

The Contributions and Reputation of Community and Technical Colleges in their Communities: Report of focus group findings

June 2004

Introduction

Douglas Gould & Company asked Belden Russonello & Stewart to conduct a research project to learn what the image of community colleges is, what needs changing and what should be reinforced, and to test messages that could be used to raise the profile of these institutions. BRS designed a two-phase research project to meet these objectives. This memo contains the analysis of phase one, six focus groups. Phase two, a national survey, will be completed this summer.

The six focus groups were held in Seattle, Washington, North Olmsted, Ohio and Albuquerque, New Mexico from May 17 to June 10. Two groups were held in each city and in each location, one group was comprised of suburban and rural residents and the other group included residents residing in urban areas. Group participants were screened to assure that they are voters and involved in their communities. All of the participants were between the ages of 30 and 55 years old. In each group, at least a few of the participants had attended a community college themselves and in some groups, most of the group members had attended a community college. The guide and statements were refined after the first two groups in Seattle, but the same concepts were discussed in all of the groups.

Key points:

Positive impressions: The area residents in the groups are very laudatory of their local community and technical colleges. They see many strengths of community colleges and appreciate the role of these institutions as educational providers in the community.

Opportunity: Opportunity is the reigning value that virtually all the participants in our focus groups ascribe to community colleges. Participants see community colleges first and foremost as institutions that provide educational opportunity to a wide range of people. Statements which best encapsulate this value describe the breadth and depth of community and technical colleges and the opportunity they provide for life-long learning which make them available to many people.

Affordability: Participants easily and quickly volunteer that community colleges are an affordable opportunity for all kinds of students. The role of community and technical colleges in providing an affordable option for students is key to their identity in the minds of the participants.

Comparisons to four-year institutions: Themes that are not helpful in communicating the importance of community colleges draw comparisons between these institutions and four-year colleges and attempt to persuade the audience that community colleges have positive characteristics by pointing out the negative attributes of four-year institutions.

Reinforcing the stigma: Participants told us some of the concepts we posed backfire by reinforcing the perceived stigma of attending a community college. For example, participants objected to statements that appear to demean individuals who work at minimum wage jobs or those who do not eventually go to four-year colleges.

The focus groups suggest community colleges are strongly valued in their own right as a place where people at all stages of life can get an affordable education. The research to date indicates it is not necessary to justify their existence, but the use of messages that reinforce the strong positive impressions the public holds for community colleges reminds people of their worth and may be helpful in building more consciousness of their importance in communities and states. While the above themes reverberated through the six groups, it is important to keep in mind that this is qualitative research, based on segments of the population in three states. In the next phase of the project, we will conduct a

national survey to test these assumptions and inform the development of messages on community colleges more fully.

Findings

A. High awareness and good will toward community colleges

Most of the participants in the focus groups are familiar with the community and technical colleges in their area, and many praise the institutions and the students who attend these programs. Many have attended local community colleges at some point in their lives or have friends or family members who have attended them.

Group members are well-informed of the programs and services offered by the community and technical colleges close to them. Participants are aware that these colleges offer a wide range of courses from core curriculum for students recently leaving high school, to GED and ESL programs, to courses that teach trades. In addition, they note that students can obtain associates degrees and certificates, or attend without seeking a degree or completing a program.

B. The purpose of community and technical colleges: providing education at an affordable price

Across the groups, participants see a broad role for community and technical colleges offering an affordable education to students of various ages and backgrounds. Within this overall mission, participants view the purpose of community colleges as four-fold:

- First, they are “feeders” to four-year schools for students who were not ready or could not initially afford the cost of a four-year university.
- Secondly, these institutions offer a direct route to the workforce for those going into careers not needing a four-year degree.
- Third, community and technical colleges offer continuing education and retraining, allowing people to become more skilled at their jobs and to help people train for new careers.
- Finally, they provide an opportunity for life-long learning and personal enrichment in the community.

