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Gateways and Gatekeepers:  
Moving beyond the Access 'Saga'  
toward Outcome Equity*

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## SYMPOSIUM

# *Equity and Access in Higher Education*

## *Community Colleges as Gateways and Gatekeepers: Moving beyond the Access “Saga” toward Outcome Equity*

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*Community colleges are essential – though often overlooked – institutions of higher education. In this essay, Alicia C. Dowd draws attention to the challenges facing community colleges as they seek to balance their roles as both gateways and gatekeepers with their multiple missions, which include meeting the diverse needs of students at the postsecondary level and responding to the changing educational and economic needs of U.S. society. Using research from the California Benchmarking Project, Enhancing Institutional Effectiveness and Equity, Dowd offers insights about the ways community college leaders, staff, and partners might navigate these dual and often divergent roles. Her essay raises important questions about the nature of higher education accountability in the context of community colleges and the way these institutions are used, managed, and evaluated.*

Community colleges are sometimes overlooked when we talk about issues of equity and college admissions. After all, aren't they free (almost) and open to everyone? The answer is yes . . . and no. In this paper I outline the state of equity in community colleges by describing the historical role of the community college and presenting current statistics about student outcomes. I observe that the uses of transfer and remediation at community colleges are stratified by students' racial/ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics. Given this context, I argue that the mission and identity of community colleges

must shift from the “saga” of access to a focus on outcome equity. I then draw on my work with colleagues at the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education to illustrate strategies for making progress toward that goal. These strategies embrace the goals of accountability, including that of improved institutional performance, while also emphasizing the need for on-campus assessments rooted in critical perspectives on inequity in order to develop the capacity for improved performance.

### The Community College as Gateway and Gatekeeper

Community colleges are both the gateways and gatekeepers of American higher education. As gateways, they are open-access colleges with minimal enrollment requirements and low tuition. They offer a “something for everyone” curriculum, including occupational certificate programs, general education credits toward the completion of an associate’s degree and for transfer to four-year colleges, developmental (or remedial) education, English-language instruction, and noncredit short courses for business training, self-improvement, or leisure (Bragg, 2001; Dougherty, 2002). During their widespread establishment in the 1960s and early 1970s, community colleges grew dramatically (Breneman & Nelson, 1981). Today they enroll nearly eight million students and about 40 percent of all undergraduates (Horn & Nevill, 2006, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> As gateways to higher education, community colleges have provided access to groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by four-year colleges and universities.

By enrolling the lion’s share of new entrants to higher education, community colleges have also acted as gatekeepers, reducing the pressure on four-year colleges and universities to expand by enrolling larger numbers of students (Turner, 2004). As community colleges have responded to the growing demand for higher education by enrolling greater numbers of students, the share of students enrolled in public and private research universities and in private liberal arts colleges has declined. These institutions, instead of expanding, have become more focused on increasing their selectivity and other indicators as markers of quality (Hoxby, 2000). As a result of these trends, the collegiate student body has become more stratified by ability and socioeconomic status (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005), with the most capable students increasingly concentrated at a smaller number of the more elite colleges (Hoxby, 2000).

The use of the community college as a point of access in a stratified higher education system appeals to ideological principles across the political spectrum. The gateway function, through its universalism, appeals to principles of democratic education. By offering the prospect, even for poor and immigrant students, of movement from the lowest rung of the educational ladder to the highest, it also appeals to the principles of meritocracy, equal opportunity, and social mobility. On the other hand, for fiscal conservatives the gate-

keeper function is desirable. From this view, it makes sense for less academically prepared students to enroll in the lowest-cost higher education sector. Funneling some students into workforce training creates economic efficiency (promoting economic development) and social efficiency (creating a supply of workers for clerical, service, and nonprofessional technical occupations) (Labaree, 1997).

The socioeconomic and academic stratification of higher education is putting pressure on community colleges in two ways. One set of pressures, in the form of articulation and transfer policies, is intended to improve transfer rates to four-year colleges (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These policies have arisen out of a need to meet the growing demand for bachelor's degrees without expanding the supply of seats in the more expensive four-year sector. The other set of pressures, in the form of remedial education policies, is solidifying the role of community colleges as gatekeepers by imposing restrictions on access to four-year colleges for students who require remediation (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Shaw, 1997).

