

ABSTRACT

THE CHANGING ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN AMERICA AND A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

This article suggests that community colleges in the United States (U.S.) are becoming the vehicle of social control for economic and political elite. As a result of broad systemic changes, publicly funded community colleges have adapted the role of indoctrinating recently arrived poor immigrants of color, the new workforce in many of America's communities, into the work ethos of the U.S. Under the rubric of "workforce development," these institutions of higher education have demonstrated "Chameleon" like qualities, changing their "color," and have developed alterations in their internal structure and policies in order to better serve the interests of government and corporate America. Using China's system of higher education as an "ideal typical" government controlled institution, this presentation looks at the extent to which community colleges in the U.S. have moved in this direction. This comparison and review is important because, in a country that is based on the fundamental principals of democracy and freedom of choice, poor individuals of color have been led to believe that they truly have "freedom" to choose their educational levels, when in reality it is government, with the help of community colleges, which determines the actual extent of realizing this goal. Further, holding back educationally significant numbers of poor people of color stunts the economic and social development of these communities and groups, and in the long run the nation as a whole.

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Introduction

The focus of this article is to examine how community colleges in the United States (U.S.) have become an extension of government's mechanism for initiating, supporting, and managing attempts of social control. The chameleon-like qualities of community colleges have, in essence, made them into the new "Settlement Houses¹" for the new millennium, helping assimilate and control poor, immigrants often of color, on behalf of the government. This article focuses on the convergence of social theory and public policy; a development that is leading many publicly funded American community colleges to adapt a broader interventionist approach to higher education.

Using Weber's (1947) framework of an "ideal type," we note that China's system of higher education can serve as the "measuring rod" in determining the extent to which community colleges in the U.S. have moved in this direction of government control (Hin: 1998). That is, by developing a composite of characteristics of China's system of higher education, an institution controlled by the central government, we can begin to determine the extent to which community colleges in the U.S. have come under more government control and influence. As such, we can begin to suggest the level to which poor students truly have selected a method of reaching their educational goals in the U.S., or, as been suggested by others, they are stratified and tracked away from an education and toward vocational training, on the basis of social class (Karabel: 1972), in order to control these masses of poor people and provide corporate elites with better trained cheap labor.

The first section of this article discusses the impact that welfare reform and workforce development have had on the role of community colleges. In recent years there has been a growing role of community colleges in the social policymaking process in the U.S. As social, economic, and political changes occurred, community colleges have been increasingly asked, in effect, to play a particular and key role in helping with the task of social control. Historically, the ideal role for community colleges has been to help poor students transition themselves into a four-year educational setting (Coley: 2000). Government sponsored reforms, such as we witnessed in the welfare system of the U.S. during the mid- 1990's however, has provided opportunities for community colleges to shift the role of "professional reformer" on to themselves². Community colleges, in many instances, have been positioned as the major avenue by which the poor are indoctrinated as participants in the labor force, tracked, and stratified, using "workforce development" as the vehicle, into "acceptable" American values, as well as careers for the benefit of elite corporations. Workforce development is viewed, as the method by which the role of community colleges, that of social control, is optimized among segments of the poor population. . Community colleges perform this function, according to Karabel's framework, by expanding their "domain" (Levine and White: 1961) and taking on the task of controlling potential discontent among poor, often recently arrived immigrants of color

In the next section of the paper, the Chinese system of higher education, is then presented, highlighting the major characteristics that make it the ideal typical government controlled institution of learning. The premise in this instance is that colleges and universities in China are one example of social reformers that the government uses to help

socially control its people by determining what they will study and thus do for a living. This presentation concludes with a comparative review of both community colleges in the U.S. and China's system of higher education. The attempt in the last section is to demonstrate the extent to which we, as a nation that is supposedly based on freedom of choice, have moved community colleges toward becoming a mechanism for socially controlling poor immigrants of color, for the benefit of government and most especially corporate elites.

