Chapter One

Understanding the “Community’s” College

[1.0] Community colleges possess a comparatively short but rich history in the United States. Public two-year colleges first emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century with the establishment of Joliet Junior College in 1901. From that time until the middle of the century the number of institutions grew as the sector gained legitimacy in higher education. By the late 1940s, community colleges arrived at a new milepost. A report published by the President’s Commission on Higher Education (the Truman Commission) called for equality of opportunity in American education and gave community colleges the role of ensuring access.1 Throughout the 1950s to the 1970s, community college enrollment grew rapidly and the principle of the “open door” became a well-established feature of the American postsecondary education system.2

[1.1] Community colleges now play a prominent role as providers of undergraduate education enrolling over seven million students each fall. Overall, they educate more than fifty percent of the undergraduates at public institutions and just over 40 percent of all undergraduates.3 This is a time of unprecedented interest in higher education and for many students community colleges represent an opportunity to pursue educational goals and aspirations previously beyond reach. Community colleges are low cost, close to home and offer a broad range of courses and curricula in a variety of formats. Students can choose to enroll full-time or part time, attend during the day or evening, in classes on campus or online, and choose either credit or noncredit status. The admission process is user-friendly and involves filling out a small number of forms, taking necessary placement tests, and paying for classes, all of which can be done up until the last possible moment at many institutions.
Chapter 1

As a result, community colleges enroll a highly diverse population of students. Students are considered matriculated even though placement tests reveal academic deficits that indicate their skills are not yet at college level. Community college students may be in their teens or senior citizens, affluent or financially disadvantaged, academically talented or underprepared, but are blended into courses and curricula as they pursue a variety of goals. Some enroll to complete a course or two, others a certificate or Associate degree, and for many, transfer to a four-year institution.

THE PARADOX OF SUCCESS

Unquestionably community colleges represent a major success story in American higher education. As George Vaughan described them in 2005, “What is wrong with the community college today? Not much, seemingly. To the contrary, community colleges are on a roll. Enrollments are booming; prestige is high; public support is unwavering; resources, though far from adequate, continue to flow; courses and programs are, for the most part, current; and much of the rest of higher education finally acknowledges the importance of community colleges in the loosely connected confederation of colleges and universities that constitutes American higher education.” But he goes on to say, “somewhere along the way, something went wrong.”

While community colleges have a great track record for expansion, their graduation rates lag far behind those of public four-year colleges. Of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students starting in fall 2005, only 20.6 percent graduated within a three year period (which is 150 percent of time to graduation). Even more problematic, graduation rates are as low as 12 percent for African-American students and 14–16 percent for Hispanic students. This has not gone unnoticed by funding agencies and policy makers. The past decade has seen growing interest in marginal student outcomes and intensified efforts to hold community colleges accountable for both access and completion.

When I started studying community colleges in the late 1990s, student success was not the focal point of dialogue on campus. The focus at that time was on institutional success. For years, social scientists had been trying to draw attention to the low completion and transfer rates of community college students, but their impact was limited because their concerns were largely structural. The perspective that students were not successful at community colleges was framed in large part by a belief that the point of comparison should be four-year colleges and universities. In addition, there were concerns that community colleges were over-extending their resources by continually broadening their mission. Breneman and Nelson, in their 1981 analysis of the financing of community colleges, saw the need to establish prior-
DRAFT

Understanding the “Community’s” College

ities as a means for strengthening and improving quality at community colleges. Brint and Karabel and Dougherty argued that, based on research findings, outcomes of students starting at community colleges were inferior to those of students similar in background and characteristics starting at four-year colleges.

Dougherty’s analysis defines community college outcomes in terms of economic benefits, freshman and sophomore year attrition, failure to transfer, and attrition after transfer. He found that “community colleges have a contradictory impact on the educational futures of students” because students aspiring to a bachelor’s degree attain fewer bachelor’s degrees and fewer years of education as compared to those starting at four-year institutions, while students who aspire to less than a bachelor’s degree “appear to complete more years of education, but perhaps fewer baccalaureate degrees.”

