

The Classroom as Public Space: Civic Mission and the Community College

Emily Sohmer Tai

Abstract

The role of the two-year, or “community,” college as a dimension of the academy is often overlooked by senior scholars in four-year colleges and universities. The potential contribution of the community college to current efforts, promoted by such organizations as the Imagining America consortium, to engage in “public scholarship”—academic efforts that reach beyond student enrollment to engage with the broader population—has been similarly little considered. This article nonetheless argues that certain national trends are situating community colleges in a uniquely felicitous position to reclaim the university’s “civic mission” in twenty-first-century America, and offers the author’s personal experience as an instance of how training in disciplinary research can be applied to achieve this objective through teaching community college students.

Introduction

The role of the two-year or “community” college as a dimension of the academy is often overlooked by senior scholars in four-year colleges and universities. This article will nonetheless argue that certain national trends are situating community colleges in a uniquely felicitous position to reclaim the university’s civic mission in the twenty-first century.

According to the Web site of the American Association of Community Colleges, 46 percent of all students pursuing postsecondary education in the United States are doing so at the nation’s 1195 two-year colleges (AACC 2008). Community colleges, as the name implies, cherish institutional missions of community service that weave the American ideal of self-improvement together with the promotion of culture and civil society. Community colleges meet the first of these objectives by offering “associate’s degrees”—the equivalent of two years of postsecondary general education in the liberal arts and sciences, as well as a variety of nonacademic degrees in a spectrum of technical fields.

Because community colleges, often subsidized by public monies, generally charge lower tuition than their four-year counterparts and do not apply selective criteria in admissions, they are likeliest to attract a large number of students who might be judged “at risk”

for their departure from the characteristics of “traditional” college students. Most community college students come from low-income backgrounds. Many are in the workforce, 27 percent on a full-time basis. Many shoulder responsibilities as family caregivers or as parents—17 percent as single parents (AACC 2008). Some are recent immigrants from non-English-speaking countries. Others are American born, but poorly prepared for college-level work.

While community colleges offer developmental courses and evening classes to serve the needs of these students, many community colleges also maintain performance spaces for local theater, symphony, and other cultural events, as well as regional historical archives, museums, and centers devoted to public discussion and inquiry. In many parts of the country, community colleges join forces with local businesses, charities, or school districts to support job training, adult enrichment, or service-learning opportunities that prepare students for a life of public engagement and civic service, even as they hone skills needed for success in the workforce (see AACC 2008 and Tai 2005b).

Community colleges, then, routinely reach out to forge partnerships with organizations “beyond the academy” such as those promoted most recently by the Imagining America project, which has identified “public scholarship” as an enterprise that joins scholars to wider civil society (June 2008; *Imagining America*). Community college faculty, meanwhile, dedicate their careers to fostering the success of what Gail Mellow, president of LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York, in a speech before the American Council of Education last winter, termed “a radically inclusive student body” (Jaschik 2008).

Community college appointments are seldom perceived by research university scholars as the ideal destination for graduates of their doctoral programs. Over the past four decades, a transition has nevertheless been occurring on community college campuses across the country, as a number of university-trained scholars join community college faculties. Shifts within many regional economies, from factory-based or extraction industries to service-oriented areas that demand proficiency in information discovery and management, such as health care, retail sales, or primary education, have redirected the focus of curricula on many community college campuses away from the exclusive mastery of technical fields to the development of proficiency in the liberal arts. These market demands, coupled with the mounting cost of enrollment even in public four-year institutions, also appear to be fueling the rising number of students—sometimes as high as 60 percent, according

to the National Center for Education Statistics—who enroll in community college but declare intentions to transfer to four-year institutions before or after completing their associate's degree. Current estimates suggest that 300,000 of the 1.5 million students who earn baccalaureate degrees annually are these community college transfer students. In short, 21 percent of all students enrolled in a community college will finish a baccalaureate degree, and a few will go farther still, earning master's degrees, even doctorates (Hoachlander et al. 2003; Jaschik 2008; Velez and Javalgi 1987).

