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References

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Finding Alternate Degree Paths for Non-Traditional, NOW-Traditional Students

SOMETHING that matters is a four-year college degree; 'For an individual, it means 86% more yearly earnings than high school graduates and 69% more than even people who went to college but did not obtain a bachelor's degree.

For society, a college graduate means someone who is more engaged in the political sphere, less dependent on public services, more productive and charitable, and less likely to commit a crime. In short, a bachelor's degree is a simplistic yet powerful indicator of success--and it's worth measuring.

Alicia (not her real name) came from South America to this country as a teenager. She took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at the local community college. Once she became proficient, she started taking credit-bearing courses. As she progressed, her friends told her that a nearby community college offered courses that would better correspond with her educational goal.

Alicia transferred and continued to progress toward her associate's degree in computer science. She also realized she could concurrently enroll at the state university where she was planning on transferring after finishing her associate's degree. She began to construct a course load that consisted of classes from the community college and the state university.

Alicia plans to finish her associate's degree this academic year. When she does, she will transfer to the state university where she has already earned several credits. Alicia's story is a success--on an individual and a societal level--but her success will not be counted.

Right or Gauged?

There is the right way to go to college--the way that takes into account a student's educational preparedness, economic situation, and familial obligations. Then there is the measured way. Typically, this means bachelor's degree completion in four years (or, to accommodate the federal financial aid definition of full-time enrollment as 12 credits, an "extended" measure of six years). At the institutional level, it also means a linear matriculation at one institution.

This way of measuring collegiate success makes sense for the "traditional" student, the ones who graduate from high school in the spring, enroll in college full time in the fall, and walk out four years later with bachelor's degree in hand.

As Zachary Karabell writes in What's College For?, "For these [students], college is simply the next step in a series of stages leading to membership in a productive society.... For these students, college is just what one does." Their parents provide significant financial support, and if they attend more than one institution, it is for a study-abroad program or Semester at Sea.

The problem is that the traditional student is a minority today, only 27% of the national college population. For Alicia and millions of others, Karabell says, "College is a choice--it is not a choice without sacrifice--of time, of pride, and most of all, of money, which means many of these students are working.... They juggle family, job, and school."

The fact that so few students conform to the traditional model, where higher education can be seen as a sort of entitlement, is not a failure of our society. In fact, to a degree, it indicates the opposite.

Since 1810, the total U.S. population has grown about 390%. In that same time, the college student population has increased about 3,630%.

Postsecondary schools have opened their doors to more types of individuals than ever--including first-generation students, low-income students, and students with remedial education needs.

Along with the demographic shift of student-population, attendance patterns have changed. Metaphors for the college experience abound. Often, it's seen-as a pipeline, a well-defined, carefully engineered way to get someone from here to there.- Others see a multilane highway, with many possible points of entry and exit. Still others envision a river, with various streams of entry and a clear destination, but many eddies and snags that can halt progress, at least for a while.

U.S. 1999-2000 college graduates show the winding ways students take: 13.5% took remedial courses; 28% had "stopped out" for at least four months, and 17% had stopped out for two or more years; 13.3% had done a reverse transfer, from four-year to two-year colleges.

Despite the usefulness of these metaphors, there is another, more concrete way of-conceptualizing the student population. If college is a choice, it may be-useful to think of today's students as savvy customers with many options. And it seems as if they like to make their -college choices a la carte.

Many students, for instance, enroll part time while they work, increasing, decreasing, or pausing enrollment based on their economic situation. Transferring, too, has become the norm, although it exists in many variations.

Some students take-a few classes at a new institution as a trial enrollment. Others rebound back and forth between institutions. Some double-dip, or enroll concurrently at two institutions. One of the fastest growing groups may be serial transfers, or students who attend three or more institutions before obtaining-a bachelor's degree.

Myriad Reasons

Students attend multiple institutions of higher education for myriad reasons. For instance, some start at a two-year college and then transfer to a four-year college to achieve their educational goals.

