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Why elite universities should admit more community college grads

By C. L. Max Nikias

Every year about 3 million students graduate from high school in the United States—and only about 50,000 will have the qualifications to begin their academic careers at one of the country’s top 30 private research universities. These are schools that not only teach, but also inspire scientific innovation, social progress and artistic expression. Yet these universities are often branded as perpetrators of high student debt or bastions of privilege.

But they need not be. An important step toward reversing this perception would be to expand the ways that low-income, academically qualified students can gain access to these institutions. In this regard, the University of Southern California has been leading the way by widely recruiting and admitting transfer students from two-year community colleges.

A 2006 study—the last to comprehensively examine this topic—found that fewer than one of every 1,000 students at the nation’s most selective private institutions is a community college transfer. But at USC last year, on a campus of 18,000 undergraduates, we accepted 824 highly qualified community college transfers. USC has had this policy in place for decades to attract qualified students, particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The results have been compelling, and we have increased our efforts as a result—admitting 13 percent more community college graduates in 2013 than we did in 2007.



USC students after 2011 commencement ceremonies in Los Angeles.
Nick Ut/Associated Press

The value of an education at a top private research university like USC is often overshadowed by the wider national debate about student debt. But the Association of American Universities (AAU) finds that about 60 percent of graduates at top private research institutions finish school with no debt whatsoever. As of 2012, those who did graduate with debt owed approximately \$27,000 on average, far below the numbers often cited in the most dispiriting news stories. Just as important, loan default rates among these graduates are about 2.5 percent, compared with a national average of

nearly 14 percent. Finally, the National Center for Education Statistics tells us that graduation rates for the top private research universities are more than 90 percent, compared with an average of 59 percent at other public and private universities. These numbers attest to the value of an education at such institutions.

The challenge for top private research universities is to increase economic diversity without sacrificing academic rigor so that a wider breadth of students can benefit.

According to the AAU, less than 20 percent of undergraduates enrolled in its member private research universities come from low-income families. Meanwhile, a 2012 paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research says that many high-achieving, low-income students don’t apply to elite universities at all. Part of the reason is that their high schools don’t have the resources to provide adequate guidance. The authors find that when low-income students do enroll at elite universities, they perform as

well as their high-income counterparts. So we should be doing everything we can to attract them—be it when they graduate from high school or with a second chance when they complete community college.

The reality is that some students with the right combination of talent, creativity and personality will not begin their academic careers at a selective private university. Many won't apply, while others simply require more time for polish or introspection. The most academically driven will hone their skills and prove themselves in a two-year program, emerging more motivated, more mature and hungrier than ever.

One such student is Marco Valadez, whom I've met personally. Marco grew up in a Los Angeles neighborhood plagued by violence and poverty. With more pressing priorities—such as finding a job and helping support his family—when others were graduating from high school and applying to colleges, Marco began his post-secondary education in his mid-20s. He moved quickly from remedial subjects to excelling at his local community college. By the time he was ready to move into a four-year school, he had been accepted to a number of top public universities in California as well as to USC. He tells me that, after all he'd lived through, being able to attend USC was a stunning achievement.

The taboo among selective private institutions on admitting community college graduates is rooted in two fears. The first is that graduation rates will take a hit. But this is not borne out by the record at USC, where 91 percent of these students graduate with a degree, in line with the rate for all USC undergrads. In addition, they save money, completing their studies without paying four years of tuition and often with the help of financial aid. In Marco's case, a combination of state, federal and university aid covered all his academic fees.

The second fear is that the institution's brand will take a blow. But many factors—quality of faculty and students, research innovation, volume of grant money, residential life, and laboratory facilities, to name a few—contribute to a research university's

brand or reputation. A wider breadth of students on campus is always a plus.

In 2013, 44 percent of the community college transfer students enrolling at USC were first-generation college students, and like Marco, 46 percent came from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Integrating students from all walks of life makes the campus experience more like the real world. And it inspires and promotes upward mobility.

Finally, accepting transfers from community colleges can help an institution make more meaningful local connections. This happens in two ways at USC. First, the university works with a number of community colleges to ensure that their curricula prepare students to continue their education at USC. Second, transfer students graduating from USC become role models within their communities. These kinds of connections lift not just individual students but entire families. As a result, these efforts can help universities become forces for change.

Marco will graduate in December with an economics degree and is weighing a number of options, including business school or a post with one of the Big Four accounting firms. Eventually he plans to build his own consultancy in the city where he has forged his civic and academic ties, to support the growth of Latino-owned small and medium-size businesses. I have no doubt he will succeed.

While we can make a solid case that our top private research universities are not perpetrators of rising student debt or lackluster graduation rates, there is little doubt that more can be done to combat the widespread perception that we are a club for society's most affluent. Offering a second chance to community college graduates is one way to close this gap and, in turn, underscore what every premier research university can and should be: a place for the most talented, whoever they are and wherever they may come from, to come together and cultivate their strengths.

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