education (Hull, 1993; London & Shaw, 1995; Weis, 1985). Rhoads and Valadez (1996), for example, employ a critical framework to identify the ways in which community colleges invalidate or ignore the diversity of student experiences and lifestyles. Yet they also uncover institutional practices that embrace student diversity. It is our intention to build upon these studies, along with several others currently underway. In presenting examples of how an array of community colleges can either reproduce or help dismantle inequality, we hope with this volume to suggest ways in which community colleges can adopt a culture and set of educational practices that empower and transform students.

Understanding the Cultural Texts of Community Colleges

As is true of all complex organizations, the culture of a community college is made up of formal attributes, such as administrative structure and curriculum, as well as informal aspects, such as the interactions between faculty, students, and staff, and the attitudes, beliefs and norms of these

groups. The dialectic interaction between individuals and organizations results in a complex, multi-layered culture which is continuously revised through these interactions (Geertz, 1973). In this volume, we refer to the complex interaction between individuals and organizational structures as a “cultural text,” and use this construct to explore the ways in which educational practices, and students’ experiences of them, are shaped by these factors. We choose the metaphor of “text” to suggest that, in the same way that a novel or poem is subject to multiple readings, so too are community colleges. There is no one “correct” reading of an institution or any component of it; rather, a multiplicity of interpretations can, and do, exist. Yet in choosing to utilize a critical theoretical framework within which to conduct our “readings,” we hope to provide detailed portraits of the ways in which community colleges grapple with issues of diversity, power, and educational equity.

The diversity of the textual readings included in this volume are in large part the result of a rich array of analytical approaches. While all of the chapters of this manuscript view qualitative data through a critical lens to explore various aspects of community college culture, the authors differ with regard to the importance placed on data relative to theory. Several authors employ a straightforward, traditional approach to qualitative analysis, in which primary importance is placed on the data. This approach results in chapters which are “grounded” in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967), and provide thick descriptions of institutional and student culture. As such, they are valuable tools in exploring and understanding the inner workings of these institutions and their cultures.

In contrast, other chapters place primary emphasis on theory, utilizing data to expand, support, or refute various theoretical constructs. In doing so, these authors are engaging in what we call “critical qualitative research.” While data is still a vital aspect of this analytical approach, these chapters are somewhat unorthodox in their emphasis on theory. A critical qualitative analysis challenges the researcher to examine the positions from which faculty, staff, and students speak. Where does their authority derive? How do they envision knowledge within the educational context? What opportunities do various groups have to construct knowledge for themselves? And relatedly, how do we construct community colleges in a manner that students become equal participants in knowledge construction?

This emphasis on issues tied to culture, identity, and power follows a tradition of social science research described by many as “critical social science” or “critical theory” (Bernstein, 1976; Fay, 1988; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). While there are many assumptions undergirding critical social science, a key point stressed in several of the chapters in this book is that research itself is not simply a matter of objective, empirical inquiry. Knowledge does not fall from the tree of life as researchers explore the universe from positions of neutrality. Instead, critical scholars believe that inquiry begins from a

specific location. Hence, the findings one constructs throughout a study relate in large part to the theoretical stance brought to the work. However, theory should not be seen as static: Critical researchers are charged with continually rethinking their theories as they proceed and as knowledge gets constructed between the researchers and the research participants. Thus, the conclusions and implications in critical qualitative research are not drawn from “pure” empiricism, but rather are the result of the interplay between data and theory.

The complexity of community college culture demands such a diversity of analytical approaches. Indeed, when taken as a whole, the blend of theoretical and empirical examples represented in this volume provides a portrait of the community college which recognizes the complexity, nuance, and paradox inherent in this diverse sector of education.

An Overview of Chapters

As we mention above, the chapters which comprise this book explore the cultural texts of community colleges from a variety of theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis. Although we provide a more detailed summary of each chapter at the end of this section, a look at the ways in which the various studies included in this volume overlap and intersect is instructive. While each chapter presents a unique reading of the cultural text of the community college, thematic strands surface repeatedly across several chapters. For example, many of the chapters address issues of diversity, multiculturalism and identity, and focus on students for whom these issues are most salient. Another identifiable theme explores the role that different types of “capital” play in the educational experience of community college students. Because of these thematic strands, the book is best approached as a coherent whole, rather than a set of unrelated chapters. It is our belief that, when read in this way, this manuscript presents an uncommonly detailed and nuanced portrait of community college texts in all of their complexity and contradiction.

