1

THE PROBLEM OF THE ACADEMIC CULTURE

Community colleges have not often appreciated the complexity of their own origins, and the deep tensions in their mission. Their great guidewords, "access" and "opportunity," are not really synonymous, although they are frequently taken to be; the gap between them looms wider as decades pass. Legislation, district policy, and board policy can decide the issue of access by dropping barriers to admission and by making adequate funding available. But opportunity is more than a matter of whether students get to sit in college classrooms; opportunity depends on what goes on in those classrooms. However, recent research raises disturbing questions about the academic rigor of the community college classrooms, and consequently, the real level of opportunity offered there.

In *Literacy in the Open-Access College,* Richard C. Richardson Jr., Elizabeth A. Fisk, and Morris A. Okum (1983) report on a three-year ethnographic study of a typical college within a large, multicampus community college system, "Oakwood." Their analysis is both novel and powerful. Rather than focusing on the standard fare—academic deficiencies of students or pedagogical failures of teachers—they look instead to the academic culture of the open-access college, particularly to the practice and social meaning of literacy. Their conclusion is that academic practices have gradually weakened at community colleges, that they have experienced a significant leveling down of the "norms of literacy."

Traditionally colleges had insisted upon what Richardson calls "texting." The comprehension and composition of sophisticated texts was very much at the heart of higher education, very prominent in the intellectual formation of students. Typically, they

read books of the sort now called "primary sources" and wrote frequently in most of their courses. At open-access colleges, however, texting has been largely displaced by an impoverished form of linguistic behavior, "bitting." Bitting finds students reading textbooks, as opposed to primary texts, locating information, defining terms, and summarizing chapters. Evaluation primarily tests information retrieval. Examination devices such as true/false questions, fill in the blanks, and matching or multiple-choice questions, simply cue students to produce decontextualized, isolated, nonrhetorical, and fragmented language.

Since academic advancement and career mobility depend heavily upon sophisticated, critical, and expressive language use, the findings of the Richardson team are very unsettling. The academic culture that has come to pervade community colleges, they argue, plays strongly against the cultivation of the sorts of abilities most needed by students struggling to understand and to enter the academic and professional worlds.

Since institutions are naturally unwilling to engage in searching self-examinations, the impact of *Literacy in the Open-Access College* was severely limited. The implication that the reality of community college falls so far short of the ideal was enough to guarantee that the study be perceived as hostile. Although offered in a friendly way, the portrayal by Richardson and his associates raises issues which cannot be thought other than fundamental. If they are right, a profound irony in the history of community colleges is revealed: despite their commitment to democratic education, they come to delimit rather than enhance students' possibilities. How could that have happened despite a generation of talent and effort?

The story as told by the Richardson team is somewhat complicated, since it proceeds at various levels—from classroom teacher to chancellor. With sweeping strokes, the narrative traces shifting classroom expectations and pedagogical practices back to broad policy decisions at the district level, and the manner in which those policies were translated into specific organizational goals at individual campuses. The decision to expand enrollment was made at the highest levels. On individual campuses that meant underprepared students, large numbers of them, whose presence put great stress on the existing curriculum and support services. At the same time district attempts to reduce costs brought an increased reliance on part-time faculty—a practice which tended increasingly to isolate faculty in their classrooms

and reduce collegiate control over the curriculum. Finally, faculty members, lacking both the means to dramatically improve student skills and the authority to maintain traditional expectations, informally "renegotiate" with students classroom relations, academic norms, and intellectual practices.

The attenuation of course content, expectations, and requirements result from the meeting of nontraditional students with a traditional faculty, ill-prepared, as anyone would be, for this novel educational setting. On the student side of the desk are mostly what Richardson calls "requirement meeters" and "specific or nonspecific information users"; on the teacher side are instructors whose pedagogical goals are the limited cognitive objectives of information dissemination.

In retrospect the accommodations made by each side, the inevitable *modus vivendi,* perhaps ought to have been foreseeable. As the average level of academic preparedness and interest of students declines, the faculty—committed to a particular instructional style, the classroom lecture, and a limited instructional goal, "information transfer"—respond by simply watering down the requirements. They both transfer less complex information to the students via lectures and demand much less literate behavior from the students by replacing term papers and essays, for instance, with check marks on multiple-choice exams. What begins in the individual classroom ultimately alters the entire intellectual climate of the school; throughout, the norms of literate activity gradually dip, as the rigor of academic work is negotiated away.

