

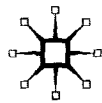
**Nontraditional Students
and Community Colleges**
The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism

John S. Levin

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NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES: THE CONFLICT OF
JUSTICE AND NEOLIBERALISM

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Chapter 2

Theoretical Frameworks

Over the past thirty years, the community college has become not only an educational institution that invites two somewhat contradictory views of its performance, but also the home of increasing numbers of students who do not possess characteristics of students at universities or traditional baccalaureate four-year colleges. There is considerable debate about the purposes and accomplishments of the community college, and much of the debate centers around its role in moving students toward social and economic equality with others in higher education.¹ This is no doubt a question of the definition of justice. For several scholars, the academic and employment outcomes of community college students must be equal to those of students in four-year colleges and universities for community colleges to be viewed as worthy institutions that grant justice to their students.² Although the practitioner literature does not make such comparisons, it nonetheless makes claims that community college students are well served by the institution and that outcomes, particularly employment, are advantaging students.³

Judgments about the community college, based upon student outcomes, become increasingly testy and significant in a higher educational context where there are changing population demographics, considerable growth in student numbers, and more overt competition for students, prestige, and resources. For example, in 1990, there were 13.8 million higher education students; in 2002, that number had grown to 16.6 million.⁴ During that same period, community college enrollments rose from 5.2 million to over 6.5 million. The minority student population of community colleges was 33.3 percent, up from 26.5 percent just a decade earlier. During this period, approximately 64 percent of students attended community colleges part-time, compared to approximately 20 percent at four-year colleges.⁵ These figures, combined with the academic background and economic conditions of community college students, suggest that the community college has considerably more work to do with its students than four-year colleges and universities in order to equalize both outcomes and opportunity for students compared with those institutions. Unless institutional effects have more influence upon student performance than the literature indicates,⁶ the community college cannot hope to equalize outcomes for its students compared to those at four-year colleges and universities. Thus, if justice is defined as creating conditions or outcomes of equality, then the community college falls short.

Related to the demographic pattern, the quest for prestige or greater legitimacy that characterizes the present trend in higher education⁷ not only separates the community college from other higher education institutions, such as the liberal arts college or the research university, but it also affects the mission of the community college, as that institution, too, is not immune from advancing its status. The community college baccalaureate degree is a case in point.⁸ Ultimately, community college students must compete with university students, and clearly the community college's low status role impedes the chances of its students.⁹

The political and economic context for both community colleges and other higher education institutions engages these institutions in competition over both students and resources.¹⁰ In order to compete, the community college has, to a large extent, followed the business model of operations, choosing efficiency as one method to satisfy its sponsors and to gain and satisfy customers as an open access institution that endeavors to meet the demands of the public.¹¹ The use of part-time faculty—now making up 67 percent of the total faculty workforce—and “one stop” centers for students are two important examples.¹² Within a global economy, the community college has modeled both services and production upon corporations.¹³ With its increasing emphasis upon workforce development and its default role as a remedial center to prop up those who are in need of upgrading for employment or preparation for further academic education,¹⁴ the community college has become a vehicle for neoliberal policies.¹⁵

This chapter provides an explanation of the theories of justice, neoliberalism, and globalization that serve as foundations for the perspectives I use in discussing the book's topics. I rely upon a body of scholarship in both higher education and the sociology of work to explain neoliberalism as well as the views of neoliberal critics such as Noam Chomsky.¹⁶ Furthermore, I explain understandings of neoliberalism from the perspective of higher education. This chapter also introduces and explains the concepts of organizational power and “street-level bureaucrats” and shows their application to higher education institutions. New managerialism is also introduced as another way to view the effects of neoliberalism upon the academy. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the apparent and theoretical conflict between neoliberalism and justice.

In examining institutional behaviors and their actors, I rely upon several concepts and theoretical perspectives. The first and principal concept, justice, is based upon John Rawls' theory of justice—justice as fairness and the principle of fair equality of opportunity. For Rawls (1999), the hardships of some are not ruled out by the greater good to the aggregate or whole: “[I]n order to treat all persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social positions.”¹⁷ In these community college sites, I determine the extent to which those in less favorable social and economic stations are accorded justice.