This contradiction poses a formidable challenge to community colleges and the learners they enroll. The majority of today’s high school graduates report that they plan to earn a bachelor’s degree, but student aspirations are not always well informed. What students think they need to do and what they realistically need to do in order to achieve educational and career goals are often out of alignment. Students enter higher education with multiple options for choice of institution, program, and degree—a characteristic that Brint and Karabel describe as “one of the most distinctive features of an American educational system that is open because it gives students with undistinguished academic records multiple chances to succeed”. Burton Clark described the downside of this system as embedded in the role that community colleges must play in delivering disappointment to students: “the conflict between open-door admission and performance of high quality often means a wide discrepancy between the hopes of entering students and the means of their realization...while some students of low promise are successful, for large numbers failure is inevitable and structured.”

While academics have fixated on the transfer and vocational role of community colleges, practitioners and policy makers have placed their emphasis elsewhere. The comprehensive mission of community colleges has made it possible for colleges to emphasize their success in providing access and service to broad segments of the population. It has simultaneously diverted attention from long-term outcomes such as Associate degree completion. The absence, until recently, of a public policy focus on student outcomes can be traced to the growing popularity of community colleges and effective advocacy by college leaders and national associations.

Reliable information about student outcomes at community colleges has been made all the more opaque by the absence of definitions and data regarding student success. Outcomes data can be gleaned from national surveys, as it is today, but these surveys are limited in scope and accessibility. In 1997, when I first started visiting community colleges to conduct research for the
Community College Research Center at Columbia University, I would find myself in the offices of institutional research directors aggregating data in fact books and accreditation self-studies as evidence of the demographic and programmatic characteristics of community colleges. I could readily obtain counts of the number of degrees conferred by major. Occasionally, I could obtain “bits” of information about transfer students based on small-scale inquiries carried out by colleges. Course completion rates, cohort analyses, and breakdowns of both by student background characteristics such as race and age were limited or nonexistent.

At most midsize and small colleges, it was impossible to get data beyond basic descriptive data reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS). In many cases, I would find myself talking to the registrar or a college vice president who would explain the complexities of accessing data. This would be accompanied by an awkward commentary on the student information system, reflecting frustration and confusion with a system that seemed to take so much and give so little. At some colleges I would find social scientists delighted with the opportunity to vent their frustration about data with a colleague. Occasionally I found myself confronted by a bureaucrat whose fondest wish would be that I vacate the premises as soon as possible. The language of student outcomes did not exist in the colleges that I visited in the late 1990s. Success was defined in terms of enrollment, diversity of programs and services, campus facilities, economic development initiatives, and institutional resources.

Institutional success does not necessarily equate to student success when it comes to community colleges. Part of the popularity of community colleges stems from the comprehensiveness of their mission that allows them to touch so many lives. Community colleges find their way into people’s lives one way or another: whether it is through continuing education classes, public events held on campus, English language classes, classes for children, or the year that their friend’s son spent there before transferring to university. College presidents serve on a variety of local boards as a way of strengthening connections with the community and garnering local support. Community colleges may not be perceived as high status in comparison to selective colleges and universities, but they are highly valued within their local communities.

Beginning in 2002, the public gained access to more and better information about higher education. Specifically, the Student Right-to-Know (SRK) and Campus Security Act, which was an amendment to the 1965 Higher Education Act, required reporting of graduation statistics. Starting with the cohort entering in 1999, colleges were required to report graduation rates to IPEDS on an annual basis.

Faculty and staff at community colleges were armed with information to meet the SRK requirement and well-prepared for the critical assessment that
would follow. After all, if a college enrolls 4,000 first-time students each year but only 400 complete a degree within three years, it is clear that attrition has occurred somewhere along the line, perhaps as a function of part-time course taking patterns, transfer, or employment prior to degree completion. And it was not as if high rates of attrition were unheard of in community colleges. Among campus constituencies and knowledgeable public officials, it was generally understood that graduation was one of the less likely outcomes for community college students. Researchers were also in the know because data from various national surveys indicated low completion rates, low transfer rates, and low levels of college credit earned.

