

QUALITY AND ACCESS IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION:

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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The years 1950-1980 might be called the access years for American higher education. In 1950, only half of all young Americans were graduating from high school. A decade later, this figure grew to two-thirds, and by 1970, three fourths. The proportion of high school graduates going on to college showed a similarly rapid increase--from one-fourth in 1950 to about a third by 1965, to almost half by 1970 (Advisory Panel, 1977, p. 13).

There were a number of reasons for the extremely rapid rise in the proportion of young people entering college. First, the "G.I. Bill," which offered generous financial aid to servicemen returning from World War II, demonstrated that far more young people were "college material" than had ever been realized. Servicemen, many coming from families that never would have considered college, did very well in college in the 1950s.

Second, the Civil Rights Movement focussed attention on the importance of education, not only for ethnic minorities, but for all groups, who had not previously considered college as a

realistic option--women, the children of blue-collar workers, and students from the lower socioeconomic classes.

And finally, the years from 1950-1980 were years of relative affluence in America. Resources existed to expand the number of colleges, not only to meet existing demand but, as it turned out, to create further demands for educational opportunity. Open-admission community colleges which catered specifically to so-called "non-traditional" students were opened at the rate of one new college each week throughout the late 1960s. Between 1965 and 1975, almost 500 new community colleges opened their doors in the United States.

This enormous increase in the opportunities to attend college appeared to many to be accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the quality of education. National attention was focussed on the sharp decline in the test scores of students entering college. True, the most talked about measures of decline were on the Scholastic Achievement Tests, (SAT) which were taken largely by students applying to relatively selective colleges that used test scores as one criterion for selection. But a national panel, appointed to study the decline of SAT scores, found that virtually all nationally standardized tests were showing similar declines in the verbal and quantitative skills of young people coming through the American school system (Advisory Panel, 1977).

The SAT scores began dropping in 1963, and continued to drop steadily for the next 15 years. Since this period of test score

decline corresponded rather closely to the years of greatly increased access to college, the question was raised as to whether "too many people were going to college?" Was quality becoming the victim of access?

Some of the most careful and comprehensive education research ever conducted was directed to the investigation of this question in the late 1970s. The Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline (1977) concluded, after exhaustive investigation of every conceivable hypothesis, that a "two-stage" explanation was necessary to account for the data. The first stage, the 1963-1970 decline, was attributable primarily to changes in the composition of the SAT-taking population. "Most--probably two-thirds to three-fourths--of the SAT score decline between 1963 and about 1970 was related to the 'compositional' changes in the groups of students taking the test" (p. 45). But only about a quarter of the decline between 1970 and 1977 could be attributed to continuing change in the make-up of the test-taking group. Rather, the even sharper decline that occurred after 1970 was attributed to "pervasive" changes taking place in schools and in society at large. Schools were found to be lowering standards--requiring fewer courses, less homework, and accepting lower levels of performance, while at the same time, tolerating more absenteeism, automatic grade-to-grade promotion, and rampant grade inflation (Advisory Panel, 1977, p. 47). In addition to problems in the schools, the

Panel blamed changes in the society--too much television, less family support for education, and general disruption and turmoil caused by the political and social protests of the era.

The Panel quite explicitly rejected the view that lowered academic performance was caused by increased access, thus providing one well-informed perspective on the question to be addressed at the Princeton Anglo-American meeting on the relationship between Access and Quality in higher education.

There is recent evidence in American education to support the faith that Access and Quality need not be inversely related. Test scores are going up again, and there is beginning to be some evidence that the recent demands for academic excellence are having an impact on academic standards. While assertions about national trends toward more rigorous standards can be made on the basis of self-reports from colleges claiming to be making the changes called for in the 1980s reform reports, (See Chronicle for Higher Education, March 12, 1986) a more convincing test of the potential for the happy co-existence of access and quality may be made by looking in depth at the experience of community colleges.

Community colleges in the United States are virtually all public, open-admission, low tuition colleges with an emphasis on increasing the access to college for previously underserved populations. Undeniably, community colleges have been more successful than any other segment of American higher education in

attracting new kinds of students. They serve the majority of ethnic minorities and part-time students, and the socioeconomic level and the past academic performance of their students is clearly below the averages of students attending four-year colleges. The relationship of access to quality is literally put to the test in American community colleges. The question is, Is it possible for non-selective colleges to provide high quality education?