I think it's almost like a feeder and finish. Feeder for four-year and for some people it's a two-year for some trade certificate or whatever. So it offers both. - *Male urban resident, Seattle*

I think that it gives everybody the opportunity to attend college and get that experience. A community college can be a great stepping-stone for somebody who's not ready to necessarily enter a four-year college. So I think it provides an open way for a lot of people. - *Female urban resident, North Olmsted*

It's for working people. Or even for non-working people. It may help people back to work. It may help round out people. - *Female, suburban resident, Seattle*

It also allows people to take classes that just makes them better at their job. They can advance and do their job better. - *Female, suburban resident, Seattle*

C. Who attends community and technical colleges: anybody and everybody

Most of the participants maintain that community and technical colleges generally have open admissions policies and can be attended by anyone. Some describe community colleges as servicing the non-traditional student or providing an education for people going through "life transitions."

Specifically, participants volunteer that young people who recently left high school, senior citizens, those seeking to learn a trade, and people hoping to start a second career, are likely students of community colleges.

Community colleges are a necessary part of our society because they provide an opportunity for so many people to receive a quality education, including the young and old, the non-traditional students and those who are barely able to speak English. Community colleges are critical to the success of so many of our young people who might otherwise get lost in the shuffle. - *Suburban resident, North Olmsted (Written statement)*

Only a few focus group participants mention immigrants or individuals who need to learn English.

D. Strengths: affordability, quality academics, and many others

Strengths for the individual: Participants easily list many strong points of community and technical colleges.

Affordability

- Most participants are quick to acknowledge the affordability of these schools, and cite it as a reason people they know attend them.

Quality academics

- The wide range of course offerings is a major benefit for students. Many types of people with varying interests can find courses and programs in community and technical colleges that fit their needs, according to participants.
- Many in the discussion groups also volunteer the small class sizes as a plus.
- Group members who have attended a community or technical college maintain that the learning environment is hands-on and teachers are often currently working in their field of instruction. In addition, students have the opportunity to learn from classmates, some of whom have relevant work experience they share in the classroom and lends additional insight to classroom discussions.

You have welders . . . teaching the [welding] course. Nurses are teaching nursing courses. - *Female suburban resident, Albuquerque*

You meet a lot of people who have been in the real world for a few years and are going back and taking classes to learn something else. They bring a lot to the table. You're just not learning from the teacher, you're learning from people who've been in the [field]. - *Male suburban resident, Albuquerque*

Job training

- Also offered as a strength is the role they have in retraining individuals for different careers and training people for jobs in the trades. This is an important theme that participants return to throughout the discussions and recognition of this aspect of community colleges tells community residents that these institutions are part of the local economy.

Feasibility factor

- Participants say community colleges offer the young people the chance to stay close to home. This gives young students the chance to mature before going to a four-year college or entering the workforce, and young parents and caregivers a way to continue their education..
- Flexible scheduling – the ability to take classes at night and on weekends and to complete a program at an individualized pace – is an important strength of community colleges. Participants say many students are working or taking care of families and are not always able to attend classes during the day or take on heavy course loads. Community college students have more flexibility in the schedules and the timeframe for completing a degree.

Community benefits: Community benefits appear secondary, behind the personal benefits made possible by community colleges. Benefits deriving from these institutions for communities are mainly economic, according to the group participants. Some say community colleges add to the tax base when their students or graduates join or rejoin the workforce and pay taxes. Other assets mentioned include the influx of students into the local area which brings in money as they buy food and pay for gas and parking, or in some cases, move into the area to be closer to the community college.

Well, there's a lot of money that comes into the city from people coming from outside of the city to go to one of the schools. You've got people who come to live here or they just come in during the day and they pay for parking and they pay for books and they pay for food . . . It's a whole economic development associated with community colleges. -
Male urban resident, Seattle

Some group members point out that community colleges train people locally, and subsequently, provide trained workers in the area. But, others disagree, saying that many people get their training or degree but move to other cities or states in order to find jobs.

E. Weaknesses: the perceived stigma

In spite of their own pronouncements of positive attitudes about community colleges, many participants maintain there is often a stigma attached to attending community and technical colleges. These institutions are sometimes thought to provide a lower quality of education than four-year colleges and universities. Participants say this lack of prestige may be attributed to one of the aspects that they value about community colleges: that anyone can attend.

Sometimes the attitude of people as far as how they look at community college compared to a major college like Ohio State... You get a different reaction from people when they ask you want college you went to. - *Male suburban resident, North Olmsted*

They also say that students who attend community colleges are sometimes perceived as not having the commitment or intellectual ability to enter a four-year institution.