Despite persistent debates over the most appropriate credentials for faculty who teach introductory courses, community colleges are increasingly seeking to support the aspirations of students with transfer intentions by hiring doctoral-trained faculty who can assert the frequently contested parity and portability of credits earned at community colleges to four-year institutions.¹

Although currently only 19 percent of all community college faculty nationally hold doctoral degrees, these numbers change if viewed at the regional level—at my own campus of Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, for example, approximately 54 percent of all full-time faculty hold doctorates (Queensborough Community College 2008). This, moreover, is the shape of things throughout all six community colleges within the CUNY system, as well as within many com-

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munity colleges in hub areas about such major cities as Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Dallas. Representation of doctoral-trained faculty is particularly high in the field of history, for example: fully one-third of all historians are employed in community colleges, and 45 percent of those hold doctorates.

The most obvious source of this trend is presumably the shrinking of the academic job market, which is reducing the number of tenure-bearing lines in four-year colleges and universities. Again, to cite the field of history as an example, only about 40 percent of all historians, nationally, currently hold certificates of continuing employment (Townsend 2002; Townsend 2006). Yet, for all the economic trends that may have converged in marrying scholars to nontraditional students in community college classrooms, another factor in this transition may be what might be called “a

hunger for meaning” among a small but growing number of individuals emerging from doctoral programs since the 1980s. Like many of the scholars who described their professional journeys in the *Imagining America* report recently compiled by Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*, these community college faculty became dissatisfied, over the course of their training, with the research university’s emphasis upon a scholarly productivity so consuming that it seemed to divorce scholarship—at least on some occasions—from ethical engagement, and particularly from what many regarded as the most crucial form of scholarly service: teaching (Ellison and Eatman 2008; on university culture and community college teaching, see Cuban 1999; Brittain 1999; Wilson 2002; McKenna 2000; Lederman 2005; Arnold 2005; Tai 2006).

Although these scholars—this author among them—have chosen to reject the “incentive structure of university scholarship,” it’s not entirely accurate to say that we have rejected scholarship altogether. This doesn’t just mean that some of us try to maintain a steady, if modest, scholarly output (although many do). Rather, community college scholars have chosen to articulate a broader conception of scholarship’s potential application and impact.

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In the narrative tradition of the *Imagining America* report cited above, the author’s own experience will be offered as an illustrative, if anecdotal, example. In graduate school, I studied fields that might be deemed arcane: the history of the Byzantine Empire, Provençal poetry, medieval maritime trade. I wrote my dissertation, and continue to conduct research, on medieval piracy. But it was not until I taught the history of Western civilization to a population of largely immigrant students from south Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean at Queensborough Community College that I began to see how my pirates, poets, and Byzantines could link the lived experience of many of my students to the abstractions of historical inquiry; how they could serve as a means to show students a premodern Europe at once rent, like the world they know, by religious, ethnic, and political rivalries, and sewn together by commercial ties; a place where emerging polities contended with nonstate actors; where conquering Christians and Muslims imposed secondary economic status upon subdued territories;

where minorities struggled to maintain the integrity of regional cultures; and where individuals of differing backgrounds often built bridges across these divides. Through my community college teaching, I am able to use my own exploration of Western civilization's darker corners to validate the Western civilization curriculum's master narrative of liberalism and rationalism triumphant in the face of the skeptical, and even critical, view many of my students are inclined to take. This enables me to more persuasively affirm historical analysis as an ethical project to students troubled by the ways the study of history can challenge religious belief, and to make a stronger case for the civic values of open discourse, tolerance, and human rights that underlie American democracy.²

It is conversations with students on weighty subjects such as these that render the community college classroom the "public space" of my title, where nontraditional college students develop educated habits of mind; where "civic mission" is realized in a process of critical debate. The engagement my colleagues and I share in our own research meanwhile enables us, in the words of Stephen A. Calatrello (2002), a professor of English at Calhoun Community College in Alabama, to "practice what we teach"—that is, to model the process of inquiry for our students as they struggle to master academic subjects. Many of my students, preparing for careers in a variety of engineering, medical, or forensic fields, have learned to love laboratory research working alongside Queensborough faculty in the fields of biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. These faculty have invigorated general education by winning highly prestigious national grants to support their cutting-edge vision of science mastered at the introductory level through forays into "discovery learning" research projects. Students are further empowered by opportunities to present their findings at conferences for undergraduates in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields around the country.

