

## **IT'S TIME TO TALK QUALITY – AND A WHOLE LOT MORE!**

What do people think of when they think of community colleges and how do these factors compare to reasons given for selecting colleges in general? A series of community perception research studies we have conducted across the country give us some answers and tell us that community colleges need to do a lot more in creating recognition and credibility for many of the benefits that they clearly offer.

Since their explosive growth in the 1960s community colleges have become a mainstay of America's collegiate educational system. Today, 44% of all undergraduates are enrolled at one of over 1400 community colleges around the country. Our research verifies what most of us already know; i.e. community colleges have done an outstanding job of selling themselves as convenient and affordable places to get an education. Furthermore, community colleges are known as places where students at all levels can get started on a college education. Unfortunately, community colleges have done such a good job selling these advantages, that some other important reasons for attending community colleges are often lost.

When we asked research participants to rate 20 possible reasons that are important in selecting a college, quality of instruction was almost always first, followed closely by courses that lead to degrees, courses that lead to jobs, flexible scheduling, a wide range of courses, and classes in technology. An initial reaction would be to say: "That's great – that's exactly what we offer at community colleges!" -- and indeed it is. However, *not one* of these factors is mentioned significantly when individuals are then asked to indicate why someone would attend a community college.

This article is a result of many community perceptions surveys that we have done for community colleges across the country. In these surveys, one of the many different issues that we examine for the colleges is how important different factors are in the selection process if the respondents were to select a college or university and also why these people think that someone would attend a community college (or a technical college depending on the client). The figures presented are from six representative two-year colleges across the country including both community and technical colleges. Although their identities have been hidden for confidentiality purposes, two are in the east, two in the mid-west, one in the south, and one in the west. The colleges represent diversity in size as well. Some are larger, multi-campus colleges and others are smaller, single campus colleges. Some are urban campuses and others are rural.

The first indication of a problem is shown in Exhibits I and II, but before we examine the results, we must explain the difference in approach to the surveys in general and these two exhibits in particular. In our community perception studies we usually call 400 households in a community using ZIP codes provided to us by our client college. Calls are made at random within these ZIP codes, and respondents, unless otherwise selected by the client, are 17 years of age or older. To generate the data in Exhibit I, respondents

are read each factor (i.e. the question is an *aided* question) and asked on a scale of “1” to “5” how important that factor would be in choosing a specific college if the respondent were selecting a college or university with “1” being “not at all important” and “5” being “very important.” The percentage that selected either “4” (“important”) or “5” (“very important”) are presented in the exhibit. A blank space in the column simply means that this factor, for any one of a variety of reasons, was not used in that particular survey. As you can see, although the precise percentages vary, the results are remarkably similar for all the colleges.

### **EXHIBIT I – IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE SELECTION FACTORS**

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>COLLEGES</b>						<b>AVE</b>
	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	
Quality of instruction	95.50	94.50	94.75	95.75	86.08	98.75	94.22
Offers courses towards a degree	91.25	89.25	94.50	90.25			91.31
Courses for a job	91.00	76.50	91.00	89.50	79.63	85.00	85.44
Flexible scheduling	88.25	87.75	87.50	88.75	68.86	84.00	84.18
Wide range of courses	88.00	79.75	82.00	87.75	75.21		82.54
Classes in technology (e.g. computers)	88.00		87.00	85.00			86.67
Cost of tuition	86.00	80.50	81.50	86.25	78.63	89.50	83.73
Transferability of credits	85.75	82.50	86.25	87.25	77.09	83.00	83.64
Personal attention-classroom	85.75	83.50	85.50	87.25	73.83	85.25	83.51
Courses for promotion	81.75	74.75	80.00	82.25	72.27	79.50	78.42
Availability of continuing ed. classes	81.00	77.25	76.25	80.75			78.81
Availability of financial aid	79.75	65.00	73.25	75.25	76.88	74.00	74.01
Convenience of location	77.00	62.25	62.50	68.50	50.75	73.00	65.67
Personal attention-registering, etc.	73.50	65.50	78.25	82.00	62.54	65.75	71.26
General Atmosphere	70.75	79.25		79.00	55.73	67.75	70.50
Classes for personal enrichment	65.25	63.25	52.00	74.00			63.63
Sensitive to ethnic differences	64.25	57.25	67.00	70.75	52.81		62.41
Diverse campus community	56.75	53.25	47.50	58.50	39.03		51.01
Campus life	38.25	47.25	38.50	44.25			42.06
Offers day care services	36.00	28.50	29.25	41.75	27.04		32.51

