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The Case for Standards: Why “Open Admission” Policies at New Mexico Comprehensive Universities Fail Students & Taxpayers

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Introduction

New Mexico’s higher education system faces wrenching challenges in the years ahead. As the State’s budget growth has stagnated and expenses (especially for Medicaid) have risen, higher education budgets have faced increased scrutiny.

Adding further evidence to the need for reform has been the University of New Mexico recent Acting President Chaouki Abdallah who was profiled in the *Albuquerque Journal*. He said, “Our higher ed spending is more than most other states; the trouble is we don’t spend it wisely and (we) spread it across so many entities. We do need a plan.” Abdallah went on to say, “UNM has these spires of excellence, best in the world or top five, but like everything else around this state, **the average is bad because you have to make sure everyone is taken care of.**”¹

Such statements would be strong enough were they offered by any higher education reformer, but coming from the top brass at New Mexico’s flagship university it becomes clear that New Mexico’s higher education system is inefficient and requires a serious overhaul.

The Rio Grande Foundation has long advocated for a *smaller* government that also works *smarter*. Reducing expenditures in ways that minimize the harm done to serve populations (or even helps them) is ideal. In the case of higher education, we believe that revised/new standards for academic performance and remedial education can be integral to making New Mexico’s system better (and leaner).

This paper discusses the disappointing retention and graduation performance of New Mexico’s Comprehensive Universities. The Universities—Eastern, Highlands, Northern, and Western—have retention and graduation performance rates that fall below the national average for public institutions employing similar admission policies. But the issue is much more serious than a low standing on a national score sheet. Admitting a student solely based on a diploma or certificate and subsequently testing for post-secondary readiness is deceitful.

¹ Walz, Ken “UNM President on Unlikely Journey,” *Albuquerque Journal*, June 3, 2017, <https://www.abqjournal.com/1012754/journey-4.html>.

There are many reasons why students admitted to universities do not subsequently complete their degrees. Employment, family, degree progress issues and many others often stymie degree pursuit. The unforeseen is a part of life. However, the State of New Mexico spends \$750 million annually (let alone federal student loans and other tax dollars) to subsidize the price of higher learning.² Students who begin their studies and do not complete them are spending their own and the taxpayers' money with little to show for it.

Telling her or him, post-admission, that they have as much as two years of remedial coursework is needlessly costly and ethically questionable. Historical data suggests that those with the greatest academic deficiencies are at the greatest risk of dropping out before they fulfill the required remedial coursework. Many leave their university with student loan debt for tuition and fees charged. These students are often among the most ill-prepared to repay their debt.

Incomplete academic preparation in the common schools often leads to required remediation after university admission. Thus the State's taxpayers are double charged for the flawed preparation in the common schools and the subsequent attempts to remediate in the universities. With the universities depending on annual enrollment to balance their budgets there are no ready solutions to these complex issues.

Options to improve retention performance in the short-term will be presented. This paper focuses on the Comprehensives because three of the four—Highlands, Northern, and Western—employ open-door admission policies. The three admit all eligible applicants. Eastern is said to be a more selective institution, yet its retention and graduation performance lag national averages of comparable selective institutions.

Definitions

The retention rate reflects the percentage of first-time full-time matriculates returning to start the subsequent fall semester. The percentage of students in a specific intake year who earn a degree in six or fewer years reflects an institution's graduation performance. Institutions with open-door admission policies require only proof of eligibility to enroll with a high school diploma or General Education Development certificate. Although Eastern may be classified as a more selective institution, its retention and graduation performance rates appear to be impacted by a similar negative influence as its three comprehensive university peers. All four receive the bulk of their applicants from New Mexico's public high and charter schools. They appear to admit high percentages of applicants ill-prepared for the academic demands of university coursework.