Welfare Reform and Workforce Development As Catalysts Within The Role of Community Colleges

This section examines two concepts and systems namely welfare reform and workforce development. The concept of "regulating the poor" developed by Cloward and Piven (1971) is helpful in providing a better understanding of how welfare reform in 1995 helped develop the new role of community colleges. More specifically, Cloward and Piven argued, "expansive relief policies (were) designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms," (p. XIII). In this way, government regulated discontent, channeled potential unrest toward acceptable behavior, and generally controlled the poor. It is evident that government policies toward the poor have historically been designed to stifle any real or perceived discontent from the masses of poor people, or in other words for social control.

We must recognize the fact that the existence of poverty among people in this country is not through conscious choice or behavioral characteristics as have been

suggested by the right, but due to race, ethnic background, and gender (Jennings: 1999). Development of the welfare system, and its various periods of reform throughout U.S. history, were essentially attempts to alleviate potential discontent and social disruption that poverty and any movement of the poor precipitated (Cloward and Piven: 1978). The system of the public dole has served as a mechanism to control movements of the poor. Concessions to the poor therefore, are nothing more than “safety valves” designed to usurp potential social revolutionary disruptive power in American society.

Welfare reform has historically been used to “tighten” control over the poor, and they have taken three basic approaches (Gueron: 1986). One approach has been to change the rules for determining eligibility. The second has been to treat entitlement as a “bargain” by which benefits required the obligation of looking for work, accepting a job, and/or participating in a job training/education program. The third strategy has been to cut back cash benefits and rely more on alternatives like child-support through enforcement, changes in tax policy, and job placement. From the mid- 1960’s to mid- 1990’s the government implemented a variety of such policies within the welfare system in order to instill work ethics and values among poor recipients. In 1995 welfare reform included all three previous approaches, as well as term limitations imposed by both federal and state governments. It is at this point when we begin to see more restrictive policies in participation in order to reinforce work norms, values, and expectations.

Along with welfare reform in the 1990’s other significant areas within the “task environment” of community colleges underwent changes (Dill: 1958). The social environment, “relevant to goal-setting and goal-attainment,” changed, including

demographic, cultural, governmental, and economic institutions for community colleges, causing many internal shifts to occur. The decline of welfare consumers, as a result of the 1995 reforms, along with increases in the number of poor immigrants of color in most urban settings set the stage in many states, that have community college campuses in such municipalities, for these educational institutions to take a more significant role in social control. Government leadership made its position clear when it made available less money for social services, or public assistance, and more resources for what has been termed “workforce development.” Legislation aimed at workforce development, at a period when the nation’s economy was enjoying an unparalleled boom, made available more money for short-term training and job placement and less for longer-term education. This shift was especially prominent among initiatives aimed at the poor who were looking for a real education, which has been historically argued to benefit an individual on a longer-term basis than short-term training that benefited employers. While education has not realized its objective of economic equality among the different classes as has been envisioned, it is still nevertheless better than short-term training (Bowles and Gintis: 1976). Many job-training providers took advantage of this shift and new revenue stream, especially the community colleges. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) indicated that approximately 53% of 1,124 community colleges surveyed had developed welfare-to-work programs, illustrating that many of these institutions were taking advantage of this new funding source (1998). It is apparent that participating community colleges, that had developed workforce development initiatives under the rubric of welfare-to-work, were the “social buffer” between the poor and elite (Pfeffer: 1994).

Workforce development, as has been developed by these community colleges for the poor, reinforce norms, values, and work habits consistent with the American work ethic, for the benefit of corporate America in terms of increased profit, as well as for realizing the goal of government of social control.

Workforce Development

Most of the welfare reforms that took place in the mid-1990's shifted emphasis from income maintenance and education, to that of a shorter term on public assistance along with a "work first" modality (Leonard: 1999). Education, as a formal option, was dropped in many states, and instead short-term training, something quite different from a formal education, was put in its place for the poor on public assistance. For many community colleges, initiatives directed toward welfare consumers were categorized under the training activity of "workforce development."

