

Open Admissions: An Experiment that Became a Reality

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Introduction and Background

This paper provides information intended to facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of the open admissions concept in public higher education. In today's academic environment, an open admissions policy allows students to enroll in postsecondary educational programs if they have earned a high school diploma or received a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Open admissions policies became popular between the mid-1960s and early 1970s, when the civil rights movement focused attention on the underrepresentation of minority students in colleges and universities, and many pushed for greater diversity in the student population. In response to growing concerns regarding the limited numbers of Blacks and Hispanics participating in postsecondary education, institutions removed admission requirements viewed as barriers and implemented efforts designed to correct the underrepresentation of women, minorities, and low-income students.

However, the practice of open admissions did not begin with the civil rights movement. When established, the majority of today's public colleges and universities were community colleges or teacher colleges. They were open institutions that relied on the enrollment of self-selected applicants, a practice that existed through the mid-1940s and early 1950s. Most postsecondary institutions enrolled fewer students, and focused on the basic interests of affluent society members seeking "personal and intellectual" growth and on individuals preparing to enter professions such as education, law, and medicine. Students came from established families in surrounding communities, and consequently, the demand for enrollment rarely exceeded what campuses could accommodate. Applications were individually reviewed and stringent admissions criteria were not required. Since students at most colleges came from the immediate surroundings, space was not a problem, and applicants from

traditional backgrounds with adequate financial resources could anticipate being admitted. Students who completed one or two years of college were viewed as “college educated” and qualified for key positions. Nontraditional applicants such as women, low-income individuals, and minorities did not consider college a realistic option, so few applied. Most nontraditional applications resulted from the encouragement of a teacher or influential community leader, and the recommendation of such an individual usually ensured admission.

College attendance was dramatically changed with the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill. With the end of World War II, a large number of young men sought employment or educational opportunities. The GI Bill provided the financial means for many of these individuals to pursue postsecondary education, and the demand for higher education skyrocketed. The number of new students competing for limited college spaces generated major enrollment growth, leading to the expansion of academic programs offered by institutions, the enlargement of existing postsecondary institutions (in both the physical plant and the programs and degrees offered) and the creation of new colleges and universities. The tremendous expansion of higher education also brought changes in the courses offered, forced reevaluations of institutional goals and support services, and necessitated the creation of policies and procedures for the selection of students. Admissions standards and deadlines became essential tools for controlling the unprecedented increase in applications received by campuses. The number of students being denied admission grew. As might be expected, the academic standards established by campuses maintained the traditional status quo of predominately White-male enrollment. The civil rights movement focused attention on the need to open the doors of higher education by increasing minority enrollment, providing educational opportunity to excluded segments of our population. The nation’s leaders and community activists strongly endorsed the concept of open admissions. Most colleges and universities sanctioned full or limited open admissions efforts and aggressively recruited and enrolled minority, low-income, and female students. By the mid-1970s, however, many four-year institutions had moved away from larger open admissions efforts, using a limited number of special admission slots to recruit and enroll underrepresented students.

A complementary component of the open access programs of the mid-1960s was financial assistance, since many argued that offering access without providing the financial resources needed to attend was meaningless. With the introduction of large federally funded financial aid programs, concerns were raised about open admissions based on the practice of inflating enrollment in order to generate additional revenues through federal financial aid. Critics of open access pointed to reports showing increased attrition and lower graduation rates. This concern further supported the need to set admissions criteria based on predicted persistence and degree completion. In response to growing concerns, the Department of Education (DOE) added new regulations that required postsecondary institutions to determine that students have the “ability to benefit.” Campuses have access to numerous DOE approved tests that can be used to determine if students have the ability to benefit from their programs.

