

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES: NATIONAL VS COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

*Erin Croke*  
CUNY Graduate Center

*Using examples from New York City, this article explores the current economic and political context that places pressure on community colleges to improve graduation rates. Community colleges are expected to contribute to the economy by producing sufficient quantities of skilled workers. This pressure is manifest in calls for greater accountability for community colleges. But without adequate resources, and facing concerns about efficiency and performance, community colleges may not be able or willing to remain openly accessible to all students. This article reviews the national context, and then argues that community colleges would be better served by maintaining respect for local needs and individual agency and focusing on high quality curriculum, student supports and alternate models of education delivery.*

In July 2009, President Obama announced a new plan for community colleges. He set a goal of graduating an additional 5 million community college students with associate degrees or certificates by 2020<sup>1</sup> (The White House, 2009). Part of the solution to America's troubled economy, he suggested, lies in the educational attainment of American citizens. Although helping more people to graduate from community college is an important goal, I will argue below that educators and policymakers must be mindful of the many missions community colleges are expected to fulfill, and the tensions that exist among stakeholders.

National and local needs are not always synergistic. The current economic and political context demands that community colleges contribute to the economy by producing sufficient quantities of skilled workers. Improving community college graduation rates is viewed as a primary mechanism for increasing efficiency of these institutions and fostering greater economic growth. Yet as historically open access institutions, community colleges are designed to serve local communities, in all their diversity and complexity. For example, Hostos Community College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, was created in 1968 as a result of advocacy by Hispanic leaders who wanted an institution of higher education that would serve the South Bronx (Hostos Community College, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008-09, 787,325 Associate degrees and 805,755 certificates were conferred (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Assuming the rate of Associate degrees and certificates awarded remained constant, the total awarded over a 10-year period would be 15,930,800. President Obama's proposal to award an additional 5 million Associate degrees or certificates between 2010 and 2020 represents a 31 percent increase.

Given that 38 percent of people in the Bronx age 25 or older do not hold a high school diploma, and more than half speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), the following questions arise: Should it be expected that all students entering Hostos quickly earn a degree? Should resources be targeted toward improving graduation rates, at the expense of college support programs? Is it appropriate to demand that adults with work and family obligations proceed through college linearly? The U.S. does not require higher education, nor are students who choose higher education fully supported; yet students are labeled as failures when they do not complete a degree in a specified number of years.

The analysis in this article is based on the theoretical perspective that institutions of higher education must balance national, local, and individual student needs. As academic excellence and institutional efficiency are pursued, the importance of preserving access for all student groups regardless of socioeconomic background, academic strength, or likelihood of success must not be overlooked. Embedded within this conception of higher education is the belief that education is a right and a public good, and therefore should be provided by our government.

The article explores pressures that are resulting in a narrowed community college mission. But first, an overview of community colleges will be provided, including the scope of community colleges, the many missions of the community college, and the challenges these institutions face.

### **Overview of the Community College**

Community colleges are institutions of higher education that receive public funds and award the associate degree as the highest degree. The vast scope of community colleges demonstrates the potential contribution of these institutions to individuals and to society. Nationally, in fall 2009 there were 999 community colleges serving 7.1 million students, or 35 percent of all college goers (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Within New York City, public higher education is available through the CUNY system of 23 colleges, including six community colleges (CUNY, 2011a). According to the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA), in fall 2010 there were 91,264 students enrolled in one of the CUNY community colleges (CUNY OIRA, 2011a). Many more community college students are enrolled in non-credited courses. During 2009-10, 146,030 people enrolled in coursework through departments of Adult and Continuing Education at CUNY community colleges (CUNY OIRA, 2011b).

Community colleges are charged with serving members of the local community seeking education services. Possible customers include community members who want to complete a GED or English as a Second Language course, employers seeking occupational training for employees, students who want to complete an associate degree or transfer to a senior college<sup>2</sup>, and those who just want to take a few classes.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, "senior college" refers to an institution that awards baccalaureate degrees.

Community colleges also provide public service activities and access public and private grants that benefit the community.