The intellectual drift described in *Literacy in the Open Access College* is not a function of open access *per se.* But it does appear to be what happens what open access is unguided by an adequate understanding of nontraditional education. This is not peculiar to community colleges; it has happened before. Studies reveal mass secondary education to be beset by similar difficulties in maintaining a strong academic culture. Particularly valuable is the ethnographic study of high schools reported by Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen in *The Shopping Mall High School* (1985). Their remarkable central metaphor, the "shopping mall high school," captures the fact that both the public comprehensive high school and the shopping mall are primarily characterized by practices directed at inclusiveness—to serve as many people as possible, to provide something for everyone, to cater to consumer choice. Their analysis roughly parallels that of the Richardson group; the ground level consequences of the commitment to

inclusiveness are traced throughout the high school—its formal administrative structure and extensive array of student services, to be sure, but also its cultural features, particularly the pedagogies and academic practices that evolve among teachers and students.

Because the high school curriculum is shaped by the desire to retain as many students as possible, it has become differentiated to an extraordinary degree; in fact, "the word 'curriculum' does not do justice to the astonishing variety that one finds" (Powell et al., 1985:2). The broad "horizontal" curriculum is hard to miss: from anatomy to zoology, from science to science fiction, from art to the art of cooking, almost any course for almost any interest. The curriculum is also arranged "vertically." Sections of what look like the same course, which carry the same course title or description, say composition or American history, may actually differ quite dramatically from one another. Within the same high school, what counts as American literature, for instance, may include courses which have students reading a demanding list of major primary texts, but may also include courses which teach literature through comic strips, courses which are designed for students who are not expected to be able or willing to do any reading for the course. The spacial imagery of verticality may be a bit misleading; it encourages thinking in terms of varying levels of difficulty, but in fact differences among courses in the vertical curriculum are differences in kind as well as in intensity. "Levels" are not so much a matter of how hard material is, or how much of it students will have to master, as they are a matter of different sorts of expectations, of changes in the nature of the activities students undertake.

The complicated differentiation of the secondary school curriculum, with its proliferation of courses both horizontally and vertically—perhaps hundreds of courses, each at multiple levels—inevitably has had unanticipated repercussions for the academic culture. The curriculum has so many options that it serves to dilute the school's responsibility to its students; choices come to rest almost entirely on the student and her family. The high school simply offers the choice; it remains neutral itself, even indifferent, about what selection is made. Schools "will press themselves to offer great variety but will not press students to choose wisely or engage deeply—it is a deliberate approach to accommodating diversity so that students will stay on, graduate, and be happy" (Powell et al., 1985:2). Although students will say "You can get a good education here if you want it," that is not accompanied by any sense that faculty or administrators expect students to follow

a demanding and intellectually rigorous academic program. Similarly, faculty feel little pressure to reach substantive agreements among themselves about educational goals or the expectations they should have of students. The academic community among the staff has become so weakened that "community has come to mean differences peacefully coexisting rather than people working together toward some serious end" (Powell et al., 1985:3).

Inside ordinary "shopping mall" classrooms informal negotiation really determines the processes, the content, even the goals of individual courses. In the absence of institutional guidance or expectations, students and teachers strike bargains—"classroom treaties"—which decide the features of students' classroom experience: the kind of and intensity of engagement with, or avoidance of learning, the sort of relations students have with teachers and with one another, the amount of time committed to various learning activities, and the degree of seriousness that is brought to academic work. Thus, "a course may require more time or less time. Personal relationships may be employed to relate to the subject or to ignore it. A teaching method may approach the subject intensively or passively. Participation in class carries no general expectations for either students or teachers" (Powell et al., 1985:117). Where classroom treaties are the norm, high schools have seen the legitimation of a tremendous variety of learning environments. Many classes expect little commitment or effort from students and provide only meager models of intellectual activity. Others may provide a richer academic setting, but the important point is that as far as the school is concerned all options are equally available, and equally proper. The aspect that such schools present to students, and to faculty, is neutrality and indifference about the nature and worth of the academic enterprise.

This picture of the comprehensive high school is reminiscent of the Richardson group's portrayal of the academic culture of community colleges; nor should it be surprising that the two great institutional efforts at democratic education have travelled down similar roads. If neither has yet found how to translate open access into substantive opportunity, perhaps that is because they were not really designed to that end. As David Cohen argues in the latter part of *The Shopping Mall High School,* current curricular structures and classroom practices should not be thought of as attempts to solve the problems of democratic education. They have a much more ambiguous status as the heritage or remnants of the great debates about whether to try for democratic education at all.

