Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College

A Critical Perspective

Robert A. Rhoads and James R. Valadez

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and the Community College**

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Series Editor's Introduction

Robert Rhoads and James Valadez have written a dangerous book. *Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College: A Critical Perspective* contends that American community colleges face an identity crisis. Burdened with so many tasks over the last several decades, community colleges have sometimes lost their organizational identity. Founded as open access venues of higher education, community colleges represent American education's commitment to democracy. It is this dangerous dynamic that Rhoads and Valadez seek to question. Around the democratic impulse the book takes shape.

Asserting that community colleges have too often failed the test of democracy, the authors delineate the institution's unsuccessful efforts to provide social/economic mobility to many of its students. Community college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds continue to find low-pay, low-status jobs awaiting them after graduation. What changes are needed, Rhoads and Valadez ask, to make community colleges more democratic, more true to their egalitarian mission? What forces, what belief structures have impeded this attempt? At this point the explorations become especially hazardous. These questions are rarely asked in the public conversation about community colleges at the end of the twentieth century. Raising questions of democracy, Rhoads and Valadez become the bearers of the bad news, the dinner guests who broach the unspoken unpleasantry at the dining table. In an era where right-wing attacks on equal opportunity and various inclusionary practices have become the order of the day, such questions become even more "crass." In this social context too much talk about democracy is inappropriate; indeed, as the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities put it: "Too much democracy can be a bad thing."

How should community colleges deal with their identity crisis? How might they reaffirm their commitment to democracy? Rhoads and Valadez maintain that such tasks can be conceptualized around the discourse of critical multiculturalism. The term, multiculturalism, has been used by different groups to mean many different things. Understanding the lack of consensus about its meaning, the authors delineate a specific form of multiculturalism as the theoretical grounding for their effort to democratize the community college. Critical multiculturalism contends that representations of race, class, and gender are inseparable from larger social struggles. In this "power play" critical multiculturalists assume that multicultural curriculums attempt to transform the social, cultural, and institutional structures that produce these representations. Power operates, critical multiculturalists argue, by its ability to produce knowledge that shapes our understanding of the world. Mainstream science, the official curriculum, corporate advertising, and many other social dynamics *represent* reality in ways that benefit particular interests while undermining others. In the case of the community college and its students, power-driven representations of the world and its people are dramatic in their impact. For example, the representation of African-American, Puerto Rican, Mexican, or poor white students attending community colleges as unworthy or remedial students is damaging to the public commitment to community colleges in general and marginalizes students' self-concepts in particular. Critical multiculturalists point out these power-related issues and their relation to America's historical commitment to democratic values.

Thus, critical multiculturalists assume that issues of democracy and education must be analyzed in their relationship to power and privilege. Indeed, they assume that justice does *not* already exist and *only* needs to be distributed more fairly. In this context critical multiculturalists struggle with the definition of a just community, focusing their attention on competing conceptions of community as a homogeneous body and community as a heterogeneous body. Critical multiculturalists argue that community does not rest on a simplistic notion of consensus. In a racially and ethnically diverse society that respects but does not essentialize differences, great gains can be realized in the cultivation of critical thinking and moral reasoning. A homogeneous community grounded on consensus may

be unable to criticize the injustice and exclusionary practices that undermine it. Criticism and reform of cultural pathology often come from the recognition of difference, from interaction with communities and individuals who do not suffer from the same injustices or who have dealt with them in different ways. Consciousness itself is spurred by difference in that we gain our first awareness of who we are when we become conscious that we exist independently of another or another's ways.

From this critical multicultural position Rhoads and Valadez challenge the tendency of contemporary community colleges to embrace what they call "an authoritarian view of knowledge and pedagogy." Such authoritarianism poses a special threat to students who fall outside the boundaries of white and upper-middle class contexts. Culture is irrelevant and student welfare is overlooked in the authoritarian curriculum's dismissal of their experiences and special needs. The authoritarian stance views the community college's pedagogical task as one of "adjusting" low-ability students to the workforce in a way that reflects the needs of business and industry regardless of the needs and best interests of the students involved. Too often community college leaders fail to question the purpose of career education in a domestic society. What skills do we want community college graduates to possess? What types of attitudes and behaviors? What understandings should students acquire that will help them to become better workers? Better citizens? How do factors of race, socioeconomic class, or gender affect various aspects of community college education?

