

REPORT

Postsecondary Access and Diversity

Reflections from the Bowen Colloquium on
Higher Education Leadership

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On November 7, 2017, Ithaka S+R hosted the first Bowen Colloquium on Higher Education Leadership. Named for our late, founding board chair, William G. Bowen, the president emeritus of Princeton University and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the event brought together 50 higher education leaders and experts to discuss current issues facing colleges and universities. The discussions were wide ranging and off the record. This paper presents our reflections—deeply informed by the discussion at the Colloquium—on one of the major themes discussed: access and diversity in higher education. For more information on the Bowen Colloquium program and participants, including papers on the other topics discussed, visit <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/landing/the-william-g-bowen-colloquium>.

“[T]he twin problems before us are, first, an unacceptably stagnant level of overall educational attainment in spite of historically high returns to degree completion and, second, persistent disparities in BA completion rates by socio-economic status. The two are, as it were, linked at the hip because we can’t achieve significant increases in the overall level of educational attainment unless we do a better job of graduating students from poor families and from Hispanic and African American populations.”

—William G. Bowen, “Crossing the Finish Line,” Association for Institutional Research Forum, Chicago, May 30, 2010, in Kevin Guthrie, ed., *Ever the Leader: Selected Writings 1995-2016*, p. 103 (Princeton University Press 2017).

Summary of the issue

Higher education remains a major path to economic mobility in America, but despite some progress over the past decade, access and success remain closely correlated with both race and income.¹ To fully realize the potential of higher education to improve individual circumstances and contribute to our national economic vitality, the benefits must be made available to a broader portion of the population on an equitable basis.²

While inequality in access and outcomes is a challenge across American higher education, the nature of the problems and the strategies for addressing the problems differ by sector. Community colleges educate nearly 40 percent of undergraduate students and have the most diverse student bodies, but the graduation rates for two-year degrees are generally low. In

¹ Raj Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, No. 23618 (July 2017); William Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

² The authors thank the following Ithaka S+R staff members for their contributions to this paper: Rayane Alamuddin, Melissa Bender, Jenna Joo, Kimberly Lutz, Elizabeth Davidson Pisacreta, Daniel Rossman, and Emily Schwartz.

addition, students starting at community colleges planning to transfer to four-year institutions to pursue bachelor's degrees face significant challenges. Public four-year institutions are another broad pathway for postsecondary educational attainment, but like public community colleges, they have faced long periods of constrained state appropriations. And, apart from public flagship research universities, many four-year publics struggle to graduate their students at high rates. Highly selective, wealthy institutions (including public flagships) focus significant resources on highly talented students, but they serve relatively few low-income and first generation students—indeed, they admit only a fraction of the highly talented low-income students that graduate from high school each year. Less-wealthy, private, non-profit colleges also face significant challenges, including declining enrollments and/or declining net revenues.

Why is this issue important?

Broadening postsecondary attainment would have individual, institutional, and societal benefits. The lifetime wage premium to earning a bachelor's degree is nearly \$1 million. On top of these financial returns, individuals with postsecondary education tend to have better health outcomes, greater job satisfaction, and more engagement with their community.³ Postsecondary students generally acquire these benefits regardless of their socioeconomic background, making higher education one of the few reliable pathways to social and economic mobility.

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prepare for their post-college lives, where they will encounter an
increasingly diverse world.

From the perspective of the institution, colleges and universities are strengthened by having a diverse student body. Interacting in academic and social contexts with people who are of different backgrounds and perspectives improves learning as students are exposed to greater diversity of thought. Greater diversity on college campuses also helps students prepare for their post-college lives, where they will encounter an increasingly diverse world. And, many colleges

³ "Higher Education and Income Levels Keys to Better Health, According to Annual Report on Nation's Health," Center on Disease Control, last modified February 8, 2012, https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2012/p0516_higher_education.html; "Job Satisfaction by Education Level, 2008," College Board, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/job-satisfaction-education-level-2008>; "How Do College Graduates Benefit Society at Large?" Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, accessed January 17, 2018, <http://www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/college-costs-tuition-and-financial-aid/publicvalues/societal-benefits.html>.

and universities recognize that their contributions to the public good include educating future citizens and leaders from all different backgrounds, who will make a difference in society.

Finally, the public sector supports higher education because of its contributions to the public good. An educated population contributes to overall economic growth as well as to other non-economic benefits, such as an educated citizenry that supports our democratic institutions. To attain these public goods, the federal and state governments should help make postsecondary education available to students who otherwise could not afford it.

What needs to be done?

Challenges and possible solutions differ across different segments of higher education. For selective institutions, the focus is on evolving the admissions process. For open-access institutions, meeting students' basic needs and streamlining and improving student support services are critical. For all types of institutions, funding and resource allocation is where the rubber hits the road.

Open Access Institutions

Many students start their higher education at community colleges and other open-access institutions. If we are to increase educational attainment, including at the bachelors level, we need to improve graduation rates from community colleges and open-access four-year institutions, as well as increase transfer rates to selective, four-year programs which have high graduation rates and a lot of resources, but do not currently serve many transfer students or lower-income students.

Over the past twenty years, there has been a robust effort to improve outcomes at two-year institutions—focused on meeting students' basic needs, developing clearer and more streamlined degree pathways, and offering additional advising and academic support—and a set of best practices is emerging.⁴ It is important to continue developing practical guides explaining these practices, and support implementation across a variety of contexts. A similar effort is

⁴ "What We Know About Guided Pathways," Community College Research Center, last updated March 2015, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/What-We-Know-Guided-Pathways.pdf>; Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow and Emily Schneider "Unlocking the Gate: What We Know about Improving Developmental Education," (MDRC: June 2011), https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_595.pdf; and Melinda Mechur Karp, "How Non-Academic Supports Work: Four Mechanisms for Improving Student Outcomes," *CCRC Brief*, No. 54 (April 2011), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/how-non-academic-supports-work-brief.pdf>. Sara Goldrick-Rab, Jed Richardson, & Anthony Hernandez, "Hungry & Homeless in College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education," (Wisconsin HOPE Lab, March 2017), <http://www.wihopelab.com/publications/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>.

needed at open-access four-year institutions, which have received less attention from researchers and policymakers. It is likely that many of the lessons of community college improvement (for example, shifting to a co-requisite model for developmental education) will be relevant to this sector.

