Baltimore City Community College: Tapping into Unrealized Potential to Change Lives

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The research advisory committee has concluded that BCCC is unable to meet the educational needs of students from Baltimore City, is not responding adequately to the workforce development needs of business and industry, and has been beset by a series of educational, organizational and financial problems. This study provides incontrovertible evidence to support these conclusions.

Here we will focus on key areas where changes are necessary for BCCC to become the community college that residents of Baltimore City need and deserve as well as a resource that plays a central role in the economic vitality of the city and the region.

We want to underscore a fundamental perspective that guided these recommendations: Our premise is that the status quo is unacceptable. The problems are not new. For too long, they have been ignored or allowed to go unresolved because of inertia, protection of turf, and lack of proper oversight. Failing to address BCCC's inadequacies will produce the same results: a college that falls short of what it could and should be.

Our recommendations focus on strategic choices that need to be made. Operational recommendations are included in the next section of the report. We intentionally left many implementation details for the proposed new governing body and leaders. We hope that the response to our recommendations focuses on what is best for BCCC and the City of Baltimore rather than on the interests of any single group. Change is never easy, but continuing on the current path will be much more costly.

GOVERNANCE

BCCC's current governance structure is unique among community colleges in Maryland. The decision in 1990 to make the college a state institution rather than one built on a state and local partnership was largely a response to the challenges Baltimore City was facing in funding its local share.[95] That step relieved short-term financial pressures but also created unforeseen consequences. Cutting off BCCC from the city has left it adrift with no clear link to Baltimore policymakers. BCCC has also not had a strong working relationship with the Baltimore City Public Schools.

Middle States' 2011 decision to place BCCC on academic probation and its warning in 2014 that the college's accreditation may be in jeopardy have had a major impact on BCCC's reputation and on enrollment. Declining enrollment, frequent turnover of leadership, and deficiencies in a number of operational areas, have raised fundamental questions about the leadership and strategic direction of the college.

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Our conclusion is that the governance system must be replaced. Wishful thinking, marginal adjustments and "more of the same" are not a recipe for creating a vibrant and successful community college in Baltimore.

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Before examining specific governance options, it is essential to review the outcomes that must develop as a result. A fundamental flaw in the current structure is the absence of a clear involvement and stake by Baltimore City. In other community colleges in Maryland, that connection stems primarily from the financial commitment that local government makes to the college's budget. Given the city's continuing financial problems, we are reluctant to recommend a return to that arrangement. Nevertheless, finding a meaningful connection is critical.

Regardless of which option is selected, the city must become a true partner with BCCC. Possible solutions include: making the president of BCCC a member of the mayor's cabinet; creating a formal link with the Baltimore Development Corporation; instituting regular meetings between BCCC officials and leaders of Baltimore City Public Schools and city government; and establishing a connection to major business groups such as the Greater Baltimore Committee.

Ultimately, the success of these measures depends on the leadership of the mayor, key city officials and the BCCC president. The objective that all of them should be working toward is making BCCC a valued educational and economic development asset.

Having rejected the status quo, we examined four alternative governance models. All four have advantages and downsides. We considered them purely from the perspective of what is best for Baltimore students. While it is clear that some stakeholders have different political ideas of the best governance structure, we have, for the time being, not factored those considerations into our analysis.

The first change, and least dramatic change, would be reconstituting the college's board to emphasize and formalize connections with Baltimore City, the public school system and economic development agencies. The second is to merge BCCC with the Community College of Baltimore County to create a community college system for the Baltimore region. The third is to place BCCC under the Morgan State University Board of Regents. The fourth is to transfer the governance of BCCC to the Board of Regents of the University System of Maryland.

Option 1: Reconstitute the BCCC Board of Trustees

With the absence of close ties to Baltimore City and the school system, one option is creating a board that reflects the importance of those relationships. Any reconstituted board must represent the relationships that BCCC needs in order to be successful: employers, the city school system, city workforce development, and the mayor of Baltimore.

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Whether it would be possible to create the type of links that exist in other jurisdictions without a financial commitment from the city is a serious question. While this option is the least disruptive, it also offers the ,smallest chance of addressing the major challenges facing BCCC.

A theme in our interviews was the absence of strong leadership and a strategic direction for the college. Turnover in the presidency is certainly part of that, but we also observed that the governance structure did not provide the expertise, oversight, or advocacy required to fill the vacuum created by the continual turnover.

Option 2: Merge BCCC with CCBC

The economy of the region is not defined or constrained by jurisdictional boundaries. Employers are looking for skilled workers regardless of where they live or received their education. This reality is already underscored by the very large number of Baltimore City residents who attend the Community College of Baltimore County, (CCBC) despite the higher tuition.

CCBC has already transitioned from three community colleges — in Catonsville, Dundalk and Essex — into a single system. The idea of a regional system could be a logical extension of that consolidation.

