

FOREWORD

When in 2010 I first heard that Mayor Richard M. Daley had appointed a businessperson to be the next chancellor of the City Colleges of Chicago, I was intrigued. I had been part of earlier efforts by community and advocacy groups in Chicago to convince the mayor to focus more attention on improving the City Colleges. His tapping Cheryl Hyman—an experienced leader from the private sector with no experience in college administration—indicated that he was willing (finally) to do something to shake up Chicago’s community colleges.

But I was also skeptical. I had worked with the City Colleges, community organizations, and employers starting in the mid-1990s to develop “adult technical bridge” programs, a sort of boot camp designed to prepare adults with poor education or limited English skills to enter college-level, career-technical training programs that would in turn lead to career-path technician jobs in manufacturing, health care, information technology, and other fields. These efforts created a successful model that has since been replicated throughout the country.

In my work with the City Colleges, I observed that, like a lot of community colleges, the institution was very focused on inputs—on getting students into classes—and not much on outcomes—ensuring that they completed with degrees of value for employment and further education. This preoccupation with access over success showed in the results: graduation rates were in the single digits. Many occupational programs were outdated and failed to train students for jobs in demand.

Not surprisingly, then, the City Colleges of Chicago were held in low regard by employers and universities. And they were not respected by community organizations and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), even though they offered adult literacy programs through many community-based organizations, and were and still are the most common destination for CPS graduates who go on to college.

Although I worked with some excellent faculty, staff, and administrators, management of the colleges was not generally strong. In the several years I partnered with the colleges, I never saw a broad-based effort to engage faculty, advisers, and others in efforts to design improvements in programs and support services. Faculty and staff were rarely, if ever, shown data on how students were faring at the colleges outside of individual classes, much less what happened to them after they left. The result was a culture that was unaccustomed to innovation—and in many respects, resistant to it.

Another source of my skepticism was that there was no clear guidance in the field about how to turn around a large community college system (or even a small college, for that matter). Since the early 2000s, there had been a great ferment of activity in community colleges nationally aimed at improving student outcomes. Achieving the Dream, funded by Lumina and many other foundations and involving over 150 colleges nationally, is one prominent example. Yet research we at the Community College Research Center and others conducted on these reforms found that the programs tended to be relatively small in scale and that their positive effects diminished over time. While in many cases, they benefited small numbers of students, they were not succeeding in moving the needle on student completion rates overall or reducing equity gaps in achievement between students by race and income. This led to a growing recognition among researchers and practitioners that to improve student outcomes substantially, “boutique” innovations would not suffice; rather, colleges needed to fundamentally redesign their programs and support services. The field had some high-performing colleges that had achieved standards of excellence to strive for, but there was no “playbook” on how to turn around a system as poorly performing as Chicago’s City Colleges.

In this candid and provocative book, Cheryl Hyman chronicles the efforts she led at the City Colleges to address these obstacles: challenging the culture of complacency that sometimes characterizes colleges and engaging faculty and administrators around a far-reaching and comprehensive program of reform.

I had the good fortune to observe these efforts by Hyman and her team, serving as a pro bono adviser to the whole-system redesign—the “City College Reinvention.” From this experience, I saw that that her approach to

the work was animated by a set of core ideas—ideas that reflected her personal and professional experience.

The first was that a student-centered education needs to be a *career-focused* one. Hyman calls this principle *relevance*: what students are taught needs to be relevant to what they hope to achieve. Hyman believes that what students and their families are seeking foremost when they invest the time, money, and effort to go to college is entrée to a career. It was her own desire to have a professional job in an office downtown, along with an interest in computers, that motivated Hyman to earn a college degree and thereby escape a life of poverty.

As Hyman points out in this book, the debate about the purpose of a community college education has been going on since the first community college, Joliet Junior College, was established in 1901—a debate that unfortunately has been driven by class and racial conflict. Chicago’s City Colleges themselves evolved from post-high school courses first taught in 1911 at two Chicago vocational high schools, which later added general education and prep-professional focuses to the “terminal” vocational programs. As has been true in community colleges nationally, these three mission areas were never reconciled with one another.

Hyman emphatically rejects this separation. She believes that to thrive in today’s workplace and society, students need both the broad skills of the sort associated with the liberal arts *and* strong technical skills. They also need degrees—and increasingly, bachelor’s degrees even in occupations that traditionally did not require a baccalaureate. This is supported by research on the returns to postsecondary credentials. Hyman advocates a “third way” that integrates academic and vocational education. She urged her colleagues at the City Colleges to move out of their traditional organizational siloes because their students suffer as a result. Students taking general education arts and sciences courses need to see the connection of these courses to careers of interest to them, while those in career programs need broader skills and college degrees if they are to be able to advance in their careers. While faculty may be reluctant to embrace this view, students and their families clearly understand this, which is reflected in continued demand for “degrees with skills.”

