Are Film Perceptions of Community College Students and Faculty Accurate?

A Case Study Analyzing Larry Crowne

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Hollywood films have been portraying the collegiate experience in a variety of ways since Harvard Crew in 1897. Films and media have a direct impact on the ways in which consumers view higher education (Conklin, 2008). A portion of this portrayal is what students do when they are in college. There is limited research about films whose setting is a community college, but research has been done on films of students attending four-year institutions. One does not have to think too much to recall Animal House or Van Wilder to showcase a party-like collegiate experience. The ways undergraduate life can be seen often influence behaviors and attitudes towards higher education. However, Hinton (1994) references this idea of Hollywood cutting or editing out the dull parts of the collegiate experience which should be taken into consideration by those constituents who are using film to evaluate a collegiate experience.

In 2011, an American romantic comedy representing a division of higher education debuted on the big screen. Being inspired by his time studying at Chabot College, Tom Hanks produced and directed the film. Chabot College offered a variety of different courses, including stenography, auto mechanics, and foreign languages. The student demographics at Chabot College are representative of community colleges nationally. Many students were coming from a variety of identities related to their gender, race, socioeconomic status, and past experiences. The number and variety of students attending community colleges has seen annual growth since the 1960s (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Tom Hanks has stated “that place made me what I am today” (Hanks, 2015). Bringing in his own personal experiences and seeing community college from a community college graduate’s perspective should make for a film of interest to anyone unaware or interested about community college. However, Larry Crowne received less
than remarkable reviews from a variety of stakeholders in the media business. One particular critic stated the film had “a good premise and a colorful supporting cast, but what it doesn't have is a reason for existing” (Ebert, 2011). However, this researcher believes the film does have a reason for existing. It exists in order to show the realities of community college and the students and faculty who are a part of this community. It allows for outside viewers to pull back the curtain and see in its own rom-com way, the life of a community college student who has lost everything and must start over.

**Media Portrayal of Community Colleges**

Examination of the depiction of community college students and faculty in a movie may give good insight because media is intentional in why and how it chooses to focus on a specific topic (Hastings, 2000). Being able to critically examine community college media depictions may be one way to better understand stakeholders, especially students and faculty, of community colleges (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009). Pop culture’s portrayal of community college can serve as a means to improve or degrade the image and emphasize areas of concern (Stevens, 2011). Depictions in pop culture remain relevant to educators and constituents of community colleges because they represent ways in which they are perceived by those who aspire to enroll in higher education and those within higher education who have not had the opportunity to interact with students or faculty from community colleges.

Pop culture provides initial frames of reference for those curious about community colleges (Stevens, 2011). This has been done through a variety of media lenses, including *Community*, *Rudy*, and *Hoop Dreams*. The NBC television show, *Community*, “centers on a tight-knit group of friends who all met at what is possibly the world's worst educational institution - Greendale Community College” while highlighting the positive and healthy
relationships that can be formed between different student demographics at the community college (Community - NBC.com, 2016). While Rudy and Hoop Dreams focus on students who are passionate about football and basketball, respectively, and dream of making a better life for themselves. They are stories of men and women who become leaders for their community and they get their start in higher education at local community colleges. While many depictions of community college have been favorable, it may be beneficial to critically analyze other depictions to deepen the understandings of portrayals to better serve prospective and current community college students (Bourke et al., 2009).

**Implications for Faculty**

The perception of community college in film and media can have a direct impact on the experiences of faculty members in the community college system. There are a number of challenges and opportunities that are faced by these faculty members. First and foremost is the level of diversity in the students they are teaching. However, it is no longer just identity based diversity, there has been an increase in the number of students who are attending community college who are diverse it their level of academic ability, reasons for attending, and goals and aspirations (Bourke et al., 2009). Faculty need to be equipped with the necessary resources and skills to ensure the success of these students. It is essential with different learning styles out there, faculty are ready to tailor their different courses to the learning styles within their classrooms. In Larry Crowne, the audience gets a glimpse at the style of two different community college faculty members – Ms. Mercy Tainot and Dr. Ed Matsutani. There is an additional faculty member, Frances, who is a minor character and there is little development of her as a faculty member. They provide a spectrum of the type of faculty that could be encountered at a community college because recently there has been an increase in the number of
minority and women faculty members. Minority faculty has risen from nine percent in 1987 to 22 percent in 2009; women faculty has also risen from 38 to 54 percent during the same timeframe (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014).

