

From Access to Outcome Equity: Revitalizing the Democratic Mission of the Community College

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By expanding higher education's enrollment capacity, community colleges are understood by many to play an important democratizing role in the American postsecondary system. As public institutions, they also face demands for accountability, productivity, and efficiency, which in recent years have led to a greater market orientation. This article analyzes the ideology of efficiency and its effects on the acclaimed democratizing mission of the public two-year sector. It argues that open access in the traditional sense of nonselective, low-cost enrollment has been eroded by the stratification of educational opportunity and by declining college affordability. Technical and economic efficiency are discussed as concepts having meaning and application distinct from the ideology of efficiency and that are not inherently at odds with equity goals. Performance accountability is explored as a mechanism to collect and examine detailed student outcome data and balance efficiency concerns with a focus on equity.

Keywords: college; efficiency; equity; accountability; access

The two-year public sector is the primary point of entry into higher education for low-income students, African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, and working adults (Bragg 2001, 95-96; Nora n.d., Enrollment Patterns). By expanding higher education's enrollment capacity, community colleges are understood by many to play an important democratizing role in the American postsecondary system. With open admissions policies and diverse student bodies,

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community colleges “in an idealized sense, represent higher education’s commitment to democracy” (Rhoads and Valadez 1996, 7). However, critics have argued that community colleges serve mainly to stratify higher education and to shield four-year institutions from new populations of students seeking upward mobility through attainment of a baccalaureate degree (Brint and Karabel 1989). In the 1990s, the ideal of the community college as an agent of democracy was undermined by cuts in public funding and privatization of the public sector (Dougherty 2002a, 303-4, 335; Levin 2001).

As Serban (Burke and Serban 1998) has observed, “the state higher education budget, implicitly or explicitly, sets forth the state’s major policy preferences for higher education” (p. 23). In the 1990s, state policy makers sought to emulate the “resurgence of productivity and performance in American business” by providing incentives for colleges and universities to focus on outcomes (Burke and Serban 1998, 1). Through the language and funding stipulations of performance funding, performance budgeting, and outcomes assessment, state governments signaled their preferences for colleges to act more like businesses. These tools were consistent with broader policies intended to encourage colleges to adopt a market orientation and to become more accountable for their expenditures of taxpayers’ dollars (Levin 2001, 100). As a result, community colleges have become more responsive to the needs of the business sector (Dougherty 2002a, 303-4; Dougherty and Bakia 2000, 234-36; Levin 2001, xix-xx, 6, 17-18).

Against the din of calls for efficiency, productivity, and accountability, concern for the vitality of the community college’s democratizing role is barely evident in the policy agenda (Dougherty 2002a, 339-40; Levin 2001, 112; Rhoads and Valadez 1996, vii). Furthermore, although the ideal of the democratizing effect of community colleges relies on open access, there are signs that access in the traditional sense of nonselective, low-cost enrollment has been eroded and is ineffective in providing equality of educational opportunity. Higher net tuition charges inhibit the enrollment of low-income students (Empty promises 2002), while those students who do enroll in community colleges experience low levels of academic success relative to their peers who begin their studies in four-year colleges (Dougherty 1994, 2002a).

This article analyzes the privatization of community colleges and its effects on the democratizing mission of the public two-year sector. After reviewing the historical role of community colleges in providing educational opportunity in the first section, I summarize the debate contrasting the community colleges’ ascribed democratizing role with its stratifying effects in the Educational Stratification and the Reproduction of Inequality section. I adopt Labaree’s conceptualization of three historic and conflicting goals of education in the United States—democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility—to characterize that debate. Looking closely at the community college’s new market orientation in the Privatization, Capitalist Ideology, and a New Market Mission section, I analyze growing curricular diversification in the community college as a sign of increased stratification of educational opportunity. I argue that privatization and programmatic stratification threaten to undermine democratic equality goals, as epitomized by open

admissions. The declining affordability of community colleges is demonstrated in the Declining Affordability section, showing that access has also been eroded by changes in public higher education finance. In the final section, performance accountability systems are discussed, along with proposals to make them more compatible with the acclaimed community college role as a democratizing agent.

Community Colleges and Educational Opportunity

Community colleges are often called the “people’s college” (Labaree 1997, 203; Rendon n.d., Introduction, paragraph 1) or “democracy’s college” (Brint and Karabel 1989, 205; Shaw, Valadez, and Rhoads 1999, 2). These terms reflect the community colleges’ central role in creating educational opportunities and expanding higher education enrollments. Although two-year public colleges have existed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when they were known as junior colleges, they were established at an “explosive” pace in the 1960s (Dougherty 1994, 118), such that their “degree-credit enrollment quadrupled in fifteen years, rising from 1.0 million to 4.3 million between 1965 and 1980” (Labaree 1997, 190). During that period, they doubled their share of higher education enrollments to account for 36 percent of all students (Labaree 1997, 191). As the total population of undergraduates increased between 1970 and 1998, students at community colleges accounted for nearly two-thirds of enrollment growth. By 1998, more than 5.2 million students, 43 percent of all undergraduates, were enrolled in community colleges (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002).

Low tuition charges and open admissions were the key policies by which community colleges expanded access. Rhoads and Valadez (1996, 36) and Levin (2001, 6) have referred to open admissions as the “fundamental” attribute of the community college identity.

Many of America’s poor seek a pathway to a better life through the community college. They believe that higher education will provide the way for them, and the “open door” is seen as an opportunity to achieve their version of the American dream, (P. 217)

observed Rhoads and Valadez. The language of universal education that fueled the creation of public schools (Labaree 1997, 21) also contributed to the growth of community colleges. In 1947, President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education argued, “The time has come to make education through the fourteenth grade available in the same way that high school education is now available” (cited in Labaree 1997, 205). In 1970, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education “made the community college the centerpiece of its calls for universal access to higher education” (Dougherty 1994, 4) as it promoted the expansion of higher education. It is clear that equal, open access is a key tenet associated with the community college’s acclaimed role as “democracy’s college.”

Education was expanded not only by the founding of additional colleges but by an enlargement of the community college mission. The “comprehensive mission”

of community colleges includes four primary components: academic preparation for transfer to four-year institutions, vocational education, general education, and noncredit community outreach (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 19; Labaree 1997, 196). Provision of the first two years of undergraduate education was the primary function of junior colleges in their early years (Dougherty 1994, 191). Vocational training was offered throughout the colleges' history but played a relatively minor role (Labaree 1997, 202) until the mid-1980s when it began to dominate other aspects of the comprehensive mission (Levin 2001, xix-xx; Rosenfeld 1999, 11). Approximately three-fifths of today's students are enrolled in vocational programs (Dougherty 2002a, 301). Labaree (1997) describes general education as having two quite different meanings, the one with an emphasis on providing training in morality and civic responsibility for "effective workers and good citizens" and the other "unalloyed with vocationalism," promoting civic virtue to "protect the republic from markets rather than simply to train docile workers" (pp. 203-4). Noncredit and community outreach programs were added as a primary component of the community college role during the period of expansion in the 1960s. During this time, the term "community" college became more popular, reflecting the shifting balance away from the dominant transfer function (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 22). Outreach programs, like some forms of general education, promote the development of "social, political, and personal competencies" (Labaree 1997, 203) but do not lead to associate's degrees.

