

Chapter 14

Resilience and resistance: the community college in a pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

All universities and colleges in the United States were deeply and immediately affected by the sudden appearance of Covid-19. What began as incredulity at the severity and rapidity of the virus' spread was quickly followed by incredulity at the failure of the federal government to act responsibly. States and municipalities were on their own, and universities and colleges were largely left adrift to seek their own ways of acting quickly to protect their students, campuses and communities.

The result was a patchwork of closures and re-openings. Initially, in March 2020, there was an almost universal move to distance learning in lieu of on-campus teaching and research, with the closure of campus services and operations and a hurried gathering of advice and guidance on how best to honour the requirements of "stay at home" and "keep students enrolled".

The two-year public community colleges suffered the same fate as their university neighbours: the immediate needs were to close up operations, shift instruction to online and distance modalities and keep students engaged and focused when all around them collapsed. But the community colleges suffered under constraints not shared by many of their university neighbours: limited discretionary dollars, little or no funding from endowments to fall back on and students whose limited economic resources and constrained family circumstances made any transitions much more difficult and stress-inducing.

But it would be an error to look at the experience of US community colleges or their students during the pandemic only through the lens of their constraints or their limited resources. This is instead a story of resilience and engagement, and the remarkable ability of poor and first-generation students to adapt and then resist despair and isolation. More critically, it is a story of what happens when equity drives college practice, and commitments to participation and democratic governance matter.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The 1 050 US community colleges enrol over 11 800 000 students, 44% of all undergraduate students in the United States (AACC 2020). These are “open access” institutions, accepting students whose credentials would not allow entrance to university, students without admissions requirements beyond some English-language competence. This means that community colleges enrol the vast majority of low-income, first-generation or immigrant students in the United States and offer a pathway to either vocational employment or transfer to four-year universities. Indeed, over 50% of all bachelor level (first degree) graduates of public comprehensive universities in the United States⁶² are transfer students from the community colleges. And at the most selective of the public research universities in the United States – the nine campuses of the University of California – over a third of all graduates are transfer students from the state’s community colleges.

Community college students are diverse in all ways. Among all students enrolled in credit courses in US community colleges, 26% are Latino, 13% are Black, 45% are white, 6% are Asian/Pacific Islanders, 4% are two or more races and 1% are Native American (ibid.). This is a diversity which reflects the changing demographics of the United States, where non-white persons are projected to be the numerical majority by 2042.

More critically, the community colleges are the entry point for communities long marginalised in the United States: 57% of all Native Americans attending college are in the public community colleges, 52% of all Latinos, 42% of all African American students and 39% of all Asian/Pacific Islander students are enrolled in these colleges (ibid.). And among all the students who complete a four-year degree at US universities, 49% have enrolled in a community college at some point in their academic career (Community College Research Center 2020).

Community college students are older than the 18- to 22-year-old cohort typically found in private colleges and universities, they often have families and jobs and they most often have fewer resources with which to pursue their education. Two thirds of them attend part-time, the vast majority do not attend residential colleges with available student housing and over 60% of them receive financial aid. And, the vast majority of them work while being students: 62% of all full-time students are employed, 72% of all part-time students are employed (AACC 2020). But, because they are more likely to be poor and first-generation, their employment is most often low-wage and insecure.

These demographics matter in the daily life of the colleges, where there is no presumption that education is an expected privilege, or that students and their families can easily manage the financial obligations, commitments of time or focus that more elite institutions often presume about their students. Yet, the daily reality is that these students do the work, complete the credits and the programmes, transfer into

62. State-funded “comprehensive universities”, serving regional and state constituencies, offer baccalaureate and master’s degrees and some doctorates; Research 1 universities have research as one of their primary functions.

university or get employment. At the University of California, community college transfer students perform the same as or better than so-called “native” or first-year admits.

RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

The diversity and resilience of community college students provide a framework for understanding the experience of the colleges during the pandemic, and the degree to which the students’ own agency and engagement have mattered in confronting the indignities and dangers of the pandemic. At the same time, the colleges’ commitments to equity and to democratic participation were critical to the nature and scope of their institutional response.

I will refer almost exclusively to the experiences of California’s community colleges and I focus particularly on De Anza College. California’s 116 public community colleges enrol over 2 200 000 students, more than 20% of all community college students in the United States. De Anza College, located in Cupertino, California, is one of the state’s larger colleges, with 21 000 students. De Anza has a long tradition of superb teaching, a commitment to equity and civic engagement, and activist students. It is located at the epicentre of California’s first major outbreak of Covid-19, in Santa Clara County.

When De Anza shut down its on-campus instruction and operations on 16 March 2020, virtually overnight, the overriding concern was to establish continuity of instruction via distance learning. But the college faced some immediate challenges. They needed to train their faculty and staff in online modalities if they had not yet done so, and their students also needed immediate training in these modalities, while many students did not have sufficient internet access or the necessary equipment to access the internet. In state-wide surveys, almost 20% of California community college students reported a lack of equipment and internet access (Student Senate 2020).

At almost all community colleges, there was an immediate mobilisation on two fronts: communication and access. At De Anza College, the college used all available communication tools to reach its students, alerting them to the emergency measures required by new regulations. Two surveys were conducted to determine the depth and range of needs among students, and this information, in turn, prompted a new emergency fund for students. The college then distributed over US\$1.8m in CARES Act funding (i.e. federal relief funds made available to colleges and universities)⁶³ to students for emergency financial aid, laptops and tablets and leveraged free internet access through partnerships with local internet providers.

63. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided over US\$16 billion in funding for emergency relief to American universities and colleges and their students. The U.S. Department of Education established the criteria and protocols by which the colleges applied for assistance; a common complaint was that the Department kept changing and revising its processes and delayed the money ultimately available to students. As a result, many colleges, including De Anza, used their own emergency funds, and those donated to the college, to offer emergency funds until the federal dollars finally arrived.

At De Anza, one of the few California community colleges on a quarter-term programme (i.e. three main sessions per year, plus a summer term, rather than a semester programme of two main terms), the college declared a one-week delay in opening the spring term and devoted that entire week to training faculty and staff in distance learning and off-site service delivery. The extra week gave time for students to regroup and figure out their options for continuing their education.

The results of the college's survey work were often startling and highlighted the particular difficulties faced by poor students. At De Anza, 44% of students reported losing their employment in the first month of the pandemic; 48% reported anxiety and depression. Of the students with food insecurity, 63% had either lost their employment or had their hours reduced (De Anza 2020). In a survey of California community college students conducted by the state-wide Student Senate, 67% of students reported serious anxiety or depression (SERU 2020; Student Senate 2020).

In the face of these findings, the college sought to provide counselling and other services, but those remained limited in scope and capacity. What has been less remarked upon is the resilience of those same students, however burdened by both unemployment and legitimate anxiety, and the critical role they played in pushing the colleges to respond to the pandemic in ways that acknowledged the particular burdens carried by low-income and first-generation students. At De Anza, it was, in fact, the elected student leadership that first asked for the campus closure to protect the community's health, two weeks before the campus closed, despite the obvious burden this would place on students. It was the students who first raised policy changes in grading and course withdrawals that later became state-wide policy.

These acts of agency and initiative are often overlooked in the narratives of "service" that mark how colleges responded – in good faith and with good effect – to the pandemic. And it is of course hard to tease apart what initiatives made which difference, but the proof of the students' resilience was in their persistence in the face of the dislocations of the virus. At De Anza College, the persistence rate (i.e. students continuing from term to term) fell only two percentage points between the winter and spring terms, which means that the vast majority of students persisted, remained enrolled and continued their education. And when the summer term opened, Mallory Newell, supervisor of college research at De Anza, confirmed that enrolment was up 26% (Newell 2020).