**Mercedes “Mercy” Tainot.** Mercy Tainot is played by Julia Roberts. Mercy has a master’s degree which she is ironically irritated by because it has caused her to pick up an additional course taught at 8:00 a.m. at East Valley Community College. Mercy is the epitome of an overworked and underappreciated faculty member. Mercy no longer finds passion in the work she does and has an apprehension to creating a collegial environment for students in her courses. At the beginning of the film, Mercy walks into her SPEECH 217 course and before walking to the front of the room, she counts the number of students in her class. When she realizes there are only nine students, she says, “This class is cancelled. The state charter requires a minimum of 10 students per class or else it costs more for us to be here than not so, did you really want a class at 8:00 a.m.? I did not” (Hanks, 2011). This provides a clear example that Mercy is not invested in the students who are in her courses. This is ironic considering her beliefs in ensuring her courses teach people how to care. She actually asks herself in the morning “if I make a dollop of difference to anyone sitting in my classroom” (Hanks, 2011). Seemingly benign and detached from the classroom experience, Mercy Tainot does not paint a community college faculty member in the best light. This may have to do with her increased workload or her underprepared students. Community college instructors have traditionally had to teach twice as many hours, but to students who are less well prepared (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). This creates an environment where many of Mercy’s remarks are warranted.

However, her teaching pedagogy seems to have a significant impact on the students in her courses. When she begins a course, she always states that this class is going to teach the
students how to care. This culture of care provides Mercy an opportunity to invest time and energy into the students and helping them realize their full potential. The Dean of Student Services even reflects briefly to two students that Mercy’s speech course will change their life. It is important to make a brief note here about Mercy and Larry’s growing relationship. This romantic relationship seems to change her perspective and her teaching pedagogies. Though she often seems unimpressed by the students, when her and Larry begin to kindle a romantic relationship, she seems much more invested in the students’ experiences and what they are getting out of the course. This illustrates the importance of relationship building between faculty members and students. However, it is important to recognize the potential problems this romantic relationship could create for both Mercy and Larry. After the kiss, Mercy realizes if this type of behavior gets out, it would be “both embarrassing and her reputation as a professor would be forever tarnished” (Hanks, 2011).

**Dr. Ed Matsutani.** Dr. Ed Matsutani represents a different type of community college faculty member. When he is introduced in the film, it is in the front of his large lecture course on the Introduction to Economics. As his title implies, he has extensive educational experience – a Doctor of Philosophy in Economics – which provides him deep knowledge of his area of study. His teaching pedagogy seems to align more with courses focused on lecture style and dissemination of knowledge. He seems a bit colder and unapproachable to the students than Mercy. In one scene, he even berates Larry for having his phone out by stating, “They call them smart phones but only dummies would use them in my class” (Hanks, 2011). There is an expectation in the course the students must read this course pack which will provide them with all the answers they need.
He teaches the material in such a way that allows for Larry Crowne to finally speak up and defend himself when he is at the banking/mortgage company where his housing is going into foreclosure. Larry is able to understand what he is learning inside the classroom and applies it to something going on in his own life. This is in alignment with the belief community college students are more interested in the practicality of their education and what can assist them in earning more money (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). In the long run, being able to go to his bank and default on his mortgage will assist him with financial stability in the future.

**Implications for Students**

Through examining *Larry Crowne*, the audience is introduced to a variety of students who are quite consistent with the demographics of community colleges today. According to Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker (2014), the best way to describe students today is with the words number and variety. In some places, they are seeing an increase of about 15 percent a year. Community colleges are also educating a large number of students of color and international students. Though the audience is only given a glimpse into one or two courses at East Valley Community College, it is important to recognize that this provides us an idea of the kind of students that compose the student body; but this may still be unrepresentative of the total student demographic on community college campuses (Hinton, 1994). In addition to the students below, Larry Crowne has two additional classmates, Dave Mack and Natalia Calimeris. They provide additional representation of the community college demographic, but the film lacks character development for these two to analyze.

**Larry Crowne.** Larry Crowne is the key actor in this film. It is based on his journey from successful UMart employee to unemployed middle-aged man with no college degree to successful culinary specialist at a local restaurant pursuing higher education. When Larry loses
his job because he does not have the proper level of education needed to move up in the company or to reaffirm the work he is currently doing, UMart chooses to let him go. Larry seems to lose his sense of identity because he is not sure who he is without his employment. He never expected something like this to happen and is not sure what he is supposed to do. When a neighbor encourages him to check out East Valley Community College and invest in his education, Larry begins to have some hope for what could be next.