These components of the comprehensive mission are at times "contradictory" (Dougherty 1994) and "mutually incompatible" (Labaree 1997, 191). These contradictions may in fact completely undermine the democratizing role of the community college and vacate its claim as the "people's college." In the next section (Educational Stratification and the Reproduction of Inequality), Labaree's (1997) conceptualization of the competing goals of education in the United States is discussed and applied as a framework for analyzing the comprehensive community college mission. Based on this analysis, in the Privatization, Capitalist Ideology, and a New Market Mission section, two threats to the community colleges' democratizing role are presented. The first is the privatization of community colleges, in which efficiency serves as a key theme sounding a capitalist ideology. The second is increased differentiation of educational and entrepreneurial activities, which have proliferated as a market mission has encroached on the colleges' comprehensive mission. Curricular and programmatic differentiation is viewed through a historical lens of growing educational stratification, signaling the erosion of open admissions policies.

Educational Stratification and the Reproduction of Inequality

"Democratic Equality, Social Efficiency, and Social Mobility," chapter 1 of Labaree (1997), describes the U.S. educational system as the product of historic

tensions among three primary goals of schooling, which Labaree called “democratic equality,” “social efficiency,” and “social mobility.” He located the creation of community colleges in a broader struggle among educational constituents for resources necessary to obtain the economic and social returns to schooling. In Labaree’s framework, democratic equality goals are evident in calls for equal access to schooling and full participation through education in political and civic life. Social efficiency goals are evident in concerns about workforce preparation, economic development, and the effective use of taxpayers’ dollars. Social mobility goals seek to preserve the American dream of the just rewards due talented and hardworking individuals who attain social and economic status through success in the educational system. The social mobility agenda relies heavily on a meritocratic ideology to distribute credentials of varying quality and value. Market mechanisms are favored as the means to provide a great diversity of educational programs and degrees. The role of the student as consumer, rather than as citizen or productive worker, is preeminent.

These three goals are evident in the community college’s comprehensive mission. The transfer and community outreach functions of community colleges are most clearly associated with the democratic equality principles of open access, equal opportunity, and civic participation. General education, in its forms stressing citizenship training and community development rather than worker socialization (Labaree 1997, 204), are also viewed as promoting a democratic society. Social efficiency and social mobility goals often, but not always, take shape in opposition to democratic equality and create pressures for stratified educational systems.

Labaree (1997, 37-39) portrayed the diversity of educational forms and credentials found in the American educational system, including the great multiplicity of roles assigned to community colleges, as taking shape in the tensions between two opposing political coalitions. The first coalition combines democratic equality and social mobility goals to forward a progressive educational agenda, emphasizing access, opportunity, and individual attainment.

The two issues that constitute the area of overlap between democratic equality and social mobility goals—educational opportunity and individual achievement—define the core of a consensus that has driven progressive educational politics in this country for the past century and a half. Organizations representing the working class, ethnic minorities, and women have all seen this educational agenda as a means for becoming participants in the political process and for gaining access to the more attractive social positions. (P. 37)

For their part, the middle and upper classes join this coalition as a means to develop supposedly meritocratic educational institutions, which instead serve to protect and reproduce class interests by legitimating social position as educational achievement. The key to controlling the value of educational credentials lies in creating ever-increasing levels of educational stratification. Access is then restricted to scarce, valuable credentials based on meritocratic structures, such as grading and testing, while the value of degrees available to the masses falls. Labaree (1997, chapter 4) pointed to the declining value of the once-scarce high school diploma to illustrate this process of educational expansion and market differentiation.

A counterweight to the progressive agenda is provided by proponents of social efficiency, who are interested in the efficient use of taxpayers' dollars and effective development of human capital to meet the needs of the economy. This "complex coalition" includes policy makers, employers and business leaders, educational administrators, taxpayers, and working-class students interested in the short-term economic returns of vocational education (Labaree 1997, 38-39). Like programs developed under social mobility goals, socially efficient programs accept and reproduce social inequality. From the social efficiency vantage point, the economy needs workers at all levels of the occupational hierarchy; if one's class of birth is a determinant of one's life chances, this is not of particular concern, as it is in the democratic equality agenda.

Labaree's (1997) conceptualization of credentialism and social stratification draws on the work of scholars who preceded him, particularly, in regard to the two-year public sector, Brint and Karabel (1989), who argued that the primary role of the junior and community colleges was to perform a "sorting function." They wrote, "Wherever they developed, the public junior colleges faced two contradictory tasks: the democratic one of bringing new populations into higher education and the exclusionary one of channeling them away from the four-year institutions that they hoped to attend" (p. 208). Scholars of community colleges have long debated claims of this type and the potential mechanisms by which a sorting function might be carried out (Brint and Karabel 1989; Clark 1960, 1980; Cohen 1990; Dougherty 1994). In Labaree's view, social mobility goals pursued through competitive educational systems and market-oriented program development are insidiously dominant today. His view provides a useful framework for understanding current changes in community college systems, where social efficiency and social mobility goals dominate the vision of democratic equality that was so much a part of the founding rhetoric of the public two-year sector.

Privatization, Capitalist Ideology, and a New Market Mission

The history of the community college reflects the tensions between democratic and capitalist goals (Labaree 1997, 218). As discussed above, democratic goals are embodied in the theme of open access. Capitalist goals, I will argue here drawing on recent analyses of higher education policy, are embodied in the theme of efficiency. To the extent policy goals are expressed as self-evident, natural, or of unquestioned value, they operate as part of a political and cultural belief system and can be understood to function as an ideology, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as

a systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics or society, or to the conduct of a class or group, and regarded as justifying actions, especially one that is held implicitly or adopted as a whole and maintained regardless of the course of events.

Recent research demonstrates that a capitalist ideology has been forcefully reshaping the community college and its mission.

Levin (2001) has conducted a case study of community colleges in the United States and Canada, including three U.S. colleges in Washington, California, and Hawaii. His analysis includes interviews with college administrators and the review of state and federal documents outlining policies affecting community colleges. Federal documents, he concluded, “were almost singly focused on work-force training” (Levin 2001, 103). This focus was embedded in overriding concerns about economic development, national competitiveness, and the desire to increase productivity and efficiency.

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These themes were also sounded loudly in state policy documents. Social issues received little attention. Service to the growing populations of ethnic “minorities,” who would soon be in the majority in California, was framed in terms of underemployment, workforce dislocation, and skills training (Levin 2001, 99-107). Community colleges were “directed and coerced to serve the needs of capital through supplying business and industry with a trained workforce” (p. 111). Efficiency was a central theme, as institutions were expected to reduce costs in the face of declining government revenues. Social issues were subsumed under economic issues. Although “access for all was maintained as a primary value . . . for all three U.S. states, expanding and even maintaining access, according to government policy, required ‘doing more with less.’” Levin concluded, “Government policy in the 1990s clearly favored the interests of business, industry, and capital. The state’s attention to issues of equity, access, and an informed citizenry—issues that could be held up as critical to the community college movement—was marginal” (p. 112). Although the concept of access, the cornerstone of the democratizing mission of the community college, was articulated, it was harnessed to the goals of workforce development and divorced from the promise of upward mobility from which it derives its power. The unquestioned preeminence of economic goals indicates that capitalist values are functioning as ideology in these educational policy documents.

