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Community college leaders express many ideas pertaining to research and assessment in student affairs at two-year institutions.

View from Community Colleges

Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy

The likelihood of finding staff specifically assigned to support research needs of student services areas in community colleges is as probable as winning the lottery or having the team from a magazine sweepstakes contest ring your doorbell after the Super Bowl game in January. When I asked one vice president of student services what she thought about the idea of a research function in student affairs, she said, "That's nuts! We're trying to justify the positions we already have, so it is unrealistic to expect more staff for research." In contrast, Tom Flynn, vice president of student services and administration at Monroe Community College, New York, responded to the same question with, "It is absolutely feasible to have research report to student affairs." He did not limit his thinking to a single staff person in student affairs devoted to research, but thought it feasible that the entire college office of institutional research would be under the supervision of the senior student affairs administrator! To put the idea of research in student affairs in community colleges in context, I first need to describe the current pressures on community colleges and then share how research may be defined in most community colleges.

Generally and ideally, community colleges mirror the personality of their surrounding communities, and collectively they include a growing percentage of the U.S. population pursuing higher education. These colleges belong to the community, and their priority is to address community needs through course offerings and specialized support programs. Community for these two-year colleges includes businesses and corporations that make up the national workforce. Community colleges, perhaps more than any other sector of higher education, are expected to respond to what Theodore Hershberg, professor of public policy and history at the University of Pennsylvania, calls the "human-capital-development challenge." The National Workforce Development Study

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by the American Association of Community Colleges confirms that "ninety- five percent of businesses and organizations surveyed reported they would recommend community college workforce education and training programs to others" (Zeiss, 1997, p. 51). With such expectations, community colleges are required to create reports that demonstrate their contributions to the success of students and to the larger goal of educating and training workers who will keep the United States competitive.

Though the general public may not be aware that there is a major unit of the college called student affairs or student services, as is more often the title in community colleges, student services has a key role in helping these colleges reach goals of accountability. If students are not applying and attending college, if they are not remaining in college for goal attainment, if they are inadequately prepared for jobs, student services is expected to help provide answers to the question, "Why?"

More and more segments of higher education are responding to pressures from legislators, parents, corporate heads, and students themselves to deliver goods that are judged as practical in helping students get jobs. Corporations are demanding that future employees come to them with basic competencies in reading, computing, communicating, and thinking. Consequently, all units of the college exist to contribute positively to these results. Therefore, whether it is feasible or not to measure a unit's contributions to students' basic competencies, student services in community colleges want indications that their programs and services are effective in helping meet student and workforce needs. Collection of such measurement data falls under the rubric of research.

When community college student services administrators or administrators in offices of institutional research speak about research, they are generally not concerned about the strict definitions of research methodology. The best- case scenario will feature a research design whereby data are collected on those students who participate in particular programs and use specific services under review. Seldom is it possible to develop experimental designs that include control and experimental groups, because community college students are generally fitting classes in between responsibilities at work and home. Perhaps the best circumstances, in the absence of control groups and experimental groups, are pre- and posttest designs for research.

With relevance high on the agenda and time a major factor, any data systematically collected that provides practical information for decision making is defined as "research." For example, the offices of institutional research (IR) provide numerically descriptive snapshots as well as broad overviews of the college. They support planning and evaluation and provide information and data for accreditation, mandatory state and federal reports, and, of course, on enrollment and graduation rates. Generally, they see themselves primarily as "number crunchers" in service to the president and the president's cabinet. They say what they do is to provide "research" data for, on, and about the institution.

Student services administrators say what they want is some form of research or assessment to provide documentation on services and a better

understanding of processes and outcomes to improve programs such as orientation and academic advising. Research is often heuristic but accepted as evidence to support current processes or to make a change in procedures. Though analysis and interpretation of the data may not fit the strict definitions of scientific research, this quantifiable and systematically collected information is no less useful in providing direction and information for decision making.

Community college administrators are relatively secure in these practices of data collection and uses because the results address fundamental questions. However, some say they need more empirically based research with true experimental designs to give them a better understanding of some of their perennial problems.

