The Role of Community Colleges in Teacher Education and Standards-Based Reform

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Over the past several years, most educators in the nation have become involved, in one way or another, in the standards-based reform effort. For grades K–12, state departments of education and national professional organizations in many subject areas have developed standards for what students are expected to know and do and to ensure that they are taught by highly qualified teachers who will prepare them to meet those standards. The next step of aligning the standards—with curricula, assessments, and teacher training—is critical for ensuring that the standards movement accomplishes its goals of improving education for every child in the nation.

One of the results of the standards movement has been the realization that all sectors of education play an important role in education reform, from the K–12 classrooms to the colleges and universities that prepare teachers to enter those classrooms. And increasingly, community colleges are being recognized as important players. Enrollment figures alone suggest the importance of this sector. According to a study conducted by the Education Commission of the States (Rifkin, 1998), approximately half of all students who pursue postsecondary education begin their studies at two-year institutions. This amounts to almost 6 million students who are enrolled in community colleges. In my own state of Illinois, more than two-thirds of all public university teacher education graduates have taken courses.

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at community colleges, and more than half have completed at least one year of their general education coursework there. Nationally, four out of ten teachers have taken some of their mathematics and science courses at community colleges (Shkodriani, 2004a), and at the elementary and middle school level, many future teachers have studied science and mathematics only at community colleges (Patton, 2005).

The demographics of community colleges also suggest how important these institutions have become to large segments of the population. More than half of the students enrolled in two-year institutions are women; around 65 percent are enrolled part-time, combining their studies with full- or part-time jobs. About one-quarter to one-third are minorities. In Illinois, for example, fully 50 percent of all minority students enrolled in higher education attend community colleges.

The implications of these figures in terms of teacher training and teacher recruitment cannot be overstated. As Gina Shkodriani points out (2004a), community colleges are “a conduit for minority and nontraditional candidates.” Not only are they playing a large role in educating the next generation of elementary and secondary teachers, but they also have enormous potential for increasing the diversity of the teaching force in the United States. Currently 30 percent of the K–12 population in the United States belongs to an ethnic minority, compared to only 13 percent of the teachers. With their large numbers of minority, low-income, and nontraditional students, community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide leadership in recruiting and training teachers who will serve as role models for their future students. In addition, with their traditionally strong connections to the communities they serve, community colleges in rural areas or inner-city neighborhoods are strategically located to attract new teachers to parts of the country where the teacher shortage is especially acute.

In recognition of the increasing prominence of community colleges, many national educational organizations have undertaken ambitious projects focused on community college development and policymaking. Phi
Theta Kappa’s “Preparing Tomorrow’s Science and Math Teachers: The Community College Response” is an ongoing program funded by the National Science Foundation to study community college initiatives in the high-demand areas of math and science (Eisenberg and Risley, 2003). The Education Commission of the States (ECS), in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, established in 1999 the Center for Community College Policy to conduct research and analysis in areas of interest to community colleges. A recently completed three-year ECS initiative, “The Role of Community Colleges in Teacher Education,” involved collaborative work with education agencies in Illinois, Nevada, and Texas to identify state policies that enhance or impede community college involvement in teacher preparation.

The ECS project was divided into five parts, each of which examined one role played by community colleges in teacher education. These were “Articulation and Transfer,” “Paraprofessional Education,” “Alternative Certification,” “Baccalaureate Degree Availability,” and “Professional Continuing Education.” Although the issues of standards and alignment are significant in all of these areas, this paper focuses on two in particular—articulation and transfer and paraprofessional education—with particular emphasis on the state of Illinois.

**Articulation and Transfer**

When students transfer from one institution of higher education to another, their credit hours need to transfer as well and be applied toward the graduation requirements and major department curricula of the new institution. Articulation refers to an agreement between a sending and a receiving institution that specific courses on the two campuses are comparable and that credits can be transferred from one to the other. For students who transfer from a community college to a four-year college or university (nationwide, about 20–29% of the community college population), the goal of articulation agreements is to enable a seamless transition between the two sectors of higher education. Studies have shown that once community college students matriculate at a four-year school,
they go on to graduate at the same rate as students who began there as freshmen. The data seem to indicate, therefore, that whenever a transfer student fails to complete the bachelor’s degree, the impediments probably arose before the transfer took place or during the transfer process itself (Rifkin, 1998). Clearly, then, students need and deserve a transition that proceeds as smoothly as possible.

In most cases, students who complete an associate’s degree in arts or science can be assured that the general education classes taken at the community college will count toward graduation requirements at the four-year college. Students who transfer before they have received the associate’s degree (about 65% of community college students, according to the Education Commission of the States) are sometimes in a more ambiguous position. For all students, the most difficult problem tends to be whether or not the corresponding department or division in the four-year school will accept specific classes in the student’s major program.