In a review of the evolution of vocational education in community colleges, Rosenfeld (1999) demonstrated that this ideological stance is relatively new. He observed,

Economic development was *not allowed* to be included among possible goals at the time the 1981 Vocational Education Study was released. Nevertheless, by the time the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984 was drafted, economic development gained the legitimacy it sought and was mentioned in the legislation's "Purpose." (P. 11, emphasis added)

Prior to 1984, economic development was not cemented as a core value of vocational education. This change in values is significant as a shift in focus from students' personal, academic, and employment needs to the needs of regional and local economies.

The increase in contract training programs at community colleges coincides with this shift in focus from students to industries. Dougherty and Bakia (2000) emphasized the significance of this new clientele: "unlike traditional occupational education, contract training involves an outside party (such as a firm or government agency), rather than the individual student, as the primary client, and from this simple fact flow all sorts of consequences" (p. 199). These consequences include the contractor's involvement in determining course content, pedagogy, and enrollment. Contract training programs are found in more than 90 percent of community colleges, where they account for approximately 17 percent of credit and noncredit enrollments (Dougherty and Bakia 2000, 201). Revenues from contract training programs are quite small, estimated at 1 percent of the median operating budgets of colleges that offer such training (Dougherty and Bakia 2000, 226). However, college administrators view these programs as offering an important service to the community, where the community is defined in terms of business interests. Dougherty and Bakia (2000) described the ideological dimensions of this view:

The community college orientation to meeting the needs of the "community" is not unproblematic. It is a value that is shaped by the fact of business's ideological hegemony within this society. Community colleges tend to define community in a way that makes employers the central constituents of the "community." There is little or no consideration of the possibility that on occasion the interests of the community and of employers might actually be opposed. (Pp. 220-21)

The pervasiveness of a capitalist ideology is indicated by changes in the college culture, such as when college administrators espouse business principles and view educational programs as a business (Dougherty and Bakia 2000, 233-35). Levin (2001) found pervasive evidence of such a cultural shift at the institutions he studied: "a pattern was established beginning in the 1980s and institutionalized in the 1990s toward a more corporate and businesslike approach to education." This new culture was evident in a "changing managerial ideology at colleges, with emphasis upon education and training as commodities . . . actions to align the institution with the marketplace, and the drive in operations for economic efficiency" (p. xix). The comprehensive mission of the community college was expanded even further. A market mission became dominant as colleges sought new market niches and customers. The colleges became entrepreneurial "multi-institutions" and developed

“colleges within colleges” (Levin 2001, 17, 55) as the traditional curriculum was retained and new programs were added.

The notions of productivity, operational efficiency, and “doing more with less” that Levin (2001) discussed reflect a narrow meaning of efficiency, which is called “production” or “technical” efficiency, while the emphasis on market-oriented outcomes demonstrates the ideological context in which efficiency is a dominant theme today. Production efficiency is defined as obtaining the same quality of output for fewer inputs or a higher number or quality of output for the same level of inputs (DesJardins 2002, 190; Monk 1990, 8-9). These improvements are gained by reducing waste in the production process or by adopting new technologies.

However, economists also define a broader meaning of efficiency for evaluating the impact of public investments on social welfare. An investment is efficient at the point where the value of the additional benefit obtained equals the cost of additional dollars invested;¹ society is investing neither too much nor too little in the program to obtain the desired outcomes. It is difficult to estimate this type of efficiency of social welfare investments in higher education because the full range of quantitative and qualitative outcomes is hard, if not impossible, to measure (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 39-44; DesJardins 2002, 201-2, 209). The value of benefits from investments in higher education and other publicly funded programs is determined through the political process.

The emphasis in today’s community college on workforce training and entrepreneurial activities reflects a contemporary political agenda and ideology. The call for production efficiency is a dominant theme of this agenda, but it is important to realize that society could pursue production efficiencies in higher education—and should, in the interest of reducing the burden on taxpayers and releasing funds for other social programs—while placing a different valuation on the potential outputs of public investments in college. For example, the political agenda could shift to place great emphasis on community building through higher education rather than emphasizing workforce preparation. These goals could also be pursued with a concomitant desire to realize production efficiencies, in other words, to effectively foster strong communities while using the lowest level of public resources possible. Efficiency is often viewed as antithetical to equity goals, but this is not necessarily the case (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 43; DesJardins 2002, 176, 198). When I discuss performance measurement below, I will return to this point to recommend that equity advocates retain a focus on production efficiency, while arguing that higher education should increase its concern for the distribution of outcomes.

Programmatic diversification and stratification of educational opportunity. As the colleges have entered new markets, they have become “not only the traditional community colleges, with comprehensive curricula and open access, but also training centers, charter schools, private high schools, language institutes, music conservatories, applied research centers, and businesses” (Levin 2001, xix). Some of these activities, such as contract training, reflect an intensified orientation to the business sector. Other activities, such as the creation of honors programs (Selingo 2002), new structures for remediation (Shults 2001), and dual enrollment agree-

ments with secondary schools (Barnes 2001; State funding 2000, 33-37), reflect an increasing stratification of offerings to the traditional customers of the college: students and taxpayers. Colleges are as apt to create new participation structures for state-sponsored markets as private markets. To the extent these new programs have admissions requirements, which some do, they erode the community college's traditional and fundamental characteristic of open access through open admissions. In addition, those programs that restrict participation to control market perceptions of program quality may well erode the promise of equal opportunity through open admissions by undermining the economic value of open admission degrees.

Labaree's (1997, 26-34) conceptualization of the social mobility goal of education explains the coincidence of a market mission and increasing program differentiation, as well as the consequences of such an orientation for the value of an open enrollment diploma. As educational consumers, parents and students want educational stratification, including academic standards, grading, and hierarchical program levels, because a pyramidal system is necessary to create relative competitive advantage. Through stratification of program levels, individuals of higher class origin gain access to greater educational resources and credentials with greater exchange value in economic and social markets. In this respect, the social mobility goal is distinct from both the democratic and social efficiency goals in that it treats education as a private good, rather than as a public good. "From the social mobility perspective, the chance to gain advantage is the system's most salient feature" (Labaree 1997, 28). The true value of the teaching and learning environment is of secondary concern.

In Labaree's (1997) distinction between social mobility and social efficiency goals, the social efficiency coalition creates a demand for economically valuable learning produced through effective schooling. Education has a true "use value"; it is intrinsically valuable for the production of informed citizens and skilled workers. In contrast, the forces of social mobility "treat education as a form of exchange value" (Labaree 1997, 31).

