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The pursuit of relevancy is a rural community college's chance to evolve, adapt, to obtain long-term sustainability. This chapter discusses ways that institutions can demonstrate their relevancy to support their sustainability.

Achieving Institutional Sustainability Through Relevancy

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Stockdale Paradox . . . retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties AND at the same time confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be . . .

Jim Collins, *Good to Great*

The Stockdale paradox supports that during times of difficulty, one must keep the faith while confronting the facts of the current situation (Collins, 2001). For community colleges, specifically small, rural-serving institutions, this action is required to be and stay relevant. Collins (2001) states that greatness is accomplished by focusing on those things that have the greatest impact. The case we want to make in this chapter is this focus will result in community colleges being relevant.

Financial issues for institutions of higher education are real and have

been documented quite extensively in the literature (e.g., Dougherty, Natow, Bork, Jones, & Vega, 2013; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2014). Though these issues affect many colleges, they may have more dire impact on small, rural-serving community colleges (Hicks & Jones, 2011; Smith, 2009). Many in leadership positions at these small institutions (e.g., enrollments between 1,000 and 2,999) see the need to focus on institutional sustainability due to the financial concerns they face. The Oxford Dictionaries (2009) defines sustain as “cause to continue for an extended period or without interruption” (p. 1452), which is the focus of the discussion in this chapter. Sustainability in higher education institutions affects multiple areas including academic programs, faculty and staff positions, and student support services, among others—down to the core of

sustaining the institution's existence. Many people working at small, rural-serving community colleges have discussed in administrative meetings, *how do we continue to survive?* Here, groups contemplate what is the circumstance or event that will finally *do us in*, or what windfall might be received to allow *to fight another day?* These concerns and discussions are all centered on institutional sustainability.

In contemplating sustainability in higher education today, the question one has to consider is whether the needed action is to focus on how to sustain higher education institutions in times of external constraints—as a reactive approach, or if there is a need to redirect the focus and efforts to being *relevant* to support sustainability—a proactive approach? Relevance (n.d.) is defined as “the degree to which something is related or useful to what is happening or being talked about” (para. 1), and is the definition that guides our discussion. Sustainability does not resonate with many individuals on a college campus beyond high-level administrators, chief financial officers, and the governing board. However, when targeted efforts are focused on relevance—doing important work—individuals at every level on a college campus are more likely to feel connected to the work and empowered to deliver. Focusing on relevance also sends a resounding message to community college students, parents, and the community that the focus of the college is squarely on the quality of the student learning experience.

Message of Being Relevant

Building or achieving relevance is an endeavor carried out on numerous fronts across all functions of a community college, beginning with a focus on the community college's multifaceted mission. The community college includes functions such as academic, transfer, developmental and community education, workforce development, among others (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). To focus on relevancy versus sustainability shifts the discussion from one of reactive institutional decisions to institutional decisions that are proactive. Alfred (2006) refers to this work as strategy, and emphasizes that strategy is dependent on context. Here, the discussion

includes small, rural-serving community colleges. The focus on sustainability implies maintenance and leads to the feeling of *just keeping our heads above the water*. When the institution's focus shifts to being relevant to the local community and broader society, the college collectively has something to work toward, something to achieve. Miller and Tuttle (2007) claim that "rural community colleges have been viewed by residents, state legislators, and policy makers, as catalysts for sustaining high-quality of life opportunities for rural America" (p. 4), making them key to the economics of a community.

Relevancy has a more purposeful intent, an offensive or proactive posture as opposed to sustainability, which is more defensive or reactive. Sustainability is focused on maintaining the status quo. Relevancy has no

boundaries, no predetermined parameters, and no limitations that restrict one's thinking or actions. Sustainability seems to imply surviving in the short-term. When the focus and efforts are on being relevant instead, the institutional strategy becomes long-term and builds upon itself. The change in mindset from sustainability to operating with a relevancy goal shifts the focus to people who support causes, not necessarily organizations.