A second idea underlying Hyman’s approach to reinventing the City Colleges is the efficacy of applying business practices to running

educational institutions. She and her team used private-sector know-how to improve operational competence and fiscal efficiency—both of which had been sorely lacking at the City Colleges before she came. Today, when states continue to cut subsidies for public higher education and colleges are forced to rely more and more on tuition—while trying to keep costs affordable to students and their families—sound fiscal management is increasingly essential for the survival of public colleges and universities. Hyman saved tens of millions of dollars by streamlining administration and business processes, savings that were reinvested in the educational programs and student support services of the colleges.

Hyman's experience in business taught her more than just how to run an efficient operation. As she describes in the book, when she was at Commonwealth Edison, Hyman led a team that introduced major innovations, increased efficiencies, and supported improved operations. A key lesson she brought with her to the City Colleges is that to effect fundamental change in practice, it is necessary to change the culture. To do that, you have to change hearts and minds. Hyman's strategy for changing attitudes at the City Colleges was to broadly engage her colleagues in redesigning their institution. In late 2010, she invited people from throughout the colleges, in all types of roles from faculty to IT staff, to join Reinvention task forces that would spend an entire semester working together to make recommendations for reform on issues from program portfolio to faculty and staff development and technology. Once a task force came up with a solution, they were responsible for conducting workshops to present their ideas to other colleagues and solicit further input. Later, each college set up separate task forces to further deepen engagement. Ultimately, over 20 percent of full-time faculty, in addition to many staff and administrators, were directly involved in the process, which resulted in changes in practice I would not have thought possible when I worked with the City Colleges several years before.

The third essential idea behind Hyman's approach is the overriding importance of accountability both to students and to taxpayers. She acknowledges that community colleges are poorly funded (all the more reason why a focus on fiscal efficiency is important). She recognizes that many City Colleges students come unprepared academically and that many have fraught lives outside of school where even getting by day to day can

be a challenge. So there are lots of reasons the community college mission is not easy to fulfill. Yet, the hand Hyman was dealt in her own life was far from ideal. She could have made a lot of excuses for not trying to make a better life. And once she'd made it in the private sector, she could have continued with a lucrative career. But she wanted to give back. These values formed through her own life were manifest in how she approached leading the City Colleges. Every time I saw her speak publicly, she communicated a clear message: *The City Colleges' job is to serve the students who come to them, and we are accountable to students and taxpayers for doing so. There are lots of obstacles, but we're in this business for a reason. No one else will do this if colleges won't. The mission is so important that we cannot make excuses.*

Cheryl's thinking along these lines turns out to have been very prescient. By following these guiding ideas, Hyman and her colleagues at the City Colleges conceived and implemented innovations in practice that have begun only in the past two or three years to take hold in the community college landscape nationally. These include working with employers and university partners to more clearly map programs to career-path jobs and further education, requiring all students to select a broad field and develop a full-program plan in their first term, and implementing technology systems to allow advisers and students themselves to monitor progress along their plans and change course as needed.

Now that reforms along these lines are sweeping the field, *Reinvention: The Promise and Challenge of Transforming a Community College System* is quite timely. It tells the story about the innovative in practice that the City Colleges put in place, and how they managed the change process. *Reinvention* is the playbook for redesigning a large urban college system that was missing from the field when Hyman came to the City Colleges in 2010.

The changes in practice the City Colleges implemented under Hyman's leadership were pathbreaking and enabled the colleges to substantially improve outcomes for students. However, the extent to which the field is successful in adopting similar reforms will depend less on what specific practices colleges put in place, but rather on whether college leaders can change mindsets. We will not see sustained reform until faculty, staff, and administrators adopt the guiding ideas manifested in Hyman's leadership. We need to move beyond the antiquated academic-vocational divide

and see that in today's world, both as workers and citizens, our students will need broad skills and technical ones, and that increasingly, a bachelor's degree (ideally with certificates and associate degrees embedded) is required for career-path employment. We have to accept that in order to provide a quality education with limited resources, colleges have much to learn from the private sector both in terms of operational and fiscal management and in how to manage large-scale change. Finally, we need to recommit ourselves to our students and the vital public role of community colleges. We must hold ourselves and our students to high standards—and be accountable to students and taxpayers for doing so.

In this book, Hyman shows us how to this. As she makes clear, if we don't do it, no one else will. It is up to us. There are no excuses.

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