

A study of External Stakeholders' Perspectives of a Midwestern Community College

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Abstract

A Midwestern community college hired a new president in 2003. Since then, community college personnel endeavor to improve institutional effectiveness, program quality, and perceived stakeholder value. The president expressed a concern that the institution's progress remains relevant to the needs of the stakeholders. This study was designed to ascertain data from external stakeholders of the community college regarding their current perceived value of the community college, what value it could bring in the future, and suggestions about moving from the present to the future. The main question of the study is: What are external stakeholders' perceptions of the value of the college to the service area? A mixed-methods research approach was used consisting of interviews, focus groups, surveys, and document review to triangulate stakeholder perspectives. Participants included 176 high school seniors from different counties, four counselors, and four focus groups. The findings from the data are presented in this study are planned to be used by community college officials to incorporate into their strategic plans. They showed that the college needs to take into account the value that it brings to the service area including economic benefits, specifically community support; accessibility; and cost of tuition.

Keywords: Stakeholders, Perspectives, Community College, Community Service

1. Introduction

Since the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901, America's dependence on two-year community colleges has continued to grow. Presidents Truman (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958), Johnson (Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966), Nixon (Public papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1971), Clinton (Clinton, 1998), Bush (Evelyn, 2004), and most recently Obama (Lewin, 2009) declared public support for the community college as a major contributor towards the democratization of America. More students are attending community colleges than ever before. Enrollment growth in the last 10 years has increased over 20% to an enrollment in 2007 of 6.6 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). These figures represent 35% of all post-secondary students who enrolled that year (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). More students recognize the value of post-secondary education. "Community colleges remain the single most important resource for economic and social gain through education" (Eaton, 1994, pp. 6-7).

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This is especially relevant during economic recessions when employers lay off unessential workers who return to post-secondary institutions to continue their education. Today, many people are struggling to hold onto jobs as the nation's unemployment rate has risen in September of 2009 to 9.8% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The White House budget chief expressed concern that the upward trend will continue beyond 10% (Runnigen & Faler, 2009). Research staff for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities collected data that ranks states' fiscal crises as the number one issue for higher education in 2009 (Hurley, McBain, Harnisch, & Russell, 2009). This translates into decreased state funding for public post-secondary education. Increasing enrollments and decreasing state funding place enormous pressures on community college officials to fulfill their mission. Under these circumstances, the president of a mid-west community college is interested in identifying the public's perception of the services the community college provides. Table 1 shows how the information obtained about the college.

Table 1: How Students Obtained Their Information About the College

Source of Information	Number	%
Friends	41	71
Internet	39	67
Recruitment	26	45
Website	15	26
Media	6	10
Other	6	10

2. Purpose/Objectives of the Study

In 2002, the Higher Learning Commission, a regional accrediting agency, placed the community college in this study on academic probation for several criteria (e.g., inadequate assessment system, the decision-making processes of the board, financial issues). Many residents of the County believed closing the college doors was the best option for addressing these concerns. Taxpayers did not understand the college's value to the community and questioned whether their tax dollars were being used wisely to improve the community at large.

A new college president was hired in 2003. Since that time, it has worked to improve its academic reputation as well as its perceived value to the service area which includes three counties (personal communication, President V. Smith, September 2, 2009). The college has become the fastest growing community college in the state of Kansas (Kansas Board of Regents, 2009). While the national economy wavers, current enrollment at the college is up 18% from the Spring 2009 semester, and the college boasts a 31% increase in credit hour offerings since 2003. The president of the college attributes these gains to several factors including adding academic programs, maintaining high standards for graduates, and giving the community "what they want, when they want it." These changes have led to the perception by college administration that the community now supports the college and is satisfied with the direction in which the college is moving.

1. This study focused on the perspectives of external stakeholders regarding: (a) the perceived level of service provided by the community college; (b) a preferred level of service provided in the future; and (c) the necessary modifications needed for the community college to move towards providing a higher level of service. A mixed-methods research approach was used consisting of interviews, focus groups, survey, and document review to triangulate stakeholder perspectives. The main question of the study is: What are external stakeholders' perceptions of the value of the college to the service area?