**LIFTING THE VEIL OF MYSTERY SURROUNDING GRADUATION RATES**

SRK graduation rates for all colleges are collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as part of the IPEDS postsecondary data reporting system. A cohort consists of new college students attending college for the first time. Since part-time enrollment would impact the time it takes to graduate, the cohort is further narrowed to first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. This is the definition used by all colleges and universities nationwide to submit data to IPEDS. However, because of the high rate of part-time attendance at community colleges, the first-time, full-time cohort may be a relatively small proportion of overall enrollment in a college. For example, one out of five students (20 percent) of the 2009 entering student population at Macomb Community College in Michigan was a first-time, full-time, degree-seeking student, while more than four out of five (87 percent) of the entering students at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor were first-time, full-time, degree-seeking. So, graduation rates that are the basis for assessment of student success at community colleges actually represent outcomes for a small percentage of students overall.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) provides an excellent online resource for reviewing student data and national graduation rates through its Information Center. NCHEMS data reveal results that vary widely among community colleges throughout the nation. Connecticut currently ranks at the bottom, with a graduation rate of 11.7 percent, while South Dakota graduates 60.7 percent of its community college students. If the focus is shifted to states with the highest community college enrollments, we see that only three (Florida, Arizona, and California) had graduation rates above the national average of 29.2 percent in 2009 (see table 1.1).

Variation among the states suggests that context is important. For example, institutional remediation policies affect graduation rates because the
rates are based on a short time frame of three years. Since remedial courses do not count toward a college degree, the number of remedial courses a student is required to take often results in a delay. Many students find themselves taking two or more remedial courses, which can delay enrollment in degree credit courses by a semester or a year or more. African American and Hispanic students place into remedial courses at higher rates than other learners, so states with high proportions of students of color enrolled in community colleges tend to have higher remediation rates and hence lower graduation rates. It is also possible for students to start full-time and switch to part time yet remain in the original SRK cohort. Therefore, states in which the cost of living is high may have more students working full-time during college and hence lower graduation rates. In the state of Connecticut, where the cost of living and competition for jobs is high, two-thirds of community college students are part time. Statistics on the proportion of students switching from part time to full-time are difficult to obtain, but at my college (Norwalk Community College) about 24 percent of students make a change of this type within the course of a semester.

Curriculum can also have a significant impact on graduation rates, which may account for difficulty in assessing differences across institutions. Some occupational programs (for example, those with short-term certificates) may have higher graduation rates, particularly if there are licensing incentives to earn a credential. The economy can have a bearing on graduation rates. In a weak economy where the supply of workers outweighs demand, evidence of having completed a college degree may carry more value on a résumé. Transfer policies also have implications for completion rates. In states and systems with strong articulation agreements that provide direct incentives for degree completion, graduation rates may be higher. Whereas in state systems where articulation is at the course or program level, students may be incentivized to leave the community college once all transferable credits have been earned, even if this means not completing a degree.

Analyses of graduation rates conducted at the individual institution level typically go well beyond those available through IPEDS as they are calculated for different purposes. For example, an institution may have its own internal measures, a state may have accountability reporting requirements, accrediting agencies have specific requirements, and grants are generally awarded with accountability measures involving graduation rates for spec-

Table 1.1 Selected Graduation Rates
Understanding the “Community’s” College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SRK Graduation Rate 2006 cohort</th>
<th>2006 Fall enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>245,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>203,669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>1,581,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>179,103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>593,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>357,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>292,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>219,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>235,465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* NCHEMS

My research uncovered significant differences in graduation rates among institutions, which varied as much as three percentage points from one another. These discrepancies are noteworthy, especially when considering the relatively low graduation rates across the board.

