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Letters

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LETTERS

ACCOUNTING FOR CORE SKILLS FULFILLS PART OF MISSION

Accountability as described by Christopher Nelson in the November/December 2007 issue of *Change* (“Accountability: The Commodification of the Examined Life”) is easy to oppose, since it dictates measurement of specific bits of learning and thus prescribes what universities teach. Elimination of diversity in mission and pedagogical approach inevitably follows such prescription. Fortunately, no one proposes such measurement. Thus Nelson’s article establishes an elaborate straw man.

What the College Portrait: Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) developed by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities calls for is measurement of our graduates’ acquisition of the skills of analyzing and making sense of multifaceted problems (i.e., critical thinking and analytic reasoning) and of communicating to others in writing what they understand.

These are the core skills that employers repeatedly say that they want in our graduates and that faculty look for when admitting graduate students. In developing the VSA, we found that virtually all public universities include the acquisition of these skills in their otherwise diverse missions. I suspect the same is true of private universities. Is measurement of achievement of our mission really unacceptable?

Unfortunately, existing piecemeal assessment programs usually fail to measure the acquisition of these skills, even though such measurement is pre-

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requisite to modifying programs so that our students leave the academy with the ability to think critically, solve problems, and communicate effectively. Nothing sacred is violated: Diversity of mission and approach survives, while our graduates are better prepared for life.

—David E. Shulenburger

*Vice President for Academic Affairs
National Association of State
Universities and Land-Grant Colleges
Washington, DC*

REALISTICALLY LOOKING AHEAD AT WORKFORCE NEEDS

Paul Barton (“How Many College Graduates Does the U.S. Labor Force Really Need?” *Change*, January/February, 2008) would have the reader believe that the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ projections overstate the skill requirements of the future economy. But Anthony Carnevale, with whom I agree, takes the opposite view (“College for All?” *Change*, January/February, 2008), pointing out that the BLS methodology fails to take into account the fact that many jobs may go by the same titles over long periods, while the skills required to do those jobs are steadily escalating.

Statistical reviews of the BLS projections by other observers show that the BLS consistently underestimates the rate of technological change. It is technological change that, on balance, drives

skills requirements up. More important, the BLS projections take very little account of the likely effects of changes in the dynamics of the international economy over the life of the projection. These effects are much greater now than they used to be and much more likely to affect the demand for labor and the price offered for that labor than ever before.

The reality is that the demand for highly educated labor in the United States depends in part on our ability to produce it. If we do not produce it in sufficient quantity in this country, global employers will simply look for it in other countries. That fact is not well accounted for in the BLS projections.

—Mark Tucker

*President, National Center
on Education and the Economy
Washington, DC*

As Paul Barton stresses in his article, there is considerable confusion about the growth in the demand for college-educated workers. The inconsistencies in the article (e.g., the college-wage premium is increasing, yet there is underemployment of college graduates), however, do little to clear up the confusion. Moreover, the article neglects a crucial point that is almost never raised in discussions about the demand for college-educated labor: Jobs are created (and destroyed) all the time, and this job creation is not random or exogenous. Where jobs are created and which jobs are created depend on the skills of the labor force. It is not a coincidence that high-tech clusters are located near important universities.

Growth in the demand for college graduates is not independent of growth in the supply. My research suggests that the supply of college-educated labor essentially creates its own demand. As the proportion of college graduates rises, the jobs that are created are disproportionately for college graduates. This is why, contrary to the dire predictions in the 1970s, the college-wage premium has not fallen as more and more Americans have obtained a college education. Thus,

increasing college attainment leads to rising national prosperity and is essential for global competitiveness. It is basically as simple as that.

—Philip Trostel
Professor of Economics
and Public Policy
University of Maine
Orono, ME

THE WRONG PRESCRIPTIONS

While John Merrow is to be commended for bringing the plight of community colleges to the public eye (“Community Colleges: The (Often Rocky) Path to the American Dream,” *Change*, November/December 2007), his diagnosis of the problems and prescriptions for change—although intended to promote greater equality through the realization of the “American Dream”—will not lead to the acquisition of the critical competencies necessary in 21st-century conditions.

I am a product of the community-college system and have attained academic and professional accomplishments that would not have been predicted, given my geographic, social, and economic background. I grew up in a rural ranching community that placed little emphasis on the value of an education beyond high school. But when I met two community-college professors who provided significant academic challenges in the context of substantial support, I began to envision my life path in radically different ways. In short, these two brilliant, highly committed, and deeply democratic professors had a profound impact on my life.

