



REVIEW ARTICLES

Casting a Wide Multidisciplinary Net: Two-Year Colleges as Human Services Contributors in Their Communities

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The need among human services professionals for interdisciplinary approaches to meeting population needs, especially in the current COVID-19 and Black Lives Matters (BLM) contexts, is unprecedented. This conceptual article reviews the current research and practice literature in order to discuss two-year colleges as often-overlooked partners in meeting community needs. We present the argument that American two-year colleges, by design, can be human services partners when addressing the inequities, economic and other deficiencies, and marginalization based on racial and ethnic discrimination or similar dynamics found in our communities. Specifically, we demonstrate the relationships between human services, on one hand, and the work of community colleges in their roles as economic engines intended to generate socio-economic security, as academic success centers intended to mitigate obstacles to learning outcomes, as mechanisms for social justice intended to produce life improvements among marginalized populations, and as mental health and wellness supports intended to reduce barriers to achievement. We rely on our own experiences in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) as illustrations, and we use the work of one sample institution to provide a start-to-finish example of the overlap between human services goals and community colleges.

In this conceptual article, we review the current research and practice literature in order to discuss community colleges as an often-overlooked partner that the human services field has in meeting the needs of its community members. As Schwitzer (2021) recently pointed out, “while human services has always cast a wide professional net, involving a diverse range of ... service delivery systems, the modern need for professionals across settings and institutions to work together to serve ... population needs is unprecedented” (p. 11). In part, this need exists because of the increased complexity of the skills and knowledge that are required in order to adequately serve constituents (Nancarrow et al., 2013). As professional requirements have advanced, it has become impractical for one professional group to be able to address the complex needs of consumers (Nancarrow et al., 2013). As a result, practitioners from different professions must work together to provide integrated supports and services (Johnson & Mahan, 2020). This increased need for interdisciplinary approaches has been further heightened by recent events including the current context of COVID-19 effects, the BLM moment, and related social and economic pressures. These recent factors have exacerbated needs in communities by introducing new challenges to social determinants of health and mental health (Gauthier et al., 2021; Suggs et al., 2021). In turn, when casting a wide net for modern professional partners, we suggest that it is beneficial for human services professionals to include community colleges. The

well-established role of United States (U.S.) community colleges is to provide consumers with educational, developmental, professional, and other learning opportunities that often are not found elsewhere in their communities. These learning opportunities promote economic, academic, social justice, and health and mental health benefits (Schwitzer et al., 2016). In other words, these institutions are providing services that are parallel to those of human services. As the human services literature has documented, human service practitioners are well-known for ensuring the involvement of community stakeholders and collaborating with community members (Neukrug, 2017). Likewise, the community college literature has emphasized these institutions' roles as agents for access, equity, and life improvement among community populations (Hodes et al., 2019). The community college literature also highlights these institutions' inter-disciplinary approaches in their communities (Baird, 2011; Frost, 2011). However, little has appeared in either literature about the potential for more active professional relationships among these two enterprises.

Correspondingly, our article's purpose is to: increase human service professionals' awareness of the work two-year colleges do alongside other human service institutional agents to support community-member needs; introduce community colleges as resources for consumer referral; and suggest ways these institutions might be developed as partners for programs, services, and interventions. First, we review community colleges and their missions and highlight their congruence with human services goals. Next, we discuss community college outcomes on economic, academic, social justice, and mental health and wellness needs in the community. We include illustrations from our own experiences in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). Finally, we pull it all together by showcasing a comprehensive institutional example. We use the work of one sample institution to provide a start-to-finish illustration of the overlap between human services goals and community colleges.

Community Colleges as Human Services Contributors

The human services profession fills a unique role as it is practiced in the U.S. context. Generally speaking, American social structures are intended to maximize democratic equality and socio-economic opportunity. However, many aspects of these structures also serve as "countervailing pressures" (Schwitzer, 2021, p. 9). These countervailing pressures produce inequities, economic and other deficiencies, and marginalization based on racial and ethnic discrimination or similar dynamics (Churchwell, 2018; Schwitzer, 2021). Results for communities impacted by these countervailing pressures include social disadvantages, reduced quality of life, increased daily burdens, as well as heightened challenges in healthy living due to increased risk of "disease, injury, [and] violence" (Kettlewell, 2021, p. 11). Effects from the COVID-19 health crisis have further exacerbated the negative effects of these countervailing pressures on social determinants of health and mental health in marginalized populations (Burt & Eubank, 2021; Gauthier et al., 2021), as have the

unsettling implications of the BLM moment (Couch, 2020). In response, the human services profession exists to ameliorate such challenges as they are experienced by affected community members. Human services in the U. S. context “helps meet human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge-base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations” [National Organization of Human Services (NOHS), n.d., p. 1]. The functions of human service professionals include engaging in direct outreach work inside communities; employing behavior change intervention strategies and counseling-related skills directly with clients and consumers, or providing direct care; promoting access to community resources through mobilizing, organizing, brokering, or advocacy; filling an educational role comprising tutoring, mentoring, and modeling; as well as other responsibilities (Neukrug, 2017). In this way, human services may be viewed as working to democratize access and opportunity among its consumers.

