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## IMAGES OF FICTIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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*Popular media represent outlets for shaping and informing public perception of institutions and institutional actors found in our society. Community colleges and their students have been featured in a number of fictional works. This paper provides an analysis of the portrayal of community college students in the fictional works of novels, short stories, television programs, and motion pictures. Through this analysis, the authors highlight significant lessons that can be learned from increased understanding of fictional portrayals of community colleges and their students and applied to both community college practice and continued research.*

Writers have generated hundreds of novels, short stories, screenplays, and television scripts that take an institution of higher learning as a setting and a student, professor, or administrator as a protagonist; a growing number of these works center on the two-year institution. These works are important to understand because the mass public has access to them, whereas they may never see a catalog, Web site, or other publicity document from a community college. Thus, these fictional accounts may have a dramatic effect on public opinion and are worthy of scholarly attention.

Our study examined images of the two-year college student in popular media and analyzed the images presented to the public.

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We proceed with a review of relevant literature related to scholarly analysis of higher education in fiction that leads to a discussion of community college students. We next include our analysis of primary sources, the short stories, novels, and movies that depict community college students. We finally contend that these images have implications for two-year colleges, particularly in the areas of marketing and admissions, student services, and instruction.

### **COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN FICTION**

Higher education generally has enjoyed a long and continued place in fiction. Academic or college novels are a popular genre, and they feature such works as *Moo* by Jane Smiley (1995), *Murder at the MLA* (1994) by D. H. Jones, and *The Lecturer's Tale* by James Hynes (2001). Higher education has also been depicted in numerous tales and short stories, including *Rappacini's Daughter* (Hawthorne, 1899) and the *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer, 1971). Higher education has also been represented in movies and television ranging from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff* (1966) to *Animal House* (1978) on the big screen, and from *Rosanne* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on television. The portrayals range in their approach to higher education from satirical comedy to down-trodden realism. Scholars have cataloged or examined these works for many years (see Barasch, 1983; Belok, 1958; Boys, 1946; Carr, 1990; Hinton, 1994; Kramer, 1981; Lyons, 1962; Rossen, 1993; Seigel, 1989; Thelin & Townsend, 1988; Tierney, 2004; Umphlett, 1984).

While the community college specifically has been the focus of many short stories, novels, and movies, scholarship examining fictional accounts of the community college is limited. Conducting a historical analysis, DeGenaro (2006) looked at the ways "junior colleges" were depicted in popular print media during the 1920s and 1930s. (DeGenaro explains in his analysis that the term junior colleges was used to describe two-year institutions' relation to four-year institutions.) He found that, by and large, positive accounts were provided. As he noted, occasional attacks were levied against the junior college for the threat it posed to the tradition of the four-year liberal arts college.

The combination of DeGenaro's work and the relative dearth of scholarship pertaining to the depiction of community college students in fiction demonstrates that we have a great deal to learn about the ways in which these students and institutions might be perceived by the reading and viewing public. Understanding the messages presented about the community college and the community college student is important to the continued success of higher education (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann,

2006). A review of portrayals of community college students can provide insights to the perception of community colleges generally and among potential students more specifically.

### **COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Understanding who community college learners are can help us understand how accurately they are depicted in popular media. Leaders in the field have argued that “two words sum up [community college] students: *number* and *variety*” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 39). As a group, community college students represent the greatest diversity among students grouped by institutional type (Laanan, 2000). Students who enroll in community colleges come from a broad range of ages and backgrounds including gender, race, and economic standing. Community college students also represent the spectrum of academic ability: from the academically gifted and well-prepared to the under-prepared and those who need remedial education in one or more subject areas. However, due in part to the nature of open admissions policies used in community colleges, lower-ability students represent the bulk of enrollment (Savage, 1989).

While there is great diversity in today’s community colleges, we know that community college students are more often female, tend to be older (with an average age of late 20s), are more often from lower to middle socioeconomic backgrounds, and more likely to be the first in their family to attend college (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). While enrollments are dominated by white students, a community college is likely to represent the institution of choice for students who are first-generation college-goers or members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Zamani, 2000). Additionally, community colleges enroll more students of color than most four-year institutions. In their review of articles pertaining to students with disabilities, Quick, Lehmann, and Deniston (2003) found that community colleges enroll more students with disabilities than do four-year institutions.

