Community Colleges, Shared Governance, and Democracy

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Shared governance is a hotly contested topic throughout higher education in the United States, but the tensions surrounding it are in particularly stark relief in the community college sector. As a practicing community college administrator, I will suggest here that the tensions around shared governance and performance funding offer a rare opportunity for fruitful research.

Community colleges occupy a unique niche in American higher education. They were born in the twentieth century—Joliet Junior College in Illinois is generally recognized as the first, established in 1901—and quickly came to embody multiple missions that often stand in tension with each other (Cohen and Brawer 2008). At the time of writing, they enroll approximately 45% of undergraduate students in the United States (AACC 2016), yet they tend to remain an afterthought in most policy discussions on higher education.

As with public education generally, community colleges differ in their governance structures from one state to another. California has "districts" with "superintendents," very much like K-12 public schools. In Pennsylvania, community colleges draw funding from the budgets of public high schools within their service areas. In New Jersey, their "districts" are counties, and the county Boards of Chosen Freeholders (the county legislatures) set appropriations for their operating budgets. In Massachusetts, community colleges have neither districts nor county support; they compete for enrollment very much as independent colleges do. In Michigan, community colleges rely on "millages," or property taxes set by referenda.

Some states, such as Minnesota and Tennessee, have statewide Boards of Regents to which each campus president reports. In others, the presidents are selected locally and report to local boards. Some boards are elected, as in Arizona, some are appointed by a governor or a county legislature, and some are appointed by multiple authorities, with each authority controlling different numbers of seats on the board.

With such different governance structures and reporting lines, it should be unsurprising that the political imperatives faced by colleges vary widely. Still, performance funding has arisen as a common issue over the last decade that provides potentially fruitful ground for scholarly inquiry. Many states have conditioned some or all of their appropriations for operating funds on various "performance" measures. The measures generally include graduation rates taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), as well as milestones towards completion and—sometimes—preferences for certain majors or populations. In Ohio, the entire operating appropriation for a given community college is based on performance funding (NCSL 2016).

Community colleges tend to push back on the IPEDS graduation rate, because the headline rate of this most commonly used performance statistic counts only first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students.[1] Yet, on most campuses, the IPEDS cohort is a distinct minority. Even within that minority, a student who transfers after a year to a four-year college and subsequently graduates with a bachelor's degree shows up in the community college statistics as a dropout.

Such measurement errors have political consequences: legislators who don't know any better may see a 20% graduation rate as a travesty, rather than a sign that they're counting the wrong way. The IPEDS measure is based on the assumption that students are 18-years-old, full-time, and living on campus; when applied to a much more heterogeneous student body, most of whom work thirty hours a week or more for pay, it leads to distorted readings. For example, a student who takes twice the "normative" time to degree counts as a dropout. When a college has a majority of part-time students, as many community colleges do, that wreaks havoc on the headline number.

This funding regime also tends to sit uneasily with shared governance, and it is in looking closely at tensions between performance funding and shared governance that political scientists have an important contribution to make. Shared governance is often understood to refer to collaboration among the constituencies within a given institution, with each having its special role. For example, it is generally assumed that faculty members collectively have primary responsibility for the academic program of the college, including but not limited to academic standards, what shall be taught, and in what format. The administration is generally assumed to be responsible for the budget and all that goes with it (AAUP 2016).

This is not a perfect model—anyone who thinks that curriculum and budget are easily separable is invited to attend a discussion of cost-cutting and program prioritization—but it is generally accepted. It is part of the expectations of regional accrediting bodies, and it sometimes is a condition for state licensure. Border skirmishes among the various constituencies are frequent, but they do not bring the model into question.

The underlying assumption of shared governance is that everyone agrees about who is sharing. In the context of public institutions, the state (and/or local funding entity) is assumed to be a silent partner. But performance funding has recast the nature of shared governance, with states (and/or local funding entities) demanding much greater voice in the academic

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decision-making of community colleges, even at the level of curriculum. The new assertiveness of funders can look to campus constituencies like an attack on shared governance, because it constrains the choices available. It can also be interpreted as an expansion of shared governance to include the entire polity, with the elected legislative branch representing the populace's concerns.

colleges to zero, effectively abdicating the state partnership role, though they have maintained legal control. With campuses increasingly expected to be both economically self-sufficient and accountable to external legislative authorities, tensions are inevitable. Those tensions tend to peak during recessions, when state revenues decline at the same time that community college enrollments increase.

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Public higher education has long struggled with the need to serve two masters: the public at large, and the community of educated professionals who determine credentials. At a basic level, it is a tension between expertise and democracy. "Shared governance" as an ideal attempts to split the difference between expertise and democracy. It does so by implicitly allocating spheres of influence according to presumed expertise: faculty control over the curriculum, the administration's control over the budget, and so on. Expanding shared governance to include the public at large, via legislatures, resolves the conflict between expertise and democracy, in favor of democracy. That can prevent undue insularity, but it can also lead to decisions made on the basis of demagoguery, rather than knowledge.

At stake in the battles over shared governance is the purpose of the community-college sector. Are campuses simply arms of the state, to be deployed to serve broad policy goals? If so, on what basis can we assume that academic freedom will be upheld? (To put it another way, to the extent that colleges are subject to majoritarian control, what is to stop a legislature from punishing faculty who teach unpopular material?) Or are colleges freestanding, if subsidized, institutions subject to the control of local faculty and administration? In a low-trust external context, the latter can be a hard sell, but the former tends to lead to tremendous internal conflict. Does the move to performance funding represent usurpation, or a (possibly unintentional) move towards greater democracy?

The "greater democracy" reading is challenged by the increasing influence of a few large private foundations. In a context of sustained austerity, a few large private funders have found fertile ground to wield influence. Gates, Lumina, and their various offshoots have largely set the national agenda—what they call the "completion agenda"—and organized political pressure around it (Ruark 2013). Private foundations are tax-exempt, but unelected and politically unaccountable. As states have disinvested and budget shortfalls have become chronic, a few people with money wield considerable power.

More often than not, performance funding has been perceived to be punitive. For institutions with high fixed costs—typically, labor is the lion's share of a college's operating budget—variable funding creates crises of its own. Illinois and Arizona have recently cut state funding for certain community

Budgetary pressures are unlikely to go away, as community colleges compete with programs like Medicaid and K-12 education for funding from tax revenues, and policy makers frequently seek to use tax cuts to stimulate the economy. At this stage, political responses appear contradictory. At the state level, where balanced budgets are almost always a legal requirement, operating cuts (or failures to keep up with costs) are the order of the day. At the federal level, where deficit spending is an option, a movement for "free community college" has gained traction. Assuming sufficient political momentum—which is far from given—it is unclear how a federal push for free community college would operate through the diverse and multi-level funding systems across the country. Nationally, federal support accounts for about 14% of community college revenues, so a national push for free community college would mean a dramatic shift in funding sources and, presumably, reporting lines.

After a history of being largely overlooked in higher education, community colleges have received both new attention and, inevitably, new scrutiny. But the contradictory demands being placed upon them have not been fully theorized. By researching the tensions reviewed here, political scientists could contribute to better policy making in the community-college sector. ■

NOTE

1. For the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, see the website of the National Center for Education Statistics at https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/.

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