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The Negative Commandments: Ten Ways Urban Community Colleges Hinder Student Success

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The Negative Commandments: Ten Ways Urban Community Colleges Hinder Student Success

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This article highlights ten negative operative principles identified through focus group interviews conducted on 9 urban campuses with faculty, students, and administrators. Together with its sister paper “The Positive Commandments”, the list of operatives serve as an indication of appropriate practices.

Keywords: Community Colleges; Institutional Effectiveness

The community college is an American educational success story. Through their open-door admissions policy, community colleges admit and then remediate the under-prepared, provide vocational training for those in need of vocational or technical skills, and offer all curricula at varied times on weekdays and weekends. Community colleges provide convenient access to those with work or family constraints that would have prevented attendance under more traditional circumstances. Despite the documented successes of the American community college, critics maintain concerns about the quality of education students receive and the value of vocational training. For example, some have asked whether one institution can simultaneously prepare students for rigorous undergraduate study and train competent workers to pursue vocations not requiring a bachelor degree (Dougherty, 1994). Others question how one institution can provide both of these services to a diverse student population with complex needs while adhering to state budgets and remaining competitive with four-year universities in terms of resources offered.

One of the goals of the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) project was to understand how the community college fulfills its multiple missions. This article uses qualitative data collected through a series of focus groups with students, faculty and administrators held at the nine Los Angeles campuses during the Fall semester of 2001.

In a sister paper, published in the *Community College Journal*, we described ten “positive commandments” or factors that promote student success (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006). Here we took the opposite approach, highlighting ten negative operating principles found to be consistent among the focus group interviews we conducted. Thus this article takes the approach of what NOT to do. Taken together, these lists of positive and

negative “commandments” formed the basis of ongoing research designed to illustrate the duality of institutional management.

While we identified the best practices and commend the community college system for its advocacy of student potential and development, we also found areas needing attention. Some of these flaws were inherent to urban environments, where issues of transportation, access, and diversity were pressing. However, other problems we identified were endemic to the larger, two-year system of education and speak to its shortcomings in areas of resource development, bureaucratic policies/procedures, and campus architecture.

The ten negative commandments detail what the community colleges should NOT do, practice, and create. We hope that combined with the positive commandments (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2006) this set of operatives gives simple guidance to community colleges. For the sake of convenience, at the end of this article, we have also included a list of the positive commandments as well as the negative ones discussed herein.

Commandment I: *Thou shalt NOT underestimate the need for accurate and consistent general counseling services.*

One of the most consistent complaints we heard from students was that general counseling services were inadequate. In some cases, students reported that staff counselors gave false or misleading information. For an academically savvy student, the issue of misinformation may not be significant because s/he is most often equipped to decipher accurate and misguided advice regarding major or transfer requirement; however, for a student without much experience, one wrong suggestion can lead to a string of problems that result in student apathy or even dropout (Tinto, 1987).

At Campus 1¹ three students emphasized the poor quality of advisement they received. Students at Campus 8 complained that counselors were not proactive in reaching out to them, and that once students did visit the counseling center, frequent negative interactions reinforced their lack of trust in whatever advice they received. For example, one student summarized his experience:

My first impression of a counselor was horrible. I talked to him and he was yawning the whole time like he was too tired to help me. It was early in the morning (8 a.m.). I can't get past that first impression. As a result of that experience with a counselor I just said to myself 'forget it' and I didn't register for classes or come back that semester.

Several students interviewed by the TRUCCS team indicated that poor service had undermined their faith in the system.

Students at Campuses 2, 4, and 6 complained of counselors who either did not help them or were discouraging in their remarks regarding intended goals. One disgruntled student explained, “The process of getting in to see a counselor is difficult. There is no follow-up and there is no encouragement to come back.” At Campus 4, a woman lamented that when she indicated to her counselor a desire to attend one of the University of California

¹ Instead of revealing information specific to a given Campus in Los Angeles, we have chosen to label the Campuses 1-9 in random order to protect the identities of those we interviewed.