### **REASONS FOR ATTENDING COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

Students choose to attend community colleges for many and varied reasons. The information that students and parents use in making a college choice are just as varied as the reasons they choose to attend community colleges; however, community colleges often face the challenge of not meeting the information needs of potential students

and parents in adapting to preferred information sources and delivery (Goff, Patino, & Jackson, 2004). Just as popular print media served a function in disseminating information about community colleges to the public in the 1920s and 1930s (DeGenaro, 2006), so too do contemporary works of fiction.

Beyond these reasons is the role community colleges play in building human capital (Laanan, Hardy, & Katsinas, 2006). The authors suggest that students who achieve success in the community college (through the earning of an associates degree or technical certificate) attain greater levels of human capital than those students who drop-out from four-year institutions. This movement of human capital is facilitated in part by the community college's use of open admissions policies. Through open admissions, community colleges become academically accessible to those students who would otherwise forego higher education due to poor academic performance or preparation in high school. Due to the prevalence of community colleges in most states, they are also easily accessible geographically (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005). And, through a variety of state and federal funding initiatives, community colleges are more financially accessible than four-year institutions (Hendrick, Hightower, & Gregory, 2006).

## **METHOD**

Two research questions drove this study: (a) how are two-year college students portrayed in fictional works, and (b) how do these images and portrayals group together in meaningful ways?

The research design of this study drew on Thelin's (1976) proposed alternative approach to the study of higher education. He suggested the use of unobtrusive methods that focus on images of the ways in which institutions and their constituents interact as well as the nature of these relationships. Thelin contends that such efforts are made through the study of cultural artifacts, which in the case of works of fiction are represented by the artist through various representations of culture. This approach has the potential to reveal a great deal about the ways in which the two-year college experience might be perceived by the general public and future potential students.

The difficulty in finding answers to our questions arose in the process of collecting, winnowing, and analyzing images apart from works that simply give passing mention to two-year colleges. We searched electronic databases that focus on education and also humanities (including ERIC, Academic Search Elite, MLA International Bibliography, and the Internet movie databases) to identify fictional

works that provide an in-depth focus on the community college student. We came up with hundreds of works that mention two-year college students. We reviewed abstracts and identified 10 works in each of our areas (short stories and novels, television, and motion pictures) that took the community college student as a central character.

To analyze these data, we used techniques customary to both humanistic and qualitative research: content analysis, inductive analysis, and constant comparison (Barzun & Graff, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When reviewing the works, we looked for and labeled recurrent themes. We present the findings according to genre, and we highlight themes we found within each category, pointing out similarities and differences of themes in the different genres.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***Novels and Short Stories: Two-year Students and Self-improvement***

In fiction, two-year student protagonists are often portrayed as bright, goal-oriented individuals who attend community colleges for self-improvement. In “Shiloh,” a short story by Bobbie Ann Mason (1989), for example, the protagonist is Norma Jean Moffett, a 35-year-old married woman from a lower class background who is returning to school. Norma Jean has a job and a family, yet she attends the local community college because she has a feeling that she has missed something important in her life (Mason, 1989). She wants to improve herself, so she is taking composition and a body-building course. During the course of the short story, Norma Jean exhibits competence and academic success as she learns to write topic sentences and paragraphs. Her personality becomes more sophisticated, and her character seems to flourish, reflecting her college attendance combined with her personal goals for her education. Even though her growth ultimately results in the breakdown of her marriage, since her husband is unable to keep up with her intellectually or emotionally, she is portrayed as a dynamic character flourishing even within an oppressive home environment. Her character aligns closely with scholarly literature analysis of the average community college student.

Joyce Carroll Oates’s (1969) *Them* also shows an underprivileged character who seeks personal growth. The protagonist, Maureen Wendall, is a single 26-year-old woman who wants to improve her life. Maureen has overcome living in a slum, selling herself, and being

beaten almost to death by her stepfather, and she now wants a chance at success and happiness. She flunked out of a university years earlier and has begun to attend a junior college. Like Norma Jean, she takes English composition, and she attends class with “several housewives, a sour-faced taxi driver, a milk delivery man, three men who worked at Ford’s on the dayshift, all of them worn to the bone by other lives, other identities, so that their shoulders [are] permanently rounded” (Oates, 1969, p. 444) and all of whom, like Maureen, are seeking to improve their circumstances. Maureen plans to marry her English teacher, even though he is already married and has three children. It is the teacher’s desire to help Maureen, to improve her writing, and to protect her that brings the two together.

In Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), a novel that later was made into a movie and television series, the student character (Melanie) Kiswana Browne is a single African-American female. In contrast to Norma Jean and Maureen, she comes from an upper middle-class family. Kiswana wants to bring political consciousness to her family and her community. She does not want to be like “other educated blacks sitting . . . with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia,” and she would “rather be dead than be like . . .—a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black!” (Naylor, 1982, p. 85). Her quest for self-improvement and the fact that her “old lady is always on her about going back to school” (p. 161) led her toward higher education so that she may learn more about her heritage and cause (Naylor, 1982). Instead of choosing one of “those bourgie schools” (p. 84), she attends community college, where she is “studying black history and the science of revolution” (Naylor, 1982, p. 161). She is a strong, intelligent, independent woman who ultimately realizes she needs an education, and because of this realization finds not only academic success but also success within her community.

### ***Television: Two-year Students, Financial Issues, and Career Paths***

In television situation comedies, student characters often choose to attend two-year colleges for financial reasons, either because of immediate financial difficulties or to acquire job skills and financial stability. When it aired, the television sitcom *Roseanne* professed the goal of portraying a “real” family. On one episode, the Conner family gives their daughter Becky money to take a community college course. She is intelligent, has always done well in school, and is motivated. Becky, however, chooses to give the money to her husband

Mark, so he can take an auto mechanics course, instead of going to school herself. The young couple feels financial pressure and believes the course will give Mark the job skills necessary to open his own auto shop. Becky also wants her anti-intellectual husband to succeed in her domain, namely in an educational setting, so that she can be proud of him and respect him. In her mind, the two-year institution is prestigious, and if he can succeed there, then he will prove her intellectual equal. Mark, even though he believes the two-year school can afford him occupational success, is not devoted to his studies and drops out of school. Becky accepts her husband for who he is, and she returns to school. Again, the student who does not want to attend the two-year institution and is not goal-oriented ultimately withdraws and makes room for another.

On the television series *Growing Pains*, Mike Seaver was a central character. He was an 18-year-old student from an upper-class family. His high school grades are less than impressive, and he now seeks the education that he has bypassed. Mike's dream is to be an actor, but when he fails to get a role for an off-Broadway production, he realizes he must obtain job skills in order to live. To gain these skills, he takes classes at the local community college. Drama is among the classes he takes, and under the tutelage of an instructor who is in Mike's initial estimation overbearing and pompous, he hones his skills with continued hopes that he will eventually be a success. Mike is successful in the community college environment: his grades are much better than in high school, he is popular with fellow students, and on one episode, he even manages to land a small professional role on a popular police television series. Mike is depicted as a student who feels fortunate to be attending school and as one who feels generally satisfied with the quality of education he is receiving. He is also pleased with the overall experience associated with attending the community college.

Another student character who did well in the community college environment appeared on the television sitcom *Who's the Boss*. Tony Micelli, a single parent in his mid-30s from the Bronx, is a live-in maid for an upper-middle-class family. He begins attending a community college to enrich his life and, more specifically, to gain job skills. Tony desires a career that is fulfilling, both intellectually and financially. Additional motivation comes from his need to be on equal footing with his boss, who is well educated and successful in her advertising career. He flourishes in the community college environment and is depicted in various episodes as the teacher's pet, a popular student, and a campus Romeo. He is satisfied because he is learning and growing intellectually.

In the Canadian television comedy *Trailer Park Boys* (shown in America via satellite networks and BBC America), the two protagonists, Julian and Ricky, chronicle their lives in the Sunnyvale Trailer Park community. Throughout the “mockumentary,” we follow Julian and Ricky in their quests to get rich quick and to provide better lives for themselves and their loved ones, all of whom reside in Sunnyvale. Despite their best efforts, and sometimes good intentions, each season begins with Julian and Ricky being released from jail, just as each season concludes with one or both returning to jail. Due in part to their escapades, Ricky never completed high school and never sat for his Grade 10 exit exam, a point that is regularly made by host of antagonists who swarm through the series on a regular basis. In one particular episode, Ricky approaches the admissions officer of the local community college in order to earn his high school diploma so that he can move on to trade school and the ability to provide financially for his family. Unfortunately, Ricky lacks the aptitude to gain admission, and he takes a job as a janitor. He and Julian then turn this into a money-making venture and begin selling drugs. They rationalize this as taking part in the community college in order to improve their lives and the lives of the ones they love. But during Ricky’s time at the community college, he finds a great deal of pride in being associated with the school, and he tells his loved ones that he is working toward his academic goals.