3. Theoretical Framework

A review of literature focused on the evolution of the community college and its role in providing value to students and the community at large. It is well documented that community colleges have struggled with their cultural role and identity over the past. As economic issues plague society the value of community colleges continues to evolve. This brings a new awareness for communication and promotion of current programs and offerings for return on investment.

3.1 Organizational identity. An organization's identity is defined by the culture it provides in the community (Anafara & Mertz, 2006). The community's perceptions of the value provided by a community college and how it fits with the needs of the time are critical for a positive identity. A synthesis exists between the value of the individual in creating the whole of society, and in turn an organization's identity.

The incorporation of attitudes serves as the impressions that are formed in developing expectations and guidelines for behavior and in identity formation in an organization (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Identifying with a group creates a social identity that students want to be a part of in order to be socially accepted. An individual's desire to enhance self-esteem through positive evaluations of the right place to belong influences their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In addition, collective identity and self-representation are interdependent and defines an individual's social identity, as well (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). An organization's identity represents the collage of experiences and expectations of those who are involved with it and the various perspectives and motives brought with them. An organization's identity is important in order to recruit and retain students and bring a positive message to the community (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). From the perspective of the community college the process of identification can be complicated because neither the individual nor the organization has a single identity, nor do they have consistency among the attributes. The focus of the organization's identity can change depending on the context of the information provided (Anafara & Mertz, 2006).

4. Research Design and Methodology

A mixed-method case study was chosen for this because of the nature of the research problem and the questions being asked. This method offers a means of investigating complex social units with multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Mixed-methods is defined as the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research (Best & Kahn, 2006; Cresswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 212). For the purpose of this study, mixed-method data will be collected sequentially.

According to Bogdan & Biklen (2007), qualitative data are often used to supplement, validate, explain, illuminate, or reinterpret quantitative data gathered from surveys. Quantitative research involves some type of comparison or contrast and attempts to discover relationships between existing non-manipulated variables (Best & Kahn, 2006). A mixed-method study of the College will provide rich descriptions of perceptions from the external stakeholders.

Research was conducted at multiple sites within communities of the service area. This provided for some diversity in the sites selected as well as in the participants interviewed. According to Merriam (1998), the strategy of including multiple sites enhances the external validity and generalizability of the findings.

4.1 Participants

Study participants were chosen from external stakeholders in the County service area. Purposeful sampling was used for the study to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Cresswell, et al., 2003). For the purpose of this study, participants included 176 high school seniors from Anderson County High School, Ottawa High School, St. Paul High School, Erie High School, and Chanute High School. Approximately 50% of the high school seniors in these schools participated in the study. All participants 18 years or older were required to sign a consent form prior to participation in data collection. Students under 18 years of age were required to have a consent form signed by their parent/guardian as well as an assent form. Four counselors were interviewed from Ottawa High School, St. Paul High School, Erie High School, and Chanute High School. In addition, four focus groups were conducted with community member representatives from Garnett, St. Paul, Erie, and Chanute.

4.2 Data Collection Strategies

The methods of data collection included surveys of high school seniors, individual interviews of high school counselors, focus groups of community members, and a review of documents. Multiple researchers conducted the research, strengthening the internal validity of the study.

Patton (2002) states, Multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective...By using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings (p. 244). Data Collections consisted of observation of patterns of action, verbal and non-verbal interaction between members as well as between the subjects and researcher and his/her information.

4.3 Surveys. Survey research is the method of gathering data from participants using an instrument composed of closed structure or open-ended questions (Krosnick, 1999). Surveys were administered to high school seniors in the five high schools in the college service area. They were conducted during the normal school day by members of the research team. By conducting the survey on-site with the participants, the researchers were able to assure a high level of participation.

4.4 Focus groups. The utilization of focus groups was one method to obtain rich information from participants. Bogdan&Biklen(2007) defined focus groups as group interviews that are structured to foster talk among the participants about particular issues. Focus groups provide important multiple perspectives from the group participants which provide researchers with a wide range of views. For this reason, the research team conducted four focus groups with six to eight community members in each focus group from the Garnett, Chanute, Erie, and St. Paul communities. The purpose of the focus groups was to listen to the participants and gather information. The focus groups were audio recorded for transcribing purposes.

