Emphasizing “Community” in the Community College Experience:

The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

Cheryl Almeda and Julie Stotz-Ghosh

New Voices

This essay describes the unique advantage community college students have of concentrating their liberal arts studies in the intimate environment of their two-year experience, sharing examples of successful strategies that emphasize and build community in the liberal arts tradition at Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

The home page of University of California, Berkeley’s College of Letters and Science suggests, “To be liberally educated is to be transformed.” Similarly, community college students from diverse cultural backgrounds, vocational interests, and educational goals seek an education to transform themselves. As students of the liberal arts, former teachers at high schools, universities, and liberal arts colleges, and now community college faculty in both the English and Transitional (Reading) Studies Departments, we argue that our current community college students have the unique advantage of concentrating their liberal arts studies in the intimate environment of their two-year experience. Though recent state and national attention has focused on “back to work” and vocational skills enhancement at the community college, we argue for an integrated experience of education, identity, wholeness, and community. At Kalamazoo Valley Community College, where we teach, our students are similar to and different from other community college students throughout the country. To embed the points of this article into the context of our students’ particular experience, we first offer a look at who we are and how we are like and unlike other community colleges.

At Home in Kalamazoo, Michigan

By some accounts, the city of Kalamazoo is as matchless and unique as its name. Recognized for innovative engineering, specialized medical equipment and pharmaceutical opportunities, and a revitalized downtown, Kalamazoo recently welcomed an extraordinary civic gift from generous (anonymous) benefactors who endowed the Kalamazoo Promise, an inimitable educational opportunity that provides college tuition to graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools. These attributes set Kalamazoo apart from other Michigan cities. Yet, Kalamazoo shares characteristics with other
midsized, mid-Michigan towns: we too battle economic, cultural, and educational concerns within our southwest region of the Great Lakes State. About 75,000 citizens strong, Kalamazoo boasts three institutions of higher learning—Western Michigan University, a large public institution; Kalamazoo College, a small liberal arts college; and Kalamazoo Valley Community College. KVCC has welcomed students of the Promise, which since its inception with the KPS graduating class of 2006 has promised up to 100 percent tuition and mandatory fee costs for students for four years at any public university or community college in Michigan. Taking into consideration factors like transportation (because 61 percent of KVCC students attend part-time and do not choose to live on campus), KVCC has provided many Promise students their higher education of choice.

KVCC was founded in 1966 and now enrolls over 13,000 students. With 27 percent of our students coming “back to school” between age 25 to 39, a mix of student demographics represented by students of color (24 percent), and an active prisoner re-education program (linked to the Michigan Prisoner Re-entry Initiative), a majority (54 percent) of KVCC’s students receive financial aid. KVCC students bring a collage of cultures to our institution. To meet the needs of this diverse population, KVCC grants a variety of degrees from certificate and apprenticeship programs to associates of arts and applied sciences, which was our largest population of degree earners in 2009/2010. We also serve a large “transfer” population of students who start their education at KVCC but move on to four-year colleges and universities. Besides our larger campus, located fifteen miles outside the heart of the city, KVCC also offers classes at a smaller downtown campus, the Groves Campus, financed by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation with matching grants, and runs the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, which is open to the public. Students work through a core of classes in math, communication, humanities, and sciences (to name a few) and must complete several gateway courses, English 110 being one of them, to move into their various areas of study. Compass Test or ACT scores open doors to college-level classes, but many students must work through transitional coursework in math, English, and reading before meeting the score or grade requirements of those gateway courses. The communal experiences we address in this article are shared among students at every level of coursework—from transitional students to those in their last semester of coursework, ready to transfer to four-year universities or to graduates preparing to work. The following examples will emphasize the ways we strive to create this community of learning for our students inside and outside of the classroom.

**From Access to Student Success**

Community colleges offer an affordable liberal arts education. As Rob Jenkins points out in “The Liberal Arts Are Work-Force Development,” with half of all U.S. freshmen and sophomores in community colleges, “two year colleges are among the country’s leading providers of liberal arts education, although they seldom get credit for that role” (par. 4). Attributes that community colleges share with private liberal arts colleges are a focus on undergraduate education, a culture that places a

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strong value on student-faculty and student-student interactions both in and out of the classroom, and “curricular and environmental structures that work in combination to create coherence and integrity in students’ intellectual experiences” (Blaich et al. 13). Similar to private liberal arts colleges, faculty at community colleges are hired to focus primarily on teaching students and for their teaching skills, resulting in personalized attention with a goal to help every student achieve his or her potential. Though not as small as traditional private liberal arts colleges, community colleges tend toward a small institutional size. Students are able to share in their “intellectual experience[s] in the curriculum” as they progress through core classes (11). These elements of the community college are conditions that foster student learning. At KVCC we foster these conditions and seek to explore both rigorous coursework and community-building exercises that will invite participation in every aspect of our students’ education, whether they are learning to fix cars, fight fires, or quote Shakespeare.