\*Percentage ranking factor as either “Very Important” or “Important”

In Exhibit II, respondents are not read any factors (i.e. the question is *unaided*), but are simply asked why they feel someone would attend a community college. I have sometimes been asked why we don’t read the choices for this question as well. The main reasons are two-fold. First, the possible selection factors have just been planted in the minds of respondents -- the two questions always follow one another in the survey -- and, therefore, the choices for the first question have just been read. Having planted possible factors in the respondents’ minds, we now wish to see which ones they recall and relate to community colleges. Second, by not mentioning the factors specifically, we leave it entirely up to them to select the factors that relate in their minds to community colleges.

We believe that this spontaneity provides an additional measure of candor. One should remember, however, that the approaches to the two questions do differ in this manner.

FACTOR	COLLEGES						TOT
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Quality of instruction	0.51	5.21	3.00	1.16	0.28	7.09	2.88
Offers courses towards a degree	0.77	0.95	0.00	1.30			0.76
Courses for a job	3.46	2.05	17.75	1.74	4.78	2.28	5.34
Flexible scheduling	4.99	4.27	2.50	3.91	4.78	1.27	3.62
Wide range of courses	0.64	4.90	5.00	2.03	1.27		2.77
Classes in technology (e.g. computers)	0.64	0.32	0.75	0.43			0.53
Cost of tuition	33.93	28.12	51.75	37.39	36.85	17.97	34.33
Transferability of credits	4.74	2.05	11.75	7.83	5.49	3.80	5.94
Personal attention-classroom	2.56	1.74	5.50	1.16	1.55		2.48
Courses for promotion	2.56	0.63	0.00	3.19	1.55	1.52	1.58
Availability of continuing ed. classes	1.15	2.37	2.25	0.72			1.62
Availability of financial aid	0.90	1.11	2.50	0.29	0.42	0.76	1.00
Convenience of location	17.80	24.17	15.00	14.93	21.94	51.65	24.25
Personal attention-registering, etc.	0.38	0.95	0.25	1.16	1.27	0.00	0.67
General Atmosphere	0.51	2.69		1.01	4.08	0.25	1.71
Classes for personal enrichment	2.05	1.74	0.75	2.17			1.68
Sensitive to ethnic differences	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00		0.03
Diverse campus community	0.00	0.95	0.50	0.29	0.84		0.52
Campus life	0.13	1.90	0.25	0.00	0.00		0.46
Offers day care services	0.13	0.16	0.75	0.00	0.00		0.23

As you can see, the results are also consistent across the country, but a closer examination shows what we believe is a potentially serious problem for community colleges. Whereas over 94% of respondents said that “Quality of instruction” was either “Important” or “Very Important” to them in selecting a college, *only 2.88%* of the respondents indicated that this was a reason that people would attend a community college. And why do they feel that people would attend community colleges?

As one might expect, they are thought of for the reasons that community colleges have been emphasizing for over 30 years: “low tuition” (34.33%) and “convenience of location” (24.25%). The use of percentages in comparing these two exhibits, however, can be somewhat misleading in that the first question is “aided” and the second is “unaided.” While a certain amount of comparison is reasonable, one would naturally expect the percentages to be higher in the “aided” responses. It is more useful, I believe, to examine the rankings for each question, which I have done in Exhibit III.

**EXHIBIT III – SELECTION FACTORS COMPARED BY RANK**

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>TOT%</b>	<b>RANK</b>	<b>TOT%</b>	<b>RANK</b>
Quality of instruction	94.22	1	2.88	6
Offers courses towards a degree	91.31	2	0.76	14
Classes in technology (e.g. computers)	86.67	3	0.53	15
Courses for a job	85.44	4	5.34	4
Flexible scheduling	84.18	5	3.62	5
Cost of tuition	83.73	6	34.33	1
Transferability of credits	83.64	7	5.94	3
Personal attention-classroom	83.51	8	2.48	8
Wide range of courses	82.54	9	2.77	7
Availability of continuing ed. classes	78.81	10	1.62	11
Courses for promotion	78.42	11	1.58	12
Availability of financial aid	74.01	12	1.00	13
Personal attention-registering, etc.	71.26	13	0.67	18
General Atmosphere	70.50	14	1.71	9
Convenience of location	65.67	15	24.25	2
Classes for personal enrichment	63.63	16	1.68	10
Sensitive to ethnic differences	62.41	17	0.03	20
Diverse campus community	51.01	18	0.52	16
Campus life	42.06	19	0.46	17
Offers day care services	32.51	20	0.23	19