Beginning in the 1890s, high school enrollments doubled each decade as growing numbers of immigrant children entered formal schooling; the new experience of mass secondary education was accompanied by stormy, public debate about the nature of the high school, its curriculum, pedagogy, and goals. Although lines of argument crisscrossed and intertwined, the disputants divided into three main camps, with advocates of the traditional classical curriculum cast into a defensive fight against two distinct thrusts for reform. Harvard's innovative president, Charles W. Eliot, pressed to reshape curricula in ways that would emphasize study of modern subjects, such as mathematics and science, while providing students more elective choice. Others, led by G. Stanley Hall of Clark University, argued for a curriculum geared to the needs of the majority of students who could not be expected to have an interest in or much capacity for academic work. Debate was joined on several issues, but the central question was whether all students should pursue an intellectually demanding program of academic study, or whether they should follow an easier and more "practical" curriculum. The familiar compromise solution was to do both, to develop a dual educational system in which a small minority of college-bound students are provided a rigorous academic program while the bulk of students are provided a rigorous academic program while the bulk of students pursue a curriculum designed for those less able or less interested in academic work (Powell, et al., 1985:239-253; Krug, 1972; Kimball, 1986). This somewhat ambiguous commitment to democracy and education for all, within a system of dual expectations, was emphasized and codified in what became the bible of school reformers, the 1918 NEA report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*.

By the 1930s the new, and by now familiar, system of mass public education was firmly in place. It featured a few broad curricular tracks which distinguished the rigorously trained college-bound from the great majority of students for whom academic demands had been eased. The latter were served by practical, vocational, and personal development programs, supported by an extensive extracurriculum of sports and clubs. Radically different conceptions of academic work and standards of academic performance were thereby institutionalized; overall, a climate was established in the schools which discouraged serious academic work, and which highlighted instead the social and practical dimensions of school.

The worlds of high schools and colleges are often thought far apart; nevertheless, the story of modern comprehensive high

schools provides a valuable way to think about contemporary community colleges. As the later stage of the same struggle for democratic education, community colleges share the intellectual history of the "great school debates"; they appropriated for their work the terms legitimated there and have even rediscovered and replayed the same organizational and curricular options. Although recent fashionable arguments of E. D. Hirsch (1987) and Allan Bloom (1987) depend heavily upon the imagery of a golden age of hard-working students and intellectually demanding schools from which we've declined (and even Richardson talks of the "leveling down" of community colleges), that is simply not the case. Actually, contemporary curricula and pedagogical practices have been shaped by prior efforts at reform that attempted to deal with much the same issues in much the same ways.

The important point to take from the two studies we have canvassed is that what look like multiple discrete features of educational institutions actually come as a package. Organizational and curricular structures may seem to vary independently, each in turn independent from the vocabulary in which an institution describes and understands itself. But in fact those are all mutually constraining, and only really intelligible in relation to one another within institutional history. Taken together they guarantee that what is called "reform" will be a continually driving feature of educational institutions—as long as reform comes in the approved species, as the insistence that schools do well but not enough. Reformers rarely draw the lesson that failed practice discloses failed theory, that reform should be more than a matter of proliferating offices and expanding activities, more than refining and baroquing courses, programs, structures. Implementation may be thought a problem, or the students intractable, but not that mass education has been continually replaying the great school debates in the daily classroom experience of students. The uncomfortable and long-avoided conclusion is that substantial alteration in the outcomes of comprehensive, open-access institutions is not a problem of will, which has been good and enough, but of understanding, of finding perspicacious ways of seeing differently what we now see conventionally and unreflectively.

College in the Era of Disarticulation

As community colleges gradually accommodated themselves to a generation of "new," or nontraditional students, they evolved

away from many of the traditional mores of higher education. Curricular structures, for instance, were reshaped, as shifting student demographics appeared as a pronounced alteration in course-taking patterns. Increasingly, community college students were part-time, frequently episodic course-takers, professedly less interested in degress. Most community colleges are enrollment driven: they have been extremely sensitive to patterns of student choice. Consequently, such changes eroded traditional curricular structures and degree-granting programs, the Associates in Arts, for example, and encouraged an unprecedented expansion of curricula with few formal requirements. In some community colleges such a "shopping mall," or "cafeteria," curricula can contain fully half the student body, with the rest mostly in highly structured vocational programs.

