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The Dilemma of Accountability in Higher Education in the U.S: A Systems Perspective

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Accountability as a general concept is often view as an intervention, or set of interventions, generally into an area the interveners have reason to believe will lead to improved results through bringing about changes at a particular point in a system. All organizations are systems, and most complex social problems exist within contexts where multiple organizations have a direct or indirect effect on a given outcome. The trick is defining the key pressure points that are in fact amenable to accountability interventions, then tailoring interventions to achieve desired goals with a minimum of unintended or undesired outcomes.

Higher education is a system like all others subject to these generalizations regarding accountability. It is a system that is composed of subsystems and, within the subsystems, specific elements, often operating in a highly autonomous fashion. Higher education is composed of public, private, two-year, four-year, and can have a variety of focal points and programs. Even within one system, such as state public universities, considerable complexity exists among campuses, colleges within each institution, and departments within each college. Conceptualizing and operationalizing accountability in the context of such complexity is a truly daunting proposition.

One place, however, in which commonality is assumed to exist, in some fashion, is undergraduate admissions policies and procedures. Although each system and each campus within a system may set its own specific admissions standards, all use roughly the same information based on some assumptions about the type of education students have had in high school and about the nature of the type of entry-level courses they are most likely to take upon admission.

The problem or issue, from my vantage point, is with the system higher education uses to admit students and the subsequent success that admitted students achieve. Stated succinctly, it is as follows: ***how well prepared for college success are the students higher education admits, and how does the system support or hinder their success once they are admitted?*** I view this issue in terms of the interaction of several systems, some that precede higher education, and some within higher education. I examine each of these systems in turn, then conclude with recommendations of ways to enforce a measure of accountability and system improvement.

1. The Admissions System

Higher education's ultimate ability to produce students, particularly at the baccalaureate level, who are uniformly well prepared for success beyond college is highly influenced by the students admitted in the first place. While higher education theoretically has always strived to admit the most qualified students, the question is whether in practice current policies admit a group of students who are truly prepared to benefit from the college experience. This is a value-added proposition: To what degree does the admissions process result in a pool of students who are capable of benefiting from what an institution of higher education has to offer?

Such a process needs to take into account two factors: 1) is the candidate properly prepared to succeed? 2) how much value will the education add to the candidate? The first factor is a strictly performance-based decision. The second factor requires a closer examination of the privilege and advantage a student brings to college. I will not examine the second factor in depth, but it is worth keeping it in the back of one's mind as issues of accountability are considered. If not, the inadvertent result can be to reward institutions that impart the least value and punish those that add the most.

Examining the first factor, admitting students prepared to succeed, it is clear that admissions policies as currently constituted (except at perhaps the most highly selective institutions) are much like the policy my university has toward faculty parking. You must purchase a permit in order to park, but this is no guarantee that a space will be available. In other words, admission policies may yield a set of applicants who are offered admission, but the institution makes no guarantee or warranty that all of those students are capable of succeeding. Admission to college, in this context, is an invitation to come and see if you can succeed. What many learn is that they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to make it past the freshman year, let alone graduate. Others abandon long-cherished dreams when they are unable to get past an entry-level course that controls access to a major they had planned to pursue.

2. The High School as College Preparatory System

Higher education admissions officials can rightly argue that high schools do not maintain uniform quality standards, which makes it exceedingly difficult to make admissions decisions that reflect probabilities of success. Admissions processes, it can be argued, utilize the best information available, including scores on national tests of college readiness, courses taken in high school, grades in those courses, rank in high school class, record of extra-curricular activities, personal essays, and letters of reference. What more can be asked of higher education than this?

The short answer is that many if not most of the measures currently employed have developed serious problems, both in terms of what they measure and how they report what is measured. High school grades in "rigorous" college preparatory courses are often cited as the single most important indicator of potential college success. However, increasingly the content of those courses varies not only from high school to high school, but from teacher to teacher within a high school. Part of this occurs as a result of the fact that an ever-increasing proportion of high school students go on to college, and the

college preparatory curriculum now extends spreads beyond a core of teachers who had historically controlled these courses within a school, and with them access to college. When most classes a high school offers fulfill college preparatory requirements, the variance among those classes is necessarily greater. This turn of events is not necessarily a bad thing, because it was not uncommon for teachers to withhold entry into college prep courses to students whom they deemed not to be “college material,” for whatever reason. This opening up of college prep classes has led to serious increase in variance, though, in terms of what students who take such courses know and are able to do. Our research has confirmed this variance at a range of high schools across the nation through content analysis of similarly-named courses.

