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Our University: The Power of Community Colleges

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Our University: The power of Community Colleges

Clark Kerr, the former chancellor of the University of California, had a good idea. He wanted to make college more affordable for more people, and simultaneously build excellence in higher education for California.

He did both.

He proposed a three-tiered statewide system for higher education: Community colleges allowing broad access and teaching excellence for workforce education and university preparedness, research universities focused on research and innovation, and state colleges granting bachelor's and master's degrees. This created a potent environment for higher education in California.

There are roughly 1,200 community colleges nationally, serving 6.5 million students. In all but ten states 70% of the population lives within 25 miles of a community college. In twenty states 90% of the population lives within the same access radius according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Community Colleges are open, convenient, and cost effective and are educational outposts for research universities, not competition.

Kerr had the gift of a compelling vision.

With the establishment of the Samuel Silver Space Sciences Laboratory at Berkeley in 1959, it could be argued that Kerr shepherded an outstanding Berkeley faculty to help put a man on the moon.

The high-energy focus was facilitated by serving the people of California with excellent, mission-specific institutions allowing everyone a chance to achieve a level of education bridled only by ability and drive. Elite institutions can focus on the loftiest scientific and creative national dreams and aspirations.

The precarious balance supporting Kerr's vision was anchored on the one side by egalitarianism (community colleges) and on the other with elitism (highly selective research universities), galvanized through relentlessly enforced mission specificity.

And despite the specter of entitlement foul-ups, and weak-kneed leadership the educational opportunity provided in this configuration has proven to be the best in the world and has led to scientific advancement and economic development that are the envy of every state in the nation.

For this model to work universities must partner with community colleges and create seamless transfer opportunities to qualified students. This requires communication, shared goals and divided responsibilities. This is, I believe, what President Obama has in mind with his attention directed to the community colleges of the nation.

But it can't happen from Washington or in state capitals mired in partisan politics, because ideological battles trump focus and excellence at every turn. All fifty states own policy directives that encourage transfer right now. In order for community colleges to meet student's needs and feed university enrollment, articulation and transfer must be student- and program-centered.

Effective relationships that serve student stair-climbing are initiated by policy but must be nurtured by action at the academic program level by faculty and department leaders. People desire this opportunity. Community college enrollment continues to outpace other post secondary institutional enrollment growth. According to the Texas Association of Community Colleges enrollment was up 13 percent last year and bigger increases are predicted next year.

Dave Spence, the president of the Southern Regional Education Board suggests that Florida leads in the transfer initiative. But what it boils down to is relationships between degree granting programs at four year institutions and degree granting programs at two year institutions working together across traditional boundaries to serve the student.

A strong network of focused institutions creates opportunity and the foundation for new ideas and economic strength at research universities, which builds state and national strength through the egalitarian opportunity provided by community colleges.

Without effective community colleges in the higher education matrix, research universities will fail to meet our national needs.

Want to go to Mars? Appreciate mission-focused community colleges as engines of opportunity and efficiency for university and workforce preparation.