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ABSTRACT

While there are many ways to differentiate among community colleges (size, control, student characteristics, etc.), there have been few attempts to categorize them. The Carnegie Foundation's classification system, published first in 1971 and since revised several times, categorizes research universities, comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges, and specialized institutions, differentiating them by the amount of federal research money received annually, number of graduate degrees offered, number awarded, etc. However, Carnegie does not differentiate between community colleges, listing them all together as "Associate in Arts Institutions." This document proposes criteria and categories for meaningful classification of community colleges that could be integrated into the pending 2005 Carnegie classification system revision. Criteria include: (1) the measures used must be valid for community colleges; (2) the data must be reliable, national in scope and readily available (such as from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)); (3) the categories must be readily understandable, discrete as well as meaningful; and (4) resulting information must be descriptive, not evaluative. Suggested categories (which might each be rated as "High," "Medium," or "Low") include college size; per capita expenditure on instruction; amount of auxiliary revenue generated by the college; and the ratio of full-time faculty. (PGS)

Are All Community Colleges Alike?

Arthur M. Cohen

Are all community colleges alike? Or course not. There are big ones and small, institutions in state systems or locally controlled, those emphasizing occupational or pre-baccalaureate study, colleges with high or low proportions of non-credit enrollment, and so on across the horizon of possible variables. Obviously, there are many ways of differentiating among community colleges but few attempts to categorize them have been made. One reason is that many community college CEOs have resisted classification systems, saying that wherever their colleges fall on any continuum, some observers will use the information to comment negatively: "You are putting too much (or not enough) emphasis on occupational (or transfer) education. Why aren't you in line with the state average on degrees awarded (or jobs gained) by your students?" The leaders have good reasons to be concerned because, over the years, stories of local community colleges that fall short on some measure have appeared in the media with distressing frequency.

Should we attempt to classify the nation's public community colleges? Maybe it's time. Many ways of categorizing four-year colleges and universities have been brought forth, most notably the classification system published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching first in 1973 and since revised several times. Carnegie uses many categories to differentiate among research universities, comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges, and specialized institutions, including number of graduate degrees conferred and the types of degrees. More recently a group at the University of Florida has categorized research universities using nine measures, from endowment assets to median SAT scores of the entering class (Lombardi and others,

2000). And yet both Carnegie and the Florida group have avoided attempts to classify community colleges, with Carnegie listing them all together as "Associate's Colleges," and the Florida analysts completely ignoring them.

However, some recent developments suggest that the community colleges are finally receiving attention. The Institute for Higher Education Policy has published A Classification System for 2-Year Postsecondary Institutions (Phipps, Shedd, and Merisotis, 2001). The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (1998) considered two-year colleges in its examination of institutional distinctions. And Carnegie plans on differentiating among community colleges when it issues its new classification system in 2005.

Establishing the Criteria

Several criteria must be satisfied before any classifications can be made. First, the criteria must be valid. There's no point in using such measures as "research funds received" or "size of endowment;" too few community colleges have a visible presence in these areas. Nor does it make sense to use "degrees awarded as a percent of enrollment." This comes closer to community college purpose but it assumes that all enrollees are degree seekers and it omits counting students who transfer short of receiving a degree or who gain employment short of program completion, along with enrollment in short-term programs, job upgrading, and skill development. Furthermore such a criterion can be construed as normative.

A second requisite for classifying institutions is that the data must be readily available. It is rather futile to create categories for which special surveys must be done in order to find data to put into them. Therefore, as important as "reason for enrollment,"

"student satisfaction," or "student learning" are, no national data collected routinely according to consistent definitions exist. The most reliable data available come from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). And the data reported to IPEDS are limited to such categories as: total enrollment by sex, attendance status, and age; full-time equivalent enrollment; full-time and part-time faculty and staff; degrees awarded; and revenue and expenditures.

A third criterion is that the categories must be readily understandable. There's not much point in creating a complex formula in which institutions are classified by computing such arcana as "ratio of part-time students to part-time faculty as related to college location, programs offered, and value of physical plant." The categories must be discrete as well as meaningful.

A last requisite for a classification system is that the resulting information must be descriptive, not evaluative. They must afford commentators no opportunity to rank institutions or to question why a particular institution is not doing better on one or another variable. With good reason, college leaders, who live in a political environment, resent seeing stories in the media headlined, "Latest Data Show Local College Falling Short."

