
CHAPTER 3

BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND BREAKING BARRIERS

DALE P. PARNELL
1981–1991



Major Accomplishments of the Parnell Years

- The associate degree was defined and established.
- Vocational and technical education were appropriately recognized as important contributions of community colleges to the U.S. workforce.
- The “neglected majority” was identified and defined as a population needing support and recognition in society and in the world of work.
- The concept of 2+2—high school to community college and community college to 4-year college—was established in the ladder of education.
- AACC gained acceptability and recognition in the hierarchy of higher education at the National Center for Higher Education as a member of the Big Six higher education associations and as a significant member of the Washington Higher Education Secretariat, a federation of higher education associations located in Washington, DC.
- Community colleges were well positioned through the “Putting America Back to Work” and subsequent “Keeping America Working” initiatives.
- AACC’s newspaper, *Community College Times*, was established.
- The Commission on Improving Minority Education, which evolved into today’s individual minority councils within AACC, was established.
- Three major awards programs honoring excellence—the Harry S. Truman Award, the Outstanding Alumni Award, and the Leadership Award—were created in 1982.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

POSITIONS HELD

1981–1991	President and CEO, AACC
1976–1981	President, San Joaquin Delta College
1974–1976	Chancellor, San Diego Community College System
1968–1974	Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction
1964–1968	President, Lane Community College
1960–1964	Superintendent, Lane County Schools, Oregon
1954–1960	Principal and Vice Principal, Springfield High School, Oregon
1950–1954	Secondary School Teacher, Salem and Springfield, Oregon

EDUCATION

- DEd, University of Oregon
- MA, University of Oregon
- BA, Willamette University

HONORS

- Chair, National Council on Equal Education Opportunities (presidential appointment)
- Citizen of the Year, Springfield, Oregon
- Distinguished Service Award, Council of Chief State School Officers
- Distinguished Service Award, Phi Theta Kappa
- International Communication and Leadership Award, Toastmasters
- Leadership Award, AACC
- Man of the Year, Oregon Administrative Management Society
- National Person of the Year, National Council on Community Services and Continuing Education
- Student Appreciation Award, Oregon Community College Student Association

If there's one slogan that I developed in my ten years in Washington, D.C., it was "Opportunity With Excellence." If there's one word that describes the community colleges for me, it is opportunity. And we do that in an excellent way. I never want to talk about opportunity alone.

—Dale P. Parnell (Lane Community College, 2008)

Dale P. Parnell's tenure as president of AACC can be summed up in the word *connections*. In a 2004 interview, Parnell said:

I commend Ed Gleazer for the work that he did in laying the foundation, and from the foundation that he had built over 25 years as leader of the association, I was able to continue to build. With the other major presidentially based higher education associations at One Dupont Circle, we formed a group we called the Big Six to improve our connections and coordinate higher education advocacy. Not only did we try to improve connections with the rest of higher education for community colleges, but we also wanted make sure AACC had a seat at the table so that people would know what community colleges were and what they could do.

Coming to AACC at the beginning of the Reagan years and at the start of an economic recession that lasted from July 1981 to November 1982, Parnell had his work cut out for him. The Reagan administration's efforts to downsize the federal government threatened many of the programs and agencies that were important to community colleges and their students, including the U.S. Department of Education (ED) itself. However, Reagan had appointed Parnell's good friend, Terrel Bell, as secretary of education—a position that the White House both supported and challenged (see Box 3-1). Bell's four years at ED had a lasting impact, in part through the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), author of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983). Bell's disinclination to see the ED eradicated, combined with congressional support for its continuance, was enough to defeat Reagan's attempts to demolish it:

Secretary Bell asked Reagan to appoint an independent commission to study the condition of American education. When the President declined to do so, Secretary Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education as a cabinet-level operation. The favorable attention accorded the commission's report, which was released in April 1983, ended the debate about abolishing the department, guaranteeing its political survival. (Ravitch, 2003)

Bell's efforts paid long-term dividends by supporting education as a cabinet-level concern. In a 2004 interview, Parnell acknowledged, "You have to have people in important positions who are going to look out for you, and Bell certainly looked out for me at the Department of Education. I also had a

3-1 PARNELL RECALLS WORKING WITH THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

The game in Washington is access. If you don't have access, you're nothing. So, I tried to develop access points in Congress, in the White House, in the office of education, and other nerve centers where decisions were going to be made about community colleges and their funding.

