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COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THE AMERICAN SOCIAL ORDER

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Today, the idea that the education system in general, and higher education in particular, should provide ladders of upward mobility is so familiar as to be taken for granted. Yet viewed from a comparative perspective, the emphasis in the United States on individual mobility through education is quite remarkable. To this day, no other society—not Japan, not Canada, not Sweden—sends as many of its young people to colleges and universities as the United States does (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 1983). *The vast and expensive system of educational pathways to success that has been constructed in this country is both the institutional embodiment of this commitment to the ideology of equality of opportunity and a constant source of reinforcement of this ideology.* The shape of today's enormous system of colleges and universities—a system in which in recent years almost half the nation's young people have participated—is incomprehensible apart from this commitment.

Central to this distinctive system of higher education is an institution—the two-year junior college (or community college, as it came to be called)—that came into being just when the American educational system was being transformed so as to provide new ladders of ascent. The two-year college . . . has from its very origins at the turn of the century reflected both the egalitarian promise of the world's first modern democracy and the constraints of its dynamic capitalist economy. Enrolling fewer than ten thousand students in 1920, the American junior college had by 1980 grown to enroll well over four million students (Eells 1931:70; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987:138). The most successful institutional innovation in twentieth-century American higher education, the two-year college has in recent years spread beyond the United States and established roots in a growing number of foreign countries, among them Japan, Canada, and Yugoslavia.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY

With over one-half of all college freshmen now enrolled in two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education 1986:111), the community college has come to be an integral feature of America's educational landscape. Yet as recently as 1900, the junior college was no more than a dream in the minds of a few administrators at a handful of America's leading universities. Enrolling under 2 percent of all college freshman in 1920 (U.S. Office of Education 1944:4, 6), the year in which the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was founded, the junior college came to play an increasingly pivotal role in the transformation of the nation's system of colleges and universities. Perhaps more than any other segment of postsecondary education, the community college was at the forefront of the postwar demographic expansion that changed the face of American higher education.

The transformation of American higher education was organizational as well as demographic. For the birth of the two-year college marked the arrival of an entirely new organizational form in the complex ecological structure of American postsecondary education. In terms of sheer numbers, no other twentieth-century organizational innovation in higher education even begins to approach the success of the two-year college, which grew from a single college in 1901 to over 1,200 institutions in 1980, representing almost 40 percent of America's 3,231 colleges. In 1984, over 4.5 million students were enrolled in two-year colleges nationwide (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987:138).

When the junior college first appeared, the outlines of a hierarchical system of colleges and universities were already becoming visible. Nonetheless, the emergence of the junior college fundamentally altered the shape of American higher education, for it introduced a new tier into the existing hierarchy. Thus the two-year institution was not simply another of the many

lower-status colleges that dotted America's educational landscape; it was a different type of institution altogether. Unlike even the humblest four-year institution, it failed to offer what had come to be considered the sine qua non of being an "authentic" college—the bachelor's degree.

What was behind the birth of this new institutional form with roots in both secondary and higher education? What explains the extraordinary growth of the two-year college during the twentieth century? And why has the provision of terminal vocational education—a function that, as we shall see, was for decades peripheral to the mission of the junior college—come to occupy an increasingly central place in the community college? The answers to these questions require an understanding of the peculiar political and ideological role that education has come to play in American life.

AMERICAN EDUCATION AND THE MANAGEMENT OF AMBITION

All industrial societies face the problem of allocating qualified individuals into a division of labor characterized by structured inequalities of income, status, and power. Since occupying the superordinate positions in such systems provides a variety of material and psychological gratifications not available to those who occupy subordinate positions, the number of individuals who aspire to privileged places in the division of labor not surprisingly tends to surpass, often by a considerable margin, the number of such slots that are available. In advanced industrial societies, all of which have renounced to one or another degree the ideologies that have historically legitimated the hereditary transmission of positions, this problem of a discrepancy between ambition and the capacity of the opportunity structure to satisfy it is endemic. All such societies face, therefore, a problem in what might be called the *management of ambition*.¹

In the United States, the management of ambition is a particularly serious dilemma, for success—as Robert Merton (1968:185–214) and others have pointed out—is supposed to be within the grasp of every individual, no matter how humble his (and, more recently, her) background.² Moreover, ambition and hard work have been held in more unambiguously high regard in America—a society that was bourgeois in its very origin—than in many European societies, with their aristocratic residues. From Benjamin Franklin to Norman Vincent Peale, the desire to succeed and the willingness to work hard to do so have been seen by Americans as among the highest moral virtues. One consequence of this belief that the “race of life” is both open and well worth winning is that more Americans from subordinate social groups harbor aspirations of making it to the top.

