

Fulfilling American Community College Missions: Perceptions of Community Education Program Leaders

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Abstract

Community education offered through the American community colleges is regarded as the broadest and the most complicated program structure because of its responsiveness to community needs. However, not much research has been done to primarily explore its implementation. The purpose of this research is to explore how community education programs are organized and implemented in American community colleges through the lens of community education program leaders. A phenomenological approach was methodologically employed for this qualitative study. The findings of this research were drawn from the lived experiences of five seasoned community education program directors interviewed, revealing that community education programs had been positively perceived as the integral mechanism in the American community college contexts to link every aspect of institutional missions together with their community-based orientation, affordability and accessibility. Leaders of such programs also encountered resource constraints (shrinking funding, difficulties of faculty recruitment, and a shortage of staff) and administrative hurdles (tensions between credit and non-credit programs, and struggles to balance demand and capacity) in the everyday practice, so that they had to act in a calculating manner to sustain and nurture the longevity of their programs. The study led to the recommendation that the presidents of American community colleges need to re-evaluate their community education programs within the organizational structure in order to guarantee a stable resource base for community education programs for better fulfilling the needs of the surrounding communities. This study shed light on how community education programs have been delivered in contemporary American community colleges..

Keywords: community college; community education; mission; program planning; leadership.

INTRODUCTION

As a distinctive invention taking place in the early 20th century to respond to the increasing demand of the American society for more skilled men and women and for advanced educational opportunities (Deegan, Tillery, & Associates, 1985), community colleges in the United States have provided various educational programs and services to people who otherwise would not have had the opportunities to pursue higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). They also have been regarded as an “effective democratizing agent in higher education” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 6) because of their grassroots origin of standing for open admissions, geographic proximity, and financial affordability to the potential students from the community they served. In other words, social contexts shape the development of the missions of American community colleges, and at the same time the educational programs and services that community colleges offer also reflect various aspects of the demand from the society.

Amongst the three generally-regarded as core programs provided by American community colleges (transfer/collegiate, occupational/vocational, and community education programs), community education is the broadest of the three (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Vaughan, 2000). Community education is a program that “focuses on college-

community interaction, utilizes the community as a learning laboratory and resource, helps to create an environment in which the community educates itself, and evaluates its success by citizen successes that are recognized as significant by the community itself” (McGuire, 1988, p.9). Unlike transfer and occupational education programs that are closely bound by institutional regulations, community education programs are more flexible and able to respond quickly to community needs. With the offerings of community education, American community colleges have had stronger focuses on developing and providing the kind of education that community members want and need, not on what educators and instructors think is good for them (Boone & Vaughan, 1993; Gleazer Jr., 1974a; Harlacher, 1969; McGuire, 1988). Previous studies provide evidence that the scope of community education programs highlights the community college’s unique position to demonstrate to the community it serves its awareness of community needs and willingness to collaborate with various groups in meeting those needs (Gleazer Jr., 1974b; Harlacher, 1969; Harlacher & Gollattscheck, 1978; McGuire, 1988; Phinney, Schoen, & Hause, 2002).

However, community education is also viewed as the most complicated of the core missions (Baker III, 1994; Bergquist, 1998; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Community education programs offered by American community colleges come in many forms, including adult education, continuing education, lifelong learning, community services, and community-based education (Bogart, 1994; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Fields, 1962; Gleazer, 1974b; McGuire, 1988). Contract training is another form that is particularly prevalent in recent years (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In other words, community education offers a large array of programs with various subjects, such as adult ESL classes and summer youth programs, and is expected to be self-sustaining. It is also not rare to see community education programs overlapping with the community college's vocational education function since economic development is a common need of many community residents. On the other hand, the complex nature of community education may have limited the effectiveness of community colleges due to resource constraints. The phenomenon may also have abandoned the educational missions of the community college-developing a democratic society, because market-driven programs are skyrocketing and overpowering. Yet not much research has been done to primarily explore the implementation of community education programs in the contexts of community college setting for better understanding the phenomenon.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the breadth and complexity of the practice of community education, it begs the question of how contemporary American community colleges organize and position their community education programs, in order to better use community resources and to build meaningful relationships with other community organizations for fulfilling their commitments to address the needs of their surrounding constituents. In short, how do community colleges in the 21st century respond to community needs through their community education programs? The purpose of this study is to examine through which mechanisms community education programs are organized to help the local communities. The questions guiding this study are:

1. How do community education program leaders identify community needs?
2. How do community colleges implement community education programs to serve community needs?
3. What are the challenges these leaders facing in the process of delivering community education programs?