That kind of hard data aside, nontraditional students have remained mysterious, although major analysts of community colleges all have attempted to characterize their distinctiveness and to understand the challenge they present. K. Patricia Cross described them as new to higher education because only in an age of open admissions would they be considered "college material." About two-thirds were first generation college-goers; in traditional measures of academic achievement, most ranked in the lowest third of high school graduates (Cross, 1971:6). Together with other influential theorists such as John Roueche, Arthur Cohen, and Florence Brawer, she argued throughout the 1960s and 1970s that such students could never be effectively served by watered-down versions of regular college courses, nor by traditional pedagogies. What was needed, they each claimed, was an instructional revolution based on the principles of mastery learning, and the individualization of instruction made possible by development of new learning technologies. More recently, Dale Parnell described the natural community college clientele as that "great mass of individuals in the middle quintiles of the typical high school student body." His recommendation was to develop innovative degree programs that blend liberal arts with technical education (Parnell, 1985:16).

All major first generation theorists were concerned with devising curricular structures and instructional processes appropriate to the extremely diverse group of nontraditional students who previously had experienced only limited academic success. They agreed that community colleges would have to break from conventional university conceptions of curriculum and instruction, and find unconventional, nontraditional ways to work with nontraditional students. Unfortunately, since they were so influential in

determining the general direction in which innovation was pursued and solutions sought, they shared a somewhat conventional view of the unconventional. They construed the problem of nontraditionality primarily in terms of individual cognitive psychology; the solution was to be the nuanced, individualized application of educational technology.

Perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive education in cultural rather than psychological terms. The understandings, motivations, and practices of students and faculty may be better thought of as shaped by distinctive institutional contexts and relationships, than as invariant functions of the structure of the brain. Sociologists, of course, have been arguing that point for a long time. David Riesman, for instance, suggested that colleges and universities can be sorted by the extent students identify with the value system of the faculty. His sketch of the structure of higher education located the elite private colleges and universities at the top, followed by flagship state universities, through the other types of schools which display increasing divergence between the values of faculty and students (Riesman, 1980).

Of course, college students have always varied in their degree of acceptance of faculty values and their willingness to subordinate themselves to the goals of the curriculum. And, historian Helen Horowitz has shown that the current cultural configuration is not of long standing. College life of the last century valued irresponsibility, good humor, and carefree abandon; it revolved around the extracurriculum of fraternities, athletics, clubs. The "college man" rejected the formal academic curriculum, in favor of the extracurriculum, believing business and professional success to depend less on mastering academics, and more on demonstrating leadership, developing personal style, and forging contacts. Only a minority of students acceded authority to the faculty and formed a culture oppositional to college life. Horowitz calls them "outsiders" (Horowitz, 1987).

Those nineteenth-century attitudes toward academic life echo still. However, Horowitz argues, early in this century the informal, antagonistic college life of undergraduates was-co-opted into the formal institutional life of colleges. The Greek system was accepted; athletics were subsidized and directed by faculty/coaches; secret societies were reborn as honor societies. Simultaneously, growth and formalization of the professions, and changing notions of the path to economic success, were reflected in the incorporation within college life of the outsider culture of hard work, diligence, and grade consciousness.

Despite qualifications of the sort noticed by Horowitz, until the massive expansion of higher education in the 1960s, students and faculty shared similar backgrounds and life-worlds, and enacted familiar cultural roles. The most stereotypically "collegiate" students, striving only for "gentleman's C's," understood the value system they were rejecting by engaging in the social rather than the intellectual life of the college. The value systems of students and faculty were in at least rough articulation. This fact deeply shaped the teaching and learning situation of traditional institutions since it assured mutual understanding and working agreement about the aims of the curriculum and the value of such academic practices as writing, interpretation, argumentation, and analysis. But the very success of the original mission of the community college, the democratization of education, access, has shattered the once routine expectation that teachers and students share a common cultural world.

The educational problem of nontraditionality is not really primarily a problem of low skills, or spotty previous high school achievement, or low income, or family responsibilities. More centrally it is what sociologists call a "structural disarticulation" between colleges and their student populations. Even very bright community college students, and there are many, are nontraditional in the sense that they typically carry a spectacularly nonstandard repertoire of behaviors and attitudes with which to cope with the traditional requirements of college life. Overwhelmingly, they come from backgrounds which have not prepared them to identify with, or even to recognize the central values and practices of academic life, and which have not provided adequate models of intellectual activity. They do not take themselves seriously as learners of something worth learning, but rather view themselves as engaged in a certification process in which credits are "accumulated," and requirements as unreasonable obstacles placed in their path. Often they come from backgrounds which do not value controversy and debate, so that they tend to reduce reasoned inquiry and principled dispute to just "matters of opinion." Many, also, have little sense of controlling their lives; they see themselves as having little command of the resources that might improve their prospects.