The critical multicultural community college education that Rhoads and Valadez envision is grounded on the production of thoughtful worker-citizens. Such students understand the contradictions in their education and their work experiences; they appreciate the way power shapes their view of themselves and the world. Thus, the authors push us beyond narrow visions of careerism, working in the name of democracy to construct a new type of community college education that is grounded in the best traditions of America's sense of justice. A critical multicultural community college education empowers its students by cultivating their capacity for self-direction. Such an education grants students a sense of possibility, a sense that positive change can take place. Empowered com-

munity college students look for the footprints of power and domi-
nation in not only the construction of their own consciousness but
also in the curriculum and organization of their college. They ques-
tion inequities, asking why the "mastery" of some forms of knowl-
edge confers greater status than others. Acting on their own empow-
erment, they weigh existing social, economic, and educational
institutions against their own claims of integrity and democracy. In
this context they ask if the institutions that shape their lives expand
the possibilities of humanness.

Rhoads and Valadez are haunted by the questions: "Is it possible
to restructure community colleges around such issues?"; and, "If it is
how do we do it?" Maintaining that multiculturalism involves more
than merely offering courses on diverse peoples and cultures, the au-
thors induce community college leaders to restructure their institu-
tions so that all people are capable of input into decision making. If
critical multicultural institutions exist first and foremost as democra-
cies, then a critical multicultural stance demands that innovation be
created within the culture of the college and its student and teacher
community. Thus, the authors conclude that in such a theoretical con-
text, community college leadership ought to be reconceptualized. Criti-
cal multicultural educational leadership is not a quality found only
among college officials—leadership from the authors' perspective is
an ability possessed by a wide variety of institutional participants. The
authors provide important insights into the nature of democratic lead-
ership: Leading involves not as much commanding as it does helping
institutional participants make sense of the multiple dynamics shap-
ing the college and its relationship to the larger society.

The ability to make meaning is a primary theme of the book—
and the understanding of social context and the power of culture to
shape educational life is central to the authors' project. In the effort
to reclaim the democratic origins of the community college, under-
standing the cultural identities of its students cannot be ignored. All
members of the college community must understand the various
ways these cultural dynamics operate. When such understandings
are grasped by all parties involved, the community college is pre-
pared to address issues that have traditionally undermined institu-
tional effectiveness. An appreciation of cultural dynamics allows fac-
ulty, staff, and administration insight into the fact that student

performance has more to do with cultural difference and social in-
teraction than most other factors. In this context Rhoads and Valadez
address assessment strategies, advising, and placement tests. Place-
ment tests in particular have victimized several generations of com-
munity college students. To label and categorize students on the basis
of tests that often measure familiarity with industrialized modernist
ways of seeing the world (in other words, dominant cultural capital)
is a consequence of the absence of cultural contextualization. The
authors are keenly aware of the pernicious ways such "technologies"
of dominant power subvert the progress of students from outside
mainstream culture.

    When we know that over half the students who attend commu-
nity colleges are non-white, our view of community college peda-
gogy should change. Non-white and economically disadvantaged
students are saddled with an entirely different set of problems than
most students at four-year colleges and universities. Such students
bring a very different set of skills to the community college table—
skills that teachers and administrative officials view in sometimes
negative ways. Marginalized students who are intelligent and cre-
ative are convinced of their intellectual inferiority because educators
fail to understand the socioeconomic context in which they have
come of age. Such class-based and ethnic issues often do not "play"
well in American society where many argue *there are no social or
economic classes*. In a context dominated by such belief structures,
raising these issues subjects one to charges of demagoguery and un-
necessary agitation. The use of racial and class analysis has never
been more important than in the 1990s with the massive redistribu-
tion of wealth from the poor to the well-to-do. Indeed, the attempt
to dismiss class as an American political and educational issue must
be exposed for what it is—an instrumental fiction designed to per-
petuate the inequitable status quo by pointing out the poor and
culturally differents' own incompetence as the cause of their pov-
erty. Suffice it to say that the authors of *The Bell Curve*, Charles
Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein, will not enjoy this book.

