



Anthony E. Beebe, president, San Diego City College, during the college's Week of Service

# SERVING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

RECENT COMPLETION REFORMS ARE SHIFTING THE CONVERSATION FROM ACCESS TO SUCCESS. NOW IS THE TIME TO CONSIDER WHAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES' MISSION IS REALLY ALL ABOUT **BY ANTHONY E. BEEBE**

Community colleges were founded on the principles of social justice. This foundation still permeates the mission and core values of community colleges across our country. Certainly one of the most unique and compelling social-justice elements of community colleges has been the emphasis on open access to higher education. This open-door philosophy helped the colleges become known as the “people’s colleges.” From the start, community colleges provided educational access to the masses, democratizing higher education and breaking the classism of higher education, which had been largely reserved for the wealthy elite. This was an epic social-justice change in our nation’s history.

Though it began with great enthusiasm, the progressive social movement of community colleges has stalled. We could argue that our expansion into basic skills, vocational education, transfer, lifelong learning, community education, contract education, and beyond was a natural and necessary evolution of our open-access mission, but it has also diluted and muted our once edgy emphasis on social justice. Some might also argue that community colleges have now been absorbed into the Big Learning Organization Bureaucracies (BLOB), made up of the more than 200 groups, associations, federations, alliances, departments, offices, administrations, councils, boards, commissions, panels, organizations, herds, flocks, and coveys, which collectively comprises the paralyzed educational industrial complex.

As society and life cycles evolve, we, too, must keep pace and recognize the

**We must elicit lawmakers who understand the tremendous value of community colleges to help us be equitably funded.**

changes needed in many social areas. It is time to revisit our community college mission to gauge if we still have the passion, courage, interest, and political will to make meaningful social change in our communities. We also need to recognize that the dramatic socioeconomic stratification taking place in higher education is threatening the community college social-justice progress.

**A Framework for Social Change**

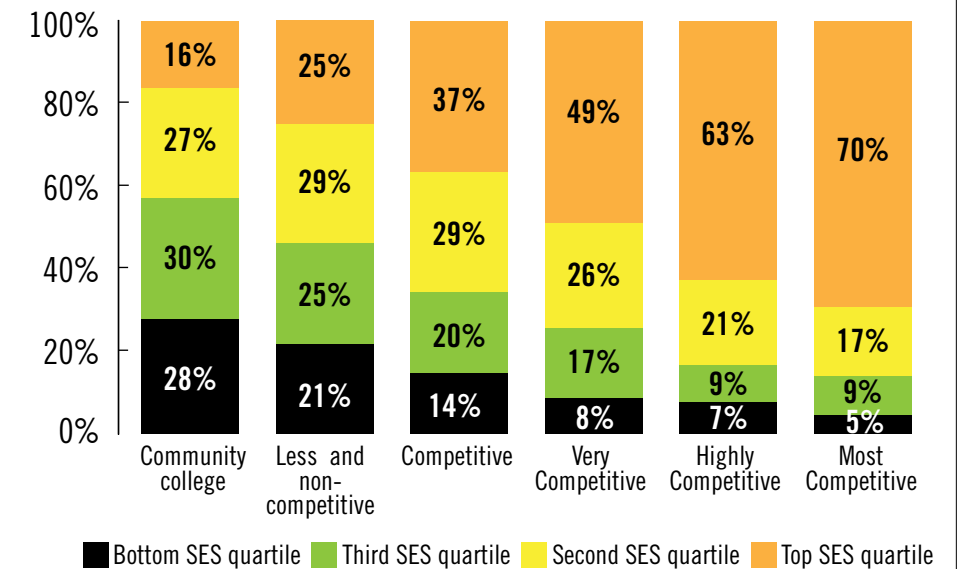
Community colleges sit at an ideal intersection of social justice and education. Philosophically, operationally, demographically, politically, and socially, community colleges are poised to advance a reawakening of the social-justice movement. When we refer to a social-justice movement, or to the broader concept of social change, we are referring to a significant and sustain-

able shift in behavior, cultural values, and norms over time. These changes yield profound social consequences. Examples of significant and sustainable social change and justice topics include the abolition of slavery, the feminist movement, and environmental awareness. The fact that community colleges have opened higher education to the masses certainly marks a significant social-justice change.