MATERIALS AND METHODS: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGY, AND LIMITATIONS

This study was conceptually informed by a community-based programming model that Boone and Associates (1997) created. Community-based

programming is a process involving a series of interconnected tasks in which the community college functions as a leader and catalyst in effecting collaboration among community agencies and organizations to identify and seek resolution of community issues (Boone & Associates, 1997). In other words, the community-based programming model highlights the position of the community college as the catalyst for facilitating and effecting collaboration among people from all sectors of the community system in identifying critical community issues and in developing collective efforts to resolve them. Community education units undoubtedly have strong and frequent interaction with their communities, which position them in the context of the issue-driven and collaborative community-based programming model.

A phenomenological approach was methodologically employed for this study. Phenomenological inquiries focus on the study of how people describe and experience things/feelings through their senses (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). Because the nature of this study was to look at how community education program leaders managed to meet community needs and to fulfill institutional missions, phenomenology was an appropriate approach to understand the essences of the practice of community education programs through the lived experiences of the research participants.

The participants for this study were drawn from American community college senior administrators who held leadership positions in the units of Community Education, Community Services, Continuing Education, and the like (the term community education is exclusively used in this paper to reduce confusions). In a phenomenological study, it is essential that all participants have lived experience being studied (Patton, 1990); therefore, only community education program leaders serving in the positions for at least three consecutive years were chosen. This "criterion sampling" (Miles & Huberman, in Creswell, 1998) strategy increased the likelihood that all potential participants had rich experiences and knowledge of the studied phenomenon.

An invitation email was sent to seasoned community education program leaders in a Midwest state of the U.S. Follow-up phone calls were made two weeks after the email was sent. The final participants were selected depending on their geographical locations, enrollments, and demographic distribution of the service areas. As a result, leaders of community education programs from 3 urban and 2 rural community colleges were selected (respectively coded as A, B, C, D, and E, and "director" was solely used to refer to their leadership position title). Interviews followed an open-ended, semi-structured

protocol focused on their experiences of organizing community education programs to meet community needs. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one, and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Digital recordings were transcribed. Data analysis followed the guidelines of phenomenological analysis (Patton, 1990).

A limitation of this study was that it was conducted in a single state. Even though the state had a sufficient number of community colleges and enrollments, the state was not representative of all community colleges in the United States. Another limitation was that criterion sampling caused a dilemma when the sample pool was small. Since this study focused on program directors who held their leadership positions at respective institutions for at least three years, the total number of qualified institutions was fewer than expected. As result, there was no room to justify sample distribution. There were many showing their interests in this study, but because they were fairly new to the current positions, their voices were not being heard due to the criterion restriction. With a full awareness of the methodological limitations, the researcher did not aim to generalize, but carefully examined each interviewee's first-hand lived experiences without theoretical prejudice and discovered the essences thereof.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means To Identify Community Needs

The participants in this study used similar means to identify community needs.

Community Advisory Groups

Advisory groups and committees composed of local professionals were frequently identified by the community college leaders as informants providing insights into community needs. Community education directors usually took counsel with them, given their expertise and first-hand interaction with local people, to obtain information of what is being demanded by the community in order to furnish them with quality programs and services. Community Education Program Director D from D Community College had formed such groups specifically to help identify community needs:

[M]any of our programs have community advisory groups... [T]hey meet with faculty and staff of that area and talk about these things that we need, these things that we think could help to improve the program. So there's that direct link.

Community Surveys

Conducting periodic community surveys was another way several community college leaders in this study used to systematically assess community needs. As Director E said, "*we've done more purposefully perhaps over the last several years... It has been the*

last ten years that we've done more formal, telephone surveys... We now take a more purposeful approach... It's more of getting in touch with your stakeholders." Similarly, programs at C Community College applied market research, which was regarded as a systematic approach to define the niche of the college; the market research approach helped C Community College continuously evaluate how well the needs fitted into the services it provided.

Public Information

Leaders from a few colleges in this study specified that they used different information sources, including published national trends, local advertisements and classifieds, to gather clues in understanding what current or imminent needs of the community were. "*We read the paper,*" said Director B and, "*I also look at the want ads in the local newspapers to see what employers are looking for,*" said Director C. According to both participants, those written forms of public information hinted the latest social demands and provided college leaders marketing niches.

Informal Contacts

In addition to the formal informants on the advisory committees, participants in this study also identified community needs through informal networks. Director E provided his perspective on this particular information source,

We encourage our staff to be involved in communities... We have a number of staff members who coach youth teams. And all of those types of community services, if you will, are means by which we can gather inputs and look at what is community looking at, what are their needs, are there things that we can do to help if it's something for us to help.

