

Not a Big Stretch:

Community College Humanities

by Ronald G. Cantor

The October 21, 2012, “Maine/New England” section of the *Maine Sunday Telegram* carried the following headline: “It’s a big stretch, but brothers pull off modern dance.” Two brothers had enrolled in a three-credit modern dance class at Southern Maine Community College (SMCC), “where stereotypes go up in sweat.” Their story was considered a newsworthy example of young men defying expectations and overcoming inhibitions to indulge the artistic. One brother was majoring in automotive technology with an emphasis in electronics while the other had yet to declare a major. Both understood a reality overlooked by many: college expands horizons, and therefore it can’t be approached narrowly.

The newspaper story also suggested that it’s a big stretch for a community college curriculum to include a dance class. Yet for years, thousands of SMCC students had been fulfilling degree requirements in programs ranging from precision manufacturing and nursing to business management and criminal justice, in part by completing classes in painting, literature, philosophy, music, art history, and other humanities disciplines—modern dance was just the latest step. Community colleges are expected to emphasize technical and trades courses. Many people are surprised to learn that thousands of community college students in Maine, and millions across the United States, enroll in liberal arts disciplines.

Some complete course requirements in the humanities and social sciences as part of their career-oriented or technical majors. Other students give many reasons for selecting majors in the arts, sciences, social sciences, or humanities. Community colleges provide low-cost access to degrees and certificates in all disciplines and also offer noncredit training and educational opportunities. Many graduates transfer to bachelor’s programs, while many others enter the workforce directly. In Maine and several other states community colleges evolved from vocational-technical institutes that once offered courses in construction and accounting, but not in subjects such as history or religion. In the twenty-first

century, however, community college students have more options and employers face new demands.

Our changing, category-defying economy has transformed *soft skills*, such as communication, creativity, and teamwork, into essential workplace skills. Studying the humanities helps people to make useful conceptual and practical breakthroughs. And a variety of factors lead more than half of America’s college students to begin at a community college. Employers applaud that for a huge proportion of students, community college has become *college*, broad and nonexclusive. Maine historically lagged the nation in percentage of college graduates at every level, but Maine’s percentage of college graduates is now close to the national average. However, it still lags the rest of the New England states. For economic and other reasons we need to catch up.

If community colleges did not offer programs in the humanities and social sciences, thousands of low-income students in Maine and millions across the United States would find their options severely curtailed. A few fortunate students would receive scholarships to expensive institutions, while the majority of their peers would find that their only affordable option was a technical or trades program. Careers in welding, dental hygiene, or heavy-equipment operation are rewarding and honorable regardless of a student’s socioeconomic roots, but they are not the best choices for all students. Channeling people toward selected categories of job preparation based on their socioeconomic situation is contrary to American values. Talent, inclination, ambition, and market forces all have roles to play.

A student paying (and perhaps borrowing) \$60,000 a year for college can earn a degree in engineering, music, or social work. Should a student paying \$3,500 a year for community college not have similar choices? The millions of Americans who can afford no college other than a community college must be free to work toward their aspirations.

Years ago few machinists, foresters, technicians, bookkeepers, welders, fire fighters, medical assistants, or police officers had attended college. Most of today’s jobs

either require some form of postsecondary education or applicants with postsecondary credentials are far more likely to succeed in them. The difference between blue-collar and white-collar is no longer education. To borrow a phrase from Vice President Biden, community colleges do not distinguish between those who take a shower before work and those who take a shower after work. Rich or poor, philosophy major or plumbing major, today's community colleges prepare diverse people for success in a changing future. They expand options—they do not restrict them.

REALITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Public universities and private colleges offer numerous curricular options. Community colleges continue to invest heavily in technical and trades programs, and the numbers of students in these programs have increased. So too have the numbers of students attending community colleges as a first and affordable step to attaining a wide range of education and career goals. It is not curriculum or program offerings that distinguish a community college from other institutions of higher learning; the chief distinguishing factor is the students served. And if community college students do not have the curricular choices available to students at more expensive institutions, America's problems associated with income inequality, the skills gap, and student-loan debt would worsen.

Community colleges enroll large numbers of students who, a generation or two ago, would not have attended college. A significant portion of these students excel academically and go on to successful careers and lives. Community college students are often the first in their families to attend college and, on average, their family incomes are low. Many of them arrive at college ill prepared academically. With relatively few aspirational role models or supports, they lack realistic expectations of what it takes to succeed in college or a career. Whether 18 or 48 years old, they often lead complicated lives full of financial, personal, and family challenges that effectively relegate their studies to low priority. Yet they come to college to improve life for themselves, their families, and their communities.

As confirmed by study after study, higher education continues to increase the likelihood of substantially higher lifetime earnings (see, for example, Dadgar and Timble 2014). With rock-bottom tuition and fees, averaging half the cost of public universities and less than 10

percent the cost of many private institutions, community colleges make higher education affordable and minimize student debt. Some states are reducing community college tuition to zero and President Obama is paving the way for more states to follow suit. Already, in 48 states students who otherwise could not attend college find that with a federal Pell Grant (that does not need to be repaid), they can cover the full cost of tuition and fees at a community college. Other institutions package financial aid to minimize loans, and a few even operate on a need-blind basis, guaranteeing that an accepted applicant can attend regardless of ability to pay. Only community colleges accept all applicants with high school or general equivalency diplomas and set tuition and fees so low.