By definition, community colleges are not generic. They derive their unique differences and relevance from the communities they serve, morphing and evolving with area needs. Today, this local connection is critical when we think about the context of social change. Here in San Diego, significant social change is needed in immigrant rights, homelessness, environmental stewardship, juvenile justice recidivism, and veteran reintegration into civilian life.

Figure 1

**Socioeconomic Distribution at Colleges and Universities, 2006**



Note: Some columns do not total 100 due to rounding.  
 Source: Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do About It," in *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*

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San Diego City College students participate during the college's Week of Service.

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Whatever the areas of needed social change, community colleges should be involved in the framing of social solutions. Specifically, we want to create programs that will empower our students to be the social change we want to see in our communities. This is true regardless of political persuasion. As a civilized society, we all want strong communities that promote goodness and care for those less privileged among us. Like we develop mathematicians, biologists, teachers, nurses, police officers, and fire fighters, community colleges should want to develop social-change agents for a better community and society.

Community colleges are under enormous pressure to deliver students with marketable workforce skills. As a part of this workforce mission, community colleges must recognize that progressive, responsible, and successful

employers also want social consciousness as part of that workforce-skill package for their employees. With this, community college education is much more than a vehicle for workforce development in the traditional sense. Our students will become economically self-sufficient with family-wage jobs, but they will also become socially responsible citizens and community members. Indeed, community colleges should contribute to the cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of good citizenship, life, and happiness. This requires students to receive an education with a local historical, economic, social, and political context.

### Unequal Opportunity

Philosophically, the above instructional call for social justice in our curricula is clear to many of us, but there is another important aspect to commu-

nity colleges and social justice that few have considered. This relates to the dramatically widening socioeconomic gulf between two-year and four-year institutions. This is increasing the inequity and stratification of higher-education institutions across the nation. In essence, this ironic situation comes from community colleges educating students with the greatest needs, but doing so with the least amount of funds in the higher-education environment. As 2013 research from The Century Foundation has well documented, this is creating an increasingly separate and unequal U.S. higher-education system, which cuts to the core of social justice and our community college mission.

Community colleges are open to all who are willing and able to attend. However, colleges with open doors are often criticized for having significantly

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lower graduation rates than the highly selective four-year institutions. It is true that while about 45 percent of all undergraduates attend community colleges, on the whole, the community college dropout rate may be as high as 50 percent. This is far higher than public four-year universities or even the national high school dropout rates. That said, there is an overwhelming body of research that indicates that a material reason for dismal student performance relates directly to unequal financial resources coupled with an isolated, lower socioeconomic and racially diverse student body. This was true during the era before the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and it is true today. Schools or colleges of poor students of color, who are separated from white students with elite backgrounds, provide an inherently unequal educational opportunity, producing detrimental student results. Here are just a few statistics demon-

**The dispersion of per-student total operating expenditures: \$66,744 at elite four-year universities; \$12,957 at community colleges**

strating our nation's higher-education stratification. As Figure 1 indicates, the most competitive, highly selective four-year institutions have the greatest percentage of high-socioeconomic-status (SES) students, at 70 percent compared

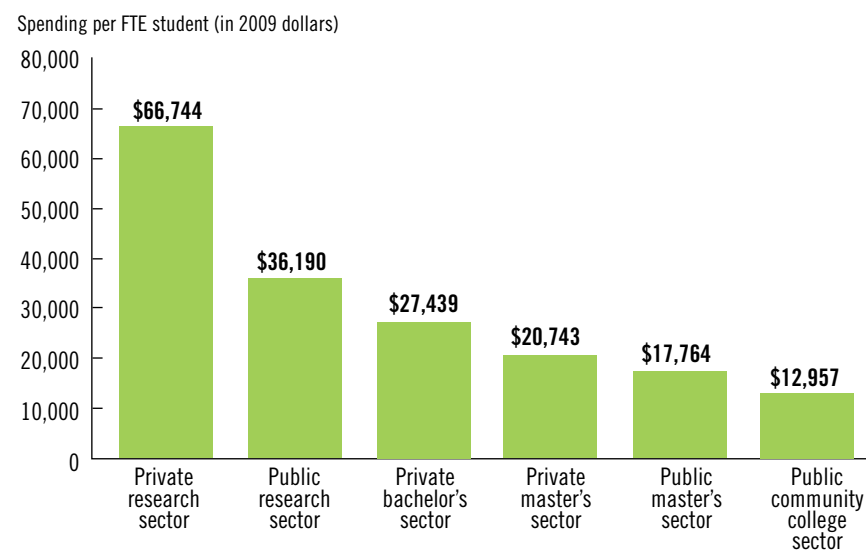
with only 16 percent high-SES students in community colleges. Moreover, as Figure 2 indicates, the dispersion of per-student total operating expenditures among the nation's higher-education institutions is astounding, ranging from \$66,744 at elite four-year universities to only \$12,957 at community colleges. These numbers reflect only the teaching funds, not any research dollars.