For their part, community colleges in the U.S. context fill a parallel niche. In general, contemporary American higher education works to industrialize the delivery of higher education in ways that produce teaching and learning on a mass scale while simultaneously emphasizing revenues. By comparison, two-year colleges target the pressing needs of various constituents in their own communities (Schwitzer et al., 2001). Campuses have had to amplify and fine-tune their community role as the effects of COVID-19 and the BLM moment have had their impact (Couch, 2020; Jones et al., 2022). Their mission includes “serving as catalysts for individuals’ life span development, academic achievement, and ability to fill important life roles” (Schwitzer et al., 2016, p. 77). They serve a diverse clientele, including traditional-aged and non-traditional learners across the lifespan, economically disadvantaged families, educationally underprepared students, culturally diverse populations, and individuals presenting academic as well as social needs (Bulger & Watson, 2006). Human services practitioners are very likely to be working in rural or urban communities housing two-year institutions. There are more than 1000 community colleges serving over 10 million learners – among whom Black and Hispanic consumers, first-generation students, women and single parents, and students with disabilities are highly represented [American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2022]. These campuses are intentionally designed to promote social justice goals in their communities. To do this, they maintain open, equal-access admissions that support equitable opportunity (Vaughn, 2006). Many offer services using a one-stop center model, whereby various academic services (like registration, financial aid, etc.) are all available in a single physical location or at a single website (Leatherwood, 2022). Some extend this concept to include in their one-stop centers various additional resources for serving the broader community (such as workforce development, job searching tools, and daily living assistance) (Leatherwood, 2022). Depending on the institution, its location, and the needs of its community, services might encompass, for example, childcare, emergency funding or stop-

gap loans, food banks resources to address housing insecurity, programs or referrals for financial literacy or tax preparation or legal concerns, or technology supports (laptops loaners and rentals, Wi-Fi hot spots, etc.), Correspondingly, consistent with the work of the human services profession, Sandoval-Lucero (2019) recently characterized as the community-college ideal as “Changing the system of higher education to focus on serving the students we have, not creating systems of oppression based on the students we wish we had” (p. 4). Taken together, we believe community colleges often are under-utilized by human services as resources, collaborators, or professional partners. In the following sections, we draw on the extant literature and our own experiences to re-introduce community colleges as potential economic, academic, social justice, and health and mental health co-change agents.

Community Colleges as Economic Engines

Among the primary roles human services professionals undertake is the advocacy of social justice in the form of promoting individuals’ own self-determination (NOHS, 2015). This often takes the form of working to “optimize” the career paths of consumers who otherwise lack job and career development supports in their schools, families or neighborhoods (Neukrug, 2017). Marginalized populations in particular tend to experience obstacles in establishing effective paths to economic security. They tend to have greater hurdles breaking through the negative effects of social class and stratification they encounter. This is due to the power of those countervailing pressures of American socio-economic structures (Gauthier et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2014). In fact, the negative impacts of poverty or economic insecurity on job development and career exploration are common concerns among human services clients. Likewise, they often encounter the real-life problem of having limited employment choices (Barrow et al., 2019). Notably, these systemic fragilities have caused marginalized populations to be especially vulnerable, and to be hit especially hard, by the socio-economic fallout of the recent health and social crises (Burt & Eubank, 2021; Couch, 2020; Gauthier et al., 2021). Further, Barrow et al. (2019) suggested these effects can be repeated generationally in affected families, leading to a chronic lack of income. In turn, human services practitioners confront the dual tasks of assisting such clientele with, on one hand, acknowledging these realities, and on other hand, reducing or removing the barriers to self-determining economic security (Barrow et al., 2019).

For their part, a well-established mission of community colleges is to serve as catalysts for economic transformation. Specifically, community colleges are designed to provide open, equal access to opportunities ranging from job training and certificate programs, to GEDs and career-specific two-year degrees, to associate degrees leading to four-year college admission (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019). This in itself is a critical service to target populations. Recent estimates of median earnings of full-time employees by educational attainment ranged from about \$27,000 annually for those with less than a high school diploma, to about \$40,000 for high school graduates or GED recipients and

increased to about \$48,000 for people with associate degrees and \$67,00 for bachelor's degrees [American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2022)].

