Why “Dodging That Bullet” Matters

ACCJC members did not get hit with the Varsity Blues scandal. None of us made the news about having celebrities bribe their kid’s acceptance into a community college. None of our students fudged their sports profiles to gain a coach’s favor and garner an athletic acceptance. No one needed to persuade an admissions committee that our students are worthy. Our students are worthy because they want to learn. Period.

But we don’t gloat. We don’t flaunt our innocence. We don’t smirk at the pain of those prestigious institutions; there are enough lawyers lined up at their doors to do that. We do, however, use this news cycle to reflect, to shine a light on why it’s good we dodged that bullet.

As we reflect, one reality becomes clearer: The majority of the students we serve don’t even run in that race. Not that some of them couldn’t compete. But mostly they come from a different context, a different set of life circumstances. They seek a quality education that is close at hand, that is adaptive to their work and family responsibilities, that is affordable, that offers programs they want, that generates credentials useful for employment and transfer, and that is offered on a campus populated with faculty and staff who care passionately about their success. Their online search engines don’t track a history of exploring prestigious colleges.

Through several administrations, the legislative community in Washington has been fascinated with college performance data. The Obama administration mounted the College Scorecard for the purpose of giving students who have choices the information to inform those choices. Other sources, such as the College Navigator, chimed in – all with the assumption that America’s college-bound population all had choices.

Recent research by the College Board confirms what many of us have suspected: Data to compare colleges is used mostly by those who have choices – mostly White and Asian students from well-resourced high schools (many of them private) whose parents have some college education. As such, these data sources may in fact be contributing to the widening gap between those who have prestigious choices and those who don’t as the competition becomes more fierce at the top end.

A major goal of the College Scorecard, that students would look at the data and shun poor performing schools so the market would drive them to change or go away, isn’t being validated. People using the Scorecard aren’t researching lower-performing schools. Some critics bemoan that less-advantaged students aren’t looking at the data. I would suggest instead that, for most of them, it simply doesn’t matter.

Our community colleges are simply not in the business of making the privileged and elite more privileged and elite. We are about democratizing higher education. In their path to a better life, our students are making different kinds of decisions. They are not doing a calculation about whether Georgetown has better performance data than USC. They are pondering which courses can fit their schedule between two jobs. Many are wondering where they will spend the night and secure the next healthy meal. And a large number of them are celebrating the faculty member who helped them discover that they really are learners, the counselor who guided them to make good curricular choices, and the financial aid specialist who made an academic pathway even possible.
The Washington fascination with performance numbers continues unabated, only with an additional focus. Accreditors are being asked with heightened intensity to track key performance data and to hold institutions accountable for low numbers. In the vocabulary of some, “hold accountable” means to punish or even shut down low-performing schools, presumably to protect both students and taxpayers. In the heat of the dialogue, nuances can get lost, such as which data accreditors must monitor, whether different institutional missions and student populations generate non-comparable data, and which strategies can accreditors deploy when a school’s numbers drop.

This leaves open a new question: Even though ACCJC’s member institutions dodged the Varsity Blues bullet, will they dodge a misguided legislative bullet?