

Reflections on the Topic of Transparency

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“Where you stand depends on where you sit.” Noting the cynicism of this saying, I accept the truth of it. Therefore, I begin these reflections with comments about my professional perches so that I can more legitimately share my seasoned stands.

Currently, I am the head of admissions and enrollment at a major public research institution that holds a relatively privileged place in both perception and geography. We recruit sparsely; we give almost exclusively need-based aid; our enrollment goals are not driven by net revenue considerations; we do not have legacy admissions. Soon after my arrival, I was invited to give a presentation to university leaders on differential tuition and net tuition revenue mechanisms. They were curious. Everyone listened politely. They asked a few cogent questions and then thanked me. On the walk across campus after the presentation, one mentoring senior colleague simply told me, “Philip, remember that we are all about access here.” Including all monies attached to undergraduate recruitment, admission and supportive services, we spend about \$100 on average per applicant. We care primarily about student profile elements and crafting an entering class that is as socioeconomically diverse and culturally vibrant as it is academically strong. We are able to take admission risks on students for the sake of access and diversity because we have very strong support programs. No one at the university calls me when the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are released. Information transparency is simply taken for granted. Until now, enrollment and admission practices have aligned well with the institutional mission. Hard to believe ... but true. I sit in one kind of enrollment manager’s paradise.

I have sat elsewhere. I once worked at a fine university with a strong sense of historical mission and community. The enrollment goals and emphases were different there. It was not in a privileged place of perception or geography. Its budget was tuition driven. The college had to recruit significantly. It depended on sophisticated tuition-discounting strategies to ensure enrollment and net revenue goals. Issues of equity and diversity were important in the admission office and in institutional mission statements, but were not reflected strongly in primary institutional or enrollment goals. The president danced a jig when the college’s ranking improved from number four to number three in its *U.S. News & World Report* region. The university leadership conducted strategy meetings on how to improve those institutional rankings. A lot of money was spent on recruitment and merit aid. The primary enrollment goals were numeric and financial. If they were not met, programs and positions could be cut.

Now you know where I sit and where I sat. So I feel some freedom to share with you where I stand and why I stand there. My first “stand” is this — **enrollment issues cannot be parsed through an institutional lens only**. They are, in essence, issues of public and national concern. This stand requires some explanation and context.

The American higher education system is a touchstone and magnet for the rest of the world. Students from around the globe flood into our universities and colleges. U.S. institutions of higher learning dominate university rankings of all sorts and origins whether they focus on research outcomes or undergraduate education. And yet, although the quality of American higher education is world renowned, and although the state of higher education in the United States appears, relatively speaking, quite good, serious fault lines exist — fault lines that will, if not mended, lead to erosion of the country’s economic and social welfare. These fault lines center upon the socioeconomics of preparation for and access to higher education, particularly access to selective four-year institutions. These fault lines are becoming more apparent as demographic shifts accelerate during this time of economic and educational duress. To more fully understand the fault lines in question, allow me to review the social matrix of the “higher education industry” in which we work.

No matter how much a private good higher education is, it is also a *primary* public good. Higher education is an essential component of our social, economic and democratic infrastructure. It is simultaneously a societal stabilizer and source of societal propulsion. That the quality and breadth of higher education in the United States have provided enormous social and historical dividends is certain. Aside from the massive economic impact of the educational and research outcomes of universities and colleges, the individual, familial and social benefits associated with college education are striking. We all know the facts: Higher education levels correlate with significantly higher income levels for all ethnic and racial groups and for both men and women; adults with higher levels of education generally contribute more to the tax revenue base and rely less on costly social safety-net programs; higher education levels correspond with much lower rates of unemployment and poverty; college graduates have better health on average than those who have not graduated from college; they have lower incarceration rates; they appear to have higher rates of volunteerism and civic participation. What’s more, these benefits are multigenerational — the direct benefits of the higher education of parents often extend to their children and grandchildren. In short, higher education directly affects the quality of life of individuals and families, and strengthens the economic and civic health of society at large.

