Community College Leadership Programs: A Review of the Literature

Sydney Freeman, Jr.
Gracie Forthun

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/sydney_freeman_jr/50/
The community college leadership crisis has been well documented in the literature of higher education studies. Due to the impending retirements of the baby boomer generation, community colleges may soon lack presidents and other administrators (Smith, 2011; Hull, 2005). Others recognized this danger a decade earlier, however. In 2001, Evelyn published an article drawing attention to the lack of qualified applicants for high-level administrative positions in community colleges (Evelyn 2001). Pointing to competition for applicants from public K-12 schools and concerns that pipelines to
high-level administrative positions were insufficient, Evelyn predicted a coming shortage of community college leadership (Evelyn 2001).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2016), recognizing this problem by the early 2000s, held multiple leadership summits with existing community college leaders in an attempt to discover what future community college leaders would need to know and do in order to fill the rapidly vacating positions. Distilling the results of these summits, in 2005 the AACC compiled and published a set of essential competencies for community college leaders in the hope that they would provide guidance for community college leadership programs—and, by extension, that more leaders would emerge, well prepared to take the reins of community college administration.

Soon, scholars became interested in learning how well community college leadership programs were addressing the void in leadership they had been designed to fill. In 2010, Bornheimer conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of leadership development programs for present administrators and faculty on the shortage of community college administrators. The results of Bornheimer’s study indicated that while community college leadership development programs stand in need of further development, they have been instrumental in alleviating the administrator shortage and in producing more competent leaders.

Although “in house” community college leadership programs are doing their part to combat the shortage of community college leadership, they are not the dominant producers of community college administrators. Friedel (2010) writes that

Community college leadership programs may take a variety of forms, among them university-based programs, leadership institutes, community college-based “grow your own” programs, professional organization-based institutes, or a combination of these. University-based doctorate leadership programs are the principal providers of these leaders (p. 51).

This literature review is intended to provide an overview of the solution to the community college leadership crisis; namely, community college leadership programs that train administrators for the day-to-day, real-world challenges they will face in the community college system.

**History of Community College Leadership Programs**

According to Goodchild (1996), the birth of modern higher education programs occurred in 1893, when G. Stanley Hall, Clark University’s president, pioneered a course in higher education problems. Eventually
augmenting the course with related offerings while performing and publishing higher education research, Hall and his colleagues established a precedent for higher education as a field of study. Desiring to reform university culture by strongly emphasizing the importance of research, Hall found it imperative to train the next generation of administrators to meet this goal. By the 1920s, several other universities had followed Clark University’s direction and had established programs to train higher education administrators. While these programs were initially designed to furnish leadership for the rapidly multiplying junior colleges of the day, the field’s focus eventually broadened to include leadership programs oriented toward other colleges and universities.

The proliferation of community colleges was not merely a 1920s phenomenon, however. Hagedorn and Punamasari (2014) report that during the 1960s, new community colleges were appearing quickly enough that finding properly prepared leadership became a serious concern. In response to the predicted scarcity of administrators, particularly community college presidents, universities began to add community college leadership programs to their education departments.

Although changes in the roles of community college administrators from the 1960s onward have been documented, Brown, Martinez, and Daniel (2002) wrote that by the beginning of the 21st century, there was no documentation of any restructuring of the programs designed to prepare community college leaders. These researchers discovered that when current community college administrators were asked to identify the vital skills and competencies necessary for success, their values differed—sometimes sharply—from those espoused by the community college leadership programs in which they had been trained.

In harmony with these findings, Young (1996) argued that “In view of today’s needs, the challenge of providing administrative leadership for two-year colleges exists in a vastly different social milieu than that of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s” (p. 13). Stressing the importance of being responsive to the changing needs of community colleges, which in turn respond to the changing needs of their locales, Young recommended that community college leadership programs remain sensitive to the development of the community college system (1996).
According to Hagedorn and Purnamasari (2014), community college leadership programs can be defined as graduate degrees, primarily at the doctorate level but sometimes at the master’s level, that are designed to prepare students for employment as community college administrators. Often targeted toward working professional students, particularly those who are already employed in higher education administration, such degree programs frequently offer nontraditional schedules, accelerated courses, and online instruction, structured in a cohort model (MSU, 2000; McPhail, Robinson, & Scott, 2008). In 1994 Keim surveyed 58 doctoral programs with an emphasis in community college leadership and found that these programs had the following characteristics: (a) not well defined, (b) variety of degree offerings were confusing, (c) programs were small, (d) ethnic minorities were a sizable population of the programs that were not tracked for program completion and success in employment post-graduation, (e) standards for programs admissions were varied, and (f) program requirements were also varied.