Another drawback or weakness of community colleges raised by participants is that it may be difficult for some students who have attended a community college for two years to adjust to the four-year college setting. In particular, the big change in the social scene may cause some students to have difficulty adjusting to the new environment. In fact some say they or their friends quit a four-year college because the social scene was too distracting and returned home to more success at a community college.

Bottom line, the strengths of community and technical colleges far outweigh the weaknesses in our discussion groups, where participants had a difficult time thinking of weaknesses when asked directly about them. We are interested in seeing how this develops in the survey, which will include a much wider array of communities and experiences.

F. Strong belief in the need to continue investing in community colleges

Almost all the participants believe community colleges play an integral role in their communities and that they need to continue to be funded. Participants again return to the themes of opportunity and affordability: community and technical colleges provide an educational opportunity to people who cannot afford to go to four-year institutions.

When asked to choose between funding four-year universities or community colleges, the decision is hard for many. When pressed, many say they would invest more in community colleges because they believe four-year institutions, with endowments, sports and other resources, have more sources of funding than community and technical colleges.

I think in four-year colleges they have significantly more endowments. Their cash flow is significantly greater than your two-year colleges. Just sporting programs, much more high visibility that will draw money to them where you don't see that in a community college. - *Male suburban resident, North Olmstead*

However, some believe that four-year institutions need funding more than community colleges because they are an indicator of the strength of a state's educational system.

Many of the participants strongly object to being asked to make a choice between the two types of institutions because they value both and believe both have important roles to fill in the state. This sentiment reflects the objection participants make to comparing community colleges and four-year institutions; they do not view them as competitors, but rather as fulfilling very different needs.

Values and communicating about community and technical colleges

In the discussions, participants read a number of statements regarding community colleges. The statements and other themes raised in the discussions fall into three categories: 1) the umbrella of opportunity; 2) supporting themes; and 3) unhelpful statements and themes.

A. The core value: opportunity

Throughout the discussions, participants suggest that the educational opportunities community colleges provide are extremely important. Opportunity itself encompasses many ideas. Participants say students have the opportunity to go to community colleges because they are affordable, accessible and offer training in the areas where jobs exist.

Opportunity . . . to me it encompasses most of those things. You have the opportunity to go because it's affordable, you have the opportunity to learn . . . You have the opportunity too with the convenience of scheduling. It's just the opportunity, opportunity, opportunity. – *Female suburban resident, North Olmsted*

The statement presented in the discussions which best captures this view and reinforces the importance of community and technical colleges for the participants is:

The great thing about community and technical colleges is their breadth and depth. They offer a wide variety of courses and degrees for people in all stages of their lives, providing an opportunity for life-long learning.

This statement is a summation of the participants' feelings about community colleges, *i.e.*, that these schools offer a wide range of courses and programs that suit people with different interests and needs. This statement also includes the concept of life-long learning, which many in the groups relate to their own ideas.

I think what I like about . . . the last statement on the green page: “. . . providing an opportunity for life-long learners.” You want to be learning throughout your life or you're going to stagnate. – *Female suburban resident, Albuquerque*

Another statement which was very popular in some groups but was criticized in others stated:

The fact that anyone can enroll means that anybody can get an education if he or she works at it. Community colleges provide an open door to education not available elsewhere.

Some participants are drawn to this statement because it says, “anyone can enroll.” They like the inclusiveness of the statement, saying it means that the opportunity is available for all who would like to take advantage of it.

Again, it is an opportunity if you have the desire to go into it. If you have the desire, here is an affordable place to go. It doesn't matter if you're poor, rich, young, old, smelly or not smelly. I like the word anyone, it is not judgmental. – *Female suburban resident, Albuquerque*

That to me is the thing that sets them apart from other educational institutions, the fact that they are for everybody. I think they are for the public; they are for everybody. – *Female suburban resident, Seattle*

On the other hand some believe the phrase “anyone can enroll” reinforces the stigma surrounding community colleges. Since anyone can enroll, the perception is these the institutions have lower standards and subsequently inferior students. This is an area we will explore in more depth in the survey.