The book achieves this goal by examining these institutions with a wide array of lenses, ranging from the most micro explorations of individual experience to broader, institutional-level analysis. For example, the experiences of a few individuals within a single community college are portrayed in chapters by Amey and Valadez; portraits of individual classrooms and programs are seen in the work of Goto and McGrath and Buskirk; Rhoads and Trujillo and Diaz explore the cultures of individual community colleges; Laden conducts comparative institution-level analyses of the cultures of several community colleges; and Shaw combines portraits of a few students with comparisons of institutional culture.

The chapters represent a broad range of topics and critical theoretical frames as well, which afford the reader multiple tools with which to interpret

the community college setting. For example, curricular and pedagogical issues are examined from the vantage points of two vastly different approaches to education: the implementation of a democratic pedagogy examined in Stan Goto's description of a basic writing classroom, and the more oppressive effects of a traditional vocational program described by James Valadez. Whereas Goto utilizes a semiotic analysis of how writers and faculty make sense of their tasks, Valadez relies on Bourdieuan theories of cultural capital and habitus to examine the ways in which African-American females make sense of an employment training program within the context of our postmodern economy. Although both portraits emphasize a dialectical interplay between structure and the individual, Goto's basic writing teacher creates a far more flexible and responsive environment for his students than does the vocational program portrayed by Valadez. The contrast between the two chapters points to the capacity of curriculum and pedagogy to either limit or expand the hopes and aspirations of community college students.

The differences seen between these two approaches to education may well reflect what Robert Rhoads labels monocultural and multicultural educational environments. In the former, authoritarian pedagogical styles dominate the educational landscape, whereas multicultural education embraces the diversity of the student body and results in a more flexible pedagogical style designed to empower students. While the community college that Rhoads examines in his chapter is primarily monocultural in its approach to education, he does uncover a small "pocket" of multiculturalists within the culture of the college. In contrast, multiculturalism is the dominant culture in Trujillo and Diaz' portrait of Palo Alto College. In this chapter, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is linked with Putnam's (1993) notion of social capital to explore the ways in which multiculturalism is operationalized in this college. The result is a student body which, although predominantly poor and Hispanic, nevertheless displays a consistently high transfer rate to four-year institutions.

McGrath and Buskirk also utilize Putnam's theory of social capital, or the role of social bonds in facilitating connection and shared norms, and label the resulting increase in students' self-esteem, engagement, and sense of hope "emotional capital." Both types of capital are seen in their comparison of two seemingly dissimilar support programs, as the authors uncover distinct similarities in the means through which each program engenders student connection, self-esteem, and achievement.

Laden also focuses on formal elements of community college culture—specifically, curriculum, administrative practices, support services, and financial allocations—in her institutional-level analysis of two California community colleges. Drawing on Giroux's (1993) notion of "border knowledge," Laden points out the importance of "celebratory socialization" for diverse student groups, and explores the ways in which community colleges can create a "web" of affirmation and support that leads to empowerment and, ultimately, success.

Marilyn Amey's postmodern leadership study has important implications for the ways in which administrative culture can also reflect the larger institution's approach to diversity. Her chapter uses the life histories of two female community college administrators to explore issues of inclusion, power, and diversity within the administrative culture of these institutions, specifically with regard to gender. Kathleen Shaw also explores the intersection between institutional culture and diversity. She applies several strands of identity theory to the experiences of community college students to examine the ways in which institutional culture can both embrace and ignore the multifaceted nature of students' lives. Although the colleges in her study generally regard students as much less complex than they reveal themselves to be in their descriptions of their lives, Shaw's research suggests that some faculty and administrators do recognize and respond to the varying sources of identity that community college students articulate.

While the theoretical and substantive topics explored in these chapters are quite broad in scope, they are bound together with an important common thread: in some way, all pose the question of whether, and how, community colleges can confront the challenges of diversity within the context of providing real opportunities for upward mobility. Our readings of the cultural texts of these colleges are neither wholly encouraging nor largely discouraging. These chapters provide examples of both exciting and innovative approaches to education, and of practice which reflects neither a recognition nor acceptance of the challenges posed by diversity. Yet such variability is to be expected, since it confirms our suspicions that community colleges do not operate as a monolithic entity. When taken as a whole, this volume not only advances our understanding of the complexities of culture in community colleges; it also provides us with examples of progressive practice which can help move these colleges toward their full potential as empowering and democratizing institutions.