Upon leaving the community college, I went on to earn a bachelor’s degree from the University of California and a master’s degree from the University of London; then I had an internship with UNICEF, and now I am working toward a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago—this from someone who initially saw herself obtaining nothing more than an associate’s degree, if that.

I believe that my student experiences—as well as nearly a year teaching at a community college and more than five years working as a research assistant to Ted Hamilton, a Carnegie Foundation award-winning professor, and Paula Clarke at Columbia College in California—enable me to shed light on some of the most pervasive problems within the community-college system and call Mer-

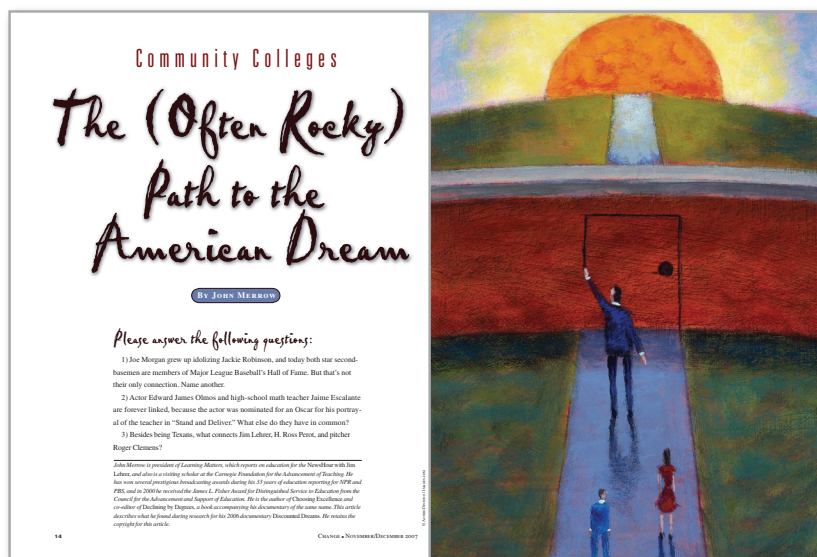
row’s recommendations into question, particularly those regarding remediation, transfer, and “connecting” with students.

Merrow claims that “Job Two” of community colleges is to promote transfer. I could hardly agree more on this point. However, his preceding recommendation is to “make remediation Job One.” While it is true that community-college students are increasingly under-prepared for higher education, remediation is unlikely to lead to successful transfer. ...

The focus on remediation ignores the changing nature of work, increasing economic inequalities, and the contemporary demands of citizenship. Regardless of

petencies. The two remedial teachers Merrow heralds as “successful” hardly resemble academic mentors. In his documentary, these two instructors promote “self-esteem” and student engagement with incentives such as candy bars as rewards for good behavior. Such tactics may make students feel good, but they hardly equip them with the intellectual and institutional knowledge required not only for transfer but also for citizenship and participation in the workforce.

Along with much of the broader culture, community colleges have an almost religious commitment to a cluster of empirically unsound ideas, among them



work status or aspirations, contemporary conditions require an innovative approach to problem solving, which includes critical thinking, flexibility, and a capacity for effectively engaging with ambiguity, abstraction, and synthesis. The “back-to-basics” approach of remedial courses is unlikely to lead to these outcomes. Students are *not* prepared for higher-order thinking and problem-solving through lower-order course work. Instead, my research suggests that if students are to gain the “critical competencies” necessary for economic and civic engagement, academic institutions (especially community colleges) must provide both challenging courses *and* significant levels of support.

This brings me to Merrow’s recommendation that faculty increase the “help and encouragement [students] need” to transfer. Again, I agree in part: Under-prepared students need support. However, the *kinds* of support he describes do not lead to the acquisition of critical com-

ideas about self-esteem and carrot-and-stick approaches to learning. “Successful” community-college teachers often provide an ethic of “care” that consists of relatively easy classes that boost students’ GPAs and self-esteem but little else—certainly not their chances to live the “American Dream.” Instead, such strategies tend to perpetuate class-, gender-, and race-based inequalities. ...

To provide students with *authentic* collegiate opportunities and the institutional support (including sustained mentorships) that make success possible is not cheap or easy, to be sure: It requires institutional and professional restructuring (including financial investment). Even more, it requires a profoundly different teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Remediation and “feel-good curricula” are not going to do it. ...

—Sara Keene
Graduate Student
University of Chicago
Chicago, IL