Community colleges are further designed to be macro-level economic engines which generate financial growth and stability in their communities. They serve as catalysts for workforce development in communities with high unemployment due to historical or prolonged economic depression – or due to worker displacement, job dislocation, or severe financial downturns (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019). They also facilitate workforce development through training and educational programs linked to specific local businesses and industries, thus producing skilled workers who can move directly into employment (Baird, 2011; Frost, 2011). For example, in Danville, VA, a community affected by a severe historical economic downturn, the Danville Community College's (DCC) Workforce Services Division delivers a tractor-trailer truck-driving program that provides professional training as well as job placement assistance (DCC, n.d.). Earlier on, DCC launched an intervention program for unemployed factory workers whose jobs were displaced when the local textile industry was dislocated; this program provided not only job skill training, but also social services and human services in a one-stop-shop approach operated on its campus in partnership with local agencies (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019).

As we have said, human services consumers confronting economic barriers include clientele from chronically unemployed or underemployed situations, workers dislocated from local industries, and marginalized populations with unsuccessful educational backgrounds. These consumers frequently present common themes. For example, they may lack the workplace communication skills or skills adapting to industry cultures needed for successful occupational adjustment. They might experience family and social-network strains associated with job instability. They can be especially vulnerable to physical and mental health problems. They could confront psychological stress and trauma associated with job instability or displacement. They also tend to become increasingly vulnerable over time to financial, educational, workplace, and social-personal barriers (Duggan & Jurgens, 2007). As follows, by offering scaffolded educational options and by supporting local industries, community colleges serve economic and social development functions from which many of the most common human services consumers might benefit (Frost, 2011). As the Danville, VA examples suggest, human services professionals might benefit from familiarizing themselves with the educational, training, and support services provided to target populations by these institutions. In this way, practitioners should find local campuses to be valuable referrals. DCC's one-stop-shop approach underscores the potential, as well, for developing partnerships (or memoranda of understanding) with these institutions that might launch services to increase consumers' job and economic security through a multidisciplinary combination of education, professional training, psychosocial support, and employment assistance.

Community Colleges as Academic Success Centers

As we have outlined, a core responsibility of human services professionals is to work towards the goal of optimizing consumers' self-determination – by improving economic stability and enhancing their ability to fill life roles – in the face of countervailing social pressures and economic structures (Schwitzer, 2021). This necessarily includes reducing educational barriers. Some of these barriers comprise the negative effects of co-factors outside the school building or away from the college campus, like housing instability and food insecurity, inadequate access to social support and health and mental health care, or family strain (Shonkoff, 2020). Other barriers comprise foundational problems with learning experiences themselves, such as lack of equitable teacher support, lower quality of academic delivery, etc. (Middleton, 2020). Along these lines, recent research has begun to document the special negative impacts that the recent health and social crises have had on student populations of color and other marginalized populations (Cobb et al., 2021; Couch, 2020; Jones et al., 2022). Relevant human services functions may include supporting clientele who are in occupational education programs; ensuring educational access for clients with physical or mental health disabilities; orchestrating opportunities for high school or community college learning that is connected to on-the-job training; and advocating against educational discrimination (Neukrug, 2017). In sum, human services workers fill roles in conjunction with counselors, psychologists, and educators in school and college settings that promote educational achievement as a mechanism for realizing socio-economic goals (Neukrug, 2017).

For their part, community colleges exist to open up academic access in their communities. As we reviewed, their specific role is to provide educational and training services ranging from GED completion and job development up to 2-year Associates Degrees (which can further provide access to 4-year college and university degrees). Looking at their position in the American social system, community colleges are seen as having “the greatest potential [in higher education] to increase ... attainment and reduce equity gaps” (Sandoval-Lucero, 2019, p. 4).

This is because of their equal-access open-enrollment mission, their policy focus on student success and learner completion, and their emphasis on being a reachable, barrier-reducing pathway to post-secondary education (Sandoval-Lucero, 2019).

This is illustrated by 2-year college metrics (AACC, 2022). For instance, although 60% of community college students pursue academic credit programs, the remaining 40% participate in non-credit training and development offerings. About one-third are first-generation college students and more than 40% are non-traditionally aged learners. About 60% qualify for financial aid, such as federal grants (44%), state aid (25%), federal loans (15%) and the like. In fact, community college campuses are heavily supported by federal aid, including Pell Grants (33%), Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (24%), federal work study funds (17%), and subsidized or

unsubsidized federal loans (5%). Reflecting their focus on access and barrier-reduction, community college student populations are well-represented by learners with disabilities (20% of students), single parents (15%), and historically marginalized groups such as women (60%) or Latinx and African-American cohorts (about 40%). By far, the majority attend community college while also working part-time or full-time (AACC, 2022).