The most concrete way to look at the evidence on this question is to examine closely a college that has made "access with quality" its slogan. Miami-Dade Community College is the largest community college in the United States, enrolling some 125,000 students in credit and non-credit courses in 1985-86. The majority of students (more than 2/3) are ethnic minorities--50% Hispanic and 17% Black. The college also has the second largest enrollment of foreign students of any college or university in the United States. Forty-five percent of Miami-Dade's students report that their native language is something other than English; 59% enroll on a part-time basis, and all are commuters. Close to 30% of Miami-Dade's students qualified for Pell Grants in 1983, grants that are especially designed for disadvantaged students (Skidmore, 1983).

Of all of the colleges in the United States, Miami-Dade would seem to be one of the most intractable when it comes to implementing academic reforms--it is huge, spread across four

campuses and 180 different degree and certificate programs; it serves mostly part-time commuting students from disadvantaged and low SES backgrounds, and it is located in one of America's most rapidly changing urban areas. The question President Robert McCabe and his colleagues asked a decade ago, when they started their reforms was, Can we maintain open access and provide a high quality education for the diverse student population of Miami-Dade Community College?

In general the reforms at Miami-Dade have consisted of providing greater structure and direction, accompanied by more assistance and a more demanding curriculum, with emphasis on the academic skills. (McCabe, 1981, p. 5). It is a tough-minded approach to standards, with a firm commitment to provide the remedial and other services needed by entering students, a majority of whom are deficient in one or more of the basic academic skills.

Fortunately, Miami-Dade has monitored the progress of students and the effects of the reforms since they began their major push for higher expectations and higher standards in 1976. The results are impressive, and it may prove useful to take a quick look at results before describing in some detail the nature of the reforms.

In 1982, the State of Florida initiated a statewide testing program (CLAST), required of all students at the end of their second year in college. Students must pass all four subtests

(reading, writing, essay, and computation) in order to get an Associate in Arts Degree from a community college, and they must pass three of the four in order to continue their education --to the upper two years -- in the State University System. Since the Florida testing program began, the performance of Miami-Dade students on the CLAST tests has been steadily improving. In 1983, 63% passed all four tests; the pass rate was 75% for 1984 and 88% for 1985. The improvements cannot be attributed to better entering classes, since entering classes have remained comparable over these years (Roueché & Baker, 1987). The improvements, however, could be related to the growing ability of teachers to "teach to the test." Maybe as Miami-Dade teachers become more familiar with the test, they are improving their knowledge of how to teach the skills that are needed in order to pass the tests--but then, presumably that is one of the things that the Florida legislature had in mind.

There are also some impressive data comparing the performance of Miami-Dade students to those in the more selective State University System (SUS). In 1985, the 88% of Miami-Dade students who passed all four subtests of CLAST tests scored higher on average than students at the two local selective universities. This is all the more impressive since about 30% of the Miami-Dade students who were successful on the 1985 CLAST had deficiencies and would not have been admitted to the Florida State University System as freshmen. Those Miami-Dade students who were eligible

for the state universities but chose instead to attend Miami-Dade Community College, did as well or better on CLAST than students who enrolled for their first two years in the state universities (Roueche & Baker, 1987, p. 85-86).

So far, the results of the Miami-Dade reforms seem sufficiently positive to deserve a look at the structure and direction of their reform programs. Descriptions of the many pieces of the Miami-Dade reforms exist in the literature (some of it referenced in this paper), and I will discuss, in this paper, only those which relate directly to the issues of quality and standards.

When Miami-Dade began their reforms in the late 1970s, access was still a major social and political cause, and community colleges, the major vehicle for access to higher education, were noted more for their ability to admit students than to educate them. Tests were shunned in the community colleges nationwide--even for diagnostic purposes--and the open admission policies resulted in greatly increased diversity in the classroom. It was not uncommon for teachers to have students reading from the 4th grade to the 13th grade levels in some classrooms. Diversity in the classroom was exacerbated by the "right-to-fail" ideology which included self-advisement and few requirements. Students insisted on access to any education program offered, and the slogan of the access revolution --"the right to fail" was often fulfilled as students who were

drastically underqualified, registered for classes in which there was little realistic hope for success. "As they wished, students did indeed have rights and freedoms--the right to attempt whatever they wished at their own risk, the freedom to select their own courses, unrestricted by college or departmental rules, and freedom from remedial courses, cut-off scores on achievement tests, or even advice." (Roueche & Baker, 1987, p. 35).

