FOREWORD

COMMUNITY COLLEGES TODAY OCCUPY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN OUR COUNTRY’S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. FROM THEIR MODEST ROOTS AS EXTENSIONS OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO, DESIGNED IN LARGE MEASURE TO PREPARE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND OFFER A MIX OF LIBERAL ARTS AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING, COMMUNITY COLLEGES SINCE 1901 HAVE SERVED MORE THAN 100 MILLION PEOPLE. CURRENTLY THERE ARE SOME TWELVE HUNDRED COMMUNITY COLLEGES—OR SIXTEEN HUNDRED, WHEN ALL BRANCH CAMPUSES ARE INCLUDED—AND THEY EDUCATE ALMOST HALF OF THE NATION’S UNDERGRADUATES. ALL TOLD, THEY REPRESENT AN EDUCATIONAL MARKETPLACE OF REMARKABLE DIVERSITY AND CHOICE.

IN WHAT EXCELLENT COMMUNITY COLLEGES DO, JOSHUA WYNER PROFILES THE EXEMPLARY COLLEGES THAT WERE SELECTED AS FINALISTS FOR THE ASPEN PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE IN 2011 AND 2013 BASED ON THEIR PERFORMANCE IN FOUR ESSENTIAL AREAS: COMPLETION, EQUITY, LEARNING, AND LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES. THESE WIDELY VARYED SCHOOLS—SOME ARE HIGHLY URBAN WITH A LARGE MINORITY POPULATION, OTHERS ARE RURAL AND MOSTLY WHITE, AND STILL OTHERS ARE MIXED—PROVIDE A SNAPSHOT OF A SECTOR THAT IS UNDERGOING RAPID AND OVERDUE CHANGE IN ITS MOST FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURES, GOALS, AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS.

THE VERY SUCCESS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAS PLACED THEM UNDER UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURE. COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE ALREADY COMPLEX NETWORKS WITH MULTIPLE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS. THE RESULT, INCREASINGLY, IS THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE AT THE FOREFRONT IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM A MISSION SOMEWHAT VAGUELY DEFINED BY THE GENERAL PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE TO A MORE
complex set of missions governed by overlapping but separable outcomes. The challenge going forward is to make the matrix of missions and outcome standards explicit.

Two of the community college missions are primary. The community college has emerged as the primary “on-ramp” to a bachelor’s degree as well as the “off-ramp” to a job; it is the interface not only between high school and a four-year college, but also between would-be workers and employers. The modern community college is the gateway for poor, minority, and immigrant students who seek to realize the American Dream. Community colleges are filled—and frequently overrun—with high school students taking college-level courses prior to graduation, high school graduates taking remedial courses before they can embark on standard college-level courses, and full- or part-time students taking courses to fulfill a range of ambitions, from short-term job training to a four-year college degree. For many, arguably most, of those students, a certificate with immediate labor market value, an associate’s degree, or a bachelor’s degree is the must-have prerequisite to a decent-paying job.

Amid all this, community colleges—like the rest of higher education—are facing demands to help improve on national outcomes that are often lackluster when compared to our country’s performance twenty-five years ago as well as to current global competition. A generation ago, the United States led the world in the number of postsecondary graduates; today it ranks in the middle tiers of the most advanced nations and is gradually being overtaken by rapidly developing and more populous countries, notably China and India.

Given the rising expectations, it was inevitable that the format of the community college, as we have known it for decades,
would be compelled to change. And, in fact, the higher education system is being subjected to the same market forces that have already revolutionized big business and are starting to make significant inroads in the health-care industry.

THE BUSINESS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

For many decades, community colleges operated much the same way other colleges did—with relative freedom from government oversight and with the autonomy to determine what programs and delivery models were best for their consumers. Not surprisingly, they followed the efficient industrial organizational model of the twentieth century: a top-down hierarchy organized to deliver standardized goods or services. Competition within this model—for business and for higher education—meant reaching ever more consumers with a standardized product at lowest cost. For community colleges, success in delivering the core product was defined, well into the 1980s, primarily as increasing higher education access.

But expanding access translated into a steady shift in the nature of the community college consumer over time. The passage of the GI Bill in 1944 opened college doors to a multitude of students, followed by a huge enrollment of baby boomers in the 1960s. In more recent years, expansion has ushered in large numbers of low-income, minority, and adult students who bring with them a set of expectations and challenges very different from those of the traditional twentieth-century college student. Community colleges now serve a disproportionately large percentage of the nation’s low-income and underrepresented minority students.
In addition to the complexities of a shifting consumer base, ever-expanding access has been increasingly in tension with the ever-expanding variety of missions and purposes served by the community college sector. The top-down model was enormously successful at delivering mass-produced goods and services, including mass education. It is less well designed for providing individualized educational programs across a multitude of vocational and academic programs to highly diverse students. In community colleges, as in any business, this fragmentation makes performance measurement and cost control equally challenging. It is difficult to bring quality and innovation to scale in fragmented systems, and the fragmented industry that is community colleges had fallen behind other industries in mobilizing capital for investment in technology—the investment that industries have most often utilized to move their production models into the twenty-first century.