Under the rubric of workforce development, significant numbers of welfare recipients were provided short-term non-credit training in order that they enter the job market. According to AACC data 44% of the 1,123 community colleges responding to their 1998 survey reported that job-readiness instruction was the most common type of training activity for welfare recipients. Further, "welfare -to -work programs at community colleges primarily emphasized entry-level training (69.9 percent of respondents), adult education and remedial education (53.3 percent), and basic technical training (47.6 percent)" (AACC: 1998, p. 1). Such workforce development efforts were

not developed to benefit the students attending these institutions. Instead, as has been argued above, such short-term, mostly non-credit, training has been developed for corporate employers seeking a better trained cheap labor pool in order to eke out more profit. Further, from government's perspective, welfare recipients forced off public assistance by the reforms of 1995, the programs developed by these community colleges provide a mechanism for indoctrinating these poor people into a work ethos that serves the function of social control. There was, and continues to be, little "freedom" for these students to pursue a traditional educational course. Instead, it is dictated and predetermined by government and corporate America, with the help of community colleges.

For many poor individuals not based in traditional "welfare population," community colleges have devised a method of tracking them toward a similar fate as their counterparts on the public dole. The major group affected is that of recent immigrants of color. "Workforce development" as defined by AACC and its member institutions involves preparing individuals specifically for American employers in order that they may compete more effectively in the global economy (Tony Zeiss & Associates: 1997). More and more U.S. corporations are turning to community colleges, as partners, to help with the task of providing training for employees already on the job according to the AACC³. In addition, for those poorer class individuals, not in the labor force or just looking to advance themselves from the entry level position they may currently have, community colleges with workforce development programs are successfully moving them

away from traditional educational tracks and into training programs that mostly benefit employers.

In 1972 Karabel highlighted several key features of community colleges that help to better understand how they function to track poorer class students away from a traditional academic education and into what was then vocational training, or workforce development training today. Looking at what he described as a “complex set of forces” that structurally changed America’s system of higher education, Karabel highlighted six characteristics of community colleges and their environment in stratifying individuals on the basis of social class (p. 233). He argued that, while at face value, the community colleges were consistent with American society’s ideology as “the land of opportunity” and “open admission” to its system of public education, these characteristics were in reality false for poor students since they were “tracked” away from a four year education and “stratified” into low paying vocational careers. Table 1 highlights his premise by listing the key components of his framework.

Community colleges in the U.S. are “agents of capitalism, training workers to fit business and industry, it is a tool of the upper classes designed to keep the poor in their place by denying them access to the baccalaureate and, concomitantly, to higher-status positions in society” (Cohen and Brawer: 1996). Community colleges do this by tracking individuals of the poorer classes into workforce development initiatives specifically designed with particular employers in mind. Through the process of socialization, government and corporate America, instills the belief that this country is the land of

opportunity, which is critical in giving an impression that the system of higher education is open, and that it provides ample opportunity to just about anyone to attend college.

This belief system is most prominent among community colleges in the U.S., with its posture of “open admissions.” As such, it provides the illusion that just about anyone can attend college. In reality, however, these institutions serve the purpose of channeling low -income individuals away from particular academic programs that may have led to four -year colleges, through a complex process of “cooling” them off⁴. Community colleges on the public dole serve the role of tracking, as well as the much higher function for government of controlling any real or potential discontent among the poor by “diverting the dreams”⁵ of members of these social classes toward lower level career options, and indoctrinating them into America’s capitalistic work ethos under the auspices of workforce development initiatives. Further, it gives the students from the lower social classes the false impression that if they fail to reach their educational goals of a higher education, it is mainly their fault and not the community colleges’ “system” of cooling them off. It “blames the victims” (Ryan: 1975) of workforce development not the system which purposefully tracked them. Similar to what Cloward and Piven argued in the 1970’s about the welfare system as a whole, social institutions under the tutelage of government (e.g., public community colleges), give the false impression that they provide concessions and real opportunities to movements of the poor (1971). In reality, they serve only to regulate the poor.