The American K-12 educational system’s vaunted local control results in extremes of challenge and content coverage across schools and districts even for courses with the same name. No functional control over course content exists beyond the school district level, and sometimes it does not exist even at that level.

Grading practices within courses of the same name in the same school vary just as widely. A related although more severe and intractable problem has been the unchecked increase in the average high school student’s grade point average over the past 30 years. More students are getting A’s in more high school subjects each year. Yesterday’s C is today’s B. When these three factors are combined, variance in course content, variance in grading practices, and grade inflation, the underlying value of a “rigorous” program of college preparation is diminished significantly.

The effect on colleges is that they are unable to assume much about what students actually know and can do. Research conducted by our center on the content of entry-level college courses in math and science in particular demonstrate convincingly that many entry-level credit-bearing college courses essentially re-teach precisely the same material students were taught in the corresponding high school course, and they teach the material as new material, not review. This is unfortunate for all involved. High schools can’t or don’t need to have students learn material in the first place if the material will be re-taught to them anyway, and students often get the wrong message upon taking their first college class, that it is just a rehash of high school. These students are often shocked when the pace accelerates or the course moves into new content. They have neither the study skills nor discipline to maintain the pace and focus necessary to learn what is suddenly new and very challenging material.

There is some justification for re-teaching high school content in college under the current system whereby students are required to take only two to three years’ worth of science and mathematics (and second language and social studies) courses in high school. As a result, a student can go several years between math classes, particularly if the student does not take the entry-level math course in college until the second year on campus.

Although high school students routinely take four years of English, what occurs in such courses is, once again, largely undefined. Our studies of high school English classes

indicate they tend to focus on literature and literary analysis, areas that reflect the academic training and interests of many high school English teachers. The problem here is that students do not have high school English courses that provide them formal training in composition or rhetoric, nor are they explicitly taught the more sophisticated reading skills necessary to comprehend complex informational texts, which constitute the bulk of college reading for most students. What colleges accept as evidence of literacy, namely four years of high school English, is often very specialized and not likely to generalize well across the types and range of literacy expectations they will confront in college. nor will students have developed well all-important writing skills.

Perhaps most important and most puzzling is the apparent discontinuity between the importance college faculty place upon thinking skills and the importance high school teachers place on content coverage. Here, once again, colleges may not be communicating well the true measures of potential success. Our research has repeatedly found that college instructors emphasize analytic thinking, ability to accept criticism, ability to cope with ambiguity, logic, and the use of evidentiary rules, to cite just a few examples, as key skills that should be developed by studying content material. In their view, content is largely a means by which to stimulate ways of thinking that enable students to understand a subject area and how people who study that subject area think. High school instruction does little to prepare students for these expectations and goals.

3. The System of College Tests

This issue of measuring accurately what is important for college success is reflected in the two most important tests colleges use to make admissions decisions, namely the SAT and ACT. While both tests are certainly worthy psychometric instruments in many respects, they simply cannot capture the kinds of skills that appear to be most important to college success and that college faculty profess to value in their students. These include, among others, critical analysis of complex material, analytic approaches to non-routine problem solving, ability to synthesize and interpret competing or contradictory points of view or documents, persistence when faced with a difficult task, and ability to learn from failures. These tests do make an effort to gauge some of these skills, but generally fall far short of measuring what is truly required. By the very nature of their design, these tests are limited to a relatively few short paper-and-pencil responses.

While these tests are certainly not without their uses, they have become disproportionately important to colleges, particularly now that grade inflation has resulted in compression of grade point averages at levels approaching 4.0 (or exceeding it in places where course weighting is practiced). Perhaps more important, students are not supposed to be able to prepare for these tests. Leaving aside for the moment test prep centers and their ability to yield some improvements, these tests are designed to measure very broadly the sum of a student's high school preparation. This is disadvantageous, not because students can't prep for the test, but because they (and their teachers) receive little practical guidance regarding how to structure the high school curriculum and what to teach in order to be college-ready, as opposed to test-ready.