Educational credentials come to take on a life of their own. Their value derives not from the useful knowledge they symbolize but from the kind of job for which they can be exchanged. And the latter exchange value is determined by the same forces as that of any other commodity, through the fluctuation of supply and demand in the marketplace—the scarcity of that credential relative to the demand for that credential among employers. (P. 31)

Given that the exchange value of a credential is determined by supply and demand, those students in programs that have selective admissions can expect a higher return on their educational investment. Those in open enrollment programs can expect a lower exchange value.

The social mobility and democratic equality agendas overlap in that both seek greater resources for educational institutions, while the social efficiency coalition of taxpayers and fiscally conservative policy makers aims to reduce costs, promote efficiency, and develop human capital with true use value for the economy. As dis-

cussed above, the social efficiency agenda is evident today as the community colleges emphasize workforce training and economic development. The social mobility agenda is evident through the stratification of program offerings and a renewed emphasis—in the community colleges and throughout the educational system—on academic standards. Program stratification is an outgrowth of the new market orientation as colleges respond to all their diverse constituents—the state, businesses, students—as consumers. This consumer orientation is radically opposed to a public orientation, in which access is conceptualized as universal rather than pyramidal.

The structure of new dual enrollment, honors, and remedial programs illustrates the threat to open access posed by program stratification. New York State provides “school-based college level learning,” a dual enrollment program through which colleges enroll high school students (Barnes 2001). Offering community college courses to high school students does extend access, but in nonuniform ways. Barnes (2001) reported, “Students respond along with parents to the possibilities to earn college credit and save money” (p. 3). He argued that school-based learning is less “elitist” than advanced placement classes because college credits can be earned without passing an examination, as is required for advanced placement credit. However, the value of the program in creating college access depends on which students actually enroll in the college courses. If academically motivated students take advantage of this benefit while poor students are still struggling to meet mandated core curriculum requirements, the program may simply serve to bring additional benefits to families of college-bound students. Also, since students must pay tuition for these credits (State funding 2000, 36), those from higher-income families are more likely to enroll. This benefit for a select group of high school students is relatively expensive because both the school district and the college count the credits taken in their funding formulas, so the taxpayer is “paying twice for one-time instruction” (Barnes 2001, 5).

Similarly, a news article reporting the creation of honors colleges at community colleges indicated that students in the honors programs would benefit from smaller classes and have the opportunity to work on special projects (Selingo 2002). In this way, the bright students in the honors programs garner greater resources and, not surprisingly, appear to experience greater academic success. At one college, the transfer rate to four-year colleges was 98 percent, more than double the transfer rates of average community college students, as is discussed below.

While “school-based learning” courses may dilute program quality (Barnes 2001, 2) as they extend resources to college-bound students, policy issues surrounding remedial education indicate a desire on the part of policy makers to limit spending on students requiring developmental instruction and to protect collegiate academic standards. This is evident in the trend to restrict remedial instruction to the two-year sector (Dougherty 2002a, 310). The American Association of Community Colleges reported that only 11 percent of colleges responding to a national survey offered degree credit for remedial education. The majority of colleges (76 percent) offered credits, called “institutional credits,” that allowed students to count the courses toward financial aid eligibility but not toward gradua-

tion. In addition, policies are in place to limit the number of remedial courses taken and concurrent enrollment in degree programs (Shults 2001, 6-8).

While some programmatic initiatives may increase access to higher education, others are likely to reduce the exchange value of an associate's degree. Community college credits have monetary value for high school students who can potentially exchange them later for more valuable private or four-year college credits. Honors program students receive a boost in the value of their degree through bureaucratic structures and real resources that are intended to set them apart from regularly enrolled community college students. Similarly, remedial courses and enrollment structures are designed to place average students one step above remedial students. From a social efficiency perspective, the value and effect of these new structures depend on whether they create teaching and learning environments in which students learn valuable skills to become productive workers. Students too hope to benefit economically from these skills. From a social mobility perspective, the programs create hierarchical credentials for which educational consumers must compete through meritocratic processes. Vocationalism, which potentially brings students labor market returns for learned skills and gives them the prospect of upward mobility, is a lesser threat to democratic equality than privatization, which redirects resources to more powerful educational consumers. However, both privatization and stratification undermine the community college's potential to enact a democratic agenda.

Declining Affordability

The ascribed role of community colleges in creating a more just and democratic society is central to the manner in which community colleges have traditionally been financed, which is with high levels of public subsidy and low levels of direct costs to individual students. Low tuition rates combined with open admissions policies have been the cornerstones of equality of access and opportunity (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 100-103). As discussed above, stratification of program offerings threatens to undermine open admissions. The other cornerstone of access, low tuition, is also being eroded. Tuition rates have increased as a proportion of real income and are not so low today as to be negligible. Average community college tuition and fees in 2001 was \$1,705 (McKeown-Moak 2001, 8). In inflation-adjusted dollars, they have more than doubled since 1968 (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002, 8). Furthermore, today, the tuition rate is generally not an indicator of a student's true costs. A significant number of community college students rely on grants and loans to pay for college. As in other sectors of higher education, students must discern the "net price" (tuition and fees minus grant aid) when determining their true costs and gauge the investment value of student loans. While there is great variation in community college tuition and financial aid by state and some states have maintained affordability for low-income students (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002), most systems today cannot point to low tuition rates as a beacon of open door access.

Consistent with the tenets of affordability and access, community colleges have been insulated for many years from the enormous price hikes occurring in other sectors of higher education. In inflation-adjusted dollars, average annual costs in the public two-year sector (including tuition, fees, and expenses) increased 9 percent between 1980 and 1990. This increase was modest compared to price increases of 57 percent for private universities, 30 percent for public universities, and 34 percent for public four-year colleges during the same period (Mumper 1996, 25). While community colleges are certainly still the most affordable college

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option, the total price of attendance, including tuition, fees, books, transportation, and personal expenses, is estimated today at \$9,100 (Berkner et al. 2002, 4). The problem of rising community college prices is compounded by the decline in real income in the lowest income brackets. Even the relatively small price increases in the two-year sector have had a serious impact on low-income families as college costs now consume a larger proportion of earnings (Mumper 1996, 54). By 2000, low-income families spent 12 percent of their income to pay tuition at public two-year colleges. The comparable figure in 1980 was 6 percent. Only the income of the wealthiest Americans has kept pace with tuition increases (Losing ground 2002, 5). The effect of tuition increases on the poorest Americans is of particular concern because nearly half of students with family incomes less than \$10,000 attend community colleges (compared with just 9 percent of students from the highest income families) (Access denied 2001, 10). These are also precisely the students whom the community colleges are intended to serve through their democratizing mission, providing higher education for all regardless of their economic circumstances.

