

Avoiding the Community College “Cool Out” in English Graduate Programs: Some Concerns about Equity and the Discipline in a Tough Job Market

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Almost everyone can go to college, but the institutions that are most accessible (community colleges) provide the smallest boost to a student's life chances, whereas the ones that offer the surest entrée into the best jobs (major research universities) are highly selective. This extreme mixture of equality and inequality, of accessibility and stratification, is a striking and fascinating characteristic of American education.¹

I had intended to talk about how I have translated my Phd in the “long 18th century” into community college teaching and scholarly engagement as a generalist in writing, literature and digital humanities. But instead I thought it might be more useful to share one thread of my current book project, which is entitled *In Resilience and In Repair: Digital Humanities at Community College and the Limits of “Cooling Out.”*

This term “cooling out” has haunted me since I first stumbled upon it more than a year ago while reading Brint and Karabel’s fascinating study of community colleges in America, *The Diverted Dream*. I think this term “cooling out” has relevance for the state of graduate training in English studies that could impact the quality of community college education for years to come. As you know CCs are getting-new attention recently--from graduate programs, grant funders, and professional associations such as MLA and CCC. This attention, of course, is both warranted and belated, and has taken the form of calls for more tailored graduate preparation to teach in CCs. This term “cooling out” can help us analyze the shape

¹ David F. Labaree qtd in Brint, Steven. *Two Cheers for Higher Education Why American Universities Are Stronger Than Ever--And How to Meet the Challenges They Face*. Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 125.

this attention is taking and perhaps make visible institutional impacts we may not intend. Calls for graduate program reforms and tracking will have effects discipline-wide and institutionally. I want to ask whether this sudden attention may further stratify the field and student access to its core disciplinary function.

Scholars have argued that after WWII community colleges served a “cooling out” function in American higher education (Brint and Karobel, Clark). As Burton Clark put it from his vantage point at the beginning of the CC movement, “The cooling out process in higher education is one whereby systematic discrepancy between aspiration and avenue is covered over, and stress for the individual and the system is minimized.”² The community college, for Clark, “motivates and mollifies” simultaneously through slow adaptation.³

Several features of this process characterize what Clark called the “soft denial” of “cooling out”:

1. **First, Substitute achievement:** the institution provides alternative achievement—a differentiated option that helps community college students adapt to failure
2. **Second, gradual disengagement**—institutions foster a deteriorating sense of engagement with original student goals
3. **Third, an objective denial of options:** the student experiences this path as inevitable
4. **Fourth, “proper classification and placement”** in community colleges replace the selective function of SATs, grades and financial resources in selective schools.
5. **Finally,** this can only happen with the help of “**agents of consolation**”: Faculty, counselors and advisors explicitly steer students toward paths that

² Clark, B. R. “The ‘Cooling-out’ Function in Higher Education. *American Journal of Sociology*, 65, 1960, 569–576, p. 576.

³ The “cooling out thesis” and its application through academic advisors is a controversial thesis. Education researcher Peter Riley Bahr failed to find direct correlation between advising and declining success. However, he notes, “as a broad institutional effect . . . cooling out may be an ongoing process in community colleges” (726). Bahr, Peter Riley. “Cooling Out in the Community College: What Is the Effect of Academic Advising on Students’ Chances of Success?” *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2008, pp. 704–732., doi:10.1007/s11162-008-9100-0.

support the “soft denial” of original goals. The aim of these agents is “to reduce aspiration as well as to define and help fulfill it” (Clark 576).

On first pass, some might say that this “cooling out” function is an outmoded description of the mission of the CC. They might argue that the current vogue in redesign efforts at more than 300 CCs--and climbing--would seem if anything to be *heating up* CC student ambition.⁴ The stated aim of such redesigns to improve success and accelerate time to credential supports such a view. But I am alerted by Clark’s warning that the CC function in higher ed was “to be a general screen behind which unnamed and unperceived tasks are performed” (*Open Door* 174). It is these “backstage elements of work practice” (as sociologist Leigh Star put it) with which I am concerned here. “[I]t takes some digging to unearth the dramas at the heart of system design,” writes Star in her study of infrastructures. To get at them we perform what she calls an “infrastructural inversion.”⁵

The institutional “backstage” of cooling out is hidden in plain sight if you pay attention. Key architects of the Guided Pathways movement recently wrote that CC students flounder because of “too much choice.”⁶ This framing of the causes for CC student failure as one of “too many choices” stands in stark contrast to the way elite four-year schools frame choice. Let’s take a look at a tiny sample. In its recruiting materials, “The Harvard Mission of Discovery,” for example, Harvard College emphasizes the “infinite” choices available to its students.⁷ And even public R1 Berkeley plainly calls out expansive choice in its recruiting materials—“go wide and go deep” it counsels, with more than 13,000 courses to choose from.⁸ Let’s compare these to how choice is framed at Guided Pathway college Linn Benton Community College: “Be a welder, a teacher, a nurse, a business owner, an artist...whatever your dream, your launching pad is LBCC.”⁹ Or Sinclair

⁴ See, for instance, Jenkins, Davis, et al. “Redesigning Your College Through Guided Pathways: Lessons on Managing Whole-College Reform From the AACC Pathways Project.” *Community College Research Center*, 12 Sept. 2019, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/redesigning-your-college-guided-pathways.html>.