Harry Harden, dean of student development at Montgomery College in Germantown, Maryland, who worked at the Catholic University of America before coming to the community college, said, "At Catholic University, research was pretty much expected, and it was done by professionals working in student affairs. It was routine and ongoing." He thinks research is less of an expectation in community colleges--less of an expectation, perhaps, but a great need according to administrators in student affairs. Expectations, needs, and means are interconnected variables in promoting the idea of a research role and function in student services in community colleges.

Administrators at community colleges today express the same reasons for wanting more research as Linda Moxley (1988) talks about regarding what prompted the University of Texas at Arlington to create one of the few research and evaluation offices for student affairs. The need to make decisions on the basis of facts, the demand for accountability, and a desire to use the division's (and institution's) resources and personal talents wisely, still top the list. Many of these decisions are about the effectiveness of programs and services, and an appropriate balance of costs and benefits of the student services area. Therefore, it is important to realize that the scarcity of research functions in student services does not imply the lack of need for research (Moxley, 1988).

The Need for More Research on Students

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is a classic film made in 1967 in which Sidney Poitier plays a research physician who is black, and is introduced to the white family of his fiancée. Thirty years ago, this situation was novel enough to serve as the controlling theme for a major film. Just as the film would stir little interest today, the idea of changing demographics on college campuses is hardly news to anyone. What is news is that new students often require new and different programs, and nowhere is the challenge more acute than in community colleges with their enhanced role of serving the greater number and variety of students attending.

Those who previously had barely acknowledged the existence of community colleges soon realized the potential for their enhanced role when President Clinton in 1997 made access to K-14 education a universal expectation

with his new tax credit plans. The focus on community colleges as an option for all who seek learning beyond high school makes attaining the associate degree potentially as traditional as the high school diploma has been over the last century. Community colleges will hold a central and pivotal location between K-12 and four-year colleges and universities. Serving as a gateway for so many students, community colleges are compelled to study who their students are and to identify barriers between these new students and their ultimate success.

Student Characteristics and Attrition. Characteristics of community college students and their experiences range from one end of the demographic continuum to the other. For instance, at the numerous campuses of the Maricopa Community College District in the Phoenix area, the average age of Students is thirty years, and 78 percent attend part-time. Many of these students are referred to as returning students, meaning that they may or may not have attended this college or another, but they are returning to the life of a student even if their last educational experience was as a high school student. Such students bring different experiences, skills, expectations, obligations, and privileges with them. Although many want to enter the workforce upon completing the associate degree, one out of four indicated in 1989-1990 that they planned to transfer to a four-year college or university (McCormick, 1997).

Retention of students is a perennial pursuit among student affairs administrators. The attrition rate has been high in community colleges, and they have called the "open door" the "revolving door" on occasion. Administrators often report frustration because they have not determined how to increase the retention of historically underrepresented students in any consistent manner. Research is needed to determine how to stem the flood of leavers.

\ Though many students in the traditional eighteen- to twenty-year age group attend community colleges to receive their first two years of general education more economically before going on to a four-year college or university, others see attending the community college as an extraordinary opportunity to better their circumstances. To them, it is often a leap ahead, a great escape, the key. to the good life. With such life-changing incentives for attending and completing college, administrators and staff are often baffled by the number stopping out and leaving.

Student services staff believe that many of these students often have experiences and circumstances that delay them and cause deleterious effects on their academic achievement in comparison to students who have had the advantage of continuous, successful study. More often than not, students come to community colleges as the first in their families to attend college and often have the additional burden of being among the historically defined minorities.

Minority Students. With increasing numbers of first-generation and minority students beginning their education at community colleges, there is a need for research on who these students are, what they want, and how best to help them close the gap between their potential and eventual success as they define it. New students call for close observation and study to best meet their needs.

Community college administrators need to know why one group of students has a higher attrition rate than others. When there are small groups of students of color, the loss of these students has a profound effect on campus diversity. Further, college attrition affects not only the lives of these students but the health of the economy, with its dependence on qualified workers.

To open doors for students formerly excluded without special attention to their needs is a counterfeit invitation. The new student is in direct contrast to traditional college students for whom programs were originally developed. The new student is radically different from any previous generation, and this shift represents the nation's move toward more adequately realizing the promise of democracy.