As can be seen from these metrics, community colleges, in their roles as academic success centers, serve many of the same communities as do human services professionals. Human services practitioners (a) see potential in the consumers with whom they work, (b) foresee progressive life improvements they can pursue, and (c) valid and reliable interventions and programs that attempt to optimize their clients' forward progress (Neukrug, 2017). Along the same lines, community colleges attempt to produce student success on an institutional scale (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019). Correspondingly, community college programming often is a good fit with the educational and development needs of human services clientele.

To do this, community colleges generally use the following three strategies: (1) they are intentional in knowing about the populations they are working with; (2) they are aggressive about catching students when first arrive and are at greatest risk for poor retention; and (3) they actively provide classroom supports (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019). First, two-year campuses use strategies to clearly understand the demographics, academic backgrounds, goals and purposes, and psycho-social factors their learners bring to their educational programs (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019). For instance, one VCCS institution which offers developmental math courses conducted work to find out what most commonly undermined these classes' students. Developmental math courses are designed to remediate academic needs and deficits arising from obstacles in previous learning. These obstacles can include the social co-factors and foundational problems with learning experiences themselves we introduced earlier. Based on their work, the institution found out they needed to develop different types of math-class support programs for their traditionally-aged versus older students, and needed specific support efforts matched to developmental math recipients from academically fragile high school backgrounds (Schwitzer et al., 2016). These would be some of the same individuals using the community's social services.

Next, two-year campuses use strategies to "catch students when they arrive" (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019, p. 8). Operationally, this means launching front-end support programs. These programs aim to strengthen the resilience of under-prepared college degree seekers, occupational certificate seekers, those seeking job training, or those with other life needs. For instance, another VCCS campus uses high-engagement orientation programs that take into consideration their consumers' math-related and English-related academic backgrounds and social demographic factors in order to provide the psycho-

social support participants might need in addition to academic help (Schwitzer et al., 2016). These campus strategies suggest a role for multi-disciplinary collaboration.

Last, two-year institutions use strategies to “reach students in their classrooms” (Schwitzer & Huber, 2019, p. 9). They put in place institutional practices and student services that are intended to directly ameliorate high-risk students’ difficulties and promote their success. This means providing “academic and career support not just in their student success centers but also across campus and, especially, inside classrooms” (p. 9). For instance, a third campus in the VCCS system employed a learning-community plan in its developmental English courses (like developmental math courses, developmental English is designed to remediate background needs and deficits arising from obstacles in previous learning) (Schwitzer et al., 2016). Learning communities form small groups of students who take their classes together, and are enrolled in courses led by specially trained high-touch instructors. There is ample research showing that arranging some learners into small learning communities with familiar teachers promotes resilience. Here again, there is a potential role not just for referrals from the field, but for interdisciplinary collaboration. In fact, community colleges already are experienced at multidisciplinary relationships in their communities with K-12 school systems, four-year colleges, and local industries. We believe therefore they could be relied on more by human services workers (Schwitzer et al., 2016).

Community Colleges as Mechanisms for Social Justice among Marginalized Populations

It is somewhat artificial to distinguish human services’ and community colleges’ work to promote educational and economic attainment from the topic of improving self-determination among marginalized populations. As Schwitzer (2021) described, marginalization is based on systemic structures leading to “callous economic disadvantage” (p. 9). It has been well-documented that race and ethnicity are critical factors that differentiate these types of adverse experiences among marginalized populations” (Gauthier et al., 2021). We simply mean in this section to emphasize the compatibility shared by human service practitioners and two-year college educators in their positions as social justice experts. We believe this is important to emphasize, on its own, because such institutional support from professionals and educators is associated not only with reduced psycho-social needs, but also with higher thriving and life satisfaction outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Seidel et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). The human services field fills a well-established role in communities by serving varied populations who are defined in part by culture, race or ethnicity (Neukrug, 2017). The demand for practitioners to serve in this role, the need for greater health and mental health supports for these populations, and the pressure for social justice activism, has been magnified in the current post-pandemic and BLM moments (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Seidel et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

