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Our Universities: Community College Bachelor's Degrees

Bachelor's degrees at community colleges are not a good idea. Articulated transfer is a better answer but both community colleges and universities must be more responsive to the needs of student and state.

Pascarella and Terenzini suggest, in Studying College Students in the 21st Century: Meeting New Challenges, that *“Community college students who successfully negotiate the challenges of transferring to a four-year institution and who complete their bachelor's degree appear to achieve overall parity with similar four-year college students in such areas as job prestige, stability of employment, job satisfaction, and earnings”*.

The Review of Higher Education

In a June 12, 2011, story in the Chronicle of Higher Education *Go to Community College, Earn a Bachelor's Degree: Florida Likes That Combination*, Jennifer Gonzalez, reports on the strengths and weaknesses of community colleges offering four-year degrees. The Common Sense Institute of New Jersey, a new think tank, suggests that four-year institutions should not be afraid of the mission creep, but welcome it as a means to provide more educational opportunity at a lower cost.

According to The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, New Jersey has the lowest Import/Export Ratio of college-going students. New Jersey leads the nation in the ratio of college students leaving home state to study. New Jersey is a great state, but does not appear to serve the citizens well in higher education. Arizona, on the other hand, records the highest Import/Export ratio.

Cost and quality must be perceived in the marketplace as two important variables.

Community colleges serve a powerful role in providing educational opportunity to students for whom time and money are unavoidable considerations. They should not have athletics teams or offer bachelor's degrees. These dilute their ability to give students a cost-effective technical or vocational education in an environment geared toward allowing budget-minded students to live and study close to their homes. In addition, open admission allows service to non-traditional students, or those who need a second academic chance.

Why undermine these critical missions by copying universities? Why blur the focus required for excellence?

Navarro College, (established in 1946 in Corsicana, Texas, as Navarro Junior college but, in 1974, with no significant change in mission, dropped the modifier “Junior”) is the 2010 NJCAA National Football champion. The Bulldogs are the best in the world. And they are deservedly proud. But what does that have to do with their mission?

They have won more than a national championship in football. Now they are like their “big brothers”: Athletics are not self-sustaining at the University of Texas either.

I am not disparaging Navarro College. Don’t even think that. This is the fastest growing community college in the United States for good reason. They serve.

The reluctance of university and board leadership to mandate articulation is costly. Careful articulation allowing for seamless transfer from community college to university, with no loss of time, credit, or resources, will better meet the needs of all students, including adult learners and non-traditional students, and workforce, state and national leadership as well.

Responsible university leaders recognize that workforce education must be accessible, cost effective, and flexible: areas where community colleges have traditionally been stronger than four-year schools. Responsive universities will recognize the value of applied sciences and arts and workforce education in response to the educational needs and aspirations of students, and not relegate such organizations to second class citizenship on university campuses. I have heard them called “community colleges within.”

Who wins with this mentality?

Universities risk losing effectiveness and the opportunity to claim first-class students who graduate from community colleges among their alumni. The qualifier “graduate” is important. Taking a few courses at a community college requires little money, commitment, determination, performance or intelligence on the part of the student. However, the associate’s degree has demonstrable value as a predictor of a student’s ability to graduate with a bachelor’s degree from a university.

The probability of getting a good classroom experience in an introductory calculus course is no different at a research university than at a community college. History, Physics and English too. Teaching excellence determines the quality of the experience, and I have found no professional studies that conclude that the teachers of introductory coursework at universities are any better on average than the teachers of those same courses at community colleges. In many settings the same people teach the same courses on both campuses.

Institutional missions are clearly different, I hope, but high and low quality teaching can be found in both environments.

Responsive university leadership will promote student transition between community colleges and universities willingly, and in so doing improve the value proposition and range of offerings for both partners, and the buying public in the process.