Open Door Admissions a Flawed Portal

Scherer and Anson provided a detailed assessment of open admissions outcomes flaws within the nation's community college sector.³ Sadly many of these flaws are found among New Mexico's Comprehensive Universities. 50 percent of community college and university applicants present deficiencies in mathematics, reading, or writing proficiency requisite to success in collegiate

² Legislative Finance Committee, "2017 Post Session Fiscal Review," https://www.nmlegis.gov/Entity/LFC/Documents/Session_Publications/Post_Session_Fiscal_Reviews/May%202017.pdf.

³ Scherer, J. L., & Anson, M. L. (2014). Community colleges and the access effect: why open admissions suppresses achievement. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

coursework. These students are directed to non-credit courses designed to prepare them for the challenging required degree coursework ahead.

The Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) has reported that on average only 17 percent of students who take only one remedial course in college graduate within six years. Matriculants who are not required to take remediation present a 77 percent graduation rate.

The LFC suggested a link between the need for remedial courses and retention and graduation performance challenges nearly every post-secondary institution in the state. Among the public universities, the Comprehensives are most challenged. Unfortunately, the remediation they provide appears to lack efficacy in retaining and graduating all but a small percentage of remedial students.

The relatively high percentage of the Comprehensives' matriculates found to require remediation before beginning their degree work suggests that their non-selective admission criteria may not be entirely the root of the disappointing retention and graduation results. A lack of requisite preparation rather than deficient intellectual ability is offered as the primary contributing factor. New Mexico's public elementary schools employ social promotion and pass their students to the secondary schools. The latter in turn award diplomas that imply proficiency levels not adequate for entry-level university degree work.

Trying to Do Good but Falling Short

The Comprehensives should be commended for attempting to remediate their students' long-standing academic skill deficiencies. Unfortunately, only after admission do they seek to assess their new matriculates' mathematics, reading, and writing readiness for regular bachelor degree coursework. Matriculates' persistence appears to decline at much higher rates as the number of remedial courses required increases.

Matriculates scoring below the institution's minimum benchmark on the post-admission placement examinations falls along a continuum ranging from marginal to profound deficiency. Those with a marginal deficiency may be required to take a single remedial course. Others with more profound levels of deficiency are required to enroll in additional remedial courses designed to repair long-standing academic deficiencies. Remedial courses do not carry degree credit. Depending on the depth and breadth of the student's deficiencies remedial course sequences may require up to two years to complete. While remedial students are enrolled in their university and paying tuition, they are not making progress toward a degree.

Remedial students are eligible for public and private student loans to support their educational expenses. In spite of the Universities' best intentions, many of these students quickly become frustrated and drop out before they complete the first year. The Comprehensives are doing their best with the pedagogic strategies at hand, but as shown below, many students drop out before completing their remedial assignment. Unfortunately, while providing an opportunity to succeed, they are given more of an opportunity to fail.

Remedial pedagogy, in spite of its apparently questionable efficacy, has changed little in recent years except for its cost, which has grown like all post-secondary operating costs tend to do. The *Albuquerque Journal* has reported that the aggregate cost of remedial courses in the post-

secondary institutions was \$22 million in 2013. ⁴ Had these belatedly confirmed deficiencies been addressed when first revealed, taxpayers would not be paying twice.

Table I presents NCES data on admission selectivity influence on retention among the nation’s public universities for 2010 thru 2014. An institution’s retention rate improves as its admission criteria become more selective. It especially noted that even a comparatively lenient standards result in a larger retention percentage. On average the 90 percent accepted band produced 10.3 percent more retentions than their open-door peers ⁵

Table I
NCES Retention Percentage of First-time Degree-seeking Undergraduates at Degree-granting Public Postsecondary Institutions.