In this climate, the direction of the Miami-Dade reforms was toward more direction, increasing structure and requirements, and concentrating on collecting information and monitoring student performance and progress. Gradually, professional judgment was returned to the design of a sequential curriculum and to setting acceptable standards for performance.

Between 1978 and 1986 the college instituted the following reforms: assessment testing after admission with remedial requirements for those with deficiencies, a required general education core program, increased feedback to students on their status and progress, warnings and enforced regulations for those failing to maintain academic standards. All of this was supported by extensive programs of remediation and advisement.

Since most of the reform programs depend heavily on information and feedback, computerized technology was the key that unlocked the innovations for monitoring the progress of this huge commuting part-time population. To cite but one example of the dependence on technology, the Academic Alert program is a

computerized information system that provides each of Miami-Dade's thousands of students with a personalized letter six weeks into each term on their progress in each course, with special "early warning" signals about potential problems. The letters are composed by taking into account information on class performance and attendance (provided by instructors) and information previously provided by students or college records--grades, hours of work, native language, basic skills, etc. Academic Alert provides the student with information (which teachers have provided at mid term) on performance and attendance. It also offers suggestions (based on information from college records or the student) about reducing course loads, taking remedial courses, seeing a counselor or the instructor. If counselors were to provide such information, it would take hundreds of people, working around the clock, and there would still need to be some centralized system for collecting the essential "input" information from students and teachers.

The innovation that gained the most attention for Miami-Dade --and that was probably most controversial in the beginning--was one called Standards of Academic Progress (SOAP). This is a system of academic warning, probation, and finally suspension. Beginning in the semester in which seven credits are earned, the student's progress is continually monitored, and too many withdrawals or a low GPA will trigger the system to notify the student in writing of his/her status. Since course load has been

found to be a significant factor in student performance with this largely working population, a student placed on warning or probation automatically has his/her course load limited for the next semester. Whenever a student is warned, information will be provided about how to improve the status--e.g. suggestions for developmental courses, counselling or study skills courses.

In 1978, the first year of SOAP, more than 6,000 students were given some level of warning. Between 1978 and 1985, more than 15,000 students were suspended--indicating the college meant business, but also costing the college more than \$1,500,000 in state and federal funds (Roueché & Baker, 1987, p. 76). The message intended by the suspensions was to inform "non-achieving students that there is no further help we can provide, and that society has, through this institution, made full effort on their behalf." (Skidmore, 1983).

One of the initial concerns about SOAP was that it would prove especially harmful to the retention and graduation of minority students, but data collected by Miami-Dade in 1983 (Losak, 1983) showed that graduation rates for Blacks entering in 1979 (after SOAP) were 25% higher than for those entering in 1976 (before SOAP).

One of the keystones of the Miami-Dade reforms has been the provision of information--vast amounts of it, easily available and pinpointed to practical questions. Through innovative use of computers, Miami-Dade has been able to answer questions for

students, teachers, administrators and others who may need information for planning, curriculum decisions, research or a variety of other uses. Some examples of questions that could be answered almost immediately by one or another of Miami-Dade's information systems are:

1. How many more courses and what titles are required for a student to complete degree or certification requirements or to transfer to a upper-division college in Florida, majoring in the subject of the student's choice? (For an answer to this question, a student may go to the nearest computer on campus, enter identification, and request and receive an answer within minutes through AGIS (Advisement and Graduation Information System)).

2. For placement and advising purposes, a dean may wish to know, What is the minimum placement test score required to make a C in a required course? (Such questions are routinely researched by the Office of Institutional Research).

3. In order to allocate resources efficiently, a dean may wish to know, How many students are in academic difficulty mid term? (Academic Alert).

4. An individual student may wish to know, which instructors have indicated unsatisfactory progress at mid term, and where should that student go for help? (Academic Alert).

5. What kinds of errors is a student making in course work and where can the student get further information about that

pattern of errors? (RSVP,--Response System with Variable Prescriptions--is a computer-based instructional management system used by classroom teachers to give students information about their performance. It has been used in classes ranging from physical fitness to English composition.)

It is not my intention here to describe in detail all of the programs that are elements in the Miami-Dade reforms. The point is that they are all directed toward the goal of assuring that access and quality can co-exist. In fact, the leadership at Miami-Dade would go further and claim that access and quality must not only be compatible, but that one cannot exist without the other. Viewed from the perspective of society, we cannot have high quality education without devising ways to educate all who wish to learn, and we cannot have equality of opportunity without high quality education for all who gain access.

