

“California Community Colleges provides opportunities to all who seek them and is a powerful force for breaking down systemic inequities that block too many students from attaining the career and life they want.”

— California Community College Chancellor’s “Vision for Success”

Liberal Arts in Community Colleges? What's the Point?

The relevance of a liberal education in a tough, messy, and demanding world.

by Deirdre Frontczak, Ph.D.,

As I write this essay, the news in the background makes learning—anything—a challenge. Humanitarian disaster threatens Afghanistan as allies and adversaries point fingers across the globe. Historic wildfires devour huge swaths of the state while Californians prepare for the rolling blackouts and water shortages we now expect. Meanwhile the pandemic resurges, vaccinations plateau, and battle lines harden between political camps with opposing views of how to pursue that elusive “American Dream.”

Grappling with pervasive turmoil and the challenges of distance learning, equity gaps, plunging enrollments, and ever-growing pressure to meet standards of “student success,” how can anyone find time to indulge in study of a liberal arts and sciences? And, more importantly—why should they? We have existential problems to solve, a

crippled economy to restore, and an urgent need for students to take their place in meeting these needs. What is college for, we ask, if not to equip students to succeed through near-term, practical, “good paying” work?

The issues are admittedly overwhelming, but our role as community college educators still merits some thoughtful attention. In the culture wars that frame our lives, the entire college enterprise is under fire from a populist mood of fed-up-ness with what’s seen as elitist dreaming or useless dallying in outdated pursuits. Paradoxically, at the very time educators are called to engage in brutally honest inquiry—about race, climate, social inequities, technology, global threats, and the continued relevance of democratic institutions—a flurry of proposed (and enacted) legislation has raised new barriers to asking tough but meaningful questions

and engaging students in so-called “divisive” conversations.

Writing in *Inside Higher Ed* (2017), Marvin Krislov of Pace University notes that as colleges face new economic, demographic, and social challenges, “among the most significant is the public’s changing perception of the purpose and value of a college education. The short version: many Americans think a college degree should be a ticket to a specific job—the cheaper the ticket, the better.” This view is especially prevalent across two-year institutions, where student success is easily tracked by certificates, badges, and career-based degrees that lead quickly and reliably to economic rewards.

Translation: If we taxpayers are going to foot the bill for learning beyond grade 12, we expect a clear and quick return on investment. And we turn to business and industry leaders to show us the way.

How we got here: A winding road to the *Vision for Success*

With higher education long viewed as an engine of social mobility and a promise of prosperity and respect, an economically based vision of college seems reasonable, on its face. This view was present at the inception of the first California two-year institution—Fresno Junior College, founded in 1910 to provide young people in the farmlands access to college. By World War II California boasted 57 such schools, offering an attainable path to a degree that might otherwise have been financially out of reach. Early “junior colleges” were imagined not as a terminal point in learning but as the first two years of a prized bachelors degree—a foundation on which a “higher education” could be built.

That vision shifted in the postwar years. California junior colleges received a major boost from the defense industry, where shorter and less costly vocational training was put to immediate and patriotic use. The G.I. Bill fed that demand as students flocked to junior colleges at public

expense. As boomers graduated from high school, California college applications soared, leading to a commission charged with developing a coordinated plan for higher education in the state. The resulting California Master Plan for Higher Education (1960) created the three-tier system of higher education in place today and imposed limits on both numbers and the standards of admission to reach the state college and university levels. In practice, the plan became a blueprint for channeling less affluent or underserved students—often from minority groups—to less costly two-year institutions where faculty were called upon to help close the gaps that prior learning had left unaddressed.

Not surprisingly, many students found the smaller, community-based environment, along with a dedicated cadre of first-rate teachers, more suited to their individual learning needs. But admission disparities grew when the UCs and CSUs gained stature—and funding—as leading research institutions, often welcoming the most ambitious and high-achieving learners while others struggled toward more modest goals. Over the next two decades attendance at junior colleges fluctuated with economic ebbs and flows; recessions fueled enrollments as students turned to community college for a fast-track to workforce success. More importantly, the impacts of the civil rights movement, and increased immigration in the 1990s and beyond, brought growing awareness of the needs of minority students, sparking changes in governance, services, curricula, and academic support. As the impact of education on social and economic status became more obvious, higher education became more intimately connected with the wider communities and their emerging needs.

Responding to pressures for structural reform, nearly 60 years after the original Master Plan the Chancellor’s Office released a new plan in 2018 to address the full scope of student needs, starting from “a remarkable idea: that higher education should be available to everyone.” The promise of the *Vision for Success* continues:

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"The CCCs ... are the state's primary entry point into collegiate degree programs, the primary system for delivering career technical education and workforce training, a major provider of adult education, apprenticeship, and English as a second language courses, and a source of lifelong learning opportunities for California's diverse communities."

