Moving Beyond Access: Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education[1]

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On the surface, America's public commitment to provide access to any individual who seeks a postsecondary education seems to be working. Our higher educational system enjoys one of the highest participation rates in the world. More than 16.3 million students currently enroll in US public and private two and four-year colleges. In the past twenty years, enrollments have grown over 25 percent; the proportion of high school graduates entering college immediately after high school has increased from about 49 percent in 1980 to 66.7 percent in 2004. More importantly, the access gap for low-income youth has, until recently, shrunk as greater numbers of economically disadvantaged students have enrolled in college.

Stratification of Patterns of College Attendance

But scratch beneath the surface of this apparent achievement and the news about access and opportunity in American higher education is much more complex and a lot less hopeful (NPEC, 1997). Though access has increased and gaps between groups in overall access have decreased, sizable gaps in patterns of access remain. For too many students, especially those from low-income families, the door to higher education is only partially open because financial constraints limit their choices not only in how they attend, that is to say whether they work while in college and/or attend part-time, but also where they attend. Despite gains in access generally, marked economic stratification of patterns of access and participation remain. As importantly as access has increased so to has stratification of participation by income.

This is most noticeable in shifting patterns of attendance at two verses four-year institutions. In 1973-7, the first year of the Pell Grant program, 62.4 percent of Pell Grant recipients were enrolled in four-year colleges and universities. By 2001-02 the share of Pell Grant recipients enrolled in four-year colleges and universities had shrunk to 44.9 percent, a decline of 28 percent.[2] Strikingly the shift from four-year to two-year colleges among Pell Grant recipients has been most marked since the late 1990s. Between 1998-99 and 2001-02 the share of Pell Grant recipients enrolled in four-year

[1] Presented at the Achievement Gap Initiative, Harvard University, June 21, 2005.
[2] The shift of low-income students from four-year to two-year colleges has occurred among both dependent (typically 18-24 years old) and independent students (typically 24 years and over). The percentage of dependent low-income undergraduates with Pell Grants enrolled in four-year institutions declined from a peak of 69 percent in 1980-81 to about 58 percent by 2001-02. The share of independent undergraduates with Pell Grants enrolled in four-year institutions has declined from 49.2 percent in 1977-78 to 34.8 percent in 2001-02.

institutions has dropped from 49.7 to 44.9 percent. In other words, nearly 28 percent of the twenty-eight year decline in enrollment in four-year institutions among Pell Grant recipients has occurred in just a three-year period. Notably this period coincides with economic recession, large job losses, state cutbacks in financial support for higher education, large tuition increases, and frozen Pell Grant maximum awards (St. John, 2002, 2005)[3].

Understandably, some measure, if not a large measure of differential participation can be attributed to well-documented differences in levels of academic preparation of low and high-income students and the impact of recent policies that have restricted access to four-year institutions for students who have substantial academic needs.[4] There is little question that academic preparation matters and that differences in preparation continue to pose daunting challenges to our ability to promote greater equality in patterns of access (Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, 2005). But even among students with similar levels of academic "resources," low socioeconomic students are less likely to attend four-year institutions than are students from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa, 2005, p. 159-160, Figures 7.1 and 7.2).

It is also the case, as documented by Carnevale and Rose (2003), that low-income students who enter the four-year sector are substantially less likely to attend elite institutions than are high-income students. Indeed there is even less socioeconomic diversity than racial or ethnic diversity at the most selective colleges (see Table 1.1, page 69). Whereas "74 percent of the students at the top 146 highly selective colleges came from families in the top quarter of the SES scale (as measured by combining family income and the education and occupations of the parents), just 3 percent came from the bottom SES quartile, and roughly 10 percent came from the bottom half of the SES scale" (Carnevale and Rose, 2003. p.11). Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) reach the same conclusion (p.98).

