

From Paternalism to Self-Advocacy

Obama's community college graduation strategy and students with disabilities

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President Obama recently asked community colleges across the nation to take on a central role in his economic policy by awarding 5 million new associate degrees over the next decade. Those familiar with community college data know this is a daunting task for the nation's public two-year college system. America's community colleges collectively award fewer than 800,000 associate degrees per year, so an increase of 5 million over the decade implies that the system will have to increase degree awards at a rate of 60% per year to meet the president's goal. [See Forum: Higher Education Attainment, *THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*, Summer 2009.]

The president's strategy to create long-term economic growth by asking community colleges to award more degrees is well-grounded. The National Commission on Community Colleges, a study commission established by the College Board, has noted that emerging job market requirements have made postsecondary certificates and degrees the "minimum required for productive entry in the nation's economic life." Researcher Thomas Bailey at Columbia University Teacher's College has found substantial economic returns to earning an associate degree. Bailey and his colleagues find that *finishing* a degree program is critical to capturing the economic benefits of a two-year college experience. Indeed, the "sheepskin effect" of an associate degree is quite large. Our own analysis of the lifetime earnings of associate degree-holders in New England also reveals strong and persistent earnings advantages for those who earn an associate degree. So policies aimed at getting students to earn a community college degree are an essential ingredient of the administration's economic growth strategy.

In order to meet the challenge, the nation's community colleges will have to shift their focus from *access* to *retention* and ultimately *graduation*. Success at retention means understanding the diverse nature and needs of the entering freshman cohort at different institutions and organizing programs of study and services designed to bolster degree completion among entering students. It means ending the old organizational ethos of "look to your right, look to your left, one of you will be gone in a year." It means developing an organizational culture and business strategy tied to the objective of retaining students to graduation.

Successful retention strategies are almost always grounded in research on how student characteristics and experiences in high school and college impact the likelihood of students completing their undergraduate course of study. Indeed, this type of research and analysis is the work of enrollment management organizations that have been established at many four-year institutions who are working to reshape their 1960s-70s organizational and business models of high student turnover into high-retention and completion models. Based upon this research, specific services are provided to bolster retention among the student body.

For example, our recent research has found that community colleges appear to enroll disproportionately large shares of students with disabilities. To meet the president's challenge of increasing the number of associate degree awards, new organizational designs, programs and incentives are needed to increase retention and graduation of students with disabilities.

Unlike their four-year counterparts, community colleges do little to vet new students with respect to their academic and related school-persistence capabilities.

Access and retention

Community colleges, especially in New England, have regarded student *access* into the postsecondary system as a fundamental organizational mission. Since their inception, community colleges have used open admissions strategies to position themselves as the gateway for all into American higher education. Students can enroll initially at a community college then transfer to a four-year institution to earn a degree, opt to stay at the community college and earn a degree or certificate, or just take a few courses without completing a degree. By the measure of access, American higher education and especially community colleges have been quite successful. Record numbers of students are now enrolling in college. Our recent look at graduates from 24 Massachusetts high schools found that 78% of their graduating senior class had enrolled in a postsecondary education program. But by the measure of degrees awarded, our institutions of higher education, particularly community colleges, are found wanting. Only a small fraction of students who enroll in community college earn a college degree.

James Rose, chair of the National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges, summarized the problem most succinctly when he noted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “We have great capacity for open access, for getting them in ... [the] challenge for us is getting them across the stage to get their certificate or diploma.”

The ease with which community colleges enroll students is connected to the open enrollment nature of these institutions. Community college enrollment has two characteristics that are generally not found among four-year schools. First, the level of enrollment appears elastic: As the number of students who attempt to enroll in a community college increases, the level of actual enrollment rises, seemingly regardless of funding or other limits in physical capacity. Indeed, over the past two years as the national economic crisis has ravaged state budgets and state support for two-year colleges has declined, community colleges in a number of states have seen their enrollments grow. Second, unlike their four-year counterparts, community colleges do little to vet new students with respect to their academic and related school-persistence capabilities.

