

BEYOND ACCESSIBILITY

This paper, originally written in December 2008 and updated in August 2009, offers an enrollment management perspective on DePaul University's long-standing commitment to student access and lays out some of the key issues and questions surrounding DePaul's commitment to access in the light of its changed market position.

That DePaul is committed to student access should go without saying. Not that it does go without saying for very long, as it is clearly one of the most frequently and widely expressed tenets of institutional mission, strategy and activity. It is a core belief that shapes much of what we do and who we are. Put another way, if we were to try to imagine DePaul without a significant commitment to student access, we would surely be imagining a very different kind of university. It would still be a good university but possibly no longer one of clear distinction or great public purpose.

Yet what do we mean when we talk about access? And what should we mean as we think about the future direction of DePaul? This paper is an attempt to raise and explore these questions because the fact is that our commitment to student access is more frequently invoked than defined. And while it provides arguably the most important connecting thread between DePaul's past, present and future, its meaning has changed over time. This, of course, is part of its enduring value and appeal, but there are at least three reasons why continued ambiguity may no longer serve us well.

First and most self-evidently, DePaul is changing. By any measure this is a very different university from a decade or so ago; certainly from two or three decades ago. DePaul's commitment to access is rooted in its mission, history and culture; but it is also a function of the fact that for most of its history, it was in a relatively weak market position and almost entirely dependent on tuition revenue. The latter remains the case, of course, but less so the former. This has important implications for student access that have yet to be clearly expressed, fully appreciated, or explicitly addressed in institutional strategic plans.

Second, the challenge of college opportunity and attainment remains very great. It is common to hear that the real issue today has moved beyond college access to outcome, but this is only true to the extent that the two need to be viewed together. Even today, only 52 percent of Chicago public high school graduates go to college within a year of leaving high school, and this includes both two-year institutions and essentially open-access baccalaureate institutions. The odds are worse if the student happens to be Hispanic/Latino or African-American or for that matter male. Clearly, we have not solved the issue of access.

Third, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are changing. CPS school reform has by no means run its course, and the Catholic schools have seen significant enrollment declines over the past few decades. As both systems enroll large numbers of low-income students, such changes

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present both a challenge and an opportunity for DePaul; how well the university negotiates the first and seizes the second will say a lot about the way it continues to live out its mission in vastly altered circumstances.

ACCESS AT DEPAUL: AN EVOLVING COMMITMENT

In describing DePaul's commitment to access today, we tend to invoke the goals and principles on which the university was founded and draw a straight line from them to the present. DePaul was always committed to student access, we tend to say, and has continued that commitment through to the present day. But this is to use a single word to describe something that has evolved over time in response to varying interpretations of religious and institutional mission as well as changing external circumstances. There is no question that DePaul's founding included a commitment to educational opportunity, but this was understood within the framework of its religious mission and the needs of the burgeoning Catholic population in Chicago.¹ When we talk about student access today, we are talking about a very different public challenge and a very different institutional landscape.

What is that mission and landscape today? DePaul's strategic plan commits it to becoming "one of the finest urban, Catholic universities" in the country. But it also remains "resolute in its Vincentian mission to make an extraordinary education accessible." In other words, DePaul will continue to improve in quality *without* sacrificing its historic commitment to student access. This is an exciting goal and one that would certainly meet Burton Clark's standard of a truly "distinctive" college.² Half a century ago, Clark noted that very few colleges were so "strongly purposive" that they were able to "sustain their mission over time to the point of success and acclaim." However, those that do are able to transform their mission into an "embracing saga." Such institutions become "legendary, even heroic" on the social stage.

This is very difficult to do, however. In today's marketplace, higher education is seen as a *positional good* by students and their families as well as by institutions. In other words, its value lies less in its essential quality than in the comparative advantage that it bestows. Two things are going on here. While access to knowledge is presumably not diluted by its more equal distribution, access to *credentials* is another matter entirely. As Collins has argued over the past few decades, expanded access to credentials has led to a process of credential inflation and differentiation.³ By the same token, institutional "quality" is increasingly defined as a function of market perception and position.