For their part, community colleges are reliable institutions for their work with these populations. By design, community colleges give “people who were historically excluded from American higher education ... the opportunity to enter college without [the often] oppressive admissions constraints” (Lindsey, 2019, pp. 14–15). In fact, providing marginalized community members with the tools to build academic capital that leads to social and economic attainment “is one of the signature goals of community colleges” (p. 15). They “offer an academic open-door to all types of students, especially students who [due to counter-vailing social pressures] may not believe [they belong in higher education]” (p. 16). Further, to assist learners from marginalized or oppressed backgrounds in “getting to the [educational, economic or social] finish line, faculty, staff, and administration [focus on the] need to help increase students’ sense of belonging and validate that they are worthy of belonging” at such institutions (N. Martinez, 2019, p. 23). It will be familiar to human services professionals that populations of color are considered “perhaps our most vulnerable students” (Couch, 2020, p. 17). Correspondingly, more than 40% of two-year college consumers are people of color (AACCC, 2022).

More specifically, two-years colleges are, for the most part, an American innovation designed to be seen from a social-justice lens. They set several related priorities. As we noted, the first priority is access. Their open-access enrollment is designed specifically to broaden educational offerings for community member who otherwise are constrained by marginalization. Across the national landscape are a variety of educational and training offerings (E. F. Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Some institutions offer training in the foundational household skills needed to fill life roles at home and in families. As described, essentially all two-year institutions offer job training, technical training, and training that supports local business needs. In other words, the economic engine effects we discussed include an intentional community focus.

They further have been charged by federal mandates to offer entry-access to higher education that prepares students for subsequent academic pursuits, including bachelor’s degrees and then graduate degrees. A large portion of this work is with marginalized students who arrive socially and academically underprepared for college-level coursework (but probably are the community members with the greatest to gain from higher education pursuits). The developmental math and English roles of community colleges as academic success centers we presented are examples of this work. In fact, about 68% of public two-year college matriculants take one or more developmental courses [Community College Resource Center (CCRC), 2019]. In all of these roles, the student focus is “very diverse ... whether considered by race, ethnicity, income, [or] family background” (E. F. Martinez & Munsch, 2019, p. 31).

As can be seen, community colleges should be among the critical resources human services practitioners rely on in their communities for promoting marginalized client self-determination. These campuses reach their goals in several ways. They hire staff with skills in these areas. They design intentional (and sometimes mandatory) support programs like targeted orientations and

cohort models. They launch social media platforms to reach specialized populations. They involve students in campus activities. They implement orientation and support sessions, regular meetings, and special events in the various academic programs and departments (E. F. Martinez & Munsch, 2019). There is potential for teamwork with human service delivery in all of these.

Community Colleges as Mental Health and Wellness Supports

A final community contribution of two-year colleges in the human services context is the supportive environment they create for learners with mental health and wellness needs. This contribution is especially important when these needs might otherwise be difficult to overcome as barriers to success (Schwitzer et al., 2016; Warren & Schwitzer, 2018). While contemporary human services professionals typically are generalists who take on a wide range of roles and responsibilities, their work with clientele presenting (health and) mental health and wellness needs is a critical part of their service to their communities (Neukrug, 2017). Human services workers are interdisciplinarians regarding mental health. They deliver direct service as caregivers and behavior changers; provide evaluations, psychoeducation, and consultation; arrange outreach and advocacy for populations with psychological needs; and are assistants to, or collaborators with, multidisciplinary colleagues comprising psychiatrists and other physicians, psychologists, clinical social workers or other types of counseling practitioners (Neukrug, 2017). As researchers have begun to extensively document, marginalized populations are likely to continue in the post-pandemic and post-BLM era to have especially strong needs for inter-disciplinary mental health and wellness supports due to their heightened systemic susceptibility (Cobb et al., 2021; Couch, 2020; Jones et al., 2022; Zhai & Du, 2020)

For their part, two-year colleges often are the institution of choice as educational resources for community members with psychological disabilities (Schwitzer et al., 2016; Warren & Schwitzer, 2018). As human service professionals know, students with diagnosable psychological disabilities confront higher risks of withdrawal from educational programs and failure to attain life goals (Jagers & Xu, 2010; Warren & Schwitzer, 2018). In their effort to ameliorate these hurdles, they also are more likely to enroll in community colleges. This is especially true for two-year institutions delivering a combination of face-to-face and distance learning. These settings are seen as providing greater access and fewer interpersonal obstacles, and a “universally accessible experience that often is not available in the traditional classroom” (Barressi, 2014, p. 5). In fact, looking at earlier pre-pandemic numbers that are available, about 85% of community colleges employed mental health professionals who delivered psychotherapeutic, academic advising, and psychoeducational services. Of course, such services were not universal, with some campuses providing only more-limited crisis interventions services; and depression and anxiety screening [American College Counseling Association (ACCA), 2013; Gallagher, 2014]. Learners with severe psychological disorders

comprised 44% of caseloads, with the most heavily represented diagnoses being Bipolar, Depressive, Anxiety and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders, ADHD, and PTSD (ACCA, 2013; Gallagher, 2014).