Many community colleges never see new students' high school transcripts, letters of recommendation or student essays or even standardized test scores measuring student achievement. Instead, many community

colleges rely on the Accuplacer test as an inexpensive substitute for a more rigorous and personalized review of the strengths and needs of applicants. While the rest of the higher education system moves toward a more rigorous and holistic assessment of applicants, community colleges continue to rely on one-dimensional measures such as the Accuplacer to screen new students.

Even while maintaining the goal of access with open enrollment, the adoption of more thorough assessment and screening procedures can provide community colleges with information they can use to design strategies, programs and service delivery to improve retention, persistence and graduation. These colleges need better information about their student body to better understand the reasons for student success as well as failure in completing their education and earning a degree. Such information can be used to design appropriate interventions to effectively bolster student retention. For starters, we need to examine students' experiences in high school and how they predict enrollment and retention in college.

Students with disabilities

Over the past two years, Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, with support from the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research and the Boston-based Institute for Human

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Centered Design, has undertaken the first systematic study in New England that tracks high school students into the region's and the nation's postsecondary system. The primary purpose of our research is to gain some understanding about the nature of postsecondary access and retention of students with disabilities.

Our study includes 24 schools from 18 school districts across Massachusetts that agreed to provide us with key information about all their recent high school graduates including data about students' socioeconomic background, educational performance, high school course of study, special education status, diagnosis and treatment and in-school behaviors such as attendance, truancy and suspensions. These figures are part of the student information management system (SIMS) data that are regularly reported to state officials. Consequently, the concepts and measures we have used in this study are routinely employed and well-understood by all participating school districts.

The overwhelming majority of college-bound high school graduates with disabilities during their senior year in high school initially enroll in a community college.

We have amassed data for more than 20,000 recent high school graduates from a variety of both comprehensive high schools (community high schools with a curricula primarily, but not exclusively, structured around college) and career and technical education (CTE) high schools. Combining the postsecondary enrollment and retention data from 3,300 U.S. colleges and universities through the National Student Clearinghouse's StudentTracker System with the SIMS data files we gathered from the cooperating high schools, we were able to measure the actual college enrollment and retention outcomes of graduating high school seniors based on a variety of their characteristics.

The combined database allows us to track the initial enrollment, transfer, stop-out, drop-out and graduation activities of the individual seniors that have graduated from each of the participating high schools for all students, as well as students with and without disabilities during their senior year in high school. Furthermore, the SIMS-based data provided by the cooperating school districts allows us to measure college enrollment and retention behavior for a variety of race-ethnic, income, academic performance and related variables that are known to influence college enrollment and retention.

Historically, high school graduates with disabilities have not accounted for very large shares of the nation's undergraduate population. The UCLA freshman surveys

in the mid-1980s found that about 6% of the entering undergraduate freshman class reported a disability. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates from the mid-1990s also found that about 6% of the undergraduate population had a disability. Some NCES estimates developed during the mid-1980s indicated that 10.5% of all college students had a disability of some type. But the latest UCLA freshman survey for the entering class of 2008 suggests that the number of entering freshmen with a disability is more likely in the 8% to 10% range. Virtually, all these data sources are based on student self-reporting and this may in part explain some of the inconsistency in estimates of the population of post secondary students with disabilities.

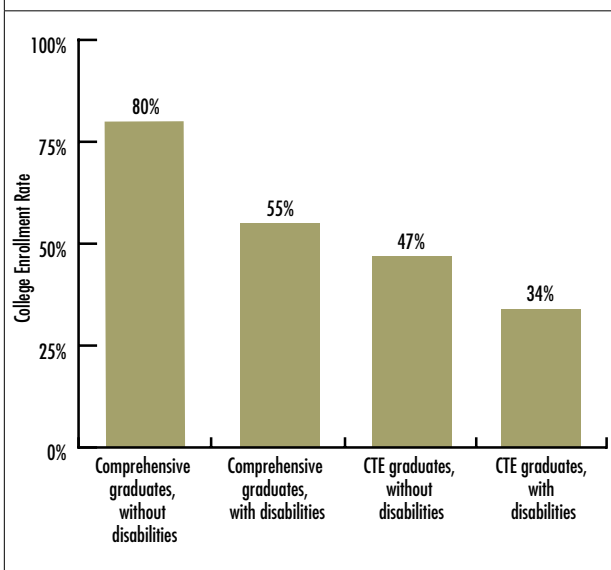
College-going among students with disabilities

