Kisker, C. B. (2021). *Creating Entrepreneurial Community Colleges: A Design Thinking Approach*. **Harvard University Press. 280 pp.**

Review by Peter M. Simpson

The field of higher education continues to grapple with the challenge of identifying interventions adequate to address today's myriad challenges. Climate change, pandemics and other global health threats, and increasingly stratified societies are prompting the field to both acknowledge and respond to rapidly changing conditions. Historically and contemporarily, community colleges have been central to granting enrollment to those who otherwise would not have access to a postsecondary education and its benefits. Despite efforts to improve access to higher education for historically disadvantaged students, inadequate public education funding, coupled with dwindling enrollment rates, has severely limited the long-term sustainability and viability of community colleges.

Community colleges face several expectations, including preparing students for the 21st century workforce, contributing meaningfully to the surrounding community, and hosting lifelong education programs. Such local and regional capacity-building expectations are a hallmark of the two-year sector. Thus, mentions of entrepreneurship, innovation, and revenue generation are often viewed as in conflict with community colleges' central mission and values.

However, education practitioner, research consultant, and policy specialist Carrie Kisker's (2021) *Creating Entrepreneurial Community Colleges: A Design Thinking Approach* utilizes design thinking as "a framework for exploring entrepreneurship in an empathetic manner, one that ensures new ventures amplify—rather than sacrifice—the institution's mission" (p. 3). Kisker argues that positioning a college's entrepreneurial actions as market-oriented creates the false dichotomy that a college serves either students or the market.

Her significant contribution to the field of higher education and innovative education lies in the basic premise of design thinking as a process that begins with "empathizing with stakeholder needs and iteratively prototyp[ing] and test[ing] new programs or ideas with those same stakeholders" (p. 4). In doing so, she underscores the importance of colleges pursuing mission-oriented approaches to fiscal sustainability, which enables them to best serve the unique needs of their students, and plan for their long-term future.

Creating Entrepreneurial Community Colleges expands dialogue between community colleges, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses, providing a renewed glance at the changing role of community colleges in the 21st century. Kisker advances discussions about design thinking practices and outcomes through four community colleges case studies focused on Maricopa Community Colleges, North Iowa Area Community College, Tarrant County College, and Valencia College. For a field in which research on four-year universities predominates, Kisker's text is a welcome addition.

Taking a Closer Look: Design Thinking in Depth

Community colleges lie at many intersections, serving as a site for vocational training, postsecondary credential attainment, and lifelong learning. Thus, the two-year sector serves both economic development and higher education attainment efforts. Given these important missions, as well as the pivotal role of community colleges for students and community members alike, leaders of two-year institutions need to find ways to mitigate fiscal uncertainty and ensure their institution's ability to carry out its educational and training purposes.

According to Kisker, this argument stands in contrast to the typical, albeit unsustainable, financial model of community colleges to educate students with the greatest needs, using the least funds, all amid an increasingly unequal higher education landscape (p. 20). Thus, she proposes using the tenets

of entrepreneurship, embracing failure, and rewarding risk-taking in the two-year sector as a method of creating transformative change and simultaneously meeting the needs of community members.

Lake et al. (2021) defined design thinking as a process of working in teams to recognize diverse contributions and engaging in active listening to find shared meaning. Their particular focus on teamwork, active listening, and shared meaning underscores the versatility of design thinking as both a starting point and process. Examples of entrepreneurship in the two-year sector include engaging in strategic alliances with businesses and community groups, providing training for local companies or industries, and creating a shared culture of supporting and rewarding innovative thinking.

These approaches ensure that collegiate leaders rethink what their stakeholders, students, and community members need. Challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic similarly prompted many institutions to consider alternative models of learning and development in an effort to plan for a sustainable future. Going forward, design thinking can play a critical role in helping students, researchers, and practitioners envision a more long-term, mission-driven, and community-centered approach to higher education. Its iterative, relational, and context-responsive process promises to enable community colleges to develop valued and viable responses to challenges through capacity building, which will deepen collaboration within educational institutions.

Design Thinking in the Field

Kisker's text utilizes case studies from a variety of metropolitan and rural community colleges. Despite their differences, her emphasis on stakeholder inclusivity, a gradual shift toward third-wave entrepreneurship, and the importance of community colleges in solving community problems unite these institutions. In doing so, all four case studies demonstrate the ability of colleges to remain mission-oriented in pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunity.

One example that Kisker offers is accelerated training programs, which lead to industry-recognized certifications, provide individuals with sustainable wages, and prepare graduates to enter the workforce in under 6 months (p. 88). Kisker's example of such programs illustrates a balance between individuals' goals, earning a livable wage, and contributing meaningfully to surrounding communities. Thus, community impact is both financially viable and sustainable in the short and long term, allowing community engagement to exist alongside more long-standing missions in the two-year sector, such as workforce development and teaching and learning.

