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VCCA 2022 Convention Keynote Address: The Mission of the Community College

Jim McClellan

This keynote address was delivered at the Virginia Community College Association (VCCA) Convention in Virginia Beach on October 5, 2022. The community college is an attempt to realize the promise of the Declaration of Independence: the ideal that all are created equal. It is to higher education what universal suffrage is to the ballot, voting rights for all, higher education for all. The mission of the community college is to provide access to education for those to whom it has traditionally been denied.

I started my career at Northern Virginia Community College 47 years ago. My father-in-law at the time was a full Professor of History at the University of Texas. After my first semester, he asked me this question: “Jim, what’s it like teaching at a *junior* college?” I respected him, and I gave his question serious consideration, and then I divorced his daughter.

I do not now, nor have I ever, taught at a junior college. We work and teach at a community college. We are not created in the image of the universities. We are not simply preparing students to study at another institution; we are preparing students for life and all life has to offer. We provide opportunities for those who have too often been denied them.

I was hired to teach history and the mission of the community college is clear when seen in its historical context. The founding goal of our nation was set forth by Thomas Jefferson in 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (U.S National Archives, 2020). Equality was an aspiration, not a reality in 1776. American history is the story of the continuing effort to realize this aspiration: equality of opportunity, equality of voice, equal protection of the law. In 1805, an enslaved Native American named Mingo Jackson sued for his freedom here in Virginia. At his trial, Mingo could have offered this amazingly prophetic prediction:

Across this land of great promise, the sons and daughters of Africa, the sons and daughters of Europe, and the sons and daughter of Native America—all enslaved or

indentured—toil shoulder to shoulder in the fields of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Washington and others of their class. Someday, from these very fields of the wealthy will rise special colleges—colleges where the descendants of the enslaved and the indentured will sit in classrooms shoulder to shoulder acquiring the knowledge and the skills that will enable them to have their fair share of all America has to offer.

There is absolutely no evidence to prove Mingo actually uttered these visionary words. The transcript of his trial has been lost. Therefore, there is absolutely no evidence to prove he did not. He did win his freedom, and Virginia declared Indian slavery unconstitutional in 1806.

It is doubtful that either Mingo or the generations of disadvantaged before and after him could even imagine the potential that community colleges would offer their descendants. The community college is to higher education what universal suffrage is to democracy: an equal voice for all, higher education for all. Education is the great equalizer. But when our country was founded, education was a privilege of the rich, not the right of the many. Wealthy men sent their sons—and never their daughters—to private schools. The masses remained uneducated and largely illiterate. They were excluded from any formal education by race, gender, or economic background. Most of those who were not wealthy could only sign their names with an X.

There was no equality of voice. The right to vote was also restricted to white males who owned property. The prevailing attitude of the colonial and early national periods had been that government represented property, not people. The Founding Fathers were the richest men in America. Most were comfortable maintaining aristocratic rule and content to keep Mingo and others like him in servile roles.

Adam Smith wrote in *Wealth of Nations* in 1776: “Civil government is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all” (Smith, 2012). As Chief Justice John Jay reportedly explained it: “Those who own

the country ought to govern it.” (Foner, 1976). Or, as James Madison wrote, government ought to “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority” (National Historical Publications, n.d.). If the majority who were without property were allowed to vote, what would prevent them from using the ballot box to take for themselves the wealth of the opulent minority? Working class people who owned no property, field hands, indentured servants, women, slaves, free African Americans, and Native Americans could not vote or hold office. There were thresholds of wealth that determined the eligibility of the levels of office that could be held. In some states, the right to vote and hold office belonged only to around five percent of the population. That population was wealthy, white, and male. The richer the candidate, the higher the office he could pursue.

It may be surprising for many to learn that there were more women professionals in 1750 than in 1900. Women may not have been able to vote or hold office in the colonial and early national periods, but they could enter professions. Anyone, regardless of gender, could become a doctor, a pharmacist, or a lawyer by serving as an apprentice to one. But then around 1800, a strange thing happened: the professions underwent “professionalization.” A college degree was now required to enter the professions. When a young woman named Lucinda Foote applied for college, she received this answer: “We find the applicant fully qualified, except in her sex, to be received as a pupil at Yale” (“Celebrating 150 Years of Yale Women,” 2020). The same answer awaited other female applicants for college. Women disappeared from the professions and the professions became the realm of men.

By the 1830s, the movement for equality was gaining strength and America moved from the “Age of Aristocracy” into the “Age of the Common Man.” Our nation came to the realization that government should represent people, not property. Universal Manhood Suffrage began to replace property qualification for voting and holding office. That enfranchised white men regardless of wealth. It did not enfranchise women or people of color. To assure that the masses could vote

responsibly, the Age of the Common Man introduced tax-payer supported public schools. Education was no longer just a privilege of the rich. It was now the right of the many.