While research experience in the sciences offers explicit credentials to students planning careers in health and technical fields, humanities research can similarly confer the benefits of analytical training, authority in discourse, and content enrichment. Over the years, to cite a few examples, I've worked with a business student who studied the economic thought of John Locke and Adam Smith; a Jewish refugee from religious persecution in Iran who used her proficiency in Hebrew to study Jewish women in Early Modern Europe; and a Polish immigrant who studied Hebrew myth.³

There are, among these students, undoubtedly a few who will ultimately build this early research experience into an academic

career, as did two colleagues in the History Department at Queensborough who began their studies while serving in the U.S. armed forces. Extended reading projects in history and literature may launch individuals, often the first in their families to attend college, along a path of self-realization that will lead them to unexpected careers in the educated professions. But it is worth stressing that most students will make careers in fields that draw only tangentially upon their study of history. The vast majority of successes experienced by faculty in a community college classroom pose the same difficulty Ellison and Eatman have described in their report on public scholarship: they elude easy documentation. After

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all, exactly how does one capture the thrill of hearing a student still learning English ask a substantive question in class? Of hearing one student explain a concept to another in a study group—or even make, or laugh at, a joke—that conveys perfect understanding of a historical circumstance? It is in these moments that “traditional” academic scholarship meets and engages public interest to construct public knowledge;

in these moments when students who will never be academics nevertheless acknowledge the newfound importance learning has attained in their lives.

In the same manner that faculty in the Imagining America project have argued that collaboration between academic and public institutions may be accounted an intellectual endeavor as vital, demanding, and worthy of professional reward as scholarly publication, I would like to close by inviting all scholars, whether “publicly” or “traditionally” engaged, to consider the equal importance of the classroom as the first and most memorable arena in which many individuals encounter the university, including the considerable number of Americans who embark upon postsecondary education but never successfully complete a degree (*see National Center for Education Statistics 2004*). What first-time students find in the classroom will shape, ever after, their notion of who faculty are, of what the university is, of what the academy can do for them. It will affect how they range themselves, as citizens, and as voters, in legislative debates over the cost and value of a university education; the support a society owes its intellectuals; the merits of the tenure system and the need for academic freedom. At community colleges, community college scholars are ever mindful of the power

they wield, of the real good they have the opportunity to foster in opening a world of possibility to nontraditional students. And while we satisfy our altruistic—even romantic—yearning to realize civic mission in our classrooms, I would like to suggest that we may also be serving the broader interests of the academy as a whole, including those of senior colleagues who chose appointments in research universities, by making the case to the American public for the contribution scholars can—and do—make to American society.

Endnotes

1. For a survey of the arguments at issue in this debate, see Taylor 1973; Haworth 1999 and follow-up comments at <http://chronicle.com/colloquy/99/phd/phd.htm>; Winter 2002; and Evelyn 2002, 2003, 2004.
2. For the history of the Western civilization course and critiques of its content and original learning objectives, see Segal 2000; Allardyce 1982; Lougee, Rossabi, and Woehrlin 1982; Wasserstrom 2001; and Shubert 2005.
3. All students mentioned with consent. See also Tai 2005a.

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About the Author

- Emily Sohmer Tai (PhD, Harvard University, 1996) is an associate professor of history at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York. Between 2004 and 2007, she served on the Teaching Division of the American Historical Association. She currently serves on the Editorial Board of the AHA's monthly newsmagazine, *Perspectives*, and is contributing editor of the Community College Humanities Association's tri-annual newsmagazine, *The Community College Humanist*. She is the author of several articles and book chapters on medieval Mediterranean piracy and community college teaching.

