



## Manual for Community Colleges Developing Programs in Peace and Conflict Studies

### **Teaching Peace and Conflict in U.S. Community Colleges**

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Today, policy makers, government officials, business people, and the public are looking to community colleges to solve some of the most pressing challenges facing this country. This is not surprising, as community colleges have been in the forefront of positive social, economic, and policy change since their inception in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

America will continue to be a destination for immigrants who have been economically, politically, and socially marginalized; subjected to human rights abuses; and victimized by violence in their homelands. These new arrivals depend on community colleges to provide them with occupational and life skills, social and political security, and the opportunity to become part of a society that guarantees tolerance and promotes upward mobility. Individuals who find themselves suddenly out of work are seeking out community colleges for retraining and the hopes of retaining their dignity in the face of the current economic crisis. Veterans returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are looking to community colleges as places to find caring faculty and supportive environments that will assist in their pursuing careers and coping with adjustments after military life. All who are in need of second chances or a fresh start know that community colleges are there for them.

Because community colleges are open enrollment, less costly as compared to 4-year institutions, and are able to provide a wide range of opportunities in both academic and vocational education, they are aptly referred to as “democracy’s colleges.” They have long been in the business of making communities stronger and more vibrant, minimizing economic and social inequities, and overall providing hope to those who need it most. This sector of American education has done much to secure prosperity and security, competitiveness and stability, and cultural and social enrichment. As such community colleges have been a major force in guaranteeing the essential building blocks necessary for a society that is peaceful and able to deal with conflict in constructive ways. Thus it should come as no surprise that community colleges are ideally and logically positioned to tackle one of the most pressing challenges facing the world today: increasing levels of unmanageable conflict and violence. As the need to resolve conflict and foster security becomes more pressing, community colleges are

positioning themselves as ideal environments in which to promote strategies and initiatives that can strengthen peace in the U.S. and around the world.

The field of peace and conflict studies was born out of the reality that only a multi-disciplinary perspective could transform society from a culture of violence to one of peace. As such, solving the world's most serious conflicts requires a range of actors, academic fields, perspectives, and strategies. Because of the array of traditional liberal arts and vocational education approaches that community colleges take, they are uniquely positioned to provide the broadest range of Americans with opportunities to learn about peace and conflict resolution. No other sector of U.S. education is as well placed for this charge. The time for community colleges to engage in this important work is now.

The approaches that community colleges are taking to increase peace are as wide ranging as their missions, talents, and demographics. Students intent on obtaining 4-year degrees find themselves in community colleges often because of academic deficiency or economic hardship, and as such developing courses and degrees that transfer is an essential approach. Increasingly, community colleges are also looking at their vocational and career education missions as opportunities to teach about peace. In that career students upon graduation are not as likely to continue with formal higher education, incorporating the teaching of peace and conflict at this level is essential. As centers of community education and social and cultural life, community colleges are also considering non-credit and extracurricular efforts and projects that seek to serve their student groups be they defined by ethnicity, age, socio-economic class, or professional cohort. These colleges are also exploring innovative approaches to teaching and learning based on experiential education. Finally, many community colleges are seeking the means to not only increase peace in their home communities, but in the communities that their populations have come from overseas. As such, some community colleges are redefining community to extend beyond the county line and to the farthest corners of the world.

Community college environments are ideal ones to teach about peace and conflict issues. Besides their often demographic diversity and multiple missions, community college faculty are well-suited to engage students on the issues of the day, be they global and international, or domestic and community-based. Community college faculty are first and foremost teachers. It has been the authors experience that faculty from four year colleges and universities tend to research more and teach less than community college faculty. Many community college faculty come to teaching after having careers as practitioners and as such can provide unique perspectives on conflict management strategies such as problem solving and peacebuilding. Their stories and lessons in understanding the sources of conflict and approaches to peace are not taken merely from textbooks, but are drawn from their own life experiences.