Below are brief summaries of the chapters which follow.

Chapter two by Dennis McGrath of the Community College of Philadelphia and Bill Van Buskirk of LaSalle University, explores cultures of support for at-risk students, and focuses upon the role of social and emotional capital in the educational experiences of women. The authors uncover elements of organizational culture that recognize and validate the experiences and knowledge that female students bring to the community college. Case studies of two community college-linked programs—a transition program for women wishing to enroll in an engineering program at a four-year institution, and a community-based women's education program that offers community college courses on site—form the basis of this analysis. Using the constructs of social and emotional capital, the chapter presents illustrations of the ways in which these programs recognize and confront issues of identity and membership in an attempt to

create an inclusive culture that provides “bridging” experiences for participating women.

In chapter three, Stan Goto of Teachers College at Columbia University illustrates some dilemmas of implementing a democratic pedagogy in a diverse, basic writing course at a community college. Drawing on ethnographic data from classroom observations and interviews, he examines how three focal students from different cultural backgrounds interpret and respond to the classroom environment. The analysis shows how their differing expectations complicate the instructor’s efforts to prepare them for the academic work while encouraging individual expression.

Goto focuses on the pedagogical practices of a Chicano male instructor that involve creating a contact zone where students are encouraged to express divergent views—a self-consciously democratic approach advocated by Harris (1995). The purpose of this chapter is not to criticize a particular teaching methodology, but to illustrate the difficulties of implementing any writing pedagogy (particularly a democratic one) when students have vastly differing views of literacy and college life.

In chapter four, “Navigating the Raging River: Reconciling Issues of Identity, Inclusion, and Administrative Practice,” Marilyn Amey of Michigan State University describes how the bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational structures of community colleges often leave its members feeling disconnected and disenchanted with the institution. As she reveals in her research, the experiences of women and administrators of color are similar in many ways to those of students who lack the cultural capital of the white, middle-class, male-dominated society. Amey suggests that rather than viewing the struggles of women administrators in academe as a result of their own inadequacy, the emphasis on change and modification needs to be placed on the organization.

By detailing the work lives of two women, Amey identifies some of the structural and cultural barriers hindering women’s performance in senior administrative ranks. She concludes her chapter with recommendations for redefining institutional climates by making them more conducive to a collective sense of power and leadership.

In chapter five, James R. Valadez of the University of Washington describes his study of a group of poor African-American women who enrolled in a work-preparation program in a rural southern community college. The purpose of the program was to prepare students to enter the world of work, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Most of those enrolled were high school dropouts and unskilled. The chapter describes the internal conflict the students have about schooling, and the influence of relationships with significant others in shaping their goals and aspirations.

Valadez also explores the impact of institutional structures on the aspirations of students. Despite the apparent good intentions of the instructors

and administrators at the community college, their actions served to socialize students into becoming workers who would be pleasing to local businesses. Specifically, the college and the business community interacted in a way that preserved existing social and economic structures, and paved the way for students to accept low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Although students obtained employment and even escaped welfare in some instances, their longterm hopes and aspirations were ignored. The analysis in this study focuses on the complementary roles that social actors play in these complex scenes to enable us to understand the ways in which social and economic classes are reproduced through schooling.

Robert A. Rhoads of Michigan State University has entitled his chapter, "The Politics of Culture and Student Identity: Contrasting Images of Multiculturalism and Monoculturalism in a Community College." Chapter six discusses issues related to the politics of identity within the context of a community college setting. The chapter is based on a longitudinal case study and utilizes theories of culture and identity to highlight how visions that faculty have of education, pedagogy and students interact with assumptions they hold about the nature of social life. More specifically, monoculturalism and multiculturalism are presented as Weberian ideal types and are used to highlight essential differences between two groups of faculty.