China's System of Higher Education: An Ideal Type of Government Control

In reviewing China's system of higher education as an ideal type, we must keep in mind that its current structure is relatively new when compared to the 100 year old community college system in the U.S.⁷. Chinese post-secondary education as it appears today was established in December 1977 when the government introduced the formal process of examination. As such, there is a paucity of available material on its structure and changes. Still, China's system of higher education represents a good example of an ideal type of such an institution since this nation's government heavily controls it.

In 1996 there were some 1,000 institutions of various types, including general universities, technical universities, specialized institutions, and teacher training colleges that comprised China's system of higher education⁸. The State Education Commission administratively supervises this system of post-secondary education⁹. The Commission oversees all aspects of post-secondary institutions, except for military schools. This government body oversees curricula, publishes the required textbooks for all fields of study, and formulates admissions guidelines to mention only a few of its functions. Within this larger structure of post-secondary education there are institutions, non-university in nature, but which nonetheless are considered college level. Similar to what our community colleges in the U.S. consider as workforce development, these post-secondary technical schools offer more than 400 specialties, including light and textile industries, construction engineering, and commerce. As two year institutions, these

technical schools provide students with a “vocational education and training...for a specific job¹⁰.”

Yang Xu Hin, of Wuyi University, published a paper in the fall of 1998, which highlighted some key and salient “problems” (his term) in China’s system of higher education¹¹. An examination of these problems is important since they highlight the areas and level of government control over China’s post-secondary institutions, providing a clearer understanding of the characteristics of this ideal type. Specifically, Hin listed six problems including:

- a system so specialized and detailed that students only learn the particular field and no knowledge beyond their major;
- no real and original research going on among scholars;
- too many tedious required subjects that students just cram for;
- textbooks produced by the Commission contain much irrelevant subject matter;
- instructors teach obsolete material, what they learned years ago, reflecting traditional not current scientific knowledge; and
- required assessment examinations do not measure the student’s knowledge but only how much they memorized in class and from textbooks.

By coupling together, both the structure of post-secondary education in China and the problems that Hin presents, we can highlight at this juncture the ideal typical government controlled system of higher education using Weber’s (1947) theoretical construct.

In reviewing China’s system of higher education we see that several key characteristics are essential for labeling it an ideal type of a government controlled post-secondary institution. Table 2 lists these major characteristics along with the particular explanation that help make China’s system of higher education an ideal type of a government controlled post-secondary institution. Of significance among these major

characteristics is the fact that government controls all content within the classroom, the textbooks, and areas of specialization. Further, it is through government controlled assessment tests that Chinese students gain entry to post-secondary education, as well as determine whether they are ready to receive their diploma. Finally, government determines the course of study for many Chinese students in technical/vocational training with a specific job in mind, thus determining what they will do for a living. With these facts in mind, the question is: To what extent does the publicly funded community college system in the U.S. measure-up to China's ideal type of a government controlled post-secondary institution?

Conclusion: A Comparative Review

While the publicly funded community college system in the U.S. does not have overt government control of course content, workforce development efforts funded by specific corporations, who determine curricula in these cases, do have the tacit approval of the government. Government encourages corporate America to seek-out institutions like community colleges to help with their workforce development needs. As such, these efforts within community colleges in the U.S. are often driven by corporate elites. In reality, it is questionable as to whether we can call these corporate programs "workforce development" or more accurately "human resource development" initiatives since they are driven by particular companies for their specific purposes. Data on workforce development demonstrate that initiatives specific to a company tend to more often than

not benefit professionals and managers, and are not directed toward entry-level workers who may benefit from such training for job advancement (Training Magazine: 1999). Using the term “workforce development” for the type of training currently being offered to students in community colleges is therefore misleading.

Like their Chinese counterpart, publicly funded community colleges in the U.S. have a variety of assessment examinations aimed at determining whether an individual has the wherewithal to enter a post-secondary institution, and ultimately graduate once they complete course requirements. Such examinations in the U.S. are, in most states, required and approved by some government appointed board of higher education. In China, these examinations, determined by the State Education Commission, help determine the individual’s course of study and the educational institution they will enter. It is these examinations in the community college system of the U.S. that analysts like Karabel, for example, see as mechanisms for diverting the educational dreams of poor students away from an education and toward vocational (workforce development) training.