(UC) campuses her counselor did not provide her with information about UC admissions but rather suggested that she consider a lower-tier university. She left the meeting feeling defeated: “The counselor made me want to cry. They should be more encouraging.” Several other students explained how bits and pieces of misleading information they received from counselors led to an array of negative consequences such as late registration fees or even delayed graduation.

Commandment II: *Thou shalt NOT neglect programs targeted specifically at transfer and retention.*

Faculty and administrators at a number of the campuses were forthright about the need to increase staff in student services that specifically target retention and transfer. These services included, but were not limited to: tutoring, counseling, admissions and records, career/transfer centers and computer/writing labs. For some campuses a major problem was rooted in a lack of self-promotion: “We need to do a better job of communicating to students what services are available to them.” More broadly, however, the problem was linked to limitations associated with low-level state funding. According to one administrator at Campus 7, “It would be nice to have more support for the transfer center. Just having a line item budget for the year instead of having to use so many budgets scraping for money would be helpful.” A similar comment was made by a senior administrator from Campus 8: “I think we do phenomenal things in student services given what we have to work with; but if we had more funding we could expand our services in the transfer center and maybe take students on more bus trips, more field trips.” The students we spoke with did not mention a desire for excursions from campus; rather, they wanted workshops on study skills, tutoring programs, and general support for students who need mentoring.

Commandment III: *Thou shalt NOT view or treat occupational programs as “second class”.*

Critics of the community college system often cited development of career education programs as an example of the way two-year colleges have devolved into job training centers and moved further away from the mission of providing quality academic preparation for baccalaureate study (Clowes & Levin, 1994). However, anyone familiar with the history of the community college is aware that vocational departments have flourished on two-year campuses since the 1960s. Further, enrollment has continued to grow as practical training becomes more in demand and corporations expand their partnerships with campuses to legitimize and subsidize industry-specific programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Students who seek certification in auto repair or criminal justice should have opportunities to find the courses they need and receive adequate institutional and financial support to complete their studies in a timely and convenient manner – just like their counterparts in traditional academic programs. To distinguish between them or privilege one type of training over the other is to engage in a kind of academic elitism that is anathema to the community college mission.

Commandment IV: *Thou Shalt NOT* prolong unnecessary bureaucracy which takes time away from student services and administration.

Bureaucracy is the enemy of efficiency in every kind of organization; no office or institution is immune. The TRUCCS team found that students in focus groups did not complain about the issue of bureaucracy *per se*, but rather about the various symptoms of its presence on their campuses. One administrator from Campus 8 was passionate about the need to reduce time spent on bureaucratic matters and get back to the business of serving students. His main struggle was with the “amount of redundant paperwork” and other processes that slow administrators down. When asked to elaborate on these processes, he replied, “things I think sometimes get in the way of your wanting to do the right kind of job.” At the campus level, staff and administration must work together in order to enhance the ability of all offices to operate effectively. At the district level, there needs to be an increased awareness of the fiscal and personnel limitations of each campus, which dictates the amount of work any particular administration can produce before the strains of bureaucratic procedure overwhelm staff and negatively impact students.

Commandment V: *Thou Shalt NOT* make it difficult or impossible for students to know where or to whom they can go for help or questions.

Much of the literature on community college retention has verified the importance of a strong connection between student persistence and interpersonal bonds with peers, faculty and their environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Richardson, 1994; Tinto, 1987). The TRUCCS team noted myriad ways in which the LACCD impeded the development of such bonds. Part of the problem was a lack of space, say administrators at Campus 8, who admit that “creating a feeling of connection has a lot to do with retention”; these administrators also conceded, “The research on retention says that students drop out because they don’t feel connected to the family. So if we can find ways to connect them, even through a service or a person or a setting then it’s more likely that students will be retained.” Campus 8 was outdated with buildings from a different era that were hardly large enough to house the current number of students enrolled in scheduled classes. As a consequence, there were no designated study areas or facilities reserved for student organizations. Students from Campus 8 echoed the need for more open, student-friendly space. Without adequate resources, though, administrators were prevented from making substantive changes to improve student integration through construction or remodeling.