### ***Movies: Two-year Students, Transfers, and Life-changing Experiences***

In movies, two-year students often overcome past failures to receive a second chance in the two-year system. A positive representation of the two-year college’s role as a stepping-stone to a bachelor’s degree is the movie *Rudy*. In the film, the title character is a football player from a rural Midwestern town whose dream is to play football for Notre Dame. When he is not accepted to Notre Dame because of poor grades and test scores, he attends Holy Cross College, a two-year college in South Bend, Indiana, near Notre Dame. After two years of hard work, he graduates and gains admission to Notre Dame. There he makes the practice team but is unable to play in a game until the last game of his senior season. He is put into the game for one play in which he sacks the opposing quarterback. In this film, the two-year college is vital to a student’s success and ultimate fulfillment of a lifelong ambition. Through diligence and hard work, Rudy attains an aspiration that would have been denied to him by

four-year institutions alone. He is ultimately successful as a community college student and as a transfer student.

In the documentary *Hoop Dreams*, the camera follows two basketball players through their high school and college careers. One of the students, Arthur Agee, is kicked out of a private high school and is forced to go to public school. He then attends a community college. During his sojourn at the community college, Agee is portrayed as a hard working, dedicated, and motivated individual. He springboards from the two-year institution to play basketball at Arkansas State University and achieves success, popularity, and fame as a college athlete. Again, the main character is successful in the community college arena as well as a transfer student.

In the television movie *Nobody's Child*, a middle-aged woman named Marie Balter has been wrongly institutionalized in a mental hospital, and a community college instructor helps bring about her release. She attends the community college and thrives under the tutelage of the female English teacher. This student, like the other two-year college students portrayed in movies, uses the community college as a springboard to another degree: an MA from Harvard. Here again, the leading character experiences academic success within and out of the community college setting using the transfer function.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE***

The depictions of two-year students can provide us with lessons pertaining to multiple areas of practice and research in the community college. An overarching lesson from these depictions is that we can begin to understand how the community college experience might be perceived, not only by those who aspire to attend higher education, but also those within the higher education community who have not had opportunities to knowingly interact with students, faculty, or staff from community colleges. This includes those who engage in scholarship of higher education as a field of study. The lessons that apply specifically to those whose practice and research is based in the community college are likely to extend far beyond the discussion provided in this paper, but the authors will discuss the dominant lessons that emerged from the data analysis.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING AND RECRUITING***

The competition for students has never been more intense in higher education than in recent years. This is particularly true for the

major types of students that two-year schools seek. For-profit schools and universities are looking to expand their market share of adult learners, noncredit students, and traditional-aged students. In order to compete for these students, community colleges need to understand the initial assumptions of these populations. Popular media sources influence perceptions, for better or worse, and marketing strategies of community colleges should consider their impact. The wide influence of movies, television, and fiction literature often serves as the initial frame for those who community colleges try to attract. Using the positive aspects of their depictions of community colleges—as we have referenced—can increase the potential for marketing and recruiting success. Likewise, understanding the negative portrayals provides insight into areas that must be overcome to win over various populations and stakeholders. A tremendous amount of money and time is spent on marketing efforts. Improving the effectiveness of these endeavors by understanding the sway of popular media is important to marketing and recruiting success.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE TEACHING***

Faculty who teach in community colleges face a number of challenges and opportunities that are highlighted by the fictional works reviewed above. As noted in the literature and the fictional works, there is significant student diversity in the community college classroom. Not only are students becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and religious beliefs, but also in academic ability, reasons for attending, and goals and aspirations. Faculty will face a variety of college students, and knowing who they are will better help prepare faculty for the instructional methods and strategies that will work best for their particular learners (see Barr & Tagg, 1995).

While many community college students are often described as of lower academic ability, there are growing numbers of high academic talent students entering community colleges. Honors students comprise only 2% of community college students, compared to 7% at four-year institutions (Long, 2002). Serving these students in the classroom is likely to require a different approach than working with students who need developmental and remedial instruction. Some community college faculty may resent and balk at the delivery of special courses to honors students that are not open to other students at the community college (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). Because of the variety of learning abilities that fill community college

classrooms, faculty have to be mindful to tailor courses to the unique qualities possessed by each group of students.