While faculty may have more input in determining course content in American community colleges, the fact is that workforce development initiatives often have their material selected by the particular company financing the training. Further, in many post-secondary settings in the U.S. faculty are required to provide department heads and/or the college with copies of their course outline to “review” for informational appropriateness and completeness. Thus, while faculty in the community colleges of the U.S. have a slightly higher level of academic freedom in determining course content than their Chinese

counterparts, there are nonetheless boundaries in which they must work within, especially if a corporation is financing the workforce development training.

Perhaps the most significant area of comparison between community colleges in the U.S. under the oversight of government and the post-secondary institution of China is in the area of students being able to select their course of study. Most Americans truly believe that they have the ability to choose the level, as well as the type, of education they wish. The fact is, however, that social class predetermines type and level of their education. As noted above, entrance examinations, direction in which career counseling takes, assessment testing, and the system of “tracking” all conspire toward determining whether a student is given the opportunity to pursue a four year education and beyond, or whether they are steered toward training for an entry level job. In China, it is what government determines is needed for a particular job which decides a student’s educational fate. Thus, while Chinese assessment testing is more direct in making such decisions for the student, in the community college system of the U.S. the processes and structure have the dual function of making this decision while at the same time giving the student the false impression that they made the choice themselves.

There are many similarities between post-secondary education in China and that of the community college system in the U. S. As the U.S. leaves behind the industrial age of the twentieth century and enters the technological era of the twenty-first it finds itself in need of preparing a workforce capable of working with the hardware and software necessary for producing the goods and services needed globally. The U. S. cannot afford to let its poor social classes develop a consciousness based on the understanding that they

do not determine their educational fate. To do so government in the U.S. would be itself sowing seeds of discontent. As such, it must control any real or potential discontent, and it has accomplished this task by devising this complex system of tracking poor individuals while also providing the illusion that: 1) through an education beyond high school an individual will increase the likelihood of economic success; 2) community colleges represent the best avenue of acquiring such an education, especially if you are poor; and 3) it is the individual himself who determines their level of educational attainment. Of major difference between China's system of education and community colleges in the U.S. is that the former directly informs its people its system is devised for benefiting society through the job they are destined to be educated and/or trained for, while the latter selects one's education on the basis of social class, provides the illusion of free choice, all for the benefit of major corporate elites.

The driving force nonetheless is the same in both systems, government! Their purpose is basically the same, social control! In both societies not everyone can attend college since there are not enough resources to allow such to happen. Mechanisms are therefore in place to determine whom gets an academic education versus job training, and at what levels. While in China government overtly and directly determines these issues for its people, in the U.S. government covertly makes such determination. In the U.S. the community college system plays a critical role in this determination by providing the façade that there is an "open admissions" policy when, in reality, social class determines the kind and level of education that an individual will receive. In both systems, however, the results are the same, control of masses of people.

It is vital to understand the differences, similarities, and functions if we in the U.S., as a nation which prides itself in valuing “freedom,” and professes to be “the land of opportunities,” are to truly move closer to these ideals. Surely, not all of the hundreds of thousands (even millions) of poor recent arrivals are incapable of performing well in a four- year course of education. Yet, the system in place does not discriminate, and tracks all toward the same dead end workforce development for the purposes of providing cheap productive labor to corporate elites, while also maintaining control socially. This massive waste of human potential raises a research question that looms high above all others: Can we change the community college system in the U.S. to provide a good education to their constituents, not on the basis of their social class, but on the basis of their dreams and potential? A challenge for American society!