Over the years, particularly doctorates in community college leadership have been viewed to be valuable credentials amongst community college presidents (Hammons & Miller, 2006; Townsend & Wiese, 1990). These doctoral degrees have been perceived as an important credential for those seeking advancement into the middle or senior level administrative ranks of these institutions.

However, program offerings for community college leadership are not necessarily standardized (Hammons & Miller, 2006). While Hagedorn and Purnamasari (2014) argue for the definition of community college leadership programs as graduate degrees or graduate-level certificates, they acknowledge the existence of nondegree professional development options and elective courses available to aspiring community college leaders, stipulating that these courses should not be considered, in and of themselves, as adequate preparation for community college leadership.

Perhaps due to the practical, vocational orientation of community colleges, enrollment tends to rise in times of economic downturn, resulting in increased leadership demands (see Hagedorn and Purnamasari, 2014). Friedel (2010) argued that community college leadership programs, in response to these demands, should be tailored to the practical needs of community colleges. Rather than offering research-focused PhD programs to future leader-practitioners, Friedel recommended programs such as California State University Northridge’s EdD, which focuses on
..., preparation of competent and reflective leaders committed to moral and ethical actions and capable of serving as change agents and solving problems in complex organizations” (p. 56).

Because graduate degrees specializing in community college leadership are predominantly a response to the recent community college leadership crisis (see Smith, 2011 and Friedel, 2010), there are few published studies documenting the specifics of curriculum or contrasting the effectiveness of individual degree programs within this field of graduate study. However, Townsend (1996) found that faculty within these leadership programs have significant influence in the following areas, which include, who is admitted, what curriculum is taught, who teaches, and how students are treated. Further research is needed to help universities offering graduate degrees in community college leadership assess, evaluate, and optimize their programs.

**Current Community College Environment**

Per the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2016), community colleges serve a diverse body of students for a broad range of purposes. In addition to serving students who might be labeled as “at risk”—including low-income, first-generation students and minorities—community colleges also cater to part-time and nontraditional students, such as working professionals. However, Eddy (2008) warned higher education researchers against assuming community colleges were contextually similar; Hardy and Katsinas (2007), as cited in Eddy, noted that, among other disparities, there are substantial differences in enrollment numbers between publicly and privately controlled two-year institutions (publicly controlled community colleges enroll, on average, 10,957 students, while privately controlled community colleges enroll an average of only 705).

The AACC (2016) reports that while some students attend community college with the intention of later transferring to universities, others attend to learn specific skills related to job acquisition or advancement. There are also students who attend community college for personal fulfillment, rather than academic credits or career benefits.

In contrast to the practices of many four-year colleges and universities, community colleges generally offer low tuition rates, making college studies more accessible to members of the area the colleges serve. Indeed, community colleges enroll nearly half of all American undergraduate students, according to the AACC (2016).
Grow-Your-Own, or “In-House” Training for Community College Leaders

Some community colleges, facing a shortage of leadership, opt to train existing employees to become administrators (Hull, 2005). According to Rowan (2012), this practice is apparently economically beneficial for the community college; it also allows the institution to train leaders who are particularly aware of the unique needs and the culture of their employer. Hammons and Miller (2006) noted that a common shortcoming of graduate preparation programs for community college leadership is a lack of opportunities for students to interact with current practitioners and real-world scenarios; “grow-your-own” community college leadership programs would seem to be an ideal remedy for this problem.

However, there is a potential for the training to be too institution-specific to be applicable to other community colleges. While Rowan (2012) acknowledged the merits of Grow-Your-Own leadership training programs (GYO)—increased upward mobility at the institution where training occurred, investment in community college employees, and opportunities for employees to engage with other leaders at their workplace—she also noted several limitations of such programs. Her study revealed a lack of infrastructure in the GYO program under consideration, as well as a lack of rigorous program evaluation. These limitations could easily be generalized to apply to GYO programs, as such programs, by their very nature, are neither accredited nor accountable to a body outside the community college they serve.