Policies establishing remedial education as the sole purview of the community colleges have been particularly contentious, in part because the completion and graduation rates for remedial students are low and the magnitude of the remedial education challenge is large. It appears that on a national basis only one in four students who take remedial courses at community colleges ultimately graduate (Attewell et al., 2006). Recent national data indicate that, on average, 42 percent of students entering community colleges will enroll in "developmental" or "basic skills" courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2003, p. iv). However, the range of estimates is quite substantial, extending upward to 60 percent (Adelman, 2004; Kirst, 2007). Notwithstanding the difficulties in estimating the prevalence of remedial education, it is clear that the majority of students enrolled in remedial courses are at community colleges, and that the burden on community colleges for remediation has increased in recent years (Parsad & Lewis, 2003).

### Contradictions of Accountability and the Access "Saga"

Transfer, remedial education, and other "accountability" policies have placed the performance of community colleges under scrutiny. Accountability indicators and performance reporting requirements have been established in many states to track transfer rates, student persistence from term to term, degree completion, and workforce readiness (Burke & Associates, 2005). These requirements have generally been regarded as onerous by administrators of community colleges because they hardly take into account the colleges' multiple missions and diverse student bodies (Dowd & Tong, 2007).

In particular, the calculation of performance indicators can be a source of tension. For example, transfer rates are infamously difficult to calculate in a

manner satisfactory to all stakeholders. They are often reported along with a primer explaining the effects of including or excluding students with certain characteristics from the calculations (see, e.g., *Clearing Paths to Degrees*, 2007; Horn & Lew, n.d.; Moore & Shulock, 2007; Wellman, 2002). As a way of arriving at more acceptable measures of institutional effectiveness, recent studies have sought to empirically parse out indicators of student commitment to transfer to a four-year institution or to attain a specific degree based on students' enrollment behavior (Adelman, 2005; Horn & Lew, n.d.; Horn & Nevill, 2006). Perhaps because community colleges have long been subject to the charge that they "cool out" students' aspirations of degree completion (Anderson et al., 2006; Clark, 1960, 1980), a perennial debate concerns the inclusion in transfer indicators of students who potentially had no intention of transferring. Similarly, the question of whether colleges are responsible for increasing students' aspirations to transfer continually arises. Due to the difficulty of collecting faithful measures of students' academic aspirations, community college administrators and policy makers alike have struggled in deciding how to include students who do not have clear educational goals in measures of institutional effectiveness.

Beyond the challenges of accurately measuring student aspirations in community colleges, more generally accountability for student outcomes is contradictory to the culture of community colleges because, as many scholars have noted, it is open access enrollment (not outcomes) that defines the community college mission and identity (Bailey & Smith Morest, 2006; Bragg, 2001; Breneman & Nelson, 1981; Levin, 2001; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Shaw, 2001). Yet with access to college more assured today than student success in achieving educational goals or earning a degree, there have been many calls for higher education to shift its focus to when, where, and how successfully students of different academic and socioeconomic characteristics navigate educational opportunities (see, e.g., Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hoxby, 2004; Moore & Shulock, 2007; Vaughan, 2005).

In this respect, the accountability movement, with its focus on outcomes rather than "inputs," is aligned with the goals of "outcome equity" (Dowd, 2003; Dowd & Tong, 2007). The concept of outcome equity arose from contentious legislative and judicial battles in K-12 education finance to provide greater levels of resources to students with greater educational need. The fundamental argument is that the provision of equal resources is not equitable when educational achievement gaps are so strongly correlated with family wealth and race/ethnicity (Levin, 1994; Verstegen, 1998). Students with greater educational needs require greater resources in order to achieve at rates equal to those with fewer needs.