Rising tuition signals the end of the era when low tuition was the “full, posted price” serving as one of the “pillars” of access (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002, 7), but it does not in itself signal the end of affordability. In fact, even as tuition prices increased over time, community colleges became more affordable through the 1970s and 1980s with the creation of the federal Pell grant program. Through financial aid availability, the net price of two-year colleges actually decreased. However, these gains unraveled in the early 1990s. By 1992, the net price was higher than it had been in two decades, and many more community college students, like those in other sectors, were now expected to borrow to finance their education (Mumper 1996, 67-68). A recent study of public college affordability conducted by the Lumina Foundation concluded, based on a comprehensive state-

by-state analysis, that community colleges are generally affordable only when students take loans. Financially dependent students from middle-income families were the only ones likely to find community colleges consistently affordable in most states in the absence of borrowing (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002, 22, 26).

Thirty-eight percent of all undergraduates in community colleges received financial aid in 1999-2000, with 33 percent receiving grants and 7 percent receiving loans (Berkner et al. 2002, 9). The numbers were much higher among the 20 percent of community college students who attended full-time, full year. Fifty percent of full-time students received grants, and 17 percent received loans, which averaged \$3,900 (Berkner et al. 2002, 12). These numbers represent a sizeable increase over the 9 percent of full-time community college students who borrowed an average of \$2,000 in 1989-1990 (Berkner 2000, Table 4.4). Borrowing decisions also depend on student status as financially dependent or independent of parents and on enrollment choices. Among independent students enrolled in community colleges in 1995-1996, approximately one-quarter took out a federal loan during their higher education, about twice as many as dependent students (Berkner 2000, Table 4.6). Part-time students, many of whom were not eligible for federal subsidized loans, borrowed to finance their education with much lower frequency (5 percent) in 1999-2000 (Berkner et al. 2002, 22). Students who chose to enroll on a part-time basis may have been discouraged from full-time attendance by the prospect of taking loans, which clearly now sum to nontrivial amounts among those who do borrow, and decided instead to work to finance their education. Possibly in response to higher costs, part-time enrollments have risen at community colleges, from 48 percent of enrollments in 1970 to 64 percent in 1998 (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002, 7).

The increased incidence of borrowing demonstrates that grant aid is not sufficient to defray increases in community college tuition. In fact, the average net price in 1999-2000 was more than \$900 for full-time, full-year students and about \$500 for part-time, part-year students (Berkner et al. 2002, Table 4.10). Among community college students in the lowest-income quartile in a study of federal student aid data, 92 percent were identified as needing federal aid, but only 63 percent of those with need received aid, including grants and loans. The remaining unmet need for this group to pay the total costs of attending college is estimated at an average of \$3,800 among the 85 percent of students who had remaining need. Forty-two percent of middle-income students were also identified as having federal need, but only 58 percent of those with need received aid. Thirty-six percent of students in this group were estimated to have remaining unmet need averaging just more than \$3,000 (Berkner et al. 2002, 482, Tables 4.3A, 4.3B, Tables 4.4A, 4.4B, Table 4.5).

As the statistics above show, the amount of unmet financial need—defined as the total cost of attendance minus the expected family contribution minus all types of aid—can be sizeable for community college students. It is also a significant barrier to enrollment in the four-year or two-year sector for many students (Access denied 2001, v, 10, 25). A recent report of the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance titled *Empty Promises* (2002) stressed the following findings: academically qualified low-income high school graduates with high

unmet need attend four-year colleges at much lower rates than their academic peers with low unmet need (52 percent vs. 83 percent); 21 percent attend community colleges (compared to 12 percent), and 22 percent do not enroll in any college at all (compared to just 4 percent). These disparities suggest that qualified students cannot obtain adequate financial aid to attend the college of their choice and signals the “failure of federal, state, and institutional student aid policy to jointly ensure access to postsecondary education” (Empty promises 2002, Figure 11, p. 25).

High unmet need also forces students to choose enrollment patterns that are not optimal for degree completion and academic success. Low-income students are more likely to study part-time. Nearly 30 percent work more than thirty-five hours per week (Access denied 2001, 10). The authors of *Empty Promises* (2002) concluded,

A generation ago, many students were able to achieve access to higher education by working their way through college. Unfortunately, it is simply not possible today to work enough to cover college expenses without taking a heavy toll on student academic performance. (P. 11)

As students choose part-time enrollment and long hours working off campus, the chances of their persistence and degree attainment declines very significantly (Access denied 2001, 10). Researchers who analyzed federal college student persistence data spanning the academic years 1996 to 1998 found that borrowing combined with less than fifteen hours of work per week constitutes the best college financing strategy for low-income students. They concluded,

Students at two-year and less than two-year institutions who borrowed and worked part time also were far less likely to drop out than other students at these institutions. Only nine percent of these students had dropped out by 1998, compared with 45% of all low-income students who began at two-year or less-than-two-year institutions.

Among low-income students, the financing strategy of combining relatively limited work hours and borrowing was also associated with enrollment in the four-year sector and full-time, full-year enrollment (King 2002, 25), both of which are factors associated with degree attainment. Thus, borrowing appears to be a key component of academic success. Students who believe that community college attendance comes at a low cost—consistent with the open access tradition—may be grossly underestimating their total costs and undermining their chances of success.

In the future, the prospects for further increases in tuition and net price—further erosion of the important “low tuition” cornerstone of open access—are great. As forty-six states faced budget gaps in the 2002 and 2003 fiscal years (State budget 2002), higher education was particularly vulnerable to spending cuts. In many states, tuition increased sharply (Morgan 2002) and with little integrated planning between tuition and financial aid policies (Longanecker 2002). With worries about college affordability for middle-income students dominating the headlines in the 1990s, financial aid policies shifted toward merit aid at the state level and tax credits at the federal level, both of which disproportionately favor wealthier

students and their families. While the Pell grant program received periodic incremental increases, its purchasing power has declined significantly (Access denied 2001). Movement has been away from grant aid toward loan availability, and this trend is unlikely to be reversed in a worsening economic situation. In addition, higher education faces stiff competition in the quest for state dollars from other high-priority budget items such as primary and secondary schooling, health care, and prisons (Ehrenberg 2000, 2-5).

Larger proportions of high school graduates will continue on to college than in the past, expanding public college enrollments. This growth will increase the total subsidy necessary for public colleges if spending per student does not decrease (Kane 1999, 3-6). The new cohort of students will include a large proportion of students of color (80 percent nonwhite and 50 percent Hispanic), nearly half of whom will be from low-income families and have high levels of financial need. These demographic changes will “greatly increase the gross amount of financial aid required to guarantee access” (Access denied 2001, 5-6), so it is likely that the amount of public funds expended per student will, in fact, decrease, and students themselves will be expected to finance a larger proportion of their college expenses. As tuition charges have increased in recent decades, students have already come to pay a larger share of the costs of higher education, while the share of community college revenues for basic operations coming from state and local general funds has declined. The Institute for Higher Education Policy reported that the average state share fell from 70 percent in 1980 to 50 percent in 1996 (Merisotis and Wolanin 2000). This shift in burden from the state to students supports the characterization of community colleges as an increasingly privatized sector of higher education.