To be sure, not all Americans have joined the race to get ahead. Educational and occupational aspirations are systematically related to social class (Kerckhoff 1974; Spenner and Featherman 1978), and some segments of the population, especially in the racial ghettos of the nation’s inner cities, have withdrawn from the competition altogether (Ogbu 1978, 1983).³ Even among those individuals who do harbor hopes of upward mobility, the depth of their commitment is highly variable and shifts in aspirations are common. Upward mobility has real social and psychological costs, and not everyone is willing—or able—to pay them. For many Americans, hopes of a “better life” crumble in the face of obstacles; consigned to low-status jobs, they nonetheless find fulfillment in the private sphere of family and friends. Moreover, aspirations to move ahead are often accompanied by a belief in the legitimacy of inequalities that are based on genuine differences in ability and effort⁴—and by doubts about whether one measures up.

The problem of managing ambition is particularly difficult in the United States. In 1980, for example, over half of high school seniors “planned” (not “aspired to”) careers in professional/technical jobs. But in that same year, only 13 percent of the labor force was employed in such jobs (Wagenaar 1984). Even if one assumes that there will be a

considerable increase in the number of such jobs in the future and that there is significant uncertainty in many of these “plans,” it seems clear nonetheless that American society generates far more ambition than its structure of opportunity can satisfy.

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In light of the extraordinary emphasis in the United States on individual economic success and on the role of education as a pathway to it, it is hardly surprising that there has been such a powerful demand from below to expand the educational system. What is perhaps more difficult to understand is the readiness of the state to provide the additional years of schooling demanded by the populace. After all, one can well imagine the state trying to control public expenditures by limiting the amount of education. Yet for the most part, governing elites have joined in a broad national consensus that favored the construction of an educational system of unparalleled dimensions.

There have been many sources of elite support for the expansion of education, among them adherence to the classic Jeffersonian view that a democratic citizenry must be an educated one, and a related commitment to the task of nation building (Meyer et al. 1979). But also critical, we wish to suggest, has been the implicit recognition that a society that promises its subordinate classes unique opportunities for individual advancement needs to offer well-developed channels of upward mobility.

No one could deny the inequalities of wealth and power in the United States. But what made these inequalities tolerable, perhaps, was that everyone—or so the national ideology claimed—had a chance to advance as far as his ability and ambition would take him. And once education became established as the principal vehicle of this advancement, it became politically difficult for any group to oppose its expansion.

The result of this interplay of popular demand and elite response was the creation of a huge but highly differentiated educational system, with unequaled numbers of students enrolled in it. America’s commitment to the idea of equal opportunity guaranteed that there would be a tremendous

amount of ambition for upward mobility among the masses; somehow the educational system would have a way to manage the aspirations that its own relative openness had helped arouse. The junior college was to play a critical role in this process, and it is to the complex pressures it has faced both to extend and to limit opportunity that we now turn.

THE CONTRADICTIONARY PRESSURES FACING THE JUNIOR COLLEGE

From its very beginnings, the junior college has been subjected to contradictory pressures rooted in its strategic location in the educational system in a society that is both democratic and highly stratified. Its growth in substantial part a product of the responsiveness of a democratic state to demand from below for the extension of educational opportunity, the junior college's trajectory has also been shaped by the need to select and sort students destined to occupy different positions in the job structure of a capitalist economy. In the popular mind—and in the eyes of the many dedicated and idealistic men and women who have worked in the nation's two-year institutions—the fundamental task of the junior college has been to “democratize” American higher education, by offering to those formerly excluded an opportunity to attend college. But the junior college has also faced enormous pressure to limit this opportunity, for the number of students wishing to obtain a bachelor's degree—and the type of professional or managerial job to which it has customarily led—has generally been far greater than the capacity of the economy to absorb them. Poised between a burgeoning system of secondary education and a highly stratified structure of economic opportunity, the junior college was located at the very point where the aspirations generated by American democracy clashed head on with the realities of its class structure.