In recognition of such a phenomenon, Lanham (1992) sees a "radical democratization of higher learning.... in the early nineteenth century only one or two in a hundred Americans attended college, and they were almost all male, white, leisure class native English speakers ... now half do, and they are often none of these.... American minorities hitherto excluded from higher education have demanded access to it, and a new flux of immigrants have joined them" (Lanham, 1992, p. 34).

Students are seeking a chance at a better life through community colleges, and they bring extra baggage that includes poverty. Poverty has and will have a mediating effect on the education of all students. Students who bring both poverty and minority status to the higher education environment need to be listened to in order to be provided appropriate support for academic success.

The statistics on the level of poverty of African-American students attending community colleges are important to consider. Volume I of the African American Education *Data Book* illustrates the barriers attributed to poverty: "43.4 percent of African Americans compared with only 18.2 percent of whites had family incomes below \$20,000 ... 64.9 percent of African-American men and 60.4 percent of African-American women were in households in the bottom half of American socioeconomic status, compared with 46.6 percent of white women and 32.4 percent of white men" (Nettles and Perna, 1997, pp. 197-199).

Community colleges are the first option for many African-American students who fit the economic profile above. The first year is the most common time for all students to stop out or drop out of college, but for African Americans the rate of leaving during the first year is 69.8 percent compared with 60.1 percent of white students. This situation supports the notion that research in community colleges should focus on who is coming to college and what is needed to help them reach their goals.

Spencer (1985) suggests that students of color tend to "read the environment," and an awareness of negativity toward them along with inadequate academic preparation, in some cases, appears to be a threat to the students' ego and self-esteem. Removing themselves from the environment by dropping out, what Spencer calls "short-term solutions," may be their way of maintaining a healthy ego. This hypothesis and others need more study and exploration to

address the drop-out rate of students who attend community colleges as their first and most accessible route to higher education. Community colleges should be expected to study this issue and pose solutions.

Understanding Today's Students. In addition to students who begin with academic disadvantages, there is the generational change in attitudes, needs, notions, and perspectives of all students. In a special segment of the *To day* Show in August 1997, we were told that 40 percent of all college students are "returning students" and a thirty-three-year-old woman is the average college student today. There are also differences in what we have known as traditional-age college students. Each generation brings students shaped by experiences different from those who came before. These experiences have a profound impact on students' motivations and capacities to pursue higher education. To assume that programs and services that were adequate for previous students are effective for today's students is to ignore the obvious and deny reality. All of this translates into issues for recruitment and retention for student services.

Student affairs has been in the forefront in acknowledging the changing nature of students. Since admissions offices generally report to student services in community colleges, the student services administrator probably has the most up-to-date information on who students are in the aggregate. Admissions offices track trends and note major shifts in attitudes and values among entering students. The downside of this knowledge of student trends is that student affairs and admissions offices, in particular, have been criticized for catering to consumer-like demands of students during the recruitment process.

Edmundson (1997) most likely expressed the sentiments of many faculty when he wrote that the university was "looking more and more like a retirement spread for the young. Our funds go to construction, into new dorms, into renovating the student union" (p. 43). He says that he must concede that "the consumer ethos is winning" (p. 48). His remedy was to jettison services and just provide essential classroom teaching. He was opposed to responding to students as though they were customers. Edmundson's frustration was palpable. However, it should be understandable that if student services has major responsibilities for recruitment and retention, they must look to the needs of the student market. Here is where we may see a clash of values between some faculty and student services administrators.

Rather than eschew and ignore student consumerism and deny that these attitudes exist, student services in community colleges are balancing two primary roles. On the one hand, they must reinforce academic programs for increased student learning through programming such as service learning, student activities, counseling and advising, and on the other hand, they must provide the kinds of services consumer-oriented students demand.

Without the continuous collection and analysis, and use of data about students, it will not be possible for student services to do their job. The role of student services is to understand student needs and when possible, within the mission of the institution, be responsive.

In addition to acknowledging a market culture among students, the academic atmosphere is suffused with a race toward national educational standards and universal outcomes assessment. Call it research or the collection of data on what we do and what difference it makes, these processes are an expectation from all constituencies, especially accrediting bodies and funders. Whether in a four-year college or university, two-year or community college, independent or public, rural or urban, the need for research on students in relation to educational goals and processes is crucial.