Our students did this, one must add, in the face of the pandemic's cruel demographics: low-income and poor communities, especially Black and Latino communities, were and are disproportionately represented in the awful numbers of Covid-19 illnesses and death. In neighbourhood after neighbourhood, poverty and race determined the odds of illness, and this was true of our students and their families. Almost all students from the poorest communities served by the college had family members laid off from work or had other family members employed in front-line jobs in hospitals, grocery stores or public services. Among those who were compelled to leave school, there was a disproportionate number of Black and Latino students. But many among them persisted.

How can we better understand the resilience of our students? At De Anza, there is a long tradition of student mobilisation and political leadership. There is a strong

student government with its own independent funding; there is a superb elected student trustee with organising skills representing the students on the locally elected Board;⁶⁴ there is a certificate programme in “Social change leadership” which educates students seeking careers in organising and community leadership; there are over 70 student organisations and clubs where students group together; there are talented faculty and staff committed to the political and social activism of students; there are offices and projects that enlist students as mentors and leaders (VIDA 2020). In short, the college has a deep commitment to the active political and community engagement of its students and their engagement in the life of the college. And when the pandemic hit, these students did not fade into the woodwork; they did their own organising, they did their own outreach, they joined with faculty and staff in keeping the college focused on their needs.

At the same time, the administrative leadership at De Anza made a serious effort to broadly engage the faculty and staff unions and senates, to seek their guidance and agreement regarding the transition to online learning and the timing of any return to campus. This engagement came out of traditions and protocols developed over years, in which the advice and leadership of faculty and staff are valued not only for process reasons but for substantive reasons: they know the students and the college’s capacities, and their views count. As a practical matter, this means endless meetings and protracted conversations. This means sacrificing speed in the name of broad participation. And, it is never good enough for some. Indeed, some faculty and staff at De Anza felt there had not been enough consultation and participation, and that too many decisions in the heat of the emergency had been made without adequate consultation. Similarly, student leaders complained at what they thought was inadequate communication, in a context where this expectation came up against the need to act immediately.

It was, in short, messy and contradictory. But no one can understand the efficacy with which a college serving 21 000 students reacted to a completely unexpected set of circumstances, or the astonishing resilience of those students, without understanding the depth of commitment to democratic action and equity at the college.

THE REBELLION IN THE STREETS

Three months into the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered by policemen in Minneapolis, and the streets of US cities exploded in grief and rage. Across the country, in the largest set of public demonstrations in its history, college and university students joined with younger students and their elders in a mass repudiation of police violence and the deeper structures of racism in the country. Risking their own health in an ever-widening health crisis, hundreds of thousands demanded both justice and a confrontation with racism.

These demonstrations were notable for the diversity of their participants and for the deep expression of solidarity that reverberated through them. At the same time, the

64. In California, all public community colleges are governed by locally elected boards of trustees, in geographically defined districts, subject to the legal and policy frameworks from the state Board of Governors. In the district governing De Anza College, each college has an elected student trustee.

demonstrations confronted the national embarrassment of a reactionary president whose pathological failure to lead the country during the Covid-19 pandemic was now compounded by his embrace of white supremacy and his demonising of the demonstrators.

While all accounts of the demonstration talk of tens of thousands of “young people”, or tens of thousands of students, we need to point to the obvious: the health risks for young people of colour, especially Black and Latino, are significantly higher than for most people. And yet they took those risks, while at the same time focusing their energy and attention on what they could change close to home – and that included their colleges and universities. The most immediate focus of their energy was the police forces of colleges and universities and the demand that these forces either disband or transform into agents of community service.

At the same time, students were concerned to demand that colleges provide better and more responsive resources to students of colour, particularly African American. Student organisers, in short, did not see their lives as students divorced from their lives as actors in the streets. At De Anza College, this meant making demands on the administration, in concert with multiple faculty groups, to fund positions in support of Black students and (successfully) demanding that the local elected Board of Trustees pause in hiring two police positions. In the midst of an ever-worsening pandemic, under stay-at-home orders and required to organise through Zoom and Google Meet, our students were effective and powerful.