Like the American high school, the community college over the course of its history has attempted to perform a number of conflicting tasks: to extend

opportunity and to serve as an agent of educational and social selection, to promote social equality and to increase economic efficiency, to provide students with a common cultural heritage and to sort them into a specialized curriculum, to respond to the demands of subordinate groups for equal education and to answer the pressures of employers and state planners for differentiated education, and to provide a general education for citizens in a democratic society and technical training for workers in an advanced industrial economy.⁵

Burton Clark, in a seminal article on “The ‘Cooling-Out’ Function in Higher Education,” put the dilemma facing the junior college well: “a major problem of democratic society is inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity” (Clark 1961:513). By virtue of its position in the structure of educational and social stratification, the junior college has confronted the necessity of diverting the aspirations of students who wish to join the professional and managerial upper middle class, but who are typically destined by the structure of opportunity to occupy more modest positions. In such a situation, Clark notes bluntly, “for large numbers failure is inevitable and *structured*” (Clark 1961:515, emphasis his).

The junior college has thus been founded on a paradox: the immense popular support that it has enjoyed has been based on its link to four-year colleges and universities, but one of its primary tasks from the outset has been to restrict the number of its students who transfer to such institutions. Indeed, the administrators of elite universities who developed the idea of the junior college (and who later gave the fledgling organizational form crucial sponsorship) did so, . . . with the hope that it would enable them to divert from their own doors the growing number of students clamoring for access to higher education. These university administrators recognized that the democratic character of American culture and politics demanded that access to higher education be broad; in the absence of alternative institutions, masses of ill-prepared students would, they feared, be clamoring at their gates.

The junior college thus focused in its early years on offering transfer courses. The reason was simple: Students who attended two-year institutions did so on the basis of their claim to be “real” colleges, and the only way to make this claim convincing was for them to offer liberal arts courses that would in fact receive academic credit in four-year institutions. For the first three decades of their existence, the junior colleges thus concentrated on constructing preparatory programs that, as the catalogues of the two-year institutions were fond of characterizing them, were of “strictly collegiate grade.”

There was almost a missionary zeal among the predominantly small-town Protestant men who presided over the early junior college movement; their task as they saw it was to bring the blessings of expanded educational opportunity to the people. Proudly referring to their institutions as “democracy’s colleges,” they viewed the two-year institutions as giving thousands of worthy students who would otherwise have been excluded a chance to attend higher education. Yet they were also aware that the educational and occupational aspirations of their students outran their objective possibilities by a substantial margin; while some of their students had great academic promise, well under half of them, they knew, would ever enter a four-year college or university. Something other than college preparatory courses, therefore, would have to be provided for them if they were to receive an education appropriate for their future place in the division of labor.

The solution that the leaders of the junior college movement devised bore a striking resemblance to the one developed earlier by the administrators of secondary education at the point when the high school was transformed from an elite to a mass institution: the creation of a separate vocational education track. The underlying logic of the vocational solution is perhaps best captured in a speech given in 1908 by Dean James Russell of Teachers College, Columbia University, to a meeting of the National Education Association. Entitling his presentation “Democracy and Education: Equal Opportunity for All,” Russell asked:

How can a nation endure that deliberately seeks to raise ambitions and aspirations in the oncoming generations which in the nature of events cannot possibly be fulfilled? If the chief object of government be to promote civil order and social stability, how can we justify our practice in schooling the masses in precisely the same manner as we do those who are to be our leaders? (quoted in Nasaw 1979:131)

Russell’s answer was unequivocal: The ideal of equal education would have to be forsaken, for only *differentiated education*—education that fit students for their different vocational futures—was truly democratic. Paradoxically, then, if mass education were to realize the promise of democracy, separate vocational tracks had to be created.