As community college tuition rates have increased in real terms during the past thirty years, financial aid programs have at times functioned effectively to maintain college affordability for low-income students. Today, with rising tuition and the declining value of need-based aid, there is evidence that low-income status is a significant barrier to college enrollment, even at community colleges, despite their open access tradition. The three primary barriers to enrollment are understood by policy analysts to be lack of financial aid, lack of information about available aid, and lack of college preparedness. Analysts debate the relative importance of these barriers, with Kane (1999), for example, urging policy responses addressing information barriers and the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (Access denied 2001; Empty promises 2002) urgently emphasizing lack of aid and minimizing difficulties associated with lack of information. Cameron and Heckman (2001) reject both lack of aid and lack of information as the primary barriers, focusing instead on failures of academic readiness and the early educational experiences of children from poor families. This policy debate is ongoing, but the era in which low tuition sent a clear signal of college affordability is coming to a close. Larger numbers of community college students are receiving grants and taking loans. Tuition rates no longer represent the direct costs of enrollment for many students, primarily low-income and independent students, who must be savvy about aid systems to determine their net costs.

Community college students (much more so than four-year students) are price sensitive; as tuition increases, enrollments decline. Empirical evidence demonstrates that as community college prices increase, some students will instead choose the four-year sector, and others will not enroll at all, with low-income students more likely to be priced out of higher education. Increases in tuition are not completely offset by the net price reductions effected by grant aid (Cameron and Heckman 2001, 488-91; Heller 1997, 648-50; 1999, 78-83; Hilmer 1998, 342-45; Kane and Rouse 1999, 78-81). Such tuition responses are not observed in the aggregate of recent community college enrollments, which have increased even as tuition and net costs have risen, because other factors, such as increasing four-year college tuition, declining labor market returns for high school graduates, and greater incidence of part-time enrollment, have had countervailing positive effects on enrollment.

A potential policy response to rising tuitions is for states to abandon commitments to low tuition and adopt integrated “high tuition, high aid” policies (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 103; Griswold and Marine 1996). This strategy eliminates the subsidies provided by low tuition to students who can afford the full cost of college or who determine it is a good investment and will enroll even as prices increase. In this respect, it is considered economically efficient because public funds are not misdirected toward outcomes that would occur even in their absence. The resources saved are then redirected to those whose enrollment decisions are affected by financial constraints, thereby increasing access to college. Critics have objected to this approach on the grounds that low-income students rely on the signal of low tuition to understand they can afford college. Since this signal is already compromised, it may be time to seriously revisit high-tuition, high-aid policies as an opportunity to increase the efficiency and equity of higher education finance. College information and advising systems are already badly needed to help students determine their net costs and potential investment returns. Under a policy of high tuition and high aid, additional resources would become available to provide needed financial aid and to finance extensive information, counseling, and articulation systems. The reform of legislative practices and the political will to integrate tuition-setting and financial aid policies presents the greater challenge (Griswold and Marine 1996; Heller 1999; Longanecker 2002).

Performance Accountability as an Instrument of Democratic Equality

During the expansion of the community college system during the 1950s and 1960s, states adopted per-student formula funding policies to allocate resources among institutions. The distribution of state funds was enrollment driven. In addition, many state formulas included adjustments to the per-student allocation to compensate for differences in the preparedness and socioeconomic status of the student body across institutions in a state. In this way, the estimation of a student’s

fair share of resources compensated for socioeconomic disadvantage. As Burke and Serban (1998) noted, “the desire for equity was a prime factor in the development of funding formulas” (p. 16).

In the past two decades, the rhetorical emphasis of legislative debates and policies pertaining to higher education financing has shifted from equity to efficiency concerns, and financing systems reflect this change. Formula funding has been modified as legislatures have begun to place an increased emphasis on the quality, productivity, and accountability of community colleges. The new financing approaches were termed “performance funding” and “performance budgeting.” Recent reports show that with mixed success, states are still exploring the efficacy of these strategies (Albright 1998; Burke et al. 2000; Burke and Serban 1998; Dougherty 2002b; Gaither, Nedwek, and Neal 1994; McKeown-Moak 2000; Schmidt 2002). While the percentage of funds allocated through performance funding is very small—estimated at an average of 3 percent of state higher education spending (Burke et al. 2000, 2; Schmidt 2002)—the shift away from funding based strictly on input levels (numbers of students) to outcomes indicates a new emphasis on accountability. Although the monetary incentives have not been large, campus administrators have responded to them (Dougherty 2002b, 10-14), sometimes in consideration of the additional dollars that flowed to campuses and other times in aversion to the negative publicity generated by poor reviews (Burke et al. 2000, 11; Schmidt 2002). As policy makers “enunciated their priorities” through the development of indicators, college administrators became aware of and focused on those priorities (Dougherty 2002b, 10-11).

Burke and Serban (1998, Table 4.1, p. 53) reported the most common indicators of success for two-year colleges in states that have adopted performance funding. These include retention and graduation rates, job placement, graduation credits and time to degree, licensure test scores, workforce training and development, and two- to four-year transfers. Categorizing common indicators, the authors found a heavy emphasis on efficiency and quality and a few indicators that reflected equity and institutional choice concerns. Indicators for equity measures such as affordable tuition and fees, minority student access and graduation rates, and developmental education services were observed infrequently in either the two- or four-year sector (Burke and Serban 1998, appendix A). Surveys conducted more recently show that the performance measurement trend has gained momentum in the past few years, with more states developing some type of accountability system and utilizing similar measures (Burke et al., 2000; State funding 2000), although new programs are even less likely to include equity measures of student participation and attainment by race than indicators developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Burke and Modarresi 2000). In 2000, nearly three-quarters of the states in some way linked campus funding to campus performance (Burke et al. 2000, 1).

The trend toward performance accountability has continued despite “campus resistance” (Burke et al. 2000, 13). A recent news report observed, “Most state legislatures have embraced the practice of linking tax-dollar support for public colleges to performance, even though a large share of public-college officials remain convinced that doing so is a bad idea.” College officials have “denounced” the plans

as “unworkable, unwise, and unfair” (Schmidt 2002). The design of more recent accountability systems appears to take these objections into account. They are “more flexible, collaborative, and diverse,” abandoning mandates for extensive lists of performance indicators in favor of more limited objectives that take diversity of campus missions into account. The campuses themselves have been more involved in designing and selecting the indicators (Burke et al. 2000, 12-13).

Inequitable social programs are economically inefficient (when equity is a valued goal), and no improvements in technical efficiency can change that.

This changing dynamic of accountability offers an important opportunity for community college leaders, civic activists, and academic researchers to engage in a political dialogue about the role of the public two-year sector. Those who believe in its democratizing role must argue for the design of performance indicators that include a focus on that role. Current accountability efforts emphasize production efficiency to the neglect of a broader political conversation about economic efficiency. Standards that focus narrowly on production efficiencies through increased outputs, without significant attention to the nature and distribution of those outputs, risk losing sight of the purpose of public investment in public colleges. A full valuation of the economic efficiency of public investments in community colleges must consider the colleges’ role in reducing social and economic inequality and strengthening democratic processes. These outcomes must be valued alongside economic development. Although competing political ideologies often place equity and efficiency goals in conflict, they are not necessarily at odds. Equitable programs can be economically efficient in the sense of achieving desired goals more successfully than the next best policy alternative. And they can minimize waste (operate with technical efficiency) while pursuing their objectives. However, inequitable social programs are economically inefficient (when equity is a valued goal), and no improvements in technical efficiency can change that.