To date, Miami-Dade has been the showcase of American community colleges. When two professors from the University of Texas decided to conduct a study of the characteristics of "excellent" community colleges, they started by consulting the literature, and they also polled a panel of nationally-recognized authorities on community colleges. In developing a list of colleges recognized as outstanding, they found that Miami-Dade generated more than 3 1/2 times as many points as the next highest-rated community college, and they therefore decided to make their study of excellence at Miami-Dade alone (Roueche &

Baker, 1987).

One of the characteristics that keeps Miami-Dade at the head of the pack is that they believe that improvement is always possible. Having built a reputation for using technology well in education, Miami-Dade is now turning its attention to the more personal relationships between faculty and students. The latest reform, modestly entitled The Teaching/Learning Project, but typically given an action-orientated title by the President who speaks of "Organizing Miami-Dade Community College to Emphasize Faculty/Student Performance" (McCabe, 1987). The Teaching/Learning Project articulates three interrelated goals: 1) to improve the quality of teaching and learning at Miami-Dade, 2) to make teaching at Miami-Dade a professionally rewarding career, and 3) to make teaching and learning the focal point of college activities and decision processes (Teaching/Learning Project, 1987).

Characteristically, this latest project was kicked off by the President with some fanfare, heavy involvement of Miami-Dade faculty and administrators, and assignment of personnel and resources to the project. By March, 1987, the following goals had been identified:

1. Insuring that all faculty and staff fully understand the college's commitments with regard to students. Outcomes that are valued by the college will be identified and broad commitment to achieving these outcomes will be sought.

2. Firmly establishing the centrality of student learning outcomes in the total college operation by relating evaluation, promotion and tenure decisions directly to those outcomes.

3. Incorporating what is known about successful faculty behavior and future needs of the college into the selection/retention process.

4. Assisting faculty to learn more about successful practices in teaching/learning, and to become skilled in classroom teaching/learning research. A graduate course in teaching/learning will be provided by the college on-site.

5. Utilizing institutional research capabilities to provide data for faculty instructional research and evaluation.

6. Creating a professional environment which includes recognition, reward for contributions, an attitude of respect, and compensation appropriate for professional career teaching faculty.

7. Providing support to faculty in their professional growth and achievement as teachers.

8. Developing a system which will relate the success of units of the college in achieving desired student outcomes to administrative promotion and evaluation (McCabe, 1987).

The basic goal underlying these specific action-oriented goals is to "institute a program in which teaching/learning is the focal point of the college's activities and decision-making processes" (McCabe, 1987, p. 3).

Past performance would suggest that if anyone can do something to improve teaching and learning at the college level, Miami-Dade probably can. But for everyone, the leadership of Miami-Dade included, the goals will always be ahead of accomplishments in trying to achieve "equality with quality" in collegiate education. There is still a large gap between the majority of Miami-Dade Community College graduates are able to do and what many think a college graduate should be able to do. Research is unequivocal; the easiest way to achieve high quality output is to start with high quality input, inevitably through selection for admission on the same criteria that are desired upon graduation.

The point of this paper is two-fold: First, to present an analysis of the data on the relationship between access and quality as revealed in the United States experience with increasing access. Second, to present a case analysis of the

acknowledged leader in open-admission education--Miami-Dade Community College.

As I conclude this paper, I confess to mixed feelings on the role of external evaluations of Miami-Dade's innovations. On the one hand, anyone visiting the campuses or pouring over the masses of data collected has to be impressed by the energy and commitment of the people at Miami-Dade to the conviction that open-access colleges can offer high quality education. At the same time, the visitor to Miami-Dade and the researcher looking at data has to notice the tendency to put the best light possible on reforms that fall short of the ideal.

The same tendency to believe in the possibility of access with excellence is noted in the work of the national Advisory Panel studying the decline of the SAT. While they appear admirably objective, and they are using the well-honed research expertise of Educational Testing Service and other researchers to look at the impact of increased access on educational quality, there is still a reluctance to even entertain the notion that increased access may be deleterious to quality.

The hope that access will not sacrifice quality is consistent with the American dream of excellence in education for all. The sentiment of the Advisory Panel draws the American conclusion: "We do not find support for the conclusion [that there are simply too many young people going on to college] in this evidence. Should the next 15 years see the opening of still further

postsecondary educational opportunities to young people who today are not finishing high school, with another attendant decline in test scores, we suspect that the reaction would again be to welcome the problems on the one hand and on the other to recommend changes in the schools to meet it" (p. 17).

8/14/87

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