In a society that generated far more ambition for upward mobility than its structure of opportunity could possibly satisfy, the logic of vocationalism, whether at the level of secondary or higher education, was compelling. The United States was, after all, a class-stratified society, and there was something potentially threatening to the established order about organizing the educational system so as to arouse high hopes, only to shatter them later. At the same time, however, the political costs of turning back the popular demand for expanded schooling were prohibitive in a nation placing so much stress on equality of opportunity. What vocationalism promised to do was to resolve this dilemma by, on the one hand, accepting the democratic pressure from below to provide access to new levels of education while, on the other hand, differentiating the curriculum to accommodate the realities of the economic division of labor. The aspirations of the masses for upward mobility through education would not, advocates of vocationalization claimed, thereby be dashed; instead, they would be rechanneled in more “realistic” directions.⁶

The leaders of the junior college movement enthusiastically embraced the logic of vocationalism and, by the 1930s, had come to define the decided lack of student enthusiasm for anything other than college-transfer programs as the principal problem

facing the two-year institution. Their arguments in favor of expanding terminal vocational education in the junior college were essentially identical to those used by advocates of vocational education in the high school: Not everyone could be a member of the elite; vocational programs would reduce the high dropout rate; and occupational training would guarantee that students would leave the educational system with marketable skills.

CURRICULAR CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Observers of the transformation of the community college from an institution oriented to college-preparatory transfer programs to one emphasizing terminal vocational training have tended to focus on one of two forces as the principal cause: either the changing preference of student “consumers” of community college education or, alternatively, the decisive influence of business elites. In the first, which might be called the *consumer-choice model*, institutions of higher education are regarded as responding exclusively to students’ curricular preferences: what the consumers of higher education demand, they receive. In the second, which we shall refer to as the *business-domination model*, the curricular offerings of the community colleges are seen as reflecting the imprint of powerful business interests, which prefer programs that provide them with technically trained workers. Drawing, respectively, on classical liberal and Marxist approaches to the problem of institutional change, each of these models provides a theoretically plausible explanation for the trajectory of community college development, and, accordingly, commands our attention.

The Consumer-Choice and Business-Domination Models

Both the consumer-choice and the business-domination perspectives capture something important, we believe, about the forces shaping

community college development. Market forces have influenced student preferences, and the downturn in the labor market for college graduates in the early 1970s was indeed a major factor in the rapid community college vocationalization of the following years. And especially since the mid-1970s, business has influenced (occasionally directly, but more often indirectly) the shape and content of the curricula from which community college students select their programs.

Today student “consumers” eagerly enroll in community college occupational programs that they hope will lead them into relatively high-paying, secure jobs with opportunities for advancement. These choices, though based, we shall argue, on imperfect labor market information, are in part logical responses to the overcrowded market for college-trained persons and the difficulties of competing in such a market. The programs in which these occupational students enroll, in turn, are determined in part by industry’s needs for particular types of “middle-level” manpower.

We believe that the indirect influence of business on community college curricula has always been great. The colleges have for some time sought to keep pace with manpower developments in the private economy. Indeed, the more enterprising two-year college administrators have studied regional and national labor projections almost as if they were sacred texts. Arthur Cohen, now director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges at the University of California at Los Angeles, was hardly exaggerating when he wrote that “when corporate managers . . . announce a need for skilled workers . . . college administrators trip over each other in their haste to organize a new curriculum” (Cohen 1971:6).

Yet despite the consumer-choice and business-domination models’ contributions to our understanding of recent developments in the community college, neither is an adequate guide to the past. Rather, they are most useful for the period since 1970, the year of the first signs of decline in the labor market for college graduates—and of little help for the period before that year. Since some of the most influential community college officials

have been attempting . . . to vocationalize their institutions since at least 1930, that leaves forty years of history almost entirely unaccounted for by either model. Moreover, we shall argue, neither model captures some of the key dynamics of the process of vocationalization since 1970.