Students who attend community college do so for a variety of complex reasons. One interview study found that African-American female community college students revealed a desire to work in careers in which they could contribute to the advancement of other African-Americans (Hamilton, 1996). Based on a survey of first-time students enrolled at Hostos Community College, Santos (2004) found that students enrolled for multiple motivational reasons, including the belief that higher education could potentially be life-transforming.

Typically, community colleges do not have selective admissions criteria and charge lower tuition compared to senior colleges. Community colleges enroll high percentages of students who are low-income, black or Hispanic, and older (Horn & Neville, 2006). In fall 2010, 66 percent of CUNY community college students were black or Hispanic, 65 percent received Pell grants, 48 percent were the first generation to attend college, 46 percent spoke a native language other than English, and 46 percent had a total annual household income under \$20,000 (CUNY OIRA, 2011a). On each of these indicators, students enrolled in CUNY senior colleges were more advantaged (CUNY OIRA, 2011a). Many students enroll in community colleges with weak academic preparation. In fall 2010, 79 percent<sup>3</sup> of all first-time freshmen enrolled in CUNY community colleges required remediation (CUNY OIRA, 2011c).

Community colleges serve a challenging student population with relatively few resources. Approximately 60 percent of all operating funds for community colleges come from state and local revenues, making community colleges susceptible to cuts during economic downturns (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, & Kienzl, 2009). The final report of the New York State Commission on Higher Education released in June 2008 cites a significant lack of public funding for institutions of higher education. The NYS Commission (2008) found that due to funding shortages, community colleges have been forced to raise tuition, which currently stands above the national average. The New York State budget for fiscal year 2011-12 lowered community college base aid by \$138 per student, resulting in a decrease of \$10.6 million for CUNY community colleges (Goldstein, 2011).

Today, when public dollars are scarce and the capacities of American citizens are viewed as integral to economic recovery, community college performance comes under scrutiny. In particular, community colleges are critiqued for low completion rates. Only 21 percent of all students who enrolled at a public 2-year college in 2005 as full-time degree-seeking students completed a degree or a certificate within three years (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Just 12 percent of black students and 16 percent of Hispanic students completed an associate degree or certificate within three years (Snyder & Dillow, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Preliminary data.

### **American Graduation Initiative**

Community colleges face significant pressure to improve graduation rates. This pressure is manifest in calls for greater accountability for community colleges, and various proposals that suggest tying funding to improved performance. In 2009, President Obama introduced the American Graduation Initiative at Macomb Community College in Michigan, a state especially hard-hit by the recession. After referencing the nation's 6.5 million job losses, Mr. Obama said:

...the hard truth is, is that some of the jobs that have been lost in the auto industry and elsewhere won't be coming back. They're the casualties of a changing economy... And that only underscores the importance of generating new businesses and new industries to replace the ones that we've lost, and of preparing our workers to fill the jobs they create. For even before this recession hit, we were faced with an economy that was simply not creating or sustaining enough new, well-paying jobs (The White House, 2009).

Continuing, Mr. Obama proposed that funds be used to, "...put colleges and employers together to create programs that match curricula in the classroom with the needs of the boardroom" (ibid.). He planned for the Initiative to help colleges address low rates of degree completion, which are viewed as a hindrance to economic growth. When discussing low rates of degree completion at Macomb, Mr. Obama said, "That's not just a waste of a valuable resource, that's a tragedy for these students... And it's a disaster for our economy" (ibid.).

The 2009 Economic Report of the President emphasizes the societal economic benefits of higher education attainment (Council of Economic Advisors, 2009). Improvement in overall educational attainment is credited with one-third of the increase in American productivity between the 1950's and 1990's (Council of Economic Advisors, 2009, p. 220). Today, the need for skilled workers is pronounced. Many of the fastest growing professions require some college, but not necessarily a 4-year degree. Professions such as dental hygienist, veterinary technologist, physical therapist assistant, and environmental engineer require a 2-year degree and have a projected job growth over the next decade in excess of 30 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Yet educational attainment has stagnated. Although increasing numbers of high school graduates are attending college, the percentage completing college has remained relatively stable (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009).

### **Policy Meets Politics**

Prospects looked promising for eventual adoption of the American Graduation Initiative in September 2009, when the U.S. House of Representatives passed The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act. The Act authorized \$7 billion to increase the number of students graduating with an associate degree or certificate, to be paid for by switching to a direct lending model of student financial aid and ending subsidies for banks and private student-aid lenders. Amidst a difficult political climate, the U.S.