Specifically, I use Rawls' “difference principle,” which states that “social and economic inequalities . . . are to be adjusted so that, whatever the level of those inequalities, whether great or small, they are to be the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.”¹⁸ As well, I adopt his argument of a social

contract between members of a society, a contract that implies a future, applicable from one generation to the next. This permits me to look at not only individuals and their fair treatment, but also groups and classes of people to determine fairness over time. As well, I apply Rawls' notion of good, or “rational advantage.” That is to say that advantage in a cooperative arrangement applies to individuals, groups, and institutions. In my use, I apply this good to students, to college members, and to the college itself, as well as to society. Finally, I adopt Rawls' view of good as a developing element, and this affords me the opportunity to speak to both evolving conditions at community colleges as well as potential conditions that I can propose.

Rawls opposes a utilitarian conception of justice, wherein maximizing collective happiness is the preeminent goal. Instead, Rawls argues that unequal distributions of wealth and power cannot be justified merely by aggrandizing cumulative utility: “All social values . . . liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect . . . are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's benefit.”¹⁹ This, I suggest, speaks to the issue of privilege in higher education, wherein merit is equated with benefits, justifying elite educational opportunities for a small percentage of those who have demonstrated academic achievement in high school and whose continued advantage will arguably benefit the public good.²⁰

For my analyses, I incorporate Rawls' second principle and its corollaries into my interpretation of data. According to Rawls, each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty, compatible with a similar liberty for others, and social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all. This view is consistent with underlying principles of the community college mission, which includes an “access for all” imperative and an espoused goal of democratization.²¹

In applying Rawls to educational institutions, I conclude that institutions must be judged by how effectively they guarantee the conditions necessary for all equally to further their aims, and by how efficiently they advance shared ends that will similarly benefit everyone. In other words, we can judge a nation's or a state's educational apparatus by how well it facilitates actual, not merely formal, equal opportunity for the worst-off citizen. We can consider developmentally challenged students, for example, as among the worst off in society, as they lack those basic skills required for independent living. According to Rawls, educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure substantive equality of opportunity, regardless of the potential economic benefits of unequal access. Specifically, disadvantaged students must not be subjected to an educational system or program in which their individual agency and self-purpose are neglected in favor of the economic benefit for a local industry.

Theoretically, I rely upon neoliberalism and globalization theory²² and their application to higher education institutions, particularly the economic influences upon organizational behaviors. While proponents of neoliberalism argue that individuals are rewarded based upon their achievement, critics of neoliberalism

deride this view and indicate that those who have favorable conditions—those with privilege—are unjustly rewarded, and that rewards are based more on capabilities than achievement.²³ This argument certainly has implications for and applications to higher education institutions, where there are contests over issues of merit and inequality.²⁴ My previous work on globalization and the community college touches on some of the fallout from a competitive economy: that education becomes increasingly oriented toward higher-level programming, credentials, and economic marketplace demands.²⁵ This orientation results in a replay of economic globalization within the institution, where there are “winners” and “losers” and some programs are favored and other programs are neglected and sometimes jettisoned. That work did not take a close look at those programs and students on the losing side. In this research, I examine programs and students less favored in an economically competitive environment, those that have low academic capital.²⁶

I use neoliberalism, in particular, to examine the concept of lifelong learning and to critique that concept. This is amplified in Chapter 7. In this critique, I rely upon a body of scholarship in both higher education and the sociology of work.

