

An Identity Crisis in Continuing Education

Some notable public figures have recently been quoted praising community colleges. Among those singing our praises are 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 cite the importance of America's community colleges in his 2004 and 2005 State of the Union speeches.

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

While this favorable press is good, it also ironically 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. But today's community colleges also are succeeding in serving many more populations than these



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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 popula-

tions we serve. As a case in point, let's consider continuing education.

Before those of us in continuing education can market our programs effectively, 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.

As simple as that may seem, a common language with a shared vocabulary in the workplace is rare indeed. Firing staff is called 'letting people go.' Some call it retrenchment, redundancy elimination, downsizing and reduction-in-force. In the academic arena, we label nonacademic classes 'noncredit,' 'continuing education' or 'credit-free.' Typically, the community in general and students in particular are confused.

Topping 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, below is a list of titles used in community colleges across the country:

- Dean
- Vice president
- Associate vice president
- Manager
- Liaison
- Coordinator
- Associate coordinator
- Director
- Associate director
- Executive director

Community College Week

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 that 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, 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 their new community may prove elusive. In the interest of time, the business leader may choose another resource for his or her company's training needs, simply because finding his/her current contact's counterpart in a new town is too difficult.

We find our second national branding and marketing challenge in the inconsistent language we 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 and industry training

Some colleges have tried to promote their customized training departments outside the college's identity. While 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 not only is impractical, it ultimately creates more confusion for an already confused public.

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 that it's very difficult for them to open their minds to everything the community college of the 21st century really is.

So, by not developing 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 programs 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. For these meetings to be effective, we must start by standardizing our vocabulary.

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