

Mann, William. Annotation of “Limited Reach: The Role of Mission and Institutional Aid in Supporting Minority Students.” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2017).

© William Mann, FSC, DMin. Readers of this article have the copyright owner’s permission to reproduce it for educational, not-for-profit purposes, if the author and publisher are acknowledged in the copy.

ANNOTATION

Finger, Mary Catherine. “Limited Reach: The Role of Mission and Institutional Aid in Supporting Minority Students.” EdD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2013. 234pp.

The purpose of the research of this dissertation was “to look more closely at the relationship of financial aid to over-all Latino and African-American [college] graduation rates, the decision-making process around distribution of financial aid, and the intersection of financial-aid practice to institutional mission” (6, 45, 49-50).

The research approach used involved both a quantitative part of the study and four qualitative case studies (vi, 51). The quantitative analysis showed no relationship between financial-aid allocation and graduation rates (vi, 199, 213); and the qualitative case studies revealed that economic, demographic, and political trends “are making it increasingly difficult to align mission with financial-aid practice” (vi, 21, 187, 197-198, 200, 211). “The common perception among the leaders at the four institutions studied is that the current model for funding higher education is broken and cannot be sustained in the long-term” (197, 210).

In the review of literature (30-50), the author examined “the two broad categories of literature on student persistence, social interactionist [the student-fit model], and economic approaches” (30) and noted that “the literature invites examination of – quantitatively – the relationship between financial aid and persistence and – qualitatively – the effect of mission and organization culture on decision-making” [vis-à-vis] “financial-aid practice and retention of Latino and African-American students” (30).

The author attempted to “understand those factors that increase the likelihood of retention, persistence, and completion” (3). Factors indicated as worth study were size, selectivity, composition of the student body, and expenditure of resources in support of students (3); and the author noted that the “persistence literature indicates that there are multiple categories of variables – individual, institutional, societal – that can influence the retention and graduation of students” (5).

The interactionist model suggested that “how well the student integrated academically and/or socially with his [her] college or university was the primary factor in determining if he [she] would persist to graduation. In contrast, economic models looked at variables such as finances and financial aid that had a direct influence on student persistence” (31). Some of the literature “found that not only were pre-existing familial and community support structures important [for “minority student persistence”], but also social systems within the college or university that reinforced students’ racial and cultural identities . . . It was clear that persistence factors that might influence majority populations had a different result with Latino and African American students” (36).

By the early 1980s, “the student’s perception of difficulty in financing his [her] education” began to be factored into the exploration of factors contributing to persistence (40). Data in the early 2000s began to indicate that “lower income students were more influenced in their persistence decisions by a lack of grant aid and/or sufficient grant aid, while insufficient access to loans and work study affected working class students” (43, 44-45).

Using what is called “path analysis” (80) of the quantitative data studied, the author concluded that: (a) the “percentage of [financial] need met was unrelated to overall graduation rates or to the graduation rates of Latino or African American students in the populations examined” (82, 92, 202); (b) the “analyses show that three variables have a statistically significant positive direct relationship to overall, Latino and African American graduation rates [SAT scores, endowment, and enrollment]” (82-88, 200-201); (c) “average incoming SAT score has the strongest positive direct relationship of the variables to graduation” (82, 88, 195, 207); and (d) “the percentage of aid to needy students is unrelated to the overall graduation rate and to graduation rates of African American and Latino students” (87, 92).

Concerning the case study analysis of Institution One, which is a mission-driven college with a commitment to enrolling and funding a percentage of low-income and minority students (95-118), it was noted that its “ability to continue to align its espoused and enacted mission” is becoming increasingly difficult due to factors somewhat beyond its control – including the economy [vis-à-vis increased student need and the college’s deepening student discount] and its place in the [increasingly competitive] marketplace of higher education” (103, 114-117).

Faced with a national agenda focused on persistence and graduation rates (108-115) and the reality that “graduation rates for Latino and African American students are considerably below the mean for private nonprofit four-year colleges,” the administration is asking “what is the incentive nationally for anyone to take on the issue of helping high need, low-income kids” in a private institution?” (112).

Institution Two, which is mission-focused and committed to diversity and access, finds itself searching for a sustainable business model (119-137). The college “is dependent on tuition for more than 90% of its operating budget,” and this is making it increasingly difficult “to support mission in the context of substantial external pressures and internal limitations” (135). As students more and more come “from families of limited economic means,” without increased federal and state aid and successful fundraising the institution’s ability to remain “committed to a racially and socio-economically diverse university community” is in doubt (124, 133-134).

One administrator’s prescient observation was that “we’re not in a crisis and this is not a storm, this is a permanent change in the landscape. It is never going to go back” (124, 200, 203, 214).

Institution Three, which attempts to meet full need, is seemingly becoming an unsustainable model to maintain (138-157). The college created “a financial aid policy that meets student need at a high level and, in doing so, has achieved a diverse racial, socio-economic, and ethnic university community that successfully graduates underrepresented minority students at a high level” (138-139, 144, 148, 157); but as the institution is “highly dependent on tuition [more than

90%] to fund the operations” (139-140), this model is eroding. “In the years since the recession of 2008-2009, student need has increased” (142, 145); and this is causing the administration and trustees to re-think “the institution’s capacity to continue funding the financial aid component of the mission initiative at the level it has for the past several years” (142, 144). The institution appears to be moving toward “a more strategic distribution of . . . resources in support of financial aid similar to other institutions” in the research study (138).

Their financial aid model “depends on a high percentage of full-pay students to underwrite those students who are unable to pay” (148-149, 153), and more recently the enrollment “yield rate on students with a high level of need was the highest of the students in the applicant pool” (147).

Institution Four, which by design “has one of the lowest tuition rates of any of the private institutions in the state in which it resides,” finds itself at a crossroad and is now re-thinking its mission (158-179). The student population “has shifted in recent years. Similar to the student populations of other universities in this study, the affluence . . . of the student body had declined since the recession of 2008-2009” (159). Consequently, two themes are emerging: (a) there is concern about “the university’s ability to continue to meet its stated mission in the same way it has historically – by holding tuition costs comparatively low while meeting need at the level it has” and (b) there are questions about “whether providing access to education at the university to poor and working-class students without fully meeting need is a practice that should be continued” (161).

Balancing “the university’s mission and the need for institutional sustainability” is front and center due to the amalgamation of a number of factors: (a) “the university’s approach of providing accessibility and affordability through comparatively low tuition pricing”; (b) “a difficult economy” and “the shift to a more [economically] needy population” of students; (c) “a more competitive environment in which to recruit” students and “the national attainment agenda” [persistence and graduation rates]; and (d) “a low endowment with minimal fundraising” (164, 178).

With reference to further study, the author asks if it might be “possible that undertaking a similar analysis at colleges and universities with different institutional characteristics or with a large number of institutions would result in findings different from this study” (78-79, 212).