Overall, I view higher education institutions as value systems. At the core of recent musings on the behaviors of higher education institutions is the questioning of values in higher education.²⁷ Research scholarship takes a less moralistic tone but nonetheless is value-laden in its examinations. It is evident from these two bodies of literature that higher education institutions are reflections of value systems, containing, on the one hand, a number of value systems and serving as vehicles for value systems outside the institution. More specifically, although the values embedded in the community college mission may suggest some contrariness and tensions,²⁸ that mission historically connotes public accessibility to education and training and “open door” admissions, including the admission of those normally left out of other postsecondary institutions. From this perspective, I consider the condition of the access mission of the community college and the accommodation of those at the lower end of the economic spectrum. To this extent, my work connects with institutional theory, particularly neoinstitutionalism.²⁹

Furthermore, I examine the community college as a human service organization,³⁰ to determine its focus upon students outside the mainstream; to note the “fallout” from a competitive economy; and to identify the practice of justice within an institution. I rely upon a considerable body of community college literature that characterizes the community college, at least in part, as an institution whose mission includes attention to the least favored segments of society,³¹ and as an institution that addresses the social and economic needs of its community, especially at basic levels of individuals who are coping with daily life. To this end, I draw upon theories of justice as well as principles of communitarianism that extol the benefits of social interest and value individual development and responsibility.³² In addition, I find that Mintzberg’s power theory,³³ particularly his concept of power configurations, is useful. These configurations are conceptualizations—ideal typologies, according to Mintzberg—that are the

amalgam of internal and external organizational conditions and influencers. Organizational actions, according to Mintzberg, are determined by arrangements or configurations of power—from those with considerable control exerted by external sources or influencers, such as governments, to those with a high level of control of an executive group or autocratic leader within an organization. As well, I rely upon the concept of “street-level bureaucrats”³⁴ to explain the actions of college administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as policy executives at both the institutional and state level. Michael Lipsky notes that public service organizations, with vague or ambiguous goals and the tendency to ration services, permit considerable discretion among managers and staff to make personal judgments in their daily work. He refers to these individuals who exercise personal judgment in their dealings with customers or clients as “street-level bureaucrats.”

I use these perspectives to analyze the perceptions of college members on students and programs and the behaviors of community colleges in their treatment of students, particularly “beyond the margins” students. For example, Mintzberg’s missionary configuration is especially appropriate for those institutions or units within institutions that hold strong belief systems and apply these to the students. Lipsky’s “street-level bureaucrat” concept helps me to understand how institutions accommodate students beyond the margins: For example, faculty and administrators do not ask and do not tell which of their students are illegal immigrants, and thus these students are provided English language training on the same basis as legal immigrants, residents, and citizens.

As I am also interested in the state’s role in promoting social and economic justice, I rely upon Carnoy³⁵ to analyze the state’s use of the community college as an extension of capital and corporate interests. The state both facilitates access to education for students and limits the educational advancement of students. The state—in the form of the state government—can enhance access by providing basic education at community colleges without cost to students, as is the case in the state of North Carolina. But, the state—in the form of the federal government—can limit educational opportunities through its welfare-to-work policies, which support students for inadequate program length and then require welfare recipients to work before they have achieved required skill competencies. Adding to Carnoy’s work in our understanding of the behaviors of the state with respect to institutions, such as community colleges, is the recent scholarship that critiques the neoliberal project.

Neoliberalism

One of the more influential forces for institutions over the past two decades is a political and economic ideology referred to as neoliberalism. Noam Chomsky views the term *neoliberal* as applicable to those who favor the control of social life of the many for the maximization of profit for the few.³⁶ Feminist scholar Catherine Kingfisher, in a critique of neoliberalism and its effects upon poverty and women’s poverty in particular, notes that in the state’s movement to free-market behaviors, there are attacks upon the welfare state to the extent that the

responsibility for poverty devolves to the level of individuals.³⁷ In the neoliberal argument, welfare programs encourage dependency, and thus cuts in benefits grant freedom for individuals to pursue individual ends and realize their potential. Policies of the state, notes Kingfisher, are directed at reforming individuals, not social structures. Political economist George DeMartino argues that “neoliberalism induces inequality—domestically and globally.”³⁸ By inequality he means economic inequality. Michael Apple summarizes the ideological commitments and ideal behaviors of neoliberalism.³⁹ These behaviors include, among others, the expansion of open, economic markets; the reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of a competitive structure for economic behaviors; and the lowering of social expectations for economic security.⁴⁰ Neoliberalism is an ideological commitment to competition, in the form of social Darwinism, to state reduction of social programs and to state support for players, especially corporations, in international markets. Neoliberalism is a political project aimed at institutional change, and education is one of those institutions where the norms are undergoing severe pressure to change.⁴¹

Lisa Duggan’s critique of neoliberalism connects the economic and political components and actions of neoliberalism with identity politics, suggesting that it differs from earlier versions of liberalism. “Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism,” she writes, “organizes material and political life in terms of race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion.”⁴² One of her targets in this critique is the poor, particularly poor women of color, and her example of the dismantling of social welfare in the United States shows that such actions lead to increasing economic inequality as money moves from the public sector to the private.