The cultural disarticulation that is the central feature of open-access colleges has been noticed by major ethnographic studies where it appears as the social psychology of disarticulation. For instance, in the late 1970s, Howard London reported on his study of a newly founded urban community college that served

predominantly white working-class students (London, 1978). He argued that the students were deeply ambivalent toward themselves and their situation. In his account, the students had internalized an individualistic ideology which traces academic success to character traits such as hard work, diligence, and self-discipline. But acceptance of such a characterological account of success naturally produces self-doubts in students who previously had been mostly unsuccessful in school. Since the traditional nostrums—be disciplined, work harder, and so on—have not worked for them in the past, academic competence seems frustratingly out of reach, mysterious, and, students fear, unattainable. To protect their self-worth and dignity, students adopt a defensive stance. Then they are caught in a double bind. The students suspect their own ability to do intellectual work, to handle ideas and language, yet still they hold them to be important, indeed as indicators of personal worth. The ability to engage in abstract reasoning, and to handle language carefully are, they believe, essential for success in the world and for entry into the middle class, and failure to master those abilities is potentially crushing to their sense of self and their hopes for the future. Thus, according to London, for community college students intellectual activity is simultaneously alluring, but emotionally charged, and deeply problematic.

With such complex feelings rarely acknowledged, the classroom becomes dangerous terrain, dealing with teachers fraught with tension and anxiety. Each classroom is the scene of negotiation between the teacher and the students. Teachers, for their part, cannot begin a course assuming that students will be committed to the work, or will even come regularly, appear for examinations, or turn in assignments. London, like Lois Weis in her more recent study of a community college serving primarily black, low-income students, describes a familiar situation in which students drop in and out of school, arrive late, and too frequently exert little effort (Weis, 1985). Students have great difficulty seeing school as a comfortable, inviting environment. In the case of the exchange between vocational program students and the liberal arts faculty, London found the most striking instances of barely muted conflict. Here was the least agreement about the nature and level of expectations; consequently, those classes were most likely to trigger student fears and ambivalences. Here, particularly, academic work has the dual quality of attractiveness and danger.

The prevalent, indeed, canonical, understandings of educational psychology and student services make it extremely difficult to recognize the social and cultural dimensions of the disarticul-

ation between nontraditional students and academic life; but seeing the ways student culture intersects, or fails to intersect academic practice and expectation, throws the educational issues into sharp relief. The hard job is not just to build student skills or provide them with information but to create a learning context which alters students' sense of the nature of intellectual life, their conception of themselves as learners, and their fundamental orientation to academic practices. For that, movement on both sides of the desk is needed, since students already carrying a rich cultural ensemble cannot magically transform themselves into traditional students. And, even if they could, community colleges have not held still. If the Richardson team is correct, colleges themselves have evolved away from being traditional academic institutions, partly by choice, and partly through diffuse efforts to accommodate nontraditionality through informal negotiation.

Education as a Social Act

Nontraditionality is usually talked about as if carried inside the heads and hearts of individual students, rather than being characteristic of student *populations.* It holds place for what are thought to be cognitive and affective deficiencies, the social features of nontraditionality being quite invisible inside canonical cognitive psychology. Once the phenomenon of cultural disarticulation has been noticed, however, new disciplinary resources can be brought to bear which yield a rich picture of the striking mismatch between nontraditional students and academic life. For instance, recent work in composition theory and literary criticism suggests how to understand the complex relations among nontraditionality, declining norms of literacy, and the practices of the academic culture.

The contemporary theoretical work itself is necessarily somewhat arcane. But what it comes to is that scholars studying the processes of interpretation and understanding among readers and writers in a literate community have come to reject context invariance of meaning, in favor of theories that emphasize the crucial historical and cultural dimensions of meaning and thought. The prominent composition theorist, David Bartholomae, who has written extensively on remediation, sees the dramatic implications of such research for understanding nontraditional students:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community . . . or the student must try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes—to write as a literary critic one day and as an experimental psychologist the next; to work within fields where the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional mysterious (Bartholomae, 1985:134).

In Bartholomae's provocative metaphor, students who undertake academic reading and writing must "invent the university" by identifying and decoding, perhaps constructing for themselves, its characteristic forms of thought and analysis. Writing, thought also, are essentially social and rhetorical, rather than introspective, expressive, or private. Student writers are therefore social actors whose immediate problem is situating themselves appropriately within academic discourse communities. That rhetorical act can misfire in different and unsuspected ways. For instance, students are often encouraged to think of their audience as the course instructor, but Bartholomae sees that the casual identification of instructor with audience is misleading and pernicious. If the university is to be intelligible to the uninitiated, to students, individual instructors must stand for something beyond themselves. Sociologists or historians who are just peculiar or eccentric figures have no call on the respective attention of students. That comes only when individual instructors represent to students the complex cultural phenomena that are their disciplines, with the rich traditions and distinctive methods that bind the membership.