Higher education will attract growing numbers of students and place a larger burden on society’s resources. Colleges and universities should certainly operate as efficiently as possible, keeping in mind that administrative processes are more amenable to waste reduction than are human development and learning (Bailey 1994). Organizations that function efficiently have greater resources to pursue their objectives, no matter how these objectives are defined. The effort to interject

equity goals into accountability programs depends on separating opposition to the overriding capitalist ideology in which efficiency has gained prominence, much to the neglect of principles of democratic equality, from the technical notion of efficiency. Equity goals can be pursued with technical efficiency in administration, program development, pedagogy, and other functions. The appeal to taxpayer support inherent in good management need not be ceded entirely. Efficiency can and should be a watchword of public colleges that value democratic equality as well as those steeped in capitalism.

What would it entail to interject principles of democratic equality, or “equity,” a term often used synonymously with notions of justice, fairness, and equality (DesJardins 2002, 177), into performance accountability systems? Answers to this question are explored in this section. First, a definition of outcome equity is provided, with statistics presented to demonstrate that the United States is far from achieving outcome equity in higher education. It is still a matter of active debate whether investment in the public two-year sector instead of in other policy alternatives has had a positive effect on educational and social inequities. Performance accountability systems provide a way to address this issue by measuring outcomes comprehensively by race, gender, and income; over long periods of time; and across different levels of public education. These data systems, which are discussed below, may be analyzed to provide further estimates of community college effects on student outcomes.

An equitable educational system was to be achieved through equal opportunity to participate in college. But the cornerstones of low tuition and open admissions at “democracy’s college” are being eroded by rising tuition rates and programmatic stratification. Nevertheless, “open access and educational opportunity remain *a mantra* for community college administrators” (Valadez 2002, 36, emphasis added). It is time to move beyond the mantra of access and benchmark success by equal outcomes. A continued, singular emphasis by equity advocates on access and equal opportunity, particularly one that opposes efficiency and performance accountability in all its aspects, is a lost opportunity to focus public and legislative attention on unequal outcomes.

Outcome equity. Levin (1994) provided the following definition of educational equity that articulates a standard based on equal outcomes not for individuals but for members of different social groups:

in all human populations there will be some variance in talents and attainments, even when all members are provided with exceptional opportunities to develop their talents. What that variance will be is certainly open to debate. More questionable, though, are the differences in educational attainments among populations born into different social, economic, and racial circumstances due to inadequate opportunities for human development. A reasonable criterion is that we have obtained educational equity when representatives of different racial, gender, and socioeconomic origins have about the same probabilities of reaching different educational outcomes. (P. 168)

Despite the hope of the decades in which community colleges and federal financial aid programs were founded to remove financial status as a barrier to higher education, income remains a determinant of educational attainment. The era of affirmative action similarly has not eliminated the social and economic disadvantages suffered by people of color. Higher education is far from achieving outcome equity, which, it should be emphasized, calls not for equal outcomes for all students but for equal outcomes on average for different socioeconomic groups.

Those who receive a baccalaureate degree earn almost twice as much as high school graduates and nearly 1.4 times the earnings of associate's degree recipients (Mumper 1996, 6-7). Yet as the Committee on Student Financial Assistance reported (Access denied 2001), among college-qualified high school graduates,

only 6% of students with the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) earn a bachelor's degree compared to 40% with the highest SES. Disproportionately represented among low-income students, both black and Hispanic students earn bachelor's degrees at a substantially lower rate than white students,

17 percent and 18 percent among black and Hispanic students, respectively, compared to 27 percent among white students (p. 4, Figure 3). As discussed in the previous section, low-income students are much more likely to not attend college at all, to enroll in the less remunerative two-year sector, and to lower their chances of academic success by enrolling part-time. Those who do attain an associate's degree will earn an average of 1.4 times more than a high school graduate (Mumper 1996, 6-7), but a distressingly low proportion of community college students attain the degree, roughly one in five (Kane and Rouse 1999, 68; Nettles and Millett n.d., Enrollment Challenges). Although the transfer function is central to the community colleges' democratizing role, only 16 percent of community college starters attain a bachelor's degree. This number contrasts sharply with the nearly 60 percent of four-year college starters who obtain a bachelor's (Kane and Rouse 1999, 68). With attrition rates of 44 percent, community college students leave college without a degree more than twice as often as students starting in four-year colleges (Dougherty 2002a, 317). These averages conceal much larger attrition rates for minority students, which Nora (n.d., Persistence Rates) reported at 60 percent (with extreme values as high as 80 percent).

Whether the creation of community colleges has enhanced the educational attainment of low-income and underrepresented groups is a matter of active debate among economists and educational researchers. It is not possible to observe the outcomes that may have been achieved by creating additional four-year campuses rather than community colleges or by providing public subsidies for corporate training programs and union apprenticeships rather than for vocational education at public colleges. Using multivariate statistical techniques, economists estimate the democratizing effect of community colleges—the additional years of higher education completed by those who would have completed none in the absence of a community college—versus the diversion effect—the number of

bachelor's degrees never received due to the high attrition and low transfer rates of community college students. Evidence of a diversion effect supports charges that community colleges play a "cooling out" function (Clark 1960), dampening students' educational ambitions and channeling lower-class students into low-paying jobs without opportunity for advancement. The effect is to provide workers to the economy in socially efficient ways while maintaining social stratification (Labaree 1997).

Based on his review of multivariate analyses that control for student characteristics, Dougherty (1994, 67) concluded that community colleges do increase overall college-going rates among high school graduates but diminish baccalaureate degree completion. Controlling for background, aspirations, and ability, studies have estimated "students entering the community college receive 11-19% fewer bachelor's degrees than similar students entering four-year colleges" (Dougherty 1994, 53). Thus, the gap in bachelor's degree attainment is considerable, and the "democratizing effect" of increased higher education participation appears to be undercut by the "diversion effect" of reduced bachelor's degree attainment (Dougherty 2002a, 316). However, in recent research, Rouse (1998) and Leigh and Gill (in press) concluded that the democratizing effect outweighs the diversion effect. Early studies of the effects of community colleges on educational outcomes are now subject to criticism for failing to adequately control for differences in the characteristics of students who "self-select" into further education and those who exit (Cameron and Heckman 2001, 465; Grubb 1999b, 2; Kane and Rouse 1999, 71; Rouse 1994, 602).

New data and estimation techniques have evolved through the 1990s, but the new generation of studies has not yet amassed convincing evidence for the democratization effect. Based on estimates of the higher earnings and employment status of community college students relative to high school graduates, Grubb (1999b) concluded that "critics of community colleges are incorrect in their wholesale condemnation of these institutions" (p. 7). However, estimates of the positive returns to community college study do not address the potential loss of greater earnings and employment status due to the hypothesized diversion for bachelor's degree attainment. Further study is needed to empirically evaluate community colleges as agents of social stratification or mobility. However, it is clear, based on the descriptive statistics above, that college participation and degree attainment in the United States is stratified by race and income. Colleges must play a greater role in addressing these persistent educational inequities.