4.5 Personal interviews. Personal interviews were a method used by researchers to try to gain an understanding of the participants' point of view, perspective, and meaning (Patton, 2002). The research team conducted personal interviews with four high school counselors from the individual high schools in Neosho County and the Ottawa High School. These counselors were chosen because of the close proximity of their schools to both colleges in Chanute and Ottawa and Labette County Community College in nearby Parsons. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. An interview guide was designed to ensure that the same information was requested from each interviewee. This provided an outline for more systematic and comprehensive data gathering and kept the interactions in focus. Upon granted permission from each participant, the interviews were audio recorded to aid in transcription.

4.6 Document review. A review of the documents from the college that related to the strategic plan was conducted by the researchers. This information provided invaluable data for the research team in the data analysis process.

4.7 Trustworthiness of the Data

Multiple researchers reviewed the transcripts from each focus group and counselor interviews to ensure objectivity of analysis. All records and data are maintained in a central location for audit purposes.

5. Findings and Discussion

Data were gathered from the three communities in the County that are serviced by the college under study, including Chanute which hosts the main campus. In addition, two communities in Franklin and Anderson Counties were also part of the study: Ottawa, as a host community, has a campus for the college and Garnett is part of the college service area. There were three means of collecting data to answer the research questions. First, community members were interviewed through focus groups in the four communities. Second, a high school senior in the five communities was surveyed. Finally, school counselors were interviewed individually at four high schools. Major themes emerged from the raw data when analyzed. The theme that answered research question is the *value to the service area* which provides a framework for answering the research question.

5.1 Value to the Service Area

The aforementioned theme directly responded to the research question: "What are stakeholders' perceptions of the value of the college to the service area?" Almost half of the responses from participants indicated a positive perspective regarding the college's value to the service area.

The service area is being defined as the communities directly impacted by the college either through payment of required taxes due to their location within the county or the communities with close proximity to one of the college’s campuses although not located within the County. The greatest contributors to the positive aspect were the participants from Chanute which is the location of the collegemain campus. Many shared that a host community could have an advantage over other communities in developing a deeper relationship with the college through easier access to facilities and increased interaction with the community.

One participant stated it this way,

. . . another thing they have acquired since Dr. ----- has been here is a good communication with the city of Chanute. The college seemed to be a separate entity of almost something other than the community. She along with the rest of the administration have made it a part of the city.

The idea of the college being part of the Chanute community was different from how several non-hosting communities perceived their relationship with it. “The only time I see them is when the baseball team comes and asks for a donation,” observed one participant. Non-hosting community felt that they were not part of the college’s scope of concern and that they did not have a relationship with the college. Deeper study indicated that within the theme (value to the service area) were three categories: (a) Economic benefits, specifically community support; (b) accessibility; and (c) tuition costs. Table 2 shows future plans of high school students in the county.

Table 2: Future Plans of High School Students

Schools	Community College	4-Year College	Tech School	Other	Totals
Chanute	24	32	2	10	68
Erie	11	4	0	0	15
St. Paul	7	3	0	1	11
Ottawa	5	27	3	4	39
Anderson	13	25	4	1	43
Totals	60	91	9	16	176

5.1.1 Economic Benefit and Community Support

In terms of economic benefits, most responses were concerned with community support and were mostly positive in nature. Several Chanute participants recognized the positive image the college brought to Chanute. One participant shared, “The Collegebrings a positive image to our community.” Another participant recognized the positive connection with the community in this way, “They are not only involved with the college students but they do outside activities for the community that is magnificent . . . so, I see the positive image reflected in a lot of areas.” Still another stated,

I think this community involvement is a huge thing to continue, and continue to grow. Because I don’t think that I am paying for nothing. Even though I may not reap the benefits right now . . . I feel that they promote in the area. These positive connections with the community and the ability to bring a positive image to the hosting communities were a common theme throughout the comments regarding community support. Another economic benefit cited by several participants is that of bringing in people to attend college here who might remain in the area following graduation. “Another thing too that we may overlook, is that the college brings people in for college, but that doesn’t always mean they move away. They may stay and it helps build our community if they plant here,” praised one participant. Many believe the community college brings value to the community through job opportunities. Positive comments were made about the jobs students can get in the area after attending the college and the jobs it brings to the community in general. “I think it is a benefit to Neosho County for the fact [that] it does provide a lot of jobs to the area,” stated a participant from Chanute. The idea that jobs are brought to the service area due to the location of the college campuses was supported by participants in both hosting and non-hosting communities. This participant summed it up this way,

As for value. . . taxes and so forth you are going to pay them regardless. We just hope they use it wisely. I think they really have. I think in the last 3 or 4 years they have changed quite a bit. I personally am more satisfied with them than I was.

