

"Mending Walls, Unlocking Gates: Research and Reflection on the Shifting Roles of the Two-Year College"

A Report from the TYCA Research Initiative Committee

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Background

The TYCA Research Initiative Committee was formed in 2004 in order to conduct a variety of national research initiatives related to the teaching of English at the nation's two-year colleges. As part of this national research endeavor, the TYCA Research Initiative Committee sponsored a session at the 2005 CCCC Convention in San Francisco, entitled "Mending Walls, Unlocking Gates: Research and Reflection on the Shifting Roles of the Two-Year College." One colleague from each of the TYCA constituent regions was invited to spend approximately six months gathering information in preparation for this meeting (this information was collected in a variety of ways--through formal surveys as well as by conversations with individual members and with TYCA officers in the various regions). Each researcher was asked to focus on "the key challenges and successes" in their region. Researchers were then given the opportunity to present their research at the session in San Francisco.

This report is an executive summary of the research reported at this meeting. We are pleased to note that this meeting was very well attended and that the question-and-answer session that followed the panelists' presentations was lively, substantive, and enthusiastic.

For more detailed information, please see the individual reports from each participating panelist. These are included in an Appendix.

For more information about the TYCA Research Initiative Committee or this report, please contact the chair of the TYCA Research Initiative Committee, Jody Millward at Millward@sbcc.edu.

List of Presenters and TYCA Regions They Represented

1. **Southwest**. David Lydic, Austin Community College. Austin, Texas.
2. **Southeast**. Don Andrews, Chattanooga State Technical Community College. Chattanooga, Tennessee.
3. **Pacific Northwest**. Eva Payne, Chemeketa Community College. Salem, Oregon.
4. **West**. Joanna M. Tardoni. Western Wyoming Community College. Rock Spring, Wyoming.
5. **Midwest**. Panelist unable to attend CCCC. Leslie Roberts, Midwest TYCA Representative, gathered information and provided the report for her region after the convention. Leslie Roberts, Oakland Community College, Orchard Ridge Campus, Farmington Hills, Michigan.
6. **Pacific Coast**. Sterling Warner, Evergreen Valley College. San Jose, California.
7. **Northeast**. Patrick Sullivan, Manchester Community College. Manchester, Connecticut.

Session moderator and Chair of the TYCA Research Initiative Committee:
Jody Millward, Santa Barbara City College. Santa Barbara, California.

Key Challenges

As it turns out, panelists identified a broad range of common challenges. From these challenges emerge the beginning of a national portrait of the working conditions that shape the professional lives of two-year college English teachers. Among the most commonly identified challenges were these:

Workload. This was an issue of deep concern among all of the presenters. Increasingly, two-year college English teachers are being asked to do more with less. As Don Andrews noted, for example, "Workload for faculty in North Carolina was increased to 18 hours per semester several years ago. Now the increased workload is spreading to campuses in other states. Another form of this problem is seen in the administrative decision on some campuses to increase class sizes. Other campuses suffer from uninformed administrators who believe that on-line courses do not require as much time as a regular class. Lack of available funding is the commonly cited reason for these abuses of our faculty. Reasonable guidelines must be set and followed before the problem causes good teachers to look elsewhere for improved working conditions."

Sterling Warner discussed this problem as well, as it has played out in the California community college system. All of the panelists identified workload as a key problem.

How might we best continue to advocate for reasonable class size and workloads?

Budget Cuts, Budget Cuts, Budget Cuts: As Eva Payne noted, "Oregon and Washington have both been hit with reduced state funding. Between 2000 and 2005 Oregon's investment per student in community colleges dropped from \$2,235 to \$1,951. Increased tuition combined with fewer sections of courses being offered reduced enrollment by 13% from 2002 to 2003 – the lowest enrollment level in Oregon Community colleges since 1995.

Additionally, our state retirement system underwent a major change in 2003. Faculty who were eligible for retirement left community colleges in record numbers rather than staying on and having retirement benefits reduced. The English program at my college lost 40% of our full-time faculty. Many disciplines in the college saw full-time positions being put on 'hold' and part-time faculty hired to replace them.

Fewer numbers of full-time faculty spread their time thinly serving on campus-wide committees, advising students, planning curriculum, preparing for an accreditation visit, and participating in huge structural changes planned for the college."

Most of these concerns were echoed by other panelists, and most had similar stories to tell. In times of fiscal crisis, how can we best protect the integrity of the community college and academic enterprise? How can we most effectively respond to interventionist and cash-strapped legislators?

Increasing Numbers of Part-Time Faculty . . . and Not Enough Full-Time Faculty to Train and Mentor Them All: As Don Andrews noted, "Part-time instructors are the wave of the future.' This statement made by a number of regional administrators shows the problem that we continue to battle. The Southeast region is similar in that each state has an increased use of part-time faculty in all course-levels within the discipline. Few schools in the region have attempted to implement equitable policies for part-time instruction. Most do not even pay living wage salaries and others restrict the number of classes that a part-time teacher may have during a term or year. Some areas within some states have an over-abundance of willing part-time teachers, while others cannot find enough. Some former adjuncts are taking on out-of-region on-line classes and giving up the local classrooms. Our colleges cannot continue to grow at the expense of our part-time colleagues."

As one English department member from the Northeast noted (quoted in Patrick Sullivan's report), "English departments are overly reliant on adjunct faculty and this creates a host of problems--some practical, some logistical, some ethical. Adjunct faculty members simply cannot have the same commitment to an institution as full-time professors can."

This was a major issue in every region.

ESL and The 1.5 Generation: Many presenters mentioned ESL as an important concern. Many ESL students now come to us with strong listening and speaking skills (and are "Americanized" in many ways), but they are often not strong readers or writers. They are also "caught between two cultures and two generations." How do we best meet their needs?