Another appealing aspect to this idea is that CCBC is already seen as a successful institution with strong connections to county government, the General Assembly and state government, and local businesses. CCBC already partners with Baltimore City and Baltimore employers. CCBC provides a perfect example of how strong ties to local government and the local business community support success in a community college.

Potential obstacles begin with funding. Baltimore County provides a significant share of CCBC's budget (24.4%). CCBC receives only 23.8% of their funding from the state, while BCCC's funding (70.6%) comes almost exclusively from the state.[96]

Also, this arrangement would not necessarily lead to closer links with Baltimore City government or with the Baltimore City Public Schools.

In fact, a merger of these two institutions could be viewed as a takeover of BCCC by CCBC, or, a takeover of a city institution by the county. That perception is almost inevitable when merging a strong institution and a struggling one.

While we are not going to discuss political factors, it is impossible to ignore complications on both sides of the jurisdictional boundaries that might arise. For these reasons, we conclude that a merger between CCBC and BCCC is neither likely nor viable.

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Option 3: Place BCCC Under the Authority of the Board of Regents of Morgan State University

Throughout this study, findings highlighted deficiencies at BCCC. For example, its lack of capacity — infrastructure, systems and personnel — for its mission. As just one example, the college is in the early stages of implementing an IT enterprise system, a process that started in 2006. On the projected timeline, it is likely to be an obsolete system before it is installed.

Being able to draw upon the existing infrastructure and systems of Morgan State could be a way to upgrade BCCC's capacity quickly and easily. A second advantage is that Morgan State has a Board of Regents that has provided both strategic leadership and effective advocacy in Annapolis.

Whether this is a role that would interest the Board and leadership of Morgan is unclear. They would have to address a few obvious disadvantages. For one, there is a significant difference in culture and perspective between a doctoral university and a community college. Secondly, it is unclear if Morgan sees itself as focused on the workforce and economic development needs of Baltimore City to the same degree as BCCC.

Finally, if BCCC were to affiliate with Morgan or with another institute of higher education, it would be essential to allow students at the community college to have a full range of choices if they should transfer after two years. A diverse selection of transfer institutions must be retained for graduates of BCCC, no matter the governance structure.

Option 4: Place BCCC under the Authority of the Board of Regents of the University System of Maryland

The most obvious advantage of this structure is it results in little disruption to other institutions. The University System of Maryland (USM) could also help support BCCC in critical areas such as construction management, technology infrastructure, and budgeting — areas where USM has proven experience.

The Board of Regents also has considerable success managing a diverse set of institutions, offering direction and oversight, and being a vigorous advocate with state policymakers. As one stakeholder said, placing BCCC under the authority of USM would give BCCC:

> "...the financial clout of the system, which is significant...the political clout of the system, which is significant, and...an intimate relationship between BCCC and several of the campuses that they feed on a regular basis."

Other institutions, including Coppin State University and the University of Baltimore, serve many of the same students in the same geographical area as BCCC. It is possible to imagine a clearer delineation of roles among the three institutions to benefit Baltimore City students.

Another benefit relates to BCCC's leased space at the UM BioPark. The health sciences are clearly an important area of growth for the Baltimore regional economy and many of those jobs do not require four-year degrees. This is an area where it is possible to build on the existing relationship to create new initiatives.

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There are also drawbacks. It is important for students to keep their options for transferring after two years — even outside USM. Another challenge involves blending different academic cultures, particularly with respect to BCCC's role in developmental education, an area where USM institutions have less experience.

It must be clear that this relationship would not create a path for other USM institutions to offer two-year degrees. Nor would there be a path for BCCC to offer four-year degrees. While USM can give BCCC expertise and oversight, placing BCCC under USM must in no way threaten the role of community colleges.

A final issue is whether a community college within USM would receive adequate attention from the Board of Regents. That could also be an issue with the Morgan option, but is more pronounced with the size of USM. This could be a real problem and would require the chancellor and the Board of Regents to develop new mechanisms for the oversight and support of BCCC.

Governance Recommendation:
There are pros and cons to each option but in the opinion of the advisory committee, all are far superior to the status quo.

How well any of the alternatives would work depends on factors beyond the scope of this study. The details of a new governance statute, the nature of the transition, and leadership will determine the effectiveness of any option.

With those caveats in mind, the advisory committee recommends:

> **BCCC should become a part of the University System of Maryland under the authority of its Board of Regents.**

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Our review found significant turnover in BCCC's leadership has inhibited success. Without examining specific presidents' tenures, it is reasonable to attribute BCCC's failures to them.

The litany of problems — accreditation challenges, financial and budgetary shortfalls, enrollment declines, a bad reputation among political and business leaders, student outcomes that fall short, and real questions about the quality of the education — have many causes, but the responsibility ultimately lies with the president.