Next, we find statements which specifically mention affordability and practical training or retraining resonate strongly with participants. As we have said, participants start the discussions praising community colleges for being affordable places where all different types of people can obtain an education.

A statement we tested read:

They are lower cost than other educational and training opportunities – which means they are affordable for more parents, students, young and old. People get an education they would otherwise miss.

The inclusion of affordability is extremely important to group participants. Educational costs are a significant concern to most and because community colleges are often less expensive than four-year colleges, they are viewed as an important option for those who do not have the economic resources to attend more expensive institutions.

Although most participants feel this statement is convincing of the importance of community colleges, some took issue with the phrase, "People get an education they would otherwise miss." Participants point out that some of the training received at community colleges can be obtained on the job or at four-year institutions. Consequently, it is incorrect to assume that people would be completely lacking of other options to obtain an education.

Another concept we read was as follows:

Community and technical colleges offer a way for workers to enhance job skills and train for jobs needed in today's economy - especially as the economy changes and some industries shut down.

This statement was popular because it speaks directly to communities that have been affected by changing job markets and the elimination of many manufacturing jobs. The ability of community and technical colleges to retrain workers is an important issue mentioned in each location.

During the discussion, participants also volunteered some images to describe the importance of community colleges, such as the idea that community colleges are stepping-stones (to four-year colleges, the workplace, and personal enrichment) as well as the belief that people who attend community colleges are going through a "life transition." We hope to explore these themes and further develop them in the next phase of the project.

B. Supporting themes: economic and community role and convenience

Some of the messages tested incorporate attributes and benefits of community colleges that are important to participants, but if used as stand-alone arguments, do not add to support for community colleges. For instance, direct economic benefits for the community, the use of college facilities for community events, the idea that community colleges are central parts of the community and the central location of the colleges are of secondary importance and not always credible to the participants. We will continue to explore some of these themes in the survey.

One statement read that was useful was this:

60% of students in Washington and Ohio and 74% of students in New Mexico enrolled in higher education attend community colleges.

Participants feel the high percentage of students in community colleges is a convincing fact because it demonstrates that people are utilizing these institutions.

Another statement was:

These colleges impact local economies positively, by training people for jobs local industry needs filled and attracting more industry because of the availability of training for their workforce.

Although participants are enthusiastic about community colleges' ability to offer people training in areas where there are jobs, many participants are skeptical of macro-economic benefits to the community, particularly whether colleges attract businesses.

Participants are also wary of statements that imply that community and technical colleges are integral parts of the community. For example:

Community colleges are a central part of a community. They contribute to the economy and overall well-being of the community.

Some participants say this may be true in some locations, particularly in rural areas, but this is not evident in their own communities.

It just depends on the community . . . If you have a small community and they have a thriving college there that might be their focal point. It just depends on the community.
– *Female urban resident, North Olmsted*

Similarly, we presented the following concept:

Community and technical colleges are the home to community events, and activities, such as theater, political events, town meetings and others.

Although a few participants maintain that community and technical colleges hold some events and activities in their facilities, this is not evident to others and is not a compelling reason to support community colleges.

Another twist of language of note is that some participants called the following statement misleading because there are four-year schools located in some communities even though they had praised the presence of community colleges in local communities as making them accessible.

Because they are located in communities, it is possible for people who need to live close to home to get an education.

C. Areas to avoid

Comparisons to four-year colleges and universities: Participants reject many comparisons of community and technical colleges to four-year schools because they suggest community college students are second rate. Participants repeatedly say it is not necessary to sell community colleges by smearing the image of other institutions.

For example we presented the idea that:

Community colleges provide equal access. They are non-elitist. They help new immigrants as well as long-term residents learn and move ahead.

Participants like the sentiment in the first sentence about equal access. However, saying that community and technical colleges are non-elitist implies that other institutions, namely four-year universities, are elitist. Participants reject phrases with negative connotations and those that compare community colleges to four-year institutions. Participants value both community colleges and four-year institutions and see them both as having a role in a society. Enthusiasm for this statement may have also been dampened by the reference to immigrants, an unpopular undertaking for a few vocal participants.

