

**The United States has moved from higher education designed for a few to a complex system intended to serve everyone who might benefit. Access to higher education has been a phenomenal success story in American history, and in the past half century the metropolitan university has been an important part of that story. Currently, there is a concern that some gains are lessening, even reversing. This article explores some of the pertinent issues.**

# Access: A Faltering Commitment?

Who should go to college? The question has been debated historically and is being debated today in the offices of university administrators and faculty, in state legislatures and boards of trustees, in federal offices of both legislative and executive branches, in newspapers and magazines, and among American citizens nationwide.

In many quarters the question is related to cost. Higher education represents an enormous investment in public and private dollars, an investment that must be sustained every year. In the public sector, these higher education dollars are now competing with other societal needs and governmental issues. In thinking about higher education, attention is shifting from the idea of investment to one of cost. This shift has resulted in increased interest in the internal operation of academic institutions. More and more persons insist that students who are admitted already have the ability to master college-level work and that they show progress as they pursue their studies. The public is largely unsympathetic to courses labeled remedial.

Yet access to higher education is more than ever an essential key to the future. To miss this opportunity closes the door on future opportunities. The fulfillment of this opportunity will affect not only those who benefit directly but also their children and their children's children.

Until recently, great progress has been made with regard to access. Higher education has become available to previously unimagined numbers of citizens, people whose personal obligations or financial resources do not permit them to leave their jobs or communities. The metropolitan university in particular has emerged in the

past half century as a potent instrument for good, through reasonable cost, broad program offerings of quality, proximity, and flexible institutional schedules.

Unfortunately, barriers to access remain. Indeed they are becoming more formidable. Gains made in the past 25 years are slowing and may even be reversing. This article will review a number of issues that bear on the question of access to higher education as the nation enters the last decade of the twentieth century.

### **Before the Civil War**

The idea of going to college has always been part of the nation's agenda. Who should go and what should be taught received attention throughout the history of the United States. A variety of arguments and positions has emerged over time, and different positions often are maintained even within a single institution at any given time. The topic remains a lively philosophical and political issue.

Access to higher education during the colonial period was restricted to young, white, Christian men. Colleges were expected to educate the clergy, the schoolmasters, and the new leaders required in the colonies. While intellect was a factor in the selection of students, piety was more important. Saving souls may seem odd as a goal of higher education today, but it was a central goal in the colonial college.

Although limited amounts of financial help were available for deserving poor students, the vast majority of students came from wealthier families. The idea of class and privilege in higher education was European but created little concern because advanced education was not a priority in the arduous circumstances of the early colonists. Early American colleges offered only a classical education, imitating the English institutions with which educated colonists were familiar. This kind of education had little utility or appeal for most settlers.

Access to higher education changed very little in the century leading to the American Revolution. Fewer than ten colleges existed in 1776 and this number was deemed sufficient to meet the need. Jefferson asserted that higher education should rely on the "aristocracy of talent" available to the emerging nation. This view received its first significant challenge only during the period of Jacksonian democracy. The Jacksonians believed that more—and different—citizens could benefit from higher education. They challenged the classical curriculum because it was not well suited to an emerging nation. Recommendations were made to reduce the emphasis on religion and to put weight on intellectual and practical studies, so as to serve a broader range of citizens.

In spite of the influential Yale Report of 1828 which supported the status quo, pockets of innovation emerged in the two decades prior to the Civil

War. These new approaches stressed less denominationalism, more intellectual rigor, and the introduction of science into the curriculum. The science courses were viewed as alternatives to the liberal arts, offering “mechanical arts” that were considered to be more practical in their makeup. Some institutions were created specifically to offer scientific programs. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, for example, had the first laboratories for chemistry and physics and offered the first engineering degrees in the nation. Even though these changes were noticeable and created debate across the country, a true redefinition and reform of higher education did not gain sufficient momentum until the end of the Civil War.

### **The Land-Grant Act of 1862**

The Morrill Federal Land-Grant Act of 1862 was the catalyst needed to transform a lethargic system of higher education. The act made possible a whole new system of higher education. State institutions of higher education had not been well funded and were not powerful influences before the Civil War. The Morrill Act guaranteed the survival of state schools, resulted in the creation of some institutions, and significantly increased the influence of others.

These institutions had both a popular and practical orientation, in which training programs in agriculture and mechanics were key elements. Agricultural education transformed American farming. Engineering education was in tune with the needs of a nation involved in an industrial revolution, and almost all who received it headed for American cities.