Commandment VI: *Thou shalt NOT* discount the role and importance of technology.

Student and faculty email accounts, computer labs, electronic library reserves and other applications of technology can be powerful resources for student success. Just like their counterparts at four-year universities, students at community colleges must type papers, complete Internet assignments and communicate via e-mail. Although two- and four-year students share the same technological needs, differences in access to technological resources were profound. Many community college students cannot afford a home computer, especially one with Internet access. Thus it was not surprising that many two-year students rely entirely on their college campuses to provide access to computers and the Internet for their class assignments. At Campus 1 students often experienced difficulty with the computers on campus because they are prone to viruses. For example, when the lab shut

down to service computers, students were unable to get their homework done on time, which impacted their progress and resulted in poor class performance. Part of the problem was that lab staff did not monitor student use of the computers or utilize proper software to prevent virus infection from student disks. Therefore additional training and increased staff monitoring of students in the lab are necessary to prevent the problems associated with impaired access to computers for required assignments. At Campuses 4, 6, and 7 students also complained about limited and outdated technological resources. Newer, faster computers equipped with contemporary, updated software would allow students to be technologically up-to-date.

Commandment VII: *Thou shalt NOT offer an insufficient number of sections of general education courses.*

Community college students must work to meet general education requirements – most of which involve math, English and social sciences. Frequently these classes were filled as soon as they were offered and waiting lists had to be established for those who registered late or tried to add a course at the last minute. Students at almost all of the campuses we visited voiced disappointment with the number of courses offered in basic English and math. At Campus 1, students felt that there was an insufficient variety of classes offered. Conversely, upper-level math and English classes were often closed due to low enrollment barring students from enrollment. For some students, the inability to take the course in a timely manner added a semester or more of time before they were able to transfer to a four-year college or university. Community colleges must be cognizant that some universities will not allow students to transfer without having first completed the general education curriculum plus some advanced course work. For students who wanted to transfer and pursue a bachelor degree, the problem of limited course offerings was serious. Some students actually chose to attend multiple colleges to piece together an appropriate schedule of the courses they needed.

Commandment VIII: *Thou shalt NOT heavily rely on part-time faculty who hold sparse office hours and thus appear inaccessible to students in need of support and encouragement.*

This commandment is directly related to commandment seven, in that adjunct faculty were often contracted to teach basic courses in math, English, and the social sciences. Many tenured faculty preferred to teach upper-level or more intellectually rigorous courses. Most students saw the distinction between tenured and non-tenured faculty and the courses they taught as counter-intuitive. Students desired more experienced teachers because they were more likely to have office space and office hours and thus available to assist students who had problems with assignments. While part-time faculty were generally committed to teaching, their status necessarily demanded a decreased commitment to a particular campus. Some community college adjuncts were labeled ‘freeway flyers’ because they commuted daily to multiple campuses. While they taught only one or two courses at a particular campus, they felt forced to teach at three or four campuses to make a living. The result is a lack of time to interact with students or develop long-term connections or mentoring roles.

Commandment IX: *Thou shalt NOT* discount the importance of the physical environment and auxiliary services such as a student center, cafeteria, and places for students to meet and study in groups.

The overwhelming response from students at all of the campuses was that community colleges in Los Angeles sometimes do not “feel” like colleges because they were not properly integrated into the environment. Space was limited, not only in terms of classrooms, but also in campus parking lots – where even those students who paid for permits sometimes could not find a place to park. In some instances buildings and landscape were not attractively maintained. At two of the campuses we visited, courses were taught in Quonset huts or portable facilities. On this topic, at Campus 8, an administrator notes: “We could have a much more attractive place for students to come to.”

