

ADMINISTRATION

Rethinking Open Access

By Juliet Lilledahl Scherer and Mirra Leigh Anson | SEPTEMBER 15, 2014

In the 1960s, as higher education grappled with how to diversify itself, open-access community colleges proliferated. They were innovative: affordable, geographically accessible, and providing access to students overlooked by the competitive admissions process of many public and private institutions. Enrollment surged after nearly 500 community colleges were established in that decade.

By the start of the 1970s, though, open-admissions policies began drawing scrutiny as educators increasingly observed unprepared students enrolling, failing, and exiting at extraordinary rates, a significant change in a very short time. Seeking to stem attrition, community colleges introduced mandatory assessment and placement during the 1980s and 1990s, to identify and ameliorate deficiencies among applicants before enrolling them.

The lengthy developmental-education sequences drawing sharp criticism today from many completion advocates reflect the long struggle that open-door community colleges have engaged in to educate degree-seeking students entering with lower and lower basic skills. Students in beginning credit-bearing courses of

degree programs now attempt—and frequently fail—to demonstrate mastery of numeracy and literacy objectives on a par with those well established for early elementary schoolchildren.

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For all the innovation at community colleges today, it is curious that a 50-year-old conception of open access is considered so untouchable. Growing evidence suggests that modernizing that policy would promote some of our nation's most crucial higher-education goals: improved college readiness and completion, increased financial support for promising low-income students, efficient use of public and private resources, and, ultimately, greater security and prosperity for more Americans.

Indeed, guaranteeing access to degree programs for all comers depresses the engagement and preparation of secondary-school students and makes it difficult to maintain standards in higher education. Why do we cling to such an anachronistic policy in the 21st century?

Requiring community-college students to demonstrate at least a modest ability to benefit before enrolling in degree programs might seem to be at odds with improving opportunity and college completion and, thus, promoting equality.

Yet, as part of its celebrated 2013 effort to redesign developmental education, Colorado's State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education wisely granted all community colleges in the state the ability to impose just such standards. The goal? To empower community colleges; to reserve federal financial

aid for eligible students; to educate seriously unprepared students outside the often-unforgiving federal financial-aid structure; to preserve financial aid in the long term for students now unprepared for college; and to improve postsecondary outcomes for all.

It is worth noting that Colorado accomplished that policy change despite one of the most liberal admissions policies ever written into state legislation for community colleges.

The two groups afforded protection by federal financial-aid regulations today are students and taxpayers. Students benefit when not allowed to start the financial-aid clock before they have the skills to succeed; taxpayers benefit when the government refuses to underwrite the education of seriously unprepared students on degree pathways.

Applying the same or similar protections to all community-college students, whether or not they receive financial aid, will improve postsecondary completion rates.

There is no denying that many of the world's most rewarding jobs in the 21st century require strong basic skills: numeracy, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking, as well as a commitment to lifelong learning. In a competitive global labor market, unskilled labor increasingly fails to produce family-sustaining wages, which is one reason for the importance of adopting public policies that facilitate the restoration of a culture of learning in America.

No matter how much new policies improve college-readiness rates, though, there will always be students who struggle to succeed on college degree paths. Instead of enrolling them prematurely and boldly asserting that they are being given an opportunity, we ought to embrace broader definitions of postsecondary success, so

that all students have a reasonable chance to succeed in the programs in which they enroll.

Without a doubt, students with intellectual disabilities are among the populations worst served by open-access community colleges. Why shouldn't more community colleges offer federally funded Comprehensive Transition Programs, which are designed to meet the unique education and employment needs of students with intellectual disabilities? In states where such programs exist, they are much more frequently sponsored by flagship universities than by community colleges.

Many community colleges do not perceive the need to offer programs specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, since all students are allowed to enroll in the general curriculum. Institutions with competitive admissions, on the other hand, have a clear view of the unmet needs of their students with intellectual disabilities and strive to serve them well. Fewer than 5 percent of American community colleges advertise programs for students with intellectual disabilities on ThinkCollege's website, a resource for postsecondary students with such disabilities.

Service learning, which combines classroom experience with community service, is another postsecondary alternative that has phenomenal potential to connect community-college students who have intellectual disabilities to contextualized learning that promotes gains in independent living and employment. Strategic school-to-work partnerships with community groups and agencies represent another option with more promise than unsupported enrollment in degree programs.

Alternatives to traditional degree programs for intellectually disabled or otherwise seriously unprepared students also need to be explored and expanded. They include better vocational education and training approaches, partnerships between businesses and community colleges to

prepare students for specific work-force needs, contextualized learning, and methods of connecting students to jobs so they can stabilize their finances.

For some students, programs like continuing education and the federally financed Adult Basic Education service hold great promise as flexible, lower-cost educational alternatives to long sequences of developmental-education courses. Community colleges could also forge stronger partnerships with community agencies that can enhance postsecondary success in ways they cannot.

The sad reality is that our commitment to the open door means that too many students today encounter a closed door.

In a 1962 commencement address at Yale University, President John F. Kennedy warned the leaders of tomorrow about the grave dangers that accompany the inconsiderate application of old solutions to modern problems.

"The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic," he said. "Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."

Conventional thought has led us to the current crisis in college achievement and completion. Some critics within and outside higher education will no doubt pound the table and insist that continuing to provide open entry to all to degree programs at community colleges best serves America's long-term interests. While tough

policy choices inevitably must be made, the collective rewards make it worth evaluating and discussing all factors and sensible solutions.

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