Even for so-called "basic writers," learning to write involves much more than mastering the mechanics of grammatical structure and punctuation, or logic. By far the more significant achievement is appreciating the essentially rhetorical nature of writing and thought. "Inventing the university" means recognizing not one single set of styles and standards. Each discipline, and certainly each cluster such as the natural or social sciences, comprise distinct "disciplinary cultures" which have their own complex, im-

plicit standards of analysis, description, and argumentation which enable disciplinary discourse, and constrain it (Geertz, 1983).

In *Is There a Text in This Class?,* literary theorist Stanley Fish makes a quite similar case concerning how readers interpret and discuss texts.

> Communication occurs only *within* . . . a context or situation or interpretive community and the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that context . . . to be in a situation is already to be in possession of a structure of assumptions, [to share a background] of practices, purposes, goals (Fish, 1980: 304 and 318).

The meaning of any text is not objectively embedded in it; meaning is constructed by the interpretive practices of competent readers who select among and organize aspects of the text. Bartholomae saw that being a competent writer requires mastery of appropriate disciplinary conventions; so also, Fish sees that being a competent reader requires mastery of interpretive strategies for each discipline or "interpretive community." Thus, literacy is primarily a social achievement—understanding and emulating the conventions of discourse communities—rather than a purely linguistic or cognitive psychological phenomenon.

When literacy is understood in that way standard pedagogical issues are recast. Inevitably, interpretation is multiple and uncertain, meaning fragile. Making sense of texts and disciplines of thought constructed according to unfamiliar rules, and shaped by alien concerns, is sure to be terribly difficult. But it is the educational task faced by college students, most especially nontraditional college students—to think, talk, and argue within the various academic discourse communities, as historians, for example, or biologists, or psychologists.

A student's academic career consists of a series of initiations into different, somewhat loosely related, intellectual, and cultural communities, each with its own norms of discourse, its special vocabulary and set of important questions. A successful college student is one who manages to puzzle out what is distinctive about the various disciplines she encounters, and grasps the overall configuration of the educational enterprise in which she is engaged. Even the best-prepared, most highly motivated college students may be frustrated navigating among diverse disciplines with disparate styles of rational inquiry. That is a normal, expected fea-

ture of a student's experience (Perry, 1970). However, nothing in the background of nontraditional students has prepared them for it. In almost every way college seems more alien and hostile to them, unsympathetic to the ways they have brought with them from their home communities or social class. About that they are entirely correct. Especially for them, college demands not just intellectual growth but also social and cultural transformations that are profoundly bewildering and unsettling.

The ordinary psychological features of the transition to college life are detailed by Vincent Tinto in his research on student retention. A student's college career, he argues, should really be seen as movement from membership in a home community to membership in a college community. If all goes well this will follow a familiar pattern of separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1987;1988). To achieve full incorporation into the social and intellectual life of a college, students must separate themselves, or at least distance themselves, from prior associations. Obviously, not everybody makes the transition. Whether or not a particular student does depends on a number of factors: the character of the home community, its views on the worth of schooling, and the extent to which college is seen as a normal stage in the life cycle. Successful students are those who complete the social and cultural transition. Students who never fully incorporate into the new community typically fail or drop out.

The processes of separation, transition, and incorporation will be unpredictable and trying for most students—but nontraditional students experience the greatest struggle. For them, particularly, the transition to college is a stressful and threatening process of shifting membership and renegotiating identify. It may be most arduous for minority students. Black males have shown the greatest decline in college participation (Nettles, 1988; Mingle, 1987); they are very likely to have come from backgrounds which led them to doubt their abilities and to encourage "getting-over" as an academic strategy (Saufley, Cowan, and Blake, 1983). Black students also report the greatest difficulty coping with cultural features of college—such as the social distance between students and teachers, and relatively detached teaching styles—which they often find slighting (Nettles, 1988). However, nontraditional students all are similarly outsiders to college life, and tend not to think of themselves as persons who will do well academically.

Higher education is daunting for nontraditional students because the culture of academics is foreign and mysterious to them.