More specifically, Warren & Schwitzer (2018) found that among learners with diagnosable psychological disabilities who were relying on one VCCS campus' combination of delivery modalities, the most common non-academic obstacles to attaining goals were: (1) hurdles of self-disclosure (uncomfortable ambivalence about exposing their needs to campus professionals); (2) hurdles of personal connection (a need for more and deeper social support from staff and faculty than peers without disabilities); and (3) difficulties with self-regulating and self-managing their educational requirements and other everyday demands in service of reaching life attainment goals. In response, in comparison with other institutions, consumers with mental health and wellness needs should find on community college campuses: (1) greater psycho-emotional support (support with self-identity or self-disclosure); (2) heightened relationship support (support with interpersonal relationships in the institutional environment); and (3) more intensive learning support (Warren & Schwitzer, 2018). Correspondingly, human services practitioners should find that two-year institutions in their communities ordinarily have the potential to play a strong role in supporting the life pursuits of their consumer. This can include late adolescent, young adult, or adult clients with more demanding mental health and wellness needs. Further, the potential exists for cultivating ongoing professional ties with the appropriate staff and educators on these campuses.

Pulling it all Together: Institutional Example

New River Community College (NRCC), located in Dublin, Virginia in the state's New River Valley, illustrates some of the human service themes we have introduced. As Schwitzer & Huber (2019) previously suggested, throughout more than 55 years of service, NRCC has been functioning as (1) an engine for economic and workforce development, (2) an academic success center, (3) a mechanism for social justice among marginalized populations, and (4) a mental health and wellness support. Consistent with the themes we have presented in this article, as a comprehensive community college NRCC subscribes to the philosophy that all individuals should have an opportunity to actualize. NRCC operates under the statewide VCCS system of 23 community colleges and serves approximately 5000 consumers. Located in a semi-rural area, the college's service region is economically diverse, including both small and large agricultural operations, heavy manufacturing, a major defense industry, high-tech research – along with significant retail, hospitality, and service employment. The student population mirrors the region's economic diversity. More than half are first-generation college students, approximately half receive federal financial aid, and over 60 percent attend part-time (usually while also working). Program placement for learners is evenly split between transfer programs and career-technical programs. The average age is twenty-five years; the student population is about half female and half male

Table 1. Institutional Example: Roles of Two-Year Colleges as Human Services Contributors

Human Service Role	Community College Role	Institutional Example
Providing social justice advocacy, in the form of promoting self-determination, by optimizing consumer career paths	<i>Economic Engine:</i> Catalyst for economic transformation	Curricular and certification programs form Stackable credentials and certifications Academic-credit programs targeting regional workforce needs
Improving economic stability and enhancing consumer ability to fill life roles by reducing educational barriers	<i>Academic Success Center:</i> Opening up academic access in the community	Academic access regardless of physical location, educational background, SES, or work-life situation Partnerships with local schools Career Coach High School Program Access to Community College Education Program (ACCE) Academic and Life-Skills Advisors Intentional engagement model
Serving as social justice experts against callous economic disadvantage	<i>Mechanism for Social Justice Among Marginalized Populations:</i> Opportunity to enter college without oppressive constraints	Signature goal First-generation student supports Financial aid and scholarship programs Wrap-around academic support services Anecdotal role-modeling
Promoting interdisciplinary delivery of mental health and wellness services	<i>Mental Health and Wellness Support:</i> Educational resource of choice for community members with psychological disabilities	Virtual clinical and wellness services through third-party vendor Community Services Board partnership Agency and Resource Specialist

using conventional gender indicators; reflective of the region, 81% percent of the student population is white; and the remaining 19% , who are individuals of color, comprise almost entirely African-American consumers.

Economic Engine

NRCC evolved into a comprehensive community college from its origins as a vocational-technical school. As such, reflecting Schwitzer and Huber's (2019) description of community colleges in the economic engine role, the institution has always served as an economic and workforce development catalyst in its region. Its for-credit curricular programs run the full gamut of learner interests, for example, ranging from accounting to welding. Specifically, NRCC offers 12 associate of applied science degree programs, 2 diploma programs, 7 certificate programs, and 49 career studies certificate programs. These latter prepare consumers with education and skills for immediate entry into the job market.

