Is Open Access Community College a Bad Idea?

The authors of the book Community Colleges and the Access Effect argue that low expectations and outside pressure to produce more graduates could doom community colleges.
A growing push to boost college graduation rates, sometimes called "The Completion Agenda," has joined the short list of issues that enjoy support across the political spectrum.

As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, community colleges are often cited as the best solution for broad-based educational attainment. Currently, a majority of black, Latino, and Native American college students attend community colleges. So do significant shares of first-generation college students and those from low-income families. All told, nearly half of the U.S. undergraduate population is enrolled in community colleges.

A new book, Community Colleges and the Access Effect, argues that the role that community colleges have come to play is in dire need of close examination and change. Authors Juliet Lilledahl Scherer, a professor at St. Louis Community College, and Mirra Leigh Anson, director of the University of Iowa's Upward Bound program, argue that community colleges, students, and faculty members are suffering from a facile political approach to boosting college enrollment and completion. Too many of their students arrive ill-prepared and, as a result, leave mired in debt without earning an income-boosting degree or career certification.

Scherer and Anson recently discussed their findings with National Journal via email.

A lot of people will be shocked by the book's assertion that community colleges regularly admit students who operate at an elementary-school academic level. How did you reach this conclusion?

This will only be shocking to people who do not work in an open-access community college.

Because most community colleges advertise as open-access institutions [open to anyone, no application necessary], students of all ability levels enroll. Students with the lowest basic skills test into the lowest courses in developmental sequences, but there is no admission cutoff. So, especially for those courses, students who enroll often possess literacy and numeracy skills on par with elementary schoolchildren.

We, along with our community-college colleagues all around the country, regularly teach these students—many of whom are high school graduates with standard diplomas. Students with intellectual disabilities (formerly called mental retardation) also choose to enroll in open-access community colleges and frequently place into the lowest courses in the developmental education sequence. The data to prove all this come from the curriculum being taught, course descriptions, student assessment data, professional observation of student performance, etc.
This question gets at one of the main reasons we wrote the book. We are asking for a review of the negative impact open admissions has on postsecondary completion in the 21st century.

**Are community colleges inappropriately allowing or encouraging millions of students to take out student loans for remedial courses?**

No, it's not millions of students. The number is effectively unknown. The federal government has strict rules about how financial aid can be applied to what it calls "remedial" coursework. We are stating that misuse and misapplication of financial aid around developmental education coursework occurs at many community colleges—intentional or not. Some developmental education course do meet federal standards.

The most common violation involves allowing students to apply financial aid to coursework below the ninth grade. We are saying that federal financial-aid regulations need to be understood, followed, and enforced. When they are not, funds are abused, and student success data are misinterpreted.

**Are you all taking issue with the widespread assumption that more of the American population should/must earn a degree?**

Irrefutably, more Americans must pursue and obtain postsecondary education credentials valued in the marketplace to both sustain and improve our nation's economic dominance. In fact, the only way to ensure America keeps pace in the global economy is to maintain the quality of our nation's postsecondary institutions and programs.

However, the coexistence of open access and the national completion agenda is creating tension, where unprepared students are increasingly funneled into traditional collegiate pathways that they have little chance of completing, even as colleges are increasingly expected—even mandated—to "get students through at all costs."

The cost is steep: degradation of academic standards and unwise use of both public and individual resources. If we do not carefully manage open access and the completion agenda, a higher degree of the U.S. population will not become prepared to compete globally, and our valuable public higher-education institutions will be reduced to diploma mills. America will be worse off in the end.

**Given that large numbers of low-income students of color attend subpar K-12 schools, wouldn't an end to open enrollment at community colleges further narrow the path to the middle class for students who begin their studies at a community college?**

We believe an external performance standard placed on financial-aid-eligible curriculum would actually raise secondary engagement and achievement and improve college readiness rates for low-income students of color. It's rather unfair to suggest to unaware students—through the combination of open access and initial financial aid—that
academic preparation is unnecessary if you are attending a community college, when we know it is vitally important to successful postsecondary completion.

**What would you say to critics who suggest that what you are calling for would only deepen economic inequality in the U.S.**?

First, we maintain that community colleges should remain accessible, but that students must be reasonably prepared to enter and succeed in the financial-aid-eligible curriculum. We also emphasize that any admissions requirement should not be instituted without time for the students affected by it to adequately prepare.

