

Automatic Admission to UH Mānoa for Community College Graduates

A key fact for any enrollment planning at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa is that the primary entry point for access to higher education in the state is increasingly the seven community colleges of the University of Hawai‘i, not Mānoa or the two other baccalaureate granting campuses. The ratio between the number of recent Hawai‘i high school graduates who start at one of the community colleges and those who start at UHM, UHH or UHWO continues to shift towards the community colleges. Although there are many explanations for why this shift is occurring, the schedule of tuition increases we are part way through will continue to increase the price differential between the two and four-year sectors. In addition, the Obama administration is clearly committed to a strategy of strengthening the two-year sector and sees the two-year sector as the best place to address the issue of overall college attainment. So I suspect that the shift we are seeing is in some ways irreversible, and we need to consider now how to engage with this new landscape.

Relevant information is that nationally 40% of those who enter community colleges say that they intend to complete a bachelor’s degree; in Hawai‘i, that figure is 50%. This tells us that in many cases their intended destination is us, but of course the transfer rates—both nationally and here—are far below that rate. So various aspects of the system of higher education are preventing students from realizing the goals they have when they enter the system, and this is particularly true in Hawai‘i where degree attainment is well short of the national average, itself well short of rates of educational attainment in such countries as Canada, Japan, and Korea. It is therefore important both for the future of the state and for the enrollment at Mānoa that we do everything we can to increase the flow of students from the two to the four-year sector.

This is a complex issue with a number of parts; my intent here is to focus on just one part. Students who apply to Mānoa for admission with an A.A. degree from one of the seven UH community colleges will be admitted to UH-Mānoa. Because of Banner, UH-Mānoa already has the same access to the academic records of these students that it has for any students already admitted at Mānoa--in other words, there is little real value added by any of the information contained in the admission application. We only learn two things from the application, that the student plans to attend Mānoa and we learn the student’s intended major; to put this another way, the application for admission from a transfer graduate of one of the community colleges is virtually the same signal as a registration deposit. So why do we bother to take them through this step? Why don’t we take advantage of the data integration which Banner provides and simply admit those community college graduates whom we know are admissible? What we do now is to wait for the student to decide, so that the presumption is one of non-continuation. If we automatically admitted students on some timetable to be worked out with the community colleges, then the presumption might shift somewhat to continuation. The student wouldn’t have to have that period of uncertainty (do I want to continue? do I need to

apply? where is the application form? have I heard yet?): we would do that work for the student, shifting their decision making to more productive areas of uncertainty (what do I want to major in? how will financial aid work? etc.). Obviously, the student intent on transferring who applied before graduation would not be affected by this; it would be rather a way of informing all students who graduated from the community colleges that the door was open to further study if they chose to go through that door.

Are there any disadvantages to doing this? There would be some extra cost, since we would be admitting quite a few more students, many of whom would not actually attend Mānoa, and we would forego the application fee that these students now pay. However, I think the admission process could be far more efficient than traditional applications, since we would not be dealing with individual paper applications but rather searching an electronic database for people who met certain criteria. In any case, I expect that a very slight increase in transfers would more than make up for the investment in time that this would take and the loss in revenue from waiving the application fee.

There are clearly a number of implementation issues we would need to address, as this shift in how we handle a large number of potential students would affect the operations of Admissions, Financial Aid, and advising in ways we need to discuss. The actual automatic admission process is relatively straightforward; it's more the consequences we would need to anticipate and think through. These discussions would primarily be internal to Mānoa, though communication with the prospective students could be greatly aided if the community colleges were on board with the concept and actively working with Mānoa on implementation. I see every reason for them to be on board, since this sends the strong message to students to stay at the community college and get an associates degree before coming to Mānoa, so should help their degree completion while supporting system goals concerning the overall number of degrees awarded. Could representatives from Mānoa be at community college graduation ceremonies, for instance, handing out certificates of admission to Mānoa to accompany their diplomas?

Clearly, this one step in itself doesn't magically improve transfer rates: we need to work on course articulation, so that the credits taken at the community colleges count as much as possible at Mānoa and so that the student learns what he or she needs to in the core so as to succeed in the major and graduate, and there are other dimensions of the relationship between the sectors that would repay attention. But what it does do is to signal to all prospective community college students that there is a way to get here from there and this is a recognized, logical and perfectly plausible route to bachelor's degree attainment. In choosing to start at a community college, as most of Hawaii's students are choosing, they are not foreclosing the option of pursuing the bachelor's degree that most of them would like ultimately to pursue.