

6-1998

Where the Dreams Cross: Community Colleges with a Purpose

Howard London

Bridgewater State College, hlondon@bridgew.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

London, Howard (1998). Where the Dreams Cross: Community Colleges with a Purpose. *Bridgewater Review*, 17(1), 11-14.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol17/iss1/7

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

WHERE THE DREAMS CROSS: Community Colleges with a Purpose

Howard B. London

Vanessa Climer has smooth, clear, deep brown skin and sparkling almond-shaped eyes. A ponytail cascades through the back of her baseball cap, over her shoulder and onto the front of her sweatshirt. Both the hat and the sweatshirt proclaim the logo of Temple University. Born into a stable, blue collar family, Vanessa is now, at age thirty five, raising five children of her own. When her fifth child turned two, Vanessa began GED classes at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), and in 1991 she passed the high school equivalency examination. She continued her studies at CCP, and after earning a two-year Associates Degree and with the encouragement of her husband, transferred to Temple. Despite the logistical ordeals of managing a household and a small business, Vanessa is doing well academically, with a solid B average. When asked a purposefully vague and projective question—"In the larger context of your life what did going to the community college mean to you?"—she replied:

I looked at it as the beginning [step] toward my goal. I felt also that I was going to get an education, become a pro-

ductive citizen in society even though I'm not saying that I wasn't before, but more so now that I can earn money once I finish. And I wanted to learn things I didn't know....More in-depth study about history. More in-depth study about languages and science. I love science. To me it was great. It gave me a wide perspective on things. I [now] look at things from different perspectives.

Veronica is in many ways typical of the contemporary urban community college student. She is female, older than the traditional eighteen to twenty-two year old college student, married, a parent, a member of a minority group, a part-time worker, a part-time student, and the first in her family to go to college. She wants to earn more money, be a productive citizen, and become not only skillful, but knowledgeable. In one important respect, however, Veronica is unlike most community college students: she has transferred to a baccalaureate-awarding institution.



Nationally, less than one-quarter of such students transfer to a four-year college or university. In urban community colleges, only about 12.5% of students transfer. The fate of her dreams, as well as those of hundreds of thousands of other students who attend similar institutions, are the subject of the research I have directed for the past four years. Indeed, the title of this article, "Where the Dreams Cross" (borrowed from a line in T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*), refers to the dreams of

students as they intersect with the missions of community colleges and the people who work in them. It is in this intersection that important things happen.

More specifically, we (the project's Associate Director, several field investigators and I) studied eight urban community colleges with rates of transfer that are double, triple and even quadruple the average rate cited above. (We received generous financial support from the Ford and Spencer Foundations.) The goal of our research was to determine how these eight institutions were able to maintain these high rates. It is important to note here that community colleges can be as diverse in mission, tone, philosophy, structure, student demographics, culture and tradition as are four year colleges. They also have important functions other than transfer, such as adult education, developmental education, and vocational training. The colleges we studied are in or are very close to the center city, or they draw from stu-

dent populations that historically have been educationally disenfranchised. Thus our study, if successful, may help to identify the means by which some institutions help such students to overcome barriers to educational achievement.

After a six month selection process, we identified the eight colleges for our study. In addition to the Community College of Philadelphia, they included Palo Alto College (in San Antonio), Seattle

Central Community College, City College of San Francisco, DeKalb College (in Atlanta), Kingsborough Community College (in Brooklyn), Wilbur Wright College, and Harold Washington College (the last two in Chicago). Next, in consultation with sociologists and anthropologists in these cities, we interviewed and hired a diverse group of advanced doctoral students and recent Ph.D.'s who had been trained in ethnographic field methods (the art and science of studying people in their natu-

ral settings). On a half time basis the researchers spent one academic year in their respective community colleges, going to classes with students, attending faculty and administrative meetings, socializing in the hallways, lounges and cafeteria, collecting institutional reports, and in general doing all the things that good field workers do. They wrote up their observations, composed analytic memos regarding tentative findings, and tape-recorded hundreds of interviews that were sent to us for transcription by the project's staff. The Associate Director (Kate Shaw, a professor at Temple University) and I met with the ethnographers 3 times per year in Boston, conducted numerous conference calls, and communicated regularly by E-mail. Finally, Kate and I conducted site-visits to each of the colleges, during which we interviewed and observed. In this way, we studied 4 colleges during the 1994-1995 academic year, and four more the year after.

During this research we learned that the array of programs that is widely held to represent "best practices" in regard to enhancing transfer misses what may be most important about transfer. These practices include:

- transfer centers (where resources, information, newsletters, and transfer assistance are accessible),
- transfer days wherein representatives from baccalaureate institutions visit the community college,
- trips by community college students to the four-year institutions,
- summer programs during which potential transfer students live in the residence halls and take classes at the university,
- articulation agreements with four-year colleges that are clear, routinely maintained, and widely distributed,
- high academic expectations in transfer courses and programs,
- institutional transfer goals,
- state goals and incentives regarding transfer expectations,
- faculty development programs that are

involved with transfer education and services,

- assisting students with admissions applications, financial aid forms and other paperwork.