Valid Categories

Within the limits that must be placed on any classification system, it is possible to classify community colleges according to valid, readily available, easily understood, non-judgmental criteria. One criterion is college size. The report by Phipps and others notes that "size of institutional enrollment is the most distinguishing characteristic of public 2-year institutions (p. iv)." A number of studies dating back over several decades show that

college size correlates highly with several important variables. Studies of curriculum in community colleges nationwide have shown significant correlations between the size of an institution and enrollments in the liberal arts; the bigger the institution, the higher the percentage of students enrolled in courses in English, Humanities, Science, Social Science, and Mathematics (Schuyler, 1999). In an earlier study of community college curriculum, Cohen and Ignash (1994) found a similar pattern.

This finding is readily explainable. Visualize a college with 5,000 students enrolled: 650 students are taking Humanities (history, foreign languages, literature, etc); 600 are enrolled in English; and 550 in Mathematics; while 475 are in Technical Education; 350 in Personal Skills classes; and 350 in Trade and Industry courses. Double the size of that college and enrollments in the liberal arts courses double while they move hardly at all in the occupational areas. Why? Because enrollments in occupational programs tend to increase only as new programs are added. A program in nursing that enrolls 150 students is likely to enroll 150 students regardless of the overall college enrollment; same for a program in engineering technology or auto mechanics. Accordingly, because the percentage of enrollments in the liberal arts tends to increase with college size, the percentage of students tranferring to universities tends to increase as well. And studies of the faculty have shown that college size is also likely to be a major discriminator in the way faculty view their role and the way they spend their time.

A second valid criterion is the per capita expenditure on instruction; it relates negatively with enrollment in the liberal arts. The obvious reason is that colleges tend to spend more per capita on technical and occupational classes. And indeed in many states

the reimbursement schedules show this differentiation, with occupational programs receiving proportionately greater funding.

A third criterion might be the amount of auxiliary revenue generated by the college. Institutions that are vigorous in pursuing training contracts with local industries and involved in collaborations with other agencies have a relatively high percentage of auxiliary income. These colleges tend also to have sizable proportions of part-time students enrolled in non-credit courses.

The ratio of full-time faculty is another useful criterion. As numerous studies of faculty have shown, the full-timers relate quite differently to their work. Studies of faculty dating from that reported by Cohen and Brawer in 1977, one reported by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1997, and one conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in 2000 (Outcalt and Cohen, 2001), all show the full-timers as a more satisfied, more professionally related group, one more involved with their teaching and with other educators and academicians.

Relationships

Creating High, Medium, and Low categories using just these four criteria might yield some interesting patterns showing how community colleges differ. Visualize two colleges. One is in the large size category, it has a low percentage of per capita expenditures on instruction and a low percentage of auxiliary revenue, while it is in the high category in percentage of full-time faculty. A second college is smaller but it is high in percentage of per capita expenditures on instruction and high in auxiliary revenue, while it is in the lowest category in percentage of full-time faculty. What inferences can we draw? Based on data collected in especially designed surveys we can predict that

college number one is likely to be high in liberal arts curriculum and to have a high student transfer rate, while it is low in business-industry collaborations and in occupational education enrollment. The second college probably awards more occupational certificates, does more contract training, has a lower percentage of liberal arts course offerings and a higher proportion of non-credit enrollment.

Is college number two better or worse than college number one? Of course not. It merely has a different emphasis and that's what a classification system seeks to reveal. The criteria have served as proxies for many other college characteristics.

Other analysts may propose their own categories. Any number may be entertained as long as they are valid, based on readily available data, easily understandable, and non-evaluative. They should also bear a verifiable relationship to other important criteria. The categories outlined above offer a good starting place because they relate to variables that community college analysts consider to be the institutions' main missions: pre-baccalaureate study; occupational education; community service and collaborations; and an instructional program staffed by a professional faculty who are involved with their college, their discipline, and their profession.

The revelation that the nation's community colleges are not an amorphous blob is long overdue. Each has unique characteristics that have been shaped by its history and by the ways in which it has responded to its constituents. Categorizing the colleges in a non-normative, non-evaluative, non-judgemental way can only aid in understanding them.

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