As a so-called "inclusive" document, the Vision sets the stage for pursuing a broad spectrum of educational dreams. At the same time, the California political climate post-Proposition 13 continues to bring increased scrutiny of expenditures involving all public funds. While some communities demand measures that foster diversity, elevate learning, and ensure wider and more equitable access to college-level learning, others insist that all such spending be subject to immediate priorities of the state and local economy and tailored to foster short-term competitive growth. This tension continues in California's two-year colleges today: Campus leaders are challenged to justify academic programs and performance as proven by quantitative (and external) measures of student success—measures often conceived and funded by private interests rooted in technology, finance, and key industrial sectors.

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

- Albert Einstein, physicist

Throughout the past century, community colleges have blossomed from a point of entry to = state universities, into the vibrant, complex, and multi-tiered institutions where we teach today. The Associate's degree is recognized not just as a key milestone en route to a four-year degree, but as a potential launchpad for a good career, with technical and business certificates seen as a pathway to social mobility and financial rewards. But can a short-term, financial view of "success" perhaps obscure the full scope of our work?

Returning to those challenges at the start of this essay...is this Vision for community college really sufficient to prepare students, and ourselves, to tackle these urgent social concerns?

Perhaps we should pause to define our terms. "Liberal arts education" generally refers to the traditional, Western academic curriculum, in which the word "arts" refers to a body of knowledge or skill. This term includes both the humanities and the full range of natural and social sciences. Within these many disciplines, students build capabilities such as critical thinking, communication, self-expression, disciplined research, creative problem-solving, and lifelong learning and research skills—all keys to a strong 21st-century career, and to a full and satisfying life.

But are liberal arts still valued by our students—or "customers"—who are clearly focused on practical outcomes for their college investment? At least with regard to preparation for four-year degrees, the answer is a resounding Yes.

In 2019, a report titled *Humanities and Liberal Arts Education at Community College: How It Affects Transfer and Four-Year College Outcomes*, by Theo Pippins and Clive Belfield from Columbia University, found that:

- » The number of associate degrees in liberal arts fields grew by 88% between 2000 and 2015, with degrees in these disciplines now comprising 41% of all associate degrees granted nationwide.
- » Associate degree earners in STEM and health-care fields take more than 20% of their credits in humanities and liberal arts.
- » Nationally, 57% of students who earn A's in community college courses in the liberal arts transfer to a four-year college; 77% of such transfer students go on to complete their bachelor's degrees.

By such measures, liberal education clearly remains a vital part of postsecondary education, enhancing students' abilities as researchers, communicators, and thinkers while providing skills applicable in rewarding careers. But these data address only the academic success of such learners.

The skeptic asks, "Assuming one has no interest in studies beyond those needed for a job, or no visible means to finance an advanced education, why waste time exploring the liberal arts? What can those courses offer me?"

Writing in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (2020), Dr. Sonia Cardenas of Trinity College points to key skills that are urgently in demand—in business, in civic institutions, in the nonprofit arena, and in personal life—but that are often in short supply. Among them, she suggests, we need:

- » Creative problem-solvers who ask tough questions, tolerate ambiguity, and think across demographic and political divides.
- » Collaborators who can work with others to overcome challenges—especially with those who are different from themselves.
- » Communicators who speak and write clearly because they can reason clearly.
- » Listeners who empathize with others despite disagreement, and build community on common ground.
- » Researchers who balance ideas against evidence, and have the patience to become expert in their fields.
- » Community leaders who are self-aware and humble enough to change their mind.
- » Artists who understand complexity and see interconnectedness in their world.
- » Thinkers who care about history, and provide context and perspective to emergent needs.
- » Citizens who are globally minded, embracing both cultural difference and environmental responsibility.
- » Ordinary people who care about truth and justice—who inspire hope in others, are impatient with despair, and will act to influence change.
- » Flexible, adaptive citizens able to reimagine themselves and their world.

Those are some of the practical, career-focused capabilities that are fostered and honed through

the study of literature, history, philosophy, mathematics, visual and performing arts, sociology, languages, political science, and more, but they are not the whole story.

"Producing economic growth does not mean producing democracy. Nor does it mean producing a healthy, engaged, educated population in which opportunities for a good life are available to all social classes."

– Martha Nussbaum, philosopher

The foundation of American society—our economy, our culture, our political structures—is built on the bedrock of democratic institutions, in turn made possible by the values of the liberal arts and sciences. Legal scholar Fred Lawrence, secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, asserts that the **fundamental need for liberal education** is a functioning democracy. Citing a study from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, he notes that:

"Authoritarianism tends to flourish when social norms and personal security are threatened. Historic inequalities of wealth and income, the devastating impact of COVID-19, and divisions over issues of racial and social justice, including the rights of immigrants, have fueled feelings of vulnerability among many Americans. But a liberal arts education can serve as a bulwark against this sense."

How can it do this? By nurturing the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and diversity without being threatened. By providing broad exposure to divergent histories, lifestyles, cultures, religions and ways of life, and showing how destructive impulses are countered with evidence and tempered by reason. By fostering empathy and tolerance, reducing fear of the "other," and inviting people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and ethnicities

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