What is it about transfer that these programs miss? First, the current state of articulation agreements is deplorable, both at some of the colleges we studied and at other institutions across the country. Too often, these agreements are incomplete, poorly maintained and superficial. This is especially the case when they consist only of agreed upon lists of course equivalencies (the most common form of articulation agreement), with little if any attempt to ensure that syllabi are in fact followed, that the depth with which material is covered is similar, that the attention given to different sections of a syl-



labus is commensurate, that students who begin studies in their major while in the community college get more than an array of disconnected courses, and so on. In short, articulation agreements often conceal more than they reveal.

Second, these activities conceive of education and transfer as a series of engineering or technical problems. The programs listed above are essentially bureaucratic, and in practice, great attention is paid to their running smoothly; when they do not they are tinkered with and tweaked to improve performance. The eight colleges we studied had such programs—as well as others I have not mentioned—and they were by and large energetically and thoughtfully run, though some got bogged down in too much red tape. To

our surprise, however, the great majority of students did *not* avail themselves of these services and programs, and when they did, they tended to make only brief, one-time contact. That contact may have been critical, but it still left us to ponder whether some other factors may be at play. If so, what could they be? Through our interviews with students we learned that these bureaucratic or technical approaches, no matter how innovative and clever, omit culture, emotion, and the fact that students have lives. Bureaucracy, in other words, can supply much needed practical assistance, and can embody admirable goals, but it does not speak to the hearts and minds of people. Let me briefly explain why it is necessary to do so, and then describe how one college put this into action.

For non-traditional, first generation students, transfer or even preparing to transfer, caused unanticipated disruption in their lives. Perhaps immigrant parents feared that their children were becoming too American; or students feared that the ease, comfort and matter-of factness of going home would be lost forever as they acquired new or modified ways of talking, dressing, and grooming, or changed their tastes in music and in consumer goods. Perhaps friendships

were threatened or lost as people gravitated towards different fates. These changes usually proceeded slowly and incrementally, but subtly marked the separation of students from their past, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of those who still inhabited that past. This in turn meant that relationships with friends and family members had to be renegotiated, and people had to find new ways of caring for each other, and even of loving one another. Sometimes this was done well, sometimes badly.

Said differently, for most students, but for first generation students in particular, higher education was a vehicle of separation, and as such brought into play the same feelings that are found in all separations. According the analyst Helm Stierlin

these are losing and refinding what one holds dearest, deepest distress and joy, conflict and reconciliation, the nature of love, of obedience, and of mutual growth. (Richard Rodriguez' book, *Hunger for Memory*, is but one of several that chronicles such occurrences. Vivian Gornick's memoir, *Fierce Attachments*, is another.)

Let me now briefly describe how one campus came upon and sustained this awareness. Palo Alto College, on the south or "Hispanic" side of town, was founded in the mid-1980's as a result of a protracted and sometimes bitter conflict between grass roots political organizations and the city government of San Antonio. Its founders candidly told us that they did not want the school to train porters and hotel maids and thus help perpetuate inequality. Rather, they believed that a liberal arts curriculum would be students' ticket into the middle class, and that from the beginning they fought hard to keep the liberal arts curriculum ascendent. The most difficult part of this struggle, they said, was fighting fears—their own and those of the larger Hispanic community—that students would change, as described above, so as to lose the precious treasure of their heritage and become unrecognizable to their families, communities and even themselves. Thus from the colleges's very beginnings—through hiring practices, advising, pedagogy and a climate or valence that shaped the institution—it was essential for administrators, faculty and staff to know students in a most profound and unusual way. Specifically, we found at Palo Alto an on-going institutional conversation about the conundrums students face (as described above) as they prepare to meet a new world, and, further, that this conversation was taken for granted by most people at the college. "Of course, you must know the personal, family and cultural dilemmas of students," they seem to say. "The college will not work without knowing them. We cannot do for students without knowing them."

What forms did this conversation take? In the classroom great care was given by a large nucleus of faculty members to cultivate and convey the message that education at Palo Alto has a larger purpose. In philosophy, English, art, and social science classes, to name but some, issues of social justice, ethnicity, and relations among groups occupied a central place in the syllabi and in the classroom give and take. Seldom did we see signs of an uncritical ethnic tribalism; more common were attempts to place issues in a more encompassing intellectual universe. For example, in one philosophy class the instructor had students read about the nature of justice and truth, but from the perspective of several cultures. Students read some of the great Western philoso-



phers, but also Buddha, Lao Tzu, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the feminist philosophers Susan Okin and Carol Gilligan. This instructor then helped students to make connections between the ideas they read, the lives they live, and the struggles they face. She used skits, sketches, and all manner of presentations in an imaginative display of pedagogy. But to describe it in depth risks losing the point that the philosophy she teaches has an immediacy for students, but an immediacy that is connectable to the past, to other people, and to a vision of the future.

