Patrick Sullivan's book *Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, and the American Community College* re-directs the public discussion of the students attending America’s community colleges toward a more "student present" understanding of these schools by including student authored essays as qualitative data. Chiefly, Sullivan's book seeks to counter the deficit model of community college that seems to be perpetuated in legislative and scholarly circles and instead spotlight the unique backgrounds and experiences of America's under-served college students.

Part one of his book centers around student authored essays accumulated from the Community College Success Stories Project, which documents the wide-ranging experiences of America’s community college students. In this case, Sullivan specifically highlights students from Manchester Community College (MCC), where he is an instructor. Included here are what the author labels as exceptional community college success stories, but this first section also includes "contributions from students who might appear (at least at first glance) to have equally important but quieter kinds of stories to tell" (Sullivan 16).

Students contributors chronicled the story of their journeys to and from MCC and reflected on the what the opportunity to attend community college has meant to them, including how it affected the overall direction of their lives and careers. Though students were asked to respond to a common prompt, the stories included here are representative of the wide range of
diverse experiences that are common in community colleges. Scott Kiley's story chronicles his transition from a technical high school to Army deployment in South Korea and Afghanistan and, eventually, culinary school at MCC. This appears pages away from Sarah Brihan's essay about her journey which began with a rejection from her dream school and ended with an elementary education degree. This, she says, while deflecting comments from her high school classmates regarding the stigma of community college being a subpar academic experience.

“One can go to Yale and never show up to class, and not learn a thing… but these are the people who get nothing from college. The people who take the time to be present in college and the learning involved are the people who walk away the richest of all” (Brihan, as cited in Sullivan 38).

International experiences are also highlighted here, including Chhan D. Touch's essay about his experience as a Cambodian refugee fleeing the killing fields to eventually graduate from MCC and enroll in a doctoral program, and Sabina Mamedova's story about surviving the forced relocation of Muslims in Eastern Europe to eventually find a new home among her classmates in an acting course.

Reflecting on an important theme from these stories, Sullivan highlights how community colleges create numerous opportunities for personal contact and support from teachers and faculty members (17). One or two specific college personnel can be crucial to positively shaping a student's experience, as we can see in stories like Eddie Rivera’s, which details how a professor in a public speaking class pushed him out of his comfort zone and inspired him to succeed: “One day during class the professor said something that stuck with me until this day, ‘Be the Change You Wish to See in the World.’ The semester after I took Public Speaking I received straight A’s and made the dean’s list” (33).
According to Sullivan, a key factor in the identity of many community colleges is a high premium on instruction over research, which creates the space for these important student/instructor relationships to flourish.

In part two, Sullivan focuses on the ramifications of President Truman's Commission on Higher Education, and its landmark report that re-imagined the role of higher education and helped launch America's unprecedented system of community colleges. It cannot be overstated how highly Sullivan regards this report, which he argues “must take its place among classic statements of (American) ideals," placing it among works such as the Declaration of Independence and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech (145). Sullivan believes the report’s importance lies in its "radically inclusive vision of American democracy," as well as its focus on equity and social justice through education. Despite this, the commission acknowledges that America is still burdened by inequalities, and identifies these problems as "democracy's unfinished business" (147). According to Sullivan, the mandate given in this report to combat inequality in higher education laid the foundations for historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement. Sullivan explains, “In its commitment to democratizing America’s system of higher education, the Truman Commission challenged long-held assumptions about daily life in America and also confronted the pernicious, deeply inscribed patterns of thought and behavior in our nation” (151). It would be tempting to compare the increasing number of college-bound students in recent decades to numbers from the Truman era and call it a day. However, with rising tuition prices potentially compromising the notion of open access to higher education institutions (Sullivan 386), it is important to realize that the Truman Commission’s mandate to make higher education accessible to all is still very much a work in progress.
In addition to documenting the Truman Commission report's role in promoting equity in higher education, Sullivan seeks here to hold under a microscope the neoliberal economic model that has driven many education reforms in recent years. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Sullivan contradicts the key neoliberal tenant of opportunity as a universally available commodity by describing the extremely complicated social and cultural mechanisms that impede upward mobility for those without wealth. Though heady theories about capitalism may seem far removed from the problems of modern community college students like Sara or Chhan, Sullivan never lets the immediate effects of these modes of thought stray from his central goal. Sullivan warns that the operation of community colleges under a business model has changed the way state and federal legislatures discuss community colleges and injected "such key market terms as accountability, return on investment, personal responsibility, outcomes assessment, productivity, and efficiency," into conversations about teaching and learning on college campuses (191).

Part three focuses on our culture's understanding of the concept of public good. Sullivan provides a survey of the concept's history in America, which dates back to the establishment of our nation and was bolstered by the New Deal era following the Great Depression. He also documents the shifting impressions of modern neoliberal thinkers like F.A. Hayek, who (in a limited sense) encouraged endeavoring to increase educational opportunities for all, and Ayn Rand, who described the common good as a meaningless concept. Sullivan goes on to detail the neoliberal efforts towards privatization in the public-school sector, drawing chilling conclusions from the "increasing evidence of dysfunction and -- I'm afraid there is no other word for this -- disaster" (311). In the higher education context, the effect of neoliberal economic models can perhaps best be exemplified by an increased reliance on part-time or contingent faculty over
tenure-track faculty positions, all in the name of increased efficiency, profit, and return on investment (387). These contingent faculty members are usually paid substandard living wages and often do not have job stability on a semester-by-semester basis, putting into practice neoliberal models which effectively devalue human labor in pursuit of a more efficient return on investment.

However, chief among Sullivan's concerns here are the quantitative metrics for success favored by institutions and legislatures (specifically, graduation rates) and the inappropriate comparisons that are drawn between selective and open admissions institutions. Sullivan seeks to contradict these "failure narratives" posited by such comparisons with his inclusion of student-authored success stories and by bringing to light the "complex social, psychological, and economic dynamics at play on campuses at open admissions institutions" (340).

Finally, Sullivan concludes with a "To Do" list for educators, administrators, and state and federal legislators. Echoing Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker, Sullivan persuasively argues that the revolutionary open admissions policy of American community colleges is an irreplaceable keystone of America's efforts to democratize higher education. "The community college embodies our most noble ideas about democracy and human potential, and it stands as a living, daily expression of our ideals as a nation," (375). Maintaining the affordability of community college, addressing the problem of "disposable teachers," becoming activists for higher education reform, and embracing diversity among faculty, staff, and students, should be goals of any educator who is seeking to preserve America's unique and radical experiment in educational democracy.

*Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, and the American Community College* is a relevant read for all instructors at 2-year institutions, but it is also important for scholars of higher
education, particularly those who may be removed from the community college context.

Additionally, it provides a resource for legislators who seek to expand, contract, or otherwise reform the policies and services offered by 2-year institutions. The inclusion of personal essays written by students is crucial, and provides at last a creative and democratic space for these students to influence our understanding of the role that community colleges play in their lives.

**Works Cited**


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