To compound the inequity, the increases in these per-student amounts have been alarming. Over the last decade, the top four-year institutions saw almost \$14,000 additional funding per student, while community colleges saw absolutely no net funding increase. Finally, these economic statistics provide a stark backdrop when we consider the racial stratification of higher education. At the most selective four-year colleges in 2006, whites constituted 75 percent of all students, and blacks and Hispanics combined totaled only 12 percent of students. By contrast, in community colleges, whites accounted for 58 percent of students, and blacks and Hispanics together totaled 33 percent of students. Unfortunately, that indicates a clear stratification and isolation of institutions related to student socioeconomic and racial demographics. The reduced per-student funding of underprivileged community college students creates an educational system that is not only separate but unequal.

**Mission Complete?**

Recently, President Barack Obama proposed a tuition-free community college initiative. Unfortunately, while this proposal is philosophically aligned with the mission of open educational access, free tuition alone will only serve to exacerbate the separate and unequal classism of higher education. Free tuition will flood even greater numbers of minority and low socioeconomic students into community colleges, creating an even wider chasm between two-year and four-year institutions. It is only when community colleges receive funding equal to that of public four-year institutions to teach and

Figure 2  
**Per-Student Total Operating Expenditures at Colleges and Universities**



Source: Donna M. Desrochers and Jane V. Wellman, *Trends in College Spending 1999–2009*

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serve students that the breach of inequity will be closed and our mission as the people's college can be truly realized.

Our challenge as community college leaders going forward is twofold: one, to graduate social-change agents with valuable workforce skills, and two, to develop the state and national advocacy necessary to reverse the dramatically widening stratification of our higher-education system.

Without doubt, the second part of this challenge will be the most difficult. As The Century Foundation reported, "Economic and racial hierarchies—in which wealthy and white students trend toward selective four-year colleges and working-class and minority students trend toward community colleges—are familiar, but they are in no sense natural or inevitable. They are instead the result of deliberate policy decisions that can be altered for the better."

These policies can change, but it is difficult for any underclass to have the political clout to make the necessary change on its own. For example, the homeless cannot solve homelessness by themselves; the poor cannot solve poverty by themselves; and immigrants cannot solve border issues by themselves. The same holds true for the underclass of community colleges.

We must elicit lawmakers and others in power who understand the tremendous value of community colleges in

this nation to help us be equitably funded. Then we can provide an education that integrates community college students in an equal and just fashion. The timing of these initiatives is perfect and unquestionably represents the "Next Big Thing."

ANTHONY E. BEEBE is president of San Diego City College.

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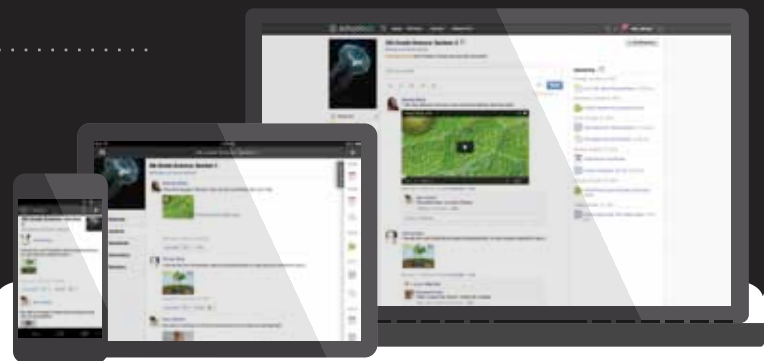
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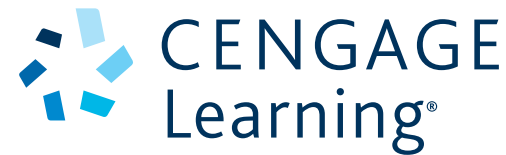


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