Senate created the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, effectively merging health care reform and student-aid reform in order to improve the chance of passing both bills.

As originally estimated by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), ending subsidies for banks and private lenders for student loans would have saved approximately \$87 billion (Field, 2009). But colleges began to switch to the direct lending model before student-aid reform was final. As a result, CBO released a revised estimate of \$61 billion in savings from the switch to direct lending (Basken, 2010). Since some of the savings had already occurred, Congress could no longer use the original savings estimate to pay for new initiatives. The revised CBO estimate, in combination with the decision to use savings for deficit reduction, toward the Pell Grant program, and to help finance health care reform, resulted in the elimination of the American Graduation Initiative from the final bill. Federal aid for community colleges was reduced to just \$2 billion, to be used specifically for job training (Gonzalez, 2011).

Although funding was not allocated for the American Graduation Initiative, the goal of increasing the number of community college graduates stands as a priority of the Obama administration. The Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, is reportedly working with the National Governors Association to develop state and institutional college graduation benchmarks (Blumenstyk, 2010). Such benchmarks would create pressure for community colleges to improve graduation rates. The impetus for the Initiative, as well as the accountability mechanisms suggested by the Initiative, shed light on the political and economic climate that will continue to exert influence over community colleges.

### **Other Sources of Pressure to Improve Graduation Rates**

The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1990, requires all institutions of higher education that receive federal student financial assistance to report on graduation rates and other measures. Institutions must report a graduation rate based on the percentage of full-time, first-time students that graduate within 150 percent of normal time (within three years for community college students). Almost all states have some form of performance reporting for community colleges in which data is publicly reported, and 15 states tie funding to performance (Dougherty & Reid, 2007, p. 25). Institutions also have their own systems of accountability. In 2000, CUNY initiated performance accountability for each of the system's 23 colleges known as the Performance Management Process (PMP) (CUNY, 2010a).

National foundations have pushed for greater performance accountability for community colleges. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Lumina Foundation have allocated funding to community colleges to improve performance. In 2009, Lumina donated approximately \$7 million to support "Achieving the Dream," a project designed to influence state policy and help improve outcomes for community colleges serving high percentages of low-income and minority students (Lumina Foundation, 2009). *Achieving the Dream* (2008) touts as policy accomplishments an increase in the number

of states that have developed measures for tracking student progress or allocated funding for performance incentives for community colleges.

The Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success Initiative aims to increase the number of low-income individuals that receive a college degree or certificate by age 26 (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010a). Concepts of performance measurement and performance funding are embedded throughout the Gates Initiative (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010b). A new CUNY community college opening in 2012 is receiving funding from the Gates Foundation (CUNY, 2010b), and aims to significantly increase the percentage of students who complete an associate degree within three years (Santora, 2009).

### **Performance Accountability, In Perspective**

The economic recession spurred increasing concern about the performance of community colleges. Yet the recession also reduced the amount of resources available for community colleges, making it less likely that community colleges will be able to significantly improve performance. A study that examined per-student state expenditures and rates of degree completion found that, "...public investment in higher education plays a crucial role in determining the degrees produced and the supply of college-educated workers to the labor market" (Bound & Turner, 2007, p. 877).

Students attempting to pay for and succeed within community college face financial barriers. In February 2011, the official unemployment rate was 9 percent in New York City, and 13 percent in the Bronx (New York State Department of Labor, 2011)—including *underemployment* and those who have given up job searches increases those percentages significantly. While more difficult to find a job to help pay tuition expenses, there is also less financial aid available for students. The New York State 2010-11 budget reduced financial aid for students, although the funding was restored in the 2011-12 budget (Goldstein, 2011). Federal student-aid is also at risk for cuts. The U.S. House of Representatives proposed a reduction of 15 percent in the Pell grant program (Goldstein, 2011).