    Rhoads and Valadez know that too many community colleges
are not equipped to take advantage of the skills and understandings
that marginalized students bring to the classroom. They know that
such students are handicapped when they run into problems tied to

their inadequate understanding of how to negotiate the culture of the college or how to "work" its impersonal bureaucracy. Such inabilities are not manifestations of low ability—they are marks of cultural differences and should not be confused with anything else. While the path to empowerment involves the ability to move beyond victimization and take charge of one's own destiny, this is not to be undertaken by the denial of socioeconomic context.

A strange alchemy occurs when the cultural baggage carried by marginalized students intersects with the middle-class dynamics of the community colleges. A pattern of alienation is created that frequently results in the failure of the student. Educational sociologists have for decades reported the cold and impersonal ways lower socioeconomic and marginalized students are treated, how they are made to feel like intruders who don't belong. School is at times like a jealous lover who demands that marginalized students choose between their culture and the school—that is, if school is chosen then one must give up her or his culture and adopt the identity of a school achiever. Rhoads and Valadez appreciate these painful cultural dynamics and dedicate *Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College* to exposing them. To assert that no student is deficient or unknowledgeable and can benefit from the community college experience is to forsake the safe path.

Indeed, this book is hazardous to the status quo.

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Introduction

In this book, we examine community college efforts to serve an increasingly diverse student population. We focus on the multiple roles community colleges enact to serve the needs of a diverse clientele. More specifically, community colleges have struggled to meet the demands of students who vary by race, class, gender, and age, all while embracing three primary roles: transfer, vocational, and community education. One by-product of facing multiple commitments is the lack of a clear sense of organizational identity, which some writers characterize as the chaotic state of the community college. We argue that solutions lie not in simplifying the mission of the community college. Instead, solutions rest with the ability of community colleges to embrace organizational multiplicity—the idea that organizations, like individuals, have plural or multiple identities. We suggest throughout this book that multiculturalism provides a connective thread that enables community colleges to embrace an organizational complexity characterized by multiplicity.

Although the lack of a well-defined organizational identity afflicts many community colleges, this is not the sole challenge they face. Another concern relates to the basic foundation of the community college and how education is enacted. We contend that community colleges, more so than other postsecondary institutions in the United States, are deeply entrenched within a mentality characterized by an authoritarian view of knowledge and pedagogy. Such a view situates certain understandings and ways of knowing above others. This is problematic for most educational institutions, but for those serving large numbers of culturally diverse students, who often bring different understandings and diverse forms of knowledge to the educational setting, it is especially insidious. We suggest

that multiculturalism, with its commitment to democratic educational processes, offers solutions to problems associated with authoritarianism as well as to problems presented by organizational multiplicity.

Thus, two different but related narratives form the foci of our research and theorizing. The first narrative discusses the multiple missions of the community college and the lack of a clear organizational identity. The other narrative describes the diverse students community colleges are expected to serve and the problem that authoritarian educational practices pose to embracing cultural diversity. We weave in and out of these two narratives the idea of multiculturalism. Our hope is to create a singular, coherent image of community college education as the practice of democracy in which organizational multiplicity is seen not as a problem to be solved but instead as a central aspect of organizational life.

This book is based on three years of organizational research conducted at five community colleges. Sites were selected because of their student diversity as well as their variety of program offerings. The colleges studied do not necessarily reflect ideal types in the strict Weberian sense. At some sites, the institutions have struggled with cultural diversity and have succeeded in creating multicultural organizational structures. At other sites, the success has been more limited. But, even in these latter cases, there is much to learn about multicultural education.