Reille, Kezar, Marshall, and Sundt (2009) noted similar benefits and limitations of GYO community college leadership programs. While these programs provide training targeted that can be easily customized and applied to the institution offering the training, as well as “real world” experiences for employees, they can also contribute to an “ingrown” culture. These authors provided multiple recommendations to combat an excessively inward program focus:

First, be aware of local biases. Second, conduct a needs assessment to customize the program to the culture of the campus . . . and to overcome the local biases. Third, pair the needs assessment with national leadership competencies and best pedagogical practices for learning leadership, such as mentoring, job shadowing, and team projects. Fourth, use both internal and external speakers. Fifth, consider a regional program to balance potential limitations of campus-based GYOs. And sixth, assess the program’s effectiveness (p. 77).
Standards for Community College Leadership Programs

Although community college leadership programs are not obliged to incorporate or refer to them when developing coursework or determining desired outcomes, the AACC (2016) has laboriously compiled and published a set of recommended core competencies for community college administrators based on community college leadership summits and survey data. These six competencies, including organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism, were developed and described based on the skills and abilities existing leaders widely agreed to be essential to community college leadership (Sinady, Floyd, & Mulder, 2010).

Regardless of their merits, Curphy (2011) wrote that search committees for community college presidents were not referring to the competencies recommended by the American Association of Community Colleges. Rather, individual community colleges in Curphy’s study determined and announced their own desired competencies. Unfortunately, these competency priorities differed considerably from the skills new community college presidents reported to be most crucial to their success. Therefore, Curphy recommended that community college leadership searches consider not only the leadership characteristics and competencies desirable to the search committee, but also the practical ones that the leader will have to use to perform his or her duties.

As can be expected when a set of voluntary guidelines exists, some institutions do make use of the AACC leadership competencies. According to Robinson’s 2014 study, the directors of GYO community college leadership programs are aware of and implementing these guidelines at their institutions. While Reille and Kezar (2010) sampled a different community college population and concluded that directors of GYO leadership programs were not often aware of and implementing the AACC competencies, this is understandable in light of the fact that GYO leadership programs are not externally accredited and, thus, they are not obligated to comply with external standards. It is reasonable to assume that some institutions will rely on the AACC competencies as guidelines for their GYO leadership programs while others will not.

Interestingly, McNair, Duree, and Ebbers (2011) reported that the AACC competencies were widely regarded in a favorable light. Nevertheless, favorable perception did not translate to uniform application; they pointed to research by Eddy (2010), who demonstrated that “the competencies may not be fully integrated into doctoral programs in community college leadership or other professional development activities” (p. 6).
The Skills Community College Administrators Believe They Need

Although the AACC established a formal list of core competencies for community college leaders, research demonstrates that community college administrators, themselves, have strong opinions regarding the skills and competencies necessary for success in their field. According to Fox, whose 2008 study recorded in rich detail the perspectives of community college presidents on the skills necessary for success in the community college presidency, the most important personal characteristics for community college presidents include ethics, modesty, passion, listening, trust, and inspiration. Similarly, the community college presidents who participated in the study strongly emphasized the personal, rather than the organizational, aspects of community college leadership. And Campbell & Leverty (1997) found that community college presidents believed that the following leadership attributes are important for them to be successful: utilizing data/logic, critical evaluation of ideas, forward planning and decision-making, preference for a nontraditional work culture. Eddy (2008) recommends that programs should also focus on helping leaders develop skills in cultural competency. In the Wilson-Strauss (2005) study, he shares that there may be the need for community college leadership graduate preparation programs that specifically focus on student affairs. And if not a specific program, an emphasis within these programs should be dedicated to student affairs issues.

The AACC’s core competencies reflect a picture of a leader whose primary duty is to direct an organization. Fox’s study participants seemed to emphasize the relational aspects of their administrative careers—engaging with students, faculty, and staff, for example—more than they did the directional aspects. (For a similar discussion of the differences in emphasis between AACC core competencies and the professional skills valued by community college administrators, see Bassoppo-Moyo and Townsend, 1997; also see Mapp, 2007). McNair (2009) found that fundraising/institutional advancement, strategic thinking, being a mentor, community development, leadership working with diverse populations, technology, collaboration with K-12 partners, and data-driven decisions are competencies that could be added to the list to reflect the leadership needs of today’s community colleges.