What has been exemplified by the American Graduation Initiative is a significant amount of pressure for community colleges to improve, without the substantial investment needed to support such improvement. Patterns of privilege and inequality replicate across generations despite our open public school system. This occurs because schools are a product of an unequal society, such inequality buttressed by federal and municipal policies that present structural barriers against the poor (Anyon, 2005). For example, minimum wage policies, weak protections for unionized workers, reliance on part-time jobs by employers, and the shipping of jobs overseas prevent poor people from earning a living wage or obtaining decent benefits and work conditions (*ibid.*). To combat these structural inequalities, significant investment must be made to improve the performance of community colleges.

In addition to a lack of resources, there is also a lack of knowledge about how to improve community college performance. Accountability begins a cycle of creating standards, measuring performance, making judgments, and sometimes administering

rewards or sanctions. There might be little understanding of whether objectives are reasonable, yet accountability presupposes that specific outcomes are feasible and that the education system has complete control over outcomes. "The problem is that the schools cannot actually fulfill such high expectations, and when they fail to meet advocates' inflated claims, critics use the failure as evidence that public schools are fundamentally flawed" (McDermott, 2007, p. 104).

Performance accountability may promote attention to overly simplistic measures of educational quality. The Community College Research Center at Columbia University conducted a 10-state survey to assess the performance measures currently collected for community colleges (Dougherty, Hare, & Natow, 2009). The survey found that most states lack sophisticated and nuanced measures that are crucial for assessing community colleges. Data are often analyzed only for full-time students, or for students who began at the college as first-time students. Students who transfer may be incorrectly counted as dropouts. Further, data is rarely benchmarked against similar institutions to assess how the institution is performing relative to other institutions.

Without sound data systems, performance accountability may result in unintended consequences. For example, improving graduation rates may be the primary focus for an institution, yet patterns of student enrollment are not carefully examined. Accountability may provide a diversion from access, or serve as a lever that may result in perverse incentives for college administrators to restrict access. There is little attention paid to the unintended consequences of performance accountability, as policies are changed and resources re-directed in order to meet goals. Policymakers must be critical of the definition of equality assumed under a system of performance accountability. True equality may be subverted when equality is defined based on simplistic outcome measures.

### **Narrowing the Community College Mission**

The American Graduation Initiative and the performance accountability movement are part of the larger trend of narrowing the mission of higher education. During World War II, the U.S. government turned to institutions of higher education to produce the knowledge and technology needed to win the war. When the Russians launched Sputnik, the nation again turned to our education system to insure American sovereignty. In *The Uses of the University* (1963), Clark Kerr described how higher education had come to be driven by the needs of the nation-state.

So many of the hopes and fears of the American people are now related to our educational system and particularly to our universities – the hope for longer life, for getting into outer space, for a higher standard of living; our fears of Russian or Chinese supremacy, of the bomb and annihilation, of individual loss of purpose in the changing world. For all these reasons and others, the university has become a prime instrument of national purpose (p. 87).

Clark Kerr was President of the University of California system from 1958 to 1967 (UC Berkeley, 2003). He wrote from his perspective as leader of a premier university about the primacy of generating new knowledge. But at community colleges, a less respected tier of the higher education system, the emphasis is often on graduating people quickly with the skills needed to work. An obsession with strengthening the economy may subvert the many other purposes of the community college, namely to educate people, to expand their minds, and to respond to their own community and individual and personal needs and desires.

In this current context, the needs of society are often viewed as more important than the needs of individuals or particular localities. The idea that our government should assume responsibility for the welfare of individual citizens is no longer politically viable.

Universally, the challenge to the welfare state has been made, either on the grounds that it can no longer be afforded in conditions of global competition, or that it failed in its aims because it did not remove the social inequalities it was intended to remedy (Griffin, 1999, p. 332).

Critics believe institutions of higher education are not contributing to the needs of society, but rather are catering to the individual welfare needs of local citizens. Systems of performance accountability have been instituted to address this perceived issue, and are rooted in distrust of institutions of higher education and concerns about the use of public resources.

Using a case study design at seven community colleges in the U.S. and Canada, Levin (2000) examined the evolution of the community college mission in the 1990's. He found that throughout the decade community colleges became increasingly globalized, focused on serving the marketplace rather than meeting the individual needs of students.

...in the 1990s, the mission of the community college had less emphasis on education and more on training, less emphasis upon community social needs and more on the economic needs of business and industry, less upon individual development and more upon workforce preparation and retraining (p. 2).

