



Casting New Light on Old Notions A Changing Understanding of Community College Faculty

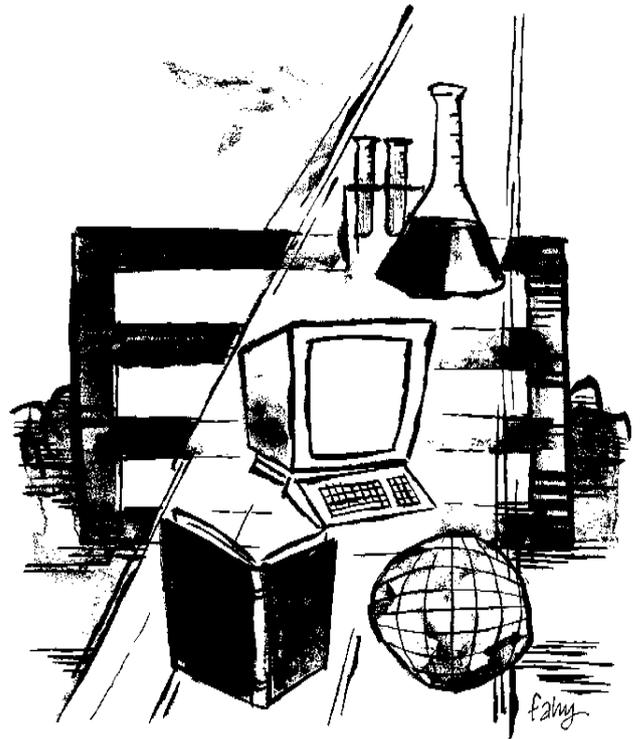
Almost one-third of the American professoriate holds a position at one of the nation's 1,449 community colleges—teaching 39 percent of all students enrolled in postsecondary education, including 46 percent of all first-time freshmen. Despite their importance in preparing students academically to complete a baccalaureate degree and vocationally to enter the labor force, community college faculty receive scant attention from postsecondary researchers—or worse, are simply dismissed as a separate, and by implication lesser, class of college professors.

Community college faculty do stand out from many of their professional colleagues, not only because of the size and diversity of their sector but also because teaching—far more than research or service—is at the heart of their professional mission. Accompanying these characteristics, however, is a set of strongly held stereotypes about the nature of community college professors: as faculty who contribute little, if anything, to scholarship; as teachers who pursue the vocational before the academic; as practitioners whose knowledge of the world outside their own institutions is parochial.

This issue of *The Landscape* takes on these stereotypes, using comparative responses of faculty from both two- and four-year institutions to a national survey by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT). Not only do faculty at two-year institutions share many of the same values as their colleagues elsewhere, they also have taken the lead in areas identified as the future directions of reform efforts for all of postsecondary education.

Surveying the Profession

The Carnegie Foundation has collected the opinions of college and university professors six times over the last 28 years through its National Survey of Faculty. Since 1969, CFAT has asked professors about their institutions, their roles as faculty members, and their professional lives as teachers and scholars. The most recent survey, administered in 1997, drew 5,151 responses—more than half the number of faculty members to whom the survey was sent (9,991).

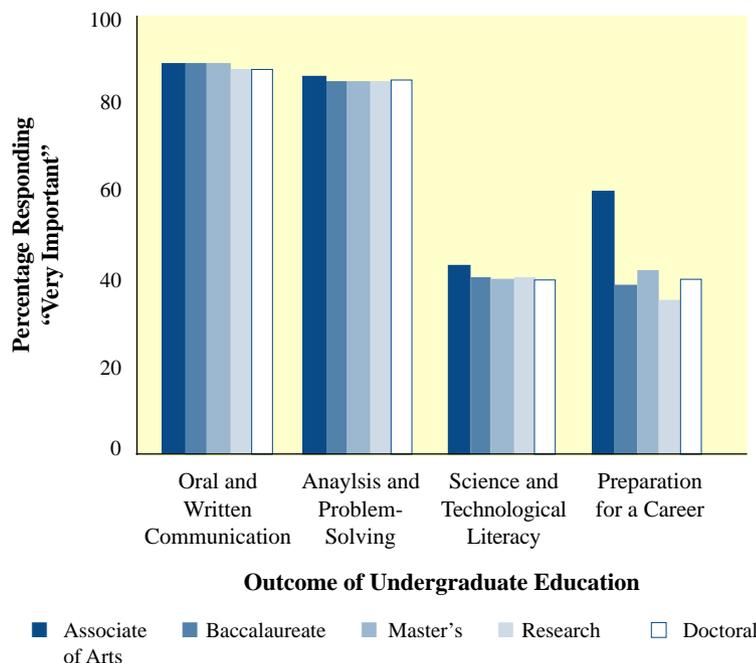


Although the survey has always included faculty from institutions offering associate of arts degrees, for the first time Carnegie has made community college professors a major focus of its report. Authored by National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) and CFAT researcher Mary Taylor Huber, the report highlights the status of community college faculty by comparing their responses with those of faculty at other types of colleges and universities. The report's purpose is to clarify the working conditions of professors in the most teaching-intensive sector of American postsecondary education.