Researchers have identified that rural-serving institutions (Katsinas, Alexander, & Opp, 2003) as well as all public state-supported institutions (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017; Mullin, Baime, & Honeyman, 2015), have seen a decline in state funding since 1980 (Katsinas et al., 2003; Mullin et al., 2015). Sustainability focuses on expenditures whereas relevancy focuses on revenues, but is inclusive of expenditures. Both of these are affected by the instability of state funding (Romano & Palmer, 2015), which leave community colleges vulnerable and dependent on the economy (Nickoli, 2013). Seeking sustainability can actually hinder an institution's ability to be relevant by forcing institutional leadership to exercise caution instead of creativity, affecting innovation and new ways of looking at old problems.

According to Collins (2001), during times of difficulty, one must keep the faith while confronting the facts of the current situation. This approach can be applied to the single organizing idea of quality within an institution, as illustrated in the two areas of finances and enrollment growth that particularly affect small, rural-serving community colleges. The general operating strategy for these institutions tends to be to seek more financial resources and to control expenses; but the core issue is really about financial stability, not necessarily more resources. The goal is simply to live within the means of the institution, and to not make excuses for what we do not have or what we cannot control. "If standard of living is your major objective, quality of life almost never improves, but if quality of life is your number one objective, your standard of living almost always improves" (Ziglar & Reighard, 2009, p. 223). An adaption of this principle to education could be stated as *If enrollment increase is the major objective, quality of education almost never gets better, but if quality of education is the number one objective, enroll-*

ment almost always improves. It is simply a dangerous idea to be focused obsessively on growth, which is about sustainability—a never ending goal (Sydow & Alfred, 2012). Shifting the focus to quality moves the emphasis to relevancy.

Community College Mission and Relevancy

Community colleges are known as the institution that attempts or is expected to *be all things to all people*. According to Amey (2017), the mission of community colleges have become “greater in number” and “more complex and more important to achieving the national goal of a more educated populace” (p. 95). In addition, Amey states that “Community colleges have

an implied social contract with the public to act as the ‘people’s college,’ serving whatever are the local and perhaps regional needs” (p. 95). Thus, it was no surprise that in 2012, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) put forth a report titled, *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation’s Future* that addressed the changing mission of community colleges, and the need for them to respond to the needs of society and our economy by redesigning students’ educational experiences, reinventing institutional roles, and resetting the system. The findings of this report support the need to more specifically define the mission of community colleges to ensure their relevancy in higher education in the twenty-first century.

Community colleges are expected to serve the communities in their service areas. The role of the community college is, primarily, to enhance the economic vitality of the communities they serve (AACC, 2018; Grossman & Helpman, 2015). Community colleges have also been identified and charged with producing a qualified global workforce (AACC, 2015; Nickoli, 2013; The White House, 2009), which some would say takes the focus away from serving the local community. Community colleges serve many stakeholders, thus a college’s message of relevance will change, being dependent on whom the stakeholder is.

Students. Community colleges enroll the most first-time in college students, the most students from rural communities, as well as the most diverse student population in all of higher education (AACC, 2018). The characteristics of who community colleges serve also support the importance of discussing institutional relevancy.

Students and their learning are the focus of community colleges; their number one priority is to be relevant to their students, both current and potential students. Being relevant to students is directly connected to the quality provided by the institution through the learning process. The institutional relevancy for students involves providing a quality education that is relevant to the student’s personal and professional goals, whether that involves taking a single course to advance a skill, taking dual-enrollment courses while in high school, participating in noncredit courses for life

enrichment, transferring to a 4-year college or university, or seeking a career path.

State funding for community colleges is most often directly tied to enrollment, and in most cases credit hours or contact hours. The more students enrolled in an institution, the more state financial support allocated and the more revenue from student tuition and fees is generated. This certainly creates a significant amount of pressure for institutions to do things that will increase student enrollments. While some states have adopted performance-based funding models for community colleges, research supports that the majority of increased funding from a performance-based funding system is still generated through increased enrollment (e.g., Dougherty et al., 2013; Natale & Jones, 2017; State Higher Education Executive

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Officers Association, 2014). In a very real way, this compels the small, rural-serving institution to focus almost exclusively on increasing enrollment, and literally retaining students from semester to semester, creating a short-term focus on sustainability.