The development of more practically oriented programs in the land-grant institutions had an impact, as well, on educational approaches in most other colleges. The classical curriculum gave way to models designed for a more broadly defined student body as change occurred in attitudes about who should go to college. Central to the land-grant concept was recognition of the appropriateness of a college education at public expense because the nation could benefit from more advanced education for more citizens. A new generation of educational leaders began to promulgate a fuller understanding of the connection between access to higher education and the economic and social well being of the country. Since the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, commitment to access may have had its ups and downs, but no significant questions concerning the value of public higher education have been raised. Until the end of World War II nothing can compare with the land-grant legislation in its impact on expanding access to higher education.

In 1870, only 1.7 percent of the college age population was actually in college. But as the nineteenth century came to a close, both the number and the percentage of young men and women seeking higher education increased. By 1900, about four percent of the age cohort was enrolled in

college, a figure that would increase to 15.3 percent by 1940. The intervening period is marked by the rapid rise of the great state universities.

### **The GI Bill and Federal Financial Aid**

The next significant benchmark in the expansion of access to higher education occurred during the period immediately following World War II. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill, enabled large numbers of returning veterans to enroll in colleges and universities. The statute added impetus to other factors that were helping to advance the democratization of higher education and accelerated the movement toward universal access. The returning World War II veterans set the stage for the burgeoning enrollments that followed. They demonstrated that higher education could be effective for countless numbers of individuals who in earlier years would never have thought of attending. By 1950, some 30 percent of college-age youth were attending college. They were joined by many older veterans, and the nature of American higher education was changed in fundamental ways. Access to higher education became recognized as appropriate for all who are qualified, regardless of gender, age, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Nowhere is the resultant student diversity more evident than in metropolitan universities and community colleges.

### **Federal Financial Aid**

The significant expansion of access that has taken place since World War II was made possible by a turning point in public policy which was also spearheaded by the GI Bill. The statute was the precursor of direct federal funding of student financial aid. A series of major legislative efforts, including the Higher Education Act of 1965, sought to remove financial barriers to college attendance. The federal government offered for the first time direct student grants, established low-interest loans, created work-study programs and funded cooperative education programs. It also provided fellowships for students interested in becoming elementary and secondary school teachers. In order to facilitate access for minorities and other underserved segments of the population, the federal TRIO programs were expanded and a program called Talent Search was established to locate students with ability who might not be aware of the new programs of financial support. The sum total of yearly federal appropriations for this variety of access-oriented programs rose to billions of dollars.

Federal funds also supported the institutional expansion to accommodate increased access. Institutions benefited from library support, funds for laboratory and other educational equipment, and from low interest loans for the construction of instructional and residential facilities.

## Minority Access

One of the major consequences of direct federal support for expanded access to higher education was the increase in the participation of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education. Until the twentieth century, access to higher education for minority citizens was virtually nonexistent. A handful of blacks attended college in the North, but in the antebellum South even teaching blacks to read was against the law. Higher education for Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian citizens did not exist, and little progress was made in the decades following the Civil War. The second Morrill Act of 1890 did stipulate that no land-grant appropriations would go to states that denied admission on the basis of race unless they established separate but equal facilities. This act resulted in the creation of a number of black institutions in the South. Until the 1960s most of the black enrollment in higher education was in these and other historically black colleges. Enrollment of other racial and ethnic minorities was minuscule.

The emerging emphasis on broadened access after World War II, the availability of federal financial aid and the Civil Rights movement all combined to change this picture substantially.

### Is the Commitment Faltering?

The substantial progress toward providing access to higher education for all who could benefit from it continued until the late 1970s, but seems since then to have halted or perhaps even regressed. Financial barriers to access persist and are even rising, and institutional as well as attitudinal obstacles remain. The country's commitment to access appears to be faltering, in ways that have substantial impact on metropolitan universities.

College costs have risen dramatically even since 1980 (137 percent at public universities and 174 percent at private universities), while programs of financial support such as Supplemental Grants and College Work Study show an inflation-adjusted drop of 18 to 28 percent respectively. That drop was part of a basic, regressive policy change shifting the emphasis in federal financial aid from direct grants to loans. Also, the definition of financial need became more restrictive, to the disadvantage of many who previously were eligible for assistance.

