

A Call to Action: Reclaiming Our Competitive Advantage

By Frank Gornick



The Hundred Year Bloom

During winter 2005, an abundance of rain in California's southwest desert produced one of nature's most spectacular events: the "Hundred Year Bloom." Species of plants not seen for generations suddenly emerged, creating a new awareness of the beauty, sustainability, and purpose of our deserts.

With the Hundred Year Bloom as a backdrop, a group of community college educators and business leaders convened

to discuss another national treasure, the American community college. This creative process focused on participants' reasons for staying involved with community college systems. Words such as community, passion, learning, connectedness, hope, opportunity, diversity and democracy were used to describe their commitment to their chosen field. Their frank and honest discussion produced a call for further dialogue regarding the future of the community college in the new millennium.

Call for National Dialogue

History demonstrates that as a nation we have taken seriously our responsibility to provide access to public and higher education. Our higher education system has played a significant role in creating the world's strongest economy. During this meeting, educators asked themselves whether America still maintains its role as an economic power in the international arena. Some have argued that America is losing its competitive edge. In a *Business Week* interview MIT President, Susan

Hockfield said:

“We are not keeping up with other countries in our investment in science and engineering. The science and math scores for our high school graduates are disastrous. We are under funding research in the physical sciences, and we are lagging seriously in publications in these sciences. This is a problem for our economy, and we have to think about where we want to be 20 to 40 years from now.” (*Business Week*, 2004)

For decades manufacturing has been the center of American economy and its prospects for future growth. Today’s manufacturing companies are a major source of high-tech innovation, wealth creation and varied careers. However, a 2001 study of workforce issues in manufacturing conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) revealed that more than 80 percent of manufacturers surveyed reported a moderate to serious shortage of qualified job applicants (NAM, 2003). The study found that what manufacturing is facing is not a lack of employees, but a shortfall of highly qualified employees.

The American Electronics Association determined America’s technological advancement greatly contributes to the nation’s economic success. Their 2005 article stated:

“...America needs to recognize that future innovation is not predetermined to occur in the U.S. Even if we were doing everything right, we still will face unprecedented competition from abroad. Rather than face the new global economy unprepared, America needs to confront this competition head-on by supporting the innovation infrastructure. If we don’t, America faces not just a continuing erosion of its manufacturing base, but also its lead in knowledge-based industries.”

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If America is losing its competitive edge, the leaders of higher education, specifically public education, must engage in a thorough analysis and develop creative solutions. To discuss and develop the appropriate plan of action, the “Hundred Year Bloom” group revisited the foundations of public higher education and the community college movement—the Truman Commission.

Meeting the Standard

The community college movement was established in response to a national concern articulated more than 50 years ago by President Harry Truman, who formed the Truman Commission to evaluate higher education and its relationship to the success of our nation. The commission clearly stated the expectations for community colleges:

“... the community college must prepare its students to live a rich and satisfying life, part of which involves earning a living. To this end the total educational effort, general and vocational, must be a well integrated single program. Many workers should be prepared for membership on municipal government councils, on school boards, on recreation commissions and the like. The vocational aspect of one’s education must not,

therefore, tend to segregate ‘workers’ from ‘citizens.’”

If President Truman were alive today he would likely be pleased with the impact of community colleges on our nation. Prior to 1940, only about eight percent of high school graduates attended college. Today, more than 65 percent of all high school graduates attend a higher education institution. While more Americans are attending college, the Bloom group asked whether today’s graduates are living up to the expectations of the Truman Commission. A growing body of evidence suggests that the community college system is not producing graduates with sufficient abilities to meet today’s challenges.

In 1993, the Johnson Foundation commissioned “An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education.” The report found that American higher education is not measuring up to the standards of the Truman Commission. “An American Imperative” encouraged educators to question if their current graduates are measuring up to the standards of the Truman Commission and American society.

“In the past, our industrial economy produced many new and low-skill jobs and provided stable employment, often at high wages. Now the nation faces an entirely different economic scenario: a knowledge-based economy with a shortage of highly skilled workers and a surplus of unskilled applicants scrambling to earn a precarious living. Many of those unskilled applicants are college graduates, not high school dropouts.” (Johnson Foundation, 1993)

The U.S. sends more than two-thirds of its high school graduates to college, but half of them drop out. The educational system fails to engage students and help them enter post-secondary programs. For those who do graduate, one-third fails to find employment requiring a four-year

degree. Meanwhile, many well-paid and rapidly increasing manufacturing jobs remain unfilled (NAM, 2003). The crucial bond between education and our nation's future has become uncertain, perhaps even disconnected.

"An American Imperative" clearly articulates the needs of today's community college: stronger, more vital forms of community; an informed and involved citizenry; graduates able to assume leadership roles in America; a competent and adaptable workforce; first-rate research that pushes back boundaries of human knowledge, and less research designed to lengthen academic resumes; and an affordable, cost-effective educational enterprise offering lifelong learning. Above all, it needs a commitment to the American promise—all Americans have the opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest. Higher education is not meeting these imperatives.

Reclaiming Our Competitive Advantage

What role does the American community college play in reclaiming its competitive edge? Members of the Hundred Year Bloom discussion recommended the need for a national dialogue to address the following issues:

1. If we accept the premise that we have lost, or are in danger of losing, our competitive edge, what is the role of the community college in regaining that edge?

2. How do we breathe beauty and life (a new bloom) back into this national treasure that helped us become what we are today?

3. What are the internal questions we need to ask ourselves as a profession?

4. We have been able to deliver education in a high quality manner using low-tech and old learning unit models. Is it time to evaluate what works and discard or change what does not work?

5. The Truman Commission gave us a new paradigm of higher education in the community college; are we ready to revisit the Truman Commission? What will we look like in 50 years?

6. We have always focused on personal benefits to the individual, and the larger benefit to the community and the nation. Are we ready to change our systems and find new ways for all students to succeed while capitalizing on partnerships with our communities to find measurable ways for all citizens to learn?

We can achieve this by staying focused on our principles of opportunity, democracy, affordability and access, which have created a culture that respects the individual and their ability to learn.

The Hundred Year Bloom group realizes that our nation is in need of assistance. Economist Paul Romer suggested that "what is missing at the moment is a political imagination of how do we do something just as big and just as important for the transition in to the 21st century as we did for the 19th and 20th." (Freidman, 2005)

We must create a national dialogue concerning the role of community colleges in American economy. We need to understand how community colleges can help our nation regain its competitive edge. A new structure may be needed—one that embodies our strengths of risk taking, improvisation, leadership, acceptance of change, focus on learning, and bridging the learning gap. We must employ every bit of our American ingenuity to meet the challenge.

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