

Grand Challenge #6: Student Access and Success: The Drift Toward Elitism?

In his essay, Mike Martin¹ argues that many land-grant universities face a dilemma today as they try to retain their commitment to be accessible "people's universities" while being driven by forces, both internal and external, to become increasingly selective in admissions. The land-grant tradition was forged in America's Jacksonian age, the era of the common man, to serve what would soon be called the "industrial classes" that did not have access to higher education. For roughly 120 years following the Morrill Act of 1862, Martin says that land grants were largely true to their mandate and focused on providing educational value for ordinary people. Through their teaching, research, and outreach services, they played a significant role in advancing social justice, enhancing economic development, and therefore in securing American democracy.

But many observers fear that in recent decades land-grant institutions have drifted toward a more elitist approach to recruiting and admitting students. In so doing, they are becoming more like filters than ladders. The drift toward recruiting a more selective student body is, of course, not unique to land-grants. Statistics indicate that the country's top colleges are not serving socioeconomically disadvantaged students well.² The drift, however, raises particularly vexing concerns for land-grants. If the institutions specifically created to serve the common student do not do so, who will?

Land-grant institutions and public colleges face unique pressures. In many states, political leaders are increasingly concerned about retention and graduation rates. Statistical evidence suggests that the simplest way to increase those rates is to recruit white, middle- to upper-class students from suburban areas. But that runs counter to the land-grant mandate and society's needs. Further, the costs of meeting the needs of academically and socioeconomically diverse student bodies are high and rising. Offering transitional/remedial programs in areas like math and English, most effectively in small classes and personalized programs, stretches already tight budgets.

In states with high percentages of black, Hispanic and American Indian students, universities face a special challenge of welcoming, transitioning, and advancing students who are not typically well prepared for higher education. Then too, teaching and, particularly, advising students from diverse backgrounds takes time and effort on the part of faculty members, some of whom would rather spend their time on research, graduate-level teaching, or other professional ventures. If state legislatures do not provide sufficient funds to meet those special challenges, universities will seek to lower costs by being more selective. Faculty members, pressured to publish as well as to teach and advise, will themselves be more selective in the students they choose to devote the most time to—so the trend away from the land-grant mandate will continue.

How will the land-grant system respond to this challenge?

¹ Martin, Michael. 2005. A Drift Toward Elitism by the 'People's Universities'. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(25). Mike Martin recently retired as Chancellor of Colorado State University. Previously he served as President of New Mexico State University and Chancellor of Louisiana State University.

² Leonhardt, David. March 16, 2013. "Better Colleges Failing to Lure Talented Poor." *New York Times*.