

Chapter 1

Community College Infrastructure: Open for Adaptations in Unique Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The idea of community colleges serves to disrupt elitism in higher education by countering social stratification that is created and maintained by conventional models of education around the world. At a time when countries seek to redefine their education policies towards stabilization, prosperity, and democratization of opportunities, the idea of community college offers a powerful connective solution to community, industry, and national economies. The powerful but flexible idea of community college infrastructure is open for adaptations through a wide range of unique economic contexts around the world.

INTRODUCTION

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There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents...There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. -- Thomas Jefferson (1813)

You, you are at the fault line in America. The fault line of American society is education. -- Bill Clinton addressing American Association of Community Colleges (1995).

American community colleges are much like the nation that invented them. They offer an open door to opportunity to all who would come, are innovative and agile in meeting economic and workplace needs, and provide value and service to individuals and communities. Little wonder that they are increasingly emulated around the world and have become the largest and fastest-growing segment of U.S. higher

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education. -- George Boggs, President and CEO Emeritus, American Association of Community Colleges (2012)

The first quotation above is from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, to his fellow “founding father” and second President, John Adams. In the letter, Jefferson argued that for a nation founded on a rebellion against the oppressive British monarchy--a system of inherited and centralized power in the hands of a few aristocrats at the center--it was imperative to adopt new strategies that would prevent it from becoming a similar aristocracy. Distinguishing that kind of inherited aristocracy against what he called a “natural” aristocracy--or one where the individual obtains privilege and power by acquiring talent and pursuing opportunities--Jefferson was trying to convince Adams about the foundational role of education. If a nation used education with a view to disrupting generational privilege and power, Jefferson argued, it could help to advance talent and virtues as assets of individuals, which out to be the center of the new governing and economic philosophy in the New World. Indeed, Jefferson went on to argue that the natural aristocracy acquired (not inherited) by individuals who work to pursue their aspirations for privilege and power, wealth and talent, is “the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society” (Skousen, 1981, p. 6). If we also situate this philosophy about society and education in the context of American individualism, then policy that seeks to let individuals be seekers and owners of social privilege that must be individually gained and sustained generation after generation “naturally” distributes aristocracy rather than entrench it in the homes and heritages of the few. He concluded that “[t]he artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendancy.”

Nearly two centuries later, the 42nd President, Bill Clinton, distilled the same Jeffersonian sentiment and value about education when addressing the American Association of Community Colleges, speaking to students: “You, you are at the fault line in America,” he said, adding, “The fault line of American society is education.” That “you” is by definition singular, the individual, and it is also the locus of economic change and social power.

And, finally, the third quotation above is from George Boggs, who was addressing the U.S. House of Representatives, as President of American Association of Community Colleges, arguing essentially that community colleges were the best manifestation of the original idea of education as a vehicle of opportunity for the individual to pursue privilege and power around which the nation has socially and economically advanced. The simile comparing America itself to community colleges is quite powerful. “They offer an open door to opportunity to all who would come,” he said, because they “are innovative and agile in meeting economic and workplace needs, and provide value and service to individuals and communities.” Boggs added that this is perhaps why the community college model is “increasingly emulated around the world [as well as becoming] the largest and fastest-growing segment of U.S. higher education” (Boggs, 2012, p. 37). From what is said so far, it may sound like the objective is to show how quintessentially American community colleges are. It is not. Rather, my attempt is to show that they are quintessentially democratic, that they are an economic dynamo, and that these attributes make them phenomenally adaptable for other contexts, especially in developing nations.

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