Attributes that enhance community college students’ liberal arts education are the benefits of a more diverse student population and the unique mission of community colleges to connect students’ college experiences to the community in which they learn, work, and live. In a time when the role and responsibilities of the community college are shifting, we should draw on an inherently positive quality of the community college; we, in fact, provide our students with a liberal arts education that can transform their thinking and position them for sustained and successful growth in their chosen career field or upon transferring to a four-year college or university. We should also draw on what makes us unique in our approach to a liberal arts education: our mission and commitment to create and promote community.

Linking Critical Inquiry to College and Community Identity

Goals of a liberal arts college are to foster “an attitude of intellectual openness, especially to inquiry, discovery, new ideas and perspectives,” as well as “the ability and desire to adopt a critical perspective on one’s and other’s beliefs, behaviors, values, and positions, whether this perspective leads one to a reaffirmation or revision of one’s current position” (Blaich et al. 13). While these attributes are common to philosophies of higher educational achievement in other types of institutions, what distinguishes a liberal arts educational approach is integration of critical thinking skills with “environmental structures that work in combination to create coherence and integrity in student’s intellectual experiences” (13). These attributes are not easy to integrate, however, and as the rigors of academic coursework test our students to memorize complicated terms and theories, read critically, and write expressively, a teacher’s greatest challenge is to focus attention on the diverse needs of his or her classroom and reach myriad students boasting varied learning levels and styles. Cultural pluralism further complicates the education equation. Carlos J. Ovando and Virginia P. Collier de ne a pluralistic culture as “a society in which members of diverse cultural, social, racial, or religious groups are free to maintain their own
identity and yet simultaneously share equitably in a larger common political organization, economic system and social structure” (qtd. in David and Capraro 80). To these intents and purposes, Robert Bellhas warns of “a pervasive loss of community in America that is characterized by separation and isolation. He argues for a restoration of the values and practice of community in America that once acted as a binding force for our society” (Griggs and Stewart 185). This suggested splintering of our culture can put increasing stress on the shoulders of the individual and the family, many of whom are being driven into our community colleges in order to gain a leg up vocationally and socially. In response, our educational system, and especially the community college, offers a place where cultural pluralism and community can be most explicitly linked for the most positive purposes. Community colleges are “well positioned” to address societal needs concerning education, social and financial equity, personal development, and “enhanced economic development” for our local economies (Bailey and Jacobs par. 6).

In “Grand Solution or Grab Bag?” David L. Levinson writes:

America’s community colleges serve as an inclusive bedrock that can provide a much needed corrective to the increasing exclusivity and segmentation of American life. Whereas our neighborhoods, communities, and schools are segregated by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, the nation’s community colleges enroll a spectrum of learners whose demographics cut across many of these dividing lines. (par. 3)

Yet, in order to provide a culturally pluralistic, academically challenging environment for our students, we must value the combined pathos and ethos of “community” as equally important to the logos of “college.” We have established that the abilities and experiences our students bring to community colleges are vastly different from one another. How do we go about creating the value and credibility innate to an inclusive classroom community in order that the academic rigors of education might thrive?

In Strategies for Teaching in Heterogeneous Environments While Building a Classroom Community, Haley Lyn David and Robert M. Capraro suggest that an inherent sense of community in our classrooms helps students nd “inner balance and wholeness” in a community of learners (81). Jim Burke in his 2012 English Journal article “Connecting the Classroom, Community, and Curriculum” argues for focusing our educational goals on Linda Darling-Hammond’s “survival skills for the new economy: Design, evaluate, and manage one’s own work for continual improvement; frame, investigate, and solve problems using a range of tools and resources; collaborate, communicate with others; and, analyze, and use information; and develop new products and ideas” (qtd. in Burke 19). Specifically in our English courses—with tasks varying between reading for information, creative composition, technical writing, and literature-based discussion—we work to bring students together with some broad instructional practices.

> In our shared classroom community, we investigate, interrogate, and celebrate individual and collective identity.