More vitriolic than Duggan is Henry Giroux, whose argument ranges from explanation to condemnation of neoliberal ideology and practice in the United States.⁴³ In Giroux’s critique, neoliberalism is a twenty-first century parallel to William Blake’s “dark Satanic mills” of dehumanizing industrialism in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century England. Giroux notes, “[N]eoliberalism is an ideology and politics buoyed by the spirit of a market fundamentalism that subordinates the art of democratic politics to the rapacious laws of a market economy that expands its reach to include all aspects of social life within the dictates and values of a market-driven society.”⁴⁴

Neoliberal practices lead to a weakened social state, replacing the social contract and the public good with personal responsibility and a competitive and vicious individualism. Dismantled are the New Deal policies that expand social provisions including health care, public transportation, housing, employment, unemployment benefits, and education.⁴⁵ In France, Alain Touraine equates neoliberalism with capitalism; yet, unlike Giroux, he sees that neoliberalism is destructible through a social critique.⁴⁶

Critics of neoliberalism frame their dissent upon the subordination of the public good to individual economic interests, as well as the dominance of corporations and corporate interests over individual agency. In this critique, neoliberalism is antithetical not only to popular conceptions of social justice as

well as to Rawls’ theoretical view of justice, but also to fundamental principles of the community college.

Higher Education and Neoliberalism

In the latter part of the 1990s and into the beginnings of this century, there have been a spate of publications on the economic competitive orientation of higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, such as Burton Clark’s focus upon entrepreneurial institutions, Slaughter and Leslie’s academic capitalism, Marginson and Considine’s enterprise universities, Bok’s commercialization of higher education, Levin’s globalized community colleges, and most recently Slaughter and Rhoades’s “academic capitalism knowledge/learning regime.”⁴⁷ These are responses to growing concerns about the shift of higher education institutions internationally to behaviors that suggest a prevailing orientation to economic matters as opposed to more social or cultural endeavors. For Marginson and Considine, students have become economic entities not citizens. For Slaughter and Leslie, faculty in research universities have become independent entrepreneurs, seeking funds to support research but directed by those resources to provide research for the private sector’s economic returns. And, for Bok, higher education institutions have turned to commercialization, selling the work of employees and students, whether that work is created in university laboratories or on the gridiron. In spite of the differences of higher education institutions—differences of institutional type and national location—behaviors have become isomorphic and the outcomes similar. For me, as well as for other scholars, these institutional behaviors are captured in the political concept of neoliberalism: what education scholar Nelly Stromquist calls “an economic doctrine that sees the market as the most effective way of determining production and satisfying people’s needs.”⁴⁸

Education is not immune to neoliberalism’s forms of governance, which include “shift[s] in the direction of increasing marketization, a redrawing of the public/private distinction, valorization of possessive individualism, and shifts in state expenditure (often accompanied by increasing state interference) in social arenas.”⁴⁹ Adriana Puiggrós argues that in the public school sector, “Neoliberal educational policies subordinate democracy to the market and evaluation to control.”⁵⁰ The university is more aptly named “the neoliberal university,” according to Slaughter and Rhoades, who see that the social roles of public higher education have been displaced by the economic role of serving corporations. This is accomplished in two ways: first, in generating revenues and producing for a market; second, in managing institutions to reduce the power of labor.⁵¹ The community college is more definitively named “the globalized community college.” It is responsive to global flows of capital, immigration, and information as well as an instrument of the state, particularly a neoliberal state.⁵²

In adjusting to an increasingly competitive market and in responding to both their traditional and new student populations, colleges and universities have adopted a decidedly business and corporate orientation to their operations.