The motivation and determination of creative and dedicated faculty are critical factors in the overall success of these efforts. As teachers, they are engaged in getting their students to think critically about not only the important issues of the day, but about the challenges and opportunities within their own lives. Community college instructors also engage in intensive advising, not only on academic issues, but frequently on personal matters. They often develop close bonds with students and are aware of the intimate challenges that their students are facing be it the newly divorced mother who must quickly learn a trade, the laid off middle age father who needs to support a family, the minority youth who cannot read or write at a level that will assure success in life, or the nearly arrived immigrant who is adjusting to American lifestyles and expectations. As such, community college faculty tend to develop strong empathy and awareness of their students' lives and aspirations. Because of the presence of conflict and violence in the lives of community college students, particularly in local and interpersonal contexts, there is a pressing need to teach about promoting peace and approaches to conflict resolution. In addition, as the world becomes more globally connected and opportunities (including career related) and challenges abound, community colleges are seeing the need to promote peace and stability not only in their students' lives, but also in a greater global context. This is all the more needed when one considers the tremendous ethnic and cultural diversity that exists on many college campuses, making them metaphors for the world at large.

Community college graduates constitute the backbone of America's middle and working classes. They will pursue careers as nurses and allied health workers, legal assistants and office workers, police and criminal justice professionals, teachers and paraeducators, mechanics and information technicians, and retail workers and business owners. As members of democratic society they will take on roles as civic leaders and PTA officers, volunteer for shelters and other charitable causes, and serve on community boards and seek public office. If we are to see a genuine change from a culture of violence to one of peace it is essential that Americans of all backgrounds learn the needed conflict resolution skills and develop peacebuilding awareness and attitudes that can be integrated personally and professionally.

There is a quiet revolution taking place on community college campuses today. More and more are furthering the teaching of peace and conflict by developing programs, courses, community based initiatives, and a range of other activities to promote a society that is peaceful, secure, and offers the promise of conflict resolution strategies for dealing with future challenges. Community colleges that are pursuing peace and conflict initiatives are generally putting forth one of four different strategies, often in combination with each other.

First, there is an increase in the development of traditional social science and humanities based peace and conflict studies programs and courses. The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Directory of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution Programs published in 2006 listed only two community college based programs in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, the U.S. Institute of Peace has been gathering data on community college programs as a way of measuring the effectiveness of its annual seminar for community college faculty. The most recent assessment indicates that as of the end of 2009-2010 academic year there are nearly 20 community colleges offering a credit based degree/certificate/concentration that has a decidedly peace and conflict studies focus.<sup>2</sup> Though frequently attached to traditional disciplines such as political science or sociology, these programs tend to be interdisciplinary reflective of the approaches that community colleges are taking to provide students with integrative experiences more relevant for today's world. This approach is also ideal for community colleges where faculty tend to teach across disciplines or with other colleagues in learning communities. As students who would otherwise attend 4-year institutions are frequently turning to community colleges, they are looking for programs that are challenging, focus on the complexity and reality of the world today, and can transfer once they finish their course work. As such, colleges are starting to realize that a peace and conflict studies program, particularly one that has a strong global focus, is a way of attracting and keeping motivated students.

But to focus only on traditional transfer areas is only looking at half of the picture. Unlike most 4-year institutions, community colleges are strongly committed to vocational education. While career students can be exposed to peace issues through general education offerings, they can also benefit from the teaching of conflict management skills in their specialty classes. Faculty are now starting to consider how they can engage vocational students such as those in nursing, law enforcement, paralegal studies, and business management in looking at the use of conflict management strategies as they interact with their future clients, patients, and customers on how to promote the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Teaching about issues of peace and conflict management may manifest itself in a variety of ways such as when treating human rights and international law in a homeland security or law enforcement program. Or it could focus on how global pandemics can hasten global conflict in a nursing education program. These career oriented strategies have an important benefit for those students who might consider non traditional starting points in their careers such as international humanitarian work or joining the Peace Corps (which has a track specially structured for community college students). In addition, the natural and physical sciences have