BENEFITS OF CURRICULAR BREADTH

At many community colleges, the humanities are not separate from the trades, but woven into them to ensure that students are prepared for the challenges of the new workplace. Furthermore, the skills and knowledge acquired by mastering technical lessons in the occupations and trades make their own contributions to the humanities in terms of precise thought, creativity, alternative constructs, synthesis, and more. For graduates who choose to pursue bachelor's degrees, community college courses in the humanities and social sciences provide the requisite foundations for transfer while saving tuition dollars.

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When small-business owners and human-resources professionals representing large corporations identify what they seek in new hires, their emphasis is rarely on technical skills. Instead, their frequent message to community colleges is this: teach students to be proficient in the basics of the specific industry (culinary arts, information technology, carpentry, criminal justice). After they're hired, we (the employers) will train them in

the technical side of our business. Most of all, employers plead with colleges to send them graduates who can communicate clearly and persuasively in multiple modalities, who can think critically and work well with diverse others to solve problems, and who have developed senses of proportion sufficient to establish priorities and negotiate ambiguous environments. The humanities are key to the educational outcomes that employers demand most.

Of course education is not always general, and different institutions pursue different missions. Workforce development is at the heart of the community college mission. These institutions mobilize, in dozens of ways, to develop the economy and close the skills gap. It is often posited that community colleges build economy-boosting skills more and better than any other sector of the education community—or any other entity in society. Community colleges are nimble and entrepreneurial. They understand that the purpose of college is to expand horizons and that their mission cannot be fulfilled narrowly. They focus on workforce preparation, but not like a laser. A better analogy would be many lasers with many foci, strategically and intermittently mixed with search lights and floodlights to achieve depth and breadth of learning. Regardless of major, all graduates need broad and adaptable skills.

At Southern Maine Community College our mission is to empower students to respond to a changing world. The more the world changes—the more we experience shifts in economics, technology, demographics, and culture—the less sense it makes to train narrowly for particular jobs in industries that are less and less likely to be recognizable, or even exist, in a few short years. Skills must be learned and developed in contexts suited to flexibility and change. Horizons must be expanded. That's education, be it at a research university, a private liberal arts college, or a community college.

Courses that do not require expensive facilities, equipment, or faculty ratios (e.g., humanities, social sciences, business) provide institutions with vital financial support to offset cost-intensive technical and trades courses. In this era of rising costs and flat funding, colleges are able to maintain investments in technical and trades programs, and to offer the same low tuition rate for students enrolled in them, due in no small part to the net revenue generated by courses that are less expensive to offer, such as those in the humanities. Reductions in liberal arts offerings actually create financial deficits that directly affect the ability to offer the

technical and trades programs that are still the backbone of community colleges.

BLURRED ROLES AND OVERLAPPING CATEGORIES

Some students begin as liberal arts majors (perhaps because they are undecided) and then change to technical or career-oriented majors. Others complete a solid base of general education or liberal arts courses at a community college with plans to transfer to another college or university. Still others graduate with a community college degree in a humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences discipline because it will best prepare them for successful employment and more in the changing future. Noteworthy are the many students who complete degrees in such technical-trades fields as carpentry, welding, horticulture, architectural design, and computer graphics—and then go on to careers in which they produce works of great aesthetic value that are purchased at premium prices (fine cabinetry, metal sculpture, elaborate gardens and structures, animated video). Also noteworthy are the many community college students who enroll in art, philosophy, and communication classes as they prepare for careers in the blossoming creative economy in Maine and elsewhere.

There was once a day when it all seemed clear and tidy. Four-year colleges and universities were all about the arts and sciences—some also offered degrees in professions such as engineering, education, journalism, law, or medicine. Separately, there were vocational and technical training institutes, and a few of these were called colleges. Today the lines have blurred. (And here we're not even discussing online degrees, virtual universities, for-profit/private-sector colleges, dual-enrollment, massive open online courses [MOOCs], badges, or charter schools.) It is no longer useful to distinguish between two-year institutions and four-year institutions for reasons beyond the extended time it takes students to graduate. Community colleges in 20 states offer bachelor's degrees. Several of Maine's universities, both public and private, offer associate degrees.

Maine's community colleges offer a wide range of associate degrees and certificates. They do not offer bachelor degrees and have no plans to do so. Beyond credit-bearing courses that lead to associate degrees and certificates, they serve hundreds of employers and thousands of employees every year through noncredit,

customized training that ranges from communication and supervision skills to highly technical topics. Noncredit offerings also include workshops and classes in languages, art history, acting, dance, and other topics in the humanities.