Representatives from regional businesses and industries serve on program advisory boards to recommend curriculum changes and to ensure the programs continually meet employer needs.

Additionally, curricula are designed to provide *stackable* credentials and certifications for students as they seek upward access in their careers and personal lives. For example, an individual might first complete a career studies certificate as *Practical Electrician I*, gaining the credentials and skills for employment as an electrician's helper or maintenance worker. A second certificate (*Practical Electrician II*) would *stack* credits on top of the first certificate, thereby mobilizing the employee for promotion to a position such as electrical maintenance technician, utility power technician, or electrical engineer technician. A final upward *stack* of credits and certifications could allow a student to complete a full associate of applied science degree in electrical technology, further advancing the student's skills and life measures.

In addition to these academic-credit programs, NRCC offers targeted programs to fill regional workforce needs. For example, at the specific request of regional developers, the college's Workforce Development Office implemented a short-term program to train apartment maintenance technicians. Other such programs include training for nurse aides, pharmacy technicians, Lean Six Sigma manufacturers, and tractor-trailer drivers. Likewise, the college's Workforce Development Office works directly with local industries to offer customized training for employees or, in response to economic downturns, to re-train employees who suffer lay-offs. As can be seen, NRCC already is experienced at collaborating with local community partners; opportunities exist in such a setting for human service relationships as well.

Academic Success Center

NRCC's core mission, like that of other community colleges, is to provide academic access to regional residents. Sandoval-Lucero (2019, p. 4) emphasized the power of two-year institutions to "increase attainment and reduce equity gaps." Likewise, NRCC's programming provides access regardless of a participant's physical location, academic history, socio-economic status, or work-life situations. NRCC serves as the provider for adult education services (GED preparation) for the New River Valley. Additionally, further highlighting their human service parallels, NRCC educators deliver transitional programs for students aging out of foster-care services and offer alternative programs for selected students who recently left high school lacking only a few credits for degree completion.

Demonstrating other access points for targeted populations are NRCC partnerships with local school divisions, such as the college's flagship Career Coach Program. In the program, career coaches are NRCC employees who report each day during the regular academic year to 1 of the 9 public high schools within the service region. The coaches work with high school students to help them define their career goals and determine a pathway to achieve those goals. Coaches also work closely with high school students who choose

to continue their education at NRCC – and link these students with academic and financial aid advisors for navigating the application, enrollment, and payment processes.

Also of special interest in the human services context, another example of the strong partnership between NRCC and its local governments and communities is the institution's Access to Community College Education (ACCE) Program. Administered through the college's Educational Foundation Office, ACCE is a partnership between each local government and the Educational Foundation to provide the funding for graduating seniors from any public high school in the service region to attend NRCC tuition-free for 2 years. The ACCE program augments other, more general, scholarship programs existing to fund community college attendance. The bottom line is that through the federal financial aid program, state-funded workforce programs, ACCE program, and traditional scholarship programs, most residents in the campus' service region are eligible for some type of tuition assistance.

Illustrating our earlier discussion about two-year colleges as academic success centers, NRCC serves many of the same populations as human services professionals and envisions access to educational services is an important catalyst toward life attainment. However, NRCC designs its systems to go beyond just improved access. The institution employs intentional strategies to facilitate individuals' success. For example, the career coaches we mentioned come to know their students and work with them before they arrive on campus; this allows career coaches to provide links to services for their clientele so they can move seamlessly – that is, with greater chance of success – from high school to college. Similarly, other college coaches connect with adults in work settings or in the community in order to link them with targeted college programs and services, thus providing them, too, with front-end support programs to ensure achievement.

Orientation programs for both traditional and nontraditional-aged students bridge the gap between enrollment and full matriculation. An important focus of the orientation is on defining academic and life goals and outlining the steps and benchmarks toward achieving those goals. A second purpose is for learners to build a support network and community with each other. The next step is to follow participants and reach them in their classrooms. Each student is assigned an *academic* faculty advisor along with a *life-skills* student-services advisor who work collaboratively to increase success. Further, using an *intentional engagement* model, NRCC employs purposeful, directed interventions for improving outcomes. These interventions may include, for example, out-of-class tutoring or embedding tutors in classes for academic support. For co-concerns, other interventions include linking consumers with community resources regarding housing, nutritional, childcare, or mental health services. In other words, while the focus is on educational attainment, NRCC approaches its mission in the human services context.