The general outline of the book follows. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework as well as current observations of researchers and educators in the field. In chapter 2, we focus on the multiple roles community colleges enact and relate the discussion to multiculturalism. We also review the methodology used in conducting our research. In chapters 3 through 7, we present case studies of five community colleges. We use theoretical insights related to multiculturalism to frame our analysis. In chapter 3, we examine how the organizational culture of a rural community college contributes to the production of a narrow sense of students' identity centering on their role as workers. Chapter 4 focuses on how student diversity might be treated in a more celebratory manner as we highlight an urban community college education center organized to serve Spanish-speaking immigrants. In chapter 5, our focus cen-

ters on issues of community responsiveness as we examine a com-
munity college high school developed primarily to serve urban Afri-
can-American students. Chapter 6 explores issues related to cultural
capital and border knowledge as we examine developmental educa-
tion at a rural community college. In chapter 7, we use a case study
of an urban community college to clarify our idea of organizational
multiplicity and to suggest ways that multiculturalism might help
community colleges to deal with their complex, multiple roles. We
conclude with chapter 8 by offering a comprehensive analysis of
our findings and by suggesting some characteristics that a more
democratic community college might exhibit. We also re-empha-
size how educational practice is fundamentally linked to culture and
identity issues.

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Chapter One
Multiculturalism and Border Knowledge in Higher Education

In this chapter, we expand upon our conception of multiculturalism and discuss what is sometimes described as *critical multiculturalism*. We relate critical multiculturalism to issues of culture and identity, which are vital to understanding the role of community college education. Our intent is to clarify a view of multiculturalism and the challenge it presents to authoritarian views of knowledge embraced most clearly in the idea of the canon. We introduce the notion of *border knowledge* and discuss its relationship to cultural diversity. Our discussion of border knowledge and the canon is linked to what has been termed the *politics of identity*.

This chapter provides the theoretical framework around which the remainder of this book is structured. Consequently, while the remaining chapters specifically focus on community colleges and community college issues, this chapter focuses on broader concerns within higher education in the United States. We see a need to situate discussions of community college education within an emerging theoretical wave led by feminism, critical theory, and postmodernism. In chapter 2 and subsequent case-study chapters, we refocus our analysis on the community college as we apply the theoretical perspective suggested here.

Campus Divisiveness or Cultural Diversity?

In debates about U.S. higher education a dualism is often posited between the traditions of past excellence and calls for greater access and equity. Idyllic images of professors and students framed by a shared language and culture, engaged in the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, are contrasted with portraits of campus divisiveness and curricula resembling more an *à la carte* menu than any

coherent educational philosophy. There is little doubt that cultural diversity has pulled at the fabric that has structured higher education in this country for quite a few years.

But professors and students engaged in deep philosophical discourse have been the exception and not the rule, and enduring images are often reflections of the "good old days" that never were. Campus divisiveness is nothing new. At Harvard and Yale between 1745 and 1771, students frequently protested "the manner by which education was imparted" in what has been described as the "war with the tutors" (Moore, 1978, p. 125). Student revolts in the early 1800s were commonplace as students rebelled against the authority of the "old-time" college and what many perceived as "political indoctrination" at the hands of federalist-leaning professors and clergy who sought to uphold "religion, morality, civilization, authority, and order" (Novak, 1977, p. 72). And there seems always to have been disruptions caused by student social clubs emerging with or without official institutional support (Horowitz, 1987). Frequently, student resistance has focused on the learning process, evidenced by Lyman Bagg's (1871) discussion of how the more socially oriented students at Yale disliked the "grinds"—those students "digging and grinding for a stand [a good grade], existing all unconscious of the peculiar and delightful life about [them]" (p. 702). Clearly, students have for years found a multitude of ways to subvert the educational enterprise despite the best-laid plans of faculty and administrators.