If an institution's focus and efforts were not on how to sustain itself but instead on being relevant, the operations of the college would look different. Relevancy includes institutional focus on getting students in the pipeline, which supports the need for enrollment and does not diminish its significance. But, as an institution strives for relevancy, it also increases its points of focus and efforts on student success, working toward an institutional focus on three crucial elements: persistence, retention, and completion. To attain relevancy with students, institutions must focus on quality and student success from beginning to end. Enrollments are not impacted solely by new students each semester, but also by the retention of current students who can have just as much impact on enrollment numbers as those new to an institution.

Faculty and Staff. Research supports that motivated employees want three things from a job (or career): autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Nort-house, 2018; Pink, 2009). Rural-serving institutions have the profound opportunity and ability to provide just such an environment, perhaps even more so than their larger counterparts. Higher education institutions need good faculty and staff who want to serve students; given the pay scale of most community colleges, there has to be more than a good salary to attract and retain good employees. In addition, the geographic location of most rural-serving community colleges is in small, rural communities.

The thought of sustainability more than likely does not resonate with most faculty and staff, but what about relevancy? Purpose and relevancy go hand-in-hand. In the context of faculty and staff, relevancy is a two-way street. Employees seek to be relevant and to have a position that provides them with purpose. In addition, the institution seeks employees who will be relevant to the mission and the purpose of the institution.

Community. Nickoli (2013) states that historically, education has been aligned with social and cultural development in a community, as well

as is seen as a utility that helps community members enhance their chances for upward mobility, while also providing communities with greater cultural opportunities. Establishing relevancy in regards to the local community can best be described as *touch points*. Touch points are defined as opportunities to interact with the local citizens. A few such examples include the library, food service, athletics programs, campus events, and student organizations—all have the potential to create touch points for the institution within the local geographical area.

It might seem somewhat unconventional, but in rural areas many individuals in the community seek food services offered by the local community college for their noon meal—from the business and industry community—to the retired citizens who gather much like they would at a local diner

(which many rural communities do not have). In many of these cases, the only connection to these individuals is the college's dining hall. It is quite the picture to arrive at the college's dining hall during the lunch hour and see as many community members as students. Want to be relevant to these community members? Provide a good meal at a fair price and the institution starts moving toward relevancy in the eyes of the community. Perhaps a bit of a stretch, but community colleges are perceived as a quality educational institution when they have a quality food service based on this touch point between the community and the institution. As a side note, as institutions seek ways to be relevant through touch points, what is discovered is that food service operations do not have to be one dimensional (e.g., just serving resident students). Colleges can add the casual meal and the catering revenue components. As institutions broaden their relevancy, they increase revenue streams.

Business and Industry. A major function of the community college is technical and workforce education (Cohen et al., 2013). According to Robinson, Christophersen, and Nadreau (2010), because of its ability to adapt and respond to a multitude of academic and occupational needs, the community college is the center of many communities' pursuits for improving the quality of life for its residents. This arm of the college is closely connected to, and dependent on local business and industry. The opportunities to be relevant to business and industry stakeholders are limited, and often there is only one attempt to develop a working and collaborative relationship between the college and the business. In these situations, it is important not to squander the opportunity to demonstrate relevancy for the sake of being sustainable. Most academic programs, initiatives, and offerings should strive to first be relevant based on workforce needs, then work on their sustainability.

Several authors support that the role of the community college is, primarily, to enhance the economic vitality of the communities they serve (AACC, 2018; Campbell, 2016; Grossman & Helpman, 2015). This vitality occurs through providing educational and workforce training opportunities that benefit both students and employers. There is a tendency to think in

terms of sustainability in these programs as they are often very expensive to implement and to maintain. This implies that institutions have to figure out how a specific program or offering is going to be sustainable first, instead of first thinking of achieving relevancy. Ward and Clark (2013) and Yarnall (2014) contend in addition to partnerships being vital for improving workforce skills and, hence, the economy, that partnerships must go beyond mere collaborations to share resources. In part, this is due to policymakers and higher education oversight boards that will not approve a program that they deem cannot be sustained.

