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Book Review: *Confessions of a Community College Administrator*
By Valerie Culler

Valerie Culler is director of financial aid for Monroe County Community College in Michigan.

*Confessions of a Community College Administrator,* by Matthew Reed, provides readers with insight into many of the practical day-to-day challenges encountered by community college administrators. The author has worked in the community college sector for more than 10 years, and he currently serves as the vice president for academic affairs at Holyoke Community College. He is also the author of a popular blog, *Confessions of a Community College Dean,* featured regularly in InsideHigherEd.com. Reed’s approach in *Confessions of a Community College Administrator* is to educate future leaders of community colleges on the current and long-term challenges in an era of decreasing public funding for education, by sharing many of his own experiences in the roles of a community college dean and a vice president.

The community college sector is known for its commitment to keeping tuition rates low and has a reputation for being an accessible and affordable choice for postsecondary educational opportunities. In fact, according to the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2013a), 36% of Federal Pell Grant recipients attend community colleges. In many instances, students who qualify for the Pell Grant find that the funding from this grant covers the total cost of their tuition, fees, and books at a community college. The low cost is not the only reason that students enroll in community colleges. The reality is that community colleges are committed to serving an incredibly diverse student population, which the author addresses in the first section of the book.

In the opening chapter, Reed describes the diverse “landscape” of community colleges, explaining that community colleges have muddled and oftentimes conflicting missions. Most people qualify for admission to community colleges, which are dedicated to providing access to postsecondary educational opportunities to anyone with a high school diploma or GED, or who demonstrates the “ability-to-benefit” through standardized test scores. As a result, students enroll in community colleges for a variety of reasons. Some students choose to attend their local community college because the Pell Grant will pay for their full costs, so they will not have to borrow loans to pay for their education. Academically prepared students may choose a community college to save tuition costs, while students who are not yet academically prepared to enroll in college-level coursework may choose a community college for developmental or preparatory instruction. Local organizations look to community colleges to provide workforce development, and adult learners look to the community college for programs that are flexible in time and delivery formats to accommodate their work schedules. It is increasingly challenging for community colleges, which typically have limited resources, to serve students with such diverse needs.
To address the issue of limited resources, Reed proposes that community colleges should consider redefining their boundaries. Most community colleges currently define their boundaries with particular counties or districts and primarily serve students in those well-defined areas; however, it could be beneficial to redefine these organizations in a regional or statewide system to eliminate program redundancies between campuses that are located nearby. Such a restructuring of the system, which many may consider a radical idea, could lead to significant cost savings.

Reed’s suggestion, while innovative, may have unintended consequences. Eliminating program redundancies between campuses may create a barrier for access to educational opportunities. The additional transportation costs for a longer commute to a different campus or the cost of the technology required to be successful in an online academic program may not be financially feasible for students with high financial need. Reed does not address these concerns in his book.

Reed dedicates the second section of the book to explaining the budget and funding structures of community colleges. This information is particularly beneficial to anyone who does not have experience working in the administrative ranks of a community college, but aspires to such a position at some point. For anyone who has limited experience working with budgets in educational organizations, Reed provides a concise explanation as to where the funding comes from to support community college operations (a combination of state and local appropriations, tuition and fees, and grants), as well as why certain types of funds (most often grants) have so many restrictions on how the funds may be spent.

Reed explains that while community colleges have traditionally received large portions of their funds from state and local appropriations, this type of funding has been scaled back dramatically in recent years due to budget cuts at the state and local levels. As a result, community colleges now rely more heavily on tuition and fee revenue to make up those losses. Reed describes this trend as using “financial aid as the new state aid” (p. 56), because as tuition and fees are increased to support the college’s operating budget, students become more reliant on financial aid to pay higher tuition bills.

