Serving Community College Students is the third in a series of four articles about how higher education administrators can make a successful transition from four-year to two-year institutions. The other articles focus on general advice, the organizational structure of community colleges, and colleague relations.

Having little or no community college administration experience when we started working at College of DuPage, each of us experienced some surprises when getting acquainted with the student body.

First, we discovered that community colleges’ unique focus on community—the specific district they serve—affects the types of programs and services offered to students. Most community colleges receive local funding, which adds to an institution’s commitment to being responsive to its district. Administrators may find themselves facilitating meetings with local high school teachers, university chairpersons, business leaders, community leaders, board members, and arts groups. Each group has particular views and requirements for the programs and services it expects the college to offer. For example, in transfer disciplines such as English and Psychology, an administrator might be expected to offer five or six different sections of a course at multiple locations within a community college district. In the occupational areas, a range of students—from businessmen to hobbyists—may require specially designed certificates and course packages to support their needs. The administrator who oversees these areas must insist that senior management clarifies priorities so resources can be aligned appropriately.

Second, we noticed that, in general, community college students have a lack of identity with the college, especially when compared with students at residential four-year institutions. Most students do not want to brag about the three hallmarks of the community college—accessibility, affordability, and small class size. Also, community college students (and to a lesser degree, students at four-year institutions) do not spend a lot of time on campus—most of their learning is done outside their classrooms. Consequently, a real challenge for faculty and administrators at all higher education institutions, but particularly at community colleges where there is a shorter learning experience, is the propensity for students to see their courses as a “check-off list” to complete so they can move on to their next step. (And, because of this propensity, student services departments have a tough time getting students to participate in co-curricular activities and nonacademic events.)
We also discovered that degree-seeking students’ state of preparedness at community colleges is different from that of their peers at four-year institutions. Community college students lack not only academic preparedness, but also familiarity with higher education culture and what’s expected of them as learners. Because the general mission of community colleges is to serve all, in particular the underprepared, new administrators may notice greater student transience, greater withdrawal rates, and less apparent student engagement than they would at four-year institutions. And because community colleges only offer the first two years of the bachelors’ degree, students do not experience the full range of development that may occur at a four-year institution. Some of the challenges for the administrator, then, are to track individual student cohorts, discover how to implement appropriate interventions, and learn how to provide faculty with suitable development opportunities to help students succeed.

Because remediation needs at community colleges are significant, administrators will find themselves regularly collaborating with student support services, in particular with the academic support center, the counseling and advising center, and ESL support. Other essential services for community college students include individual tutoring, independent learning, career placement, and ADA and LD support. Serving students effectively also means recognizing the diversity of the student body and, at community colleges, the word diversity takes on a broader meaning than at four-year institutions: It includes different learning styles, abilities, cultures, ethnicities, ages, cohorts, religions, and interests. This also carries implications for budgeting. Prioritizing the community’s needs and expectations and targeting resources are a balancing act for all administrators in the community college system.

Despite community college students’ need for many services, administrators may notice fewer student complaints than at four-year institutions. This happens in part because many community college students, unfamiliar with higher learning, are less resourceful in seeking out an administrator to file a complaint with, or may not even know their rights. The low cost of tuition at most community colleges also may play a role in encouraging students to walk away from a problem. When students do make their way to an administrator’s office, the problem may have been going on for a long time and at that point, may be difficult to address.

Although administrators may experience fewer student complaints at the community college level, they may find themselves fielding far more phone calls and visits from parents. Often, parents aren’t aware of FERPA issues, or choose to ignore them, and call to find out how their children are doing in their classes and whether they are attending classes regularly. In addition, many community colleges rely on local tax support, or have a funding structure that benefits from district taxpayers. Community members—especially parents—therefore, feel they should have a voice in students’ education, even if their children are 20 years old. Likewise, courses at community colleges, as well as at four-year institutions, are often viewed as commodities to be consumed—and, therefore, some people think grades and degrees can be
negotiated. Administrators may find themselves meeting with both students and parents in an attempt to resolve grade disputes and behavioral issues, while at the same time trying to tactfully encourage students to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions.

A final observation about community college students: These students, in general, have fewer assumptions and expectations than students at four-year institutions, and because their assumptions don’t have to be torn down, faculty may find them easier to teach. Faculty find it gratifying to teach students who for the first time in their lives earn “B” grades and are proud of such marks. Building confidence and changing lives are much of what two-year institutions give students. Success at a community college, for faculty and administrators, means learning of a student who first wanted to take “a course or two,” but who, with encouragement and continuous support from faculty and the institution as a whole, completes a certificate or associate degree, and then elects to transfer to a four-year institution or finds a high-paying job.

Working with community college students has both its surprising moments and extraordinary rewards. We have found that if we remain as open to new learning experiences as the students do, the rewards stay high.

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