In considering Carnegie's findings, readers should keep in mind that the survey's sample is biased toward full-time faculty respondents. While the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 31 percent of faculty at four-year institutions and 64 percent at two-year institutions are employed part-time, only 9 percent and 21 percent of Carnegie respondents, respectively, teach on a part-time basis. Overall, part-time faculty account for only 13 percent

The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) is supported under the Educational Research and Development Center program, agreement number R309A60001, CFDA 84.309A, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed by NCPI do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the U.S. Department of Education. The Institute for Research on Higher Education retains the copyright for this column.

Chart 1
Percentage of Faculty Who Consider Various Outcomes of a College Education to be “Very Important,” by Institutional Type



of the survey’s sample. The institutional types used in this article, as well as in the report, are defined in the 1994 edition of CFAT’s *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*.

Setting the Record Straight

The National Survey of Faculty dispels many stereotypes about the community college professoriate. Three findings, in particular, underscore how similar their perspectives are to those of faculty at four-year institutions. Where their responses differ uncovers an interesting twist to the story: the 1997 survey also suggests that, when compared with four-year faculty, community college professors are already leading the way in many of the efforts at the center of the post-secondary reform agenda.

Stereotype 1: *Community college faculty are inordinately concerned with vocational and basic skills, rather than with academic skills.*

Wrong. There is a special regard

for career preparation among community college faculty, but that focus is in addition to—not in opposition to—the same goals as faculty at four-year institutions for the education of undergraduates.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a list of outcomes for undergraduate education. Chart 1 shows that community college faculty are on a par with their colleagues at all other types of institutions regarding the importance they attribute to academic skills. The percentage of community college faculty who consider oral and written communication skills, analysis and problem-solving abilities, and science and technological literacy as “very important” outcomes of education roughly mirrors that of faculty at other institutions.

The exception to this parity is the percentage considering baccalaureate education to also have the purpose of preparing students for a career. While between 34 and 41 percent of faculty at other institutions believe that preparation for a career is a very important outcome of college education, a much higher percentage (59 percent) of community college faculty hold that opinion. With increased calls by postsecondary education’s stakeholders to make education more work-relevant, community college faculty demonstrate significant leadership in answering the challenge of relating education to work.

Community college faculty are also leading the way in promoting applied learning. More faculty at community colleges than at any other type of institution believe that students should be exposed to a stronger mix of theory and practice in their academic experience and that education should be made more relevant to contemporary lives and problems.

Stereotype 2: *Community college faculty do not engage in—and therefore do not appreciate the value of—scholarly research.*

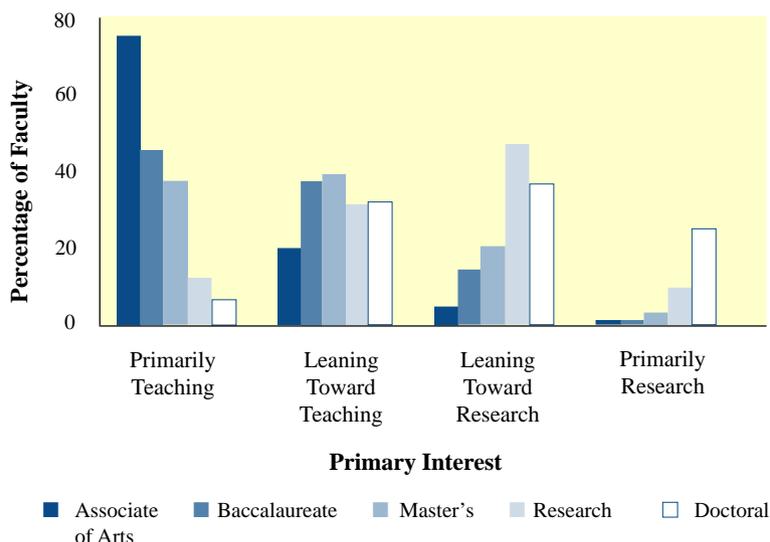
Wrong. It is true that community college faculty are more teaching-focused than their colleagues at four-year institutions. Chart 2 depicts how faculty reported their primary interests on a scale anchored by teaching and research—and the difference is striking: 75 percent of community college faculty are primarily interested in teaching, while only 46 percent of baccalaureate faculty have that same focus. That commitment to teaching is also reflected in the amount of time community college faculty spend in that activity: on average, professors at associate of arts institutions spend 14.8 hours per week formally instructing undergraduates, while faculty at baccalaureate institutions spend an average of 9.9 hours per week. Community college faculty also dedicate more hours to advising and tutoring their students.