Before 1970, our study reveals, neither students nor businessmen were very interested in vocational programs. Most students (and their families) desired the prestige of a baccalaureate degree and resisted terminal vocational training. But despite the students' overwhelming preference for liberal arts programs, the leaders of the American Association of Junior Colleges and their allies pursued a policy of vocationalization for over four decades before there was any notable shift in the students' preferences. This policy decision cannot be explained by the consumer-choice model.

Similarly, most members of the business elite were indifferent to community colleges before the late 1960s. Indeed, for almost another decade after that, business interest in the community colleges remained modest and picked up only in the late 1970s, after the colleges had already become predominantly vocational institutions. The indifference of business people to programs ostensibly developed in their interests cannot be readily explained by the business-domination model. An adequate explanation of the community college's transformation thus requires a fundamental theoretical reformulation.

Toward an Institutional Approach

The framework that we propose to account for the transformation of American community colleges may be called, albeit with some oversimplification, an *institutional model*. Inspired in part by the classical sociological tradition in the study of organizations,⁷ this approach can, we believe, illuminate processes of social change beyond the specific case of education. Perhaps the model's most fundamental feature is that it takes as its starting point organizations themselves, which are seen as pursuing their own distinct interests. Within this framework, special attention is focused upon "organizational fields"

(e.g., education, medicine, journalism), which may be defined as being composed of "those organizations that in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148).⁸

Relations among organizations within the same field are often—but not always—competitive; accordingly, understanding the historical trajectory of a particular organization generally requires an analysis of its relationship to other organizations offering similar services. The dynamics of specific institutions, in turn, are rooted in their relationships to other major institutions. For example, the educational system must be analyzed in relation to the state and the economy. If the focus of the consumer-choice and the business-domination models is on the individual and the class respectively, the focus of this approach will be, accordingly, on the institution.

According to this perspective, neither the consumer-choice nor the business-domination model pays sufficient attention to the beliefs and activities of the administrators and professionals who typically have the power to define what is in the "interest" of the organizations over which they preside. Much of our analysis will focus, therefore, on explaining why these administrators chose to vocationalize despite what we shall document was the opposition of the student consumers (an opposition that casts doubt on the consumer-choice model) and the indifference of potential sponsors in the business corporations (which in turn undermines the business-domination model). Our analysis assesses the beliefs and organizational interests of those who pursued the vocationalization policy and the techniques they used to implement this policy over time. It also examines the forces, both external and internal to the community college movement, that facilitated or hindered implementation of the policy at different historical moments.

In skeletal form, our basic argument is that the *community colleges chose to vocationalize themselves, but they did so under conditions of powerful structural constraints*. Foremost among these constraints was

the subordinate position of the community college in the larger structure of educational and social stratification. Put more concretely, junior colleges were hampered by their subordinate position in relation to that of the older and more prestigious four-year colleges and universities and, correspondingly, a subordinate position in the associated competition to place their graduates into desirable positions in the labor market.

Perhaps the best way to capture this dual structural subordination is to think of the structure of stratification faced by community colleges in terms of two parallel but distinct components—one a structure of labor market stratification and the other a structure of institutional stratification in higher education. From this perspective, educational institutions may be viewed as competing for training markets—the right to be the preferred pathway from which employers hire prospective employees. Access to the most desirable training markets—those leading to high-level professional and managerial jobs—is, and has been for decades, dominated by four-year colleges and, at the highest levels, by elite graduate and professional schools. Community colleges, by their very location in the structure of higher education, were badly situated to compete with better-established institutions for these training markets. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that by the time that two-year colleges established a major presence in higher education, the best training markets were effectively monopolized by rival institutions.

Training markets are critical to the well-being of higher-education institutions. In general, those that have captured the best markets—for example, the top law, medical, and management schools—are the institutions with the most resources, the greatest prestige, and the most intense competition for entry. Viewed historically, community colleges had lost the most strategic sectors of this market before they could enter the competition. The best that the community colleges could hope to do, therefore, was to try to situate themselves favorably for the next available market niche. Therein resided the powerful organizational appeal of the two-year college's long-standing vocationalization project, a project that, as we shall show, had become widely

accepted among community college administrators long before there was any decline in the demand for graduates of four-year colleges or any demand for vocational programs from the community college students themselves.

