

An Overview of Open Access Institutions

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Abstract

The Enrollment Management Journal began as an initiative of the Council for the Management of Educational Finance. During the past year, open access institutions have been the focus of the enrollment management committee of the council. This paper presents a summary of the committee's discussion of the topic and serves as an introduction to the topics covered in this issue that, in the estimation of committee members, provide valuable insight to practitioners and researchers interested in open access policy.

The most widely used framework for classifying colleges and universities in the U.S. is the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. In the most recent classification (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2005), the undergraduate profile for four-year institutions includes selectivity as one of the classification characteristics. An inclusive institution is one that admits students with an average ACT-equivalent score of 18 or lower; selective and more selective colleges and universities admit students with higher scores. The description of inclusive institutions clarifies that “these institutions either did not report test score data or the scores indicate that they extend educational opportunity to a wide range of students with respect to academic preparation and achievement” (n.p.). This description reflects the foundational

philosophy of institutions commonly referred to as open access—the belief that everyone should have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973).

The most common admission criterion for open access institutions is graduation (or the equivalent) from an accredited high school (Douglass, 2000; Lavin, 1976; National Urban League, 1970). Yet most admissions practitioners can also identify open access institutions that admit individuals who have not graduated from high school. Certainly, the community college represents the contemporary version of an open access institution. Enrolling nearly one half of the national undergraduate student population, community colleges have historically championed an open access philosophy, providing access to many who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education (Roman, 2007). The argument for open access, however, did not begin with the community college “boom” of the 1950s and 1960s, nor are community colleges the only type of open access institution.

Douglass (2000) points to California as the first state to act upon the call to provide postsecondary opportunity to all high school graduates. By 1920 the state had a formal network of public junior colleges. An agreement to guarantee junior college students who completed a two-year degree admission to the University of California at Berkley existed in 1910, and similar agreements with the teacher colleges in the state (now the California State University system) were put in place in 1920. In other states, primarily in the Great Plains and Midwest, land grant institutions and teachers colleges provided expanded access by adopting policies that guaranteed admission for any high school graduate from the state (National Urban League, 1970). Nasaw (1981) points out that two thirds of public four-year colleges and universities in the Midwest were open access by the late 1950s. Among the four-year institutions that followed open admissions policies were colleges and universities founded to provide educational opportunity to minority populations, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges.

One of the last public higher education efforts to provide open access occurred at the City University of New York (CUNY) in 1970 (Lavin, 1976). At that time, CUNY included eight four-year senior colleges and seven two-year community colleges. Under the new policy, to be accepted at a four-year

institution an individual had to either graduate in the top half of the class or attain at least an 80 grade average. If neither criterion was met, the high school graduate was admitted to one of the community colleges with the guarantee of transfer to a senior institution after earning an associate of arts (AA) degree. Reports credited the open admissions policy as the primary reason that freshman enrollment increased 84% in the initial year. The policy remained in place until the late 1990s, when the CUNY Board of Trustees voted to eliminate all remedial courses at its four-year colleges and to deny anyone who could not pass three skills-competency assessment tests admission to any of the four-year institutions.

Institutions have also operated as open access without formal policy or mission. Nasaw (1981) points out that the majority of private colleges and universities were open to all who could afford to pay the tuition up until the mid-1950s. Many smaller private institutions that are tuition dependent continue this practice. Astin and Calvin (1972) indicate that these institutions have provided a different kind of expanded access, a residential liberal-arts education to individuals who would not be admitted to selective institutions. Brooks (1980) found that a significant number of comprehensive colleges and universities developed open access programs for nontraditional-aged students in response to declining numbers of traditional-aged students.

With the increased number of for-profit institutions, the question of their role in providing access has recently drawn attention (Kinser, 2009). According to the Carnegie Foundation (2005), 90 for-profit four-year institutions are inclusive in their admissions criteria in comparison to 138 public institutions. In addition, there are now 568 for-profit two-year institutions. The complexities of for-profit institutions, however, make it difficult to draw comparisons to public or nonprofit colleges and universities. For example, Kinser (2009) points out that for-profit institutions can be classified by ownership: enterprise (individual or family owned), venture (privately owned corporation), or shareholder (publicly traded corporation). Moreover, for-profit exists as a singular category, although multiple educational credentials are provided by this category (e.g., nondegree, associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral).