This has very real consequences in enrollment terms. Simply put, student demand is a function of market position. A strengthened market position drives application volume, selectivity and, by extension, further enhancements in reputation and prestige.⁴ Indeed, this has happened at DePaul. While the size of the freshman class has doubled over the past two decades, the volume of applications has tripled. To date, the university has done a remarkable job not only of meeting its enrollment and revenue targets, but also balancing greater selectivity with a continued commitment to access. DePaul has a higher percentage of low-income students than its peer institutions; indeed, the number of Pell Grant recipients enrolling as freshmen actually increased between 2004 and 2008. But as DePaul continues to gain visibility, and as the applicant pool continues to grow, the pressure on student access will continue to intensify.

If DePaul continues on this trajectory—and of course, this is by no means certain given recent economic events—it will have to look beyond its long-established capacity-building approach to student access. It will need a more precise understanding of access rather than a broad commitment to *accessibility* that has served us well in the past. It will also need to adopt a more rigorously outcome-based approach to student access. For many years, DePaul could

1 Lester F. Goodchild, *The Mission of the Catholic University in the Midwest, 1842-1980*, unpublished dissertation, 1984.

2 Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College*, 1970.

3 Randall Collins, "Credential Inflation and the Future of Universities," in Steven Brink (ed.), *The Future of the City of Intellect*, 2002.

4 Some colleges have sought to further manipulate this process by employing strategies to increase the volume of applications as a way to depress the admit rate, thus giving the appearance of greater selectivity.

reasonably be proud of the opportunities it extended to students, but this went hand in hand with graduation rates below what we would like to see. Those graduation rates have improved in recent years, but there is broad consensus on campus that they need to improve further. We understand that access without attainment is essentially a promise denied, not to mention a talent wasted. On the other hand, we have no interest in getting locked into a model of admission selectivity that effectively excludes students from low-income or first-generation college families who are capable of succeeding at DePaul. So what should we do? First, let's take a closer look at the sorts of students we are talking about.

ACCESS POPULATIONS

When we refer to “mission students” at DePaul, we often imply or assume that they form an essentially homogeneous population. Today, DePaul's freshmen are still drawn primarily from the greater Chicago area, but more than twice as many are drawn from the suburbs as from the city and over a third from out of state. Equally, if we look at the intersections of race, income and first-generation status, we find many permutations. DePaul attracts a significant number of non-first-generation African-American freshmen, for example, while a notable number of white freshmen are from low-income families.

Indeed, when we look closely at the permutations of mission-related profile (defined as Chicago residence, underrepresented minority, first generation and low income) in our freshman population, we find that nearly 60 percent meet at least one of those criteria, but only 4 percent meet all four.⁵ What are we to make of this? DePaul's commitment to enrollment research and analysis brings with it not only new insights but new responsibilities. It introduces a new and necessary element of empirical reality and discipline into our institutional dialogue about how mission is reflected in our enrollment profile, and it reframes the opportunities and the obligations we face in this regard.

Equally, there is a tendency to equate the challenge of student access with strategies and activities focused on “at-risk” student populations. This makes sense to the extent that underrepresented populations tend to reflect the unequal distribution of economic resources and educational opportunity in society and so are less likely to have the academic, social and financial resources to progress to college or to succeed if and when they get there. “At-risk” students do tend to be less academically prepared, lack strong networks of social support and have fewer financial resources than students coming from more affluent backgrounds. But focusing exclusively on “at-risk” student populations is an orientation to student retention strategy that typically fails to elevate institutional outcomes. Evidence suggests, as David Kalsbeek pointed out in 2003, “that the real challenge has less to do with high-risk students than with *high-risk experiences*. To the extent that this is true, retention will be improved not so much by focusing on segments of student populations at risk—though there may be instances where this makes sense, of course—but on core educational processes.”⁶

There is also a tendency to characterize “at-risk” students in undifferentiated terms having broadly similar needs requiring broadly similar institutional interventions. But again, this is far from the case. In fact, it may be helpful to distinguish at least four admittedly overlapping and yet essentially distinct types of students:

- **Underperforming** students, especially those from low-income or first-generation families or other underrepresented populations. This is perhaps closest to what we usually mean by an access population, and the one targeted by federal intervention programs such as TRiO and GEAR UP, along with institutional remediation programs. Such students are capable of

5 Karolynn Horan, “DePaul's Mission Students: Fall 2005 – Fall 2007,” *EMR Research Summary*, 2008.

6 “Comments on the Student Success Task Force Report,” 2003.

performing well but are likely to require significant levels of institutional investment in terms of academic assistance programming, mentoring and financial aid.

