

## Education Podcast with John Merrow #71 – We Know What Works



### **We Know What Works**

Nancy Shulock doesn't think community colleges should get more money -- that is, without also implementing some major policy changes. She argues that we already know how to improve transfer and completion rates at community colleges but sometimes lack the political will to do so. In this podcast, Professor Shulock, Executive Director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University, offers insights that have upset some community college leaders.

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NANCY SHULOCK

In California, access has just been so highly celebrated for decades. And we have great access. We have 109 community colleges. They blanket the state. They provide access to all ages of the population. All groups. But the question is, access to what? If you get in there, and you don't earn an educational credential or satisfy your educational goals, what's the value of the access?

JOHN MERROW

BECAUSE NANCY SHULOCK ASKS TOUGH QUESTIONS LIKE THAT, SHE ISN'T VERY POPULAR AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS, PARTICULARLY IN CALIFORNIA. SHULOCK IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP AND POLICY AT SACRAMENTO STATE UNIVERSITY. SHE FIGURES THAT IT'S BETTER FOR SOMEONE LIKE HER, A STRONG SUPPORTER OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, TO ASK THE HARD QUESTIONS...OR ELSE THEIR OPPONENTS WILL. I'M JOHN MERROW. I SPOKE WITH PROFESSOR SHULOCK ON HER CAMPUS, WHILE WE WERE PRODUCING OUR PBS DOCUMENTARY, "DISCOUNTED DREAMS: HIGH HOPES AND HARSH REALITIES AT AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES."

JOHN MERROW                      When we did the documentary about colleges generally, I ended up with a sense that community colleges were the poor cousin. But at the same time they were also the hero.

NANCY SHULOCK                      I think that's a really apt description. They are the poor cousin, and they are the hero. They're the hero because they fulfill missions that nobody else fulfills. They're asked, and expected to do everything. Remediation is a good example of that. They're the poor cousin because they are funded so much more poorly, per student, than four-year institutions are. And I think there's a serious misconception across society, that, because community colleges are just teaching institutions, it costs less. We don't have to pay as much. And when you think about it, that means that we as a society have chosen to pay the least for the students who really cost the most.

JOHN MERROW                      I'm not sure I ...

NANCY SHULOCK                      The students who are being served by community colleges today are, in large part, educationally disadvantaged, unfamiliar with college. There are so many more services that are required to successfully serve these populations that educationally advantaged students in elite institutions don't require. So it is more costly to do right by many of today's community college students, and yet, states fund community colleges at a lower per student level. So that's the poor cousin dimension.

JOHN MERROW                      There must be a message here. You know, sort of the general public, we don't really care about you...

NANCY SHULOCK                      Um, I think the message is that um, the open access mission of community colleges that's been so widely celebrated is a wonderful opportunity for so many people. But it brings so many challenges, and I don't think that society has recognized the costs of meeting those challenges.

JOHN MERROW                      IN CALIFORNIA MANY COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE THE FIRST IN THEIR FAMILY TO ATTEND COLLEGE.

NANCY SHULOCK                      I think you have a lot of students in the community colleges, and you'll hear community college faculties, and, and officials say that we have students here, and they just,

they really don't know why they're here. And I think, you know, I never realized until recently, what it really means to be the first in your family to go to college. What I'm increasingly learning that it means is that you just don't know anything about college. You don't know what your options are. You don't know how to prepare for it. You don't know how to study successfully. When you're there, you don't know how to take advantage of the opportunities to belong, and join things. It's just, I think those of us who have gone to college just take all of that for granted. But it's just another world. And if you don't have anybody in your family, or any friends, or anybody who, you know, who can share their experiences with you, you're just lost.

JOHN MERROW

That would seem to make counseling important.

NANCY SHULOCK

Vital. Yes, it's very costly at the front end to quadruple the number of counselors available for the student body. But then, what are your benefits. How many more of those students are gonna get through? And ... increase their status in life, and require fewer costly public services, and be a more productive taxpaying citizen? You know, what is the cost to society of not investing in the kinds of programs and services that we know will increase student success in community college? I mean, I think the math would work out. But nobody's looking at it that way.