Our analysis of data on Massachusetts students going from high school to college measures the disability status of college students based on their special education status during their senior year as indicated by a disability diagnosis on the high school record and existence of an Individualized Education Plan or "IEP," as mandated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Thus our approach eliminates self-reporting error and identifies the existence of a disability on the basis of a well-understood diagnosis and treatment process. These data suggest that the share of high school seniors with a disability who enter college is quite large and they make up a substantial share of the total undergraduate degree-seeking cohort of entering students at community colleges.

Community colleges are in the business of serving large numbers of students with a variety of disabilities, but their knowledge of these students—who they are or even how many of them are enrolled—is often quite limited.

Our data reveal that 55% of all college-bound students with disabilities who graduate from a comprehensive high school enroll in college within about three years of high school graduation. Among non-disabled graduates from comprehensive high schools an astonishing 80% enroll in college. To place these findings in historical perspective, as late as 1985, the share of *all* recent high school graduates who enrolled in college was 55%—the same college-going rate as observed today among students with disabilities who graduate from comprehensive high schools. Postsecondary enrollment is also quite common among graduates of CTE schools in Massachusetts. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: College Enrollment Rates of Graduating Seniors from Selected Massachusetts High Schools, by High School Type and Graduate's Disability Status



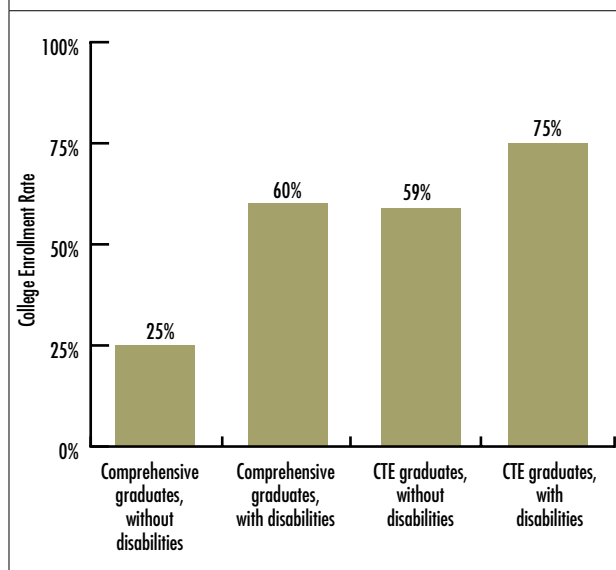
Among graduates of CTE schools, where the majority of graduates do not opt for college, we still found that about one-third of the graduates of these schools who had a disability during their senior year in high school, had enrolled in college, with most enrolling right after high school.

Disabilities and community colleges

The pattern of enrollment of college-bound high school graduates with disabilities is much different from that observed for their counterparts without disabilities. Our analysis reveals that the overwhelming majority of college-bound high school graduates with disabilities during their senior year in high school initially enroll in a community college. The data reveal that among college-bound comprehensive high school graduates with disabilities, 60% initially enrolled in a community college. Among college-bound graduates of regional CTE high schools who had a disability during their senior year of high school, 75% enrolled in a community college. In short: Community colleges serve overwhelmingly as the primary pathway into the postsecondary system for a now-large number of college-bound high school graduates with disabilities. (See Figure 2.)

These data make clear that community colleges serve large numbers of students with a variety of disabilities in their entering freshman cohorts, but the institutions' knowledge of these students, including the nature of their potential sensory, physical, cognitive or emotional limitations, is scarce. Yet understanding these limitations may help community colleges adopt broader-based universal design strategies capable of serving large numbers of students with disabilities. Whether they

Figure 2: Shares of College-Bound High School Graduates from Selected Massachusetts High Schools Who Initially Enrolled in a Community College, by High School Type and Disability Status



are cognizant of it or not, community colleges are in the business of serving large numbers of students with a variety of disabilities, but their knowledge of these students, who they are or even how many of them are enrolled is often quite limited.