Public Institutions	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	AVG
Open admissions	61.5	60.8	60.5	61.9	62.3	61.4
90 percent or more accepted	72.4	70.1	71.1	72.7	72.3	71.7
75.0 to 89.9 percent accepted	77.3	76.7	76.9	77.8	78.6	77.5
50.0 to 74.9 percent accepted	80.9	80.5	81.3	82.7	82.5	81.6
25.0 to 49.9 percent accepted	85.0	85.5	86.3	86.3	88.0	86.2
Less than 25% accepted	95.0	95.2	94.5	95.7	95.9	95.3

Table II presents the New Mexico Comprehensive Universities retention percentages for the years 2010 – 2014. An average for the interval is provided. The percentages were collected from each institution’s publication. It appears that Eastern’s greater selectivity in the NCES’s 50.0 to 74.9 percent band is reflected in higher retention percentages. The percentages were assembled from each institution Annual Fact Book or response to a Public Records Act Request. ⁶

Table II
Percent of First-time, Full-time Freshman Returning for the Beginning of Their Second Year at New Mexico Comprehensive Universities

	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	AVG
Eastern	61.2	61.6	63.9	62.5	58.1	61.5
Highlands	50.6	55.3	47.2	48.4	52.4	50.8
Northern	53.6	60.9	54.0	40.0	54.5	52.6
Western	49.9	55.1	54.9	56.6	52.2	53.7

⁴ Monteleone, James. “New Mexico students still struggle in college,” *Albuquerque Journal*, January 22, 2014

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 326.30, 2016

⁶ Eastern New Mexico University, “2016 Factbook.” <https://my.enmu.edu/web/institutional-research/factbook> New Mexico Highlands University. "2015-2016 Factbook." <http://its.nmhu.edu/IntranetUploads/003623-2015-16Factb-318201620750.pdf> Northern New Mexico College “2016 Factbook.”, <https://nnmc.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/Northern-New-Mexico-College-Fact-Book-2016.pdf> Western New Mexico University, Inspection of Public Records Act Request, December 15, 2017

Table III summarizes the difference between New Mexico’s Comprehensive Universities first-time, full-time freshman returning for the beginning of their second year five average and NCES average presented in Tables I and II. The negative gap appears persistent. All of the Comprehensives fall short of NCES average for public institutions. Western presents the smallest difference. Eastern presents largest. The variations from year to year, as well as those among the four institutions, may be driven as much by normal intake variations in the composition of the annual pools as by any pedagogical interventions. They suggest our contention that social promotion has a continuing negative influence undermining open-door admission institutions’ best intentions.

Table III			
The Difference Between New Mexico Comprehensive Universities First-time, Full-time Freshman Returning for the Beginning of Their Second Year Five Average and NCES Averages			
University	Retention %	NCES Data	Difference
Eastern	61.5	81.3	-19.8
Highlands	50.8	60.5	-9.7
Northern	52.6	60.5	-7.9
Western	53.7	60.5	-6.8

Table IV presents NCES data on admission selectivity influence on graduation among the nation’s public universities for 2010 thru 2014.⁷ An institution’s retention rate improves as its admission criteria become more selective. It especially noted that even a comparatively lenient standards result in a larger retention percentage. On average the 90 percent acceptance band produced 10.3 percent more retentions than their open-door peers.

Table IV
NCES’s Within Six-Year Graduation Rate for Public Institutions by Admission Criteria for the 2009 starting cohort remaining at the same institution

2009 starting cohort	
Open admissions	31.1%
90 percent or more accepted	47.7%
75.0 to 89.9 percent accepted	53.9%
50.0 to 74.9 percent accepted	61.5%
25.0 to 49.9 percent accepted	67.9%
Less than 25.0 percent accepted	81.5 %

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017150>

Table V presents each Comprehensive's average graduation rate for their 2007 - 2009 Intakes.⁸

Table V
New Mexico Comprehensive Universities' Six-Year Graduation Rate For 2007
Matriculates

University	Entered Fall 2007	Graduated Cohort %, 2007	Entered Fall 2008	Graduated Cohort %, 2008	Entered Fall 2009	Graduated Cohort 2009	Average
Eastern	546	28.6	572	27.1	622	30.5	28.7
Highlands	347	18.4	437	17.2	379	17.9	17.8
Northern	182	15.0	177	15.0	184	15.0	15.0
Western	247	22.7	316	20.9	424	25.2	22.9
Average		21.2		20.1		22.2	