Any diminishment of effective access to higher education, especially for those from the lower socioeconomic strata of American society, will lead to societal degradation in the long term. Economic mobility in the United States has been, in the main, fostered by higher education. Particularly since the end of World War II, access to higher education has provided a powerful engine of opportunity and social mobility for a wide spectrum of the U.S. population. Today, evidence is mounting that the institutions of social mobility in the 20th century are in danger of becoming bastions of privilege in the 21st century.

The *specific* data about access to higher education in the United States are stark. Nearly all students from families in the top income quartile enroll in college. Only about half of the students from the lowest-income quartile do so. Furthermore, of all first-year college entrants, almost half of low-income students attend community colleges while only a tenth of high-income students do so. When limited to an analysis of four-year university enrollments and outcomes, the comparable figures are even more troublesome. Nearly two-thirds of students from the highest-socioeconomic quartile enroll at a four-year institution within two years of completing high school, but only one-fifth of students from the bottom quartile do so. Finally, at first-tier institutions, students from the top socioeconomic quartile hold nearly three-quarters of available spaces while students from the bottom quartile hold only a single-digit share. The result is that nearly half of students from the richest quartile and less than a tenth of those from the poorest complete a bachelor's degree within five years of commencing postsecondary education.

If this access and outcome gap continues in our knowledge-based economy, and in spite of population increases which are primarily among groups in American society that are relatively poor and educationally disadvantaged, then the portion of the nation's population with higher education will diminish while the jobs requiring higher education will increase. This mismatch alone could have erosive consequences for the social and economic health of the nation. It will certainly weaken the ability of the United States to maintain its leadership in an internationally competitive, knowledge-based economy. A 2009 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development indicated that the United States ranked sixth in postsecondary attainment in the world among 25- to 64-year-olds. Twenty years ago, the United States ranked first. In addition, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education bluntly states that "substantial increases in those segments of America's young population with the lowest level of education, combined with the coming retirement of the baby boomers — the most highly educated generation in U.S. history — are projected to lead to a drop in the average level of education of the U.S. workforce over the next two decades, unless states do a better job of raising the educational level of all racial/ethnic groups."

The disparate participation rates at selective four-year colleges and universities along socioeconomic and racial/ethnic fault lines are a matter of national concern. Although a community college can be an excellent and necessary portal to higher education for many students, nationally a very small percentage of community college students ultimately complete a bachelor's degree. Students who attend selective four-year institutions from the beginning have several advantages: They are more likely to graduate, more likely to have access to postgraduate studies and more likely to experience increased lifetime earnings. Therefore, the question arises as to whether or not the enrollment goals, policies and practices of selective four-year colleges and universities should substantially and essentially incorporate socioeconomic factors. Failing to do so may perpetuate the lack of socioeconomic diversity at selective four-year universities. I have no doubt, therefore, that enrollment policies and practices are connected to our national welfare. What we do through institutional enrollment and financial aid policies and practices matters on a grand scale.

However, acting primarily upon the socially pressing issues of access could arguably weaken the academic and financial profile of entering classes as measured by standardized test scores, grade point averages or net tuition revenue. Furthermore, without robust financial, advising and support programs, any prominent emphasis on access could lead to disappointing educational outcomes. These entrance and outcome measurements rule the roost at most institutions of higher learning. Institutions and their enrollment professionals have to struggle between the imperatives of the public good and the perceived imperatives of institutional welfare. Enrollment officers are at the heart of this pressure. But pressure or not, the policies and practices with which they engage are undeniably connected to the common good.

