

# Bringing Justice to the Nontraditional Student

by Frank DiMaria

Community colleges and their students are the least favored and least supported in higher education. Community college students have every characteristic that impedes their progress in college, according to a 14-minute documentary that examines the real-life struggles of nontraditional students in the community college system.

The documentary, *The Costs of Education* is the byproduct of research that John S. Levin conducted for his recent book, *Nontraditional Students and Community Colleges: The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

“Neoliberalism, in short, views individuals as the primary unit and emphasizes economic or material worth of individuals as paramount as well,” Levin said in an interview. “The ideology eschews restrictions on individual economic actions and thus favors what is termed a free market.”

In his book, Levin, who is the America Professor of Education Leadership at the University of California-Riverside, attempts to examine the extent to which community college students receive justice both within their institution and as an outcome of their education.

“While individual students may receive some measure of justice, groups of students or classes of students do not,” Levin wrote. He also argues that individual action and institutional context, such as organizational culture, not policy, are responsible for the justice meted out to students.

Levin traveled the nation conducting extended interviews with administrators, faculty and students as well as state higher education policymakers. He observed and interacted with students, faculty, administrators and state-level policymakers across the country from 2002 to 2006. His endeavor brought him to Gateway Community College, the Maricopa Community College District, Pima Community College in Arizona, and Edmonds Community College in Washington, among others.

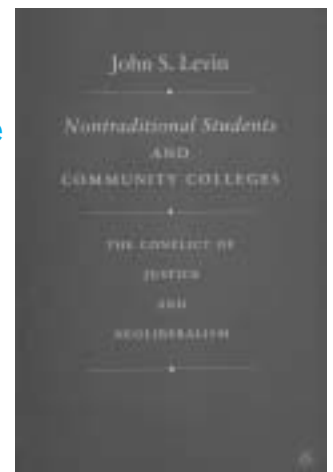
Levin’s meetings became extended conversations with individuals affiliated with community colleges. Among those interviewed were people with disabilities, such as physical and mental impairment, blindness and deafness. Some individuals Levin interviewed have learning problems, and many claim Spanish as their native language. Some have undocumented immigrant status in the U.S.

Levin said that justice, from the point of view of John Rawls, the noted author of *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, places the individual in a social context. While Rawls acknowledges that individuals have rights, these rights cannot be favored over the social good. Rawls argues that the individual has different circumstances and that justice equates with the fair treatment of individuals, which means that treatment is not the same for all.

“The conflict between the two is in part that neoliberalism assumes a level playing field for all individuals. It ignores history or individual circumstances. Rawls’ justice, in part, aimed at balancing the lack of equal circumstances of individuals,” said Levin.



Levin’s book asks:  
Are institutions doing enough to advantage these students so that their disadvantages are not the critical variable in their college experiences or outcomes?



But the playing field is far from level for many of those who attend community colleges. Some are single parents, some were born to alcoholic parents, and some have lived on the streets for periods of their lives. Unlike traditional college students – those students who are 18 to 24 years of age and have come to college directly from high school – many community college students work full- or part-time jobs, raise children and must meet any number of family responsibilities.

In his book, Levin discusses three frameworks for understanding these nontraditional students, one of which is the trait framework. Within this framework, he ranks nontraditional students as minimally nontraditional, moderately nontraditional and highly nontraditional. Minimally nontraditional students exhibit one characteristic of nontraditionality, such as identity as an underrepresented minority. Moderately nontraditional students exhibit two or three characteristics, such as identity as an underrepresented minority, but also as a re-entry student and as a person needing financial aid due to economic status. The highly nontraditional student exhibits a multitude of characteristics. These include minority and re-entry status, financial need, working more than 20 hours a week and being a single parent.

Further, those students who are beyond the customary framework of nontraditional students also engage in programs that include noncredit continuing education – both noncertificate and externally certified programs and courses, contract training provided for employers and credit-continuing education programs that are not part of the mainstream delivery, according to Levin.

These students find themselves on the periphery of education or even outside the educational system. Levin views these students as invisible and calls them “beyond the margins students.” This group comprises, among others, welfare recipients, working poor, students with both physical and mental disabilities and undocumented immigrants who are non-English-speaking. These students constitute a portion of that class of students who are either ignored in scholarship or merged as a class with students who have distinctly different characteristics and

who face less-harrowing circumstances.

