

An Examination of Stratified Price Structures and State Resources on Public Postsecondary Education Participation Between 1960 and 2000

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Abstract

The current economic and workforce climate state policymakers face calls for actions to alleviate pressures related to participation in postsecondary education. A solution often sought to provide affordable and accessible postsecondary education was the stratified education structure composed of community colleges and undergraduate institutions. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of the creation of low-priced options in postsecondary education structures on enrollment in the two institution types between 1960 and 2000. The results of the analysis indicated that there were significant associations between enrollment at community colleges and the difference in price between institution types, but no significant association with enrollment at undergraduate institutions when other state resources were considered.

Increasing tuition and fee prices at public postsecondary education institutions, decreasing state support, and the emergence of a knowledge-based, global economy have state policymakers engaged in the practice of finding solutions to make college affordable and participation commonplace. The desire to have a more educated society in America can be traced to Thomas Jefferson and the age of enlightenment. Although the goal of an educated society remains, the method of facilitating the growth of such a society has been a process of trial, error, and innovation. One innovation in public higher education was the development of the modern community college (Lingenfelter, 2004). Initially, these institutions were philosophically positioned as parallel to the first two years of study at colleges and universities (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppinger, 1994). In fact, in 1950 the difference in tuition and fee prices between community colleges and undergraduate institutions was only \$5, at \$90 and \$95 respectively (Mullin & Honeyman, 2008).

Historically, the fundamental purpose of the community college was to provide educational opportunity via the economic democratization of postsecondary education (Koos, 1924). Increasingly, since 1950, the community college has become an integral part of increasing postsecondary education participation through its inclusion in state master plans for higher education. In order for community colleges to meet the increased need for educational opportunity, three conditions were deemed requisite: (a) community colleges must be open to all who saw a benefit to attendance, (b) they must offer a diverse range of curricular offerings, and (c) attendance must be fiscally easy (Medsker & Tillery, 1971). The success of the state master plans may be judged by the rapid growth of community colleges between 1960 and 2000, where the number of these institutions were observed to increase from 412 to 1156 (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

Utilizing community colleges as the low-cost entry point to postsecondary education was a strategy supported both by research and political action. In 1972, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) found that state leaders were trying to control enrollments in the more costly state colleges and universities. Thirty years later, a survey by Ruppert (2001) found that 71% of state policymakers believed postsecondary education should be structured to route students initially through the community college before transferring to an undergraduate institution for the last two years of study.

Nearly fifty years after the rapid growth of the community college, state policymakers were still attempting to position the community college as the low-cost access point. In 2007 the governor of Massachusetts announced a plan that would make community college tuition free within ten years (Ashburn, 2007). In Oklahoma, State Senator Corn submitted a bill to make all community colleges in Oklahoma free to all high school graduates (Hoberock, 2007). If states are redirecting students to community colleges to reduce the total cost of postsecondary education and to increase participation, examining how stratified price structures between institution types influenced student participation is essential.