But there is no royal road around it: initiation into the multiple intellectual worlds that comprise academic life is still required for successful educational and professional careers. The educational challenge for community colleges is the construction of bridges of understanding across which students may move from nontraditional backgrounds to competent membership in the educated community. Traditional university models of curriculum and pedagogy are not helpful. Since they obscure the initiatory and transformative aspects of education, they may actually be harmful. Curricular forms and teaching practices can't be thought to be culturally neutral instruments, which mean the same to all people. They enact a specific form of life; more than telling about academic and professional life, they represent, show it. Debased practices may falsify, or misrepresent it.

Literacy in the Open-Access College portrays bitting practices as a watering down of the usual academic work of the university. Actually they are more interesting than that, more harmful. Bitting doesn't just reduce academic requirements; it fundamentally changes them, and consequently misrepresents intellectual practices. Bitted disciplines appear as mere compilations of facts, strung together by discrete concepts within a transparent theory. The complex culture of disciplines, their theoretical and cognitive aspects, as well as their social and rhetorical dimensions, are all hidden, or denied.

Although it is easy enough to see how such practices inhibit students' initiation into academic life, the easy and obvious alternatives may not be really any better—indeed, as their easiness and obviousness ought to have signalled to us. For example, the Richardson group recommends texting as a prominent instructional mode. And recently there have been many calls for faculty to move away from lecture and recitation as their basic teaching style, to move from "teaching as talking to," to teaching that engages and involves students, which encourages active rather than passive learning. From the perspective we are adopting, that education for nontraditional student is actually an initiation, a social and cultural transformation, such recommendations at least look suspicious. After all, bitting may be fun. What is called "engagement" and "involvement" may come to nothing more than classroom excitement, though of course they may be much more. "Active" learning may be of trivialities; in fact the whole arsenal of progressivist and reformist educational jargon has long been set at the service of whatever pedagogy anyone cares to push.

Almost all reformers now concur in rejecting the straight lecture course, accompanied by a textbook to be memorized. But discussion groups, "inquiry," "discovery," and "writing across the curriculum"—the standard range of alternatives—all focus attention primarily at the level of individual student psychology: they also fail to confront the cultural features of the exchange between nontraditional students and the evolving academic culture of open-access colleges. We will have much to say about curriculum and teaching, but all of it returns ultimately to this set of issues—the nature of nontaditionality, what academic culture pervades open-access institutions, how academic and intellectual life is represented in practice, and what initiatory or transformative processes are provided to students.

The problems of mass public education are so deeply rooted and long standing that by now the failures of comprehensive and open-access schools can hardly be thought accidental or anomalous. No quick and easy fix is possible, nor leave untouched most structures and practices while focusing on a supposed recalcitrant few. However, while educational reform is certain to be difficult and perhaps painful, it is not impossible. What makes it seem impossible is that so long as issues are framed in the familiar ways, and routinely dropped in the area of responsibility of the familiar offices, all that can reasonably be expected are the familiar outcomes. The hardest part about successful institutional reform is finding ways to reframe the familiar, and for that contemporary organizational theory provides a valuable guide.

The Organizational Culture of Open Access

The principal insight of contemporary organizational theory is that although organizations may be conceived as if typically engaged in the constant careful adjustment of means to ends, their members certainly are not such pure rational actors whose actions and interactions are governed by calculation of self-interest. To the contrary, behavior at all levels of an organization, including management, is continuously and silently shaped by a pervasive organizational culture which provides the social and conceptual environment in which action can be meaningfully conceived. Consequently, organizations always elude complete managerial control; paradoxically, they are more adaptive and effective, managers more in control, when the limits of direct control are grasped. If

actions of the organization, its policies and structures, for instance, and within the organization, the ordinary practices of its members, are thought of as artifacts which express and embody a shared culture, then the powerful resources of contemporary cultural sciences can be invoked to understand them and to chart strategies for change.

Earlier functionalist conceptions of organizational behavior conceived it as a set of learned responses to external problems in the environment. The new organizational theorists draw heavily from recent "postfunctionalist" social science; they emphasize instead the symbolic nature of culture, and the primacy of the language-like. Meaning is experienced and expressed within public vehicles such as rituals and ceremonies, but also in the privacy of individual minds, each shaped by cultural categories and patterns of inference and legitimation. Participants in a culture unconsciously appropriate, more or less fully, those available forms of life, modes of understanding, and strategies for action (Swidler, 1986). Effective management of organizational change therefore is an extremely subtle and complicated affair, calling more for an anthropological turn of mind than a bureaucratic one.

Organizations and institutions are dynamic; but their modes of change are usually best appreciated retrospectively. It is a commonplace that intervention within organizations hardly ever has the desired effect, that institutions adapt to initiatives for change with quietly powerful and effective "normalizing" resistance. Attempts to guide the development of large institutions that play within the framework of the accepted argot are particularly susceptible to co-option. Much more promising are efforts that start by recognizing that organizational culture seeks always to maintain itself—and this is as true for community colleges as it is for business firms.