Because of their precarious position in the competition for training markets, community colleges tried desperately to fit themselves to the needs of business despite the absence of direct business interest in the colleges. Indeed, far from imposing on the community colleges a desire for a cheap docile labor force trained at public expense, as the business-domination model would have it, big business remained indifferent to the community colleges for the first sixty years of their existence. Yet because of the structural location of business in the larger political economy—and, in particular, its control of jobs—community colleges had little choice but to take into account the interests of their students' future employers. Thus business exerted a profound influence over the direction of community college affairs and pushed them in the direction of vocationalization without any direct action whatsoever. This capacity to exert influence in the absence of direct intervention reflects the *structural power* of business.⁹

Reduced to its essentials, then, our argument is that the community colleges found themselves in a situation of structured subordination with respect to both other higher-education institutions and business. Within the constraints of this dual subordination, the vocationalization project was a means of striking the best available bargain. We refer in the text to this deference to the perceived needs of more powerful institutions—even when such institutions made no conscious efforts to control their affairs—as *anticipatory subordination*.

This anticipatory subordination was rooted in the recognition by the community colleges that if they tried to compete with the existing better-endowed, higher-status institutions on their own terrain, they would face certain defeat. A far better strategy, it was determined after much internal debate with the junior college movement, was to try to capture an unexploited—albeit less glamorous—market in which they would not compete directly with institutions with superior resources. In return for accepting

a subordination that was, in any case, inherent in their structural location, the community colleges would use vocationalization to bring a stable flow of

resources linked to a distinctive function, a unique institutional identity, and above all, a secure—indeed, expanding—market niche. . . .

Notes

1. The idea that all educational systems, capitalist and socialist alike, face a problem in the management of ambition is borrowed from Hopper (1971).
2. The belief that America remains a land of opportunity is a recurrent finding of sociological studies of American communities (see, for example, Warner and Lunt 1941, and Hollingshead 1949).
3. White youths, especially those from the most disadvantaged segments of the urban working class, may also withdraw from the competition to get ahead. For a powerful portrait of “leveled aspirations” in a low-income neighborhood, see MacLeod’s ethnographic study of youths in a public housing project, *Ain’t No Makin’ It* (1987).
4. Kluegel and Smith (1986), for example, in a nationally representative survey of 2,212 Americans, find that economic differences among groups are often attributed to individual differences in such qualities as “hard work” and “talent.” Moreover, many of the survey respondents view economic inequality as being legitimate in principle (Kluegel and Smith 1986:75–142).
5. The idea that education in the United States is pulled in contradictory directions by the logics of capitalism and democracy is discussed in Shapiro (1982; 1983) and developed at length in Carnoy and Levin’s book, *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State* (1985). Katznelson and Weir (1985), in their historical study of education and the urban working class, also develop this theme, focusing in particular on the conflicting pressures inherent in preparing students for life as both democratic citizens and workers in a highly inegalitarian division of labor.
6. The sources of the powerful impact that the ideology of vocationalism has had on American education are explored in Lazerson and Grubb (1974) and Kantor and Tyack (1982). On “career education,” a form of vocational education that exerted considerable influence during the 1970s, see Grubb and Lazerson (1975).
7. Among the key works on organizations that have informed our approach are Robert Michels’ *Political Parties*, 1911, and Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*, 79, especially the sections on “Domination and Legitimacy” and “Bureaucracy.”
8. Our concept of “organizational field” is similar to Meyer and Scott’s (1983:137–39) concept of a “societal sector” which, while building on the economists’ concept of “industry,” is broader in that it includes organizations that contribute to or regulate the activities of a focal industry group.
9. But we also emphasize, drawing on Bourdieu (1971, 1975, 1984), that fields are arenas of power relations, with some actors—generally those possessing superior material and/or symbolic resources—occupying more advantaged positions than others. The concept of “structural power” used here is indebted to the illuminating discussion of the relationship between power and participation in Alford and Friedland (1975). Our formulation differs somewhat from theirs, however, and is in fact closer to their concept of “systemic power.”

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