Need for Data on How Programs and Services Promote Student Success

Having a positive impact on retaining students is a cornerstone of the work of student affairs. Some innovations such as "one-stop shopping" were implemented in community colleges more than a decade ago. Such a model is still widely used, but administrators must continue to demonstrate to all constituencies that the change to such a process is worth the resources and efforts.

This idea was addressed in 1984 when the dean of student services at Williamsport Area Community College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, led an innovation called the Advisement Center Project to deal with retention (Martin, 1987). This became known as the "one-stop shopping" model because they combined all the processes for assessment, registration, and orientation.

In addition to addressing retention, a major objective of the Williamsport project was to increase the "market share" of students who enrolled from their service area. A measure of the worth of the project was developed that noted the number of students who took advantage of the combined services, and compared the numbers of students who applied and actually enrolled over the previous five years with the numbers from the project year.

Another objective of the project was to increase sales of the college's meal plan. With implementation of the project, meal plan enrollment increased nearly 50 percent in volume and revenue.

In addition to reviewing positive results related to objectives, data were collected on student satisfaction and how faculty and staff evaluated the process. Based on positive results of those aspects of the project, the model was adopted with plans to measure the effects on retention at a future date.

Some may argue that the processes described above do not constitute research. But for Williamsport, the data collected served the administrators' needs in making the decision to continue the process. Empirical data on programs in student services are useful and seen as research in community colleges.

Today, according to Paul Raverta, vice president of student services at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts, community colleges continue to search for "proactive approaches to improve student success and retention." Raverta says that his college established a one-stop model for admissions, assessment, and placement of students, and the change streamlined the enrollment

process and also identified high-risk students that staff could respond to prior to the start of classes.

Perhaps the major difference between this "one-stop shopping" model and the Williamsport model is the use of technology. Holyoke has computerized assessment in basic skills and has computerized a student needs inventory. The data become part of the student's educational plan and are available to both faculty and student services. Essentially, the college is collecting data for use in meeting student needs based on information provided by the students. Raverta says, "No longer do our student development programs use a scatter-shot approach to outreach. They focus services on students whose profiles indicate that services would be welcome and effective." Data collected not only indicate areas of greatest needs for students, it also revealed that students were 50 percent more forthcoming in expressing their needs on the electronic instrument than they had been previously on the paper and pencil model. With a belief that identifying needs and providing responsive and convenient services leads to retention, the data collected and analyzed are useful research.

As ubiquitous as the idea of one-stop shopping is today, student services must continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of the process on individual campuses. The need for research in student services in community colleges is continuous even on processes generally accepted as effective.

Bette Simmons, vice president for student services at County College of Morris, New Jersey, says research needs to be conducted not only by community colleges but conducted and shared among all colleges and universities on the issues of ethics and efficacy of on-line counseling, especially regarding confidentiality. Simmons is asking for systematic monitoring and data collection and analysis on whether the effects of the new technological medium enhances, detracts from, or has no effect on the effectiveness of the service.

Although some administrators, such as Simmons, identify specific projects to assess or study, Tom Flynn, vice president of student services and administration at Monroe Community College in New York, says that the greatest needs for research in student services are standard and should be ongoing. They fit within three broad categories, according to Flynn: (1) data on the greater community for workforce development needs, (2) what student services say they do and what they actually do, and (3) measurement of the success of graduates. Whether the needs for data are specific to an identified problem or ongoing, there are special requirements for research on programs and services in student services in community colleges.

Focus and Goals of Research in Community Colleges

Since all colleges and universities share the mission of enabling the acquisition of higher learning skills and knowledge, one would assume some basic foci and goals for research in higher education even though the type of institution does influence the mission.

William Knight, director of institutional research, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, was asked whether he saw any differences in research goals for two- and four-year institutions, and he suggested that research in two-year colleges may tend to focus more on the needs of the job market, student tracking, and how the institution contributes to economic development. He thought that community colleges would be more aware of the importance of costs and competition for students. He understood that students in community colleges are more likely to be enrolled "sporadically" and that there would be a need to find out how much time stopping-out students took between terms and what they were doing when they were not in attendance.