Indeed, despite these changes in both the consumer base and the diversity of programs community colleges offer, the fundamental business model of the sector has remained unchanged. Consequently, the fragmented service delivery of community college education has provided variety, but has not been able to provide a large set of outcomes with consistent quality, or even to establish coherent outcome measures as singular drivers of organizational improvement. Put another way, community colleges are marvelous at pursuing many different missions but rarely excel in any of them. While manufacturing and many service industries underwent sweeping transformations as they moved from top-down hierarchies to network systems, the institutional transformation in higher education, from fragmented delivery systems to coherent networks driven by outcome standards, is still a relatively new idea. For example, the shift from accreditation based
on inputs toward a more outcomes-driven system is barely under way in higher education.

If the transition in other goods and service industries is any guide, technology will play a major part in the transformation of the education system. Information technology has the potential to fundamentally reinvent higher education, just as it has car manufacturing, insurance, and government services. After all, higher education is at its core a business designed around the transfer of information, so the educational system ought to be particularly susceptible to the applications of information technology.

We have yet to see whether community colleges—and higher education more broadly—can reorganize themselves to take advantage of technological innovations in order to bring about sustained improvements in quality and productivity. While online study has been around for a few decades, the pace of its adoption is rapidly accelerating, at both for-profit and nonprofit institutions. One survey in 2010 found that enrollment in online education grew by 21 percent in the previous year, compared with 2 percent in higher education overall; more than 5.6 million, or nearly one-third of all students, were taking at least one course online in 2010, and one can only assume that number has risen substantially since then with the continuing economic slowdown and the proliferation of MOOCs (massive open online courses).

The larger question, however, is whether and how community colleges will meet the demands placed upon them by the twenty-first-century economy. Through 2020 the U.S. economy will create some 24 million new (not including replacement) job openings, at least 65 percent of which will require applicants to have some form of postsecondary education. The fastest-growing and most lucrative of these jobs—in STEM, health care, and
community and social services—are also those that will require the highest levels of postsecondary education. Based on current output, the labor market will want for nearly 5 million college-educated workers just in numbers alone. And the skills those college-educated workers bring may also be lacking: employers will increasingly look for high-level thinking and communication skills rather than just the physical skills associated with industrial-era manufacturing jobs. Community colleges must be central to the development of this educated work force, but their success in doing so will require not only changing the way they do business in order to make sure more students graduate or transfer, but also integrating technology, twenty-first-century skills, and real-world learning into their delivery and pedagogical models.

MAKING STUDENT SUCCESS THE BUSINESS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The community college sector is in a state of flux as it adapts to rapidly increasing institutional performance requirements and a fast-changing student body. In some respects, community colleges are the poster children of change within complex environments. They have, in general, always been more adaptive to changing social conditions than more traditional four-year colleges, where the in-residence chalk-and-talk model of education still dominates. And yet the fundamental structures of community colleges have not evolved to make student success the core business—regardless of mission or niche.

Community colleges have always had multiple missions. They are traditional educational institutions embodying the belief that the purpose of higher education is to enhance individuals’ lives
and intellects, and thus they offer general liberal arts foundations meant as springboards to four-year institutions. At the same time, they serve as bridges into employment, recognizing that it is hard to participate fully in a market economy without real, marketable skills. As organizations, however, community colleges still often struggle to define a set of measurable, meaningful outcomes around which to organize their human and physical resources, their production models, or their investments in new technologies. It is hard to aim for a moving target, and community colleges still largely miss the mark.

Nonetheless, in *What Excellent Community Colleges Do*, Joshua Wyner provides a foundation for optimism. The community colleges featured in this book are almost a decade into a significant reform movement aimed toward sorting out missions and measurable outcome standards. They are exceptional not only for the outcomes they have achieved for their students—which is, let’s be clear, the most important measure of success—but also because these institutions have achieved these reforms and practices absent the kinds of widespread incentives and shifts that drive change in industry. Where businesses have profit motives, definable shareholders, and at least somewhat predictable market conditions, community colleges rely on increasingly uncertain resources in the context of a multitude of public and private stakeholders, each with its own demands and competing visions for the “goods” public community colleges are expected to provide.

Too often in higher education research we start from the intervention and attempt to estimate its impact. We endorse best practices based on estimates that each has contributed in some statistically significant way to outcomes without having a clear definition of the end we hope to achieve through our innovations
and interventions. Or we look at the challenges of higher education as isolated scholarly and practical challenges: developmental education, distance education, cost, completion. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do* does something different: it begins at the end, offering a pragmatic and holistic new vision of what excellence looks like at community colleges. It then illustrates practices and policies—some blatantly simple and others quite ingenious—that emerged as factors in the Prize finalist colleges’ institution-wide approaches to ensuring success in learning, completion, and labor market outcomes for all of their diverse students.

Perhaps the book’s most important contribution to the field at this moment is its analysis and understanding of the organizational cultures and structures of highly effective community colleges—colleges that have managed to make student success their business regardless of how their programs have evolved over time. Through the voices of dedicated practitioners at these exceptional colleges and explication of their practices, the examples presented here outline the shapes of an aspirational model for reform.

There is much yet to be done to make community colleges responsive to and successful in the twenty-first-century economy. But, given that so much of our country’s future rests—and will increasingly rely—on community colleges, it is critical that we find ways to help them unlock their potential. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do* points us in that direction.

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