Working through college is a theme that runs across each of the genres that portray the community college student. As such, faculty and campus leaders should take this aspect of student life into account. While workload associated with coursework is an obvious area of consideration, the relevancy of being able to apply knowledge gained through coursework to the workplace, and vice versa, is likely to be important to working students. And, because working is likely to be one of many responsibilities of the student, faculty may have to face the harsh reality that their course does not represent a high-level priority for every student.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION***

Community college deans and administrators must focus on the overall student experience: in the classroom working with faculty to adjust curricular offers and modes of delivery to better meet student needs; outside of the classroom administrators need to understand the services students need, and work with staff in those areas to be responsive and proactive to adapt to changing needs. Academic administrators should also be responsive to changes in the local labor market, as changing demands by the labor market can affect enrollments at the community college (Kane & Rouse, 1999).

Opportunities to engage faculty in in-service programs should be sought regularly to aid in faculty awareness of student needs as they change. These in-service programs would also provide opportunities to dialogue ways to meet student needs and to adapt to them, rather than expecting students to adapt to rigid modes of instruction. In order to best facilitate these efforts, academic administrators need to not only understand the methods faculty currently use to reach students, but to also gauge what faculty want to accomplish, both with in-service and in the classroom (Quick & Davies, 1999).

Yet another aspect of the community college student draws from the fact that so many work outside of the home. Even four-year institutions have responded by scheduling classes in the evenings, and some even do so on the weekends. But, as scholars have pointed out, the student experience extends far beyond the classroom (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Komives & Woodard, 1996), and requires student services. Community college administrators should regularly monitor demand for services across the institution and adjust operating hours accordingly to best meet the needs of their students, both traditional and nontraditional.

## ***IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE***

The findings of this study suggest that there is a broad range of services through which the community college should seek to engage its students. First and foremost are recruitment, admissions, and financial aid. Central to the challenges of these aspects of student services is the diversity of community college students, particularly the diversity of reasons for attending two-year institutions. The image of the community college as a stepping stone dominates fictional works. This is certainly an aspect of the community college that can be stressed during recruitment and admissions. Additionally, student retention is an important issue with many questions as to the nature and meaning of the concept within the community college environment. This is where understanding the myriad reasons for attendance becomes paramount. Grappling with retention issues becomes especially difficult considering the multitude of options that exist for defining student success and, of particular importance for community colleges, transfer rates (Townsend, 2002).

As female enrollments continue to outpace those of males in community colleges, administrators must be cognizant of a number of issues relating to the experiences of the women who attend their institutions. Although some men do perform the tasks associated with primary childcare, it is mainly women who face the responsibilities of finding child-care and transporting children to and from childcare. Nearly two-thirds of all community colleges in the United States provide on-campus childcare opportunities for students (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). Support for students with childcare responsibilities is likely to extend beyond a place to drop-off the kids as students work to balance the many demands on their time, including family, working outside of the home, and attending school. While community college enrollments of women have been high, there is potential for their numbers to increase further. This is because demand for professionals in fields often dominated by women (e.g., nursing, health technology, and other health-related professions) is growing beyond the current supply (Laanan et al., 2006).

## ***CONCLUSION***

The fictional depictions discussed above present a relatively positive picture of the two-year student. The two-year students who appear in these works appropriately differ in age, gender, class, and race,

depicting the diversity that exists in the two-year institution. They also attend for a variety of reasons including self-improvement, career advancements, financial accessibility, skill-development, and transfer to a four-year institution. The students are nurtured, supported, and challenged in the two-year institution and often find personal, academic, and career success because of their attendance. Thus, for the most part in these cases at least, fiction does reflect fact.

Through examining the perspectives of the community college student as portrayed in fictional accounts, we are able to deepen our understanding of the ways in which potential students and the public sees the community college experience. By doing so, we gain another valuable perspective in learning how best to reach potential students. Beyond the implications associated with the perceptions of those who read and watch these works are those that are applicable to other aspects of the community college. These depictions reveal a great deal about community college students: who they are, how best to connect with them in the classroom, and the services they may need while attending community colleges.

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