- **Underprepared** students from a low-income and/or first-generation background. Such students are highly sought after by all institutions and the focus of full-tuition scholarship initiatives and early identification programs such as POSSE. There are, by definition, very few of them—less than 2 percent of CPS graduates have ACT scores higher than 30, for example, and many of them are not necessarily from low-income households. By the same token, attracting such students is likely to require significant institutional investment—most are likely to be “cherry-picked” by highly selective colleges. On the face of it, such students are perhaps not “at risk” in the usual sense of the term, and yet they may face special issues in terms of campus climate and integration.
- **Striving and achieving** students from a low-income and/or first-generation background who are engaged in pre-college programs, such as CPS College Bridge, or high-intensity curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program in CPS neighborhood schools. Such students are sometimes a bit “below the radar” in that they are typically in non-selective schools, yet they are likely to have strong family support and have elected to take the most difficult curriculum options available to them and/or have been engaged with their community. Their admission profile—at least in terms of standardized test scores and grade point averages—tends to underestimate their true potential as it undervalues the educational *distance* many of them have traveled, or the commitment many of them are making as they juggle education, work and family in a school and/or community culture that may not attach much value to college preparation.

If we look at the size of these groups in the local high school population, and view them in the context of the sorts of interventions and investments we would need to make to properly serve them, we can start to array them in terms of institutional mission, opportunity and strategic potential as illustrated below.

This schema is fairly crude and the student “types” it seeks to distinguish are highly idealized. But it starts to identify some of the choices we need to be making—and indeed are making—as we balance mission, resources and opportunities in a truly strategic way. *The challenge, surely, is to more clearly articulate DePaul’s pathway, admission and aid programs for those able and highly motivated mission-centered students in Chicago who are most likely to take full advantage of a DePaul education, and to ensure that this education is truly transformative.*

	STRATEGIC POTENTIAL	SIZE OF POPULATION	INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT	RELATION TO MISSION
Underperformer	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Low
Underprepared	Large	High	Moderate	Moderate
High achiever	Small	High	High	Moderate
Striver/achiever	Moderate	Low to moderate	High	High

This would be a strategic approach to access at DePaul. It speaks directly to the needs of the local educational environment and to ongoing public policy concerns about institutional accountability and effectiveness. It also, consistent with VISION twenty12, elevates DePaul's commitment to access by tying it to enrichment and attainment. But what would it look like?

NEW STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS NOW UNDERWAY

For most of its history, DePaul's accessibility has been as much a function of necessity as mission. Market responsiveness and entrepreneurial spirit have deep Vincentian roots, of course, but at DePaul they have also developed into strategies of institutional survival. Indeed, this blending of market and mission has long distinguished the university; it is perhaps the essence of its institutional genius. But the dynamic has changed. DePaul's historic weakness—its position in the marketplace—is now a strength. Perhaps it will not continue to be so; the foreseeable future is likely to be a turbulent one in higher education. However, at the very least it is a strategic planning assumption, and so its implications have to be thought through.⁷ At the very least, we need to be clearer about what we mean when we say we are committed to access and more focused in what we do about it. Four broad directions for thinking and action are already starting to shape DePaul's enrollment planning and practice.

