Why I Love Community Colleges

I will, up front, admit to being a late-comer to the party.

In today’s mental image of the college student, in the 1960s I would have been known as “a traditional student.” We now define them as “18- to 24-year olds, right out of high school, headed to a residential liberal arts college, having institutional options, single, parents paying for very affordable tuition, career path clearly in mind . . .” You get the picture.

Like a fish that doesn’t know it is swimming in water, I was deep into the paradigm that higher education was how the privileged and elite became more privileged and elite. I was unaware of a whole sector of higher education that practiced open admission. Had I known this at that time in my personal history, I likely would have frowned on it.

Fast forward. Late in my career, I become immersed in accreditation of the type of colleges and universities that had shaped my own earlier pathways. I join the staff at the WASC Senior College and University Commission. I learn about assuring and enhancing educational effectiveness, and I end each day deeply satisfied with the opportunity. A dozen years later, I retire from WSCUC as Senior Vice President; but my passion for accreditation is still very much alive. In the summer of 2016, I join the staff at ACCJC and begin a journey of discovery.

I discover faculty whose capacities to care about struggling students seem inexhaustible. I learn about student services staff who ceaselessly innovate ways to spot overwhelmed students and intervene effectively to help them remain as students. I interface with presidents and chancellors who champion and defend their colleges like a mother bear defends her cubs. I begin to engage with a surprising range of related organizations, like the RP Group, the Community College League of California, ACCCA, ACCT, CCCCCO, ASCCC, PPEC (all those acronyms!) that each craft a point of entry to support the mission of our member colleges. I prepare training modules for trustees related to accreditation and feel their deep commitments to the institutions they oversee.

On too-few occasions, I meet with the students who are the heart and passion of our colleges. I stretch as I take in the vast range of their goals, their varied positions in life, their life stories that seldom match the “traditional student” paradigm. The students’ stories fill me with admiration as I hear how their persistence against odds connects with the wise compassion of their faculty and staff. I met recently with the current cohort of student trustees and I was amazed at their vision and maturity. As I leave a campus, I often comment to my colleagues, “These are the future; and it looks bright.”

I resonate deeply with the cultural values of our community colleges. In addition to fostering the dreams of the serious career-bound scholars, its people champion the underserved, the undocumented, the second-chancers, the late-bloomers, the life-circumstance-constrained, the targets of prejudice, the ostracized “other,” and the ones just sampling life’s promises before shifting into second gear.

I also discover that our community colleges are very vulnerable to being misunderstood, even maligned, when judged using the norms set by selective institutions. I see the frowns on the faces of those whose personal histories as “traditional students” still rule their expectations and
I wish they could hang out for a while on a campus, listen to the stories, and feel the energies. I harbor a hope that they, too, will fall in love.

At this capstone phase of my professional career, I am deeply humbled that circumstance has placed me here. My daily routine gives me a high-altitude view of what 134 institutions, thousands of faculty and staff, and multiple parallel organizations are doing to help 2.6 million of the nation’s future succeed. When people ask about my work, I say, “I smile a lot.” And that’s largely because I love what these colleges are doing for their students.