Pressures on the federal dollar, according to the American Council on Education (A.C.E.), will adversely affect educational opportunity for 220,000 students during the 1990–91 academic year and for 300,000 in 1991–92. Students in metropolitan institutions are likely to be especially affected by these cuts, and a disproportionate number will be racial minorities. Many who do receive aid will find it limited to loans. Should

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these students be unable to continue their studies, their ability to repay loans will be problematic.

Part-time students will face similar financial problems, because institutions historically have been slow to award financial assistance to part-time students. This matter is an increasingly urgent piece of unfinished business in higher education.

Financial issues also affect institutions, particularly metropolitan universities. In many states, funding for higher education is based on a formula that counts students in terms of full-time equivalency (FTE) rather than by head count. For traditional universities, this distinction has made little difference, but it has had a major impact on metropolitan universities with large numbers of part-time students. An institution with a head count of 10,000 may have an FTE enrollment count of only 6,000–7,000. Yet each student, whether full-time or part-time, makes demands on the resources of the institution.

Reduced funding hurts across all colleges and departments, but the effect is particularly grievous in noninstructional areas. Less money is available for recruiting and outreach generally, less opportunity for ongoing articulation with high schools, less staff support for academic advising and general counseling; nor can over-taxed faculty be properly responsive to students who badly need and deserve their assistance. In addition, public funding pays no attention to the extensive “stop-out” phenomenon that is common in metropolitan institutions, a factor that makes enrollment unpredictable and adds to administrative costs.

While the quest for universal access to higher education has not been reversed, it seems to have stalled. Financial barriers are increasing. One does not sense any hostility from public bodies with respect to helping students, but there are great competing pressures of federal and state dollars. Yet, as noted by the A.C.E. Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, any savings in cutting back aid to higher education will be far less than the eventual cost if the education, training, and preparation of citizens is thwarted.

Minority access is a matter of particular concern. In recent years, black and Hispanic participation in higher education is lessening. The enthusiasm and hope that characterized the 1960s and 1970s are waning today, and progress that occurred in those years has proven to be fragile. During a time in which the participation of white students in higher education continued to increase slowly, the percentage of college age minorities attending college has declined substantially. According to the A.C.E. report, the college participation rate of low-income black high school graduates between 18 and 24 years dropped from 40 percent in 1976 to 30 percent in 1988. For low-income Hispanic high school graduates, the rate fell from 50 to 35 percent over the same period, while participation rates of low-income white

graduates increased slightly from 37 to 39 percent. Given the low high-school completion rate of low-income minority youth, the decreases in the fraction going on to college after graduation are truly alarming. The metropolitan universities can play an important role in reversing this trend.

### Other Barriers to Access

Financial barriers are a major factor inhibiting continuing progress toward broader access. But there exist other barriers as well. It is not enough for a university merely to declare its accessibility. As will be discussed in greater detail in other articles in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities*, commitment to access requires that faculty, staff and administrators be aware of these barriers and implement appropriate institutional adaptations.

Essential to encouraging access for ethnic and racial minorities are signs that they are present and contributing to the life of the campus, that minority students already enrolled have positive attitudes toward the institution, that there are minority faculty and administrators as well as appropriate support mechanisms that make the university a less forbidding place.

Minorities share with other underserved and underrepresented groups a set of barriers which K. Patricia Cross describes as follows in her exceptional book, *Adults as Learners*:

- *situational*—problems flowing from the real-life circumstances of adults;
- *institutional*—barriers arising from administrative insensitivity, rigid educational practices, and a setting that is intimidating; and
- *dispositional*—issues involving self-esteem, fear of the unknown, unclear sense of purpose, anxiety as to whether one could do the work, and other negative perceptions of the institution and of the self.

Cross's list suggests the difficulties that not only adult students but also others who differ from the traditional norm often must conquer.

Many people who could benefit from a higher education experience do not attend because of low self-esteem, fear, misinformation, and lack of support from significant persons in their lives. Even some potential students living across the street from metropolitan universities do not feel the institution is for them. They are not overtly hostile, they simply see the institution as a remote, foreign place. The reasons for these perceptions combine in unique ways for each individual but some common themes can be recognized.

One such theme is previous educational failure. Poor experiences in elementary and secondary schools, or lack of success in a previous college enrollment, are formidable barriers, permanent reminders of personal

inadequacy, which are capable of thwarting initiative. It does not occur to some people that they can overcome educational failures experienced at another time and place. Instead they have internalized a self-perception that argues against further humiliation in the classroom.