Overall, participants were more satisfied with the economic benefit provided by the college in recent years over the perception of benefits in years past. Although most of the comments regarding economic benefits were positive, a few negative comments were made. These comments walk the line between economic value and educational programming which will be discussed later. However, some participants felt that if more technical courses were offered it would benefit the community. "There is a tremendous need in this community, to this whole entire region, for technical education," observed one participant. Another participant commented about the need for more community oriented courses which might help some residents feel they are getting the most from their tax money.

He stated, "*Offer more community classes. It sounds that there is an interest in computer classes, business, ceramic, painting, and some training for ... employees.*" The college's ability to offer more courses geared toward the community and technical education was seen as a significant need by some participants for positive perceptions to increase.

5.1.2 Accessibility of the College to the Communities

In the area of accessibility, both positive and negative statements were made. These statements were markedly dependent on whether or not the participant was from a hosting or non-hosting community. For example, participants from the hosting communities of Chanute and Ottawa felt that the accessibility of the college and its programs was very good. A participant from Chanute explained by saying, "We have a school right here in our community. We don't even have to have kids travel anywhere." An Ottawa participant explained it in this way, "I think it's really something that's really good for our kids 'cause they don't really have to leave town. I'm really pleased with that." Another Chanute participant recognized how the accessibility was reaching the older population in the community. He stated,

One of the problems the community college has had in the past is that people over here are throwing darts at the community college, sometimes that's the older set, saying we don't need that because it costs more money in taxes. But because we can draw them in, they can feel they are getting something for their taxes. You haven't heard as much complaining. They also have the lifelong learning where they can take classes for free. So, they are getting benefit for their tax dollars.

There has been the perception that taxpaying constituents were not realizing a benefit from paying the taxes until the college began offering the facilities to members of the community. Allowing the community to use the college campus for meetings and providing opportunities for community members to take courses and stay informed rose to the top as the main reasons hosting communities are pleased with accessibility of the college.

On the other hand, non-hosting communities had some negative comments primarily due to the fact that the campus was not located in the community. Participants commented that St. Paul's proximity to Parsons and Garnett's proximity to Lola often encouraged students to attend closer community colleges instead of driving to a more distant the college campus. A St. Paul participant shared, "When it comes to geographical location a lot of students have gone to ... Labette Community College ... so it's a little bit negative geographically to the College." Many other comments were made by St. Paul and Erie participants in regards to other community colleges; however, those comments will be discussed during the recruitment section of this study.

Several participants expressed the fact many of the high school graduates want a new experience away from Chanute and Ottawa. This was not shared as a judgment of the college but simply a geographical challenge. A community member suggested that for some students in the area, it is too close to home. "It's probably the negative that they get because they're in town. The kids are used to the college and they're graduating from high school and I think that they ... want a new experience." Another participant viewed it in this way, "That's probably the only negative about it being here is that our kids look at it as kind of a 'Yeah, if everything else fails, I'll go to Neosho.'" However, student survey data indicated that most students viewed location as a positive rather than a negative. Table 3 shows preference of choosing or not choosing the college to enroll in its campuses according to different reasons.

Table 3: Why or Why Not Choose the College

School	Cost	Size	Location	Lack Extracurr.	Programs	Reputation	Family Tradition	Friends
Chanute								
Why	35	4	14	0	1	0	0	2
Why not	5	14	7	4	11	7	2	3
Erie								
Why	4	0	4	0	2	0	0	2
Why not	0	0	1	6	4	0	2	0
St. Paul								
Why	6	2	2	0	0	0	0	0
Why not	0	0	2	1	3	0	1	2
Ottawa								
Why	25	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Why not	3	10	5	8	4	0	1	0
Anderson								
Why	15	1	4	0	3	0	0	1
Why not	2	9	2	4	4	1	3	2
Totals								
Why	85	7	26	0	6	0	0	5
Why not	10	33	17	23	26	8	9	7

5.1.3 Cost of Tuition

Tuition costs were the third area addressed in terms of value to the service area. Many of the comments were positive and reflected the communities' appreciation for affordable education as compared to a four-year university. A St. Paul participant stated, "I think you're going to see more of our kids going to junior colleges as the prices are rising so dramatically for four-year universities." Another participant from Chanute observed, "With the economy the way that it is, the affordability plays an even bigger part." Student survey data overwhelmingly indicated that students consider cost as their number one reason for attending the college. Overall, the participants supported the lower cost tuition offered by the college and expressed value for having this option available to community members and students.