Academics at universities have shifted behaviors to emulate capitalists, forming a web-like structure of entrepreneurs routinely pursuing money. In Australia, universities comprise a vast network of the state's apparatus to transform the economy: Universities serve as a model of entrepreneurial behaviors, with faculty and institutions competing against each other.⁵³ In Europe, a select group of universities function as businesses, producing goods and providing services that only vaguely match the popular conception of academic education.⁵⁴ Even more extreme, in China, universities operate shopping malls and retail stores that have no relationship to the academy or to student learning.⁵⁵

Higher education institutions are pushed by governments and corporations, and even by higher education leaders, to conform to economic globalization, which is the vehicle of neoliberalism.⁵⁶ Higher learning has become a global business. Furthermore, the outcomes of higher education are increasingly directed to the new economy,⁵⁷ with its emphasis upon electronic technologies as critical tools of the labor force. An information-based economy requires greater numbers of more highly skilled educated employees. It also requires a repeated upgrading of skills to keep pace with the changes in the information, communications, and computer technologies being used in the technology-intensive workplace.⁵⁸ These emphases are potentially in conflict with the needs of disadvantaged students in higher education—those who require basic skills, social education, and personal attention. On one front, while educational leaders promote postsecondary education and student achievement, institutional policies and actions—from accountability measures to removal of remedial education programs from the curriculum—have negative effects on disadvantaged students. On the other front, while political leaders and policymakers champion further education for global competitiveness, government legislation, policies, or actions punish those—such as undocumented immigrants and the poor—who do not conform to either legalistic or moral strictures of the state. Indeed, the state has less difficulty spending public resources on prisons than it does on community colleges. As one community college president observed in conversation with me, “Why are we spending so much money on incarcerating people and so little money on educating them? Let’s quit spending all of this money on juvenile justice and incarcerating and making new rules to incarcerate people.”

Globalization

In the contemporary context, neoliberalism is associated with globalization, giving globalization a decidedly economic slant. Globalization as a process is replaced with globalization as a concept that combines international and transnational interactions and a market ideology.⁵⁹ This latter understanding of globalization identified with a single imperative—in this case, capitalism or hypercapitalism⁶⁰—restricts the analytical potential of globalization. It omits, for example, the multiple meanings and dimensions of globalization⁶¹ and assumes that homogenization and unity (e.g., one world system) are its outcomes.⁶² The cultural domain of globalization in some distinction from the

economic can suggest that plurality is more pronounced than unity, that heterogeneity more evident than homogenization, and that local meanings trump universal ones.⁶³ Certainly, characteristics of current trends of globalization—such as the way the movement of capital, information, and ideas is not affected by geographical distances, as well as the spread of Western institutions and Western values internationally and pervasive ideological conflicts that are both local and global—suggest more than economic or capitalistic behaviors and motivations.⁶⁴

For my analysis, however, I have resorted to the more narrowly articulated view of globalization that connects the concept to capitalism and consumerism and a neoliberal agenda of both freeing markets from state controls and expanding markets so that those who are productive can benefit,⁶⁵ albeit with justification that the economic productivity of the few or of corporations benefits all. Similar to neoliberalism, this view absolves the state from responsibility to its citizens in such areas as education, welfare, health, and domestic life, among others. In my analysis of the experiences of nontraditional students, globalization has had deleterious effects: For example the North America Free Trade Agreement and the outsourcing of production to other countries have led to a loss of jobs especially for those in the manufacturing industries. These displaced workers attend community colleges in search of skills so that they can find gainful employment; yet, the labor market is such that even with newly acquired skills, they will land in minimum-wage or low-wage jobs in the service economy. Changes in production in the global economy as a result of technologically enhanced production and management suggest that without high-level skills and advanced education, students in community colleges who either do not move on to the baccalaureate degree or do not attain an associate's degree in a market-aligned field, such as nursing or other health science professions or business or technology-related careers, will be relegated to the underclass in society.⁶⁶

Globalization and neoliberalism represent the utilitarian conception of justice that Rawls opposes. To Rawls, national (or local) economic competitiveness cannot justify the commodification of students, in which their rights to equality of opportunity are sacrificed for a larger good. This is the case even if greater competitiveness would have increased the net utility in society. That larger good becomes irrelevant once we can conclude that (a) the student does not enjoy substantive equality of opportunity in a globalized educational system and (b) the disadvantaged student is not better off as a result of the neoliberal distributive scheme.