While the College Board, makers of the SAT, and American College Testing, who sponsor the ACT, have both quietly moved in the direction of offering standards and content frameworks to help guide high schools, this work has been largely ignored by higher education and high schools. The functional result is that the diversity of curricular expectations across high schools results in students from more affluent and less racially diverse schools by and large doing better on these tests than students from poor and minority schools. Failure by higher education to generate and communicate clear expectations and to develop means by which to measure them appropriately results in the perpetuation of differential access to postsecondary education in this country and an uneven high school curriculum that disadvantages many students from groups historically underrepresented in college.

We must ask why we have admission criteria that allow the kinds of variance in preparation when that variance serves no useful purpose. We must ask what message colleges send to high schools when they allow grade inflation to run unchecked for decades. We must ask why admissions offices rely on tests that are specifically not supposed to measure what is taught in high school. We must ask how accountable are higher education institutions for the success of the students they admit.

From an accountability perspective, how accountable is higher education for the decisions made regarding who is admitted? Perhaps even more importantly, how accountable is higher education to communicate with and work in partnership with high schools to ensure students are properly prepared for the expectations they will face in college? Because the governance of education in the United States is divided between the high school and colleges, most postsecondary institutions would assert that they have no authority and in some cases no right to work in partnership with high schools beyond providing admissions requirements. This viewpoint is becoming increasingly untenable and counterproductive as the proportion of students who go on to college increases each decade while the proportion receiving bachelor's degrees remains essentially constant.

4. The Placement System

The first year in college raises its own set of issues. First among them is placement. Institutions of higher education rely on one of three commercial tests or on some sort of "home grown" test to place students into entry-level courses in composition and mathematics, and sometimes other courses. These instruments may or may not be linked with a specific corresponding college course. The problem is that students seeking to place into a range of entry-level courses are often confronted by a test for which they were not prepared and that aligns poorly with what they were taught in high school.

Placement testing often functions as a proxy for the admissions process in that they seek to gauge actual student knowledge first-hand. Many students who are admitted without conditions find out via a placement test that they lack key core academic skills. For many this means extending their time in college as they must first take non-credit-bearing courses before being allowed access to the regular curriculum.

Wouldn't it be preferable to let these students know before they are admitted how they will be placed, particularly while there still might be time for them to improve their skills while still in high school? For starters, if state high school tests could be aligned better with college placement, as is being attempted to some degree by the CSU system in California, high school juniors could gain some insight into what they needed to do to enter college and place into the course where they wish to begin their education. Students should be able to re-take these tests as juniors and seniors and use the results of specially augmented versions of the tests as guaranteed placement into entry-level college courses.

Colleges, for their part, should be far more accountable for what happens to students whom they admit but who are not fully qualified. This means, first, knowing who really is in this group, and, second, providing necessary support for a successful transition. Colleges are doing a better job of the latter, offering more support programs for students with academic deficiencies, but not much regarding the former, explicitly identify students whom have been admitted but may need help. This is particularly important to do for students from underrepresented groups, who historically struggle more during the freshman year than other students. These students need help before they get into academic difficulty, and that help should be in the form of identifying their actual skill level and matching them with appropriate resources that will enable them to close whatever gap may exist.

5. The System of Gatekeeper Courses

Part of the reason for what can appear to be a somewhat nonchalant approach to admissions is that the current model in many colleges, perhaps most, is to utilize the entry-level courses as the true gatekeepers. This is nowhere more true than in the areas of math and the sciences, where large numbers of students prove unable to succeed in the entry-level course in the sequence and are then unable to proceed to a major in these subject areas. Given this country's increasing need to produce more competent scientists and engineers, this model is long overdue for replacement with one that offers a range of introductory courses designed to maximize success without lowering standards.

In many institutions, these gatekeeper courses are taught by some of the least qualified instructors, offered at odd times of day. The courses enroll large numbers of students in lecture sections, and may fail to make clear to students what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated until it is too late. Some departments take pride in the failure rates in these entry-level courses as evidence of their high standards, but most are far more pragmatic. They realize that if all students were to be successful, they would not have room to accommodate them in the major. This real and valid concern hardly seems justification for creating a model in which many must fail for a few to move on, particularly in areas where we need far more students to succeed than do so currently.