The topic of cost came up frequently during the focus groups and often centered on the need to charge fees for use of the facilities. There were comments regarding the unfairness of services provided by the community college which are not paid by the user of the service, but by others in the form of tax support. Several participants felt fees were not assessed enough for community members to use the equipment and facilities. "I think there ought to be a fee ... if they are going to use the facility. Because somewhere you're going to have to subsidize those people that are utilizing it," explained a participant from Chanute. These fees would help support programs the community wants to see continued or implemented such as computer courses, woodworking, etc.

In contrast, other sentiments were reflected. One participant stated,

While the tuition is relatively inexpensive, it bothers me that I have to pay computer fees and student union fees and all of these other fees if I just want to take one class. I don't mind paying tuition but maybe we could have a different fee structure for those community members taking a class.

An Erie participant suggested, "you could make it fairly nominal, a sliding fee or something that would be appropriate." The idea of differentiating fees for how and when the facilities at the college are used as well as which courses are taken was a common idea among participants from several communities. Table 4 shows dual credit by gender and high school that indicates the economic consideration of students towards tuition costs.

Table 4: Dual Credit by Gender and High School

School	The College		Other College		Totals
	Males	Females	Males	Females	
Chanute	20	21	0	0	41
Erie	6	7	0	0	13
St. Paul	5	4	0	0	9
Ottawa	9	16	0	0	25
Anderson	5	15	1	0	21
Totals	45	63	1	0	109

The idea of differentiating fees for how and when the facilities at NCCC are used as well as which courses are taken was a common idea among participants from several communities. (See Table 5 for summary of value to the service area.)

Table 5: Participants' Perceptions of the College's Value to the Service Area

Categories	Main Aspects	+ -01	Host/Non-host
Value to the Service Area	Greatest contributors to the positive aspect were participants from Chanute and Ottawa	+	H
	Some communities they were not in the college scope of concern	-	NH
Economic Benefit	The college brings a positive image to the community	+	H
	The college brings people in from outside the community who may stay to reside	+	H
	The college provides job opportunities to the area	+	H
	The college needs to broaden educational coursework	-	H
Accessibility	Accessibility of the college and its programs was very good	+	H
	Community appreciated use of facilities	+	H
	High school student often attend Labette Community College due to proximity	-	NH
	May be too close to home for some students	-	H and NH
Cost of Tuition	Communities appreciated the affordability of courses at NCCC	+	H and NH
	Fees should be assessed to those community members using the facilities who are not taxpayers	-	H and NH
	Differentiated fee scale for community members needed so they do not have to pay student union fees, computer fees, etc.	-	H and NH

¹Positive (+) Neutral (0) Negative (-)

6. Recommendations

Based upon the results of the interviews and surveys, the research team would like to suggest the following recommendations:

1. Communication – Based on non-host community responses
 - a. Consider the individual needs of the service area communities.
 - b. Seek opportunities to invite students to feel a part of the community college.
 - c. Increase marketing to address the lack of information, increase visibilities in the communities, and educate community members on services provided by the college.
 - d. It is important to ensure consistent information is dispensed to students and families by reducing staff turnover.
2. Relationships – based on non-host community responses
 - a. Stable liaisons build lasting relationships with school officials and members of the communities.
 - b. Recruitment efforts require face-to-face meetings with the college representatives.
3. Services offered, quality and variety of education

- a. Continue dual credit opportunities and consider expanding to include apprenticeship-type programs.
- b. Consider expanding workshops and continued life-long learning courses.
- c. Maintain public access of community college facilities.
- d. Reconsider fee structure for non-credit/life-long learning courses.
- e. Continue developing new programs for evolving career areas.

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