State governments, private foundations, and federal initiatives have their own definitions of graduation rate because Student Right to Know is limited in terms of its capacity to measure the productivity of community colleges. The composition of a cohort can vary depending on college definitions of first-time students and programs considered to be degree-seeking. For example, when students attend multiple institutions, it is conceivable that they may be represented in more than one cohort. It is logical, therefore, that the SRK definition of graduation rate is an underestimation of actual graduation rates.18

Standard reporting systems, in an effort to provide more insight into graduation rates, break information down into multiple categories. For example, graduation rates are routinely reported by race or ethnicity, gender, age, full- and part-time attendance and so on. This can be a tedious process from the standpoint of analyzing, reporting, and interpreting data. Without statistical tests, it is impossible to know whether the results are reliable and are capable of comparison to another cohort. For example, a difference of five percentage points in the graduation rates of Hispanic and non-Hispanic students could be due to the fact that more Hispanic students enrolled full-time in a particular semester. Unfortunately, it is fair to say that at the institutional level the extensive time and effort required to calculate graduation rates is yielding little in the way of new information.
Chapter 1

BEYOND GRADUATION RATES

While it is indisputable that graduation rates are significantly lower at community colleges than the general public might expect, the implications for students are less well understood. One of the problems with graduation rate as a measure of student success is that there are multiple outcomes that represent success for community college students. It has long been the contention of community college leaders and staff that student goals must drive any analysis of success, because what could be more meaningful than helping students achieve their goals and aspirations no matter what they might be. This perspective addresses the heterogeneity of student populations and goals, and also assumes that students fully understand the wide range of choices available to them.

Indeed, community college students attend college with a wide range of intentions. Most applications for admission list anywhere from four to twelve “reasons for attending.” Cohen and Brawer tackled this issue and concluded that community colleges did not evolve with graduation as a primary goal:

Studies of student dropout may be only marginally relevant to an institution that regards accessibility as its greatest virtue. The community colleges have organized themselves around the theme of ease in entrance, exit, and reentry. Having made a considerable effort to recruit students and offer them something useful, most faculty members and administrators do want to keep them enrolled, at least until degree or program objectives have been fulfilled. But it is difficult for an institution built on the theme of easy access to limit easy exit.19

Once again, we return to the problem of institutional success versus student success. The success of community colleges as institutions was built on access, flexibility, and growth. Under this definition, success for a student would entail having a broad range of options leading many to enroll in community colleges as an avenue for fulfilling their educational needs—a fact that has not gone unnoticed by scores of students enrolling in community colleges who already hold a college degree. The emphasis on access embedded in institutional conceptions of success has opened the door to learners coming for a multitude of reasons, many of which do not culminate in a college degree. Community colleges are convenient entry/exit institutions for learners taking a few courses to upgrade a specific occupational skill or earning general education credits while attending another college or university. The latter is increasingly significant as a way in which students take advantage of the ease of entry and exit described by Cohen and Brawer.

One approach to understanding the importance of Associate degree completion for students is to analyze differences in earnings for students who complete a degree compared to those who do not. This has been described by
economists as the “sheepskin effect.” The focal question for researchers exam-ining the sheepskin effect is whether there is an added benefit to obtaining an Associate degree above and beyond the earned credit hours. To answer this question, researchers measure the lifetime earnings of students with and without college degrees.\textsuperscript{20} The results show earning gains for community college students regardless of degree completion and a small added benefit if the degree is completed.\textsuperscript{21} Noteworthy is the finding that credits earned have a positive effect on earning gains.

