

The Road Less Traveled: Factors Affecting Community College Transfer Student Access to a Flagship University

PROJECT NARRATIVE

Background & Importance:

In the past, many low-income students have found access to a high-quality four-year institution is most practical if they begin at a local community college (Hilmer, 1997). Community colleges have open-enrollment policies and have historically afforded opportunities to low-income, first-generation, place-bound, and lesser-prepared students not quite ready or able to enter a four-year institution (Hilmer, 1997). For many students coming from nontraditional backgrounds, community colleges have been the conduit to a university education that, at first, may have seemed out of reach.

Cheslock (2004) studied the determinants of an institution's transfer enrollment rate at public and private institutions. His conceptual framework identified two main characteristics that drive an institution's transfer enrollment rate: the institution's need for the characteristics of transfer students and direct attendees and the number of students of each type desiring enrollment. He found the transfer enrollment rate declines as one moves from a less selective to a more selective private institution. He also concluded public institutions maintain a greater commitment to transfer student access than most private institutions.

Hilmer (1997) examined the effect that prior community college attendance has on selection and enrollment in a university. His econometric model focuses on two decisions: the selected pathway to higher education and institutional quality. He used two equations to construct a regression analysis for students enrolling in community colleges and transferring to a four-year university and one for those students who chose to go directly to a four-year university. Variables used in his empirical analysis include family income, test scores, high school grades, and tuition and fees. Hilmer (1997) concluded, "Hispanics who attend a university are more likely to transfer from a community college" (p. 63). His findings also suggested community college attendance has a non-negative effect on the quality of the university to which the student transfers. Moreover, students from poor economic and academic backgrounds tend to fare best in

the transfer process by matriculating to a higher quality university than would have been possible had they enrolled right after high school.

Since 1997, a state law has enabled students graduating in the top ten percentile of their high school class to receive guaranteed automatic admission to a public university of their choice. Increased demand for admission to a public flagship university among “Top Ten Percentile” (TTP) students has steadily increased since the law was first introduced. As automatic admission has grown in popularity among top ranked students in the state, some students with similar demographic backgrounds seeking transfer admission to the research university have been displaced.

The flagship university has remained silent on whether two-year transfer student admissions will be protected from both the increase in TTP students and the growing popularity of a conditional transfer admission program for non-TTP students. With the fastest growth in higher education happening in public two-year colleges and a statewide emphasis on increasing bachelor degree attainment among underrepresented minority groups, the state’s flagship universities have a distinct and important role to play.

By examining student-level admission data from 1997 through 2007, this dissertation addresses what changes in admission policy and practice have most affected transfer student access to the flagship institution. It also addresses how underrepresented minority groups have fared in the transfer admission process.

The researcher examines transfer student access from a collectivist view, one obliged to “resymbolizing, reconstructing, and refashioning access based on contemporary social realities such as the diversification of society and the preservation of equal opportunity for the disadvantaged” (Rendón, 2005, p. 57). Seeking to identify the extent access is provided to transfer students by a flagship university and the extent it values the diversity transfer students bring to their campuses is an important and unexplored area of study.

Project Goals

The focus of this study is to address:

- 1) How did transfer admission criteria change from 1997 through 2007?
- 2) What specific factors affected public two-year transfer student admission to a public flagship university?

- 3) What policies and practices are recommended to protect and improve transfer access for public two-year college students at research institutions?

An equally important goal is the commitment to share the study's findings with university leadership, the state higher education coordinating board and related associations such as the state association of community colleges. In addition, a commitment to collaborate with a faculty member at a private four-year university and to publish our related research in series of public policy papers is another distinct possibility.

Work Completed:

Work completed for this dissertation study includes:

- completion of the first three chapters of the dissertation study;
- approval of the student's advancement to doctoral candidacy;
- discussions with IRB personnel to revise a current application to conduct research
- successful garnering of support for initial research from ASHE, the Lumina Foundation, and the Institute for the Study of Transfer at the University of North Texas;
- the filing of an Open Records Request and disbursement of payment to begin data retrieval;
- a document review of admission policy for transfer and freshman admission has been completed; and
- reporting of the preliminary findings based on descriptive statistics to the ASHE and Lumina Foundation fellowship committee and interested researchers at the ASHE Colloquium in June of 2007.

Research Design (who, what ,where, when, how)

This is a longitudinal study of a flagship university in the Southwest. It incorporates extant data from a ten year period (i.e., 1997-2007). The populations studied are public two-year college transfer applicants and senior college transfer applicants with at least 30 transferable semester credit hours. The threshold of 30 semester credit hours is required for transfer admission to the institution of interest.

Ten years of student level data will be collected under an Open Public Records request made on November 21, 2007. To abide by federal law and institutional student privacy policies, the data will be de-identifiable. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a document analysis will be performed on admission criteria cited in university publications as well as electronic admission reports available on the Internet. Descriptive statistics are used to highlight the number and percentage of students coming from two-year public college and four-year senior colleges. The study will also offer an analysis of the ethnic and racial diversity among community college and state university transfer students.

The researcher will conduct a logistic regression to determine which factors significantly affect the probability of a public two-year transfer applicant and four-year college applicant gaining admission. The findings will dictate what policy recommendations are suggested to address any negative factors affecting two-year transfer student admission to the flagship university.

These findings will be presented to the Vice President of Diversity and Community Engagement, the Vice Provost and Director of Admissions and the Deputy Director of Admissions at the university. in an effort to positively affect admission policy. In an effort to inform statewide policy, the Commissioner of Higher Education, a member of the researcher's dissertation committee, will also be briefed of the findings. As stated earlier, this study will be considered for inclusion in a series of policy reports being compiled by a well-published faculty member in the area of transfer admission access issues. Proposal submissions for presentations on the findings will be sent to ASHE and AERA. The author will also consider submitting a manuscript to a refereed journal focused on admission policy.

. Expected completion of the dissertation is December 2008.

Bibliography

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Rendón, L.I. (1997). Access in a democracy: Narrowing the opportunity gap. *Reconceptualizing access in postsecondary education: Report of the policy panel on access*. Paper presented at the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative and The American Council on Education on September 9, 1997. pp. 57-68. Retrieved at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98283.pdf>
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