⁵ Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 1999, 33, 77, p. 377-8.

⁶ Thomas Bailey and Davis Jenkins et al. “Matching Talents to Careers: from Self-Directed to Guided Pathways” in *Matching Students to Opportunity*).

⁷ . “Why Harvard.” Harvard College, <https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/why-harvard>.

⁸ “UC Berkeley.” *Outreach*, 1 Jan. 2019, https://admissions.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/AE_OUA_2019_Outreach_GeneralBrochure_FINAL_Web.pdf.

⁹ “Get to Know Us.” *Linn Benton*, <https://www.linnbenton.edu/future-students/get-to-know-us/> . /

College: “Graduate with the right skills to succeed in today's jobs.”¹⁰ These are reasonable goals—but not infinite.

This is not to say that community college leaders—or even the Ivy League researchers for whom community colleges are their object of inquiry—individually intend to intensify an already stratified system. But as sociologists Powell and DiMaggio tell us, institutions are like machines that shape, mediate and channel social choices (2).¹¹ “What has meaning and what actions are possible,” they write, are circumscribed by the structural power of institutions (9). This is true for CC students and it is true for future CC faculty.

In this light, I turn back to the new attention being paid to community colleges. For brevity’s sake I will limit my focus to the “TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English in the Two-Year College.”¹² There is much in this influential document to welcome and admire. My main quibble is with the way the document’s authors and readers may unintentionally formalize the “cooling out function” that has occurred circumstantially for decades, taking it to another institutional level and standard. Those of us who have been at community colleges since graduate schools are aware of the *passive* cool-out that can occur with a CC career—many CC faculty are “ghosted” by their graduate programs and thesis advisors after they enter the CC teaching profession. But if the effect of the new attention paid to community colleges is to formalize this cooling out just because of a bleak employment outlook, we might change the way English is taught and learned in community colleges for generations.

So, looking at the 2016 *TYCA Guidelines*, we notice that it plainly calls out the *marketability* of faculty and makes an explicit claim for that marketability’s relationship to training in graduate school.¹³

¹⁰ “About Sinclair.” *Sinclair College*, <https://www.sinclair.edu/about/>

¹¹ DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008.

¹² *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 45, no. 1, Sept 2017, pp. 8–19.

¹³ The TYCA document is inspired by the 2014 Report of the *MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature*, which suggests that “graduate programs should be centered on students’ diverse learning and career development needs” (1-2).

Prospective two-year English faculty become more valuable and marketable to hiring institutions when they have varied experience and training, including composition, communications, basic writing, technical writing, writing centers, literary studies, and reading. Even more importantly, those interested in teaching in the two-year college **must** be prepared for the unique community college context, which includes working with the diverse student population served at community colleges and doing so in a range of instructional modes (*n.p.*).

Most of us who teach as English generalists will recognize the work noted here. In the course of a career, we've been called upon to develop competencies beyond the traditional PhD. My concern here is that in calling for such **wide** expertise at the moment of graduate training, we implicitly bypass the deep dive in the discipline. I am reminded here of Clark's comments on the CC: "the student . . . transfers to terminal work . . . [and this] terminal student can be made to appear not so radically different from the transfer student, e.g., an 'engineering aide' instead of an 'engineer' and hence he goes to something with a status of his own" (*Open Door* 164).¹⁴

In their discussion of future training for CC faculty, Jensen and Toth¹⁵ argue that "[m]eaningful professionalization" for two-year teaching involves a range of exposure to recognizable and even very useful training including:

- curricula relevant to two-year college teaching;
- preparation for teaching the culturally, linguistically, socioeconomically, and academically diverse students who attend two-year colleges;
- preparation for teaching the range of courses that two-year college English faculty typically cover, including both "developmental" and college-level, with a significant emphasis on composition (562)

Importantly, the *Guidelines* include the following statements:

¹⁴ Clark, Burton R. *The Open Door College: a Case of Study*. McGraw-Hill, 1960.

¹⁵ Derin L. Jensen and Christie Toth, "Unknown Knowns: The Past, Present, and Future of Graduate Preparation for Two-Year College English Faculty." *College English*, Volume 79, Number 6, July 2017 p. 561-592, p. 562.

- “consider developing specialized graduate program tracks, interdisciplinary programs/certificates, or other credentials that signal students’ expertise in two-year college English instruction”
- “Committees should be receptive to innovative culminating projects that might be more useful for aspiring two-year college teacher-scholars than the traditional thesis or dissertation” (n.p.)

While I do agree that some graduate training in CC work is valuable, it’s this focus on tracking for market purposes that concerns me. My concern here is that the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive demands of institutional motivation will have unintended impacts on the future quality and character of English study at CCs.¹⁶ Here are some of my concerns about those impacts:

First, this kind of tracking partakes in precisely the kind of market solutionism that emerging humanities fields such as Critical Infrastructure Studies and Critical University Studies call into question.