However, because it is so difficult to measure inequities in funding or generate legislation to address finance inequities (Dowd & Grant, 2006), community colleges are being asked today to take on a new identity and mission. Resistance to this idea can be deep-seated, because it requires grafting out-

come equity to the “gateway” role of open access. What might be perceived as a general reluctance to take responsibility for students’ aspirations and outcomes reflects the true depth of the challenges facing open access institutions in educating a diverse student body. It also reflects what Ernest House (1974) might have referred to as the “ideology” and “saga” of the community college. House used these terms, borrowing the notion of a “saga” from Burton Clark, to describe how important it is to understand belief systems when conducting any evaluation of higher education. Ideology, as he defines it, is a “unified, coherent, and shared-belief system that is used to appeal to important audiences,” and a saga is “a collective understanding, a story, of the unique accomplishment of the group” (p. 619). In House’s application, a saga is a positive motivating force, mythical in proportion, and an important rallying point for action among people who subscribe to it.

The community college saga that motivates commitment to open access celebrates the small positive steps that many individuals make by completing just one course at the community college level (such as in English-language learning, occupational skills training, and adult basic education). While it is important to acknowledge that indicators of degree completion and transfer can mask small successes, it is notable too that their significance at times takes on “mythical” proportions, perhaps as an antidote to the low rates of student success that accountability data reveal. The belief system of the saga, House (1974) argues, becomes “nearly impermeable to conflicting data” (p. 619) and is challenged to incorporate contradictory information.

### Stratified Uses of the Community College

Often lost in accountability debates is the fact that a student’s chance of success depends considerably on their racial/ethnic background and the wealth of their community. Transfer and remediation policies may be good for White, middle-class, or affluent students at the same time that they are harmful to African Americans, Latinos, and poor students. As Tara Parker and Leticia Bustillos (2007, p. 26) have argued, in light of the bifurcated experience of these different groups of students, the community college acts and is treated by policymakers simultaneously as a “redeemer” and “dumping ground.”

My studies, with colleagues John Cheslock and Tatiana Melguizo, of the socioeconomic stratification of transfer access — or how economic class affects the opportunity to transfer to four-year colleges and universities — indicate that as a route from the lowest rung to the highest rungs of higher education, transfer primarily serves students of middle and high socioeconomic status (SES) (Dowd et al., 2006; Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, in press; Dowd & Melguizo, in press). In the data we studied, which reflected the educational outcomes of traditional-age students from the high school graduating class of 1992, only a very small proportion (7%) of community college students who transferred to highly selective institutions were students from

families in the lowest two SES quintiles. Fully half of transfers to elite institutions were from the top SES quintile. Surprisingly, students from the two lowest SES quartiles were also substantially underrepresented (at 22%) among transfers to less-selective colleges.

The experience of remediation is also stratified by socioeconomic characteristics and “socially constructed” in negative or positive ways, depending on a student’s race (Parker & Bustillos, 2007). Students from across the racial/ethnic and geographic spectrum — urban, rural, and suburban — who leave high school with a wide range of academic preparedness find themselves in remedial classes at two- and four-year colleges. Most of them successfully pass these courses in the first semester of college. Yet, the public sector has “created higher hurdles than the private sector” (Attewell et al., 2006, p. 914) for equivalently prepared students. Urban students, African Americans and Latinos, and the lowest-SES students are most likely to be found in remedial education (Attewell et al., 2006). This stems in part from their lower levels of academic preparedness, and in part from public policies that have relegated remedial education to community colleges. As a consequence, Attewell et al. (2006) show that, even after controlling for high school academic performance, students in the public sector and in community colleges are more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses, as are Black students in comparison to their equivalently prepared White peers.

These statistics illustrate that the uses of the community college are stratified by students’ racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Accountability policies have not been particularly attentive to these inequities. For example, accountability indicators often are not disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and aggregated statistics hide disparities in student outcomes. If the problem of outcome inequity is not revealed, it is unlikely it will be addressed.