Perhaps most important for our students is the feeling we create in our

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classrooms that we’re all in this together. The adage “life-long learners” means little if we do not make it real in students’ collegiate experience. Community college students are the most diverse group of learners one can find—our students come from every economic, social, and cultural background. They are new high school graduates, returning workers, international immigrants, and local first-generation college students; in summation, they come in every shape and size. “Teachers know,” Deborah Dean and Adrienne Warren write in “Informal and Shared: Writing to Create Community,” that “the most valuable learning occurs in classrooms where a sense of community exists” (50). “Community encourages rich learning because of the interactions among many individuals, not the limited, two-way exchange of ideas or information that is often the case when students fail to form a community” (50). Instructors must not miss the critical opportunity to bridge gaps in student experiences and build community in our classrooms.

What makes a real community in education? The answer is the meaningful interactions that “deepen [members’] understanding of each other,” authors Dean and Warren assert (50), along with experiences combining moments exploring intertextuality, common reading and writing experiences, and the shared motivation to discover more of who we are through what we think. Additionally, “place plays an indelible role in the way we perceive and come to understand the world around us. . . . Place influences our interactions by shaping the genres, texts, and languages we use as writers and readers” (Esposito 70). Though they are commuter campuses, community colleges are well positioned to integrate experiences for our students and to thereby foster an attitude of sharing and discussion of ideas and experiences in and out of the classroom. At KVCC, the very architecture of our main campus, an interconnected structure built beside a wooded nature preserve, creates connections with its shared hallways, integrated departments, quiet common spaces for reflection and studying, and social meeting places. We offer unique summer offerings such as a beginning biology class that meets daily out-of-doors. Students who have grown up in the city can investigate and celebrate the natural world in ways that are unfamiliar and new to them. So, too, we are fortunate to have the downtown campus and public museum that connect our rural students with our city and invite new ways of appreciating the attributes of Kalamazoo.

> As instructors, we model the behaviors we want our students to emulate.

Doug Hindle writes, “Teachers are capable of producing profound and positive changes in students’ behavior and learning by effectively modeling the positive processes, skills, and attitudes” we desire in our students (qtd. in David and Capraro 81). If we read something exciting in our personal reading lives, we share that excitement with our students. If we question the validity of a quotation, or want answers to a question, we model the research process for our students. We discuss ways to decode unfamiliar vocabulary by reading context clues, using an online dictionary, or examining the word roots; we watch clips of favorite authors reading from favorite books. We operate in front of our classrooms in the ways we behave as readers and writers at home. In Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses, authors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa shared that 36 percent
of American undergraduates showed “small or empirically nonexistent” improvements in “general collegiate skills” such as critical thinking, complex reasoning, writing, and computational skills upon graduating (qtd. in Lindsay 2), and fewer students than ever are asking the “permanent questions,” such as “Who am I?” (1). To address these fissures in and for our students, we provide the model of informed, excited, interested readers and writers many have lacked in their lives before attending community college.

> Reading across the curriculum becomes a core value for students and faculty alike.

Simply put, students and faculty read together. Together as readers, we can share current topics of interest and discuss them as a community. As teachers, we model what some instructors call “cold reading.” In this circumstance, we read something for the first time with our students, so the playing field is level. Sometimes the instructors pick the reading material while other times our students decide on articles to share or opt in for a literature circle on a book of their choice. We ask questions of the text and each other and share various strategies, interpretations, and responses. Alternating between practicing comprehension strategies, textual interpretation, and reflection regarding what we have read, we, like those students introduced in Paul Morris’s recent article, discuss “the importance of varying strategies according to the reading situation, thus emphasizing the conditional awareness of knowing when to apply approaches as well as knowing how” (382). Students and teachers together speculate, infer, respond, and reflect.

Francis A. Butler and Robin Stevens stated that “students listen and speak before they read and write. Fluent oral interaction between peers is a necessity in a classroom as a predecessor to written communication” (qtd. in David and Capraro 82). We recognize the value of talking about first impressions, emotional connections to characters, and resurfacing memories that can and often do happen when students share the phenomenon of reading an important passage together. Mel Cohen, who shares attempts on his campus at creating community through teacher-student dinners, writes: “Countless informal discussions with other faculty and my reactions following these conversations led me to realize that many of us have little idea of what is actually occurring in our classes . . . not only are student perceptions interesting, but they also are integral to teaching and learning and therefore critical to education outcomes” (356). While in our institution we do not facilitate formal student-faculty receptions, we do love a good potluck! For example, after our reading classes completed Bich Mihn Nguyen’s memoir wherein the author chronicled her assimilation to American living through her association with snack foods, we held a “snack food potluck.” At this event, faculty, reading class students, and former students from our classes gathered informally to enjoy food and fellowship. The educational focus of the event was a panel of student immigrants who were able to share their own assimilation stories. In addition to meeting face-to-face, we also make use of electronic discussion boards, like those in NiceNet or Moodle, where students engage in online conversations about what they are reading and how it is affecting them as learners and community members of our shared classrooms. Important to all of these ways we engage faculty and students is the “significance