Examples of the increasingly globalized orientation of community colleges include becoming more concerned with cost effectiveness, increased entrepreneurial efforts in the acquisition of grants and contracts, a focus on productivity in terms of student enrollments and completions, and concerned about institutional prestige (Levin, 2000). In conclusion, Levin states, "...the community college mission shifted in the 1990's from serving local communities to serving the economy, specifically serving the interests of capital by producing labor and reducing public sector spending" (p. 19).



### **Open Access, No More**

In a climate of pressure to demonstrate the efficient use of limited resources, coupled with rising demand for higher education, community colleges may not be able or willing to remain openly accessible to all students. The mission of the community college has been compromised because access to these institutions has become more limited. In California, a lack of resources led to 140,000 community college students being closed-out of priority classes (Adams, 2010). According to Tamar Lewin (2010),

In some parts of the country, the budget stresses are so serious that the whole concept of community colleges as open-access institutions—where anyone, with any educational background, can enroll at any point in life—is becoming more an aspiration than a reality.

Between 2008 and 2009, the CUNY community colleges experienced a 13 percent increase in total full-time equivalent student enrollment (CUNY OIRA, 2010). For the first time, CUNY instituted a waiting list for community college enrollment for fall 2010 (Lewin, 2010). In Chicago, Mayor Daley called for an end to open admissions at the City's community colleges, arguing that the system should not have to serve students unprepared for college-level work (Spielman, 2010). Community colleges are stretched beyond capacity and as a result, access is shrinking.

Reduced access for students may result in demographic changes within the student body. For example, prohibiting students with remedial needs from enrolling may adversely impact particularly disadvantaged students. Instituting a waiting list for community college admission may have a greater impact on less prepared students who are not as informed about college application procedures or older students who do not have the support of a high school guidance counselor.

As public institutions are under-resourced and thus unable to serve all students seeking higher education, a market has been created for proprietary (for-profit) institutions. Growth in the proprietary sector has greatly outpaced growth in the public sector (Wilson, 2010). Between 1998 and 2008, total enrollment in proprietary colleges in New York State grew by 48 percent, while total enrollment at CUNY grew by 22 percent (NYS Education Department, 2009). On average, proprietary institutions enroll higher percentages of older students and minority students compared to community colleges (Swail, 2009).

These trends are of concern, given the higher cost for students. In 2005-06, the average federal loan amount after four years for students attending proprietary colleges in New York was \$43,880, compared to an average loan amount of \$3,212 for students attending CUNY (NYS Education Department, 2009, p.71). Additionally, some critics charge that proprietary colleges may lack mechanisms for insuring faculty oversight of academic quality and rigor (Wilson, 2010).

### **Differential Impacts**

As college practices change and new programs are created to improve graduation rates, certain student groups may benefit more than others. For example, programs that attempt to improve graduation rates by encouraging full-time attendance may not be as accessible for working adult students. Two initiatives at CUNY require that students attend college full-time. Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) began in 2007 with the goal of insuring that at least 50 percent of all participants complete an associate degree within three years (Linderman, 2009). A new community college under development at CUNY will also require students to attend full-time (Santora, 2009). Although these programs represent an excellent opportunity for some students, there are many students who have work and family obligations and cannot attend college full-time. An assessment of ASAP found that participants were, on average, younger than a comparable group of CUNY students who did not participate in ASAP (Linderman, 2009).

### **Recommendations for a Future Direction**

I would argue that despite the foregoing trends and financial difficulties, community colleges should continue to serve their local communities and attend to individual student needs. High quality and meaningful curriculum should be provided that is not narrowly tied to workforce needs. Aronowitz (2000) is critical of tailoring the purposes of higher education to creating a skilled workforce. Critiquing the “corporate university”, he describes a “...mad race toward occupational education, and to the intellectual bottom...” (p. 160). He advocates that there be no skill-based or vocational curriculum, instead promoting a return to study of classics. He suggests that vocationally-oriented curriculum is useless because corporate America is constantly evolving, and the skill requirements of today are bound to change. Aronowitz also argued that since corporations maintain no allegiance to workers, students must develop critical thinking skills so they learn how to navigate complex bureaucracies that exert power over their lives.

