AERA discussant comments

Current Approaches to Broadening Access to Postsecondary Education

by Andrea Venezia

My apologies, again, for missing this panel. I am focusing these comments on providing a general frame around access to postsecondary education, and on some of the findings/implications discussed in the papers.

In terms of the general frame, when the focus on access to postsecondary education first entered into policy and practice discussions, it was rightfully focused on ensuring that traditionally underserved students had equal access to getting into postsecondary education. That conception has evolved over time to include other facets of access, such as access to academic and nonacademic readiness; high quality teaching; courses (many colleges and universities, even ones that let in almost all students who apply, have majors with wait lists that can last years); student supports and an actual person who can help students navigate (due to years of budget cuts during the Great Recession); financial aid; and other related issues.

With the Common Core State Standards and the college completion agenda, this multi-faceted frame around access becomes critically important. It can't just be about getting students in the door. And it can't just be focused on what K-12 needs to do alone. It has to mean ensuring that institutions do whatever they can to support success. And states, public systems, and public institutions are still reeling from lean years, financially. They are being asked to do more with less. And we don't have a clue which students need which kinds of services, how deep/hi-touch the services should be, how to connect supports across education systems, and so forth. Layer on top differences between academic readiness and nonacademic readiness – the key cognitive strategies that students need to succeed and access to environments that cultivate those – and increasingly diverse student populations spread across a variety of institutional types this is a very complex set of issues.

In terms of the specific papers:

Newman and Madaus

Students with disabilities are understudied and often under-supported in postsecondary education – particularly given the wide range of disabilities and related supports needed to help students thrive and complete their intended program of study. These papers are an important contribution to the field.

From their research, it appears that the most frequent services provided by postsecondary institutions are those that require the lightest touch, and it would be interesting to see additional work done to understand the amount and level of high touch services that are actually needed by students. It also appears that there might be a necessary information/messaging campaign to students, outlining their rights and the related services, given the under-reporting of need/disability status that is occurring.

It is striking to me that the vast majority of students with disabilities in higher ed speak English as a their first language and 66% were White, non-Latino. Given the historical inequalities in K-12 in terms of students of color being placed in special ed, it seems as though there is a great deal to study (and change with regard to policy and practice) with regard to postsecondary access for students of color with disabilities. Given the drop-off in use of services in postsecondary, I wonder how much is related to parents' lack of involvement in postsecondary compared with relatively active parent involvement in K-12. Given the questions at the end – are students unaware of the implications of their disabilities in postsecondary, unaware of services, and unaware of legal rights, it would be wonderful to see some rigorous qualitative work done in this area. Promisingly, students who received transition planning in high school made more use of services in postsecondary. I hope that increased collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary and the use of ed plans that cross systems will help provide more direct hand-offs for students going from

high school to postsecondary, along with information that could be helpful in determining the supports that could potentially help students progress in and complete college. This is particularly important in broad access institutions that have been hit hard by budget cuts that often reduce the staff that can help students with special needs. Finally, I found it quite interesting that students with learning disabilities tend to overestimate their skills in a range of academic and nonacademic areas. There is an increased focus in postsecondary on improving assessment, using diagnostic tools, and providing supports in nonacademic arenas. Perhaps those trends will have a beneficial impact on students with disabilities.

Edmunds et al.

Having worked to support networks of Early College High Schools (ECHS) for The Woodrow Wilson National Scholarship Foundation and Jobs for the Future, I was excited to read Edmunds et al.'s paper – particularly because success after high school graduation has been a long-standing question within the ECHS networks. The ECHS model provides access to college while in high school, including access to a college-going culture, courses, campuses, etc. Their work is a great contribution toward a better understanding of the impact of the model.

I would like to hone in on their analysis that, "The declining enrollment rates that occur after leaving the early college appear to come because some students have already had their exposure to college and they do not wish any more. This may be because they have already attained an associate's degree, and did not wish to pursue other degrees. It may also be that they simply do not wish to enroll in postsecondary education any further." Given that 18% of the students studied earned an Associates degree, I wonder how big an effect it could be that a proportion of those students could be contributing to the "leaving postsecondary" group. Furthermore, I wonder if those students might be the ones who we would most expect to complete additional an postsecondary credential because they had the academic and nonacademic prowess necessary to earn both an AA and a high school diploma in a

relatively short period of time. I think additional qualitative research could help determine if the authors' hunches are true, or if students weren't ready to succeed in postsecondary. This distinction is critically important, I think, to the continued scaling and sustainability of the ECHS model. In addition, I think research to determine if students such as those (who earned an AA and did not continue in postsecondary education after that) were employed would be useful.

Kurlaender et al.

As someone who works in the CSU system and who has tracked the development and implementation of the Early Assessment Program since it was first being discussed by the education systems in California, I am very interested in learning about possible effects. When they wrote about possible limitations and stated that, "it may be the case that student access to EAP is differential *de facto* as a result of differences in the availability of information about EAP at the individual student or school level. Moreover, as a result of the voluntary nature of the program, one might be concerned that our primary analytic strategy suffers from selection bias" – that is a very important caveat, given that schools select into the EAP and that professional development for the English Reading and Writing Course (the 12th grade English class that is a part of the EAP) varies across the state. The EAP is more than an assessment – it includes an English class and online math materials – so knowing what students did in 12th grade (after they received their scores) to prepare for college would be very interesting to include in the analyses.

The main findings – that participating in EAP reduces the probability of needing remediation in English at CSU by roughly 2 to 2.5 percentage points and in math by approximately 1-2 percentage points and that students who are among the least likely to need remediation benefit the most – are encouraging, yet disappointing. This has been a significant investment by the CSU and its partners (the California Department of Education and the community college system), and by high schools across the state. The question about return on investment of public dollars seems

important here, though I mean that from the perspective that perhaps that EAP could be augmented or tweaked, not eliminated. There have been concerns since its inception that the EAP signals information to students too late for them to be able to change course significantly to prepare. It would be interesting, especially in light of the implementation of the Common Core, to use formative and summative assessment information to help students prepare earlier and see if that makes a difference, and to explore why the EAP is not having as large an effect as we would hope.

Corwin et al.

After receiving the card game (Application Crunch) Corwin and colleagues developed years ago, I've been following the evolution of their work to engage students in new ways around college readiness. Finding a way to engage students through a medium that they enjoy to help them get to a deeper level of understanding about a particular issue(s) is a theory of action of action that we see being utilized in a lot of technological applications and it appears to be promising. I was particularly struck by the statement that, "Rarely are large ideas (e.g., deeper learning) entirely adopted; ideas need to be broken into discrete and manageable reforms with clear objectives and time frames" and by how that is operationalized in the games.

We are also beginning to suspect that leading with academics – such as our focus on English and math – will not move the needle for students who have not learned how to learn sufficiently – who need additional supports in nonacademic areas and the games provide those critical nonacademic supports in an easily accessible way. It would be very interesting to track students who used the games (at least two or more times, or perhaps more than that) and experienced the wraparound curriculum to learn about their postsecondary persistence and completion rates and to ask them questions about the utility of the games with regard to their preparation for certain aspects of college life. Finally, as they stated, learning more about the

utility of these games for traditionally underserved students would be an important contribution, given the thin student support-related resources available at most high schools and postsecondary institutions that serve underserved students. There could be utility in expanding the games into postsecondary, and particularly into community colleges.