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of caring” (Cohen 361). For Marcia Baxter Magolda, “caring is both an attitude and associated behaviors toward learning and student ideas that affirm students as learners” (qtd. in. Cohen 361). Reading, talking, reflecting, and sharing become the common experience in education we share together.

Through these classroom experiences, reading becomes not just an academic exercise, but a collective, communal experience that faculty and students celebrate together. Additionally, we strive to extend the reading audience to campus-wide collaboration. There are two opportunities for our students to engage in a “common reading experience” at our community college. First, as part of our Visiting Writers Series, instructors throughout our college had assigned Bich Mihn Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. In fact, twenty of our English classes, from developmental level through our most advanced, participated in this shared experience. This campus-wide collaboration resulted in an environment where, for the weeks prior to and following Nguyen’s visit, students recognized they were part of an experience that extended beyond the confines of their own classroom as they discovered their friends and acquaintances from other classes had been assigned the same reading. Walking down the hallways during these weeks, we could overhear students discussing their various assignments and feelings, positive or negative, about the coursework and the memoir. This integrated experience brought the classroom into the hallways and beyond. Some students experimented with writing memoirs of their own, and many students were challenged to re-examine or re-evaluate their cultural views and experiences growing up on the margins. At the public craft talks and readings, which brought together students from a variety of classes and interested community members, students and faculty had a chance to hear from the author herself and ask her questions. The line for the book signing was long after each appearance as many students had developed a special connection to the experience and wanted a chance to meet the author.

Second, we tap into the larger community’s common literary experience called “Reading Together.” Our city, like many others, has a dynamic public library that, among other things, sponsors a common “read” each year. After the selection committee makes its choice for the year’s text, hundreds of books hit the shelves in our local libraries, including ours at the community college. The public library sponsors a host of events—ranging from visiting artists, historians, and chefs to showings of documentaries and artistic displays—all of which resonate with the themes of the chosen text. At KVCC, we hang fliers and invite students and faculty alike to gather for food and conversation surrounding the chosen text. Two years ago, we read Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North*, which chronicled the journey of several teenage girls and one boy from Mexico across the border into the US in search of their fathers, who had immigrated northward. This year, we enjoyed Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*, which takes on the controversies surrounding public art, religious intent, and the conflicts that sometimes arise when we seek to memorialize someone or something in a public way. Whether or not a college can afford a guest speaker or visiting author, or instead chooses to tap into the rich diversity of its faculty to present a program or facilitates a student panel.
exploring several themes or topics stemming from the novel is insignificant. Most considerable is our goal in all of these activities: to foster intertextuality.

*Intertextuality* is defined by Chris Strouthopoulos and Janet L. Peterson as “a term we use to describe the integration of a student’s ideas with outside texts” (54). “Today,” they write, “students are inundated with texts in all their diverse forms, and they need to learn how better to interact with them and relate them to one another” (54). Additionally, the beauty of these opportunities for students and faculty is the integration that happens between those in our developmental college classrooms with far more advanced students as well as staff and faculty members who attend the book discussions and events. As Cheryl Hogue Smith suggests, “[basic] students aren’t aware it’s standard practice in the academic community to look for and make connections between and among texts, and therefore they do not think to connect texts in ways that they successfully do outside of school with their music or other elements of pop culture” (144). “This means,” she writes, “we as teachers need to help our students activate inside of school so they can pay attention not just to the texts as they read, but to echoes of and references to other texts that have to be resonant in the recesses of their own minds”(144). Tapping into the opportunities of our public libraries and community at large (and not always reinventing the wheel for our students!) seems to emphasize the lifelong learning we hope our students will embrace long after they have graduated.

> Writing, writing, and more writing . . . it’s what we do to remember, re ect, recognize, and reconsider the ever-expanding world around us.

