

BOOKS

Community College History

Carolyn Thornberry

A Bend in the River: Voices from a Community College, 1970-2000, Edward Ifkovic, *iuniverse.com*, 2001

Edward Ifkovic's 400-page, 30-year history (1970-2000) of Tunxis Community College in Farmington, Conn., may at first seem daunting, with its many chapters of straight interview text. Take time to read the introduction, however, and you will be immediately drawn into a wonderful and beautifully interwoven institutional biography of the college, its administration and its students. Ifkovic's book also says much about the evolving role of community colleges generally, while offering a parallel history of America, its popular culture and the author's own personal story of 30 years as a professor of English at Tunxis.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is its very thoughtful chapter layout. The historical content chapters are written in five-year blocks, and each begins with a local newspaper headline of the same period. Other chapters, entitled "Voices," feature the remembrances, thoughts, poems and personal stories of students during each historical period.

You probably could read the historical chapters, skip the voices chapters, and still read a very good history of

Tunxis Community College. But don't. Read the interviews, because they bring the richest understanding of the book's title, *A Bend in the River*, translated from the Native American word "Tunxis." The title is a metaphor for the lives of so many students and staff, as well as the author, who found at Tunxis an important "bend in the river" of their lives—a turning point.



Ifkovic's book quickly captures the reader's attention in the spirit of a good novel or personal biography. He takes us through the college's beginnings in 1970 with barely 50 students, six faculty and very meager facilities to its present-day expanding modern campus with 4,000 students and dozens of separate degree and certificate programs.

Along the way, we see through the author's eyes the triumphs and challenges of many community

colleges. These include struggles with the administration, precarious public funding, accreditation dilemmas, land acquisition and facilities needs, faculty unionization, program development, increased career-oriented course offerings, greater enrollment of women and "nontraditional" students, turmoil over student expression and an emerging spirit of campus life and identity. At the same time, the college's institutional development is skillfully juxtaposed against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, student unrest, the Iran hostage crisis, Reaganomics, the deaths of John Lennon and Anwar Sadat, the Women's movement, Black Monday, the gas crisis, yuppies, Rodney King and the O.J. Simpson trial.

Above all, Ifkovic reminds us that the development of any institution is measured by the range of people and competing interests that contribute to it. *A Bend in the River* is ultimately the story of students, many students, who were not necessarily destined for higher education, but who came to Tunxis Community College and found their turning point, the place that would change their lives forever. These students include high school dropouts and former prison inmates finding in the college an opportunity to rethink and relearn lost lessons, as well as immigrants and minority students overcoming the challenges of language and cultural separation to find their place in America.

It is also a story of the emergence of women of all ages and backgrounds. The book is filled with moving interviews with women who suddenly found themselves in need of something to enrich their lives or with children to support and little education. There is more than one mother-daughter pair who teamed up and supported each other through to the achievement of their degrees.

For anyone who has ever worked at a college, Ifkovic offers poignant reminders that teaching is not unidirectional. Students and colleagues contribute to our lives as well. Teaching extends beyond the classroom into the lives and hearts of those we meet. It truly changes hopes, aspirations and achievements among us and especially so at community colleges in the forefront of a broadened vision of postsecondary education.

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Teaching Diverse Students

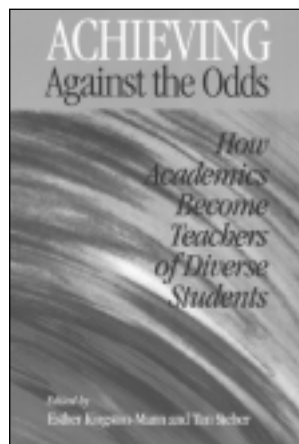
Janice S. Green

Achieving Against the Odds: How Academics Become Teachers of Diverse Students, Esther Kingston-Mann and Tim Sieber, Eds., Temple University Press, 2001, \$19.95

If you've attended a higher education conference or even a campus faculty meeting lately, you know that diversity and effective teaching are hot topics. How do we achieve diversity in the student body in light of recent court decisions weakening Affirmative Action in college admissions? How do we develop curricula to help students

understand and appreciate cultural, social, economic and political differences? How can we promote, sustain and reward effective teaching? And how do we do it all despite persistent budget cutbacks?

Interestingly, while these two topics—diversity and pedagogy—are directly related, they are typically considered separately. In *Achieving Against the Odds*, professors Esther Kingston-Mann and Tim Sieber along with nine of their colleagues from the University of Massachusetts Boston, explain why a diverse classroom demands a particularly creative approach to teaching and how each contributor found the techniques and attitudes that enabled their students to learn. Each essay is a tale of struggle, introspection and risk-taking. And each is a success story.



Notably, the authors' historically underfunded home campus serves an unusually diverse population. In 1998, fully half of the UMass Boston entering class were students of color, and 60 percent of all undergraduates on the urban campus were the first in their families to attend college, according to Kingston-Mann and Sieber. With an average age of 29, many UMass Boston students work and have family responsibilities. They represent a spectrum of cultures and economic levels. For many of them, English is a second or third

language, not yet adequately learned.

The challenge for UMass Boston then is to offer quality, low-cost education to a highly diverse student body for whom a college degree represents a giant step up the social and economic ladder. Faculty members have taken impressive steps to meet this challenge.

The contributors to this collection—themselves diverse in race, ethnicity and sexual orientation—teach humanities and social sciences ranging from gender studies to international relations and religion. But they share three common experiences. They all began teaching at UMass Boston as they had been taught—through lecture, discussion and testing of course content. They all felt frustration and disappointment as this pedagogy failed in their classrooms. And they all spent countless hours analyzing the problem, considering solutions, experimenting in the classroom and ultimately taking part in faculty development seminars at the UMass Boston Center for the Improvement of Teaching.

Founded in 1983 with a Ford Foundation grant, the center encourages faculty to adopt teaching concepts and strategies that engage and motivate students for whom academia, especially liberal arts study, is not only bewildering, but also seemingly totally removed from personal experience—even pointless.

The contributors to *Achieving Against the Odds*, regardless of their individual discipline or curricular focus, arrive at a common understanding of the educational needs of their students and ways to address them.

Kingston-Mann, a historian, sought “a pedagogy that was more informed by understanding of inclusion and exclusion.” Her Modern World History course, for example, examined England's Industrial Revolution through the eyes of a Chartist worker, a factory owner and an educator—differences the students well understood. Sieber, an associate professor of anthropology, discovered the importance of establish-