

ASSESSING THE LAST TEN YEARS FROM A JUNIOR COLLEGE PERSPECTIVE

JEFFREY BIRDSONG

Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College

Throughout most of the last ten years, Northeastern Oklahoma A & M has tried to transform itself from a rural junior college to a community college. This transition has led to a greater emphasis on distance learning, computer technology, and adjunct faculty, but also a de-emphasis on residence halls, academic programs with limited majors, and student services. While these changes may work well for community colleges in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, the results have not been very productive for us. Our experience lets us know the old adage "Know thyself" is important to remember not only for individuals but also for institutions.

Not all changes have been detrimental to the college. Distance learning and Internet courses are here to stay for my college as I am sure they are for colleges around the state. Many students who could not have gone to college can now attend, thanks to these new technologies. I am now teaching a distance-learning class in government for the Thunderbird Youth Academy, an alternative school for troubled youth, which is roughly sixty miles from campus. Both distance learning and Internet technologies provide new opportunities, but they also limit

spontaneity, which is so vital to political science classes. Certainly Internet chat rooms give some students more opportunities for expression, but these same students miss the experience of witnessing firsthand through classroom discussions why people have political differences. Perhaps future technologies will give us an ability to have the classroom experience while learning from a distance, but we are not there yet.

The use of adjuncts also has increased during this past decade. I am sure the contributions adjuncts make in the classroom are beneficial to the students and the college. However, my concern is that adjuncts will diminish job openings for young faculty members. Our profession will always need young faculty members who grow into the job and make the study of government their lives' work. With adjuncts, a part-time job likely creates a part-time devotion to the profession.

The one way we can make sure that our college or any other colleges are not overwhelmed with technology and adjuncts is to "know ourselves." First we need to know what we are not. Colleges are not businesses. Colleges are institutions that challenge students and faculty to think critically, which must always be our mission. Cost effectiveness can not be disregarded, but when it reigns supreme, the true mission of a college is harmed.

Currently my college is finding a middle ground between the attractiveness of new technologies and the steadiness of the traditional structure found in this rural two-year college. There has been new emphasis on improving the residence halls and providing activities for on-campus students, so they will feel more at home. Providing the complete college experience, academics, activities, and campus life, in a smaller context than the larger universities, is an attractive alternative for many students. This had been our mission, and we are getting back to it.

In the past ten years what has not changed for me and, I am sure, for my colleagues is the tremendous satisfaction one gets in teaching. As our institution goes through transitions, we witness transitions in the lives of our students. Our college can take young people from little towns like Bluejacket, Oklahoma, and make them realize the closeness and complexity of the world as they work on a group project with a classmate from Nairobi, Kenya. This is a valuable benefit for us all.