Nonetheless, faculty at two-year colleges are also substantially involved in research and service, much more so than the stereotypical notion of community college faculty would suggest. Despite the fact that only 6 percent of community college faculty have a primary interest that includes research—and only 5 percent reported that their institutions expect them to engage regularly in original research—a fair number (38 percent) are pursuing activities that lead to publication or to a presentation. The average difference in the amount of time that community college faculty and those at baccalaureate institutions spend each week performing research or comparable scholarly activities is only 2.3 hours. In addition, almost 80 percent of community college faculty engage in consulting or professional service.

With more intensive classroom hours and more time spent assisting students outside of the classroom, the choice of community college faculty to become involved in research projects suggests that the teaching-research divide may not be irreconcilable. Alas, two-year institutions are not taking

notice of this above-and-beyond effort. Only 16 percent of the community college faculty surveyed said that their research is regularly evaluated, and fully half indicated that their departments should give greater recognition for professional service and the applied aspects of knowledge in faculty evaluations.

Chart 2
Primary Interest of Faculty by Institutional Type

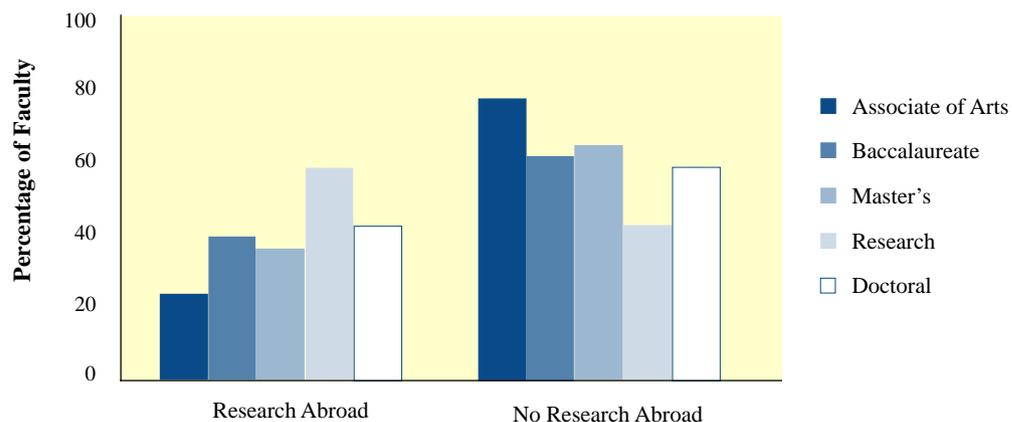


Stereotype 3: *Community college faculty have a parochial perspective, never working beyond their campuses and never considering the implications of their work for society at large.*

Wrong. Community college faculty share with their colleagues a strong belief in social responsibility and civic engagement as obligations of academic life. Few faculty at any type of institution believe that scholars can disregard the implications of their work for society. Most also agree that scholars have a professional obligation to apply their disciplinary knowledge to help resolve social problems.

Like faculty at institutions offering bachelor's and master's degrees, community college faculty believe that they have a professional obligation to collaborate with elementary and secondary teachers. A similar propor-

Chart 3
Faculty Activity Abroad by Institutional Type



tion of faculty at all types of institutions believe that colleges and universities have a responsibility to contribute to the economic development of their communities.

Other responses indicate that community college faculty members' field of vision may even extend abroad. Despite the fact that community colleges are, by mission, local institutions, a fair number of community college faculty are participating in the internationalization of American higher education (Chart 3). Twenty-three percent at some time in their career have gone abroad to perform research, to take a sabbatical, or to engage in a formal exchange program. Although this proportion pales in comparison to rates for research (58 percent), master's (36 percent), and baccalaureate (39 percent) faculty, it does indicate a perspective that is beginning to reach beyond the local.

Broadening the Postsecondary Perspective

While these findings indicate clear directions for two-year institutions as they seek to improve their organizations—such as exploring policies that recognize research and professional service in faculty evaluations—the

experiences of community college faculty also offer important lessons for four-year institutions seeking a parallel commitment on the part of their faculty to teaching and to students.

Several issues that are critical to shaping the future of the academic profession have had a long history of success in the nation's community colleges: an emphasis on teaching while also engaging in research activities, a focus on academic skills as well as applied learning and vocational outcomes, and an eye toward collaborating with elementary and secondary schools and in local development efforts.

As the CFAT survey makes clear, community college faculty may be the best equipped to contribute to a growing scholarship of teaching, building a culture that supports innovation, reflection, and conversation about teaching and learning across all colleges and universities. As Mary Taylor Huber's continuing research will explore, community colleges—the nation's premiere teaching institutions—could serve pivotal roles in identifying and developing best practices that would have a great deal to teach the nation's postsecondary teachers. □