When I first came to AACC, the big group that came along with me was Ronald Reagan's administration and all of its entourage. So we were facing an environment in which the goal of the administration was to eliminate any federal involvement in education in any way, shape, or form—despite Reagan's personal fondness for the community college sector in California.

Well, we certainly came with different agendas. Their agenda was to eliminate any federal contribution to education. Ed Meese, the White House chief of staff, told me, "We don't want anything to do with education at the federal government level." So I came to my position with a pretty hostile group in political power. But the secretary of education was Ted Bell, an old friend of mine. He'd been a chief state school officer in Utah when I'd been a chief state school officer in Oregon. And, so, we had an established working relationship. He wasn't exactly supportive of that Reagan agenda to eliminate the Department of Education, and I worked with him pretty closely as he worked to preserve the department. I experienced a political environment that was different and more hostile. I think that each leader of an association has to face the social conditions and the environment that exists at the time. Working within that environment makes leadership a little different in each case.

friend in the White House who was constantly feeding me information. To be effective in Washington, DC, a leader needs inside sources.”

EXPANDING THE “WITHIN REACH” PHILOSOPHY TO AACC

Before coming to AACC, Parnell already had a distinguished career in education. In Oregon, he had served as a high school principal, county superintendent of schools, state superintendent of education, and founding president of Lane Community College (1965–1968). He became chancellor of the San Diego Community College District in 1974 and superintendent/president of San Joaquin Delta Community College in California in 1976, a position he held until his arrival at AACC in 1981. His role in transforming an area technical school to a community college through a project called “Within Reach” made him a natural choice for AACC president and CEO.

According to Parnell, the “Within Reach” philosophy developed first as a way of convincing people to vote in favor of converting Eugene Technical College into what would become Lane Community College. Parnell’s philosophy entailed ensuring a college that would bring higher education within reach of students geographically, financially, psychologically, and academically (see Lane Community College, 2008, for an archived oral history of Within Reach; see also Romine, 1998, for a history of the Parnell years at Lane).

Parnell’s philosophy served him well in his years in the nation’s capital. His experience in shaping Lane and serving in California put him squarely in the know—certainly as far as Ronald Reagan was concerned: “President Reagan, himself, liked the community colleges; he liked the fact that I was from California, and when I’d meet with him, we’d talk a little bit about the California community colleges. He was always a big supporter of the community college idea,” Parnell said in a 2004 interview. Parnell also brought his previous experience as a chief state school officer, community college president, and chancellor to AACC, where he expanded on his Within Reach philosophy to cultivate a climate of inclusion and expansion at the association. One of the results was the expansion of the role of AACC-affiliated councils. Parnell wanted to energize AACC’s council system, thereby raising the stature of AACC and reaching out to network in a way that gave greater recognition to community colleges. As Parnell recollected,

AACC had 21 councils when I left. We had councils of instructional leaders, public relations, vocational educational leaders, and others. I looked at the councils and said, “Wow. There are thou-

sands of members in them that have not been used in the work of the Association, so why not use them?” One of the aspects of good leadership is to identify additional potential leadership wherever it exists and use it on behalf of the larger organization.

We put those councils to work developing policy statements for board approval. Whenever there was an identified need for a national policy, for example, on the associate degree, we would refer it to one of the councils to develop. The council would submit a recommended policy statement to the AACC Board of Directors for adoption. We released many policy statements on all kinds of subjects. I found it to be very helpful for the councils to be involved in policy development; it was a great way to get involvement of the most knowledgeable people in their fields.