* Includes Associate, three-year metric, and Certificate, two-year metric in cohorts

Table VI
Comparison of Comprehensives Graduation Data within Six Years for 2009 Entry Data
with NCES Aggregate Public University Data

University	Actual%	NCES Average	Difference
Eastern	30.6	61.5	-30.9
Highlands	17.9	31.1	-13.2
Northern	15.0	31.1	-16.1
Western	22.7	31.1	-8.4

* In NCES 50.0 to 74.9% acceptance band remainder are from Open-door admission band

A Supply Chain Problem

Table VII points to a supply chain issue.⁹ Too many of the Comprehensives' recent matriculates have graduated from New Mexico's publicly funded secondary schools without the benchmark academic skills necessary for post-secondary success.

Table VII
Percent of First-time Freshman from New Mexico Public High Schools and Charter
Schools for the Years 2010 to 2015 Admitted to the Comprehensive Universities Taking at
Least One Remedial Class

University	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Average
Eastern		42.5	44.3	41.3	38.0	40.9	38.5 40.9
Highlands	54.0	53.4	58.8	42.0	37.6	27.6	45.6
Northern	71.0	80.1	69.4	75.7	58.2	49.2	67.3

⁸ Eastern New Mexico University, "2016 Factbook." <https://my.enmu.edu/web/institutional-research/factbook> New Mexico Highlands University. "2015-2016 Factbook." <http://its.nmhu.edu/IntranetUploads/003623-2015-16Factb-318201620750.pdf> Northern New Mexico College "2016 Factbook.", <https://nnmc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Northern-New-Mexico-College-Fact-Book-2016.pdf> Western New Mexico University, "Inspection of Public Records Act Request, December 15, 2017

⁹ New Mexico Higher Education Department. *Percent of First-time Freshmen from NM Public High Schools and Charter Schools in Fall 2015 Who Took at Least One Remedial Class*. Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico Higher Education Department, 2016.

¹⁰ Monteleone, James. "New Mexico students still struggle in college." *Albuquerque Journal*, January 22, 2014

Western	63.1	61.9	49.8	52.5	67.7	59.4	59.1
Average	57.7	59.9	54.8	52.1	51.1	43.7	

This paper does not question the Comprehensives commendable yet heretofore largely unsuccessful effort to remediate base learning skill deficiencies, not of their making. Nor does it seek to condemn the common schools for employing a humane yet ultimately flawed attempt to avoid a student’s possible self-image injury. Using a supply chain metaphor, the Comprehensives have been attempting to repair learning proficiencies deficits that should have been addressed and resolved by their suppliers when they were first observed.

Both Governor Martinez and the LFC have identified that a major contributing factor to dismal retention and graduation performance rests with the social promotion policies employed in New Mexico’s public common schools.¹⁰ These policies sanction the promotion of students with lagging mathematics, reading, and writing skills that would normally suggest grade retention to rectify the problem(s). The primary justification offered in support of the practice is that the student’s self-image is protected by remaining with her/his age group.

Social promotion appears to undermine the efficacy of the long-delayed and sincere remedial efforts should the student enroll in one of the state’s Comprehensive universities. Thus a well-intended yet questionable effort to assuage possible self-image damage appears to end with a largely ineffective remedy years later. The solution lays in a long-term process to wean the public schools from adherence to a flawed yet humane policy that has prompted the Comprehensives to attempt to remediate previously unattended fundamental learning skill deficiencies while fulfilling their revenue requirements.

A Flawed Near-Term Remedy

The HED has been actively exploring solutions to these challenges. A tactical pedagogical innovation at hand is said to be providing a remedy for a subset of students. Cabinet Secretary Barbara Damron briefly described a promising innovation in the Higher Education Department’s 2015 Students marginally below the mathematics benchmark are permitted to enroll in the entry-level credit course with a co-requisite.¹¹ This allows the student to begin her/his degree work immediately. The accompanying course, labeled a studio course, supports the students by filling in the minor gaps in their understanding of mathematics as they progress through the semester. Funded by Complete College America, New Mexico joins some other states in implementing this promising approach.