At KVCC, we encourage students to write about their own experiences. When students are able to relate their thoughts to past experiences, David and Capraro suggest, “they are able to write more in-depth ideas, as opposed to trying to write about a topic [for which] they have little prior knowledge” (82). We have found this to be true in our reading and writing classrooms. Even with the critical goals of helping students engage with materials with which they are not familiar, we have found that starting with communal experiences grounded in what students already know can provide the ways and means into a text. For example, when our classes engaged with Michigan author Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, students started enjoying the literary experience by examining their own backgrounds. Because Nguyen had grown up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, our largely local student body recognized many of her geographical references and cultural clues throughout the text. But before we read about Nguyen’s experiences with the neighborhood bully, we wrote about our own—in journals, online discussions, essays, and poems—and together faculty and students examined their memories. As we enjoyed Nguyen’s discussion surrounding her family dinners, we shared tales of favorite foods and family traditions.

Another opportunity comes in our developmental writing classes where students compose articles about their micro-cultures. As Cheryl noted, students’ micro-cultures—ranging from Eagle Scouts to teenage parents, from blue-collar workers to first-generation college students—offer a plethora of opportunities to
examine, write about, and share the connections that are familiar and important in their lives. These exercises’ primary purpose is to provide opportunities to build curiosity and enhance critical thinking for our students, yet an additional bonus is the sense of community created as we share our lives together (Almeda 81–86). Especially in the first few weeks of class in both composition and creative writing, narrative freewriting, responses, and essays create an opportunity for students to express themselves personally. In both classes, students are required to share their first assignment by reading it to the class. The response is a one-page description/narrative of a time when the student noticed or watched a sunset or sunrise. Students almost always generate a story they are proud of and often surprised they wrote, especially students who have not paid much attention to writing description. The result of sharing this first assignment is an instantaneous development of camaraderie and empathy. What might be the most intimidating thing, reading your first assignment to strangers, becomes the glue that bonds the class.

By integrating their life outside KVCC with their coursework, we encourage our students to investigate and explore their larger community. Assignments connected with Nguyen’s visit ranged from literary analysis to assignments and essays that invited students to connect their own lives to the issues in the memoir or to conduct research about issues related to the novel, such as the fall of Saigon and Vietnamese immigration to western Michigan. Some students elected to taste Vietnamese food for the first time and write about the experience. We encourage students to explore the community around them as a way to learn about new ideas and perspectives, fostering inquiry supported by personal experience. Students conduct field research, investigating people, places, or activities in their community to bring back unique perspectives for their readers and classmates while learning or experiencing something new yet close to home. Creative writing students participate in readings of their own work or submit their work for publication, extending their audience beyond the classroom. Service learning and vocational writing are also opportunities for students to relate what’s important to them personally to their academic inquiry. Students’ inquiry and intellectual efforts can extend to all arenas of their lives. As Greg Shafer notes, most students “in [his] composition classes—both black and white—feel a sense of both optimism and pride about their city” which makes his ethnography assignment a good fit for the class. We concur. Shafer contends that “such research allows students to interrogate the very people who are being labeled by ‘outsiders’” and that interrogation can “provide students with the opportunity to investigate themselves” (63). Investigative, creative, explorational writing brings faculty and students together in ways they would not have welcomed, nor even allowed, in a context outside of college. In an environment where integration of classroom work and community is possible, students’ educational experience is supported and enhanced.

Teachers and students write together. In class, we engage in the practice of writing in highly visible ways and encourage one another in the process. It is not enough to simply say “I have writer’s block” and dismiss our work, which at times can be maddening for even the most mature writer. Instead, we find ways
of brainstorming—listing, clustering, freewriting, doodling, drawing—to move us away from a state
where we lack ideas to an overabundance of inventive thought. Students and teachers alike share our
work. In composition and creative writing classes, we freewrite with our students and share our own raw
ideas, insights, and stories. While freewriting in response to the prompt of the sunrise/sunset assignment
previously mentioned, Julie has been enriched by the seemingly endless images and details that
accompany her experience of various sunrises and sunsets in her memory, and that she has shared with
her class, particularly the memory of keeping her one-year-old son up well past his bedtime to view his
first sunset on Lake Michigan, the glassy waves reflecting pink and purple that evening, her son almost
asleep on her shoulder, the weight of his solid warm body in her arms.