During the period of slavery, the laws of Virginia were designed to prevent African-Americans from being educated. As a cold and inhumane statement from the Virginia Assembly in 1832 put it:

We have, as far as possible closed every avenue by which light might enter their minds; we have only to go one step further to extinguish the capacity to see the light, and our work would be completed; they would then be reduced to the level of the beasts of the field and we should be safe... (Berry and Virginia General Assembly, 1832, p. 3)

The Age of the Common Man marked another step backwards for women. Education was not important for them. As the saying went, women needed to know only “sufficient geography to find their way around the house and enough chemistry to keep the pot boiling” (Family Planning Amendments, 1989, p. 40). In the words of Grace Greenwood, “True feminine genius is ever timid. (It is) doubtful, and clingingly dependent, a perpetual childhood” (qtd. in Welter, 1966, p. 160). Dr. Charles Miegs, in a commencement address for Jefferson Medical College, observed that “woman has a head almost too small for intellect, but just big enough for love” (qtd. in Welter, 1966, p. 160).

The end of the Civil War was a step forward for African-Americans. The Thirtieth Amendment ratified after the Civil War ended slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 took Jefferson’s promise of equality and inserted it in the Constitution for the first time, guaranteeing all the “equal protection of the law.” The Fifteenth Amendment stated that the right to vote could not be denied because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. However, it took a century to implement these amendments. In the decades after the Civil War, publicly funded state colleges and universities were established. However, most were intended for men. Separate colleges were

created for women and people of color. Women's colleges prepared women for the only acceptable jobs available to them: secretary, teacher, nurse. Black colleges prepared black students for roles within the Black community.

The Constitution was amended again in 1920 to grant women an equal voice. And the electorate was doubled. The channeling of women and racial minorities into lower paying roles in the economy continued. The equality promised by Jefferson and mandated by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments remained unrealized. Implementing these three Civil War Amendments was what the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was all about: giving the excluded an equal chance to succeed.

Community colleges are an extension of the Civil Rights Movement. It is no coincidence that the VCCS was founded in the mid-1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was about including in the America Dream those who had been traditionally denied access and equality. They are now our students. The majority are women. Half of our students are people of color. Many of our students are recent immigrants. The vast majority of our students come from the lowest income brackets in our economy. More than 80 percent of the students we serve are members of groups traditionally denied access to higher education. They are not completely welcome at the universities even today. Over six decades, we have given generations of students their best chance to reach their full potential, and by so doing, to pursue the American Dream.

We need to remain true to this fundamental mission. It is easy to be sidetracked from the path that brought us here and leads straight on into the future. Community colleges have a special mission. We are more than farm teams for universities. We are more than recruiters for big business. Like most of our students, no one in my family had been to college. When I was 15, I went to work in a factory where my father had worked before me. My high school counselor called me to her office one day and told me there were two options after high school: college or the workplace. Then

she glanced at my file and told me that I was not college material. She said I should take shop to learn a skill. I flunked metal shop. Then I flunked electric shop. And finally, I flunked wood shop. Being without any skill, what choice remained but to go to college?

At the new student orientation, I sat with 2,000 other freshmen in the university auditorium and listened to the Dean of Students say this: “Sixty percent of you will not return for your sophomore year. The freshman year will weed out those of you who are not college material.” Then he asked everyone in sections one and two to stand and told those in the third section to remain seated. “This many of you are not college material,” he announced. Seeing so many stand opened again the question of how I could really be part of the 40 percent who were college-material. Then I realized, I was sitting in section three. I was going to make it.

Now, there is the first difference between a community college on one hand and junior college and senior college on the other: unlike universities that seek to “weed out” those not considered college material, we consider anyone who wants to learn as college material. We do not expect that 60 percent of our students will flunk out; it is our expectation that all can succeed. We do not ask prospective students to write an essay or take the SAT or get references from their high school counselor. We do not pre-judge their abilities based upon a glance at their applications. We do not reject a single student who applies to learn in our classrooms. We accept 100 percent of our applicants. We believe letting them prove they are college-material by their performance in our classrooms is preferable to pre-judging them based upon the number of words in their application essay. We have open admission and immediate acceptance. The toughest question we ask an applicant is his or her name.

Out tuition is relatively low. A student taking a three-credit freshman English course in the VCCS would pay \$462 in tuition. The exact same course at the University of Virginia will cost \$1,488 this fall. The exact same course at George Washington University costs \$5,985. For the cost

of one course at George Washington, a student could pay tuition for a full year in the VCCS and have \$1,365 in change.

We do not put first-year college students in an auditorium with 500 other freshmen. Our average class size is closer to 20. Unlike a university where a grad student is assigned to teach first and second-year students, each member of our faculty is the survivor of an exhaustive search to find the best teacher. We have full professors teaching introductory survey courses. At a university, students might not see a full professor until their junior year. While we value and support research, we hire and evaluate faculty on their skills in the classroom rather than the library.

We realize that students learn in different ways, and we try to assure that each can succeed. Is it any wonder that our students do better when they transfer to a four-year school than the students who started there as freshmen? It was never about ability. It was about opportunity and support. I have devoted my career to the community college because I believe in our mission.

I now have a wife who understands the importance of what I have done for 47 years. When I came to the VCCS, I was in my twenties. I will be 77 next month. To paraphrase Powhatan, I am now grown old and must soon retire. I hope that your love for community colleges will be no less than mine.

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