Organizational Power

Such concerns take us to the issue of organizational power. Higher education literature prior to the 1990s suggests that those who influenced institutional actions were internal decision makers, governing boards, presidents, administrative executives, and in some situations faculty unions and their leaders. Brian Pusser, Sheila Slaughter, and Gary Rhoades and others have recently indicated that in the 1990s and 2000s, universities were shaped by external

actors—politicians, business and industry leaders, and multinational corporations.⁶⁷ While there is limited research to identify powerful actors at community colleges, government prodded by business interests is a major player. Where government's role is limited, business and industry are major power actors.⁶⁸ In California, faculty unions are identified as one of the power actors, but this influence seems to be limited to the constraints on the management of the institution and not to the goals of the organization⁶⁹—which Mintzberg views as central to organizational power.⁷⁰ Powerful unions in California can and do bargain for significant salary increases that move resources to employees and perhaps away from students, but there is little or no evidence to suggest that this shift in resource allocation has altered the mission and goals of the institution. In contrast, the alteration of legislation in California in the 1990s to include economic development as a major purpose of California's community colleges is a shift in mission, and thus power, in this case, was exerted by the state government and those influencers who stand to gain from education and training for economic purposes. According to community college practitioners, the economic development mission in California was the creation of the state.⁷¹ While state government, through legislation, is a major power actor in community colleges,⁷² the forces and actors who influence state legislators and the governor have significant power in the institution. The interests of these actors are not always aligned with college members, and college faculty and administrators can become unwitting agents of these actors.⁷³ Notwithstanding these pressures from powerful forces and actors, institutional members—administrators, faculty, and staff—do have influence on student experiences and outcomes, through actions that are not always legitimate with respect to or sanctioned by institutional or government policy, or indeed normative within the institution or consistent with the interests of external influencers. I refer to these internal actors as autonomous agents, based upon Lipsky's "street-level bureaucrats."⁷⁴ They are organizational members who counterbalance the influence of those whose interests might not be in accord with those of students, especially non-traditional students who are disadvantaged. Within the institution, these actors are administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as college presidents or chancellors. Outside the institution, these actors are executives within the system, including district and state executive officers.

Organizational power, however, is contextualized and largely beyond individuals. Indeed, the rising managerial culture of higher education institutions,⁷⁵ in part a response to unprecedented external pressures upon these institutions, has turned a collectivity into a single, seemingly monolithic enterprise. Slaughter and Rhoades refer to this situation as the "academic capitalism/knowledge learning regime," and others have referred to it as the corporatization of the academy, whereby a college or university is viewed as a single entity directed by a dominant locus of power. These pressures include government controls and requirements for accountability, resource dependence upon nongovernment organizations and businesses, new technologies, and the new economy—often captured in the concepts of the knowledge

economy and globalization—and new and more strident demands from both the public and private sectors.