The complexity of working with a broad range of student outcomes has contributed to a growing number of stakeholders becoming involved in efforts to define and measure student success. These efforts fall under the rubric of accountability and their stated purpose is to inform the public about the performance of community colleges. The following are examples of ongoing efforts to refine and expand the definition of student success at community colleges:

\begin{itemize}
\item **Student Right to Know:** Although graduation rate is the focal indicator of student success for SRK, this measure has also been expanded over time. Colleges currently report on retention and transfer rates and the proportion graduating within 200 percent of time to degree (four years at two-year colleges and eight years at four-year colleges and universities). These rates are disaggregated by gender and race. Part-time rates are now also routinely reported.\textsuperscript{22}

\item **Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA):** With Kent Phillipe, Associate Vice President of Research and Student Success at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), taking the lead, the VFA seeks to provide measures of graduation, transfer, retention, credit earning, non-credit enrollments, student learning outcomes, and economic contributions. The VFA currently consists of three- and six-year measures.\textsuperscript{23}

\item **The Committee on Measures of Student Success:** A federally appointed fifteen-member committee of college officials and policy experts led by Tom Bailey (Professor of Economics at Columbia University Teachers College and Director of the Community College Research Center). The Committee first met in October of 2010 and has been charged with recommending “additional or alternative measures of student success that are comparable alternatives to the completion or graduation rates of entering degree-seeking, full-time undergraduate students.”\textsuperscript{24}

\item **Complete College America (CCA):** Envisioned and developed by the National Governors’ Association as the product of a meeting convened by NCHEMS and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) in summer of 2009. Measures developed by CCA are intended to inform, analyze, show progress, and hold students, institutions and states accountable to the general public and policy makers who invest in higher education.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{itemize}
All of these efforts are based on a fundamental assumption that community college outcomes are more diverse than simply graduation. All include transfer without a degree and retention rates as indicators of success. The VFA and Complete College America initiatives also measure success in remediation, completion of remedial courses, credit accumulation, and course completion. While Student Right to Know uses three- and four-year windows to calculate graduation rates, VFA uses three- and six-year windows and Complete College America uses three- and four-year windows.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

A problem in defining success rates is determining which group of students (or cohort) will comprise the denominator. The denominator not only has implications for the results and their interpretation, but for institutional researchers as well, because data for new student cohorts must be organized according to precise definitions. Student Right to Know, as mentioned earlier, is based on first-time, full-time degree-seeking students. Many first-time students are categorized in college information systems as nondegree seeking because they have not declared a major. At the time of publication, Complete College America did not include nondegree seeking students, but along with VFA included both full- and part-time students. This is handled by disaggregating data so that rates are calculated for both categories of students.

Although colleges invest thousands of person-hours and significant resources in calculating and recalculating success rates for external agencies, definitions of success do appear to be coalescing in terms of quantitative measures used to calculate success rates. There is general agreement that since relatively few students reach graduation, it is necessary to measure their progress at earlier points. Among these “milestones” is success in reaching college level courses for students in remediation. There is also general acknowledgment that enrollment patterns such as part-time attendance and stop-out can be incorporated into success measures, and that neither should be defined as failure.

The success of community college students, however, is much broader than the information captured through student information systems. The ladder of success is characterized for four transitional stages in ascending order. First there is the period of initial enrollment that begins with a process of anticipatory socialization, when students begin to imagine life as a college student and ultimately develop an understanding of the policies and expectations of the particular college they plan to attend. The next rung on the ladder involves the segment of a college career that is captured by data—completion of remediation, course success, and the credit earning which will move a student steadily toward completion. The third rung involves completion. This
Understanding the “Community’s” College

is the transition that students undertake as they either complete a degree and move into the workforce, or transfer to a four-year college or university. For many students this is a much more fluid process than one would imagine, in which they “swirl” in the educational system—taking courses at more than one institution or continuing to work while they pursue a degree. Finally, there is success in the workforce and the extent to which a community college degree prepares students with the skills that will allow them to pursue a career trajectory.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

We know more now than ever before about causative factors underlying student failure and attrition. This book is organized around this body of work. Arguably, the difficulties faced by community colleges and their students begin with remedial education. Nationwide, estimates suggest that more than six out of ten new, first-time community college students start in remediation. Some students can expect to log as many as four to six semesters of remedial mathematics, reading, or writing before they are prepared for college-level classes. Indeed, for many students, the remedial classroom comprises the full extent of their college experience, as course completion eludes many students. Chapter 2 reviews the current research on the success rates of students in remediation. Strategies being used by colleges to improve success rates in remediation are examined (for example, self-paced remediation) along with examples drawn from colleges employing these strategies.