\*Percentage ranking factor as either “Very Important” or “Important”

As one can see, whereas “Quality of Instruction” ranked first in importance as a selection factor when one was considering any college or university, it ranked a distant sixth as a reason for selecting a two-year college. While “Convenience of location” was the second ranked reason for selecting a two-year college, it ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in importance when one was selecting a college or university. Other examples are apparent in Exhibit III.

Another way of looking at this issue is shown in Exhibit IV. To generate the data for this exhibit, respondents were asked (unaided) why someone would “not choose a two-year college.” As one can see, the image of an associate degree providing a “low end” education and the belief that “a four-year degree means greater pay” were seen as the most common reasons for not attending a two-year college. With regard to the second point, facts are facts and a bachelor’s degree may very well generate a higher lifetime income than an associate degree. Furthermore, the third most cited reason for not attending a two-year college, the student “may wish to go away from home,” is also very real as community colleges are local in nature.

While there are certainly responses to some of these points (e.g. many people do not realize the economic value of an associate’s degree – especially when compared to a high school diploma, and getting started at a local two-year institution may be a great – and less expensive path – to a bachelor’s degree), the fact remains that the image of two-year colleges providing a “low end” education clearly exists in many people’s minds. Unfortunately, this attitude is the flip side of the low ranking given two-year colleges with regard to “quality of instruction.”

#### **EXHIBIT IV – WHY PEOPLE DON’T CHOOSE TWO-YEAR COLLEGES**

<b>NEGATIVES</b>	<b>COLLEGES</b>						<b>TOT</b>
	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	
Image of a “low end” education”	24.90	38.98	19.50	28.76	26.65	10.05	24.81
Want to go away from home	24.90	12.71	11.75	19.47	18.72	21.61	18.19
4-year degree means greater pay	22.22	21.82	32.00	19.03	18.72	34.92	24.78
Doesn’t offer courses needed	7.61	3.81	11.50	6.86	12.78	37.94	13.41
Courses won’t transfer	3.09	14.41	5.50	6.86	4.85		6.94

The good news is that the factors that are important to people when considering a college or university (Exhibit I) do not have to be developed at most two-year colleges – they already exist. that are important to people when considering a college or university (Exhibit I) do not have to be developed at most two-year colleges – they already exist. Quality instruction is a hallmark of two-year colleges. Community colleges stand out as having smaller classes with faculty that are willing to take time to work with students to see that they succeed. Courses that lead to degrees and jobs are their forte. Unfortunately, a large part of the general public doesn’t know this – or at the very least doesn’t associate these things with two-year colleges. (Although your graduates do!) Transferability of credits is not only a part of virtually every two-year program, it is an area that is growing by leaps and bounds. But two-year colleges have done such a strong sell on low cost and convenience that these other messages are often lost.

Let us emphasize at this point that in no way are we advocating that these messages – low tuition costs, convenience of location, and ease of entry -- be dropped. On the contrary, these are the backbone of two-year colleges and are critical advantages that two-year colleges offer their markets and that four-year colleges don’t and they should rightfully be promoted. What we are suggesting, however, is that community and technical colleges must begin – and, yes, in many cases continue -- to talk more about the *quality* of the education and the other key benefits that they provide because it is important to people and because it is often not what people think of when they think of two-year colleges.

There is one other side to this issue. Some students, because two-year colleges have open admission and because of the “low end” image, have the idea that they can come in and succeed in programs without a lot of personal effort. They quickly find out that the courses and programs are more rigorous than they anticipated. Yes, the doors are open to everyone, but two-year students are not handed an education – they have to earn it. Emphasizing the quality of two-year college programs will help to increase the sense of responsibility – and the sense of pride – that sometimes is lacking in the community and technical college student.

While this research identifies some areas of concern – as this article has suggested – we are very optimistic about the future for two-year colleges. Community and technical colleges have the “products” that people want and America needs. They just have to continue to do more to let people know about them.

Lawrence Golden is Executive Vice-President and Director of Research for Sandra Golden & Associates. He is a professor emeritus of the Community and Technical College of the University of Akron where he taught marketing, advertising, and retailing for 30 years.