New Managerialism and Corporatism

The ideology of neoliberalism has infiltrated the management and governance of colleges and universities. The shift is in accord with sociologist Martin Trow's view of the governance change in universities over the past thirty years: a visible shift from "soft managerialism" to "hard managerialism." Soft managerialism is equated with collegiality and professional consensus; hard management is equated with contractual relations and autocratic control.⁷⁶ In the neoliberal context, higher education institutions have also been pushed by the state, through resource allocation (and its diminishing quantities) and accountability measures (and their increasing intrusions), to both homogenize and privatize higher education for the maximization of outputs—all in an acclaimed effort to maintain or increase access for students. The shift here is away from the goals of knowledge acquisition and free, critical, and systematic inquiry, as well as undermining the traditions of academic elitism. These alterations are consistent with the neoliberal project, promulgated by the state and corporations.⁷⁷ Terms such as "reform," "improvement," and "accountability" have become the flag-words of the movement, and increasingly information technology and systems-thinking are the symbols of its progress. The entry of quality movements or improvement initiatives into higher education is the prototypical business solution to perceived problems in the academy. These initiatives, such as total quality management (TQM), are a form of management system that relies upon continuous improvement to products and processes to create quality outputs—better products; better profits.⁷⁸ While some claim that quality management is an innovation, others, particularly academic scholars, see it as a fad or, even more disparagingly, a pernicious invasion of an antiacademic ideology. Its characteristics include standardization of production, team organization and decision making, and a clear mission conveyed by a leader. Robert Birnbaum calls it a failure in higher education because it did not take root and last.⁷⁹ Higher education scholar Estela Bensimon refers to TQM as gendered, racist, and largely exclusive. Because of its drive for standardization, TQM denies pluralism, casting gays, lesbians, African Americans, Latinos, and other nonmajority populations in the academy as outcasts, identities that need to be shaped so that they form a unit, a homogenized whole.⁸⁰ Accreditation review processes and strategic planning are two other similar organizational behaviors that suggest organizational improvement, but they too lead to a unitary system that eschews heterogeneity. The art of homogenization and standardization, of course, reduces identities, blurring differences, and subordinates individual agency. Improvement initiatives in higher education have at least two major motivations: They are a mimetic tool that demonstrates that higher education is a business, and thus has legitimacy for corporate and government stakeholders; and they are a strategy undertaken by colleges and universities in the face of

demands from accountability from state governments. The positive aspect of these initiatives, theoretically, is that they carry symbolic value, showing colleges and universities as innovative, progressive, and responsive: Their use demonstrates the concern of higher education institutions for efficiency and improvement. Because colleges and universities are highly symbolic systems and because actions are loosely coupled to outcomes, change initiatives are not easily, if at all, adopted at the core of the institution.⁸¹

In a negative vein, we might see improvement efforts as firmly embedded in the managerial ethos of colleges and universities. Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter argue that quality movements are part of an ideology that values business and industry, not students, because these entities are the actual customers—those who purchase the products, be they products of the lab or the classroom.⁸² Quality improvement efforts, including review and assessment of programs, then, are tools to maximize the revenue-generating capacity of higher education institutions and reduce faculty power.⁸³ Ironically, quality improvement schemes and assessments—including teacher evaluations—reduce human performance to fit quantitative models and thus have a skewed vision of quality. Academic work is increasingly structured to fit the demands of, on the one hand, a machine bureaucracy and, on the other hand, a neoliberal state and its elite stakeholders.⁸⁴

These organizational actions are aspects of what Rosemary Deem has labeled “new managerialism,” which she defines as “the adoption by public sector organizations of organizational forms, technologies, management practices, and values more commonly found in the private business sector.”⁸⁵ Such a condition, according to Deem, leads to the alteration of the values of the public sector employees so that they imitate or approximate those of employees in the private sector. This approach to the management of colleges and universities has been explained by scholars such as Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades and vilified by Eric Gould. None of these scholars see this approach as transient: Slaughter and Rhoades refer to it as a “regime” and Gould as “corporate.”⁸⁶ In this pattern of management, justice for students may not conform to the values and practices of the corporation or regime that favors what Michael Apple calls “thin morality”—where individual competitiveness is the *modus vivendi*—in distinction to “thick morality”—where principles of the common good are the basis for action.⁸⁷

Particularly appropriate for this discussion of nontraditional students and those who are at the margins of social, economic, and educational prosperity is the recent work of Kathleen Shaw, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christopher Mazzeo, and Jerry Jacobs on the working poor and welfare women.⁸⁸ Their research on welfare reform elucidates the influence of ideology on both policy and practice, affecting students and potential students in their access to and acquisition of education and training. They demonstrate that neoliberal ideology is indeed altering traditional understandings of educational opportunities.