All of the literature on successful community colleges points to presidential leadership as an essential factor for success. The tenure of BCCC's first president after the institution's transfer to the state shows strong leadership is possible. More to the point, however, it is essential.

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A healthy college needs leadership that can build on success, keep key constituencies engaged and supportive, and ensure a commitment to excellence. A struggling institution, BCCC, needs that sort of leadership.

We use the term "transformational leadership" to emphasize the critical need for radical transformation. BCCC needs a leadership team headed by a president who will articulate a vision, make hard decisions, overcome resistance to change, and garner support from an array of constituencies – all to make BCCC an institution of choice rather than one of last resort. That president must be able to fight for BCCC, to make it more effective and recognizable in the community.

BUDGET REALIGNMENT

Because compensation accounts for 64% of the total budget, staffing levels and staff qualifications must be seriously examined to ensure that the organization is staffed with effective employees at a financially sustainable level.

> **BCCC must balance its budget with realistic enrollment projections of approximately 3,000 credit FTE.**

BCCC has a fund balance of nearly $30 million, including its portion of the State's liability for post-retirement benefits.[97] The institution should use this money to recalibrate its budget and strategically expand the institution.

STAFFING

The issue of overstaffing combined with the concerns about accountability and the ability of staff at all levels to carry out the mission leads us to another recommendation.

> **BCCC should engage in a top-down review of positions to ensure the most effective staffing levels. Current employees should be re-interviewed for their positions to ensure the organization is staffed with the most qualified employees.**

CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY

Over and over, we heard that BCCC is neither known nor respected by business and political leaders. But for most community colleges, community support is fundamental.

The anomaly that BCCC is a state agency rather than a local one is undoubtedly a reason for that disconnect. It is clear that BCCC is often "out of mind" for city officials, that the college is not seen as an important resource, and that college officials have not done a good job of forging relationships with the

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city. In other jurisdictions, the fact that as much as a third of the college's funding comes from local government ensures a connection. In many counties, the community college is also deeply engaged in county government and local business initiatives.

The disconnect is not only with city government. One of the most significant deficiencies in the absence of a good working relationship with the Baltimore City Public Schools.

State officials also noted the absence of a regular BCCC presence in Annapolis and did not see the college as an effective advocate. The college's status as a state institution makes the challenge of getting the attention of state officials more difficult. While the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (MACC) is a regular presence and an effective advocate for the state's other community colleges, BCCC is not an obvious fit with that group, despite their shared missions. As one state elected official put it:

> "[BCCC is] not really a part of the broader community college network. They're so independent, they're a part of MACC but they're separate from MACC and advocacy from MACC...They sort of mention BCCC on the side. It just doesn't have a clear role of what it is."

BCCC's governance structure and funding relationship with the state makes it so the institution is left without an effective advocate at the state level. Being placed under the USM would give BCCC that support.

Perhaps most distressing of all given the potential role of community colleges in economic development and workforce training, is BCCC's lack of a positive relationship with local employers and business organizations. It is clear that CCBC is considered a more dependable partner than BCCC.

Given the proposal to place BCCC under the authority of the USM's Board of Regents, we offer an additional recommendation:

> **Following the practice of other institutions under the University System of Maryland, BCCC should convert its current Board of Trustees to a Board of Visitors with designated positions for city officials, local employers, the Baltimore City Public School System, and other key constituencies.**

We also expect BCCC's new governance structure to place a high priority on improved relationships with a range of community institutions. That requires more than just verbal commitment. There must be operational and structural arrangements tying BCCC to the community.

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BCCC'S NICHE

Community colleges must satisfy a broad array of local needs and expectations, while also being evaluated by specific academic indicators. A model community college should prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions; provide specialized job training and workforce development skills; offer customized programs for specific employers; be the institution of developmental education for students who are not yet college-ready; and provide continuing education and lifelong learning courses and programs.

Community colleges are also expected to be financially and geographically accessible, flexible, and able to adapt to changing community needs. Keeping up with the job opportunities and skill requirements of today and tomorrow rather than of yesterday is a constant mandate.

The specific mix of these roles will vary from community to community. Maintaining funding, flexibility for change, close working relationships with business and industry, and modern technology, test even the best-supported community colleges.

As the American economy has struggled and international competitors have moved ahead on some measures of higher education success, attention has shifted to the role of community colleges. A number of studies have recommended community colleges rethink their approach.

In our view, it is essential that BCCC rethink its approach to two central functions: providing students a gateway to continued higher education; and preparing students for either a successful transition to the workforce or advancement on the job.

With these factors in mind, the advisory committee paid special attention to BCCC's niche — what Baltimore City needs most. Several major conclusions emerged.