JOHN MERROW

On the other hand, it would seem to me to be a pretty hard argument to say...you know, look at your numbers. The actual completion rate is about 25 percent, I guess. Uh, it'd be a pretty hard argument to say, gee, we're succeeding at a 25 percent rate, give us more money. I mean you could just as easily say, we, we shut the damn thing down.

NANCY SHULOCK

I don't buy...your assumption is that if lawmakers see that completion rates are low, they will disinvest. I don't buy that argument. I'm hopeful that if lawmakers see that completion rates are low, and they're convinced that that bodes very poorly for the future workforce and economic health of their state, that they will invest more money. But I don't think they should invest more money until they're convinced that some of these fundamental reforms in how the money flows and some of the policies about what kinds of behaviors are encouraged or discouraged are addressed. To me it's a package deal.

JOHN MERROW This is not you saying throw money at the problem?

NANCY SHULOCK Absolutely not. No, we're not saying throw money at the problem. We're saying be smart, and invest more money, but invest it in different ways. If colleges got extra money for each Pell Grant recipient – that would be a financially needy student who qualifies for federal aid – if colleges got extra money for each Pell Grant recipient that they got to complete a remedial program, that would be an incentive and they would be able to, they would be inclined to really look at what do we have to do to serve these students effectively and move money around. The model that can really work in community colleges is case management. Students come in, they need a case worker. They need to check in periodically: How are you doing? How's the plan working out for you? What do you need? What services do you need? That is a costly model. Right now, it's only done in what we call a boutique mode. You'll have some programs that somehow got a line item of the budget to implement a case management model. And they may be more effective, but everyone else just looks at them enviously: How come we can't do that. I mean in many cases the sad part is, as much as research is always going on about what can be done better, we know enough right now about what works. We just don't have – often we don't have the resources, and sometimes we don't have the political will to do what works.

JOHN MERROW I was just stunned to see that community colleges get significantly less than K-12. Could you just talk about ... talk about the funding of community colleges, versus the rest of it.

NANCY SHULOCK In California?

JOHN MERROW Yeah, give me a ...

NANCY SHULOCK Community colleges are the least well funded of four systems. We have the university, the state university, community colleges, and K-12. Community colleges are funded per student significantly below what our per student K-12 funding levels are.

JOHN MERROW Can you make it real for me. If you don't have money, what does it mean?

NANCY SHULOCK

If you don't have money in the community colleges, I think it's most immediate impact for students is access to classes. We had a really bad stretch a couple of years ago where the budget was cut significantly, and the number of classes was cut very dramatically and students were – it became a battle, it became a huge competition to get into class. And what we found in some study that we did on this was that the students who were the most familiar with college, and had the resources and had cars to drive around, and knew that you could go and lobby your teacher to get let into class, students who knew the rules and how to play the system, were more successful in getting the classes. And students who were really unfamiliar with college were the ones that got shut out. And there was a huge loss of enrollment in the community colleges and in part because students – they get enrolled, they registered, but they couldn't get the classes that they wanted. So that's the first impact, the most immediate impact of inadequate budgets, the students face, is they can't get into the classes that they want or need.

JOHN MERROW

A couple times, I stood up in front of the class, and I said, "You know, I, I'd like a show of hands, if, if you're working ... full-time, raise your hand." And a lot of hands went up.