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A second common theme is the lack of a support system for the very persons who need it most desperately. Friends, family and daily associates at work might not have any knowledge of higher education and thus be unable to provide any help. Indeed, some may well argue against any adventures in higher education. High school counselors may be helpful, but in many places they do not have sufficient time to spend with young people who need a great deal of encouragement. Older adults may not have access to such counselors or to any other persons having the knowledge and the caring to make a difference.

Old-fashioned fear is a third theme. How does one overcome the plain fact that he/she did poorly in high school? If one did summon the courage to inquire about attending, how would one go about it? Wouldn't it be embarrassing to have to compete with students years younger than oneself? What is a major? A credit hour? Where would one go for help? How does one know what to take? Questions like these have cropped up in everyone's experience in higher education so it is not difficult to understand that for some the anxieties are paralyzing without help.

These attitudinal barriers can be overcome only by means of effective outreach by institutions that are committed to access. They must draw attention to what they have to offer by seeking out potential students. Some institutions have found it useful to use television and newspapers. Others have provided information sessions in the workplace or in other off-campus settings. Some have eased the transition into college by offering special orientation courses, credit or noncredit.

Effective communication is also a key in making the difference between success and failure for students once they have enrolled. It is not unusual to find students in need of assistance who are unaware of existing resources. The counseling center may help students through a situational crisis; the health center may be able to procure prescription drugs for needy students at a reduced cost; and tutoring may be available at little or no cost to a student. Institutional leaders must continually remind faculty, student leaders, campus newspapers, and other relevant sources of the programs and activities available to all students. Brochures and other written materials, while necessary, will not be sufficient to ensure access to support services for those who most need them.

One area in which communication is of particular importance might be called *access within*. Some first-generation students do not understand the

difference between admission to a university and admission to a specific program within the university. Anyone who has worked very long in a metropolitan university has experienced the painful task of explaining this difference. It may well be that a student has not met the criteria needed for admission to a specific program, even though that student is in good standing.

It must be remembered that notations of "prerequisite," "sequencing," "GPA," "minimum hours," and other nomenclatures are shorthand terms, the language of insiders. The idea of program access must be made clear to all new students, and returning students may need reminding.

### The Physically Handicapped

Other contributions to this issue deal in greater detail with several of the groups that are usually underserved on our campuses: minorities, adults, part-time students, commuters. One additional group should be mentioned in this article: the physically handicapped. Students with disabilities are coming to college campuses in greater numbers. They have been encouraged by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which specifies that no person can be denied admission to or participation in higher education solely because of a physical handicap. In the fall of 1989, the United States Senate passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. The bill is now working its way through the House, has been endorsed in principle by President Bush, and provides further evidence of the growing political effectiveness of handicapped Americans.

Of course the most obvious access problem for the handicapped is physical access. From limited parking spaces to uneven sidewalks to buildings that are inaccessible, barriers appear to be everywhere on some campuses, particularly for students with severe or multiple problems. It requires a great deal of effort for these students to attend courses and a great deal of effort for institutions to reduce the physical barriers present on the campus.

A second barrier to access for persons with disabilities is attitudinal. The university community may seem to be impatient, unsympathetic, or perhaps even rude. These disincentives are potent when coupled with the low self-esteem felt by some disabled persons.

In the fall of 1985, 7.4 percent of the nation's college freshmen identified themselves as having a disability, an increase from 2.6 percent in 1978. As these percentages rise, access issues will become more apparent. The delivery of services necessary for these persons will be expensive, especially for students with severe or multiple handicaps, and cost may be a third barrier.

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Institutions will have to decide whether to actively seek physically handicapped persons for inclusion in the university community. It is costly to meet the needs of this group. Yet, for campuses striving to become more diversified, this group remains underrepresented. Many stories can be told of phenomenal courage among handicapped students, profiles that have the potential to inspire able-bodied students on any campus.

### Conclusion

Higher education in the United States has moved in 350 years from an elite system to one attempting to serve an entire nation of learners. In the last half of the twentieth century, the metropolitan university has played an increasingly important role in devising ways to serve a pluralistic student body. In spite of substantial achievement in making higher education accessible, issues concerning access remain. Several factors have been identified in this article and will be further discussed in other contributions to this issue. The metropolitan university can enhance its reputation as an instrument for good by providing an array of quality programs at an affordable cost and by striving to remove the obstacles potential students face. Commitment must not falter. The nation should return to the spirit of the 1860s, the 1940s, and the 1960s and regain a sense of the possible.

### *Suggested Readings*

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