Second, this tracking de-emphasizes humanities subjects and literature other than composition. While this could be valuable for *some* Writing Studies and Comp and Rhet graduate students who aim to focus on foundational writing/FYC in their research, for *literature* specialists—and WS and CR scholars with other interests-- it requires a distinct change of focus toward *institutional* goals.

My **third** concern is one of staging and timing: the *disciplinary* focus of graduate school—the “deep dive”—is replaced here with a *professional* focus on the *institutional* demands of a future imaginary CC context.

In addition, using graduate curriculum to track faculty creates career path dependence for these students. What coursework and disciplinary artifacts will be replaced by this professional preparation? Necessarily, this training won’t be in *addition* to coursework but *instead* of it.

¹⁶ Neoinstitutionalists speak of 3 pillars of institutional motivation: (See Alan Liu, “Toward Critical infrastructure Studies” NASSR 2018 (4/21/2018) -- p. 15)

1. Regulative—tells you to do
2. Normative—everyone does it
3. Cultural-cognitive—your internalized sense of what it is unimaginable not to do

I also worry that such calls for shifting the burden of learning the CC profession from the *career itself* to graduate *training* threatens to collapse what I consider two distinct communities of practice. The graduate credential formally recognizes membership in the first, disciplinary, community of practice—and this credential has a long shelf life. But membership in the second community of practice involves situated learning—the context of teaching and engaging in the institutional life of a community college—and “legitimate peripheral participation”¹⁷ through shared repertoires and shared practice over time. There is no replacing this practice with a few graduate courses or internships.

While many might say that it’s important to make English program graduates “career ready,” this kind of vocationalizing of the English discipline threatens to further stratify it. I am reminded here of what Linda Adler Kassner calls the “dominance of the college and career readiness frame.”¹⁸ This dominant narrative, she writes, “suggests that the purpose of education is to prepare students . . . to be economic competitors” (125). My concern is that what Adler Kassner writes of learning at the *undergraduate* level is increasingly true at the *graduate* level: a movement from a deep dive into the English *discipline* and toward professional *training* becomes “about credentialing for the purposes of vocationalism” (Labaree, qtd in Adler-Kassner 126).

In Writing Studies at the undergraduate level, Adler-Kassner writes, this movement has meant that “the actual content of academic disciplines and the connections between that content and [writing] strategies is disappearing. . . . Credentialism,” she writes, “means that the content really doesn’t matter” (126). My fear is that professionalizing *some* graduate students toward community college careers as a response to the job crisis will result in a track of community college English teaching that will be further “apart from specific disciplinary content” (126).

¹⁷ Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

¹⁸ “The Companies We Keep or The Companies We Would Like to Keep: Strategies and Tactics in Challenging Times.” *WPA* 36.1 Fall/Winter 2012: 119-140.

Given how I began, you may now guess what my biggest concern is. In addition to solutions to the current crisis being instrumentalist and vocationalist in their structure, they threaten to provide an **up-stream version** of “cooling out” that Burton Clark described. As I’ve said, this “cooling out” has occurred passively for decades. But some of these guidelines will institutionalize graduate programs **themselves** as “agents of consolation” for a “cooling out” of graduate student goals up-stream. And these graduate programs are where the English discipline, “reproduces itself” (Menand 10).¹⁹ Such development of graduate students specifically for the community college context threatens to have enhanced down-stream impacts that have everything to do with **institutional** requirements—e.g., acceleration, Guided Pathway administration, etc.--and much less to do with knowledge production and humanities advocacy in the discipline of English. Students who study English at open-access institutions such as community colleges will then feel these down-stream effects. Recall that “cooling out” occurs through several key moves:

1. **Substitute achievement:** some courses in concentrated study of English are replaced with vocational requirements of CC institutions
2. **Gradual disengagement**—the discipline itself—its forms, methods, artifacts, and values—is preemptively replaced with institutional concerns
3. **Objective denial of options:** objectively there are fewer jobs in higher ed and this can act as a screen for vocational cooling out
4. **“Proper classification and placement”** in a CC: path dependence based on training in graduate school
5. **“Agents of consolation” who** reduce aspiration as well as to define and help fulfill it” (Clark 576).

The job crisis in the humanities can bring with it either a scarcity mindset or a mindset of generosity and expansiveness. However belated, it appears that some graduate programs, professional associations, and grant funders are paying attention to the valid contribution and knowledge creation happening at community colleges. If these entities are serious about helping their graduates to

¹⁹ Menand, Louis. “The English Department: Imagined Futures.” *ADE Bulletin*. no. 151, 2011, pp. 9-17.

avoid the “cool out” and sustain a satisfying professional career as teacher-scholar-activists, they can raise their own awareness of their structural power with respect to community colleges. English faculty leaders at four-year institutions can develop meaningful scholarly connections with community college colleagues—and not just in the compliance arenas of articulation agreements and assessment. The boundary infrastructure of the curriculum—in particular the shrinking number and diversity of literature courses offered at community colleges under pressure to accelerate students time-to-degree—is a good place to start.