Looking back on the successful endeavors at many institutions (success being defined as both being relevant and financially sustainable), many would have never gotten off the ground had the focus been first on

financial viability. The expression that is often used is *find a way to say yes*. If the focus in starting a new program or initiative is solely on whether it will be sustainable, the answer will almost always be *no*. This gets back to the realization that institutions have to at times gamble on or be willing to take risks—hopefully, good risk, but be bold—double down when they can. Risk taking has more dire outcomes for small, rural-serving colleges (Chavis & Kester, 2013; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Katsinas, Tollefson, & Reamey, 2008; Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Doing what others are doing, using the same criteria or the same ROI calculation that every other larger institution is using simply will not work. In fact, this can become the differentiating fact of a small college. If the criterion for a class offering to make is fifteen students at a larger institution, the criterion may need to be eight at a small, rural-serving institution due simply to the number of students enrolled.

Budgets and Governing Boards. During the annual review and approval of the college’s budget, it is common to scourer through details, discuss whether to raise tuition and fees or maintain them, discuss whether needed new personnel can be hired or does an institution need to cut back, what support services can be added or does the institution just need to maintain what it currently offers, among others. Within the traditional budgeting process each year, what about incorporating a one page *relevant budget*? This idea came about several years ago when the question was asked of Jud from a board member’s perspective, “in all of these details, what would I want to know that is maybe not apparent? What are the things that, if I only knew these few things, would give me insight to this budget and the inner workings of this institution?”

The relevant budget is a four-column spreadsheet: the first column lists the category/items that the institution is going to significantly reduce or perhaps even completely do away with; the second column lists the associated dollar savings. The third column lists the category/items that the institution is going to commit a substantial amount of focus and effort into, and the final column lists the associated investment dollars. As a small, rural-serving college, there are two givens: the need to reduce the financial

commitment or even discontinue what is not working, and second, find ways to grow programs and start new ones with the likelihood there are no new dollars to achieve this. If the focus is solely on just cutting and saving dollars, we are unbalanced in our focus on sustainability. However, by having a direct path for those dollars saved to a purposeful reinvestment, the focus shifts from negative to positive, thus moving from sustainability to relevancy.

Policy Makers. In Texas, public community college leaders refer to the *good ole days* as any time prior to the 2011 legislative session. Even though it could be reasoned that there have been many challenging periods for community colleges over the years (Cohen et al., 2013; Mullin et al., 2015), the one thing that is unprecedented in the state was the 2011

legislative decision in Texas to *defund* state appropriations from four community colleges; these four colleges were small to medium size institutions. One thing was quite evident: at least some in the state legislature perceived the four community colleges targeted in the Texas legislation were irrelevant. Even though each of the four community colleges did survive this political maneuver and did eventually receive a portion of appropriation funds, they did so at the mercy of the other forty-six community college districts in the state that opted to shift a percentage of their own appropriations to the four unfunded colleges. This scenario demonstrates the reality that a small, rural-serving institution faces a difficult challenge to be relevant at the state level; many times the discussion within the legislature is how to educate the masses, in more suburban and urban areas, and gain a bigger return on investment rather than focusing on the needs of rural areas. This leads to the need for community colleges, specifically small, rural-serving institutions, to find ways to be relevant at all levels, including at the state and local levels, and especially with local legislative representatives. As this scenario supports, it is important in times of decreased state funding for public higher education that community colleges have a strong statewide association who can unify the voice of all colleges and advocate to the legislature, as Texas has.

Conclusion: Taking a Stand for Being Relevant

The argument at the center of this chapter is that a focus on relevance alters how rural community colleges address strategy and decision-making. Being relevant costs money, but many times becoming relevant allows an institution to focus on the end result and less on how to get there. How many times do individuals sit in meetings and lament over the fact that they cannot do something because there are no funds, and thus get nowhere fast? If the relevance of an initiative is established first, the money becomes just part of the process—not the main focus. When the focus is on relevance and not dollars (sustainability), institutions become much more entrepreneurial

and willing to take calculated risks with big payoffs. To be really truthful

and willing to take calculated risks with big payoffs. To be really truthful, nobody wants to be on a sinking ship nor does one want to be on a ship just sitting in the water with no forward movement. People want to see action and advancement.

The message is clear that things are changing at a rapid pace and higher education is not exempt (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). If this message is true for higher education in general, how much more is it applicable to small, rural-serving community colleges? The pursuit of relevancy is our chance to evolve, to adapt, to obtain long-term sustainability, and to achieve remarkable success against some pretty significant odds. So the new mantra—with your blessing—is “Give Me Relevancy or Give Me Death.” We argue that without relevancy there is no sustainability.

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