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Our University - Lowering Costs and Quality

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Our University - Lowering Costs and Quality

Community colleges and dual enrollment high school programs are seen as the ticket to reducing costs in higher education. Carefully used they are a means to reduce cost, but they are not round-trip tickets.

Cost comparisons for credit hours attained at research universities and community colleges are well known. Side by side the community college is cheap, but cheap is not always good, and not always equal.

Dual enrollment programs and their opportunities and challenges are not as well known. They are newer. The Oregonian recently addressed the dual enrollment program of Lane Community College through a satellite learning center at Willamette High School. Lane Community College offers university credit to thousands of high school students in courses taught by high school teachers.

Is it working?

The Office of Institutional Research for the University System of Oregon tracks students who have taken university courses in high school that count for both high school and university credits. Findings are mixed. Students may not perform as well in upper division courses at the university as do their counterparts who have taken the same courses in a college setting with university faculty.

The force that motivates these actions is price, frequently in the absence of value.

My mother used to call that cheap.

If community colleges focused on a few things, such as college preparation and vocational education, they may be better able to perform these vital functions powerfully with great value.

Students in dual enrollment programs persist more strongly in high school studies, and that is valuable. However, it may demonstrate little more than commitment and does not indicate a propensity to perform well in university study.

Clear mission definition was the clarion call of Clark Kerr's Master Plan for Higher Education in California which was developed in the 1950's and implemented in 1960. The plan called for community colleges to be accessible and focused on college preparation and vocational studies. Four year colleges were to focus on baccalaureate degree programs. Research universities focused on graduate study and the generation of new knowledge.

It worked like a charm.

We should follow the Nancy Regan's suggestion to adolescents seduced into drug and alcohol abuse, *Just Say No!*

To the high school student who wants to address rising costs through university credit for a high school course, *Just Say No!*

To the community college that wants to offer bachelor's degrees and host intercollegiate athletics, leadership at every level, elected officials, boards of trustees, and educational leaders, *Just Say No!*

To the university that says we will take you in your unprepared state and get you ready for university-level work, *Just Say No!*

Each entity should do their well recognized job, and do it well as measured by durable standards, not hoopla and political posturing.

The American Association of Community Colleges is looking at how community colleges should be judged in mission attainment. Measurement of success should go beyond the number of student credit hours produced. The core missions of the community colleges are generally well accepted as learning outcome and job preparedness. Focus in these areas would require shedding many of the functions currently being developed as a lower cost substitute for university offerings.

This trend is forcing some universities to act like community colleges to grow enrollment. They will become what they imitate.

Rather, university leadership should recognize that nothing will grow enrollment in the absence of quality.

Japan and Taiwan showed the world how high quality at low cost was possible. But a VCR and a university education have nothing in common. Nothing. The former is a commodity; the latter is a way of learning and life.

Universities confuse the two at high cost.