

OPINION

Community colleges need a common language to convey identity

Some notable public figures have recently been quoted praising community colleges. Among those singing our praises were Federal Reserve Chairman 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 his State of the Union message last year.

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 continuing education deal with every day.

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

Today, America's nearly 1,200 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.

We serve the aging population through our popular Institutes for Learning in Retirement. We provide programs for families and the youngest members of our communities through Kids on Campus-type offerings. And one of the most rapidly-evolving customer bases is the business community, as we work to promote our 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 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.

At the top of the list of challenges we face as continuing education professionals is the lack of standardization in job titling. There is no consistency in the way individuals who are doing the same job at different community colleges are identified. For example, this is a list of some titles used in community colleges across the country: coordinator; associate coordinator; director; associate director; executive director; dean; vice president; associate vice president; manager; and liaison.

One of the main reasons for the identity crisis in continuing education is the problem we have when we try to find the individual at another community college who does the same job we do. After a somewhat lengthy conversation with the

switchboard operator, we may succeed, but connecting with our peers when we don't have their exact names can take time and persistence. But consider this: if this lack of standardization in titling leads to confusion for us and among our colleagues in academic communities, imagine the difficulty for the public at large?

In today's transient society, business and industry leaders move frequently. They may have a satisfying professional relationship with the person at one community college who manages the corporate training program, 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 within our ranks in titling.

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; corpo-

rate solutions; and business and industry training.

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.

In summary, by failing to develop a consistent language regarding our positions, sections and courses, we have also failed to assure a consistent national reputation as a viable resource for anyone other than the "traditional student" seeking a two-year degree.

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.

Community college presidents need to arrive at a common language for continuing education that can be applied consistently. Arriving at standardized words, terms, titles and concepts would make promoting our programs easier and more effective.



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