We estimate that between one-sixth and one-fifth of the entering freshman cohort in the Massachusetts community college system were students who were diagnosed with a disability and had an IEP during their senior year of high school. The estimated incidence of disability among first-time entering students at community colleges is three to four times greater than the incidence found among students in the entering freshman cohorts at both public and private four-year colleges and universities. Indeed our analysis found only between 3% and 4% of the students in the entering freshman cohort at four-year colleges (as well as two-year *private* colleges) had a disability during their senior year of high school.

These findings suggest that community colleges face a large, but largely hidden challenge, not found in other sectors of higher education. This enormous quantitative difference suggests a need to adopt a fundamentally different approach in working with these students to ensure solid academic performance and persistence to graduation as the president envisions.

Paternalism to self-advocacy

Perhaps the most important difference between disability at the high school and college level is who bears the responsibility for identifying a disability and seeking a services strategy to respond to the limitation. At the

elementary and secondary level, the IDEA statute makes clear that it is the responsibility of the local school districts to identify any disabling conditions of students and develop a treatment plan or IEP that must be funded primarily by state and local resources. In short, teachers, school administrators and parents and local taxpayers are primarily responsible for providing and financing appropriate learning or educational services and accommodations related to a disability that a student may have. Even during their senior year of high school, many students with disabilities receive a high degree of personal care that is not likely to be commonly available at a college campus.

The transition from high school to college is particularly challenging for students with disabilities because of the markedly different environment they face in college. In high school, students with disabilities are in a protected environment compliant with IDEA legislation,

In high school, students with disabilities are in a protected environment compliant with IDEA legislation, where their disabilities are diagnosed, IEPs are designed and services specific to their disabilities are provided. In college, the responsibility for disclosing disabilities and seeking services falls squarely on the student.

where their disabilities are diagnosed, IEPs are designed and services specific to their disabilities are provided. In college, the responsibility for disclosing disabilities and seeking services falls squarely on the student. Many students with disabilities do not even disclose their disabilities while attending college.

In a report for the Institute for Higher Education Policy, researchers Thomas Wolanin and Patricia Steele recently wrote “K-12 policies are based on a paternalistic model appropriate for minors ... but this model is not transferable to higher education.” Colleges, unlike high schools, are only required to engage in non-discrimination toward students with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act and are under none of the obligations of the IDEA statute to provide educational and support services financed and delivered by elementary and secondary school districts. The most typical accommodation made by colleges would be to allow extended test time to those students who self-identify their disability and provide some documentation to that effect.

At the college level, students with disabilities, like any other students, have to take responsibility for their progress in school, and this represents at times a sharp break from the relationships that often characterize the high school experiences of special education students. As anyone who has gone to college well knows, the challenges of navigating the academic and bureaucratic complexities of college rest squarely with students. As part of our study on postsecondary access and retention of students with disabilities in Massachusetts, we ran a series of regression models to understand the determinants of retention among college students. For graduates of CTE programs, we found a strong positive connection between college retention and participation in “full-inclusion” special education programs in which a special education student spends a minimum of 80% of his or her time in the regular high school curriculum. Indeed, our regression models revealed that students who were enrolled in full-inclusion special education programs during their senior year in high school were more likely to be retained during their freshman year in college, compared with non-disabled students.

Initially this finding puzzled us. But it did not surprise special educators across the state with whom we met. Full-inclusion special education programs, we were told, are designed to wean students from the paternalistic system that characterizes much of high school education. Full-inclusion programs teach students self-advocacy skills that enable them to be more effective and assertive advocates for themselves. The improved retention performance of these students in college is in part the product of effectively making the transition from a child-centered high school system characterized by handholding and paternalism to an adult higher education system where self-advocacy is a key determinant of persistence and success.

Community colleges will have to shift their mission from access to retention in order to meet the ambitious degree goal set by President Obama. Understanding the characteristics of the student body, particularly their disability status, and conducting research on the strategies that successfully retain these students will go a long way toward designing successful retention strategies.

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