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## Book Review: What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success

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## Book Review: *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*

By Sylvia F. Ramirez

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Anyone interested in public higher education knows that the problems of insufficient state support and underprepared students plague community colleges. In *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*, Joshua Wyner offers an atypical response to those concerns. “If community colleges are to give life to their fundamental and decades-long promise—that they are the gateway to the middle-class for disadvantaged Americans—they have to look long and hard for solutions that actually work for the students they have now and with the resources they have now,” he writes (p. 142). To show how some community colleges around the country are doing just that, Wyner draws from his experience as the founder and executive director of the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program, which awards the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Wyner highlights community colleges, including Aspen Prize finalists and winners, that demonstrate a commitment to the success of all students. This book contributes to the broader discussion around improving student access and success that has been put forth in recent years by President Obama, the U.S. Department of Education, and education nonprofit organizations such as the Lumina Foundation and the Educational Trust.

Wyner’s case studies reflect innovative and creative, though imperfect, efforts to address the problems facing community colleges. The case studies exemplify the themes of the chapters: completion and transfer, equity and developmental education, learning outcomes, labor markets, and community college presidents. Several themes extend across all chapters, including student success; transparency; and data-informed, student-centered practices. Wyner builds on traditional definitions of student success by extending the concept beyond just retention and graduation to encompass access, learning, equity, and post-graduate success.

In several of the case studies, college leaders identify and share the ways that their colleges have fallen short. This transparency has helped these leaders to identify and focus the colleges’ efforts and resources on the barriers that have prevented student success. Many of the cases emphasize instances where colleges use data-informed and student-centered practices to improve student success, such as applying multiple methods for placing students into developmental education programs and working one-on-one with students to identify their goals and the pathways to reach them.

Many of the practices presented in the book owe their existence to a strong institutional culture committed to student success and cannot be implemented through top-down mandates. Wyner makes it clear in the chapter “The Community College President” that leaders cannot change an institution overnight. Improvement requires the leadership, the faculty, and the staff to be committed to the same goals. Wyner calls for firing faculty

and staff who are not committed to student success by “closing long-standing programs, changing the tenure system, or spending a portion of constrained budgets off-campus if that is what it takes to help more students succeed” (p. 144). In a case where that is not possible, Wyner recommends persisting with change efforts until unsupportive faculty or staff members retire or the cultural change forces them out. However, embracing a business-minded approach to employees in an industry built on cultivating learning and human potential for development may be difficult. Strong leaders in community colleges are often committed to identifying student potential and helping students grow as individuals. Ignoring or choosing not to develop the potential in individuals who come to the college as employees, rather than as students, presents an ethical conundrum for college leaders.

Wyner’s approach also raises another ethical question: Should a college retain well-educated, highly employable faculty and staff even if they do not really care about student success? Wyner argues that doing so comes at the expense of the future success of first-generation, low-income students struggling to rise out of poverty. However, what is for Wyner a comfortable moral position could be a challenging position for a community college president to accept.

Another of Wyner’s more controversial recommendations is that community colleges should defy the conventional wisdom that students should be given freedom to explore and sample disciplines. “[T]o increase their chances of success, community colleges will almost certainly have to narrow the options for some students,” he states (p. 61). Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, a 2011 Aspen Prize winner, encourages students to map their future via software where students “can see the job and salary prospects, as well as what education is needed... for a desired profession” (p. 21). At Walla Walla Community College, a 2013 Aspen Prize winner, counselors go further by working “with students to plan courses for every semester, all the way to a degree” (p. 22). From Wyner’s outcome-driven perspective, it makes sense to prioritize college completion over exploration and intrinsic enrichment. However, there are class implications to Wyner’s approach as well. While it seems inarguable that there should be clear pathways for each degree or certificate program, by directing underprepared students into strict pathways, community colleges may be limiting their access to high-paying and fulfilling careers outside of the six subjects they have studied since grade school. Exploring may help students discover the discipline that lies at the nexus of their passion, skills, and success.

I found the chapter on student learning outcomes to be particularly challenging to the traditional college culture. Wyner states that higher education treats classroom teaching differently than other components of student development, like tutoring, financial aid, or advising, because teaching is not questioned when students do not succeed. The cases Wyner cites focus on improving student learning through improved assessment of competencies, particularly by assessing whether students are prepared to finish sequences of courses. In doing so, instructors receive the data to determine what practices are working well for which students and where

greater curricular alignment is necessary. One institution utilizing these types of assessments is 2011 Aspen Prize finalist West Kentucky Community and Technical College, where faculty band together to assess themselves and their peers and to bluntly address problems that arise. And Wyner would like the assessment to go even further and to become a factor in instructor tenure or retention decisions.

Wyner delivers many ideas for improving student learning, retention, and graduation, but he does not provide guidance for improving student financial aid. He highlights the importance of keeping community college tuition low, and many of the strategies used in the case studies would do that. But he does not see additional funds in the future for community colleges, which may be why he does not consider financial aid a significant factor in improving student success. Wyner dismisses financial aid, stating that “community college tuition in 2012 averaged \$3,000 per year ... lowest-income students could cover that entire tuition with a Pell Grant...and still have more than \$2,000” for other expenses (p. 42). However, Wyner is only concentrating on the sticker price of attendance, not the total cost of attendance. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2011-12 the average price of attending a public, two-year institution was \$15,000 (NCES, 2014). With a \$5,000 Pell Grant, students would still need to spend \$10,000 to attend college for one year. Even if tuition were the only cost students faced to attend college, there are states in which the tuition is not low enough to end the discussion at Pell Grants. Further, Wyner demonstrates that he is aware that financial aid is not enough to cover the total cost of attendance when he cites the value of the Single Stop program, which connects “students at seventeen community colleges nationwide with financial aid, tax refunds, transportation, vouchers, food stamps, and other forms of assistance” (p. 43).

I strongly recommend this book for anyone who works with or in community colleges. Wyner’s case studies exemplify many innovative practices occurring in community colleges right now, even though he fails to adequately address student financial aid. While I endorse the book, I feel compelled to warn readers, especially those who are enthusiastic about new ideas and excited to implement them: this book is not a manual for improving a college. The practices presented in the book clearly took hard work to develop and implement, and many will end if they do not work. The faculty and staff at these colleges based their ideas on what would work in the context of their institution. Some of the ideas presented require stark self-assessment, which can be difficult and unpleasant.

At some points, it does not seem possible that any community college could make these practices work, given the challenges they face. But this book is a heartening reminder of the outstanding work done throughout the country in service of the 13 million students who attend the nation’s community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). What Wyner drives home is that excellent community colleges are not excellent because President Obama, the Lumina Foundation, or anyone else outside of the college told them they must be. Excellent community colleges are excellent because the organization and the people within that organization are motivated to identify their weaknesses and improve them.

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