Said simply, there is more community in this community college than at most public institutions. The college's slogan—"El Carazon de la Comunidad"

(The Heart of the Community)—is taken seriously, with PAC sponsoring a multitude of events for the community, both cultural and educational, on campus and off. Blood pressure screenings, tax preparation workshops, cultural festivals and more are used deliberately and self-consciously to introduce community members, many of whom are the family and friends of PAC students, to the college setting, and to blur the boundaries between itself and the community it serves. Said one faculty member, "I want students to feel comfortable bringing their grandmother to campus."

Even the Transfer Center—one of the "technical" programs mentioned earlier—is in this instance infused with the college's vision. Staff members make a point of talking with students about the personal consequences—familial, emotional, social, cultural, financial—of transferring to a baccalaureate institution. This is especially important for the young women whose fathers and husbands are sometimes deeply opposed to their attendance. Transfer counselors also create opportunities to discuss these issues with students' parents, as when, for example, parents are invited to accompany their children on visits to colleges in the San Antonio area.

Not every student responded to this culture in the fashion that college personnel intended. Some students at every college will not stand for too much education. While students usually believe in some abstraction called "education," in many colleges students who study too hard and learn too much of what the teacher is trying to teach risk being considered traitors among their classmates. In other words, the mores of most student cultures, Bridgewater included, contain proscriptions against excessive academic achievement. (Even Harvard had its "gentlemen's C," adjusted now by grade inflation and co-education to the "gentleperson's B.")

Certainly Palo Alto had some of this. But Palo Alto also has something that Harvard lost a long time ago. It is what Neil Postman in *The End of Schooling* calls a metaphysical basis for education. By this he means a transcendent vision, a propelling force, an underlying narrative that informs people about why they are being educated. According to Postman, such a basis embraces a past, points to a future, provides continuity and a sense of purpose, and so holds an ineffable moral authority in the community.

At Palo Alto one faculty member described this metaphysical purpose this way:

I don't believe that community colleges should be stamped out of a factory or something. There's regional strengths. Student bodies are different so as far as relating it to psychology...in psychology I teach theories of personality and I am interested in cultural influences on personality and cultural identity... I think in America we're lacking in the sense of rootedness or belongingness or kind of a sense of...people feel alienated, I guess, from their past, their own past and their own culture. This would (if people had it) help to give people a reason to finish school, a reason to stay in school...See, what you call courses...here they become larger than the college.

Yes, the students at Palo Alto had the usual and important practical concerns. They needed to have a high GPA, they took classes they did not like but still had to pass. Many students worked and were parents, and they worried about car payments and the kids. Yet in the midst of this, the stage was set for many students to have, if not a transformational experience, then one that allowed or pushed them to work at a level higher than they had bargained for.

What we were told in the following interview, for example, was not unusual at Palo Alto; in fact, it was common. The student in this instance is a large burly man, with broad shoulders and calloused hands. He is 38 years old and had been taking courses at PAC for five years.

If you were to take me with a group of people and categorize me, I would be known as a working person, a grunt, so

to speak. The one who actually dug the ditches, put up the fence post and strut up the wire and never take that much time behind a desk or anything like that. I'm getting into the management side of things and I'm learning to understand why decisions are made the way they are and I attribute that to my education level also. And, you see, I found out I like Chaucer, poetry and medieval times, and the Renaissance. I used to go drinking Thursday, Friday, Saturdays. I'd go to junkyards and hang out with my friends. I still associate with them. I'll go fishing with them every now and then. But I don't hang out with them. Now my wife and I we've gone to the symphony. My wife has been there before. She's enjoyed it. The caliber of people that I'm associating with are on a different level. I'm not saying that I've gone totally wacko, but I'm enjoying the different functions that I'm attending now and I can appreciate a good book now, whereas before I would never read a book unless it had directions on how to do something. Now I can walk through the library and pick a book by Edgar Allen Poe, read it and summarize why he wrote what he did. Whereas if I was to have done that ten years ago...I would have said, I'm not going to read that...

To say it succinctly, this college—for all of its problems, and it does have them—has found a way to help students resolve or at least attenuate the confusion and conflict that typically accompanied the changes in self-identity and class culture so often required by educational mobility. This an extraordinary accomplishment.

Perhaps there is no better way of demonstrating the force and efficacy of a culture that sustains a never-ending discussion of student, faculty and community sensibilities than to point out that the college has a transfer rate that is about four times the national average, despite very little in the way of administrative stability. The college, now twelve years old, has recently hired its seventh president. This, by the way, is not to say that at other colleges with other circumstances, admin-

istrative leadership is unimportant. It is to say that there is more than route to transfer success.

In part, this is the story of one of the colleges we studied. Others of the colleges have different stories, histories and cultures, so that their "success" springs from different seeds. In regard to Palo Alto College, however, I present the closing stanza from Eliot's "Ash Wednesday". As you read it, think of the private perplexities, the ambivalence and the vacillation of students at Palo Alto, or of students who you may know, and even of yourself in some earlier time. Think of people who are in transit, people who are shifting and sorting, people who slowly, haltingly, erratically altering the worlds they inhabit. Think of dreams and the personal odysseys endured to realize them:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among the rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated.



*Howard London is
Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences*