

# Research Reports

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## ***Exploring The Community College Function In A Metropolitan University***

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This report was the product of a small grant to explore the perceptions of the community college mission among students, faculty, and community members and to assess the extent of community support for the University's missions. Groups were asked to assess the importance of a variety of college outcomes and where the University should take the most responsibility for contributing to student growth. Focus groups with the community followed the survey process.

In studying important college outcomes, all three groups (students, faculty, community) placed the following outcomes on their list of top ten priorities:

- Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of specialization
- Learning to think and reason
- Improving writing skills
- Improving reading comprehension skills
- Improving ability to apply new information
- Developing problem solving skills

Students and the community (but not faculty) included in their top ten outcomes acquiring knowledge and skills for a career and improving speaking skills. Faculty and the community (but not students) thought it was highly important to develop listening skills and learn to set goals and follow through. Only faculty

emphasized the importance of improving students' abilities to make better decisions and drawing conclusions from data. In general, students were more concrete and career-oriented while faculty were more focused on intellectual development. Results indicated that students should not be considered a unified group; beyond agreement on the top three groups, students diverged depending upon their educational goal.

In terms of areas where the University should contribute to student growth, all three groups had the following five growth areas in their top ten:

- Becoming academically competent
- Increasing intellectual curiosity
- Learning to critique and judge information
- Making a lifelong commitment to learning
- Taking responsibility for their own behavior

Students and community members (but not faculty) included leadership skills, managing finances, and citizen rights and responsibilities in their top ten. Faculty and community members (but not students) included becoming more willing to consider opposing points of view and gaining insight into human nature through literature and the humanities in their top ten. Students were alone in their emphasis on human relations skills development. Faculty were alone in their emphases on political and social issues and on developing an international perspective. Again, students differed on where they wanted growth to occur, especially when comparing vocational/technical and non-degree seeking students to students seeking other degrees (e.g., AA, BA, MA).

Community members showed strong support for most aspects of what is typically thought of as the “community college mission.” When asked to rate the importance of maintaining various degree and non-degree programs in the face of tight budgets, 92% rated maintaining bachelor’s degrees “of great importance,” while vocational/technical certificates and degrees were second with 74% rating them “of great importance.” A strong majority (88%) agreed that the community college function should be an important part of BSU’s mission, while 84% agreed that providing vocational/technical learning is important for BSU.

The report is the result of a project jointly conducted by Jane Ollenburger, Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, and Marcia Belcheir, Coordinator of Institutional Assessment, and has been submitted to the *Metropolitan Universities Journal* as part of concluding the grant.

## EXPLORING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FUNCTION IN A METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

The mission of metropolitan universities is broad, complicated, and, at times, contradictory. Urban institutions both draw from and give to the surrounding community. The needs of the urban university for student internship experiences, for highly trained and knowledgeable part-time instructors, and for additional cultural experiences are met by the community. In return, communities benefit from the universities' presence. However, an urban community has large and diverse needs that often are not readily met by a single institution even though the university has the mission to serve the community.

In addition, the concept of the "community college mission" is one that defies universal agreement on its meaning. It is agreed, however, that the college mission derives from the community and should be designed to meet community needs. In Idaho, it is also agreed that community colleges should offer lower division preparation for four-year programs, career preparation and retraining, pre-collegiate education that includes GED, adult basic education, and remedial courses, personal enrichment, and links to outside resources. Yet an institution that offers baccalaureate and graduate-level degrees and programs, where excellence in teaching is valued but research also is an imperative, encounters problems with faculty focus, especially as additional graduate programs are added. Community needs must continually be redefined in a rapidly changing urban environment. The problem of assessing and meeting the needs of the community is compounded for the metropolitan university when there is no local alternative institution.

This is the issue facing Boise State University, a metropolitan university with 15,000 students, almost 500 full-time faculty, and programs that vary from vocational/technical certification to a doctorate in education. Located in a population area of over 372,000, Boise is the largest metropolitan center between Portland, Oregon, and Salt Lake City, Utah. The area has shown over 20% growth over the past five years and boasts a varied economy based on high technology, agricultural products, tourism, government agencies, and manufacturing. The University has eight colleges, including the College of Applied Technology where a number of certificate and associate degree programs are housed. All other local institutions of higher education are privately operated; there is no other public community college.

Because the state as a whole is sparsely populated, the legislature has funded only a few colleges and given each a set of missions that are both unique and diverse. In 1995, however, the State Board of Education hired the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to study these roles and missions. One focus of the NCHEMS was to assess how well the state's higher education system is meeting community needs, especially as they relate to technology/engineering and the community college function. Their findings indicated that significant tensions exist within Boise State University, and elsewhere, regarding the community college mission. Specifically, they identified three areas of key concern:

- Faculty priorities and incentives are inconsistent with the community college mission.
- Large numbers of potentially under-served lower-division students,
- Uncertain strategy for meeting the needs of underprepared adults for remedial education and adult basic education.

A small grant from the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities provided BSU with an opportunity to probe some of the underlying assumptions inherent in these concerns. Using the grant funds, the following specific questions were posed: What are the educational expectations of a metropolitan campus as seen by students, faculty, and the community? How are the faculty priorities inconsistent with a community college mission? How unified is the voice of students and the community? What are the key concerns of these constituents?

## Methodology

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To answer these questions, we undertook surveys of three major constituencies: students, faculty, and community members (see Appendix A). Items for the analysis were derived from an earlier version of the ACT College Outcomes Survey. Each set of surveys asked for ratings of importance on 26 outcomes and then for ratings on the extent to which the university should contribute to student growth in 32 areas. Community members also were asked about importance of various degree programs (e.g., graduate, baccalaureate, vocational/technical) when budget cuts must be made and the extent to which they support various activities covered under the community college mission.

The student respondents were enrolled in Introduction to Psychology or in various courses in the College of Applied Technology. Faculty were randomly sampled from within each of the colleges. Community respondents were obtained from a random sample of names in the telephone directory in a two-county area where the University had a strong presence. About 65% of the faculty and 35% of the community returned the survey. The student sample consisted of everyone who attended class on the day the survey was given. A total of 536 students, 121 faculty, and 211 community members completed the survey.

To ensure we had a good understanding of community responses, we also held a focus group in each county to discuss community college issues and perceptions further. Respondents who had indicated on the survey that they were interested in participating in a group discussion about Boise State University, its image, and its educational mission were contacted and asked to attend one of the focus groups. Though about 40 had initially indicated that they were interested, only 9 ultimately participated.

## Findings

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### Student, Faculty and Community Expectations of College Outcomes

There was general agreement between students, faculty, and community members on what were the most important outcomes of college. Where disagreements arose, they mainly occurred between students and faculty. The community responses spanned a middle ground, supporting students on some specialized skills acquisitions and faculty on some other broader skills that students rated as less important.

The most important college outcome priorities among students, faculty and community members are listed in table one. There was general goal consensus among students, faculty and community members in the following areas:

- Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of specialization
- Learning to think and reason
- Improving writing skills
- Improving reading comprehension skills
- Improving ability to apply new information
- Developing problem solving skills

*Table One: Ten most important college outcomes for students, faculty and community members*

Rank	Students		Faculty		Community	
	Outcome <sup>1</sup>	% <sup>2</sup>	Outcome	%	Outcome	%
1	Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of specialization	96	Learning to think and reason	95	Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of specialization	97
2	Acquiring knowledge and skills needed for a career	92	Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of specialization	93	Acquiring knowledge and skills needed for a career	90
3	Learning to think and reason	84	Develop problem solving skills	89	Improving reading comprehension skills	86
4	Improving writing skills	80	Improving writing skills	84	Learning to think and reason	86
5	Improving reading comprehension skills	80	Improving their ability to make better decisions	84	Develop problem solving skills	86
6	Learning about career options	79	Improving ability to apply new information	79	Improving writing skills	83
7	Using computers effectively (e.g. for computing, word processing)	78	Listening to and understanding what others say	78	Listening to and understanding what others say	86
8	Improving ability to apply new information	78	Improving reading comprehension skills	78	Improving ability to apply new information	80
9	Improving speaking skills	78	Drawing conclusions from various types of data	78	Learning to set goals and follow through to completion	77
10	Develop problem solving skills	77	Learning to set goals and follow through to completion	74	Improving speaking skills	77

There was a consensus between students and the community in areas focused on job skills and career development and included:

- Acquiring knowledge and skills needed for a career
- Improving speaking skills

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked to “indicate how important it is for students to attain each outcome.” Possible responses included “of great importance,” “of some importance,” and “of little or no importance.”

<sup>2</sup> The % column indicates the percentage of respondents who indicated that outcome was “of great importance.”

There was a consensus between faculty and the community on goals related to skills important to success including:

- Listening to and understanding what others want
- Learning to set goals and follow through to completion

The top ten goals for students were concentrated in two areas: intellectual development and skills acquisition. Concerns which weighed heavily on students but were not seen as critical to faculty or community members included:

- Learning about career options
- Using computers effectively, e.g., for computing, word processing

Only faculty felt that the following were critical outcomes of a college degree:

- Improving students' ability to make better decisions
- Drawing conclusions from various types of data

Both the above outcomes focus on intellectual development. Students may assume they can accomplish these without assistance, their belief being, perhaps, that their decisions and conclusions are not in need of questioning.

We wanted to know, too, if students were a unified group who agreed on the most important outcomes or if they differed depending upon the degree being sought. Results showed that whatever their educational goal, students agreed on the importance of the top three outcomes—acquiring knowledge and skills in their areas of expertise and for a career, and learning to think and reason. As shown by table 2, departures in perceived importance occurred mainly in the acquisition of academic skills (writing, reading, speaking) and in the use of the computer. Those seeking vocational/technical degrees were much less interested in attaining these outcomes than other students. Thus, those who sought short-term degrees probably were focused on the attainment of skills they could use on the job and saw reading, writing and speaking as “too academic” and unrelated to the immediate interests.

### Areas Where the University Should Contribute to Student Growth

In general, faculty and the community expected the university to contribute a great deal more than students did (see table 3 for percentages). Again, the community served an intermediary role, sometimes agreeing with students and other times with faculty, but never introducing a new area of their own into the top ten.

All three groups had the following five growth areas in their top ten:

- Becoming academically competent
- Increasing intellectual curiosity
- Learning to critique and judge information
- Making a lifelong commitment to learning
- Taking responsibility for their own behavior

Table Two: Importance of college outcomes by type of degree being sought

Outcome	Non-Degree Seeking Students	Vocational/ Technical Degrees	Associate Degrees	Bachelor Degrees	Masters Degrees
	% <sup>3</sup>	%	%	%	%
Acquiring knowledge and skills in their area of expertise	94.1	96.5	96.6	96.2	100.0
Acquiring knowledge and skills needed for a career	81.3	85.5	93.1	94.0	93.3
Learning to think and reason	86.7	71.4	82.8	87.6	77.4
Improving writing skills <sup>4</sup>	62.5	57.4	74.7	85.0	87.1
Improving reading comprehension skills <sup>5</sup>	62.5	61.4	80.5	82.7	83.9
Learning about career options	56.3	75.4	80.5	80.1	77.4
Using computers effectively (e.g. computing, word processing) <sup>6</sup>	62.5	67.9	86.0	77.3	87.5
Improving ability to apply new information	86.7	60.7	83.9	78.6	76.7
Improving speaking skills <sup>7</sup>	62.5	54.4	78.2	80.8	87.1
Developing problem solving skills	73.3	64.3	80.5	77.4	68.8

Table Three: Ten top areas for university contributions to student growth for students, faculty, and community members

Rank	Students		Faculty		Community	
	Area <sup>8</sup>	% <sup>9</sup>	Area	%	Area	%
1	Becoming academically competent	60	Increasing intellectual curiosity	87	Becoming academically competent	78
2	Increasing intellectual curiosity	50	Becoming academically competent	83	Increasing intellectual curiosity	69
3	Learning to critique and judge information	39	Learning to critique and judge information	81	Learning to critique and judge information	63

<sup>3</sup> Percentages indicate the percent of students indicating the outcome is “of great importance.”

<sup>4</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 27.25$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p < .001$ ]

<sup>5</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 25.96$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p < .002$ ]

<sup>6</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 17.75$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p < .05$ ]

<sup>7</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 23.34$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p < .003$ ]

<sup>8</sup> Respondents were asked to “indicate the extent to which the university should contribute to student growth in each area.” Possible responses included “should contribute a great deal,” “should contribute a moderate (average) amount,” and “should contribute little.”

<sup>9</sup> The % column indicates the percentage of respondents who indicated that the university “should contribute a great deal.”

Rank	Students		Faculty		Community	
4	Developing leadership skills	39	Making a lifelong commitment to learning	73	Making a lifelong commitment to learning	56
5	Making a lifelong commitment to learning	39	Becoming more willing to consider opposing points of view	62	Developing leadership skills	46
6	Learning how to manage personal, family, or business finances	36	Gaining insight into human nature through the study of literature and the humanities	50	Learning how to manage personal, family, or business finances	43
7	Taking responsibility for their own behavior	40	Taking responsibility for their own behavior	47	Taking responsibility for their own behavior	51
8	Recognizing their rights, responsibilities, and privileges as a citizen	34	Becoming more aware of political and social issues	44	Becoming more willing to consider opposing points of view	40
9	Dealing fairly with a wide range of people	33	Becoming more aware of local, regional, and international issues/events	41	Gaining insight into human nature through the study of literature and the humanities	44
10	Becoming an effective team or group member	32	Interacting well with people from cultures other than their own	39	Recognizing their rights, responsibilities, and privileges as a citizen	43

Students and community members agreed on the following:

- Developing leadership skills
- Learning how to manage personal, family, or business finances
- Recognizing their rights, responsibilities, and privileges as a citizen

Faculty and community members agreed on the following:

- Becoming more willing to consider opposing points of view
- Gaining insight into human nature through the study of literature and the humanities.

Students were alone in the extent that they thought the University should help them grow in dealing fairly with a wide range of people and becoming effective team or group members. Faculty were alone in their emphases on becoming more aware of political and social issues; becoming more aware of local, regional, and international issues/events; and interacting well with people from cultures other than their own.

Again, students with different educational goals expected some different things from their education. There were statistically significant differences among the groups on the top three areas—increasing intellectual curiosity, becoming academically competent, and learning to critique and judge information—as well as in the area of learning how to manage finances. In the areas of increasing intellectual curiosity and becoming academically competent, those seeking associate, bachelor, or masters degrees expected more from the university than vocational/technical or non-degree seeking students. In the other two areas, non-degree and masters degree students placed less emphasis on learning to critique and judge information and more on learning how to manage personal, family, or business finances than the other groups. See Table 4 for further details.

#### Support for the Community College Function

Does the community want a community college? Does it prefer it over other possible ways to expend higher education dollars? Results indicated that good general support existed for the community college mission within the community and where it did not, it was due more to a lack of information than outright disagreement.

*Table Four: University contributions to student growth areas by type of degree being sought*

Area	Non-Degree Seeking Students	Vocational/ Technical Degrees	Associate Degrees	Bachelor Degrees	Masters Degrees
	% <sup>10</sup>	%	%	%	%
Increasing intellectual curiosity <sup>11</sup>	23.5	38.9	51.1	51.9	43.8
Becoming academically competent <sup>12</sup>	47.1	51.8	65.9	59.4	50.0
Learning to critique and judge information <sup>13</sup>	29.4	36.4	39.5	41.7	28.1
Developing leadership skills	29.4	27.8	39.1	38.9	48.4
Making a lifelong commitment to learning	20.0	26.9	37.6	41.8	41.9
Learning how to manage personal, family or business finances <sup>14</sup>	58.8	24.0	36.5	33.8	62.5
Taking responsibility for their own behavior	62.5	38.8	37.8	37.0	53.6
Recognizing their rights, responsibilities, and privileges as a citizen	29.4	21.6	37.2	37.3	28.1
Dealing fairly with a wide range of people	35.3	19.6	34.1	34.2	35.5
Becoming an effective team or group member	25.0	38.9	32.2	30.5	38.7

Community members first were asked to rate the importance of BSU's degree and certificate offerings to the community when money becomes scarce and cuts must be made. These were not idle questions since Idaho had just rejected an initiative in November to roll back property taxes and thus severely curtail funds for higher education.

As shown by Table five, bachelor's degrees were considered the most important. Second in importance, however, were vocational and technical certificates, indicating strong support for the community college function. Note, however, that associate's degrees that were primarily academic in nature were fourth on the list following graduate programs, probably because of the lack of immediate job applicability.

<sup>10</sup> Percentages indicate the percent of students indicating that the university "should contribute a great deal."

<sup>11</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 16.65, df=8, p < .03$ ]

<sup>12</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 16.5, df=8, p < .04$ ]

<sup>13</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 22.65, df=8, p < .004$ ]

<sup>14</sup> [ $\chi^2 = 17.87, df=8, p < .02$ ]

Table five. Ratings of program importance when money is scarce

Program	Of great importance	Of some importance	Or little or no importance
Graduate degrees	67.8%	25.1%	7.0%
Bachelor's (4-year) academic degrees	91.7%	7.4%	1.0%
Associate (2-year) academic degrees	55.4%	33.8%	10.8%
Vocational & technical certificates and degrees	74.4%	23.2%	2.5%
Non-degree programs (such as training courses & continuing education)	44.3%	43.3%	12.3%

Community members were also asked other questions about their support for the community college mission. As shown by Table six, there was strong support for the community college function and vocational/technical learning with well over 80% agreeing these activities were important. There was less support for adult basic education, GED instruction, and continuing education activities, though this was more due to neutrality on the issue rather than disagreement with the concept. Less than half thought BSU was spread too thin because of the variety of programs offered. Again, however, the size of the neutral group indicated that more information would probably change perceptions.

Table six. Community support for the community college mission

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The community college function (associate degrees, vocational, technical, continuing education, remedial) should be an important part of BSU's mission	48.3%	39.9%	7.9%	2.5%	1.5%
Providing vocational/technical learning is important for BSU	44.3%	39.4%	13.3%	2.0%	1.0%
BSU should provide adult basic education and GED instruction	18.2%	31.3%	31.3%	15.7%	3.5%
BSU needs to offer more continuing education opportunities to adults seeking to take one or two courses rather than earn a degree	24.0%	36.0%	34.0%	5.5%	0.5%
BSU tries to do too much when it offers vocational/technical programs, baccalaureate degrees, and graduate study	5.0%	13.0%	37.5%	30.5%	14.0%

To better understand community perceptions and support, findings were supplemented with focus group interviews. The interviews revealed a softness and ambivalence that helped explain the percentage of neutral responses. One concern was about including “academic” courses in vocational/technical programs. This was illustrated by comments such as the following:

*... We seem to [think] that the guy that's going into the trades is going to go in and become a welder and for the next twenty years he is going to run a welding torch. Not true....The average life of a journey man electrician or in the trades is about 5 to 7 years and if they're good, they are going to become contractors, they are going to become bureaucrats....all kinds of things.... I think people going into those trades need the option of the well-rounded introduction to all these facets of education. I just think it*

*makes them a better prospect for growth and advancement and everything else.*

*...I taught a course of intro to psychology.... One person wanted a degree in welding...and he simply could not, at least in my opinion, I assume he was working as hard as he said he was, but he simply could not pass that intro to psychology course at that same level that people going into a four-year degree were. I don't know the justification, but it doesn't seem like he should necessarily have to pass an intro to psych course to be a welder. It just didn't make any sense to me and it was really frustrating to him cause it was the second time he had tried it. So part of me agrees, they can function still under BSU, but when you try to mix them and we are going to provide you with academic education for this vo-tech degree, I'm not sure that works.*

The second area was the concern about how perceptions of the university and its reputation in the community would be affected by more focus on the community college mission.. One person spoke for several when he said,

*...there may be an impression that as we expand our horizons to meet the community college function it may be seen as a step backward to the junior college.*

Another felt that....

*It (meeting community college needs) could be done without really stepping backwards as long as you are not dummifying down the courses you know to fit this community college function, but I do believe that perception is a lot of it.*

Though most expressed initial confusion over what a community college did that was different or, for some, how BSU was much different from a community college, most expressed support for the general concept. One respondent noted:

*BSU is in kind of a unique position because without that Junior college offering it puts the town at a disadvantage.*

Another argued for further merging of missions, saying...

*...there isn't enough interaction between vo-tech and the academic life...I think that that's kind of a shame that there isn't some interaction so that they could duck-tail a little bit more and provide even more to the community.*

## CONCLUSIONS

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The contemporary metropolitan campus has a symbiotic relationship with the community. The idea of a “community college mission” for a metropolitan university includes a wide range of expectations. With this research, we attempted to identify the commonalities and the differences which exist among three key stake holders in defining the university’s purposes and mission. Our findings illustrate there are many consistencies among faculty, students and community members in their ratings of the importance of college outcomes. The consistencies concentrate in areas related to academic skills and the development of intellectual abilities such as learning to think and reason. Faculty, however, do not rate career focused objectives and job skills development as highly as do students and community members.

Students—whatever their degree goal—also agreed with each other on the importance of acquiring knowledge and skills and to learn to think and reason. They disagreed mainly on the improvement of academic skills—writing, reading, speaking—with students pursuing vocational/technical degrees least inclined to see these outcomes as important. There is a certain irony to this finding since remediation of academic skills is closely aligned to the community college function as is vocational/technical courses. Some of this ambiguity was noted in community focus group responses, too.

There was also a general consensus about the academic contributions that the university should make to student growth. The major disjunction between faculty on one hand and students and community on the other was in the university’s part in developing areas not traditionally seen as academic—leadership skills, managing finances, becoming a good citizen. Again, there were also differences among students depending upon educational goal. Perhaps the most interesting was the finding that vocational/technical students were far less interested in learning to manage finances than other groups, and non-degree-seeking students were the most interested—both groups seen as fitting into the community college mission.

Results also indicated that support was generally strong for the community college function, though it probably could be strengthened with more information about what it included and what alternatives were available. Four-year degree programs were supported most strongly, followed by vocational/technical programs. Though the community focus group members tended to see community college courses (and for some, its students) as less academically rigorous, most seemed to think that the benefits of inclusion outweighed any negatives.

Taken as a whole, these findings indicate that the typical functions of a community college—especially short-term vocational/technical programs—are valued by the community. With additional information, the community support could grow, broadening the support base for the university. Community respondents also showed themselves as broad-minded in the activities and outcomes the university should pursue, siding both with faculty on some matters and with students on others. Thus, the idea of the community as an educational partner received support from this study.