EDITOR’S PAGE

Access to What?

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In early April 2003, the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia hosted a small invitational conference on “Opportunity and Access: Understanding Barriers to Equal Opportunity in Higher Education.” My colleague and conference organizer, Scott Thomas, assembled ten scholars to present papers on the overall theme with specific strands on student expectations and aspirations, academic preparation, and ability to pay / affordability. For two days with only a few breaks, the scholars presented ideas, critiqued theory and practice, sent up trial balloons for change, and debated prospects for enhancing access.

Deeply embedded in the discussion, someone raised the critical question: “Access to what?” In the wide-ranging discussion of private and public institutions, highly selective versus open door, and student expectations and preparedness, the question was never really answered. The conversation soon moved back to scholarships, loans, advisement, differential access, and so on. They dealt with the pathway to college and access to college, defined broadly, not what happens when one arrives.

The question, however, continues to resonate with me. Yes, access to what? Retention for what? What do we give students access to when they enter our colleges? From a sociological perspective, we might talk about social mobility or moving into the middle class. From a psychological perspective, we could suggest the opportunity for emotional and affective development and the development of self-knowledge. Using an economic or public policy perspective, we might advocate education for the development of a workforce, for the capacity to acquire and create capital, and an educated populace as a national resource. From a societal viewpoint, we might speak of participation in a democracy and individual contribution to the common good.

Higher education has long been assigned a variety of roles: liberal education, professional preparation, economic development, education for citizenship, knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination, social inclusion, equal opportunity, and global awareness. One must also mention the responsibility for the development in the student of a wide range of skills, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge said to characterize
the educated person. Tensions arise around elitism and egalitarianism, quality and access, distributed education and traditional instruction, credentialing and knowledge for the sake of knowledge, research and teaching.

Putting aside the multiple social, economic, and political functions of a college or university in a democratic society and focusing explicitly on what students learn, or specifically that to which they have access in the college curriculum, we are faced with two sets of four critical educational questions:

**Instructor/Institutional Perspective**
- What shall we teach?
- How will we teach these things?
- Why will we teach these things?
- Who will be our students?

**Student Perspective**
- What do I want to learn?
- How will I best learn these things?
- Why do I want to learn these things?
- Where/from whom will I learn?

At the core of educational debate is the content of education, the purpose of education, the choice of methods, and the nature of the learner. Recurring curricular themes are liberal education or vocational/professional preparation, general education or specialized study, skills-based or intellectual development. These educational differences in purposes and outcomes are captured in the educational philosophies of essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, behaviorism, and constructivism to name a few. These philosophies and practices are represented within and across more than 4000 colleges and universities nationwide and in thousands of curricular options available to students both national and international.

Over the past four centuries, the organization and governance of the nation's colleges and universities have allowed for increasing diversity in mission and purpose, content and methods. In 1638, the curriculum at Harvard (and other colonial colleges that soon followed) was prescribed for young males, and education was primarily for the ministry or public service. Over the next 200 years, growth in the number and type of institutions, changes in public expectations, and curricular experimentation changed forever the profile of American higher