All this leads to my second “stand”: **Individual institutions’ enrollment and financial aid policies and practices can become socially corrosive if pursued with regard to institutional self-interest only.** I took a graduate course in ethics years ago. When the course ended I remember telling a friend that reflecting upon ethics was like trying to eat chicken broth with a fork. I did, however, take away a few thoughts that have persisted. One deals with analyzing the ethics of particular actions and is called “the principle of generalization.” It states that when considering the ethical dimensions of a human action, one must ask what the effects would be if all humans acted in the same way. Clearly, this is not a principle to be used in an absolutist or isolationist manner, but asking the question is reasonable. This principle applies not only to actions of individuals, but also to corporate or institutional actions, even those in the realm of enrollment policies and practices. What happens if my institution’s specific enrollment policy or practice becomes the norm? What happens if it becomes the policy or practice at hundreds or thousands of institutions? Now and again I speak with colleagues whose jobs appear to end at the borders of their institutions. They do not, or cannot, engage in broader discourse either because of their personal or institutional inclination. Their jobs are apparently defined and experienced through the idioms of enrollment “technician” or institutional “sales.” This type of functional reduction, when multiplied, becomes professionally and, I would argue, socially acidic. When institutional leadership allows or even promotes such cultures in enrollment areas, corrosion beyond institutional borders sets in. Multiply radical institutional self-interest in the enrollment area by hundreds or thousands of institutions and you have an active element of societal degradation.

Here is my third “stand”: *Quod omnes tangit*. It comes from research I did as a graduate student and is shorthand for an ancient Roman legal principle that went something like this: **“What touches all should be discussed and approved by all.”** Of course, “all” in those times really meant “some” — it did not include women, noncitizens or slaves. But still, the general principle is reasonable, especially in a democratic or collegial context. One of the habits I have encountered in many years of working in different institutional settings is that this principle is not always active in the realm of enrollment policy and practice. Certainly, faculty often do not engage or are not engaged adequately in discussing and approving enrollment policies and practices. Sometimes presidents and provosts are distanced from enrollment policies and practices as well. In some settings, enrollment leaders and their immediate colleagues are left in relative isolation when it comes to their practices in particular. Enrollment goals may be discussed, but how one achieves them may not be. When this type of disassociation occurs, college enrollment areas can lose their way and go down paths that have very little to do with the academy or institutional mission.

Jerry Lucido, currently at the University of Southern California, often speaks of the challenge of “speaking truth to power” in the enrollment area. That can be hard indeed. At times I would be satisfied with simply “speaking to power” to ensure that policies and actions in the enrollment area are institutionally promoted and integrated. Enrollment enterprises that grow too distant from the academy and institutional values or ideals are like free radicals in the human body. We don’t always understand everything they do, but we know the results will be systemically damaging in the long term.

This leads to my last “stand”: *Lux sit*. This is lazy Latin for “let there be light.” In short, **transparency is best**. If our enrollment policies and practices were more transparent both internally and externally, our paths forward would be clearer. I have learned this especially well at where I now sit. Transparency is not easy. It can be contentious, time consuming, uncomfortable and even embarrassing. However, it is never lonely and is always liberating. When what you decide or do in the enrollment area is transparent broadly speaking, then your policies and practices will be polished by the friction of common discourse and debate. When in doubt, open the metaphorical shades!

I find the recent discussion about the federally mandated net price calculator an interesting stage upon which to apply these stands. First of all, the fact that 7,000 or so institutions which receive Title IV federal financial aid funds should be told that they must post a net price calculator on their websites is astounding. That the Higher Education Act should include legislation on such a specific point is telling. A matter of national concern was involved in this legislation. That concern was college access. Perhaps this specific legislative intervention can be attributed to colleges not communicating with students or legislators well enough about costs, or perhaps it has to do with misperceptions. In any case, I applaud the action. Everything I read indicates that misperceptions about college costs and aid are primary roadblocks to college participation, especially for students from lower-income families. This is particularly true with reference to selective four-year colleges. Families generally overestimate the costs of college. Many of our financial aid and discounting policies are not at all transparent. All that many students and parents see are the tuition “sticker prices.” If they have no or little knowledge with regard to how college education financing works, then those sticker prices are akin to posting signs stating “here be monsters.” The traditional responses of “it really won’t cost that, just apply for financial aid and see” or “fill out the FAFSA and PROFILE forms and we’ll let you know” were rather anemic. So we have, more or less, now been directed to tell students what our colleges will cost them up front. Whether or not we can do so accurately at first is, in my opinion, a lesser of two evils. Not all students and their families will benefit over time from this requirement, but many will.