We help each other organize our writing, list major and minor ideas, and link arguments to examples; we
share ideas and challenge theories. We finalize titles and discuss first and last lines together; we peer
review and nal edit. Composing our worlds, we are a community of writers. Motivation to write, we
acknowledge, can be both intrinsic and extrinsic, and sometimes students are compelled more by one or
the other, or occasionally by both. Patrick Sullivan argues that motivating students requires three “key”
strategies: “variety, choice, and disguised repetition” (123). Inside and outside of class, we strive to
provide students with the motivation to write by creating compelling topics and real audiences for our
projects. By al- lowing our students variety and choice in their writing, we value ownership of the topics
they select; this, in turn, increases their motivation to look outside themselves to professional models of
good writing and to each other as they investigate new genres and new topics. Self-publishing provides
even more inspiration for both faculty and students. It is essential that teachers and students share together
what they have written. Part of coming together as a community is this sharing of our writing.

Two opportunities that create extrinsic motivation for our students are our on-campus essay and poetry
contests. Cash prizes are awarded to the first- and second-place winners in eight categories; in addition,
all winners, including honorable mentions, have their work published in a journal that is distributed free
of charge to winners. This collection of winning essays is also catalogued in our library. Students who
submit poetry for our newly established poetry prize are eligible to win cash prizes and are invited to
participate in a public reading at our downtown Kalamazoo campus. Winners of our poetry contest
participate in a poetry reading, which we organize to occur in conjunction with our city’s monthly
downtown art hop, connecting students with their community. This year, we invited ten students to read,
as well as friends and family members of Ned Foskey, a former KVCC writing tutor for whom our poetry
prize is named, who read Ned’s poems in memoriam. Our reading and our college’s student art show took
place in the same building that night, bringing together students, faculty, and members of our community.
It was an amazing example of the mutual support and collaboration of students, community, faculty, and
college that creates a web that bonds us together not only in a common purpose but as humans.

In addition to student readings and publications, our instructors share their

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own creative work at four different readings throughout the year. Each semester showcase introduces three or four faculty members, with one reading taking place on our main campus and one at our downtown campus. These reading showcase not only the talent of our instructors but also the diversity of our experiences and aesthetics. Faculty readings are well attended by students, faculty, and staff, and also by members of the community.

Moving Up and Out

Our liberal arts focus and emphasis on reading and writing across the curriculum do much more than create “feel good” moments shared between faculty and students. We believe they help connect students and professional educators in ways that connect learners to ideas of exploration, inquiry, and research. Such connections ground students in their newly developing ideas of what it means to be undergraduates. Importantly, whether or not students reach the finish line in their community college experience, these activities build citizenship and seek to support a democracy that believes in education. David L. Levinson suggested that “community colleges can create what I term ‘community capital’ which comprises human capital, financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital” (par. 14). He emphasizes that by enlightening students about general education, liberal arts and work-force training programs (human capital), financial resources, collective action in our local communities to address problems like poverty and developing pro- grams to sustain human development (social capital), and “by educating students . . . an expansive cadre of learners who are often labeled nontraditional . . . about the norms for success” (cultural capital), community colleges can provide promising futures to diverse learners with specific goals (par. 14). We can forge pathways to upward mobility, help students organize plans for prosperous futures, engage one another in critical thought and discussion, and move beyond fragmentation dividing class and culture, into a stronger sense of community. Harriet Griggs and Barbara Stewart agree: “The value of a model of community by higher education to the individual is that it provides a pattern for productive, ethical thinking and behavior both in professional and private life” (187).

At our current economic and political crossroads, community colleges can continue to allow access while supporting students’ success with a liberal arts foundation. As Jenkins comments, “Many Americans learn at a community college most of what they will ever learn—in a formal setting, at least—about writing, critical thinking, the history of our culture and civilization, the environment, and human behavior” (par. 4). In addition, community college students can embrace their com- munities by sharing reading, writing, and other academic opportunities for critical inquiry that will benefit not only themselves but each other. Reading and writing, independently and collaboratively, invite students to study, discover, and envision the world outside themselves; these experiences create a construct for making meaning and generating greater understanding. Shared literacy can emphasize the connections we have to our schools, our communities, and our world. By emphasizing both

the rigor of college and the inclusiveness of community, our community colleges can provide students with the benefits of a liberal arts education, bringing this valued experience to a majority of our culture’s citizens at a price—one distinguished by access and affordability—of which many can take advantage.

Works Cited


Cheryl Almeda earned her PhD in the theory and teaching of English from Western Michigan University and teaches developmental writing and transitional reading at Kalamazoo Valley Community College. Julie Stotz-Ghosh earned her PhD in English with a creative dissertation from Western Michigan University and teaches composition, creative writing, and literature at Kalamazoo Valley Community College.