Even if fully validated, this approach only serves a subset of the total population in need of remediation. It does not address the majority of students beyond the marginal point in mathematics or those with reading and writing deficits. The HED should be applauded for supporting this promising, albeit partial, innovation. Unfortunately, without a wider-ranging strategic initiative, the bulk of remedial intervention will likely remain unchanged although its efficacy will be questionable.

Continuing the bulk of remediation programming in the hope that a pedagogical silver bullet will emerge will only perpetuate dismal retention and graduation performance rates. As a result, too many students will prematurely leave their universities with avoidable financial and emotional burdens. There are no quick fixes on the horizon for the Comprehensive disappointing retention and graduation performance percentages.

A Missed Long-term Solution

A House bill, backed by Governor Susana Martinez, to end social promotion for third-grade students not demonstrating reading proficiency would have been a positive step toward building a long-term solution. Most recently, House Bill 67 passed the Republican House then was tabled and killed for the session in the Senate Education Committee. The bill's Republican supporters' loss was superficial compared to the children who have and will continue to progressively fall further behind as they are advanced lockstep through the ever more complex material at each succeeding grade level.

11 New Mexico Higher Education Department. 2015 Annual Report.

12 *Washington Times*, Bill ending social promotion stalls in New Mexico Senate. (2016, February 8).

Regrettably, the legislation met strong opposition from the teacher unions and Senate Democrats who have stopped similar legislation in the past. Senate Majority Leader Michael Sanchez said student retention should be based on teachers' assessments, not test scores.¹² We suggest that, with individual and variable subjective assessments, no one is accountable, while too many students fall progressively further behind.

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Abandoning the open admission policies and requiring some measure of selectivity would improve retention and graduation rates rather quickly. The NCES data in Tables II and IV promise that even modest increases in selectivity would likely boost both retention and graduation rates. Further, it would also allow the resources consumed by remedial programming to be redirected to other areas of the institutions. Unfortunately, these potential benefits would likely be accompanied by political costs.

A Bridge Remedy

Assessing academic readiness post-admission is a disservice to the applicant presenting significant academic proficiency gaps. Matriculates are suddenly faced with one or more required remedial courses that will delay their entry into degree coursework. Even if social promotion were to be abandoned, it would take years for a discernable impact on the Comprehensives' retention and graduation rates. Moreover, students and taxpayers will continue to be disserved. An abrupt admission standard change of nearly any magnitude would surely produce an ethical, financial and political disaster for the Comprehensives. The impact on aspiring applicants would be equally as harmful.

A cautious first step is offered, change open admission to conditional or deferred admission. Based on historical post-placement data, it would permit each institution to identify and advise those applicants least likely to persist, that their admission would be deferred until a subsequent retest demonstrating minimal level proficiency. Referral to a community college or other source of requisite remediation would be in order. Eastern might employ a similar strategy to improve its performance within its NCES admission band.

As Table I suggests even a modest reduction in matriculants should improve retention and graduation rates. Even a minimal increase in standards to 90 percent would send a message that their open admission policies were being refined for the benefit of all stakeholders. Both the applicant and institution would quickly benefit. Applicants with the most profound academic

deficiencies would save time as well as monetary and emotional expense. In addition to saving taxpayers, by improving its retention rate the institution will benefit by needing to replace matriculants lost in the first two semesters, while behaving more ethically.

Conclusion

New Mexico's Comprehensive Universities' retention and graduation rates are disappointing and are likely to remain so unless there is a change of course. Social promotion in the common schools, a supply chain challenge, was identified as a major contributing factor. Elimination of social promotion in the public elementary and high schools remains a long-term politically charged challenge.

Conditional or deferred admission, with even a minor uptick in their selectivity standards, will allow the Comprehensives to retain the bulk of their existing policies and processes while acting in a more responsible manner both in their own benefit and towards the benefit of the students themselves.