Much of the popularity of community colleges rests on the fact that they are local and inexpensive. One unintended consequence of low cost and convenience, however, is the minimal time spent on campus by students. Limited engagement in campus life has implications for success, particularly if success is measured in terms of retention. Chapter 3 focuses on social integration and community college initiatives around retention. In addition to reviewing theory and research on efforts to integrate students into campus life, this chapter examines instruments for measuring student engagement, among them the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE).

Chapter 4 turns to the role of career and technical education in community colleges and its effect on student success. In response to low graduation rates, leaders indicate that students come to college to take specific courses or sequences of courses, but not to complete degrees. In fact, students enrolled in career and technical programs often have stronger incentives to graduate, such as certification and a clearly defined curriculum, which are characteristics that researchers believe may increase success rates. Unfortu-
nately, the value of career planning and occupational coursework is often overlooked by administrators and poorly understood by students, despite the fact that community college students come to college to prepare for employment and a career. As community colleges search for motivators that will keep students in college until they graduate or transfer, career and technical education should not be overlooked.

Much of the curriculum at community colleges is aimed at preparing students to complete degrees elsewhere, which has led to confusion and frustration in measuring community college success. Chapter 5 looks at the scope of transfer and the phenomenon of “swirling” from the perspective of student success. This chapter pays special attention to state policies that impact transfer and shape our understanding of student success.

Unless community colleges abandon access, strategies for improving success must involve organizational change. Chapter 6 looks at the topic of student success from the standpoint of theories on organizational change. This chapter provides an overview of internal and external barriers to change, and levers that can help to remove these barriers. Adoption of innovation is a process that moves through a series of predictable stages—a way of thinking about innovation that provides a useful framework for planning and implementing student success initiatives.

FROM BOARDROOMS TO CLASSROOMS

Ultimately, this book is about cultural change leading to educational reform at community colleges. While enrollment growth at community colleges has been impressive, it does not equate with success if the door is revolving and more than half of the students exit before completion. It is clear from the evidence that some of the challenges facing community college students are well beyond the control of institutions. Weak academic preparation and financial difficulties are mountains that community colleges will not be able to move no matter how hard they try.

Chapter 6 addresses the dilemma facing our colleges when they are asked to solve major social problems and respond to ever-increasing numbers of students on shrinking budgets. (translation: think organizational change and inter-institutional cooperation to increase efficiency and productivity). Yet organizational change in public education has historically been a difficult and slow process. In order to enhance the likelihood that students in our colleges will experience success, organizations at every level of the educational system will need to work together in integrated and goal-driven relationships to bring about cultural change.

Experience and social science research tell us that cultural change is unlikely to occur as a result of top-down mandates. Evidence suggests that in
Understanding the “Community’s” College

many cases reform comes through programs or interventions that reach only small segments of the student population. If the evolution of community colleges over the past century tells us anything, it is that student success runs the risk of being added as yet another mission of our colleges in contrast to a fundamental change in perspective or practice within institutions. In other words, rather than a paradigm shift, the student success movement may represent the latest wave of mission accretion in community colleges.

This trajectory can be changed so that community colleges can perform the role envisioned for them by the public and policy makers through alignment from boardrooms to classrooms. The boardrooms are not only those of individual colleges, but those of the American Association of Community Colleges and the League for Innovation, state and federal departments of education, and private foundations to name a few. The members of these boards have been extraordinarily busy during the past decade traveling around the country spending hours in meetings to investigate, debate, and discuss the future of community colleges. Likewise, those on college campuses have spent countless hours doing the same thing. In order for real change to occur, decisions made at the highest levels must align with those being made on the front lines. After all, it is community college faculty and staff who provide the advice, learning opportunities, and assessments that will shape student outcomes. Much of the power to bring about needed change rests in their hands.