1. A CHICAGO-BASED STRATEGY FOR ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT

While DePaul's overall enrollment strategy encompasses regional, national and international dimensions, we are focusing our access agenda locally. This is both a reflection of the high level of educational need in Chicago and a recognition that a more focused and intentional approach will yield better results. It is also a statement about the conservation and effective use of resources. For example, we might interpret the value of accessibility to mean that we should treat a low-income financial aid applicant from out-of-state the same way we would as if he or she were from Chicago. And yet what sort of equity is this? With limited aid resources, the attempt to achieve some sort of parity in our financial aid packaging for in-state and out-of-state low-income students only means that we are less likely to meet need in either case very satisfactorily. This raises difficult questions, of course, but they are the sorts of questions we need to address if we want to use our resources to maximum effectiveness.

It is possible that we will eventually see a reduction in the number of low-income students enrolling at DePaul. This might be defensible on equity grounds as long as (and only as long as) we make real gains in terms of their experience and attainment at DePaul. But if such a reduction were to take place, then it must be carefully managed; it cannot happen by default if we are to remain true to core purposes and mission-based principles.

Equally, we ought to establish greater institutional clarity about what number and proportion of students we are talking about. Two tests might be employed. First, the economic and racial profile of our entering students should be in advance of peer institutions. We should define this aggressively; given our mission, it will be no achievement to fall short of our peers, or exceed them in minimal terms. Second, if there is a reduction in low-income students, it has to be accompanied by added or re-allocated investment to minimize the financial and other barriers to an enriched student experience, and to ensure greater levels of attainment and outcome.

7 For example, as early as 2002-03 and long before planning for VISION twenty12 began, Enrollment Management and Marketing outlined for the Board of Trustees three contrasting enrollment models in a report focused on "2012 and beyond": a full-access model, a selectivity model and a mission-balanced model. Enrollment outcomes since that time have tended to reflect the "selectivity" model but DePaul has nevertheless managed to hold its ground in terms of access and diversity.

2. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AND PATHWAYS TO DEPAUL

One way to do this would be to more closely align our aid policies and practices with our partnership and pathway programs in Chicago. DePaul has long partnered with local schools and community organizations on a variety of levels. Ten years ago, this became an explicit component of DePaul's enrollment strategy with the establishment of the Office of Community Outreach organizationally aligned with the Office of Undergraduate Admission. In the recent establishment of the Center for Access and Attainment within the Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing, the university has taken a further step toward a more strategic approach. The Center coordinates a variety of partnership and pathway programs with CPS and Big Shoulders Catholic schools, and it is also charged with promoting campus dialogue around issues of student access and enhancing the university's wider reputation as an institutional model for both access and attainment.

Given DePaul's strengthened market position and continued changes in Chicago schools, the timing is right to strengthen and expand enrollment pathways with targeted student populations. Such programs do far more than offer potential pathways to DePaul for those who might not otherwise have thought it possible, though this would be justification enough. What they also do is provide us with an early opportunity to connect with students who have the motivation, ability and preparation to succeed at DePaul.

For example, DePaul is the largest university partner with CPS in its College Bridge program, which offers dual enrollment opportunities for high school students to take college courses for credit at no financial cost. The majority of CPS College Bridge participants are students of color from first-generation college families; most, too, are from Chicago's non-selective high schools. Yet, for those who enroll at DePaul as freshmen, their retention and graduation rates exceed those of students with similar academic and socioeconomic profiles. CPS recently stopped funding for the program due to budget cuts, but DePaul will continue to explore ways to provide academic enrichment programming to targeted CPS students as well as those in area Catholic schools serving low-income and first-generation college students.

DePaul also has developed a close partnership with the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs that have been established in 14 non-selective high schools in the city over the past 10 years. The IB Program is a highly rigorous writing-intensive pre-college curriculum that is designed to prepare students for admission to selective universities worldwide. Again, most of the participants are from low-income and first-generation families. And yet, as our own tracking at DePaul has shown, they outperform all expectations. In fact, the hundred or so who have enrolled as DePaul freshmen over the past few years are starting to post graduation rates substantially above university averages.