Table 1
A Theoretical Framework on the Major Functions of Community Colleges

1. A changing economic structure in the environment of community colleges fosters alterations in the role of these institutions.
2. As a result of “educational inflation” particular groups within society (the poor) have their opportunities narrowed.
3. Community colleges are “the bottom of a tracking system within higher education” because of their “open admissions” posture. Ultimately, their students are tracked into vocational training (workforce development) that keeps them away from a four-year education and in low paying jobs.
4. Community colleges use a complex system of pre-entrance exams, remedial classes, counseling from advisors, test scores, certain required courses, and probationary status as a “cooling-out” process with the function of convincing the student that they were at fault for not achieving their educational goals.
5. The “cooling-out” process is directed toward the “latent terminal” student who desires to transfer ultimately from a two-to-a four year degree program but does not meet entrance qualifications.
6. Community colleges, with this elaborate system, serve to “track” students both within the college itself, and among these institutions of higher education on the basis of social class. They keep poor students in vocational programs (workforce development training), and away from academically oriented course of studies within the confines of the particular community college, as well as keeping these individuals away from four-year schools.

Based on the article by Jerome Karabel, “Community Colleges and Social Stratification: Submerged Class Conflict in American Higher Education,” Harvard Educational Review, 42, (November 1972): 521-530.

Table 2
Major Characteristics of China's Post-Secondary Institution As An
Ideal Typical Government Controlled System of Higher Education

Major Characteristic	Explanation
1. Centralized Decision Making	1. State Education Commission makes major decisions.
2. Government Controls course content	2. State Education Commission determines curricula, writes textbooks, etc.
3. Students have little ability to determine what they will learn	3. Level of specialization so specific in their particular field there is little room for knowledge beyond their major.
4. Admission into and completion of course of study determined by government controlled assessment examinations	4. Must favorably pass State Education Commission exams.
5. Little scholarly work by instructors	5. No real research going on; nor is it encouraged by government.
6. Education often targets a specific job	6. Responsibility of some 400 technical schools.
7. Instructors have little input into course content	7. Instruction controlled by Commission.

Based on the article by Yang Xu Hin, "Chinese Higher Education, In My Eyes," The Forum, Vol. 7, Issue 1, Fall 1998.

Notes

¹ “Settlement Houses” historically addressed the economic and social needs of recently arrived immigrants to urban centers, along with English classes, assistance with immigration matters, housing concerns, health care needs, etc. Today’s community colleges are providing such assistance to students whom are recent arrivals to this country. See Lillian Wald, House On Henry Street, (New York: Dover Publications, 1915) for an example of such an institution.

² In the 1960’s and 1970’s the role of “reformer” was attributed to community based organizations, often-human service in nature. See Joseph Helfgot, Professional Reforming, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1981; and Peter Marris and Martin Rein, Dilemmas of Social Reform, New York: Atherton Press, 1969.

³ See Developing The World’s Best Workforce: An Agenda for America’s Community Colleges, Tony Zeiss & Associates editors (Washington, D.D.: Community College Press, 1997) where these public institutions make no excuses on the purposes and roles of workforce development efforts within community colleges.

⁴ This process is most prominent in community colleges that have their environment demographically changed with the influx of poor people of color. In addition, English as Second Language (ESL) initiatives often are used as major components of the “cooling-off” and “tracking” systems. See San Jorge Santiago, “The New Social Reformers In Massachusetts: The Changing Role of a Publicly Funded Community College Within A Latino Community, unpublished paper, Northern Essex Community College, Haverhill, Massachusetts, September 1999 for an example of this process using one case review.

⁵ See Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, The American Community College, Third Edition, San Francisco: Jessey – Bass Publishers, 1996; and Kevin J. Dougherty, “The Community College at the Crossroads: The Need For Structural Reform,” Harvard Educational Review, 61 (3), August 1991 for more on this argument of “dream diversion” as a function of community colleges.

⁷ See The American Community College Turns 100: A Look at its Students, Programs, and Prospects, Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center, Princeton, New Jersey, 2000.

⁸ General information on China’s system of higher education was obtained from two web sites: www.unesco.org/iau/educn.html; and www.sh.com/china/edu/chedu.htm.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Yang Xu Hin, “Chinese Higher Education, In My Eyes,” The Forum, Vol 7, Issue 1, Fall 1998, hakatai.mcli.dist.Maricopa.edu/labyforum/fall98/forum4.htm.

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Web Sites:

General information on China's post-secondary educational system:

- • • www.unesco.org/iau/educn.html
- • • www.sh.com/china/edu/chedu.htm
-