First, with high unemployment, concentrated poverty and a struggling economy, Baltimore City needs a vibrant community college that works closely with business and industry. The research team constantly heard from business leaders that BCCC has not been proactive and visible. Moreover, in the business community, the college does not have a good reputation for quality or responsiveness.

Second, enrollment in credit programs has declined, as more Baltimore City residents choose CCBC. The accreditation crisis and its impact on the reputation of the college is certainly partly to blame. Yet, enrollment has not recovered.

Graduation and transfer rates are not encouraging. BCCC is particularly challenged because a high proportion of its students are not college ready. As a result, it has devoted considerable resources to developmental education. The College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 (CCR-CCA), mandated that local school systems, rather than community colleges, take on primary responsibility

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for developmental education.[98] This mandate could have a significant impact on how BCCC focuses resources.

Our interviews with BCCC officials suggest an internal view that workforce development is a strength of the college. Given the contrary opinions of business and political leaders, it is clear that internal perception is not external reality.

That observation leads to our first recommendation regarding the college's niche:

Make workforce development the top educational priority of BCCC.

Achieving this goal will require fundamental changes. First, BCCC has to devise better strategies for working with business and industry. That means being more visible in the community and much more proactive and responsive to businesses.

In addition, BCCC must assess its current capacity for effective workforce development programs. Do the right programs exist? Does the college have the faculty and staff to respond to the needs of the Baltimore region? Are the labs, technology and equipment needed for state-of-the-art training available at BCCC? A critical job for the new governance system will be evaluating gaps between BCCC's workforce development programs and where the college needs to be for the business community.

Does the budget reflect this priority? Along with a greater emphasis on workforce development, to rebuild the BCCC brand, and to address the deteriorating budget, there must be a comprehensive review of the credit programs to focus on strengths.

A number of studies on community colleges conclude that a focused curriculum is key to achieving high rates of completion and transfer. Research by Complete College America repeatedly states that program choice, structure, and time to degree are essential for community colleges redesigning their curriculum.[99] Scholars found that offering highly structured programs and limiting program choice leads to timely graduation, whereas offering many options increases complexity, dead-ends, and can be challenging for students.[100] Research also shows offering too many programs leads to exploration that is particularly harmful for nontraditional students, who often need developmental education and must take the most efficient route possible due to limited funding.[101]

With that in mind, we offer another recommendation:

> **BCCC should focus its credit certificate and degree offerings on its strongest programs that are best aligned with job and transfer opportunities. In doing so, BCCC should**
> - **offer an A.A. in General Studies and associate degrees in high demand areas such as nursing, health sciences, information technology, and robotics;**

- continue efforts to ensure students earn "Stackable Certificates" while enrolled in degree programs; and
- ensure there is a continuous curriculum review process to eliminate nonproductive academic programs and courses.

BCCC must be flexible to meet the demands and future needs of Baltimore City. We think it is important to maintain a role as a transfer institution but, given the low graduation rate, the challenges of developmental education, and declining revenue due to decreased enrollment, focusing the educational offerings is a way to strengthen the college rather than spreading its resources so thin. To this end, we propose BCCC engage in a critical re-examination of its core mission and offer a finite number of credit and noncredit programs working to improve the quality of those programs and student outcomes. BCCC has taken steps to streamline programs in recent years, we recommend prioritizing quality over quantity.

BCCC should also investigate a closer relationship with CCBC to enhance the capacity to increase developmental completion rates. A closer partnership would enable BCCC to capitalize on CCBC's nationally renowned developmental education practices. In addition, BCCC should build closer relationships with its primary four-year transfer institutions in the region.

BARD REDEVELOPMENT

The closed Bard building in the Inner Harbor presents an opportunity for BCCC to develop the property into a public-private, revenue-generating venture with space for the college. With regard to Bard, the committee recommends:

> **BCCC should consider a public-private partnership to redevelop the Bard property that includes demolition cost as part of the deal.**

BRANDING AND MARKETING

Change in governance will provide a natural opportunity for the institution to rebrand. As the institution improves the quality of programs and student outcomes, it must aggressively rebrand. BCCC must also recognize that the college's brand is largely influenced by the quality of the institution and its programs. Many people inside the organization criticized BCCC for failing to improve its branding strategies. Suggesting specific branding strategies is outside of the scope of this report but the committee offers the following recommendation:

> **BCCC must rebuild its brand among students, employers, and key partners.**

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

BCCC's information technology plan calls for a new ERP system. While the team agrees that new IT systems are needed, it recommends against using the fund balance to pay for a new system if BCCC becomes part of the University System of Maryland. As part of the USM system, BCCC should have opportunities for a more efficient system-wide ERP and related software contracts. Or, the college could use USM's ERP systems. BCCC will also have a chance to leverage the expertise of USM's CIOs. With regard to IT infrastructure the committee recommends:

> **Baltimore City Community College must address its information technology needs. The planned ERP system should be put on hold.**

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