Another statement we read was:

Two-year colleges generally have smaller classes and so the faculty is able to provide more personal attention to individual students than four-year colleges do.

This statement also suffers because it compares community colleges to four-year institutions. In addition, some participants say four-year institutions can have small classes and provide individual attention, so this statement loses some credibility, even though participants themselves asserted that the personal attention in community colleges is one of their strengths.

The one thing that strikes me about most of these statements is that . . . I was always taught and found it to be true is that you don't knock the other guy's product. You sell yours. And this is what each of these statements is basically doing. "We're better than a four-year because we do this." Well, tell me why you're better. Don't compare it, just tell me what you're selling, what is your product producing. I'll decide if it is better or not.
- *Male suburban resident, Albuquerque*

Another phrase we read was:

All good jobs do not need a four-year college degree.

Participants say this sentence sounds defensive and suggest it is unnecessary to justify community colleges educational role.

Another idea that was rejected by many is that community colleges fill in gaps left open by other institutions. Participants read the following statement:

They fill in the gaps that high schools and four-year colleges don't fulfill, such as remedial help, technical training, teaching English as a second language, and basic literacy skill development.

Some said that this is not a good argument for supporting community colleges, because it presents the need to improve high schools and higher education.

The concept of a "two-year" education: Some participants draw upon personal experiences and say that people who attend two-year colleges are not well-trained for some of the occupations listed in this statement, particularly nursing. Others note that some programs are longer than two years. Thus, the following statement was not well-received:

The two-year colleges provide society with well-trained people for jobs in nursing, law enforcement, computing, graphic arts, and many other productive areas.

Reinforcing the stigma: Participants say some of the arguments we presented imply that community college students are second rate reinforce the negative perceptions of these institutions. For example:

These colleges take people who could only earn minimum wage and train them for good jobs – moving people from a position of costing society into the position of being people who contribute to society.

Participants maintain that this statement demeans those who attend community college, saying that they “could only earn minimum wage.” In addition, the statement inherently devalues jobs that pay a minimum wage. Participants say these jobs may not be prestigious, but they are valuable to society. Also, the statement implies that people who work minimum wage jobs are a drain on society, and this is not necessarily true, according to participants.

And I almost take offense at the statement that people that could only earn minimum wage are not contributing to society. They are, they’re providing services. They’re providing things that people want and that may be all that their industry in pays but they’re working, they’re trying to make a contribution. You’ve got to give people credit for that. Yeah, minimum wage you can’t live on but so maybe you work two minimum wage jobs or whatever you need to do. But they are contributing in one way or another. They’re providing a service. – *Female urban resident, North Olmsted*

There’s all kinds of judgment [in this statement]. You don’t need to put anybody down to make a positive statement. – *Female urban resident, Albuquerque*

Adaptability and adult education: A few participants are skeptical about the adaptability of community colleges. Some participants draw on personal experiences where community colleges did not adapt quickly, so they are less likely to believe the following statement:

These colleges can change and adapt quickly to develop programs and curriculum that the local community needs and wants.

Another statement we read was:

These colleges are the main reliable place that adults who need help with literacy, learning English as a second language, or other basic skills can get this kind of education.

Participants believe this statement is too broad and that local high schools probably offer similar programs. Other participants say there is a greater need to

train young people coming out of high school and to retrain adults who have lost their jobs than people who need literacy and ESL training. A few participants suggest that ESL programs may encourage illegal immigration.

Something to consider: Some group members see a difference in the term “community colleges” and “community and technical colleges.” When asked what they think of when they hear the term “community colleges,” they mention associates degrees, students fresh out of high school getting their start at community college, and opportunities for retraining. They say community colleges teach a wide range of courses, but technical colleges put more emphasis on technical and practical skills for blue-collar workers. They also believe “technical” refers to private institutions, such as ITT Technical Institute.

When people say technical college they see we’re going to study electronics or computers. You’re not going to have the English composition classes. – *Male urban resident, North Olmsted*

[Technical colleges teach:] More practical skills, technical skills and not just theory. *Female urban resident, Albuquerque*

In general, the focus groups warn against drawing comparisons to other institutions and making broad or subjective assumptions that may not be true in every case. Participants want to hear the benefits community and technical colleges provide, not how they stack up against other institutions.