One of the most insidious effects of open access is that it lulls into complacency many capable (and often low-income) students who know years in advance that their higher-education destination is the low-cost community college with no enrollment requirement. Vitally important aid awards could actually be increased to low-income students with the federal aid saved on developmental education coursework, for example, so more [academically prepared] low-income students could [receive more financial aid] and finish school.

**What are some of the alternatives that ill-prepared students should pursue instead of enrolling in community college?**

Some alternatives include enrolling in low-cost, low-risk continuing-education courses, no-cost Adult Basic Education, Comprehensive Postsecondary Transition Programs for students with intellectual disabilities, service learning, and workforce and short-term job training, to mention a few.

**What share of students enrolled in the nation's community colleges would you describe as ill-suited for school or unlikely to graduate?**

We would never describe any student as "ill-suited for school." However, community colleges do enroll students who, for a variety of reasons, are highly unlikely to complete their programs. It is difficult to confidently estimate the size of this group. But to provide some perspective, after Pima Community College began requiring students to demonstrate at least a seventh-grade basic skills equivalency on the placement test before allowing enrollment in the financial-aid-eligible curriculum, developmental education enrollment dropped about 30 percent the following semester.

If American secondary students knew years in advance that their postsecondary financial aid was tied to demonstrating readiness for at least a secondary curriculum—as is current federal regulation—community colleges would enroll far fewer high school graduates with basic skills on par with students in elementary school than they currently do.

As it stands, promised access to the financial-aid-eligible curriculum sends a strong message that no academic preparation or engagement is necessary for enrollment, with devastating consequences to individuals and our country as a whole.
How would you describe the financial consequences?

On a macro level, much media attention has been given to the student-debt crisis and its impact on the economy. At $1.2 trillion, student-loan debt now exceeds American credit-card debt and diverts from consumer spending, investments, retirements savings, and much more. Postsecondary credentials are increasingly important for individuals, for the health of the nation, and for competition in a global economy, yet not enough student aid is currently made available to support capable, low-income students through to completion.

For example, because of problems funding the Pell Grant program, summer funds for low-income students were cut as of July 2012, and the total number of semesters that Pell Grants are available to students was cut from 18 to 12.

On a micro level, seriously unprepared students who fail to complete programs of study often use up limited personal funds and/or accumulate personal debt. As a result, the likelihood that these students will complete a program when they are ready—or elect to pursue another postsecondary pathway—is low, unfortunately.

Should financial aid access be limited in some way that might prevent some of the really tragic stories detailed in your book (former students mired in debt with no degree or credentials and stuck in minimum-wage jobs)?

We think completion-friendly financial-aid access should actually be expanded in some very specific ways. As of July 2012, the Ability to Benefit provision was removed from Federal Student Aid, meaning that students without a high school diploma or the equivalent (usually a GED) became ineligible for federal financial aid. As a result, for nearly two years, many academically capable, low-income students have been unable to quickly qualify for the most completion-friendly form of higher-education financing.

If federal regulations were always followed, and students were allowed to apply aid only to classes operating at the secondary level or higher, then students’ financial-aid clocks would not begin prematurely in low-level developmental education coursework, as is often the case now. Students would stand a greater chance of completing programs within the time constraints allowed by federal student aid regulations.

Just as important, students not ready for secondary-level curriculum should not be accelerated into it for the main purpose of qualifying them for federal student aid.

What effect will efforts to tie financial aid to completion rates have on students and schools?

At a time when public higher-education funding is being slashed, and when private competitors are making a strong play in the market, federal pressure on policymakers and administrators to produce student success gains is palpable on community-college campuses. With fewer resources, fewer well-prepared students, and increased completion demands, only so many legitimate student success gains can be had.
We have already seen the effect that enrolling more unprepared students has had on academic standards. One colleague recently hung his head and said, "I am ashamed," because he had removed a large amount of necessary reading from his course when it became simply too much for his students to handle. No one else at the college has or will notice the reduction in his standards. The subtle practice of lowering in-course standards will only spread as performance funding does.

**Are there other policy approaches that might boost graduation rates?**

Effective student success efforts require a shrewd policy quilt, and we cover a lot more policy ground in our book. Generally, though, we need to adopt policies that challenge the values of a growing number of young Americans who don't prize intellectual engagement and academic achievement. We also need to be unwavering in our policy commitment to strengthen and support high-quality U.S. public education.