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, I., & Shuster, A. (Eds.) (2006). *Global directory of peace studies and conflict resolution programs* ( 7th ed.) San Francisco: Peace and Justice Studies Association/International Peace Research Association Foundation. (The directory also has an online version which permits community colleges to update their activities and add new programs).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix A is a list of community college programs that are both credit based and non credit focused.

important roles to play in teaching about peace, particularly when considering the interplay between environmental degradation and conflict. Increasingly peace studies programs are including courses that relate to environmental sustainability.

A second strategy has been to launch non credit initiatives often structured as institutes or centers that focus on issues of peace and conflict. Frequently these strategies are in response to a community-based interest in social justice or global concerns. Community colleges have always been in the forefront of community education and outreach, and these efforts thus become an extension of this work. With diversity increasing on community college campuses and more students enrolling who have lived in conflict zones, these centers often can have a strong peace and conflict focus in an ethnic or cultural context. Because of the prevalence of global peace education and non governmental organizations conducting peace work abroad, internationals often see the value of teaching about reconciliation, human rights, and other areas that form the basis of broad based peace and stability.

A third strategy focuses on pursuing international development as a means to furthering global peace, conflict resolution, and stability. Community colleges have been traditionally reluctant to engage in international work. The number of faculty who pursue Fulbright grants and other professional development type experiences is low. However, some colleges, often urged on by local diaspora and ethnic groups, are using their technical expertise in furthering peace overseas. This might be helping to start a technical institution or offering their faculty to teach or take students abroad. Because of community college expertise in occupational learning – particularly in areas that are needed in zones of conflict such as health sciences and law enforcement – they can make meaningful contributions to bringing about stability overseas. To succeed, community colleges need to partner with non-government organizations that can provide the needed technical and logistic support and seek funding from entities such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the United Nations.

A final strategy looks at new experiential approaches for teaching about peace. Though these strategies can take place as part of a course, community college faculty are increasingly building opportunities for students that transcend the traditional course and focus on “doing” peace and conflict work – be in the local community context or globally - and thereby providing hands on experiences that students can then apply in their lives and careers. For example, colleges are cooperating to provide opportunities for students to engage in large scale web based simulation exercises that teach about the complexities of international conflict and negotiations. Other colleges are capitalizing on their strength in training, and providing opportunities for students to participate in exercises that simulate working in conflict zones, thereby getting a taste for a career as

a humanitarian or international development worker. In some cases, these opportunities are taking place overseas as part of study abroad experiences.

With such a wide range of efforts, there is an increasing need for faculty in community colleges to take stock of what they have accomplished and assist colleagues in their efforts in teaching about peace. As community colleges are as diverse as the students and communities they serve, there is no cookie cutter approach to promoting a peace and conflict studies strategy. Also, it is often difficult to take models developed at 4-year liberal arts and state universities and apply them to community colleges. The structural and environmental challenges of community colleges, coupled with inherent opportunities, require that community college faculty and administrators make their own paths, develop their own models, and share them in order to grow the field in community colleges in a way that can withstand scrutiny, is sustainable, and can be built collaboratively. As such, this guide has been developed by leaders in community colleges who have blazed their own trails, often quietly and with little outside support, in making their institutions catalysts for positive and meaningful change in the world. It is hoped that this collection of articles will serve as a guide to community college faculty and administrators across the U.S. who are now realizing the potential that community colleges have to teach about peace, as well as the need that exists in the communities that their students are coming from to positively impact their students' personal and professional lives.

There is much to do, but many willing and talented faculty supported by visionary leadership are making peace a priority for their community college's efforts. This is just the start.

Please visit the web site [www.CREducation.org](http://www.CREducation.org) for additional chapters of the *Manual for Community Colleges Developing Programs in Peace and Conflict Studies*.