The greatest obstacle to guided change is that organizational culture, as any culture, is naturally invisible to the natives, for whom it operates as a transparent framework of meaning. However, a cultural analysis can suggest change at levels deeper than ordinary reform because it sees more deeply, and can disclose hidden relations of thinking, talking, and acting. When a culture is thus brought to consciousness, then it may be acted upon as well as acted within. Perhaps, if care is exercised, it may even be changed.

Obviously, the fine detailing of a culture, what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), can be an extremely powerful resource. What anthropologists have,

which ordinary managers don't have, but organizational theorists recommend they get, is a theoretical perspective broad enough and language rich enough to permit thick description. This kind of activity will seem simultaneously puzzling and familiar, possibly hostile, to insiders of the organization, since it proposes to think and talk about everyday practices and concerns in ways that make them intelligible to an outsider. Put somewhat differently, the object of disclosure is what seems most unproblematic from within, namely, how the culture thinks and talks about itself.

This is the perspective from which we look at the cluster of issues that collectively comprise the problem of the academic culture. We accept that new styles of understanding are bound to seem unnecessarily arcane and irritating for so long as they lack the benefits of familiarity. Certainly, many people would be happier if at least the long-standing problem definitions and their associated well-known solution sets were left inviolate—the jolt of having to reconceive the central problematics of one's profession should not be underestimated. Others will see interpretive cultural methods as offering a strategy for cutting through dreary dichotomies and played out debates. "Redescription" may empower institutions that have been paralysed by their own unreflective discourse and practices. Self-conscious and self-guided reform is always less likely than sporadic, incremental, and episodic accommodation to outside pressures or to occasional dimly perceived crises. But demystifying the institutional mythos, unpacking the intricate ways that underlying conceptions play themselves out in hard reality, offers new openings for action at all levels of the community college system—to policymakers, administrators, and faculty members.

The sociologist Peter Berger remarks that the social sciences inevitably have a "debunking" quality: the most treasured features of particular social roles can be "seen through" easily by persons not entangled in the system. From the outside, for instance, it is not hard to see that faculty labor under the illusion of autonomy. Isolated in their classrooms, individual faculty members believe themselves completely free to develop innovative teaching approaches, that they can experiment as they will. Ordinary institutional categories encourage that belief, favorably contrasting it with curriculum "imposed" from above. Nevertheless, perceived autonomy is constrained both by institutional structure and organizational culture, neither of which can be eluded by teachers or students. An obvious example of a structural constraint is the re-

quirement that educational activities must conform to the exigencies of crediting. Education proceeds everywhere through the vehicle of the three credit course. Faculty members have so internalized that constraint that they are long past noticing that it is a constraint, thinking it part of the natural order of things. Later we will argue that the relative isolation and independence of faculty members under conditions of severe structural constraint is an important ingredient in the creation of an anemic academic culture. Similarly, administrators are caught within the illusion of formal structure; their reality comprises the formal and easily quantifiable elements of teaching and learning—FTEs, program completion rates, and course objectives. They naturally will have difficulty understanding either the informal negotiations which shape classrooms or the wider sets of attitudes and expectations that constitute the academic culture.

Those examples are enough to show the curious paradox of ethnographically based policy analysis. Within any culture the range of opportunity will always seem constricted by powers too great to challenge. The most subtle and powerful constraints are its own categories and predilections; unless policy recommendations are couched in those ordinary terms they will appear alien, unsympathetic, and simply unavailable. On the other hand, recommendations clothed in familiar garb elicit perfectly predictable responses, well-known and oft-tried moves. For example, once the issue of transfer education is talked about in terms of "articulation" or "credit accumulation," only so many options are really open, none of which will be strikingly innovative.

Such appears to have been the fate of the recommendations in *Literacy and the Open-Access College*. Recognizing the complexity of the institutional picture they had sketched, Richardson and his associates proposed an assortment of conventional policy options—more selective recruiting, for example, or giving financial aid only to those students pursuing academic degrees, and carefully defining academic progress. These suggestions, if not rejected outright by community college administrators and policymakers, have at least generated little enthusiasm. Institutions which self-define so strongly as inclusionary, see little merit in exclusionary practices of any kind, whenever implemented and however masked.

Less conventional recommendations from the Richardson group which were more closely tied to their distinctive ethnographic findings apparently were deemed immediately out of bounds and received little attention. A very striking example is