Academic Integrity: As David Lydic noted in his report, "Plagiarism did not start with the Internet, but we all know the Internet has made it easier and more tempting. With the increased promotion by such services as Turnitin.com, there has been much discussion about ways to detect plagiarism. While detection is important and sometimes personally fulfilling, we also need to do all we can with teaching students proper techniques of research and documentation. As has always been the case, we

need the support of our administrators and counselors as we make decisions about penalties we impose."

This was an issue of obvious concern for many.

Open Enrollment: A key challenge identified by at least one panelist was a thorny, troubling philosophical question related to open admissions and the community college mission: How many chances do we give students? Should we ever say "no"? Are we being honest when we tell everyone that they can make it? Does it make sense to offer admission to even the most unprepared? Should there be a "bottom" threshold for admittance--and, if so, what should that threshold be?

Mission Statement: "Is our mission being shifted underneath us?" There was a sense voiced by a number of presenters that legislators and politicians were actively working to reshape and redirect the mission of the community college, often without input or feedback from community college professionals.

Assessment: There was a lengthy, spirited discussion about "assessment." There was a great deal of consensus that assessment is currently being "misused" or used in ways that are not conducive to the best outcomes for our students. One common claim made by administrators and politicians appears to be that "If students aren't learning/graduating/transferring in large numbers to four-year institutions, something's wrong, it's our fault, and something needs to be fixed."

A number of important questions arose from this discussion: How do we measure success at the community college? What are the components and variables that contribute to "success" at the community college? How would we prioritize them? And what, exactly, are we measuring? Should we use the same criteria that 4-year colleges do (usually, graduation and retention rates)? Is success at the community college best measured by graduation rates? How do we account for students' chaotic lives, lack of financial support, underpreparedness when we measure student outcomes?

As Leslie Roberts noted in her report, "Measuring success in community colleges is difficult, since students come with varying goals, and many never intend to 'graduate' from our institutions. Instead, they are taking a course to upgrade skills, or taking some courses before transferring to

another institution. Legislative definitions of success as the number of graduates pose a problem in many states."

Technology: Joanna Tardoni reported that technology is a big challenge in rural areas in her region (this is probably an issue nationwide), especially as our colleagues teaching in these areas try to keep up with upgrades, training, and advancing technology.

Also, as David Lydic noted in his report, "Online courses continue to grow in number. The main concerns seem to be those of quality control: How do we ensure that teachers are properly trained in using Blackboard or WebCT or other platforms? Teachers are sometimes told to teach these courses without proper training or motivation. How do we ensure proper technical support for such courses?"

Are students receiving adequate orientation after registering for these courses? Is there screening in place to determine which students are suited for them? Student withdrawal rates are often double those of traditional classes. How do we know papers written and tests taken are done by the students?"

These were issues that resonated deeply with many in attendance at our session.

The Need for "Hard" Data on Community Colleges: How are we unique? How are we similar to 4-year colleges? What does the data say about the work we do? Can we ever get beyond the anecdotal?

Workload and Professional Development: English teachers continue to be very busy, and this has hindered professional development. As I reported from a colleague from the Northeast, "I get home and the last thing I want to look at are more words! So it's hard for me to read professional journals or think about writing something to publish."

Communication. A number of panelists suggested that we need more and better communication between various community colleges state to state and on a national level.

Key Successes

There were many successes reported as well. Among the most noteworthy, were these:

Quality: Sterling Warner noted that "community college students transferring to both CSU and UC have higher GPAs, in general, than native CSU and UC graduates in the last five years." Research data like this speaks eloquently for the kind of quality education that community colleges continue to provide students.

Articulation Agreements and Common Course Numbering: As David Lydic reported, "Colorado achieved statewide common numbering for English courses. This will make predictable transfer of courses from school to school much easier. Texas did this several years ago and it has been an immense help both in the transfer of courses between two-year colleges and the transfer of courses from two-year to four-year schools."

A number of presenters noted similar successes.

Continued Enthusiasm: There continues to be great enthusiasm for the enterprise of teaching and for engaging the various challenges English teachers face in our profession. English teachers appear to continue to work happily and with great determination. Morale is strong, despite many challenges. People are busy.

Local Creativity: There is a great deal of local creativity and community engagement (poetry readings, departmental reading groups, leadership on issues related to literacy and access, academic support and success programs).

Technology Use Is on the Rise. WebCT and Blackboard are commonly used even in traditional classes. Increasing numbers of distance and online courses are being offered.

Regional TYCA Groups Flourishing: Membership appears to be improving in most regions, and national officers continue to set ambitious goals. This group was mentioned by a number of presenters as doing increasingly important work.

First-generation Students Continue to Enter Our Classrooms. As Don Andrews noted, "The day-to-day stimulation of working with an increasing number of ESL students and others who are the first of their

families to enter college continues to keep us 'on our toes' professionally. (The ESL increase is not just a Florida matter; it is regional.)"

Conclusion

The TYCA Research Initiative Committee is currently at work on a number of research projects, including producing a fact sheet on two-year college enrollment, funding, student demographics, and working conditions. The TYCA Research Initiative Committee is also in the process of conducting the first nationwide survey of English teachers at two-year colleges. This survey covers four areas: assessment, teaching with new technologies, writing across the curriculum, and working conditions. The results will provide the first national database of pedagogy and practice in two-year college English departments and is critically important to our advocacy efforts on the local, state, and national levels. The deadline for submitting the survey is September 10, 2005. If your department has not yet submitted a survey response, please do so. The survey can be found at this URL:

<http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB224BA4DG3EZ>

It will take about an hour of your time to complete.

Finally, for a more detailed account of regional successes and challenges, please see the Appendix.

Should you have questions about our research work, please contact Jody Millward. We'd love to have you join us!