

An Identity Crisis in Higher Education

By Trenton Hightower

Some notable public figures have recently been quoted praising community colleges. Among those singing our praises were Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan, Microsoft founder and CEO Bill Gates, and author and management guru Tom Peters. Even President Bush found reason to site the importance of America's community colleges in a State of the Union message last year.

Each of these national leaders has extolled the importance of community colleges in addressing the needs of the educationally underserved, establishing professionalism around the certification and recertification process, and offering a wide array of credit courses and services.

While this favorable press is clearly good in one way, ironically, it also reinforces a fundamental misunderstanding about community colleges that those of us in Workforce Development deal with every day.

As glowing as these reviews are, they focus on the more traditional role of the community college: to prepare students for their careers through credit courses and 2-year degree programs. In addition to these important functions, however, today's community colleges are succeeding in serving many more populations than these recent accolades reflect.

Today, America's community colleges have a much wider sphere of influence than these individuals' comments imply. Modern community colleges are meeting the needs of many more than the relatively small degree-seeking population.

Community Colleges serve the aging population through on-campus Institutes for Learning in Retirement, and provide programs for families with children Kids on Campus-type offerings. Which of these alternative areas is most rapidly evolving in the community college setting? Survey says: Customized Training programs and Workforce Development initiatives.

One might argue that the solution to this crisis in perception is simple: community colleges just need to do a better job educating the public about the many different functions we perform, and the large number of populations we serve. As a case in point, let's consider Continuing Education.

Before those of us in Continuing Education can market our programs effectively, however, we need to address the serious challenges we face in branding ourselves as an important part of the community college model.

The Challenge

The basis of effective communication is common language with a shared vocabulary. Before we can understand one another, we need to use the same words to denote the same things. A good place to start would be standardizing job titles!

Think about the lack of consistency that exists in the way individuals who are doing the same job at different community colleges are identified. For example, below is a list of titles used in community colleges across the country:

- Coordinator
- Associate Coordinator
- Director
- Associate Director
- Executive Director
- Dean
- Vice President
- Associate Vice President
- Manager
- Liaison

This lack of standardization and consistency creates problems when we try to reach our colleagues at other colleges. So consider this: if this lack of standardization in titling leads to confusion for us, imagine the difficulty for the public at large?

In today's transient society, business and industry leaders move frequently. They may have been working well a community college-based team for prior corporate training, but finding that person's counterpart in his or her new community may prove elusive. In the interest of time, this person may choose another resource for his or her company's training needs, simply because finding her current contact's counterpart in a new town is too difficult. As a community college system and provider of corporate training, we have missed an opportunity for an ongoing relationship with this company because of the inconsistency in titling within our ranks.

We find our second challenge in branding and marketing ourselves nationally in the inconsistent language we currently use to identify our section of the college. A review of this labeling reveals the following range of names:

- Continuing Education
- Workforce Development
- Customized Training
- Community Education
- Economic Development
- Career Programs
- Contract Training
- Lifelong Learning
- Corporate Solutions
- Business & Industry Training

Some colleges have tried to promote their customized training departments outside the college's identity. While the reasoning for this plan is understandable on one level, I believe it is also naïve. Branding a program separately takes a tremendous amount of money, time and resources—more than is prudent to devote to such a venture. A separate "look and feel" for the customized training department cuts it off in large part from the economies of scale—such as group purchasing power—that a branded relationship with the college's identity makes possible. Engendering name recognition through this avenue is not only impractical, it ultimately creates more confusion for an already confused public.

Trying to change the perceptions that have developed over the last half century regarding the nature of community colleges will take changing the way we present ourselves to the public. As valuable as our two-year degree and certificate programs are, it is time to

broaden the public's awareness to include the wide array of program's today's community colleges offer.

Presenting this new image and product to our communities will best be done through face-to-face contacts, and individual conversations. In order for these meetings to be effective, we must start by standardizing the vocabularies we use at the college-level nationwide.

Encouraging the public to reinvent its perception of community colleges involves changing deeply entrenched ideas. People identify "college" with academic instruction, research, philosophy and theory—much less with practical skills, workforce development and customized training. This point of reference is so entrenched as to make it very difficult for them to open their minds to everything the community college of the 21st century really is.