Examples of Open Admissions

One of the most studied open admissions initiatives was that of the City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY’s open admissions experiment, which started in 1970 and ended in 1976, has generated countless studies with different conclusions. A number of authors have argued that the program was successful, most often pointing to the growth in minority enrollment from a pre-1970 average of 18.8% to 36.6% of the CUNY student population in 1975. Others contend that the plan failed in many respects, pointing to low retention and graduation rates. Today the state of New York has two of the largest public higher education systems in the nation and offers educational opportunities for all students, but not at all campuses. The City University of New York is the nation’s largest urban public university and the third-largest university system in the United States. The CUNY system includes 23 institutions, including 6 open access community colleges. The State University of New York (SUNY), with 64 campuses and an enrollment of over 425,000 students, is the largest university system in the United States. The SUNY system divides institutions into four categories: technology colleges, community colleges, comprehensive colleges, and research university centers. The community and technology colleges offer open admissions.

California approached the open admissions concept from a statewide perspective, developing a master plan for higher education in the early 1960s

that distributed the public educational responsibility into three tiers. The University of California (UC), with ten campuses, selects students from the top one eighth of the state's high school graduates. The California State University (CSU) system (the second largest university system in the country), with 24 campuses, selects from among the top one third of the state's high school graduates. In addition, both the UC and CSU system allow a limited number of admission spaces to be used for specially recruited students. The community college system, with 108 campuses, offers open admissions and admits high school graduates and individuals with GED certificates. Students who successfully complete associate degrees from community colleges are given priority for admission at UC and CSU campuses.

The state of Florida is currently undergoing change as a number of community colleges become state colleges. Even with this change, admission to a four-year university in the state is selective, while the state colleges and community colleges continue to be open to everyone. In accordance with the Florida articulation agreement, associate of arts graduates from a community college in Florida are guaranteed admission to a public university, although the university may not be the student's preferred institution.

The University of Houston–Downtown (UHD) illustrates many of the points above. One of four institutions in the University of Houston System, the institution began as a small, private community college before transforming into a university of 12,700 students. Of 35 public universities in Texas, UHD remains the only university that continues to identify itself as open admissions. Applicants must have graduated from high school or received a GED in order to be admitted. Minimum GPA or SAT/ACT scores are not required. The university strongly recommends that all students complete a college-preparatory high school curriculum, and all students entering college for the first time must satisfy the state-mandated Texas Success Initiative requirement. At UHD, students who score below minimum standards on the Accuplacer tests (a test that measures academic proficiency in reading, writing, and math) must enroll in prescribed developmental courses.

With the exception of UHD, Texas uses community colleges as an open door to education and a bridge to four-year degrees for all students. The 35 universities

range from highly selective to those admitting most of their applicants. The state embraced a “Closing the Gaps” initiative in 2000, setting state-wide targets for increasing college enrollment from 1 million to 1.63 million by 2015, an increase of 63%. Many of these students will start their postsecondary experience at open admissions community colleges.

The Current Status and Future of Open Admissions

As indicated in the examples above, open admissions has evolved into an important and successful component of an education pipeline, rather than, as envisioned in the 1960s, a policy found at a majority of four-year colleges and universities. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) annually presents enrollment data showing that the majority of students enrolled in higher education attend community colleges, especially in populous states. Therefore, a majority of four-year institutions depend on community college transfers to maintain their enrollment numbers; this links their success to the success of open admissions students. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that transfer students achieve GPAs equal to or greater than those of other students. In addition, growing empirical evidence supports the anecdotal evidence of underprepared students who have been told they were not “college material,” yet because of open access institutions have persisted and earned degrees.

Many of the issues surrounding open access exist at UHD. Last year, 4,500 new students enrolled, of which 24% were first-time-in-college (FTIC), 70% were undergraduate transfers, and 6% were postbaccalaureate students. The majority of the FTIC students were minorities (51% Hispanic, 30% African American, 9% White, and 10% Asian/other) most came from low-income backgrounds, and most were the first in their family to attend college. Seventy percent of the new freshmen failed to meet the minimum Accuplacer score requirements and had to enroll in developmental courses. Less than one third of UHD freshmen graduate or are still enrolled at UHD after six years; this statistic annually raises concerns. Sixty-four percent of the students who did not return enrolled at other institutions (58% at community colleges and 42% at other four-year institutions). This pattern of transferring from one institution to another is prevalent among nontraditional students, and as a result the overwhelming majority of open access institutions do not view the six-year benchmark as

a valid measure of success. The graduation rates of their students are often determined by changes in employment, finances, and personal factors. Most students at UHD work full time, with 51% of the students enrolled in fewer than 12 hours and 30.6% of the total credit hours generated in evening courses. While most college students work, at selective institutions students schedule their work hours around class schedules, while at open access institutions students schedule classes around their work hours. When their work schedules change or work demands increase, most have no choice but to prioritize work over postsecondary persistence.