3. ADDING NEW INDICATORS OF STUDENT POTENTIAL IN THE ADMISSION PROCESS

Increased student demand at DePaul is leading to increased selectivity in admission. But improvements in student "quality" often have some cost in terms of access and diversity. We tend to define student "quality" simply by the indicators we use to measure it, and while these measures are not without meaning or utility, they nonetheless have significant limitations. While DePaul has long held to a holistic approach in its application review process, the fact is that for very practical reasons it has relied heavily on two indicators in particular: standardized test scores and grade point averages. While the research shows that strength of curriculum and grades are better predictors of college success, particularly for low-income and first-generation students, standardized test scores still factor heavily. To the extent that these scores are as much an indicator of socioeconomic status as ability or potential, they are likely to increasingly constrain our attempts to balance increased selectivity with access.

As a consequence, we are exploring new indicators of student potential to supplement and strengthen the information we already have in the admission process. Freshman applicants for fall 2009 were asked to complete new short-essay questions designed to give us a more robust sense of their motivation, goals, network of personal support and ability to adjust to new settings and overcome challenges and obstacles. As demonstrated over a lifetime of research by Dr. William Sedlacek at the University of Maryland, such “non-cognitive” indicators, taken together, are powerful predictors of long-term student success, especially when they supplement traditional admission measures such as grades and test scores. While such an approach has been successfully adopted by the Gates Millennium Scholarship program, DePaul has joined Oregon State University as one of the first universities to use it systematically in the admission process. This initiative, christened the DIAMOND program (Developing Insight for Admissions through Mining Of Non-Traditional Data), represents an innovative institutional response to managing access and attainment in the context of increasing selectivity and improved market position.

4. EMPHASIZING GREATER EQUITY OF EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOME

While we have by no means solved the challenge of college access in America, the question is increasingly being asked: access to what? There is ample evidence to suggest that low-income students experience college in more constrained ways than other students. Partly, this is a function of social or cultural capital resources, partly of financial resources. Either way, fewer low-income students live on campus, take part in internships or undergraduate research opportunities or participate in study-abroad programs than their more affluent counterparts. The result is that though they may graduate with the same degree (if they do indeed graduate), they do not necessarily graduate with the same experience. However, these are precisely the sorts of experiences that are most likely to be most transformative for a low-income, first-generation student.

Study abroad, as we have learned from the McNair Scholars program at DePaul, is one of those experiences. When McNair students first enter the program, their choices of potential graduate schools tend to be highly constrained. But most McNair scholars study abroad, an experience that seems to strengthen personal confidence, social integration and academic aspiration. By the time they are ready to apply for graduate school, they are looking at some of the best institutions in the country, and being accepted to them. True, this is also a function of other components of the McNair program, such as faculty mentoring and summer research projects at leading graduate schools. But study abroad seems to stand alone in its impact. Consequently, the Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing has supplied additional funding to the program to underwrite further participation and monitor its impact.

Improving access to international learning and experience has other implications. One of the things we are noticing about the CPS IB students, for example, is how many of them are fluent or partially fluent in other languages. This is partly because the IB curriculum places heavy emphasis on language skills and international perspectives. It is also a function of the fact that IB programs in Chicago draw quite heavily from immigrant communities. We are rightly concerned, for example, that too few American students are fluent in another language. But when we look at some of the low-income IB students in Chicago of Mexican, Chinese, Vietnamese or Romanian descent—the list is much longer of course—who are already fluent or almost fluent in two or more languages, what does the educational challenge become then? More to the point, is it less of a challenge than an opportunity?

There is, in other words, a connection to be made between such students in neighborhood IB schools (and others like them) and programs like McNair Scholars. But making that connection will require all the access strategy dimensions outlined here: partnerships and pathways into neighborhood schools and communities, more divergent definitions and measures of student “quality” in the admission process, and investments to promote greater equity of experience for students once they get to DePaul.

FROM MISSION TO SAGA?

Burton Clark draws a distinction between mission and what he calls saga. Initially, he says, a mission is simply a statement of purpose, intent or direction. But for a college to be truly distinctive, it needs something more. As an aspect of organizational culture, it needs a “saga” that connects what it was in history, what it is today, and what it will be in the future. “Its definitions are deeply internalized by many members, thereby becoming a part, even an unconscious part, of individual motive. A saga, then, is a mission made total across a system in space and time. It embraces the participants of a given day and links together successive waves of participants over major periods of time.”⁸ In its long story of accessibility—Clark would call it an “organizational legend”—DePaul may well have the makings of just such a saga. Whether it can truly make such a claim may depend on the way it balances its commitments to quality and access in the years ahead.