My research and experience in the area of community college student success leads me to believe that three cultural shifts are necessary to scale up and institutionalize the reforms currently underway. First, the dynamics of academic and social integration must be understood and prioritized on community college campuses. In the interest of open access and the belief that students should have a vast array of options available to them, community colleges have lost sight of the fact that the social and psychological processes of becoming a college student are a valuable experiences that shape students’ lives. Integration may happen through a wide range of activities including learning communities, student success courses, e-portfolios, social media, community service, and campus activities to name a few. Colleges need to be intentional about helping students forge social bonds and ensuring that students understand there are people on campus, both staff and students, who know and care about them and their academic pursuits.

Second, leadership models need to be developed that foster teamwork. The private sector has moved away from top-down, bureaucratic management, and it is time for the public sector to do the same. Thinking needs to be horizontal rather than vertical when it comes to implementing change; we need to be imagining the work of improving student success in terms of teams rather than committees. Community colleges are complex organizations in which staff play highly specialized roles. An interdisciplinary team
Chapter 1

might be composed of administrators, staff, faculty, and students and cover both academic and student affairs. Institutional research personnel should be represented on teams even though research offices are spread thin as accountability and reporting requirements continue to increase. It is increasingly important, however, to develop evaluation expertise college-wide. For this reason, I have included information about data sources and uses throughout each chapter of the book with the hope that this information will make it easier to understand the foundation from which knowledge about student outcomes is taking shape. Analysis and interpretation of data needs to become a fundamental skill of college leaders, not simply something left to “back office” staff.

Third, community colleges need to adopt a theory of change that incorporates elements of continuous improvement. The notion that reform can be implemented perfectly from the start is not supported by the literature. Change takes time and unfolds predictably, which can actually strengthen the likelihood of successful implementation. Developing a theory about how reform occurs on campus will make it more likely that scale can be achieved in our efforts. Without a roadmap, it is easy to give up too early or to wait too long for a strategy to take effect that is not working.

Northern Essex Community College (NECC) in Massachusetts provides an example of a college which has embraced these cultural shifts, and there are others as well that will be mentioned throughout the book. In 2007, NECC began to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a process for strategic planning. AI is a bottom-up approach to strategic planning that builds consensus by focusing on strength-based positive change. In the first round of planning, more than 150 AI interviews were held with college stakeholders and a culminating strategic planning summit drew over 200 members of the college community to develop the plan. The College has been through this process a second time, resulting in a new plan for 2012. This collaborative planning process has been just one of the ways in which NECC demonstrates its commitment to a culture that is focused on student success and evidence-based decision making.

Community colleges are ripe for cultural change. They hold an established and respected position in the higher education landscape and their tenets of access and low cost are widely accepted. The challenge that colleges now face is the tension between access and quality. It makes no sense for community colleges to continue to grow if they cannot ensure that entering students will be well served through the college experience. Shrinking state budgets practically mandate that community colleges create new efficiencies in strengthening their services. In the future, change will occur through disruptive innovation and redistribution of resources rather than growth.
Disruptive innovation—the process through which new technologies emerge, catch on, and completely change the way we do things—will be the wave of the future. The IT industry has provided many examples in the past two decades—from personal computers to laptops to tablets—of frame-breaking change. Each of these improvements sacrifices something in exchange for lower cost and smaller size. We have learned that we can live with smaller screens and no keyboard if the computer becomes less cumbersome. Not long ago, researchers identified community colleges as a disruptive innovation and they quickly gained in popularity. The time was right and they permanently changed the landscape of American higher education.34 Now community colleges are themselves in need of innovation. They are a sector in search of scalable educational strategies that can help students succeed, even if it means fundamentally changing how they organize and deliver services.

NOTES

24. Moltz 2011