Across the country, states are attempting to ameliorate these problems by means of transfer and articulation agreements that allow for successful transition between community colleges and universities. In most states, these agreements exist not as legislation but as formal arrangements between two- and four-year institutions. They typically involve institution-to-institution articulation of general education courses, professional education courses, or both, and sometimes a common course numbering system. This approach works relatively well for many community college students, although it is not as helpful to the large number who begin their studies with the goal of transferring but without a specific four-year institution in mind. In addition, in large states that have numerous community colleges and universities, the number of articulation agreements can be overwhelming. In response, some states—such as Hawaii, where community colleges are part of the state university system, and California, where they are not—have put in place statewide transfer and articulation agreements. California, as well as several other states, has also developed an Associate of Arts in Teaching degree that guarantees admission to a teacher education program at one of the state universities.
The issues of transfer and articulation have perhaps been addressed most comprehensively in the state of Illinois, which has taken on the task not only of easing the transfer process but also of aligning the community college curriculum with the typical curriculum of four-year schools. The Illinois Articulation Initiative, launched in 1993, was a five-year effort to establish a general education core curriculum that would be aligned with the standards and curricula of Illinois colleges and universities. The core curriculum as it now exists comprises 12 to 13 courses that commonly make up a general education program: oral and written communications, mathematics, humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, and physical and life sciences. Community college students who complete this core group of courses are assured of complete transfer of credits to a four-year institution. In addition, to address the problem of applying transfer credits toward a specific major, the initiative established major discipline panels to outline desirable lower-division coursework that corresponds, in various fields, to the curriculum typically followed by students during their freshman and sophomore years. The panels also review community college course syllabi and approve courses as meeting the transfer-credit criteria.

Like California, Illinois has developed Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) programs, specifically in selected high-need subject-matter areas. Mathematics and science programs are up and running, special education and early childhood education models are in the preliminary stages, and programs for middle school and bilingual education are on the horizon. Five professional education courses specifically aligned with four-year college and university curricula have been adopted for inclusion in the AAT models; all models will require one of these courses, Introduction to Education, and will include one or more of the remaining four courses. A slightly modified general education core has been adopted and aligned with the communication and technology student standards as well as with the Test of Basic Skills that is a requirement for admission to colleges of education and for obtaining a community college AAT degree.
Besides being aligned with community college and university curricula, these model curriculum standards are also aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards (ILS) for K–12, the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, and the standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE). This alignment was carried out by teams of community college and university faculty from education, the specific content areas, and general education arts and sciences.

**Paraprofessional Education**

A second major role of community colleges in teacher education involves the preparation of paraprofessional educators. Paraprofessionals are teachers’ aides or assistants who work under the direction and supervision of certified teachers and support instruction in various school settings (e.g., classrooms, computer laboratories, learning-media centers). Paraprofessionals provide one-on-one tutoring, assist students with special needs, organize instructional material, and provide direct teaching support. Since paraprofessionals were introduced into classrooms more than 40 years ago, the job market has grown steadily and their roles have changed considerably. Today more than 500,000 individuals work as paraprofessionals, a number that represents a 48 percent increase between 1990 and 1998 (Shkodriani, 2004b).

According to the new requirements specified for paraprofessional educators under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, paraprofessionals must (1) complete two years of study at an institution of higher education (60 semester hours); (2) obtain an associate’s degree; or (3) possess a high school diploma, meet rigorous standards of quality, and demonstrate through formal assessment their competency in reading, writing, or mathematics. Many paraprofessionals who have been working in classrooms for many years but do not meet these requirements are turning in large numbers to community colleges to further their training and education. Thus community colleges are now playing an important role in both the preparation of new paraprofessionals and in the education of currently employed paraprofessionals.
Although the federal government and NCLB have legislated the new requirements, state and local agencies are responsible for approving associate’s degrees, evaluating college coursework, and administering assessments. States have been pursuing various strategies in response to the new law. Since Illinois had a paraprofessional requirement of 30 semester hours before passage of NCLB, many community colleges there already offered a one-year certificate in teaching assistant education. In response to NCLB, Illinois, as well as Ohio and Texas, now offers a two-year associate’s degree program in paraprofessional education. An Associate in Applied Science Paraprofessional Educator degree was designed by a task force of K–12 teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals; community college faculty and administrators; state agency representatives; and union representatives. The task force also developed a newly designed one-year certificate model based on national professional standards for paraprofessionals. Students who complete degrees based on the AAS model will meet the associate and/or the 60-semester-hour requirement. Students who have already met the 30-hour Illinois requirement can complete the requirements for the one-year certificate, acquire specific paraprofessional educator skills, and thereby fulfill the 60-hour specification.

The state of Illinois has also developed training models for community colleges to use in helping paraprofessionals prepare to take one of the two state-approved standardized assessments. This training is available tuition-free, either on-site or online. Community colleges are partnering with school districts, teachers unions, and regional offices of education to engage in test-preparation assistance. The assessment option is appealing to many school districts because it allows currently employed paraprofessionals to meet the new requirements quickly. Most of the community colleges have incorporated one of the two state-approved assessment tools or the Test of Basic Skills into their degree programs as well.
Alignment

Overall, progress is being made in the alignment of standards with curricula and in alignment among and between sectors of education. This is particularly critical for community colleges, because community colleges make up the one education sector that must work with other entities to accomplish its missions. They must work with K–12 to align K–12 and higher education standards, they must work with the employment community to align professional skills standards, and they must work with university colleagues to align higher education standards. Each of these elements is crucial to their ability to meet the needs of the wide range of students they serve. Because community colleges are accustomed to working outside their own sphere, they are well suited to play a key role in teacher education and in the alignment that is needed to take standards from the theoretical to the practical.

Cooperative alignment is not easy. Higher education, in particular, prides itself on autonomy and academic freedom. Alignment necessitates looking beyond one’s own view of the world. But it presents a challenge that must be met if students are to acquire the knowledge needed to live in a complex world. Community colleges are prepared to work with others in meeting that challenge.
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References


Notes

1. Progress reports from the 18 community colleges that are the focus of the project can be found on Phi Theta Kappa’s Web site (www.ptk.org).

2. See the Web site of the Education Commission of the States Center for Community College Policy (www.communitycollegepolicy.org) for policy papers on each of these areas.