

Notes from the Access and Persistence Symposium September 8, 2005, Washington, DC

The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), a committee serving the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of Education, held a one-day symposium to both commemorate 40 years of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the publication of their report “The Student Aid Gauntlet.”¹ The symposium occurred at the same time reauthorization of the Higher Education Act was being debated in Congress. Senator Jack Reed briefly joined the symposium to report which of the Advisory Committee’s recommendations were included in the Senate version of the reauthorization.

The symposium brought fifteen researchers together with about 250 guests. Most of the researchers were economists focusing on education.

The Symposium

The four sessions were:

- I. Fulfilling the Promise of the Higher Education Act
- II. Intervening Early and Successfully
- III. Lowering Work and Loan Burden
- IV. Ensuring Persistence and Degree Completion

The general consensus seemed to be access is limited as more of the costs of education are being transferred to the student in the form of higher tuition. For students from the lower quartile of income, both academic preparation and costs are barriers. Even for those who are prepared for college, cost appears to be a major barrier.

But perhaps more interesting were some of the underlying assumptions:

- Costs to students will continue to increase faster than either inflation or income because of public policy. That is, tuition will continue to increase as state funding per student lags costs or decreases.
- Students will graduate with increased amounts of loans. Private loans—necessary because of loan limits of federal and state programs—are increasing rapidly. Financial aid administrators believe the increasing loan burden is effecting student choices of college and major, and employment after graduation.

¹ “The Student Aid Gauntlet: Making Access Simple and Certain,” Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, U.S. Department of Education, January 23, 2005. I wrote the verification recommendation and section of the report.

- There is a tradeoff between work and loan; too much work degrades academic performance or delays graduation, and too much loan creates a higher loan burden upon graduation.
- Many programs to increase persistence are effective.
- The preparation of students for college is not likely to improve in the next few years; it takes several years for improvements in K-12 education to change the students enrolling in college.

Although the cost of education to students could be reduced by increased productivity of colleges and universities, only once was reference made to the benefits of controlling the cost of education in public colleges and universities. Discussions with congressional staff suggest this is a major concern of Congress.

David Breneman, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia made an observation: If we had known in 1965 what we know today, more simple and effective (and lower cost) financial aid programs could have been enacted. The complexity of multiple programs and their interactions are a barrier to students and their parents and increase the cost of administering financial aid.

Edward St. John from the University of Michigan spoke for the group when he said the research of the Advisory Committee was well done and focused on the issues. He encouraged the Advisory Committee to continue its work in this area and, with others, should be able to continue to improve access and persistence.

eLearning and Access and Persistence

During the afternoon break, I asked Bill Becker, Indiana University, about the role of eLearning.² Based on his work with the University of South Australia and his conversations with presidents and financial officers, he said there is a general belief that eLearning increases the cost of education. He said the cost of the distance learning courses at the University of South Australia exceed those offered in the classroom because of the amount of time that faculty spend responding to students. He also observed that many on-campus students prefer to take distant learning courses, but are not permitted to do so because of costs.

I said there are examples where eLearning increased persistence, especially of at-risk students, and where eLearning was used to reduce unit costs.³ I commented that Rio Salado College had reduced faculty time per student by making technical support

² Becker was an editor of "Incentive-Based Budgeting Systems in Public Universities," a widely cited 2002 book.

³ The two examples I mentioned were Justin Tilton's work introducing multimedia in the beginning biology course at Yavapai College, reported in "Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum" and the lower unit costs of Rio Salado College of the Maricopa Community College District.

available by telephone for students who had trouble with the technology and providing answers to administrative questions without referring the student to the faculty member.

If Becker's observations reflect a general impression that eLearning is "just another expense," it will be difficult to encourage colleges and universities to increase their investment in eLearning systems and content, or to believe the costs of eLearning are manageable.