### Integrating Accountability, Equity, and Assessment through “Critical Assessment”

In this section, I describe work that my colleagues and I at the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education (CUE) are doing to address the equity issues discussed above. The California Benchmarking Project grows out of the efforts of Estela Mara Bensimon to bring attention to the problem of racial/ethnic inequities in higher education (Bensimon, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) and my own studies of community college finance equity (Dowd, 2003, 2004; Dowd & Grant, 2006, 2007) and accountability (Dowd, 2005; Dowd & Tong, 2007).<sup>2</sup> A central premise of our work is that colleges can become more equitable and effective by developing the capacity for organizational learning. Developing this capacity requires the active participation of community college practitioners as researchers into their own culture and practices (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). Our work

illustrates that there is a key role for academic researchers to develop equity-based inquiry<sup>3</sup> strategies, drawing on theories of practitioner knowledge, expertise, and equity (Bensimon, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2004).

The project's theory of change (Dowd & Tong, 2007) — and the motivation for engaging practitioners in research — derives from the concept of “*phronesis*,” which can be loosely translated from Aristotle's writings to mean practical wisdom (Bensimon, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2004). Such wisdom is required to answer what may be the million-dollar question in education reform: “What works?” Studies correlating inputs and outputs without getting inside the “black box” of schooling have not yielded satisfactory answers. As Cohen, Raudenbush, and Ball (2003) have pointed out, this is because resources are not “self-acting” in the black box. The ways instructors and students interact and put resources to use matter. Therefore, an input that is effective in one school or context may not be as effective in others. It is necessary for practitioners to have independent capacity and expertise in order to knowledgably implement reforms and improve institutional effectiveness. Without promoting practitioner inquiry and knowledge, accountability is likely to continue to have a weak effect on institutional performance (Dougherty & Hong, 2006).

Three community colleges in the Los Angeles area — Long Beach City College, Los Angeles Southwest College, and Rio Hondo College — are the lead colleges in the California Benchmarking Project, which is putting these theories of change into practice. At each one of these lead colleges, we have convened “inquiry teams” of practitioners (Bensimon, 2007; Dowd, 2005) comprising faculty, administrators, and counselors, who do action research on their own campuses using a variety of assessment methods. They will be joined in the project by twenty or so community colleges, which will form a peer group for benchmarking equitable and effective practices for improving student success. Liaisons from eight campuses of the California State University and University of California systems will also participate to improve coordination with the four-year sector. We are focusing on increasing the successful completion of “transfer-eligible” courses by students who started college in basic skills courses. Transfer-eligible courses carry course credits eligible for transfer to California State Universities and the University of California. We have chosen this focus due to the fact that so many Latinos and African Americans experience low rates of success in basic skills courses and, consequently, low rates of transfer to four-year colleges.<sup>4</sup>

Benchmarking is a process of comparing educational practices in one locale — here a community college — to established standards, to prior performance, and to the practices and outcomes of peer colleges (Dowd & Tong, 2007). In the California Benchmarking Project, we use three benchmarking strategies to create structured opportunities for learning, innovation, and change. Briefly, these are:

1. Performance benchmarking — used to improve performance and promote equity in student outcomes. The inquiry team reviews baseline data, disaggregated by racial/ethnic and gender categories, and reports the successful course-completion rates of students who enroll in key transfer-level “gateway” courses from basic skills courses. The teams also set benchmark goals for increasing successful course-completion rates and for closing equity gaps in achievement.
2. Effective practices benchmarking — used to identify practices that practitioners on other campuses, and/or the research and policy literature, consider effective. CUE researchers conduct literature reviews and examine reports from colleges and professional organizations in order to identify practices thought to be exemplary or worthy of adoption in new settings. The inquiry team compares their “instructional” practices — broadly defined to include teaching, academic administration, counseling, and student services — against documented standards of effective practice for basic skills education and for supporting student transfer to four-year colleges.
3. Process benchmarking — used to contextualize problems and possible solutions. The inquiry teams conduct action research using a variety of assessment methods, such as observations, peer interviews, and document analyses. CUE researchers support these inquiry activities by developing research protocols designed to call attention to the use (or lack) of equitable and effective practices. These inquiry activities generate a rich description of campus culture and instructional practices. From these descriptions, the inquiry team characterizes and prioritizes problems of instruction on their campus. A similar set of inquiry activities is then carried out during a site visit at a peer college. This site visit enables the inquiry team to explore the use of practices identified as exemplary in another setting in order to determine how, when, and why such practices may be effective. Process benchmarking provides a point of comparison for the inquiry team’s own campus culture, while serving to stimulate thinking about innovation and change.