THE NEGLECTED MAJORITY: FOCUSING THE NATION ON THE REAL BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The longest-lasting legacy of Parnell’s leadership of community colleges and AACC may be best defined by and embodied in his 1985 book, *The Neglected Majority*. This well-researched and thoughtfully written seminal work remains just as valid today as when it was published. In the foreword, Thomas A. Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association, wrote that the book “defines a weakness in our basic approach to education: the lack of a rigorous, constructive, and focused program of study to prepare the sixty to seventy percent of our high school students who will not likely be pursuing a baccalaureate-degree program” (Parnell, 1985a, p. xv). In the book, Parnell outlined a plan for educating the “ordinary” populace, the neglected majority who were not pursuing postsecondary education. For example, he proposed a 4-year tech prep associate degree program that would pair 2 years of high school technical education with 2 years of general education geared toward technical applications.

Parnell began the book by outlining the conditions that had excluded so many Americans from the educational enterprise. A primary one was the omission of community, technical, and junior colleges from the education reform movement then under way, despite the fact that, at the time the book was written, 55% of all entering freshmen were beginning their college careers in those institutions. That reform movement had been sparked by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983). In reading the report, Parnell observed that it made no specific reference to community or junior colleges and that only one

reference to vocational and technical schools appeared—in a list of educational organizations in America near the end of the report.

Parnell pointed out that for too long our educational system had focused only on the highest and lowest achievers. He made the case that most students in the middle two high school quartiles neither prepared for nor aspired to baccalaureate study. He noted that only about 20% of the adult population held a bachelor's degree, while admission to a baccalaureate program was the only indicator of successful college preparation in high school. His observation was echoed in *A Nation at Risk*: “More and more young people emerge from high school ready neither for college nor for work. This predicament becomes more acute as the knowledge base continues its rapid expansion, the number of traditional jobs shrinks, and new jobs demand greater sophistication and preparation” (NCEE, 1983 p. 324).

With so much emphasis on only a selected group of students, it was unclear what constituted a successful educational experience for the rest. Speaking at the National Conference on Teaching and Excellence, K. Patricia Cross, then professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, observed, “The task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate ‘apparently ordinary’ people to unusual effort ... [H]istorically ... education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them” (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 7).

Using *The Neglected Majority* as the intellectual framework, AACC government relations staff members Frank Mensel and James McKenney developed legislative language for the tech prep associate degree program, which would build stronger relationships between community college and high school technical education programs across the country. The bill that emerged was supported by both the House and Senate Education Committees, chaired by Bill Ford and Claiborn Pell, and it “sailed through Congress with funding” (J. McKenney, personal communication, February 4, 2011). According to McKenney, tech prep decreased the competition between AACC and the rest of the vocational education community and stimulated the expansion of dual or concurrent enrollment programs in which high school students enroll in college classes.

IDENTIFYING AND BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In *The Neglected Majority*, Parnell suggested a new pathway for ordinary people to access higher education. The reality, however, was that many students were not even graduating from high school in the first place. Harold Howe,

President Lyndon Johnson's commissioner of education, noted, "I would put the subject of school drop-outs first. It is absolutely astounding to me that so many intelligent people could look for so long at American schools and say so little about this problem" (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 20).

It was astounding, indeed. Dropout rates were reflected and shaped by a variety of greater social ills. The intersection of race and socioeconomic class proved deadly to education in many cases. Parnell recognized and articulated that three great social tensions had to be part of any discussion about excellence in education: socioeconomic, technological, and educational.

Socioeconomic Tensions

Socioeconomic tensions were reflected in the widening gap between haves and have-nots. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 1982 and 1985, despite decreases in unemployment rates for all races, the unemployment rate remained substantially greater for Blacks than for Whites. Unemployment for Whites dropped from 9.5% to 6% compared with a drop from 20.4% to 15.1% for Blacks (Shank & Getz, 1986). Two thirds of adults living in poverty were women, who headed more than half of the households living in poverty (Parnell, 1985, p. 29). As the National Council on Economic Opportunity noted at the time, "All other things being equal, if the proportion of the poor in female-householder families were to continue to increase at the same rate it did from 1967 to 1978, the poverty population would be comprised solely of women and their children before the year 2000" (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 31). Parnell argued that rather than relegate the poor to hit-or-miss educational opportunities, dropout rates, and persistent poverty, policymakers should view the poor as untapped human resources.