Monoculturalism relates to the notion that a unified culture is needed to form a common sense of connection within a given society or organization. Because commonality is a driving force, identity differences tend to be suppressed. Multiculturalism highlights the heterogeneous nature of contemporary culture and the multiplicity of student identity. This chapter argues that because education and identity are linked, community colleges must rethink their organizational structures and practices based on an ethic of care in which a wide range of identities are embraced within the organizational context.

Research shows that community college students do not experience the same rate of success (in terms of retention or completion of baccalaureate degrees) as students who begin their studies at four-year institutions. In chapter seven, Armando L. Trujillo and Eusebio Diaz of the University of Texas, San Antonio, analyze student culture at a southwestern community college and examine the extent to which the institution accommodates the diversity of students' racial or ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds as a way of promoting student success and transfer. Through ethnographic methods, this chapter describes the multiple levels of interaction, nurturance and accommodation that take place among students, faculty and staff within various institutional contexts. The authors demonstrate that faculty and staff at the community college (a) recognize and value the cultural capital of the students and community culture in both the formal and informal curriculum; and (b) that this process in turn helps students develop the necessary social capital that enables them to succeed once they transfer to the university.

While many critical theorists posit identity as an effect of differential power structures connected to membership in a particular race, class or gender category, more recent theories point to fluid, multiple identities that are the result of a complex interplay among demographic positioning, individual agency and social structure (Bailey & Hall, 1992; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As Kathleen M. Shaw of Temple University illustrates in her chapter entitled, "Defining the Self: Construction of Identity in Community College Students," community college students seldom define themselves solely by membership in an oppressed category of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. In addition to this type of identity membership, these students have often assumed familial, employment, and educational roles that create fractured, competing identities.

Chapter eight examines the subjective experience of identity as described by students, and the ways in which community colleges can embrace, as well as ignore, the lived experiences of students as they struggle with issues of identity. Since community colleges are increasingly the path through which oppressed groups attempt to overcome structural inequities, it is particularly important that these institutions recognize and embrace the cultures and lived experiences of their diverse student populations. In most instances, the formal and informal policies of community colleges reflect mainstream essentialist notions of identity as a stable set of innate characteristics. However, some have adopted pedagogical and organizational strategies designed to help students adjust to the fluidity and inherent contradictions of their multiple roles and identities. Ethnographic data from eight urban community colleges with high minority enrollment is used for this analysis. Organizational factors as well as individual, informal interactions between faculty, staff and students are analyzed.

Culture is a social sharing of cognitive codes and maps, norms of appropriate behavior, and assumptions about values and beliefs which profoundly influence our thoughts and actions (Delgado Gaitan and Trueba, 1991). Despite the diversity of the students they enroll, community colleges often do not respond appropriately to the academic and social needs of students from diverse cultures. Building on Van Maanen's (1984) notion of organizational socialization patterns and Rhoads and Valadez' (1996) work on celebratory socialization processes that embrace "border knowledge" (Giroux, 1995), chapter nine explores how two community colleges address the cultural knowledge and values that ethnically diverse students bring with them to the community college. Berta Vigil Laden of Vanderbilt University examines the effects that culturally-specific academic programs and support services can have on students' ability and willingness to become a part of the college community while maintaining their ethnic or racial identities.

An ethnographic case study methodology is adopted to compare the organizational practices of an urban community college with a majority popu-

lation of ethnically diverse students, and a suburban community college with a low but rising enrollment of these students. The two case studies provide rich, descriptive analyses of events, interactions, and experiences of students involved in culturally-specific academic and support services programs. By using an ecological perspective of student life that considers the cultural context of their college experience, the author examines the ways in which connections to families, communities, and cultural practices affect students' experience in these programs. Findings suggest that the academic success of culturally diverse students hinges upon strong institutional commitment, leadership from both the faculty and the administration, allocation of resources, and the development and maintenance of culturally specific programs and services that affirm and celebrate students' rich cultural knowledge.

Laura Rendon of Arizona State University draws on both her experience as a former community college student and her expertise as a community college researcher to explore the implications of this book for community college research and practice. Comparing and contrasting monocultural and multicultural approaches to community college education, she argues that traditional models of leadership are ill-suited for leading community colleges into the next century. Rendon calls for a new generation of leaders, bound by a sense of social justice and democratic ideals, who will guide and prepare students to understand and pursue the full range of opportunities laid before them.

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