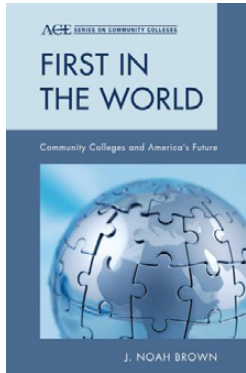


## BOOK REVIEW

# First in the World

## Community Colleges and America's Future



by J. Noah Brown  
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.  
2012  
152 pages  
ISBN: 978-1442209978

Reviewed by Valarie Avalone

### INTRODUCTION

PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 2012, *First in the World: Community Colleges and America's Future* was developed in partnership with the American Council on Education (ACE) and released as the initial book in a series to be written on community colleges. Authored by J. Noah Brown, president and CEO of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), and edited by Richard Alfred, emeritus professor of higher education in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan, the book was awarded the 2013 Bellwether Book Award by the Community College Futures Assembly in Orlando, Florida, on January 29, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Brown is a nationally recognized authority on community college governance. He specializes in public policy, legislative advocacy, and strategic planning with a focus on strengthening the strategic connections between community college boards and the many national and state organizations important to supporting the mission of these institutions.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Brown's receipt of the Bellwether Book Award, please see [www.acct.org/news/j-noah-brown-receives-bellwether-book-award](http://www.acct.org/news/j-noah-brown-receives-bellwether-book-award).

Brown captures the past, present, and future of community colleges while considering the opportunities and challenges they face as they evolve to meet the needs of their students and the nation while striving to fulfill their missions.

### SUMMARY OF CONTENT

Throughout the book, Brown advocates that community colleges are not just lower-cost educational options but also critical components in the economic welfare of our nation and a democratic society. As he counsels on the vast potential of community colleges, however, he reminds us that at a time when our nation is turning to these institutions to solve many issues, they remain misunderstood by policy makers and the communities they serve. Brown believes that if supported and empowered, community colleges can serve as change agents in improving our economy and society. To do this, though, he sees a need for public policy to change. Further, he underscores that at the very time community colleges are being asked to do more, state and local governments are scaling back their financial support.

Brown identifies and explores five issues he believes will provide challenges and opportunities for community colleges in the future:

1. Leading with Accountability
2. Citizen Governance
3. Resources and Scarcity
4. Completion Matters
5. Leadership Imperatives

In order to enhance the reader's understanding of the quandary facing today's community colleges, Brown steps back in time to deconstruct the impact of various public policies as they have affected community colleges, turning the book into a composition of historical information and reflection as well as a vision of future potential. Highlighted throughout the book are stories of innovation and success achieved by various community colleges as they strove to prepare their students for further education or employment by offering affordable educational experiences without compromising quality.

### ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE BOOK

Brown is clearly knowledgeable about the history of community colleges and the future they face. The book is well-researched, informative, and a fairly easy read. Written through the lens of community college trusteeship, Brown shares his insights and demonstrates his knowledge of the *how*, *why*, and *what* of the impact the federal role has had on public policy and legislation affecting community colleges.

In his discussion of accountability, Brown does a superb job of capturing the complex issues involved. As public concern heightens over current completion rates and the cost of higher education, he counsels "that 'one-size-fits-all' accountability systems do immeasurable harm, or worse, totally misconstrue or misrepresent the community college . . . standard accountability measures . . . do not take into consideration the varied missions of community colleges" (p. 23). He concludes this discussion by sharing information on the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) collaboration with the ACCT and the College Board to develop the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VOA). The VOA was devised by community college leaders as a system of accountability measures more relevant to their missions and their students. It offers benchmarks for community colleges to track student progress and completion data against peer institutions.

Chapter 4, "Resources and Scarcity," paints a true but scary picture for community colleges: "The impact of the economic crisis and concomitant downturn in funding for higher education and community colleges is pronounced . . . 43 states instituted cuts to public higher education institutions by the end of 2011" (p. 52). Here Brown helps the reader see the full impact of declining resources and the effects of scarcity. He concludes by providing concrete alternative resource strategies and suggestions for innovative approaches for the future.

Brown anticipates a wide audience for his book, including everyone from academicians and association leaders to policy makers and elected officials. However, perhaps those actually working in the trenches at community colleges might find his focus on just five issues, while well done, too narrow a concentration. Community colleges are also grappling with the stresses and impact felt from a myriad of other issues, including college readiness, remediation, student diversity, learning outcomes, online learning, technology adaption, economic and workforce development, sustainability and green jobs, data analysis, access, globalization, accreditation, institutional effectiveness, reporting and compliance, and partnerships. While some of these are mentioned in the book, some readers might wish he would have explored them further in order to more fully depict the uniqueness of community colleges and the issues they face.

### CONCLUSION

Brown's purpose in writing this book was "to bring greater clarity of purpose to the necessary and critical conversations needed to propel community colleges forward in meeting the challenges that they and the nation face, thereby strengthening our economic and social fabric" (p. 5). He has successfully done this and, in so doing, has painted a picture of the profound challenges and opportunities confronting community colleges. He has spoken of their strengths and of

the fact that they have no option but to retool and reinvent in order to survive and compete in the 21st century.

Brown clearly has confidence in and is a strong advocate for community colleges and all they stand for. He believes that by combining innovation, creativity, and knowledge, community colleges will be able to capitalize on opportunities as they arise and gain the critical edge necessary to draw the world's spotlight to their endeavors, thus gaining the support and recognition they need and deserve.

Community colleges are tenacious and have influenced the educational field through their accomplishments, initiatives, growth and advancement, and innovative and creative thinking. They will continue to show their endurance, soundness, and agility as they move forward. Brown's book is timely, insightful, thought-provoking, and, in this reader's opinion, well worth reading.

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## BOOK REVIEW AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

VALARIE AVALONE is the director of planning at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York. For the past three years, she has served on the Society of College and University Planning's Board as the at-large director with community college expertise.