Some colleagues express concern that this requirement — with its emphasis on cost — will undermine the notion of “fit” and appropriate institutional matching, and that students and families may miss the “value” element associated with a particular institution as they rush to ascertain cost. I find this concern somewhat “romantic” in light of current social imperatives. To our national detriment, institutions of higher education are losing a growing segment of our shifting population. We can find ways to deal with the counseling aspects associated with the potential side effects of this requirement, but to sacrifice early basic information about costs on

the altar of institutional “value” seems shortsighted. The more pressing question in my mind is whether or not institutions will use this as an opportunity to engage families and students who have veered away from selective four-year colleges in the past.

Other colleagues are concerned that competitors will dishonestly game the calculator to entice students, or that competitors will be able to derive rivals’ discounting and aid strategies by using their net price calculators. I would hope that fear of the “free radicals” in our profession does not set our agenda. As for concerns about competitive strategies, this type of initial transparency with respect to a critical element of college access may help shed light on a great many college aid practices and policies. Some colleges will have some explaining to do, I am sure. Others will make shifts in policy because of increased transparency. It will be messy ... but not perpetually so. In the long term, more up-front knowledge about net costs, even if it is not always accurate, will do some good in a segment of our population where good is particularly needed. Furthermore, I idealistically hope that this sliver of transparency will help remediate some institutional policies and practices that would, in the light, prove embarrassing to their practitioners.

How about families and students who are now the primary constituents of most selective four-year universities? Will they use these calculators to play colleges against one another in their quest for the deal? Perhaps they will. In my mind, it is our past policies and practices that have helped couch college education in a commercial idiom. We have trained our “consumers” well. Perhaps the new legislation will be an opportunity to press for transparency about how we aid and discount students and why we do so. I can’t guarantee it, but perhaps an educational approach will elicit more educationally related responses from consumers who are, at least ideally, also students.

Enrollment policies and practices, when viewed through a wide-angle lens, are of national scope and importance. Acting as a professional means, in part, that we constantly attune ourselves to the wider social issues entwined with our work. When our efforts become too exclusively and too widely exercises in institutional navel gazing, then we are certain to increase the cynicism surrounding higher education in this country. “Every institution for itself” is a sure path to further educational and societal entropy, and to further specific and interventionist legislation.

So, my stands are couched by a recognition that my work connects to issues of societal concern, that what I do extends beyond the borders and interests of my own institution, that enrollment policies and practices are important enough to be engaged by the institution as a whole, and that transparency about those policies and practices is best in the long run. I find that these stands help me place specific issues - such as a required net price calculator - in the appropriate context.

The questions I first asked remain the same now as they were before any specific legislation: What are our social commitments to one another via higher education? What are the values we share and seek in our institutions of higher learning? Do these commitments and values apply everywhere in an institution, including the enrollment area? The challenge remains the same — how do I best balance institutional and social interests? From where I stand, engagement with these questions and this challenge is the hallmark of a touchstone enrollment professional.

About Philip Ballinger

Philip Ballinger is assistant vice president for enrollment and director of admissions at the University of Washington in Seattle. He has been a college admission professional for more than 20 years, having worked at both private and public institutions of higher education. He has recently served as dean of faculty for the College Board Western Region's Summer Institute for new admission professionals and as an elected member of the College Board's Guidance and Admission Assembly Council. He was also a member of the NACAC's Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission. He currently serves as chair of the College Board's Advanced Placement® Advisory Committee. Ballinger is a primary author of the holistic application review process used at the University of Washington, a process that takes applicants' educational and socioeconomic contexts strongly into consideration.

In addition to a book on the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ballinger has written extensively on college admission and enrollment issues. His works include an essay in *College Unranked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy* (Harvard University Press, 2005) and a chapter on the use of socioeconomic factors in selective college admission in *Key Issues in New Student Enrollment* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Ballinger has spoken extensively on college admission in view of demographic shifts in the United States. He has a Ph.D. in religious studies from the University of Louvain (Belgium) and is an affiliate faculty member in comparative religion at the University of Washington.

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