In addition to improving programs and support at these institutions, transferring between these institutions and from these institutions to selective institutions is not as efficient as it should be. Again, experts have coalesced around a set of effective practices for improving transfer pathways,⁵ but replicating and adapting these practices to more contexts remains a challenge.

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Another critically important point: community colleges and open-access institutions are our most democratic institutions, but do not receive the kind of public or private financial support that other segments of higher education do. It may be impossible to implement best practices, or their impact will be extremely limited, if funding remains inadequate or is further reduced.

Selective Institutions

While often obscured by their typically high list prices, selective institutions confer on their students a significant subsidy from the public and the institution. Because the subsidy is so great, this opportunity should be visibly open to those from all backgrounds with the talent to take advantage of it. And talented students—who have great potential to use the education they receive to benefit themselves, their community, and society—do come from all backgrounds.

Providing greater opportunity to talented students from all backgrounds will require more nuanced measures than those on which most selective institutions currently rely. Indicators of academic talent are important to ensure that students can take advantage of the education offered. But the weight given to standardized tests under many current admissions policies is

⁵ Josh Wyner et al, "The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges," (Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program: 2016), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.pdf>.

disproportionate to their power to predict whether students will thrive in college and seemingly unrelated to their potential to benefit from a large educational subsidy after they graduate. At the same time, even under current admissions standards, there is evidence of significant “undermatching”—with lower-income and first generation students who have stellar high school grades and standardized test scores far less likely to apply to and enroll in selective, high-subsidy colleges than their wealthier peers. Lowering the practical barriers that prevent those students from enrolling is an important first step, while aiming for a broader reconceptualization of admissions in the medium-term.⁶

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Given the history of race in our country, leaders of many selective institutions believe race-based affirmative action continues to be essential to the admissions process, and we agree. At the same time, it would be worthwhile for these institutions to give greater consideration to student body diversity in other background characteristics such as socioeconomic status or gaps in education due to military service, to which they have not, historically, paid as much attention.

To broaden access, selective institutions will have to make a financial commitment to increase need-based financial aid and enhance programs that make their campuses more supportive of students from different backgrounds than the students they have historically served.⁷ For public institutions and small, private colleges, in particular, this financial commitment comes in the face of increasingly constrained resources.⁸ There are good reasons to think that these investments will have a positive financial return, especially for small colleges struggling with enrollment—some tuition revenue is better than none. But more generally, such financial

⁶ Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs’: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students,” NBER Working Paper No. 18586: December 2012; William Bowen, Matthew Chingos & Michael McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Susan Dynarski, “Simple Way to Help Low-Income Students: Make Everyone Take SAT or ACT,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2017.

⁷ Martin Kurzweil and Jessie Brown, “Funding Socioeconomic Diversity at High Performing Colleges and Universities,” *Ithaka S+R*, February 15, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.294278>.

⁸ “State Higher Education Finance: FY 16,” State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2017; Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, “This Trend Could Destabilize Some Private Colleges if it Continues,” *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2017.

commitment requires political will on the part of institutional leaders to make these investments a priority over other (worthwhile) investments.

Improving transfer pathways between open-access institutions and selective four-year institutions should be an important component of this strategy. It may be easier for these institutions to grow to make seats available, to avoid having zero-sum competition among students as a constraint on a more effective transfer pipeline. This proved a useful strategy when formerly all-male institutions went co-educational in the 1970s.

The Need for Better Data

Finally, publicly available data on postsecondary access, diversity, and success is still a patchwork. While the Equality of Opportunity Project, the National Student Clearinghouse, and enhancements to IPEDS have made valuable data newly available, they are no substitute for a national student-unit-record system. Such a database would permit institutional leaders, policymakers, and researchers to better understand student pathways and evaluate the effects of policies and programs. Of course, any such system would need to meet the highest standards for security and privacy protection.

Next steps

A variety of developments are making higher education's desire to increase diversity more challenging. These include increasing income inequality, re-segregation of American communities and K-12 systems, and challenges to affirmative action in many states. But, higher education needs to respond even more vigorously given these challenges, not use them as excuses for not making progress.

Based on the discussion above, we see five important next steps for institutional leaders and the broader higher education community:

1. Study, document, and replicate effective practices for enhancing student success at community colleges, open-access four-year institutions, and other institutions with room for improvement in student outcomes.
2. Study, document, and replicate effective practices for streamlining transfer between community colleges and four-year institutions, in general, and for expanding transfer from community colleges to selective four-year institutions.
3. Study and document the value of diversity in higher education, as well as effective practices for creating inclusive educational environments that enhance student success and capitalize on student diversity to improve the educational experience of all students, as well as their social contributions as graduates.

4. Advocate and develop effective measures and practices for an enhanced understanding of talent in selective college and university admissions, focused on prospective students' potential to use their education effectively and to contribute to society.
5. Work towards a secure and comprehensive national student-unit-record data system.

Across higher education, we need to continue to understand the trade-offs that are being made that limit access and success. Can we only address these issues with additional resources, or are there ways to reallocate resources that would improve outcomes without excessively sacrificing other objectives? Greater understanding of the trade-offs will lead to better decision-making and policy implementation.