The philosophy of open access extends beyond admissions criteria. One of the earliest recommendations calls for open access admissions policies to

address both academic and economic barriers (Etzioni, 1971). In other words, the educationally disadvantaged student is also likely to be economically disadvantaged, and numerous research studies have identified working full time as a factor of attrition. Lavin and Hyllegard (1996) point to *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) as a key turning point against open access policies at four-year institutions. This report's recommendations included a call for more stringent requirements for admission to four-year colleges and universities. Since the publication of this report, significant numbers of four-year institutions have eliminated remedial courses and programs. In fall 2000, slightly more than 40% of community college students were enrolled in at least one remedial class (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003) pointing to the need for open access institutions to provide classes and other support services (i.e., tutoring, study skills) to facilitate student success. Etzioni also suggests that open access policies required the development of ways of measuring achievement other than those most commonly used (e.g., retention and graduation rates). This broader definition of open access points to the need to examine more closely the characteristics found among students attending institutions that embrace this mission.

Characteristics Affecting Student Success and Persistence

The vast majority of students who attend open access institutions possess characteristics similar to those found among students who are less likely to persist in postsecondary education. In a 1995 study, Horn and Premo identified student attributes that are negatively related to persistence and degree attainment. Risk attributes were grouped broadly into three areas: enrollment patterns, financial and family status, and high school graduation status. Within these three areas, seven indicators of risk were identified:

Enrollment patterns

- 1) Delayed postsecondary enrollment by one or more years
- 2) Enrolled part-time

Financial and family status

- 3) Financially independent
- 4) Have children or dependents
- 5) Single parent
- 6) Work full time while enrolled

High school graduation status

7) General Educational Development (GED) certificate or high school dropout

Although this study was not specific to undergraduates at open access institutions, many of the students attending open access institutions have one or more of the risk factors related to attrition.

Given that community colleges are the largest providers and supporters of an open access admissions policy, it is important to pay particular attention to the community college student population. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2009):

- Fifty-nine percent of the students are enrolled part time
- The average student age is 29
- Seventeen percent of the students are single parents
- Seventy-seven percent of the students attending full time are employed, of which 27% are employed full time and 50% are employed part time
- Eighty-three percent of the students attending part time are employed, of which 50% are employed full time and 33% are employed part time
- Forty percent of the students are enrolled in at least one remedial course

Students attending other types of postsecondary institutions also possess some of the identified risk factors. For instance, the student population at four-year minority-serving institutions (MSIs) contains several risk factors. MSIs have missions directly focused on increasing minority student access to and success in higher education. Data indicate that MSIs are more likely to enroll students who are low income, first generation, and in need of developmental courses. Additionally, in 2003–2004, 44% of students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and/or Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) were first generation, versus 35% enrolled in all institutions (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2004).

Although these institutions, by design, were created to serve minority students, the increasing number of students enrolling at MSIs and community colleges creates a greater need to study, design, and implement effective retention and persistence strategies. The effectiveness of these strategies, however, will depend greatly on efforts to address the financial barriers facing the typical student attending an open access institution.

Financial Barriers for Students

The cost of higher education presents a unique challenge to open access institutions, since they enroll a disproportionate number of students from low-income backgrounds. Since the Obama administration has challenged the nation to dramatically increase the number of college graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), open access institutions will likely be expected to accommodate a significant portion of the increased student population. With the current economic crisis, the number of students seeking financial aid has increased. Many open access institutions have increased tuition and fees, in part to replace substantial reductions in state funding (Gardner, 2004) and in part to accommodate increased enrollment. Since open access institutions, in comparison to selective institutions, rely more heavily on state funding, there are increasing challenges to the task of balancing costs and access.

In order to maintain access as a priority, schools must recognize that students have greater probabilities of success if schools provide comprehensive financial aid packages that cover the cost of tuition, books, supplies, and other needs. Textbook checkout programs, extended and flexible payment tuition plans, and discounts for meeting registration and payment deadlines constitute steps in the right direction; however, transportation and childcare continue to be cited as barriers to enrolling in college and reasons that students do not attend classes or persist in their educational pursuits. Addressing these challenges by providing discounts for public transportation and childcare assistance remains an important issue for open access institutions.

Financial Challenges for Institutions

Open access institutions also face financial challenges from the organizational perspective. In the current climate of greater accountability, open access institutions are striving to move their focus solely from increasing access to also improving persistence and completion rates. Research has shown that support services are critical to increasing these measures at open access institutions. A review of the literature (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006) found that most students benefit from early interventions and sustained attention at various transition points in their educational journey. Strategies applicable to institutions include: clarifying institutional values and expectations early and

often to prospective and matriculating students; concentrating early intervention resources on those with two or more risk factors; and providing multiple learning supports, early warning systems, and safety nets. Two key support services that may prove more financially burdensome for schools, but which positively impact student persistence and success, include intrusive counseling and tutoring/skills programs labs.