Scholars recommend that there needs to be conversations and collaborations between current community college practitioners/leaders and faculty to ensure that the coursework is relevant and up-to-date (Hammons & Miller, 2006; Hull, 2005; Keim & Hull, 2007; Wilson-Strauss,
2005). However, Palmer & Katsinas (1996) admonishes faculty that they have the choice to be advocates in their teaching and scholarship for the community college sector, but they should not be pressured by community college practitioners to do so.

Ongoing and continuing leadership development and education is important for leaders beyond the doctorate (Hull & Keim, 2007; Hankin, 1996). Hull and Keim (2007) mention that some of the most popular programs that are attended by community college leaders are the Chair Academy, the Executive Leadership Initiative, Future Leaders Institute, the American Council on Education Fellows Program, and Harvard’s Institutes for Educational Management. However, Hull and Keim (2007) admonish that such programs, along with GYO initiatives, should be evaluated continually for their quality, relevancy, and applicability to the community college context.

**Conclusion**

There are many differences between community colleges and four-year colleges, which result in contrasting institutional cultures and student populations. Katsinas (1996) argues that “students in graduate programs for community college leaders need to be exposed to the diversity in community college governance, finance, economic development, students, and curriculum issues; graduate programs need to emphasize diversity in community colleges rather than portray them in the aggregate” (p.24). According to Witkow, Gillen-O’Neel, and Fuligni (2012), traditionally aged students of community colleges, in comparison to students of four-year colleges,

... were much more likely to live at home with their parents, and they reported... that a smaller proportion of their friends attend their college. They also reported lower levels of engaging in academic activities with their friends, and they were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities (p. 249).

These researchers also noted that community college students were less likely to identify with their institutions (a considerable aid to student retention) than were four-year college students. This appeared to be a result of fewer or less easily accessible “aspects of social engagement that matter for students’ sense of identification” (p. 249).

Additionally, there are notable differences in career outcomes between students of community colleges and those of four-year institutions. According to Monk-Turner (1990), community college students are more
likely to achieve low-prestige careers, even after transferring to a four-year college, than are four-year college students who began at four-year colleges.

Similarly, Monk-Turner (1994) reported that, in terms of financial investment return, “Community college and four-year college education cannot properly be treated as homogeneous” (p. 446). Regardless of factors such as mental ability and socioeconomic background, Monk-Turner demonstrated that community college students consistently earned less than their four-year college counterparts; she did not note, however, the obvious advantages of a community college education in comparison to the lack of any higher education.

The AACC (2016) describes community colleges, by their very nature, as institutions designed to make higher education as accessible as possible; although they may be considered the “bottom rung” of the higher education ladder, they undeniably assist those for whom admittance to a more selective college or university would be impossible or impractical. Community colleges, therefore, have an important place in the American system of higher education—a different place than four-year colleges and universities, certainly, but an unquestionably important one.

Because of the contrasts between community colleges and four-year institutions, it is apparent that administrators of these contrasting institutions will require differing preparations and skill sets in order to perform successfully. Whereas university presidents may have the freedom to guide their institutions toward exclusivity, and, in the case of public universities, with a comparative abundance of public funds, community college presidents must be prepared to lead institutions that serve the needs of everyone in their locale, no matter how challenging those needs might be to meet—oftentimes, according to Phelan (2014)—with an unpredictable supply of funds.

The objective of this paper was to discuss the history, current state, and future role of community college leadership programs in addressing the issue of preparing the next generation of leaders for this educational sector. We argue that community college leadership programs are well positioned to prepare these potential administrators if they continue to engage practitioner/leaders regarding the needs of the field. We challenge community college leaders to take action and be willing to work with programs so that they can refine their course offerings so that they are relevant. And that faculty members be attentive to the needs of the sector so that their scholarship and their instruction is valued by those that are reading their work and ultimately hiring their graduates.
References


Townsend, B. K. (1996, Fall). The role of the professoriate in influencing future community college leadership. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, No. 95, 59–64.