Although often perceived as radical, Aronowitz’s suggestions have merit. CUNY programs that combine theory with practice represent one possible compromise. For instance, the Disability Studies Certificate Program offered through the CUNY School for Professional Studies attracts adult learners who work for disability-service agencies (John F. Kennedy, Jr. Institute, 2010). From a workforce development perspective, the program provides the City with workers qualified to serve people with disabilities. But the program includes courses that examine the portrayal of people with disabilities in literature, the historical context of disability rights and advocacy, and psychosocial and cultural aspects of disability. Such content allows students to understand their work within a larger socio-political context.

I want to argue as well that the method of delivering higher education to students needs to be reconceptualized. Given high rates of student attrition, there is clearly a mismatch between the model of delivering higher education and student needs. Student supports such as academic advising, block scheduling of courses, and

financial aid must be available so that students are able to complete their degrees. In some cases, there should be acceptance of a longer timeline to degree, especially for students who juggle work and family obligations while attending college. Community colleges are well poised to deliver educational services to people throughout the course of their lives in response to changing technologies and the evolving global economy. A 2007 longitudinal study of women admitted to CUNY between 1970 and 1972 found that on average, associate degree recipients took 6 years to complete the degree, and black and Hispanic students took longer to complete compared to white students (Attewell & Lavin, 2007, p. 29). While longer time-to-degree may indicate that students are not receiving the supports they need, it also suggests that failure should not be assumed when a student does not complete their degree within a specified number of years.

Barriers that students experience along their educational journeys need to be eliminated. For instance, efforts to reduce difficulties experienced by transfer students are underway at CUNY. In June 2011, the CUNY Board of Trustees approved a plan to streamline the process of transfer between the system's 23 community and senior colleges (CUNY, 2011b). A common general education framework and common entry-level courses for the largest transfer majors will be developed so that students may be assured that a course completed at one CUNY college will count toward degree requirements at another CUNY college.

Improved community college research is also needed. Researchers should pay special attention to demographic shifts that suggest reduced access. The Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA), currently being developed by the American Association of Community Colleges, Association of Community College Trustees, and College Board (Dougherty et al., 2009), represents a promising development.

The intention of the VFA is to insure that the goals of community colleges are appropriately defined and performance appropriately measured. It is recommended that the VFA include a measure of student access disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, income, gender, and immigration status (Dougherty et al., 2009). Disaggregated enrollment data may counterbalance the inclination of some colleges to restrict access in order to insure a more academically successful pool of students. It is also recommended that the VFA include much more detailed process indicators that provide information about the quality of education provided. For example, data about college affordability, student academic engagement, program offerings, and availability of resources are critical, and may shed light on student outcomes.

In addition to improved quantitative analysis, qualitative research on community colleges should also be conducted. Performance accountability is based on an assumption about why students attend college and what they need to gain from their college-going experience. But the needs of community college students are not fully understood. The voices of community college students have largely been excluded from conversations about reform.

Eve Tuck's (2009) concept of "damage-centered" research can be applied to the type of research engendered by accountability policy. The intent of performance

accountability is often to document the inadequacies of individual groups and institutions. Pointing to low completion rates, community colleges are cast as wastelands of inefficiency and failure, as students who lack academic potential dropout without having gained any benefit from their educational experience. "This kind of research operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless" ( p. 1). Tuck recommends making a shift toward "desire-centered" research, "...concerned with understanding complexity, contradictions, and the self-determination of lived lives."

### **Conclusion**

President Obama's American Graduation Initiative placed community colleges in the national spotlight. Community colleges serve large numbers of students, and are the most accessible form of higher education for low-income and minority students. Rapidly expanding enrollments, a large population of students who face significant challenges, and low levels of funding make clear the need for greater support for community colleges. But policies that may result in further narrowing of the community college mission are not the solution.

As improved educational opportunities available through community colleges are sought, there is clearly much at stake for society, local communities, and individuals. Amongst the many competing priorities, balance has been lost. National interests overshadow the interests of other stakeholders. Aware of this imbalance, committed educators and researchers must provide high quality and meaningful curriculum, conceptualize new ways of providing opportunity to higher education, insure that community colleges remain accessible to all who seek public higher education, and challenge unwarranted assumptions by engaging in rigorous research.

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