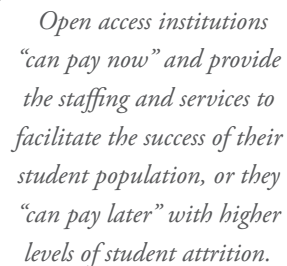
Numerous studies have stressed the importance of academic advisors to student success. Academic advisors are generally the first adult contact that students make at an institution, and a positive connection with an advisor early in a student's college experience can greatly increase the student's likelihood of retention, satisfaction with the school, and overall success at the institution (Terenzini, 1993; Tinto, 1987). Research also suggests that in order for advising to affect student persistence, it must involve more than just having academic advisors perform administrative duties, such as assisting with class registration and course scheduling. Intrusive advising proves not only more effective and efficient, but also affects student retention in a positive way (King, 1993).

Development of intrusive advising relationships require structured strategies of intervention by the advisor at specified times throughout a semester. King (1993) emphasizes that it is critical to implement intrusive counseling techniques in a manner that the student perceives as developmental, serving as a catalyst for building personalized student–advisor relationships. Through deeper connections, advisors equip students with the information, tools, and guidance necessary to succeed in their educational endeavors. When working closely with students, advisors are able to assist them more efficiently in developing an effective academic roadmap. Having a clear understanding of degree requirements and expectations while students advance through college can, in part, address some of the financial constraints facing students by reducing time-to-degree completion and minimizing overall tuition costs. Intrusive counseling also provides the opportunity for an advisor to place an at-risk student in contact with critical resources such as tutoring programs and skills labs.

Students admitted to open access institutions are more likely to need tutoring and skills development, since they were admitted to college with minimal academic qualifications. The fact that 40% of students attending community colleges in the fall of 2000 were enrolled in at least one remedial course supports this assertion (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003). Therefore, it remains critical for open access institutions to dedicate financial human resources to tutoring and skill-development programs. A recent community college study found that students ranked peer-tutoring and skills labs as 2 of the top 10 most important services (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2008).

One of the challenges of providing tutoring and skill-development programs for students is the expanded programming (day, evening, weekend, online) commonly found at most open access institutions. Providing an expanded schedule of support services can be cost prohibitive. One possible solution involves scheduling tutoring services and lab hours on the basis of when the largest numbers of students will be on campus. CCSSE (2008) recommends that community colleges make support services such as tutoring and writing labs inescapable for students by integrating them into the classroom experience, making them mandatory, or bringing them to the students. This recommendation addresses another at-risk characteristic as students attending open access institutions often choose family or work commitments over academic support activities.

Obviously, an intrusive advising approach, staffing for tutoring and skill-development programs, and training and professional development activities entail additional personnel costs (Kisker, 2005). Institutions that lose sight of the value of this investment, however, are more likely to have higher rates of attrition. Open access institutions are most often funded by enrollments, and reduced enrollments will result in declines in funding. As the commercial suggests, open access institutions can pay now and provide the staffing and services to facilitate the success of their student population, or they can pay later with higher levels of student attrition.



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The Community College Pathway

As community colleges have become the predominate type of open access institution, increased attention has been placed on the role of pathway to a baccalaureate degree. Most recently, Laanan (2003) pointed to the large population of students who enter postsecondary education at community colleges with the aspiration of earning a baccalaureate degree, but who do not realize that aspiration. VanDerLinden (2002) identified issues of transferability as a barrier to the community college pathway to the baccalaureate.

Research suggests that community colleges must collaborate with senior receiving institutions to transition students successfully. Laanan (2003) identified three important elements essential for a smooth transition:

- 1) A solid foundation at the community college, including coursework, services, and support
- 2) Data on transfer rates and student performance after transfer
- 3) Regular meetings between students and advisors, whether face-to-face or through online correspondence, to monitor student performance, provide guidance, and identify the necessary resources for completion of the community college program and transfer to the senior institution

Realizing the above recommendations requires that community colleges address the funding challenges identified in the previous section—but also necessitates the understanding and support of policymakers, legislative bodies, and external funding agencies. The concept of open access is not participation only. Persistence and success at these institutions are highly challenging, but can be achieved with adequate levels of funding.

Multiple Goals and Multiple Outcomes

Hudson (2008) points to data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Department of Education to illustrate the growing number of jobs that require less than a bachelor's degree, and the number of adults who take courses or pursue diploma or certificate programs but do not intend to earn any type of postsecondary degree. Open access institutions have multiple missions, and students attend open access institutions to achieve myriad goals. Yet retention, transfer rates, degree completion, and traditional time-to-degree remain

common measures of success. Open access institutions provide the opportunity for all individuals to pursue a postsecondary education. To develop greater understanding of these institutions, a systematic approach is needed to identify the purposes of attendance and applicable measures of success.

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