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Our University – Reducing Costs for College Students

Walter V. Wendler

I have previously commented on the various ways that families can reduce the cost of attending university. In my own case, I attended a community college and completed my AAS degree earning 70 hours... almost all of which transferred to a senior institution. There is not a single action that a family can take that will have such a positive impact on diminishing the high cost of attending university. Community colleges are cheaper to run, and therefore cheaper to attend.

No magic, no smoke, no mirrors.

Additionally, dual enrollment programs are growing in popularity. They allow high school students to begin taking courses that count for credit at a sponsoring community college, and simultaneously for high school graduation. Students may be able to secure significant course credits at a community college before graduating from high school. In one case, a young woman graduated from community college and high school in the same month: a zero cost community college degree. While rare, it is not is unique.

Coupling dual enrollment with highly articulated transfer arrangements between the community college and the local university has the impact of reducing the cost of a bachelor's degree by 50%. The idea of cutting the cost of a university education in half is real and achievable.

A two year baccalaureate degree. Time is money too: out of high school and at work in two. The system can work for motivated families and students.

This arithmetic is impossible to refute and will serve some students exceedingly well. The result of this seamless relationship between high school, community college, and university creates high efficiency and lower costs for students and faamilies. This is more potent than any loan program for students and more effective than any grant program for taxpayers. It requires no intervention on anyone's part, just the exercise of existing opportunity.

The Southern Illinois Collegiate Common Market, an association of the community colleges and universities in the region, has been cooperating for many years to facilitate efficient transfer for students.

It can be excellent.

But the appealing opportunity to save resources for students could undermine the purpose of institutions at every level if not handled carefully. High school can become a course-credentialing activity and the important aspects of becoming

part of the community and sharing a common experience may be lost. These aspects have palpable value too, even though they don't show up on a transcript.

The community colleges may see this as a chance to offer baccalaureate degrees. A fundamental mistake. The role of offering the most cost effective post secondary coursework should never be sacrificed to compete with universities in offering four year degrees. It might be possible for a season, but eventually quality will suffer.

If universities try to compete on cost, they will become low quality community colleges while community colleges will become poor quality universities, and high schools... check lists for courses completed.

Appropriately choreographed this triune relationship has great power, but if haphazardly approached the negative impacts will be deep.

These ideas are captured in the concept of "mission creep."

Each organization must focus on strength of mission in the combined picture, and provide opportunity for some students to meet some personal and societal needs in a way that allows costs to be low and quality acceptable at every level. This is a complex equation that will work when there is good communication between the student and the three levels of institution, driven by a focus in purpose and service rarely attained by the educational establishment.

Our university should always be open to working for students to help them achieve goals in a cost-effective manner. Dual enrollments and strong articulation can do that for some, maybe many, but never all.

And a trade off of dramatic savings for low quality is never acceptable.