6. Higher Education and the Political-Social System

The issue of failure in math and science raises another accountability issue: the accountability of institutions of higher education to be responsive to national needs and priorities. While colleges must be able to maintain academic freedom and independence from all governmental influence, they must also be responsive to the nation's social and

economic needs. Should, for example, a college enroll more business majors simply because it can, or should it systematically seek to expand the number of students in the sciences and engineering? Should it develop new programs to attract some of the best and brightest programs to teaching and public service? Should a college be driven by nothing more than supply and demand, as dictated by student choice of majors, or should the college engage in visionary, socially responsible program development that presents to students opportunities that would not otherwise be available under a strictly market based notion of the curriculum?

My point is not that colleges “never” or “always” do much of the aforementioned. It is that there is no accountability for their decisions in these areas. The concept of accountability is more complex and nuanced than the “big stick” notions that punish colleges for not achieving very specific goals related to graduation rate and the like. The problem with the “big stick” solutions is that they will almost certainly lead to unintended consequences, particularly if the entire set of issues I raise is not addressed concurrently within any larger program of accountability. For example, requiring colleges to improve graduation rates will only encourage colleges to become more selective unless colleges simultaneously act upon many of the measures included in this paper, such as better high school preparation, better measures of college readiness, more precise placement procedures, better support programs for admitted students, and a wider range of pathways to a degree in areas where large numbers of students currently fail and drop out. Conversely and perversely, pressure to increase the baccalaureate-granting rate could result in “salvage” majors that get students out of the institution and keep numbers high. The potential to “game” the system is great if the right measures are not selected and implemented in a coordinated, systemic fashion.

7. Higher Education as a Market-Driven System

While there is no panacea for the many issues raised by the lack of accountability within most colleges, luckily the higher education in the United States is still the envy of the world. Paradoxically, this makes change more difficult to achieve. The other factor making the imposition of accountability more difficult is the general sense that a college education is a free market commodity and that the marketplace will sort out most of the problems with higher education.

This may be true in some respects, but we have many areas of the economy where some competition exists, yet strict accountability standards are demanded and enforced. Hospitals are but one example. Even restaurants, among the most competitive sectors of the economy, must meet stringent health, safety, and food-preparation standards to remain in business. It is not unreasonable that higher education should be accountable to embark upon changes that would not naturally be market driven, but that are necessary both to improve the experience of the student and to meet social goals more effectively.

In short, achieving the goal of real improvements in higher education requires a systems perspective that takes into account where higher education is situated, namely, between secondary education and a set of larger social, political, and economic forces that influence its operation at many levels. Any accountability measure that takes into account

these system dimensions will be more likely to bring about deep, lasting change and improvement in higher education and in the other systems with which higher education interacts.

Examples of Possible Solutions:

- Require applicants to have taken a common core of college preparatory courses that includes four years of high school study in defined academic subjects
- Working with high school educators, identify the knowledge and skills that are crucial for college success and create model courses that demonstrate how to maximize student mastery of desired knowledge and skills
- Ensure that core courses accepted for college admission contain those elements
- Supplement grades and test scores with more first-order samples of student work. This use of student work samples raises operational issues beyond this paper, but it is possible and is done to some degree already. Expecting students to generate academic work that will be evaluated by the college will focus instruction at the high school level and also send clearer messages to students regarding the skills they need to develop. This method can also be employed to assess the types of higher order thinking mentioned above and to make better placement decisions.
- Create requirements for more collaboration between secondary and postsecondary systems, particularly in terms of state high school exams and state high school graduation requirements
- Require colleges to gauge success of incoming students and to make systematic modifications both to placement procedures and admissions processes based on what is learned from this research
- Improve placement testing and coordinate placement testing with state high school exams.
- Measure the number and type of students requiring remediation and not passing entry-level courses and determine how they are assisted by colleges.
- Devise a wider range of career pathways and majors, particularly in the sciences and engineering, to allow more students to stay engaged and receive advanced training in these critical areas. While the number of traditional majors in these areas may increase only at a measured pace, the number of students graduating with reasonably high technical skills would increase dramatically.
- Provide incentive funding for colleges to develop new programs in areas of high national need and hold colleges accountable for increasing enrollments and degree production in those programs.