Two years ago UHD identified students who scored among the bottom quartile of test takers on the Accuplacer math test and requested their participation in a special program. The students attended a short summer program, were limited to enrolling in three courses for the fall semester, and participated in tutorial lab programs during the fall semester. Over 85% of the participants completed the first year successfully, a demonstration that interventions can often make the difference in terms of persistence. Numerous other efforts, such as Achieving the Dream, dual credit programs, and quality enhancement programs (QEP) also help facilitate the success of students who are less prepared for college-level work.

Support of and reaction to the open admissions policy at UHD varies within the campus. A majority of supporters are faculty and staff members who have been at UHD for years and who selected the school because of its commitment to serving minority, low-income, and first-generation students. They are proud of the accomplishments of the institution and its alumni and feel strongly that UHD must remain an open admissions campus. Others disagree, contending that an “open admissions stigma” makes the campus less attractive to high-achieving students and prevents UHD from receiving the recognition of a more selective institution. Among those in both the pro and con camps, concerns are growing regarding the increasing costs of education and the high loan indebtedness students are incurring. The long-term financial consequences faced by students unable to complete their degrees in a timely manner represent a common concern across campus constituencies, regardless of their opinion concerning open access.

Within the next ten years, many states will likely experience new patterns in higher education participation, and these patterns will likely influence open access policy. Numerous states are showing declining numbers of K–12 students, and this trend will soon be reflected in the number of students applying at colleges within these states. As enrollment demands decline, campuses striving to maintain existing resources will become increasingly dependent on student enrollment, and will most likely revisit their admission policies and practices to see how enrollment can be increased. Expanding open access is one possible strategy. In other states, such as California, demand is already greater than existing capacity and a lack of resources prevents expansion—thus a possible “cascade” of students from the more selective to less selective UC and CSU systems might “push out” those who would typically enroll in the open access community colleges. Obviously, differences among institutions will continue to vary as more popular institutions and those with larger endowments will have an edge over less popular institutions and those that are financially struggling.

Given recent actions by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the current campus environment, the chances are high that UHD will soon impose minimum GPA and SAT/ACT score requirements for freshman admissions. The primary justification for this change is to limit admissions to those having a reasonable probability of success. Although many support the university’s commitment to open access, they would still add programs to assist those unprepared for college-level work. These include special college preparation programs to help underprepared students meet admissions standards, or directing underprepared students to the UHD/Community College Joint Admissions Program, which would provide developmental and entry-level courses. At UHD, and other four-year open access institutions, the “ability to benefit” criterion may likely be a guide for continuing the commitment of access to as many students as possible.

Open Admissions for What Purpose?

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that in 2005 over 57% of students enrolled in college were women, and that 31% were ethnic minorities. Was the civil rights movement’s goal of open admissions policies intended simply to increase the participation of underrepresented populations? Or was it also intended to provide access to selective institutions? If so, has the

goal been accomplished? In 2005 there were 1,699 public four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Only 97 (6%) are classified as more selective, while 301 (18%) are classified as selective. Most minority and low-income students attend community colleges. How effective is the current open admissions policy at community colleges as a pipeline to selective or more selective four-year institutions? While research continues to show low transfer rates overall, data on the intentional path from community college to selective public university is extremely limited.

More than forty years later, the open access experiment continues to be a reality, one that has provided thousands of individuals with the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education and realize their educational goals. Most certainly, greater diversity is evident in the undergraduate student population in public colleges and universities. Evaluations of the increase of underrepresented populations at selective public institutions depend on the perceived goal of open admissions: the opportunity to attend after demonstrating success at a community college, or access directly to the selective, four-year university. Given current economic realities, with the growing costs of higher education, and with many states experiencing declining numbers of potential students, the goals of open admissions should be a discussion on the forefront of institutional, state, and federal agendas.

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