For Clark, the distinctive college is an exemplar of some educational ideal, the institutional embodiment of a powerful idea in action. But such colleges are, by definition, few and far between. While their contribution to American higher education far outweighs their number, this sometimes borders on idiosyncrasy. Both conceptually and financially, the distinctive college is often close to the margin. DePaul’s distinctiveness is of a different sort. It is still highly tuition dependent and thereby operating on the margin in many respects. But as the largest Catholic university in the country with a continued mission to “make an extraordinary education accessible,” it is clearly operating at the center rather than at the margin of American higher education. Its contribution, perhaps, comes less from the distinctive nature of the educational experience it provides, than from the fact that it is still delivered to large numbers of low-income and first-generation students.

But can DePaul maintain its distinctiveness in enrollment terms as its market position continues to strengthen? The argument here is that this will not happen without clear commitment and management; the forces pulling in the other direction are too strong for it to happen by default. Increased selectivity, without more robust and divergent measures of student quality and potential, will push the university toward greater homogeneity and away from the pressing educational needs and aspirations in our community. What we have to ask is whether marginal improvements in market position (for institutions tend not to move very far or fast) make up for any diminution or diffusion in mission; an unintended consequence of improved market position could be that we simply start to look more like lots of other institutions.⁹

On the other hand, what is the option? Presumably, it is not to turn back the clock. DePaul has benefited greatly from the quality-driven investments (in enrollment strategy and campus investment) of the past two to three decades. We are a much better institution than we were, and the benefits to our students—both in terms of day-to-day educational experience and the enhanced value of a DePaul degree in the marketplace—are very real. To repeat an earlier point, part of DePaul’s access strategy historically stemmed from the comparative weakness of its market position. As Zemsky et al. point out, institutions in weak market positions are more

8 Burton Clark, page 235.

9 Here it might be well to consider the distinction drawn by Brewer et al. between strategies of reputation and strategies of prestige. Simply put, strategies of reputation would focus our attention on serving student and constituency needs while strategies of prestige would seek to position the university with higher status institutions and would place more emphasis on proxy measures of quality such as rankings. See Dominic Brewer, Susan Gates and Charles Goldman, *In Pursuit of Prestige*, 2002.

likely to operate as businesses because they are less likely to have the financial wherewithal to support broader educational or mission-based programs.¹⁰

The reality is that DePaul will be a tuition-driven university for the foreseeable future. This fact, as much as any other, will continue to define the possibilities and limits of its commitment to student access. The university has done a remarkable job of maintaining its commitment to access through a period of profound transformation; indeed, its capacity-building agenda in recent decades was grounded in a twin commitment to increased quality and continued access. But we are now in changed circumstances and need to embrace the inevitable trade-offs as they take new form and assume new intensity. While an argument of this paper is that increased market power is likely to put pressure on DePaul's long-standing commitment to access, it is equally the case, as Zemsky et al. argue, that increased market power is also necessary to deliver on mission. The question is: What are we to do with our enhanced position in the marketplace?

This paper has outlined some of the strategic assumptions and programmatic directions that will help ensure the continuation of DePaul's commitment to educational opportunity as both the university and its environment continue to change. It further makes the case that DePaul should continue to live out its mission through its enrollment, which would be by no means guaranteed if we were to continue along a selectivity path. There are many ways for Catholic institutions to fulfill their missions, of course, but for DePaul great importance is attached not only to *what* we teach but *whom* we teach. But we need to think of student access differently than we have in the past. We will need to be more focused and intentional. We will also need to deliver on the promise of access not just at the point of entry to the institution, but in terms of educational experience and outcome. Getting to this point in DePaul's history has been a story in itself. And while it will forever continue to be a strategic balancing act, moving forward could well transform this story into a saga.

¹⁰ Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, and William Massy, *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered*, 2006.