Technological Tensions

Technological tensions were caused by a distinct disparity between the supply of skilled workers and their demand in the workforce. Parnell observed that growth in technological complexity was not being matched by production of skilled workers. He wrote, "Some twenty-three million...cannot read, write, or compute at a functional level...seven to eight million [are] unemployed...three to four million [are] working part time but looking for full-time work" (1985, p. 21). In the period 1980–1981, unemployment was at 7.6%, yet the help-wanted index increased from 112 to 118, as unemployment remained constant while the number of jobs continued to increase (Parnell, 1985, p.

23). This increase showed that there were new occupations emerging for which those who were unemployed were not qualified. Parnell wondered, Where would skilled employees come from, if not from community colleges?

Educational Tensions

Educational tensions emerged because of the difference between quality and equality in education. Increasing numbers of high school dropouts and decreasing numbers of students, particularly minority students, graduating from high school were a major source of concern. Parnell saw the high school dropout rate as the root cause of the lack of employment qualifications: The dropout rate rose from 22.8% in 1977 to 27.2% in 1982 (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 24).

Parnell felt that high schools were too often viewed as clearinghouses to sort the academically talented from the less talented or as a way station to keep young people out of the job market until they matured. *“Not enough people see the high school as a human-resource development laboratory, a place in which to prevent human waste,”* Parnell emphasized (1985, p. 24). Students who did not comfortably fit into either an academic or a vocational track were too often channeled into an unfocused general education track without a direction. The problem, according to Parnell, was caused by tracking systems that limited rather than expanded possibilities, especially for students on the “unfocused general-education track leading to nowhere” (Parnell, 1985, p. 25). Teachers and principals generally disagreed about the existence of tracking; however, there was a significant agreement between students and administrations on the existence of track placement: According to one researcher, 78% of them agreed that academic track placement existed (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 25).

Parnell suggested that general education tracking in public schools was largely responsible for this loss in potential productivity. Between 1969 and 1981, the number of students in “general track” programs increased from 12% to 42.5%. Many of those students aspired to college and considered themselves well prepared, despite the fact that nearly 40% of incoming freshmen needed remediation. Sixty-three percent of dropouts self-identified as general track compared with 6.7% from the academic track and 29.8% from the vocational track. General education students also rated their experiences more poorly than their academic or vocational counterparts—not surprisingly, because nearly half the time in such programs was spent in personal development courses such as cooking, auto shop, welding, additional physical education and other nonacademic courses (Parnell, 1985, pp. 37–38).

Parnell also observed that educational tracking was exacerbated by a “loss of continuity” in educational experience, noting that 20%–25% of public school students were attending more than one school each year (1985, p. 43). And because of local differences, students did not encounter the same curriculum across schools. For many students, 12th grade was a “throw away” because they needed minimal credits to graduate.

For Parnell, all indicators pointed toward an increased focus on tech prep programs that would provide an occupational track and could offer opportunity to “lower quartile” students, that is, those without the propensity to go on to further education. Sadly, career education had become synonymous with retrograde images of dumb boys working with their hands in a dumping ground for students with behavioral problems, although, as Parnell noted, twice as many jobs required welding as required chemistry. The community college was poised to deliver the kind of education that would connect practical and liberal arts.

DEFINING THE ASSOCIATE DEGREE

Parnell was a vocal champion of the associate degree, spearheading a movement to streamline the number and types of degrees being offered by community, junior, and technical colleges. The associate degree preferred program, a concept promoted by AACC, attempted to get employers to require the degree as a way to increase employee literacy and improve perception of the colleges. As Parnell recalled, employers would say, “We had an applicant that attended Blank Community College, and he cannot read or write.” He posited that because community colleges had so many part-time students who took just a class or two, if employers would give preference to associate degree holders, the colleges could encourage more students to complete the degree requirements and almost guarantee a literate employee.