These individuals, wrote Levin, “are likely to turn to the community colleges first, due to lower tuition rates, accessible schedules and locations, and availability of relevant programs, such as English as a second language.”

Levin’s “beyond-the-margins students” are segregated from other nontraditional students. This segregation can be physical, such as discrete programs for this population only, and often programs in facilities that are detached from mainstream college programs or from the campus altogether, he wrote. Segregation can also occur in program legitimacy – whether this means a low-status program or a noncredit program, or an underfunded program, such as one in which state appropriations are significantly less than those for other college programs.

Levin attempts to answer a pressing question in his book: Are institutions doing enough to advantage these students so that their disadvantages are not the critical variable in their college experiences or outcomes?

At institutions that adopt a neoliberal view or state policy that is neoliberal in its orientation, disadvantaged students are not advantaged, Levin said. He points to the recent laws passed in Arizona that take college services away from undocumented immigrants, as an example.

Jack Oharah is president of Edmonds Community College in Lynwood, Wash., where 48 percent of the student body is 25 years of age or older, or nontraditional. Oharah, who appeared in Levin’s documentary and was interviewed by Levin himself for the book, agrees with Levin that nontraditional students are generally underserved by community colleges.

“These students – low income, first-generation, students of color – are dealing with a completely different set of circumstances than the traditional college student. This population has a different cultural background. Their income levels are such that they did not expect to go to college, they don’t know how to go to college, they have family obligations that cause them to have to work. All of these are issues traditional students don’t have to deal with,” said Oharah.

Roy Flores, chancellor of Pima



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Jack Oharah, president,  
Edmonds Community College (Wash.)



President Roy Flores has restructured Pima's grants office to improve its success and said, "As a result, in 2006 we received two Title V grants worth a total of \$5 million."

Community College, Tucson, Ariz., has the same opinion. He said that there are millions of individuals who, for myriad and often complex reasons, fail to learn in "traditional" settings. The vast majority of these individuals have high school diplomas. "We can help some with individual attention and other support services, but the sad fact is that there are others beyond our reach," said Flores.

Some community college students are in situations over which the institution has no control. For those students, there is "little we can do to even the playing field, as it were. We partner with other institutions to help extend our support services, but sometimes that is not enough," said Flores.

Both Oharah and Flores employ a number of approaches in their

attempts to level that playing field and provide advantage to those students who are beyond the margins.

At Edmonds, Oharah provides case management for his student population. Edmonds has hired individuals to work with small cohorts of students to ensure that these students get the support they need. For example, if a student does not show up to class, for whatever reason, the student's case manager is made aware of the situation and contacts the student and attempts to solve the problem.

The case managers provide emergency loans, bus passes for individuals who lack a vehicle or have car trouble, and secure child care for those who need it. "So those barriers that crop up – life-gets-in-the-way kind of things – are no longer barriers. We help them deal with the barriers so they can concentrate on getting their education and getting enough education that it makes enough difference that they can get family-wage jobs," said Oharah.

In addition, Edmonds employs a program that identifies potential first-generation, low-income college students as early as the ninth grade. The program attempts to engage them and guarantees books and tuition for the first two years of their college education. Oharah admits that this particular program has not been met with great success, but it "shows young people that education is available if they want to work for it. The interesting thing is that we have increased the number of people who graduate from high school," said Oharah.

Since employing programs with a case-management approach, Oharah has witnessed a tremendous difference in students' success rates. In the EDCAP program, "our success rate has been pretty high from the inception of that program. In the Opportunity Grant this last year, somewhere between 88 percent and 92 percent of our students got degrees, diplomas or certificates or re-enrolled. That's just phenomenal success, and my guess is that without those kind of services we would have been in the 35-50 percent range. It's a matter of getting the kind of resources needed to do this," he said.

At Pima, Flores has implemented a number of strategies as part of its 2006-08 college plan. Pima has created a comprehensive master schedule that meets the needs of all students, expanded and enhanced collaboration with nonprofit and community-based groups, business and corporate communities, aims to continue to enhance relations with other educational providers, has identified and removed institutional and educational barriers, developed and implemented a first-year experience program, and will continue to improve the financial aid process.