Larry enrolls in three community college courses. The Dean of Student Services believes three courses especially the SPEECH 217 course will change Larry’s life for the better. After registering for his courses, he returns home in preparation of starting classes again for the first time since returning home from the military and being laid off at work. On his way to class the first morning, he meets fellow student, Talia Francesco, who seems to have a wild side and wishes to draw out Larry’s as well. Through their friendship, Larry Crowne is given a nickname by Talia – Lance Corona. This echoes his search for identity in the community college. During his two courses, Larry learns some invaluable lessons. However, none more valuable than becoming the author of his own life which is realized when he is finally able to part ways with his home. From Dr. Matsutani’s course, Larry learns about gross assets, true debit flow, and his value index, while also learning that since River Creek Bank refuses to provide him new terms for this home mortgage that this has now become a bad debt. He returns the mortgage back to the bank in a strategic foreclosure which allows him to be free and move on (Hanks, 2011).

While attending community college, Larry is also balancing his new culinary specialist role at a local restaurant in town. This is indicative of community college students in America who often have to fit course and other educational activities into jobs and other obligations (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014).
Talia Francesco. Talia is the first student Larry meets when he starts at East Valley Community College. She identifies as Latina and appears to be in her twenties. She is a part of a group of students who belong to a ‘motorist gang’ and she gets Larry involved with them. She provides him a sense of belonging in the community college. However, community college does not seem to be the end goal for Talia because she ends up dropping out to pursue other passions. This can be seen in community colleges when other responsibilities or causes are cited as the primary reason community college students are less likely to persist to a degree (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014).

Steve Dibiasi. Steve Dibiasi seems to portray the community college student who did not necessarily want to attend college in the first place but there may have been an expectation from an external group that he attend an institution of higher education. His attitude toward his courses where the audience can see him seems to be of light-heartedness and carelessness. However, according to Conklin (2008), Steve’s demeanor may not be so suspect. There is this belief that you must attend college to be successful. A person must attend college to be happy. Throughout the film, Steve provides the humor of what many may believe to be a stereotypical community college student who is just attending to attend.

Lala Pinedo. Though one of the minor characters, it is important to note the different identities Lala highlights to the national community college student demographic. She identifies as a Latina who is coming back to college after having a family. This provides a glimpse into the access community colleges provide for non-traditional students, but also to students who identify with the Latinx culture. Approximately 18 percent of all community college students identify as Hispanic (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Additionally, it is important to understand her
priorities may look vastly different than her colleagues due to her life situation. However, she is still actively engaged in the community college experience.

**Implications and Opportunities**

When community college first came on the scene, they were applauded by the press for reflecting an inevitable next step towards the transformation of American higher education (DeGenaro, 2006). The question remains if films today are providing accurate perceptions of community college students and faculty and their lived experiences. This researcher would say some films may not accurately portray the demographics and lives on students and faculty, but *Larry Crowne* provides those interested into a glimpse of what a community college experience for a non-traditional student may look like. Through Larry’s experience, the audience is able to see the challenges faced and opportunities presented for advancement. According to Fain (2012), *Larry Crowne* appeals to an older audience since two-year colleges are more diverse and traditionally enroll more adult students. This allows for adult students to see community college as an opportunity for them to still have a higher education.

Considering the increased level of access community colleges provides for students of different backgrounds and experiences, there may be an opportunity to capitalize on this and showcase a film where someone who never thought they were going to be able to have a higher education is able to make their way to a community college and become successful. Community colleges, if they are going to utilize film and media to the best of their ability need to be able to change the conversation and be in charge of the story being told about the community college experience. Additionally, there is an opportunity to qualitative research in this area in which students and faculty who attend community college have an opportunity to share their
experiences and juxtapose them with the experiences of community college student and faculty in various films.

Summary

As community colleges continue to grow and become more important to the field of higher education, it is crucial for more research to be done on how media in a holistic sense impacts outside stakeholders and constituents and their perception of community college. Though *Larry Crowne* provides a positive look into how community college can be viewed as a launch point of restarting your life or career, this is not being seen as positively across the board. Though the answer to the initial question prompting this research is maybe, it also prompts several other questions for consideration. What impact do films like *Rudy* and *Hoop Dreams* have on the recruitment of student athletes to community college? Are films being viewed as a window into what could be? What can community college administration due to either enhance the positive media perceptions or fight back against the negative media perceptions? Though there are not answers to these questions yet, they may be valuable for future research into the portrayal of community college through media, or media’s portrayal of higher education in general. However, at the end of the day, it is important to recognize community colleges have value in higher education and provide invaluable and for many students and faculty, life-changing, experiences. It will be essential for community colleges to recognize this, understand what their story is, and through various media outlets share this story with the rest of society.
References