NANCY SHULOCK

I looked at some data, just recently, on that. And I think that something like 80 percent community college self-report that they're working, and maybe 40 or 60, 50 or 60 percent of them are working full-time. It is, it's, it's amazing to think of, that that many of the students work full time and go to school. There's a, a concept, called career ladders, which is increasingly in use, where community colleges can help students take that first step on the ladder. Get a foothold in the in the job market, and co- and then come back. But lawmakers tend to just want to know about transfer rates. They think that that's the success ... you know, the hallmark of success. And transfer rates have declined, because uh, in part because the populations bring more disadvantages with them when they come in. Uh, and I think colleges all want to increase their transfer rates. What I'm saying is that community colleges, I think, have been a little, they, they've been ... they've been afraid, I think, justifiably so, that in this new world of accountability, that they are going to be judged by inappropriate yardsticks. They're going to be expected to have graduation rates that look like other institutions that don't

welcome uh, more uh ... challenges uh, among the students that they take in. At the same time, that doesn't mean that they can't work to improve completion rates, graduation rates, you know, student success, as much as they can. I'm just saying that the ultimate standard by which they are judged has to be a reasonable one, given these students that they welcome into their institutions.

JOHN MERROW

The image that comes to mind is revolving door.

NANCY SHULOCK

It is a revolving door. They go to college, then they stop out. Then they go again, then they stop out. And on the one hand, it's wonderful, and necessary, that we have a set of institutions that accommodates people in those circumstances. But those patterns have been shown to be very risky. Very, very few students who engage in revolving door enrollments, in stopping out and restarting, very few of those students ever make it. The most effective pattern is to go to college right after high school, and to go continually and not drop out. Obviously not everybody's in a position to do that.

JOHN MERROW

I wonder if there's ... I mean that question of low cost solutions. If there's ... is there some sol- ... whether there's some solution that involves the community college actually working with the high school ... the kind of bridge idea and all that.

NANCY SHULOCK

The whole area of – it's being called K-16 – I think is the single most important and most promising development in education reform right now. Aligning the curriculum, aligning the standards, and aligning the assessments between the two systems. So right now a student can graduate from high school, and be nowhere near college ready. I think improving students' preparation levels in high school is going to be the single biggest thing that we can do to help the problem in the community colleges.

JOHN MERROW

Improving student levels ... student preparation in high school ... it ... it strikes me, and I know ... I know it's heresy, that if you had some sort of standards that said you know, you can't just walk in here ... I wondered does anybody say well maybe this access is the big mistake.

NANCY SHULOCK

I don't think that that's going to happen. I haven't heard anybody suggesting, certainly not in California, that

admissions standards should be imposed for the community colleges. That is not going happen. Nobody is suggesting that.

JOHN MERROW

Because?

NANCY SHULOCK

Well I hear you asking the question, should community colleges even be in the business of offering remedial instruction, or should they impose admissions standards. And my answer is that somebody has to offer remediation, because students are, in spite of all the high school reforms, students are graduated from high school without being college ready. But in the mean time somebody has to offer remediation and no other institution is stepping up to do it. And I think the community colleges have to be credited for what they're doing. The problem, the issue in my mind is, whoever does it, it needs to be done right, and we have to stop fooling ourselves that it's cheap. I think that's the fallacy. I think that's the mistake that we've been making all these years. It's not cheap. If we do it well, it's not cheap.

JOHN MERROW

It sounds like it's your sense that ... that community colleges are *trying* to do it on the cheap. Either because they don't have their money, or whatever.

NANCY SHULOCK

They're trying to do it on the cheap because they don't have the money, and they don't have the money because society thinks that it's cheap. It's circular logic, and it's not going to get us out of this box. Community colleges in California are absolutely vital to the state's future economic competitiveness. We need to bite the bullet, and put the resources in to doing it.

JOHN MERROW

THAT WAS NANCY SHULOCK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP AND POLICY AT SACRAMENTO STATE UNIVERSITY. HER COMMENTS HAVE UPSET SOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS, WHO DID NOT EXPECT CRITICISM FROM A FRIEND. NANCY RESPONSE, IN EFFECT: HEY, IF A FRIEND WON'T TELL YOU THE TRUTH, WHO WILL? WE INTERVIEWED NANCY SHULOCK WHILE WE WERE PRODUCING "DISCOUNTED DREAMS: HIGH HOPES AND HARSH REALITIES AT AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES,"

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JANE RENAUD PRODUCED THIS PODCAST. I’M JOHN  
MERROW. THANKS FOR LISTENING.