A few participants raised the notion that people from the communities also called the college offices directly to address their concerns and asked the college to react to what they were looking for; this is another way leaders got acquainted with the needs of their service areas. The leader from C Community College shared, "*people from the community call me, or one of my faculty members, and say, you know gee... we need some more people to be trained in this particular area...."* Community members' being comfortable making the initiation to provide feedback to the colleges suggested the ownership that the communities felt towards the community colleges in the areas.

In summary, these approaches indicate that open communication channels are key for the American community colleges to stay connected with their surrounding environments, and every college employee has the responsibility to report what they

know from their after work activities to their institutions. It is also clear that many community colleges have adopted a more data- and information-oriented strategy to assess community needs. All in all, community colleges have frequent interactions with their service areas, through which they can constantly identify what the needs of their clientele.

Implementation of the Community Education Programs

Collectively, research participants from the five community colleges provided rich information to understand the practice of community education programs in American community colleges. This section is made up of three overarching segments contributing to discussing the implementation of community education programs at community colleges.

Strong Community-Based Orientation with Flexibility

According to this empirical study, community education at community colleges was operated by the units like Community Education, Continuing Education, Workforce Development, and Extended Education. In terms of course offerings, these units typically focused on non-credit, short-term, skill-based, enrichment courses that were requested directly from the community. These programs were also expected to be self-supporting. The participants were asked to share how they would describe the community education programs, some quotes are as below:

“Community education is like the illusion of water; communities feed with their needs and the college responds back,” (Director D).

“Community education programs are holding up and reaching out to the community. We are beyond the border of discipline,” (Director B).

“Community education is service, participation, personal enrichment, and workforce,” (Director E).

Those quotes collectively illustrated that community education is a school of pedagogy that is extremely community-based. With a short timeframe, community education is a type of community-based programs that is able to respond to the request from the community with flexibility, affordability, and accessibility. In addition, these descriptors hinted a reciprocal relationship between American community colleges and their service areas.

How program leaders perceived the characteristics of community education in the 21st century were in great accordance to what has been discussed in the

literature. What existing literature had not yet largely discussed was how this type program linked to the fulfillment of community college institutional missions. Based on the data, community education program leaders all believed their current practices were ones that could best respond to community needs without hurting the survival of the institution. They also perceived their units provided offerings that were complementary to the credit programs and their services linked every aspect of institutional mission together.

Programming with Cautious Calculations

Across sites, community education program leaders applied a similar programming process: identifying a need and then evaluating whether or not to turn the need into a program. They further elaborated, if the answer was a no, then the process stopped; if a yes, then they started determining contents, recruiting instructors, and advertising the new programs. Although the process was similar, the leaders assessed each step differently, depending on the contexts of each program and college. For example, program leaders determined the magnitude of a need differently: Director A estimated the possible enrollment numbers while other directors evaluated based on whether or not the need had been or could be served by other providers in the area.

A critical element in the community education program planning process was the consideration of cost-effectiveness. Due to being defined as a self-contained and self-supporting unit, community education program directors were extremely concerned about whether any new initiation was sustainable, especially when there was a substantial set-up cost involved. *“I have to run [my programs] like a business, or at least break even,”* shared by Director B. Similar comments were also made by Directors A and D. Apparently, these leaders acted in a calculating matter when looking for opportunities, in order to ensure that they could still be self-sustaining before making commitments for new programming ideas

Collaboration with External and Internal Agencies

All interviewees mentioned that if their programs could not provide the services requested by the community, they would refer constituents to other providers as alternates. Through such process, a new collaborative relationship was formed, which was more important to the community as a whole since it allowed community resources to be more united and coordinated by connecting different educational providers. With this being said, community education program leaders admitted that they could not be everything to everyone, so it was extremely necessary to partner with other external agencies to broadly serve community needs.

Besides working externally, community education program directors made efforts to build internal collaborative relationships with other units on campus, especially with the degree programs. Such relationships were built primarily to share faculty expertise and campus facilities; Directors B and D commented that working with the academic side of the house also helped them understand and value non-credit community education programs more.

Challenges

Every community college is unique; therefore, research question number 3 sought to ferret out contextual challenges and factors that each program faced. The issues fell into two areas: resource constraints and administrative hurdles.

Resource Constraints

As a self-supporting unit, it is important for community education leaders to have sufficient resources in order to maintain the day-to-day practice and sustain the longevity. A variety of resource-related issues were raised by the interviewees.

Firstly, shrinking governmental funding had forced some community college leaders to cut or reduce their services in order to protect their institutions. E Community College was the one that faced the greatest financial challenges among the five participating sites because of the small local tax base and the increasing cut from the state funding: *"We had to make a lot of staff cuts and program cuts here...we made cuts in community education, non-credit, we made a lot of cuts in that area,"* said the representative from E Community College. C Community College also endured similar pressures; the restrained resource base made the staff less able to start new programs because the college could afford to take the risk of running a program that was not self-sustaining at all.