Mechanism for Social Justice among Marginalized Populations

As we noted earlier, supporting marginalized population's attainment is a "signature goal" of the American community college system (Lindsey, 2019, p. 15). Correspondingly, NRCC's mission statement begins with the words, *We give everyone the opportunity...* The previously noted student services programs and resources make post-secondary educational pursuits possible for all community members regardless of their constraining intersections of marginalization; and the commitment of NRCC educators drives the institution's work for social justice. Located in one of the least diverse areas of the state, as stated earlier, NRCC has a predominantly white student population (81%); likewise, the employee population is 93% white. In this reality, the institution's leadership team recently established a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force that garnered overwhelming support and investment among faculty and staff. The Task Force emphasizes professional development – by sponsoring forums and listening sessions; promoting an inclusive campus environment; and being intentional about the knowledge that creating a safe and accepting college campus can be the difference between validating their participants' experiences versus further compounding marginalization.

From a socio-economic perspective, NRCC serves large numbers of marginalized students who are first in their family to attend college. The previously mentioned financial aid and scholarship programs provide monetary resources while programming provides wrap-around services. Formal academic services, such as the developmental education, tutoring, mentoring, and other programming we outlined, support consumer achievement. In addition, anecdotally, the college capitalizes on the simple strategy of role-modeling. For example, the online faculty- and staff-directory indicates *First Generation Graduate* for relevant employees, helping students identify similar others who can be viewed as successes, and promoting a sense of identity and feeling of belonging. In sum, while it is somewhat artificial to separate economic and academic attainment from social justice work, NRCC illustrates overlaps with human services.

Mental Health and Wellness Support

Finally, NRCC is intentional in supporting students with mental health or wellness needs. The institution contracts with a third-party vendor to provide free access to professionals who deliver virtual clinical and wellness services. NRCC also partners with its local Community Services Board for crisis and emergency response, consultation, and support. Additionally, NRCC employs a specialist who can connect their consumers with local agencies and resources for external needs such as food insecurity, housing instability, childcare, transportation, or substance abuse and mental health issues. In these ways, NRCC stands out for its partnerships with human services practitioners and allied professionals.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we hoped to introduce or re-introduce readers to two-year colleges as human services contributors in their communities. We suggested that the current article is timely because of today's human services professionals must cast a wide net for multidisciplinary community partners. Such partners are required as the work of serving marginalized populations becomes more and more complex. We also suggested that looking for community partnerships, professional relationships, and reliable collaborators will enable human services to better respond to pandemic and BLM moment effects as we transition away from the acute phase of the dual crises. Where human services professionals advocate for consumer self-determination and try to optimize clients' career paths, community colleges themselves are constructed to be catalysts for economic transformation. Where human services are designed to confront countervailing socio-economic forces in order to improve consumers' chances of filling life roles, community colleges are designed to open up academic access. Where human services practitioners work as social justice experts against callous economic disadvantage, community college educators deliver opportunities for training and learning without oppressive constraints. In addition, where human services agencies engage in interdisciplinary delivery of mental health and wellness services, community colleges are an educational resource of choice for clients with psychological disorders.

Based on the themes we have developed in this article, local human services might actively seek out two-year institutions in their own communities as: referral resources; collaborators on regional projects; or partners for legal, legislative, policy, or funding efforts in their districts. In particular, community colleges and human services can serve localities through one-stop shops and shared programming that is conveniently and accessibly delivered to target populations. In sum, building cooperation and connection between two-year campuses and human services has great potential for positive community impact.

Naturally, our article had limitations. We adapted some of our argument about American delivery of higher education from Schwitzer et al.'s (2001) *Promoting student learning and student development at a distance*. The emphasis of this source was originally on distance education. Next, it should be noted that community college outcomes, like human services outcomes, are complex and challenging to empirically demonstrate (Schwitzer et al., 2016). Retention, program completion, and graduation outcomes all are difficult to show in these settings due to the diverse situations two-year students bring to campuses, the wide range of outcome goals that learners set out to accomplish, and other factors. Therefore, assessment continues to be an area of ongoing study among community colleges. (Hodes et al., 2019; Schwitzer et al., 2016). Also, we emphasized developmental courses in some of our case examples from the field. It should be noted that debate exists about how developmental courses will be positioned in the American educational system for future generational cohorts of community college learners (Schwitzer et al., 2016).

This debate, as well as an in-depth look at the problem of outcome assessment, were beyond the scope of our article. These delimitations, of course, underscore the need for future research into human services partnerships with community colleges. Community-based needs assessments, program case studies, empirical examinations of underlying population variables, and research that advances the available methods of outcome assessment all are next steps. Future research along these lines can contribute to both the human services knowledge-base and community college literature by providing new evidence for practice. This evidence may confirm, revise, or extend the themes we have developed.



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