In concrete ways, welfare reform and the Workforce Investment Act represent a sea change in this country's beliefs about the role that education and training should play in providing opportunities for social mobility for our most

disadvantaged populations. Driven by the idea of “work first,” these policies directly contradict a central tenet of American society: Instead of giving the poor opportunity to become self-sufficient by obtaining the training and education needed to lift them out of poverty, poor adults now need to enter the world of work as quickly as possible, regardless of pay, benefits, or the stability of the job. In short, higher education is not for all.⁸⁹ Through such an ideology and its impact upon policy and practice, Rawls' justice is unlikely to be realized.

The Neoliberal/Justice Conflict

If those in positions of institutional authority in higher education abide by the state's neoliberal ideology, then can students—especially disadvantaged students—receive Rawls' equality of opportunity, and can their treatment be fair? If the state controls higher education institutions and the state is a neoliberal state, then Mintzberg's power configuration of “instrument” is in play. That is, higher education institutions are extensions and vehicles of the state for promulgating and practicing neoliberal ideology.⁹⁰ College administrators and faculty are simply working for the state and are complicit in unfair practices that may include the underfunding of specific programs in relation to other programs, denying equal access to the institution because of an individual's residency status, and the withdrawal of services such as tutoring because of a revocation of a federal or state program. These actions are particularly devastating in the community college, where there is a substantial population that historically, as groups or individuals, has experienced an unequal distribution of values such as liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and self-respect.

Theoretically, we can expect that the community college is the educational site where the conflict between neoliberalism and justice is played out and either resolved or not. Certainly since the 1970s, the community college has assumed the role of the open-access, multipurpose, and socially democratizing institution.⁹¹ However, the institution, particularly since the 1980s, has adopted a more business-like approach, pursuing revenues, working for increased productivity, and marketing itself as a salvation for local and even state and national economies through economic development.⁹² Arguably, the institution has not only framed itself as a neoliberal college, but also acted to support that label.⁹³

In practice, this situation has led to an internally conflicted environment, including the apparent paradox of executives who manage the neoliberal policies but who, on a personal level, reject them. The conflict, in short and in general, is between social democratic principles and a consumer-based approach to education.⁹⁴ The goals and actions of community colleges include responding to the demands and fulfilling the needs of all members of its communities, including disadvantaged populations; and policies—whether state funding behaviors or business and industry arrangements with colleges—favor attention to economic and private interests and outcomes. Thus, college system chancellors and presidents, in their roles and policy mandates, give precedence to such matters as state economic development—providing contract training to businesses—but

articulate the needed attention to disconnected youth. Within the institution, there are numerous behaviors that suggest that practitioners act outside of their roles or mandates, either ignoring neoliberal policies or placing them in a subordinate role to human and social services.

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Chapter 3

Multiple Identities, Multiple Motivations and Goals, and the Student-Institution Disconnection

This chapter is an empirically based discussion of the identities of nontraditional students, bringing together data and findings from the examination of thirteen specific sites to illuminate where students experience both connection and lack of connection to the community college. It has three main parts: 1) the multiple identities of nontraditional community college students, 2) the motivations and goals of nontraditional students, and 3) the student-institution disconnection. The discussion uses interviews with organizational members and students at community colleges for both specific grounding and illumination.

The Identity Issue

Categories and classifications of students as a population—as male or female; as African American, Native American, Latino, or white; as over or under twenty-four; and the like—while useful for a variety of purposes, including research, neither capture the complexity of individual (and indeed group) identity nor explain college experience or performance. I begin with the assumption that “college” for students cannot be viewed or understood as the principal or primary community or “lifeworld.” Indeed, college is situated within the life experiences of students and the environments they inhabit, as well as the community with which they interact on a daily basis. This condition combines both the “figured worlds” of Dorothy Holland and her colleagues, as well as the “imagined communities” of Benedict Anderson.¹ According to Holland, “Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourse, performances, and artifacts.”² People are recruited to or enter into these worlds where there is common, agreed-upon, or negotiated understandings and interpretations of meanings. It is within the context of these worlds that individuals understand and develop at least a part of their identities. Through common participation in activities with others, individuals gain a sense of commonality or membership in a categorical social body, which Anderson terms “imagined