Second resource constraint was resulted from difficulties in faculty recruitment. Several program directors confessed that it was not always easy to find instructors to teach: *"Finding right people to teach... there's a demand and people want to take this class, but I don't have an instructor,"* Director C said of her biggest challenge. Director E showed his commitment to community accountabilities and claimed that if looking for someone teaching high level skill-based courses, *"the expertise has to come in from outside."* Thus, recruiting instructors locally was somewhat challenging because of a lack of human capital from the area, which could easily lead to the failure of providing highly requested community education courses.

Except Director A, the other four program directors thought that the community education units in their institutions were understaffed, which was categorized

as the third resource constraint. Running multiple scheduling cycles with at least 20% new ideas in average, the community education units at sites B, C, and D housed less than 5 staff members. Director E added, *"we are small and we have people here wearing many hats."* Although the understaffing situation did not seem to decrease the passion that the four program directors had towards their work, they felt stressed and hoped to have a larger staff since *"I know we can do a better job if we have more people,"* quoted by Director C.

Administrative Hurdles

Tension between credit and non-credit programs was the most identified challenge in implementing community education programs in this study. Previous research indicated that many community college leaders believe that credit programs are what matter the most in terms of institutional missions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008); thus negative terms such as "second-class citizen" or "stepchild" were used by the interviewees to describe the status of community education programs. Director B further explained, *"I feel we have to justify our existence to the credit side of the house. Because in academic circles, the only one good is the credit programs."* This study showed that although community education programs were expected to function as self-supporting and usually generated revenues for the college, they were not perceived as important.

Another administrative hurdle which participants talked a lot about as one constant challenge they faced was to balance what the colleges could do and what the community wanted. Across sites, community education program leaders confessed that they could not be everything to everyone, so they had to be calculating about what they were able to do to serve the community with the optimal capacity they could afford. Some leaders frequently struggled with balancing advisory groups' inputs and their professional judgments of what was good for the community, and balancing service quality and contract requirements. Community education program leaders had evolved to develop a mindset of adapting particular schemes to prioritize, or even filter, requests and demands received from the serving areas.

CONCLUSION

Both the history of the American community college movement and previous studies suggested that community colleges' offering of community education programs has become an approach to address community needs. From an organizational perspective, this research explored the phenomena understudied, which was to examine how community education programs were organized and implemented to keep the institutions connected with their local communities. Through the lens of community

education program leaders, this study provided rich data leading to a systematic understanding of how community education programs in community colleges are delivered in the 21st century and how such programs assist their institutions to fulfill the needs of the surrounding communities.

The findings suggested that community education programs in the American community college context nurture and sustain institutions' ties with their surrounding environments, given their flexibility to provide offerings that are less bound by institutional rules. By means of a more data- and information-oriented strategy to assess community needs, community college leaders frequently search for inspiration for new program ideas and feedbacks, and then endeavor to incorporate what is requested into their existing programs as long as they are able to.

Participants in this study positively perceived community education programs as the integral mechanism in the American community college settings to link every aspect of institutional missions together, since such distinctive programs were equipped with the characteristics of being community-based, affordable and accessible. Yet the findings also indicated that institutional structures and culture would hinder the effectiveness of community education programs, particularly when tensions between these activities and credit/degree programs were increasing. If community college leaders still believe in the value of community education programs and their contribution to the fulfillment of institutional missions, they must make efforts to relinquish the inferiority of being termed as stepchild or second citizen and to position both credit and community education programs in ways that allow them to work collaboratively.

From the findings, it also emerged that restrained fiscal and human resources inevitably affected the implementation of community education programs. Community college leaders acknowledge that they cannot accept all that is being asked of so that they have to prioritize the multiple needs of the communities or even at least sometimes decline certain requests. It is apparent that while as important as fulfilling community needs, community education program leaders are keen on developing a mindset of being calculating in order to keep the programs viable and sustainable.

With the above findings, it is therefore recommended that senior leaders of American community colleges, particularly the presidents, need to re-evaluate and re-position their community education programs within the organizational structure. It is a reality that community college leaders have to prioritize their services, however, it is important for leaders to diminish the misconception that the role of community education is by all means inferior to

degree programs. Presidential support is valuable in increasing the visibility of community education units among other credit programs; once the organizational tension is lessened, community education program leaders may be able to receive a more stable resource base that would in turn allow them to expand their capacity of fluffing the needs of the surrounding communities.

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