This problem may be all too familiar to financial aid administrators at many community colleges, who wrestle regularly with the issue of increasing college costs. Unfortunately, students who do not qualify for the Pell Grant increasingly rely on student loans to pay their tuition costs. According to the College Board (2013b), in the past decade the number of Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) and Direct Loan borrowers has increased from 5.9 million in 2002-03 to almost 10 million in 2012-13. In 2003-04, community college students only borrowed 6% of the total FFEL and Direct Loan dollars lent to students in that year; by 2012-13, that percentage had increased to 10%. The College Board report (2013b) shows that the community college sector is the only sector in which student borrowing has consistently increased each year since 2003-04. Reed cautions community college leaders that if this trend continues, then community colleges will be at risk for increasing their tuition to such an extent that it will
jeopardize the affordability of community colleges for students with high
financial need. Reed stresses that educational leaders in the community
college sector must address the trend toward shifting the burden of college
costs to students.

In the third section of the book, Reed discusses the challenges and
opportunities that are unique to working with administrators and faculty in
the community college setting, and what the various roles entail. Today,
community college presidents devote a significant amount of their time to
working with state and local governments, which puts vice presidents in
the position of overseeing the internal operations of the college. Deans
and department chairs have a daily balancing act of helping the administra-
tion and faculty communicate with each other, which is a challenge because
the needs or wants of the two groups are often at odds.

For anyone who aspires to take on an administrative leadership role in a
community college, but has little or no experience working in the faculty
ranks, Reed’s anecdotes from his experiences working as a community
college dean and vice president are both entertaining and astute. He relates
the challenges he has experienced trying to support creative faculty, who
sometimes view their role as “independent contractors on loan from their
scholarly disciplines” (p. 85) in an environment that is bound by many
organizational rules.

For example, an item that might seem on the surface to be a simple
administrative task, such as developing the course schedule, has the
potential to ignite fierce disagreements between faculty and administrators.
Faculty members often have scheduling preferences, and if they are
accustomed to having discretion on when they teach, scheduling changes
are unlikely to be readily accepted. Academic deans are successful, accord-
ing to Reed, when they are able to keep faculty motivated and to limit
drama about issues such as course scheduling and assessment. Academic
deans can achieve this by embracing diplomacy as a core feature of their
job. Reed’s strategy in resolving disagreements with faculty is to “assume
the best” (p. 86) of each person involved, which is a sound message for
aspiring educational leaders. While leadership within the management ranks
in the community college setting has its thankless moments, Reed reminds
us that there is still much satisfaction that comes from knowing the work
and service put forth is meaningful to the college and has a positive impact
for students.

Reed uses the final section of the book to propose changes that commu-
nity college leaders could consider implementing to remain a relevant as
well as affordable option in the postsecondary educational market. Some
of his recommendations may seem radical, such as eliminating credit hours
and instead basing credentials on demonstrated competencies. Others,
such as offering bachelor’s degrees at community colleges, are already in
the early stages of implementation at some schools.

Such recommendations may raise significant concerns among financial
aid administrators at the community college level. Certainly, replacing credit
hours with demonstrated competencies while maintaining compliance with
federal student aid regulations would create countless complications. However, such extreme innovation may be necessary for community colleges to remain relevant in the education market. Reed cautions that community college leaders must open discussions on how to change their operations and become more innovative with their program offerings. Otherwise, their institutions will either continue to raise tuition so much that the costs will start to mirror those of private colleges, or they will decline drastically in size and eventually become irrelevant due to the growing competition in the education market.

As a financial aid director in the community college sector, I found that Reed provides a realistic overview of many of the challenges that community college administrators face today. I appreciate his perspectives on both the positive and negative aspects of community college operations in today’s educational environment. He raises tough questions, such as whether community colleges should continue to strive to serve all students when their budgets are clearly too tight to adequately support the needs of such a diverse student body. He then offers suggestions for educational leaders to consider, with the understanding that there are no easy answers. Reed’s summary message to future community college leaders is clear: the path ahead is difficult, but change is important for the long-term prosperity of the community college sector.

References