Divisiveness is hardly new, but it has taken on a somewhat different tenor. Instead of complaints about upper-division students disrupting the lives of first-year students, or students forming allegiances against faculty, or the socials sabotaging the grinds, issues of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation have become central to what some see as fragmentation within today's academy. Several recent developments support our point. In protest of a decision by the college's trustees to admit men, students at Mills College, a women's college founded over a century ago, went on strike and effectively halted the school's operations (McCurdy, 1990). "Their spirited exchanges and passionate commitment showed the world that what they appreciate first about women's colleges is the empowerment they experience in institutions that place women students at the center of their educational mission" (Hartman, 1990, p. A40). At the Uni-

versity of California at Los Angeles, 99 students were arrested in
demonstrations held to protest the university's refusal to grant
Chicano Studies full academic status. Chicano students believed
achieving departmental standing was a step toward strengthening
the identity of the Chicano community (McCurdy, 1993). At the
University of California at Berkeley, a coalition of Asian-American,
Black, Latino, American Indian, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual stu-
dents demonstrated over the lack of minority students and faculty,
as well as the need to establish a Gay Studies department (Fifty-six
Protesters, 1990). African-American students at Pennsylvania State
University organized a student takeover of the university's commu-
nications tower. The demonstration was held to protest the
university's lack of commitment to improving the campus environ-
ment for African-American students (DeLoughry, 1989). And fi-
nally, African-American students at Rutgers University halted and
then forced the postponement of a highly anticipated Atlantic Ten
basketball game in protest of degrading statements about African
Americans made by the Rutgers president.

Multiple interpretations exist as to the causes and outcomes of
campus disharmony. For example, what appears in much of the higher
education literature, often in the form of innuendo, is that cultural
diversity is the major cause of both campus divisiveness as well as
incoherent curricula. Open access and efforts to achieve equal op-
portunity often come under attack from conservative critics such as
Dinesh D'Souza (1991) and Roger Kimball (1990), who see
inclusionary practices as threats to the best traditions of U.S. higher
education and as indications of how ideology has come to corrupt
the academy. Another example comes from a recent meeting of the
American Educational Research Association at which Sheldon Hack-
ney, director of the National Endowment for the Humanities and
former president of the University of Pennsylvania, talked about
cultural diversity and the declining sense of a common national iden-
tity. Hackney spoke about how fragmentation within our culture
has become a source of tension. He discussed the 1960s as the wa-
tershed period bridging our current detachment from common con-
nections and civility. As evidence of today's fragmentation and hos-
tility, Hackney called upon studies that point to declining church
attendance, decreased participation in Boy Scouts, and decreased

interactions among neighbors. Implicit throughout his speech was the need to return to the spirit of the 1950s, which is often characterized as a period of strong family values and neighborliness despite the many Jim Crow laws and pervasiveness of patriarchy. One of the authors of this book suggested to Hackney that what he was describing as fragmentation and a declining sense of common identity may in fact be "democracy playing itself out" as marginalized peoples have finally achieved enough power to voice their concerns publicly. Yes, they have disrupted "neighborliness," but it was a false sense of neighborliness obtained through the silencing of many voices and the suppression of democracy. Rhoads went on to say, "It seems odd to me that just when various minority groups have gained enough voice to point out the inequities inherent in our society, those in power now call for common ground." Hackney's response was something to the effect that "too much democracy can be a bad thing." Bell hooks (1994b) speaks to this kind of reaction: "What we are witnessing today in our everyday life is not an eagerness on the part of neighbors and strangers to develop a world perspective but a return to narrow nationalism, isolationisms, and xenophobia. These shifts are usually explained in New Right and neoconservative terms as attempts to bring order to chaos, to return to an (idealized) past" (p. 28). Their fear, as hooks goes on to note, is that "any de-centering of Western civilizations, of the white male canon, is really an act of cultural genocide" (p. 32).

Hooks and others suggest a different interpretation than that offered by D'Souza, Kimball, and Hackney: The divisiveness witnessed on numerous campuses reflects what might be seen as a lack of institutional responsiveness. The principal reason postsecondary institutions have dragged their feet is because responding to cultural diversity through the implementation of a multicultural curriculum and organization threatens the canonical knowledge upon which the dominant forces in higher education are positioned. As the rug begins to be pulled out from under the feet of those who benefit from the elevated position of traditional knowledge, these same individuals resort to calls for a return to common ground. Their calls are intended to stabilize the resistance of those most silenced by hierarchical views of knowledge evident in the traditional canon.