For four-year colleges, he thought the research focus would be on retention rates and the amount of time it took students to get the degree, as well as faculty productivity and the whole issue of how much time is spent on research as opposed to teaching. Knight's views reflect a broad-brush description of the focus of research at community colleges as different from that at four-year institutions. However, two-year college administrators will want to add retention to the list of priorities, and those in four-year colleges will add costs and competitiveness to their list of priorities, especially those in small liberal arts colleges.

Randall Hickman, director of planning and research at Piedmont Community College, North Carolina, sees the purpose of research at community colleges as one of supporting institutional development and training efforts. He says that the major focus is on tracking the relationship between skills provided by the institution and skills required by the job market, thus confirming the conventional view of the major function of community colleges. He also says that it is important to survey graduates to determine institutional effectiveness. He sees various units within the college as internal clients who need assistance in determining the effectiveness of programs, which includes student satisfaction. However, he said that realistically the primary purpose of the research office is to provide information to state governmental and accrediting agencies.

For Arlene Blaylock in the Office of Institutional Research at Montgomery College, Rockville, Maryland, what is more important than the differences between the foci of research at community and four-year colleges is what actually is being done in research offices in community colleges and what could be done. She says that community colleges tend to do more descriptive studies than research; essentially, demographic data are collected and summarized for reporting. She thinks that this is not enough research to make credible inferences.

Although the data currently collected are useful for student services, Blaylock believes that we need to know not just who is dropping out and for how long, but why students are leaving. In addition, beyond training to meet needs of the workforce, what do students need to complete courses successfully and to acquire other important career skills, such as working in teams and taking leadership responsibilities?

Harry Harden, dean of student development at Montgomery College, Germantown, Maryland, says that he wants data to help him understand possible causal relationships between programs and student success. Harden says that one research focus of the community college ought to be on the effectiveness of assessment tests in placing students when SAT and ACT scores are not used for acceptance. In other words, put first things first: Academic programs to meet job market needs are irrelevant if students are not adequately prepared or supported to pass their academic courses. The one question that rings true for all offices of student affairs, regardless of the sector of higher education, is, What impact does what we do have on student achievement and personal growth? Community college administrators ask questions that cannot be answered without research. For example, do students who participate in student activities programs, clubs, and organizations perform differently academically than students who do not participate? If so, what may be some of the reasons? What impact does use of the career center, counseling services, and advisement have on students? Harden wants to know what longitudinal studies might reveal about the grade point averages of students who begin their college course work in remedial courses in comparison with students who did not take remedial courses. In addition to the study of these kinds of questions, whose answers would have a direct impact on students, Harden would also like to know what services are used most and what services are underutilized.

Although the use of resources must be included in any analysis of services, John Barker, coordinator of institutional research at Oklahoma City Community College, says, "Studying the effects of programs is essential and more important than other data generated by institutional research."

Data collection in community colleges reveals a panoply of approaches to institutional research. Paul Raverta, vice president of student services at Holyoke Community College, Massachusetts, says he is comfortable with the research currently generated by student services and by the office of institutional research. In addition to data from admissions, which is part of student services, the student services unit does annual surveys and conducts focus groups, at minimum, on all programs and services for planning and evaluation. They often use benchmarks to compare their services with other institutions for additional information on how well they are doing with the resources they have.

Raverta cautions student affairs administrators about their zeal to connect their programs and services directly to student learning outcomes. Student learning is a collective goal of the entire institution, and what is measurable is efficiency of services and student satisfaction. Raverta thinks using national standards from professional associations, listening to students, and monitoring processes is how student affairs can best demonstrate effectiveness. Raverta's comments about listening to students is crucial when we think about the changes in the composition of the student body, especially at community colleges.

As vital as the work of student affairs is to the academic environment, students come to college, expecting to learn from classroom faculty. The faculty

members hold the keys to graduation, which opens doors of opportunity. It stands to reason that students who bring different experiences to college, borne out of poverty in many instances, will need to be taught by faculty who have skills beyond their knowledge of course content. One way student affairs can contribute to student learning is through collaboration with faculty on how best to teach students who must begin their course work through remediation. Together they can identify the faculty competencies that have the most positive impact on student learning. Previous studies have found that many of these competencies are the skills student affairs professionals regularly use in their work, such as listening and facilitation skills. More research in this area would contribute directly to the support of students in their course work. Whether looking at what we do and how we do it, counting the number of students who use services, or identifying competencies for effective teaching, the goal is increased understanding for greater effectiveness.