Commandment X: *Thou shalt NOT* neglect job placement services and internships for students who have designated or declared a specific career path or who have demonstrated a specific and marketable skill.

In technical fields like computer science, internships provided an invaluable means for gaining experience that leads to job offers upon graduation for students who earned certificates or A.S. degrees. Today’s economy has widened the appeal for occupational education as many people, some with previous degrees, are enrolling in the community college specifically in search of career training. To serve the needs of the community it was imperative for campuses to offer and advertise job placement services. This can be done through counseling centers or other student services offices, where the staff has regular contact with students at all stages of their academic development. If students were made aware of opportunities available to them upon completion of course work, they could begin planning for their futures and setting goals. Community colleges could make a difference in every student’s development by showing him/her the options available in terms of career paths he/she can pursue.

Conclusion

While the emphasis on negative “commandments” may appear didactic, our goal was to highlight areas of concern and then make recommendations for ways to solve some of these problems. After conducting this initial round of focus groups and discovering patterns of recurring themes, we hoped to construct an initial template and begin a larger conversation about the lessons one can learn from an urban district in Los Angeles. None of the issues we have explored here can be adequately addressed in a brief paper, and almost all will require long-term changes in current policies. We necessarily leave a great deal of stones unturned, but through other venues and publications the TRUCCS Project has delved into these areas specifically using transcript analysis and questionnaire data.

Students may be the best judges for the environment and services best suited to their needs. Community colleges, by virtue of their missions, attract large proportions of students who benefit from careful support and attention to details. The moral of this article is to listen to student voices and then to take actions as directed.

The Positive Community Colleges Commandments

Commandment I: Encourage faculty-student interaction by recruiting instructors who offer time, attention and resources to facilitate student development and including student interaction in the faculty reward system.

Commandment II: Offer affordable education together with multiple forms of financial aid.

Commandment III: Offer flexibility in course times and offerings by opening sections to suit student demand and convenience.

Commandment IV: Maintain transfer centers where students can receive information to allow them to identify four-year schools that offer and/or specialize in the course of study they wish to pursue.

Commandment V: Hire and retain faculty who are experts in their discipline.

Commandment VI: Promote student study skills and academic preparation through on-campus assistance with writing, computer skills and learning resources.

Commandment VII: Provide sufficient technology and/or computer access for all students at convenient times.

Commandment VIII: Provide campuses in key locations so students can attend classes locally and not travel far from home or work.

Commandment IX: Incorporate work study programs so students can work and study in one place, allowing them to take more classes or focus more directly on their degree or certificate progress.

Commandment X: Hold career days and fairs, and offer career counseling, to expose students to diverse career paths and employment opportunities.

The Negative Community Colleges Commandments

Commandment I: *Thou shalt NOT* underestimate the need for accurate and consistent general counseling services.

Commandment II: *Thou shalt NOT* neglect programs targeted specifically at transfer and retention.

Commandment III: *Thou shalt NOT* view occupational programs “second class”.

Commandment IV: *Thou shalt NOT* prolong unnecessary bureaucracy which takes time away from student services and administration.

Commandment V: *Thou shalt NOT* disconnect students from their campuses. There should be a central place for students to turn when they need help or have questions.

Commandment VI: *Thou shalt NOT* discount the role and importance of technology.

Commandment VII: *Thou shalt NOT* offer an insufficient number of sections of basic English and math courses

Commandment VIII: *Thou shalt NOT* heavily rely on part-time faculty who hold sparse office hours and thus appear inaccessible to students in need of support and encouragement.

Commandment IX: *Thou shalt NOT* discount the importance of the physical environment and auxiliary services such as a student center, cafeteria and places for students to meet and study in groups.

Commandment X: *Thou shalt NOT* neglect job placement services and internships for students who have designated or declared a specific career path or who have demonstrated a specific and marketable skill.

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