HISTORY, POLITICS, AND IDEOLOGY

In ancient times and the Middle Ages the liberal arts were defined to include the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). By the ninth century, the liberal arts had found their complement in the form of the mechanical arts, including agriculture, architecture, metallurgy, cooking, weaving, and trade. Little imagination is needed to trace today's diverse curricula to these solid, balanced roots in the Western tradition. Both then and now some people gravitate toward the mechanical arts and others gravitate toward the liberal arts—sometimes with ideological vehemence. Colleges and universities, as well as employers and larger societies, have typically bridged the divide by valuing both mechanical and liberal learning.

Elected officials and other opinion leaders are not shy about proposing programs and interventions to create incentives for certain types of skills or studies over others, to decrease student debt, and otherwise to attempt to manipulate the complex world of higher education to achieve specific outcomes. Now more than ever before, prospective students and their families question the value of taking on debt to finance a college education when lucrative job offers do not await every graduate. Such doubt often rests on the age-old debate between those who believe that the main (or only) purpose of education is employment, and those who believe in education to make a life as well as a living (or a life worth living). While reasonable people disagree, nearly all colleges and universities are committed to enhancing the lives of their graduates and communities in terms of careers as well as in other important ways.

Some champion community colleges narrowly as economic engines by demanding that they return to their technical-vocational roots and leave the humanities and social sciences to be addressed elsewhere, if at all. It is not uncommon to hear the refrain “we’ve gone too far—not every kid needs to go to college.” Furthermore, we live in an era where reduced state appropriations, challenging demographics, and changing societal values lead to demands even for public universities to reduce or

abandon the humanities in favor of narrow focus on the economy and its workforce. Some consider this rational policy while others see it as destructive heresy. The debate rages and enrages while higher education institutions continue to serve students, employers, and communities.

STEAMED ABOUT STEM

Today the humanities are in danger of neglect, if not under attack, as policymakers emphasize STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines on a scale not seen since the reaction to Sputnik a half-century ago. Without a doubt, science, technology, engineering, and math are vital for our economy and our future, but is it realistic to believe that policies and incentives could transform many of those inclined toward the arts and humanities into successful scientists, engineers, or technicians? Even if this were possible and even if thousands of additional scientists, engineers, and technicians yielded a more robust economy, the pendulum would soon swing back and people would crave parallel advances in literature, theatre, music, theology, and other humanistic perspectives that give meaning to the human condition.

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To right the balance it has become popular to advocate for the addition of art to the STEM fields, producing the cleverly expanded acronym STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math). Anyone who appreciates and values the humanities would surely cry foul as the rich world of humanities disciplines is condensed to art. Education cannot be reduced to STEM or STEAM. College expands horizons, and to approach it narrowly or superficially is to curtail some of higher education's most substantial positive impacts. Even curricula in the professions and trades must rest on solid foundations in the natural sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences.

MULTIPLE AND CONGRUENT AIMS

Every college or university pursues its distinct mission in its own way. A dominant curricular emphasis does not preclude other curricular strengths or objectives. The name of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) implies a clear emphasis, yet its website proudly proclaims: “MIT covers more than just science and technology,” and “The mission of MIT is to advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century—whether the focus is cancer, energy, economics or literature” (<http://web.mit.edu/>). Accordingly, MIT includes a School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. A preeminent institute of technology’s focus on literature sets a fine example for community colleges with technical-vocational roots.

Another model for curricular breadth and balance, as well as American ideals, is the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 that provided for each state: “at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (Morrill Act of 1862.)

A multi-tiered approach to higher education will best serve Maine, the nation, and the world in the twenty-first century. All colleges and universities must graduate generalists as well as specialists by emphasizing solid foundations along with narrow areas of expertise. Success in a changing world requires flexible minds to envision new possibilities—both technical and creative. Although some people believe that manufacturers need skilled machinists and that the sole purpose of community colleges is to meet such needs, other people, including many who make hiring and supervisory decisions, recognize an urgent need for machinists and the rest of the workforce to be more broadly prepared. The humanities are essential as we prepare all students for “the several pursuits and professions in life.” Today’s community colleges are all about the modern equivalents of “liberal and practical education of the industrial classes.”

DOWNEAST PRACTICALITY

In Maine we value hard work, our rich and beautiful environment, and innovative self-reliance. We appreciate the arts and the fact that so many people from away value Maine. Education for its own sake is not necessarily high on our list. If Missouri is the “show-me” state, Mainers say “show me how it’s useful.”

The humanities bring useful perspective. So does humor, as demonstrated by an anecdote involving a quintessential New England poet: “After a dinner party Robert Frost and other guests went out onto the veranda to watch the sunset. ‘Oh, Mr. Frost, isn’t it a lovely sunset?’ exclaimed a young woman. ‘I never discuss business after dinner,’ responded Frost” (Fadiman and Bernard 1965). Frost’s poetry paid his bills. Yet about poetry he warned: “Never do it to pay a bill—‘cause you probably won’t” (Clarke 1963).

Such are the quandaries of making a life while making a living. The humanities enrich our world while inspiring insights that help us to achieve practical goals. Breadth and depth of perspective make it possible for skills to become useful and meaningful. These are worthy, essential aims for a community college or any other institution of higher learning. It’s not a big stretch. 🐟

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