As a result of these inquiry activities, the team then adopts and disseminates changes in practice across a variety of areas, including, for example, curriculum, pedagogy, counseling, student assessment, and matriculation services. Through written reports and presentations, they will ultimately recommend larger programmatic changes to their campus presidents, administrative bodies, faculty governance bodies, and boards of trustees.

The California Benchmarking Project is designed to integrate aspects of accountability (through the expectation and benchmarking of improved performance), assessment (through campus-based research into local practices and culture), and equity (by benchmarking improvement goals to reduce inequities in student outcomes). By integrating these elements, the project

demonstrates a form of assessment that I think of as “critical assessment” — in that it attends to issues of power, authority, race, ideology, and socioeconomic inequities.

Critical assessment differs from mainstream assessment (see, e.g., Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2005; Ewell, 1991; Maki, 2004; Peterson & Einarson, 2001) through a commitment to reducing the inequities of stratified resource distribution within and across higher education sectors. Critical assessment, as I envision it, also improves on current accountability strategies in order to spur increased institutional performance. Typical accountability indicators often are too highly aggregated to inform practitioners’ views of their own effectiveness. For that reason, practitioners often reject them as invalid. By selecting student course-completion rates as a performance indicator, the California Benchmarking Project models the use of an accountability measure that can be immediately improved by changes in instructional practices. By disaggregating student success by race and ethnicity, differences in student outcomes are uncovered. Practitioners are therefore called upon to address whether teaching and learning is organized in their classrooms and colleges in ways that are culturally relevant to students and that invite active learning. (See Nasir and Hand, 2006, for a discussion of the relationship between active learning and cultural diversity.)

## Conclusion

Despite the symbolic and structural emphasis on the gateway role of community colleges, some scholars have argued that the real function of the community college is to act as a gatekeeper. Brint and Karabel (1989) wrote of the “diverted dreams” of community college students, setting in motion decades of research to determine whether community colleges have predominantly a “democratization effect” (enabling more students to enroll in college) or a “diversion effect” (reducing degree completion among students who would have otherwise enrolled in and earned a bachelor’s degree from a four-year college; for a review of this literature, see Dowd & Melguizo, in press). The tensions of the community college role as both gateway and gatekeeper are particularly salient today. It is becoming clear that community colleges have both a democratization effect *and* a diversion effect, but that these effects are experienced inequitably by students of different backgrounds.

Demand for higher education will grow, while the share of tax dollars invested in colleges and universities is likely to shrink or stagnate (Archibald & Feldman, 2006). Policymakers at the state and federal levels have emphasized the importance of improving transfer rates as a way to ensure access to the baccalaureate, while at the same time reducing college costs for taxpayers and for individual students and families. They have emphasized the cost-effectiveness of pushing remedial education out of four-year colleges and into community colleges. However, these policies do not appear to have

been successful in bringing about improvements in the equity or effectiveness of public higher education. In my mind, the adoption of critical assessment practices, such as those used by the California Benchmarking Project, is the necessary evolution and integration of the accountability, assessment, and equity movements to bring about the desired improvements in institutional performance.

## Notes

1. Slightly less than half of community college students were younger than twenty-four years old (Horn & Nevill, 2006). In comparison to other undergraduates, community college students tend to be older, financially independent of their parents, and enrolled part-time while working. They are also more likely to be Black or Latino, from low-income families, and female (Horn & Nevill, 2006).
2. This project is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Ford Foundation.
3. The notion of “inquiry” refers to the use of research, assessment, and evaluation strategies for the purpose of self-assessment and reflective practice.
4. About one-third to one-half of Latina/o and African American students in California community colleges are successful in basic skills courses (Brown & Niemi, 2007, p. 8), and approximately 10 percent ultimately transfer to four-year colleges (Moore & Shulock, 2007, p. 11).

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