Practical Implications of Research in Student Affairs

Practical is the operative word here. Little doubt exists about the need for research on students to identify what is necessary to support their success at community colleges. Opinions of student affairs administrators about the feasibility of having a research function in the division vary from thinking it is a crazy idea to thinking that it is not only a good idea but feasible. Nonetheless, when faced with the question of whether to use the resources for a research function in student affairs or add another staff person for direct services, the votes go with the latter.

In addition to the financial improbability of support for a research function solely for student affairs, current staff members often lack the time, expertise, and experience in performing research work. Community college administrators in student services suggest that the best alternative is to insist upon a direct relationship between student affairs and collegewide institutional research. To avoid 'research' that is simply the manipulation of data already collected by institutional research, a strong organizational tie between the two areas is necessary.

When administrators in institutional research thought about the practical implications of a research function in student affairs, they expressed perceptions of differences in the orientation to research between student affairs professionals and IR personnel. They describe IR personnel as being numbers-oriented with a focus on student characteristics as data for reporting. They assumed the research focus by student affairs staff would be more student-oriented because they were closer to the daily issues facing students. Though IR people agree that more research is needed to support student affairs, they are not comfortable with the idea of student affairs folks actually doing the research and producing reports.

For example, John Barker, of Oklahoma City Community College, said, "If student affairs had their own research function, competition might arise

between the offices because TR offices are territorial and want to control the quality of campus research." He went on to say that it was doubtful that college presidents would see the information generated by student affairs as institutional data and would probably not support wide dissemination of the reports. All TR personnel did agree that a real benefit of student affairs staff doing their own research was that if they generated the information, they would be more likely to use it. TR personnel also admitted that most of the requests for specific research came from student affairs, although those requests were never treated as priorities. It was suggested that the best solution would be hiring one staff person designated to do research for student affairs and one for academic affairs. The advantage here would be the support of other researchers and the aura of credibility.

The consensus among TR personnel and administrators in community colleges is that short of the ideal, the best advice for student affairs is to establish a good relationship with TR. Working with TR at the conceptual level of a project and allowing TR to interact with the computer staff to generate the raw data can develop this relationship. TR folks want their clients to have faith that what they produce is correct and will meet their needs. All agree that mutual confidence comes with time and experiences of working together.

Attempts to link activities and treatments to educational outcomes are laudable, expected, and necessary for community colleges in today's climate of measuring effectiveness and efficiency. But studying outcomes of education on students from the narrow perspective of academic or student affairs will be minimally useful. If student affairs had a research function, the focus would have to be the impact of the entire institution as well as other influences, including what students bring with them. Ultimately, research in community colleges addresses a larger picture of accountability and effectiveness than the student services area alone. Without abundant, reliable, and consistent collection of data on students, programs, and services, policies will be developed and curricula will be created or dismantled based on hunches and varying kinds of unsubstantiated logic.

Conclusion

In the best of all possible worlds, student affairs units would have resources to do research by student affairs professionals trained in research methodology. They would produce reports on students that would be powerful tools for all units of the college. Student affairs would not only share results of their research, they would act on their findings.

In the absence of this possibility, perhaps there are two ways student affairs can be more involved in research at this stage of development. One of these would be to see more decentralization of research across the institution whereby individual units take on some responsibility, with IR serving in a coordinating role to address the questions of quality control and support for individual researchers. This is done now on an ad hoc basis in many colleges and

universities. Another way to begin to develop a research function in the community college might be to look to the research program in student services in a nearby research university. Staff and resources of the university might cooperate with the community college on mutual priorities such as the student transfer function.

I am optimistic about the future of research in student affairs in community colleges because of pressures to respond to demands for accountability and the verification of institutional outcomes. As the workload of institutional research offices expands to meet increased demands for mandatory reporting to external agencies, there will be the need to find ways to address substantive issues about programs and services. Readily accessible, reliable information available to the institution would spur the improvement of programs for our changing cohorts of students.

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