When asked about the program in a 2006 interview, Parnell noted that although it did not catch on with employers, the work yielded a valuable byproduct:

AACC appointed a commission on associate degrees chaired by Leslie Koltai, chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District. The charge to the commission was to reduce the number of different types of associate degrees and, most importantly, to try to define the associate of arts, the associate of science, and

the associate of applied science degrees so there would be nationwide commonality and understanding of these three degrees. The commission was effective, and we ended up with a good policy statement, which the AACC board adopted and which was generally accepted.

Parnell saw the associate degree in applied science as the keystone—as an integrating force for the institution, as requiring the commitment of students to program completion, and as linking learning that has gone before with learning that will come after.

In Parnell's time, vocational–technical training was the community college's greatest success, but even after tech prep, it lacked sufficient linkages to high schools, and high school students were not being well prepared for college study. In a survey of 18,000 incoming freshmen conducted in 1982–1983, James Kelly at Pennsylvania State University found that

- 98% expected to earn a *B* or better.
- 61% expected to study fewer than 20 hours a week.
- More than 80% knew little or nothing about the majors they intended to pursue.
- Nearly half listed “no one” as their main influence in attending. (cited in Parnell, 1985, p. 109)

The situation has not changed much since then.

Parnell recognized that, for incoming community college students, open-door access often sounds like easy access, but students have little sense of what exit will require. Potential students need to be placed at the center of the process to know exit standards and degree and study requirements. Colleges must clearly communicate those standards and requirements to high school administrators. The secret to this open communication is partnerships between colleges and high schools.

Parnell worked to address those issues by identifying ways in which high schools and colleges could cooperate, such as through joint enrollment, shared faculty, advanced placement, and articulation agreements. Acknowledging that problems can arise over issues of turf and limitations in state leadership as well as resources, scheduling, and the community college image, Parnell suggested that for joint agreements to work, administrators and schools must begin and maintain communication with policies for program focus, recognition, and reward. Each institution must identify a point person for project responsibility

with clear-cut duties, periodic progress reports, written program coordination reports, and annual review.

FORGING A LASTING CONNECTION TO PHI THETA KAPPA

In 1928, an AACC committee of community college presidents was assigned to determine the value of having an official honor society for their colleges. Local and state honor societies were springing up on campuses as 2-year colleges grew in numbers. Following their investigation, the committee of presidents felt that having one honor society of the prestige and stature of Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), with common standards, was in the best interests of the community college movement. During the AACC Convention in 1929, the AACC Board of Directors voted to recognize PTK as the official honor society for 2-year colleges (R. Risley, personal communication, February 11, 2011).

Parnell was the first AACC president elected to serve on the PTK Board of Directors, serving from 1987 through 1992. He assisted with the development of the All-USA Community College Academic Team, a nationally selected group of 20 top academic community college students, each of whom receives a \$2,500 stipend and medallion. These students are featured in *USA Today* and presented at PTK's Presidents' Breakfast held during the annual AACC convention.

Parnell was also instrumental in helping PTK secure financial support from W.K. Kellogg Foundation to initiate the first leadership development program designed for community college students. He was elected as an international honorary member, the highest honor PTK confers on nonmembers. The Parnell Scholar Award is presented each year by PTK to a chapter advisor who has not yet attended a PTK International Convention or Honors Institute. The recipient serves as a scholar at the Faculty Scholar Conference held annually in Jackson, Mississippi, at the PTK Center for Excellence and as a seminar leader during the PTK summer Honors Institute.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

One of the most significant documents of the community college movement came out of the work of the AACC Commission on the Future of Community Colleges during Parnell's tenure as AACC president and CEO. In 1986, the AACC Board of Directors, upon Parnell's recommendation, determined

that it would be an appropriate time for the leaders of the nation's community colleges to take stock of the movement and develop recommendations to help the colleges move into the 21st century with a sense of unity and vitality. Parnell believed that a national study would be helpful as each institution planned for its future. Nineteen distinguished leaders were appointed by the AACC board to the commission; their charge was to study the history, assess the current status, and develop recommendations for the future of community colleges.