But many of America's community colleges are run on shoestring budgets. In many states, the state budget for adult education is a fraction of that of K-12 education. As more and more community college students are poor and minorities, funding for community colleges in real dollars has been declining, noted Ken Meier, vice president of student learning, Bakersfield College, in the documentary.

At Pima Community College, administrators deal with this tightening financial situation in a number of ways. First, Flores and those who work with him act fiscally responsible and make sure that programs and activities are efficient and effective. "So we've created a culture where decisions are very data-driven," he said.

Back in 2001, Arizona voters approved a special tax for education called Proposition 301. Pima has used its portion of those funds, which are targeted to work force development, to create new programs. "Those unique funds allow us to both help people train for good jobs and provide support for our region's economic development efforts to create more jobs," said Flores.

In addition, Flores said that Pima is very proactive in its efforts to gain outside grant monies. Flores has gone as far as restructuring Pima's grants office to provide coordination throughout the college and to improve its success in grant applications. "As a result, in 2006, we received two Title V grants worth a total of \$5 million," he said.

At Edmonds, Oharah and his administration just seem to find ways to give the nontraditional students the services they need, even with the tightening budgets. There are 34 community colleges in the state of Washington, and as a system, "we have made that a priority. We have been successful over the last couple of biennia in convincing the legislature to

give us more money to do that," said Oharah.

But even with all Oharah and Flores have done, they have a long way to go to advantage the disadvantaged and help nontraditional students get enough education to earn a family wage.

"We've got a whole lot more work to do before we're dealing effectively with getting all our students the proper education. I think our country depends on having a well-educated work force, whether it's doctors, lawyers, mechanics, aircraft assemblers, whatever it is," said Oharah.



## Scholars' Corner

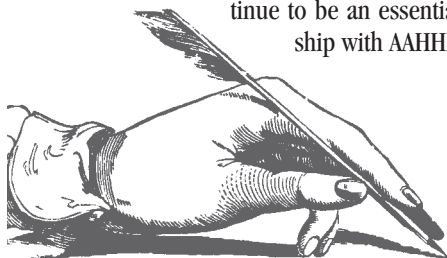
I am currently a doctoral student in the department of sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara (UCSB), having earned an M.A. from the same program and a B.A. in sociology with a Spanish minor from Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., in 2004. I was selected as an American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE) Graduate Fellow in 2007 and am the 2008 chair-elect of the AAHHE Graduate Fellows Program.

Being a part of the AAHHE community is extremely fortunate as it supports and enriches my academic and professional goals in many ways. In studying sociology at the graduate level, I use my training and research opportunities under the mentorship of Dr. Denise Segura to explore Latina/o student experiences in special education with a focus on racial and ethnic identity development, using a participatory action research approach.

I am deeply committed to challenging inequality at all levels of the educational pipeline and, like AAHHE, am interested in mentoring other students of color interested in pursuing higher education. Throughout my collegiate career, I have demonstrated this commitment by working as a residential advisor for the Upward Bound program, serving as a sponsor to first-year Latina/o students at Pitzer College, and as an undergraduate honors thesis reader for the department of sociology at UCSB. Previously, I worked as a diversity peer advocate for the graduate division and as a graduate student researcher on the Engaging Latina/o Communities for Education (ENLACE) y Avance project at UCSB. I currently represent the interests of graduate students as a graduate student representative for the section on Latina/o Sociology Council for the American Sociological Association.

Now that I am employed as an urban education research fellow for the Research and Evaluation Branch of the Los Angeles Unified School District, my ultimate goal is to obtain a tenure-track position as a professor in the areas of sociology, ethnic studies and/or education. I look forward to developing and implementing coursework and assignments that stress the importance of service-learning and community-based research. My goals include encouraging students to use their own education in an effort to create social change within the community.

Giving back to my Latina/o community, conducting community-based social science research and mentoring Latina/o students will continue to be an essential part of my professional career. I remain committed to further strengthening my relationship with AAHHE as I pursue these personal and professional goals.



*By Brianne Dávila*

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