Increasingly common, a student may start at a four-year institution and then do a reverse transfer to a two-year college--because it is less expensive, more convenient in terms of location or class schedule, and/or presents amore achievable academic challenge.

Students may also transfer laterally between equivalent institution types for the reasons just mentioned or because, as students progress, they may get a new or better sense of what they want to study and where it is best to do so.

Alicia, the original student we were discussing, could be considered a lateral, upward, double-dipping serial transfer. Her attendance pattern may be hard to describe, but that does not make it uncommon. It does, however, make her time to complete her degree lengthy, particularly when one considers that her multiple, institutional attendance has occurred while attending on a part-time basis.

But They Do

It is well documented that students who are continuously enrolled in school full-time have the highest retention and completion rates. The multiple institutional attendance and sometime variable enrollment of today's students may not make them seem like savvy customers after all--that is, if access, finances, and familial obligations didn't matter. But they do, and that makes today's students' attendance patterns logical and often successful. If someone would track them, that is.

Today, only 25% of students finish college in the traditional four years. Indeed, the median time from college entrance to bachelor's degree completion is 56 months. That time span jumps considerably for students with "nontraditional" traits, which are also considered risk factors for noncompletion.

Students with two or three factors take a median of 76 months; and highly nontraditional students with four or more traits, 131. Half of Latino graduates finished in 59 months from the time of first college enrollment, but 70 months since high school graduation. Indeed, one in 10 bachelor's degree recipients in 2000 completed -their degrees 17 or more years after high school graduation. These were not the students that statisticians had in mind when the current measures of graduation rates were developed.

This results in a distorted--and disturbing--picture. For instance, federal studies that follow a cohort for six years after high school graduation can miss half of eventual Latino college graduates, thus making the educational achievement gap between Hispanics and whites seem larger than it really is. And yet these students are succeeding, so long as one does not maintain that the definition of college persistence means degree in hand after four years.

Clearly, there is a disconnection between the commonly held perception of how students go through higher education, and the reality. The question is, what to do about it?

Policy makers and college administrators could continue to reaffirm that four-year college completion is a valid and important measure of success. It would be simple to bring back that golden norm: If you accept students only once a year, if you take only students without financial need, if you enroll only-students whose parents have been to college, then your institution's graduation rates will improve.

Or we could decide that equating institutional effectiveness with graduation rates can be both an unfair way of seeing what happens to students and a way of short-changing our missions as institutions of higher learning:

We must recognize that nonlinear matriculation is a legitimate way of experiencing college and meeting educational objectives. Definitions of success made for elite liberal arts colleges do not work for a plethora of public institutions. New definitions, measures, and guidelines must address the realities of higher education's diverse student body and of a modern society that also impacts the way students go to college.

Easing the Paths

Institutions, particularly Hispanic-serving ones; should not only accommodate but facilitate different pathways to a degree. Some ways to begin include:

• Creating new ways of tracking students across institutions, perhaps through state and national databases;

• Measuring institutional effectiveness not just by freshmen retention and graduation rates, but also by institutions' preparation of native students for' successful transfer,-including basic skills preparation, and/or transfer student retention and graduation;.

• Further collaboration between institutions to ensure that transfer students can receive full-credit for previous academic work;:

• Promoting use of electronic portfolios to support a more coherent way of recognizing prior academic work;

• Especially for older students, offering credit for job experience;

• Improving support services such as day care and also provide flexible scheduling, such as evening and weekend programs;

• Increasing the robustness of programs for transfer students, from orientation to academic advising;

• Promoting alternate degree-completion forms through accelerated programs for high-demand careers such as teaching and nursing;

• Reviewing financial-aid allocations usually given to .native students in most four-year institutions, leaving transfer students with only loans as their sole source of financing for their education.

Many things can be done to accommodate today's "nontraditional" students. Perhaps the most basic--and profound--is to acknowledge that they are now "traditional" and we have much to learn about them, their learning patterns, needs, and goals. Only then can we truly develop best practices to serve them, and to serve society.

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