After 18 months of intensive study, public hearings, campus visits, and much debate, the commission released its report in 1988. *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century* (Commission on the Future, 1988) has been a continuing source of inspiration for faculty, staff, and trustees at community colleges. The landmark publication charted a course for community colleges planning for the 21st century and addressed topics such as partnerships, curriculum, the classroom as community, and the college as community. The report contains the often-quoted line: "Community is not only a region to be served, but also a climate to be created." It includes 77 recommendations for institutional improvement, many of which are still relevant.

The Beacon College Project, funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation from 1989 to 1995, was a significant effort to help community colleges develop creative and practical community-building strategies through collaborative initiatives. The 26 Beacon colleges engaged nearly 600 institutions, including 250 community colleges, in community-building efforts in 36 states and leveraged approximately \$7 million in Beacon funds. Following conclusions and recommendations from the project, the initiatives, successes, and resulting spinoff programs included peer-assisted learning, intercultural awareness, academic and business partnerships, ethics, hazardous materials technology, international education, leadership, multimedia technology, literacy, at-risk student intervention, student diversity, and child development training. The project is described fully in *A Climate Created: Community Building in the Beacon College Project* (Barnett, 1995).

Parnell worked to create this same sense of community across AACC member institutions. He traveled extensively to member colleges, expressing his appreciation for their work. According to past AACC board chair Dan Moriarty, "Dale was an outstanding cheerleader for AACC and did so much to bring people together and make them proud of the community college movement. No one could match him. He was truly "Mr. Community College" (personal communication, February 3, 2011).

3-2 PARNELL EXPLAINS THE ORIGINS OF “KEEPING AMERICA WORKING”

I worked very closely with Washington, DC, associations that represented employers, for example, the National Alliance of Businesses and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. We used to go over and hold our video conferences at the chamber offices. After a while, they became very helpful and supportive. Throughout my 10 years at AACC, my driving force was to improve our connections and the understanding of the role of the community college.

Even as far back as when I served on the AACC Board of Directors, I wanted the association to develop a closer relationship with the employer community. I recall making a motion to adopt such a policy for the association. Unfortunately, the motion was defeated with other board members arguing that it wasn't in the mission of the community college. That was really part of my motivation for becoming AACC president. I said, “This has got to change.” I wanted to broaden the mission and the function of the association to improve connections, particularly with the employer community.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation had been an early supporter of AACC and community colleges. One of my early visits was to Russ Mawby at Kellogg. I recall Russ telling me, “Dale, you've got to broaden.” He said, “Kellogg's been a strong supporter of the association over the years,” and he said, “you need to broaden your base of support other than just Kellogg.” He even made a couple of phone calls for me, to Sears, Metropolitan Life, and other foundations, to try to broaden the financial support for the association.

After Mawby helped to make the connection, I convinced the Sears Roebuck Foundation to fund a “Keeping America Working” project. The early days of my tenure at AACC coincided with the economic recession of the early 1980s and the beginning of the Reagan administration. There was pretty high unemployment. We called the project “Putting America Back to Work,” based on the ending line one of President Reagan's State of the Union speeches: “Let's put America back to work.” When the employment rate improved, we changed the project name to “Keeping America Working.” An important component of the project was to give small grants to local community colleges to work on outreach with the employer community.

CONCLUSION

Parnell's background and skills as a leader matched the needs of AACC and community colleges at a critical time in their history. Parnell believed the community college was the greatest educational invention of the 20th century, providing a host of Americans with the opportunity to pursue a higher education. "Opportunity with excellence" is exactly the combination that, Parnell argued, was exemplified by the tech prep associate degree program that got its start through *The Neglected Majority*. Through Parnell's efforts, the associate degree became established as a milestone that gives its holder pride and that provides a step toward occupational accomplishment, and vocational and technical education was highlighted as an essential contribution of community colleges to the American workforce.

AACC became a recognized force for higher education advocacy in Washington, DC, and federal funding for community colleges was significantly increased during Parnell's tenure as president and CEO. Following his term at AACC, Parnell continued to serve community colleges as Oregon's community college commissioner. He also founded the doctoral program in community college leadership at Oregon State University. In 1993, AACC recognized Parnell with the Leadership Award—the award that he was instrumental in establishing in 1982 to recognize those who have made significant contributions to the community college field.