Kisker argues that design thinking can foster greater alignment between student and market needs. Purposes such as increasing access to postsecondary education and providing opportunities for social mobility ensure that students and communities are kept at the center of all institutional decision-making processes. Approaches to student and community success mirror entrepreneurial thinking, which provides students with the skills and capabilities to succeed despite an uncertain future.

Thus, a design thinking framework allows students to align their learning with workforce and industry needs, prepare for long-term endeavors, and safeguard institutional mission priorities. Kisker also argues that design thinking requires an ability to prioritize thinking differently, which allows collegiate leaders to think otherwise about challenges facing the two-year sector.

Open-minded thinking is critical for addressing contemporary challenges through an approach in which collegiate leaders share their ideas, support them with data, and creatively plan for ways to improve the lives of students and community members. Given the lingering impacts of COVID-19, and an increase in community needs, community colleges will be well served to prioritize creative problem solving and design thinking as multifaceted approaches to solving chronic dilemmas.

Despite the increasing demands on community colleges, Kisker reminds readers that historically, the two-year sector served as an alternative to more traditional four-year programs because of its alignment with workforce and industry needs. Thus, a culture of agility and change is common among these institutions as they have endeavored to serve the myriad pathways of their students. This flexibility will serve community colleges well going forward as they adapt their modes of instruction and community engagement to optimize benefits for students and communities.

Engaging faculty and staff in conversations early, sharing decision-making collaboratively, and providing multiple opportunities to solicit feedback are three prominent examples of design thinking in action. In the two-year sector, nonacademic stakeholders play a significant part, including parents, community members, and local business owners. Lastly, Kisker recommends speaking about the need to be entrepreneurial and innovative in a way that is congruent with traditional higher education values, including collaboration, creativity, and service. Making this connection may help further communicate the importance of this mindset to long-standing faculty and staff members who may fear that their institutions will prioritize business needs over those of students.

Although Kisker provides readers with several insights as an applied researcher, this approach partially limits her text's usefulness for current community college leaders. The tension between historical and contemporary purposes and missions of the two-year landscape and increasing calls for entrepreneurial ideas grounded in local contexts underscore the unique position within which community colleges currently find themselves. Aligning existing programs and services with community needs and increasing the importance of community engagement in faculty tenure and advancement processes are two pertinent examples Kisker provides (p. 195).

However, her use of a case study research design limits the utility and applicability by community college leaders. Although all four case studies are well-developed, readers may benefit from findings and practices drawn from a larger sample of community colleges. Despite the limitations of Kisker's text, it succeeds in pointing to the promise of design thinking as a framework for mission-driven innovation, people-centered entrepreneurship, and community colleges' success.

Concluding Thoughts

Carrie Kisker's *Creating Entrepreneurial Community Colleges: A Design Thinking Approach* is timely and situated at the intersection of multiple critical concerns facing colleges: Public disinvestment in higher education and increased pressure for education and workforce alignment. She makes a compelling case for salient interventions meant to ensure that education and training remain at the forefront of the two-year sector, and that students and communities continue to be served in fiscally sustainable ways.

Kisker also offers design thinking as one approach to reducing the reliance of community colleges on dwindling governmental funding allocations in favor of a flexible approach that ties internal allocations to outcomes, costs, and strategic objectives. This renewed mission reorients the two-year sector toward serving students and playing a pivotal role in the economic sustainability of their communities.

Despite Kisker's contributions, it is unclear to what extent her recommendations will be feasible in the two-year sector given institutional challenges, financial constraints, and limited human resources. It is also unclear how well design thinking maps onto more centralized collegiate systems, such as the City University of New York or State University of New York systems.

Her text is best utilized by those who have an in-depth knowledge of the day-to-day workings of two-year colleges and may best facilitate interdisciplinary partnerships to address community and student priorities. Going forward, community college leaders will need to become more adept at illustrating their institution's value to policymakers, governmental leaders, and industry partners.

Without an entrepreneurial mindset coupled with an ability to implement financially sustainable ways of meeting student and community needs, one of our nation's mechanisms for social mobility and regional development may be in jeopardy. However, with renewed interest in the two-year sector, community colleges are well positioned to think proactively about meeting future needs and contributing meaningfully to regional economic development. Design thinking is a powerful approach to mission-oriented change when coupled with a willingness from faculty and staff members, as well as engagement with governmental and industry stakeholders.

I posit entrepreneurship as the "new mission" of community colleges, and endeavor to situate it as the undergirding mission challenging students and college leaders to think critically about solving problems for an increasingly unpredictable future. In the two-year sector, the core business choices of a college are those that make it profitable and sustainable. Thus, our understanding of public institutions in service of the public good must now incorporate an understanding of their role in business as well.

About the Reviewer

Peter M. Simpson is a Governor's Fellow in Connecticut State's Office of Workforce Strategy. His research interests focus on the public mission and social impact of colleges and universities, specifically the role of community colleges in responding to societal challenges. He received his MA in international educational development from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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