Equity-inclusive performance accountability. The design of equity-inclusive performance accountability can be achieved by mandating extended analyses of current indicators to look at outcomes by race, gender, and income. With a productive efficiency rationale, the focus has been on improving the rates at which colleges move students through the system and into the workforce, as indicated by retention, graduation, transfer, and job placement. The system is indifferent to the distribution of these outcomes among different socioeconomic groups. Creating

equity-inclusive systems depends on redefining the valued outcomes to eliminate this indifference. Such a change would indicate that the distribution of outcomes matters.

College participation rates as determined by enrollment, persistence, graduation, and transfer statistics are already among the most common indicators of performance for two-year colleges. Job placement, licensure test scores, and earnings are also common indicators (Burke and Serban 1998, Table 4.1). By analyzing these outcomes by socioeconomic and racial groups, these efficiency indicators can also serve as equity measures. Equitable outcomes would be indicated by positive answers to the following questions:

1. Do members of different socioeconomic and racial groups in the state enroll in public two-year and four-year colleges at the same rate, or have differences in the enrollment rates declined this year?
2. Do members of different socioeconomic and racial groups living in communities served by this (an individual) college enroll, persist, attain associate's degrees, transfer, and attain bachelor's degrees at the same rate, or are the differences in these rates declining?
3. When academic and vocational programs are categorized by the economic value of the degrees issued, are the rates of completion by members of different socioeconomic and racial groups served by the state and by each college the same, or are differences in rates declining?

In response to the data demands of the accountability movement, rich longitudinal data systems now exist in many states to analyze these equity questions (Grubb 1999a; Sanchez, Laanan, and Wiseley 1999). Approximately twenty states link unemployment insurance data with higher education data to observe the workforce participation of college participants and graduates (Grubb 1999a). Florida is considered a leader in the development of such systems. The state's Postsecondary Progression study analyzes data compiled from the Department of Education, the Community College System, the State University System, the Division of Colleges and Universities, the Office of Student Financial Assistance, and the Department of Labor and Employment Security (Postsecondary progression 2002). This lengthy list demonstrates the high level of bureaucratic collaboration required to develop such an extensive database. Missouri is also now developing an ambitious longitudinal database to track the progress of individual students from high school through college and employment (Wittstruck, Watson, and Monroe 2002).

However, these systems were not born of equity concerns, and equity analyses are liable to neglect even where the data exists to accomplish them. Exceptions exist, such as in California where Sanchez, Laanan, and Wiseley (1999) analyzed postcollege earnings using a linked unemployment insurance and community college system database to report earnings gains by race and ethnicity and by initial socioeconomic status. Sheehan et al. (2002) analyzed the employment and earnings of Ohio public college two- and four-year graduates with a focus on the experiences of low-income students relative to their peers. Reviewing the uses of integrated state data, Grubb (1999a) emphasized that both the technical challenges of

developing the databases and the political conflicts have limited analyses to date. However,

as states move to use these data for accountability and performance-based funding, the problems of overly simple analysis are likely to generate opposition from colleges, who could claim that state figures misstate their local experiences. Thus, political pressures may force states into more sophisticated analyses. (P. 5)

As these pressures mount, college administrators are likely to have the interests of their individual colleges foremost in mind. Therefore, it is imperative that equity advocates in legislative positions, civic organizations, higher educational institutions, and policy institutes realize the potential of these complex data systems and argue for the inclusion and public dissemination of analyses based on socioeconomic status and race.

This proposal for equity-inclusive performance accountability calls for the use of outcome indicators to take an ideological turn away from valuing efficiency as a hallmark of good business practices to valuing efficiency as a means to achieve outcome equity in higher education. It does not address the question of whether performance accountability functions to achieve its current purposes. A case study of the implementation of performance measurement systems provides evidence of mixed results, with some states falling short on important measures of attrition and others improving transfer rates and time to degree (Dougherty 2002b, 20-21). Dougherty (2002b, 17-18) observed that some steps taken by colleges to improve student outcomes were pedagogically valuable, for example, improving counseling services, while others served to improve indicators without necessarily helping students learn, for example, redefining low-performing credit programs as noncredit and moving them outside the scope of outcome measurement.

In the logic of performance accountability, the articulation of priorities and the link between outcomes and state funds creates incentives for college administrators to achieve desired goals. Accountability systems do not prescribe the methods by which outcomes should be obtained. Colleges themselves are responsible for determining how they will meet the outcome goals. As Dougherty's (2002b) case study demonstrates, the steps taken can be substantive and constructive or simply amount to new ways of counting students, credits, and degrees. Equity-inclusive performance accountability has value in establishing equal outcomes as a goal for higher education. Other efforts to assess administrative and pedagogical practices are also needed to make progress toward that goal. As Nora (n.d.) has indicated, in the future, accountability must focus on the "outcomes of those [students] seeking services, the involvement of students in a new learning paradigm, and their participation in a collaborative learning environment" (Blueprint, paragraph 4). The focus on outcomes is coordinated with pedagogical and administrative reform. To accomplish this goal, he argued, "colleges must design programs that are data driven, based on sound data analyses, and measure conceptually meaningful outcomes" (Blueprint, paragraph 4). Those objectives require an ongoing revision of performance accountability systems.

Higher education scholars have described the positive effect democratic educational communities have on student outcomes (Rendon n.d.; Rhoads and Valadez 1996). Rhoads and Valadez (1996, 217) have conceptualized “education as the practice of democracy” as a foundation for a “philosophical and practical framework from which to structure community college life.” Their recommendations for reform include emphases on participatory management, collaborative classroom practices, commitment to multiculturalism, and critical pedagogy that includes issues of social inequality in the curriculum. Rhoads and Valadez also invoked Kincheloe’s notion of “good work” to call for a “reconstitution” of vocational education that “challenges dominant conceptions of work and worker identity” (p. 53). They argued for “a broader vision of students, encompassing not only their role as workers but also their role as citizens.” It is possible to incorporate this broader vision into performance accountability systems by recognizing efficiency as a mode in which to reach desired outcomes rather than valuing it as an end in itself.

Summary

This article makes a case for using performance accountability systems to measure outcome equity in higher education. By distinguishing technical, or productive, efficiency from an ideology of efficiency, it is possible to oppose efficiency as an end in itself and argue for an emphasis within performance accountability systems on the equitable distribution of higher education outcomes. While community colleges have been called “democracy’s college” for their role in providing open access to higher education, access is being undermined today by rising tuition and curricular stratification. Access is an insufficient standard for ensuring democratic equality, as evidenced by persistent inequities in the rates at which low-income students and students of color enroll in college and obtain degrees. Performance accountability systems establish rich longitudinal data sets that should be exploited to shift the rhetorical focus from access and equal opportunity to equal outcomes.

Note

1. More specifically, at the point of efficiency, the “marginal social benefit should equal the marginal social cost of production” (Breneman and Nelson 1981, 41).

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