Community colleges conventionally judge themselves, and are judged, by the metrics of course completion, degree attainment and transfer to university, set against metrics of cost and ease of access. Almost never is a college judged for the political efficacy of its graduates or their capacity to forge enduring relationships across differences of race and ethnicity and class. Yet, a growing number of colleges across the United States judge themselves by the degree to which their students demonstrate the sort of resilience and action I have described among De Anza students. At Allegany College of Maryland, Tarrant County Community College and Lone Star College in Texas, at Monroe and Broome colleges in New York state, at LaGuardia College in New York City and Miami-Dade in Miami, regardless of local politics or partisan factionalism, students are showing that even a devastating pandemic cannot stop their development as community actors and activists.

A COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND DEMOCRACY

I have described two arcs of action as colleges responded to the pandemic and the ensuing movement for racial justice: the institutional response of colleges seeking to support students – particularly low-income and first-generation students – and the response of students themselves when confronted with the deepest interruption of their lives and communities in living memory. In each instance, the commitment to equity – namely that poor and marginalised students be supported and engaged to the fullest extent possible – defines the actual work on the ground.

This commitment is maintained despite the absence of funding and resources. As Larry Galizio, President and CEO, Community College League of California, has

pointed out, of all the federal resources provided for US higher education through the CARES Act, only 27% went to community colleges, even though they enrol 44% of undergraduates (Galizio 2020). And in state after state, the economic collapse during the pandemic means fewer and fewer state dollars for colleges and universities, even as the need for their services expands. This countercyclical budget problem – more students seeking education when resources shrink – means that community colleges simply cannot serve all who seek enrolment. So, as deep as the commitment to equity for marginalised students might be, it cannot compensate for a lack of resources. It is estimated that California's community colleges left 600 000 potential students unable to enrol during the 2008-09 recession (ibid.), who were disproportionately low-income, working-class, non-white.

If the crisis prompted by the pandemic deepens and the state of California cannot adjust its revenue streams (i.e. generate greater tax revenues), the programmatic and staffing commitments that a college must make if it is to support student civic engagement become harder to balance against the demands of maintaining the broader curriculum.

Maintaining a balancing act between institutional survival and broader commitments to student engagement and democratic life may depend, ironically, on the political capacity of students and their families to vote, participate in local, state and national political debate, support the taxation proposals required to keep colleges healthy and refuse a history that marginalises them. The colleges may depend on the students and their families as much as the students depend on the colleges.

This mutual dependence will become more critical as the national elections in November 2020 approach. As Eloy Ortiz Oakley, the Chancellor of the California State Community Colleges, puts it, our students are “under constant attack by a hostile administration” in Washington, referring not only to education policy but changes in immigration, environmental and health policy (Oakley 2020). If the elections are determined by voter turnout, surely the votes of younger citizens will matter greatly, and community colleges that have devoted themselves to the civic engagement of their students will have played a role beyond the immediate and local.

Finally, a note on the “narratives” through which we understand our work. Any review of the national organisations representing higher education in the United States will see little reference to the political capacity of our students. Almost without exception, there is lavish attention to student success, equity for all, occasionally a reference to social responsibility. In those organisations representing the community colleges there is much attention to equity of access and student success and no reference to the democratic purposes of college beyond a vague notion that a “vibrant democracy” requires greater economic access.

That a vibrant democracy might require attention to the political and community engagement of our students is often unacknowledged, partly due to a fear of partisanship and reprisal by reactionary forces. Yet, despite that avoidance, the pandemic and the demands for racial justice have thrown into sharp relief that young people across the country, including our students, are providing political and community leadership anyway. And our experience at De Anza demonstrates that a more intentional commitment to these dimensions of our mission serves us all.

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