Economic stratification in participation can also be observed in forms of participation, that is to say whether students attend full or part-time and/or work while attending college. Students from low-income families are considerably less likely to attend college full-time than are students from higher income families and more likely to work full-time while attending college. Among students who began college in the 1995-96 academic year, for instance, 57 percent of dependent students from families earning less than $25,000 per year were enrolled in college full-time for the entire academic year. This compared to 71 percent of those from families with incomes more than $75,000 (NCES 1999-030, Table 1.3). Again, income matters.

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[3] For a more detailed analysis of the impact of Pell Grants and other tuition assistance programs see Kane (2003, 2004).

[4] According to Cabrera, Burkum & La Nasa's (2005) recent study while only 7 percent of students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds begin college with "low academic resources" 22 percent of students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds do so.

The College Completion Divide

Why does such stratification of participation matter? It matters because where and how one goes to college influences the likelihood of college completion.[5] Though access broadly understood has increased and gaps in overall access have decreased over time, gaps between high and low-income students in college completion generally and of four-year degrees in particular remain. Indeed they appear to have widened over time (NCES 2005-156, Table 5-B).

Understandably, this reflects the fact that a greater proportion of low-income youth enter two-year colleges rather than four-year colleges and in so doing reduce the likelihood of earning a four-year degree. Data from a recently completed six-year national longitudinal study of students who began college in 1995/96 bears testimony to this fact. Whereas nearly six in ten four-year college entrants earn a Bachelor's degree within six years, only a little over one in ten public two-year college entrants do so (NCES 2003-151, Table 2.1A). But even among those who began higher education in a two-year college, income matters. While nearly 25 percent of high-income students earn a four-year degree within six years, only 8 percent of low-income students do so (NCES 2003-151, Table 2.1C). In other words, the chances of a low-income student completing a Bachelor's degree within six years when beginning college in a two-year college is less than one fourth that for a high-income students who also being in a two-year college. And though some of this can be assigned to differences in prior academic preparation and educational aspirations, it is still the case that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still less likely to transfer to a four-year institution (Dougherty and Kienzl, forthcoming).

Similar differences in likelihood of completion exist among four-year college entrants. Of those who began higher education in a public four-year college or university in 1995/96, only 48 percent of low-income students earn their four-year degree within six years while 67 percent of high-income students do so (NCES 2003-151, Table 2.2C). More telling still is the fact that even among those who began at a four-year college with the stated goal of obtaining at least a four-year degree, only a little over half of low-income students earn a Bachelor's degree (53 percent) as compared to over three quarters of high-income students (77 percent) (NCES, 2003-151, Table 8.6). Of course, some of these differences can be attributed to the fact that low-income students are considerably less likely to attend elite institutions where graduation rates are quite high. For instance, among the top tier of institutions, graduation rates are nearly 86 percent, where it is only 54 percent for the lowest tier of institutions (Carnevale and Rose, 2003, Table 2.1, p.69).

[5] Understandably it also impacts the economic returns to one's investment in higher education (Long, 2004).

Again, it is undeniable that a good deal of these differences in college completion are a reflection of differences in levels of academic preparation of entering college students, two and four-year. But even when adjustment is made for student test scores, presumably related to student academic preparation, students who attend top tier institutions are still more likely to graduate (Carnevale and Rose, 2003, p.13). Even within these institutions, income matters. For instance among students attending the top tier of institutions, presumably among the most talented and motivated students in higher education, it proves to be the case that students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile are less likely to graduate (76%) than students from the highest quartile (90%) (Carnevale and Rose, 2003, p. 14).

The facts are unavoidable. Though access to higher education has increased and gaps between income groups decreased, greater equality in attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit. For too many low-income students the "open door" to American higher education has become a revolving door.

Moving Beyond Access: Enhancing Persistence of Low-Income Students

What is to be done? What issues must we address to close the gap in the attainment of four-year degrees? Clearly the most important of these is that of academic preparation. Unless we find a way of dealing with the quality of academic preparation we will never close the Achievement Gap. That being said, it is clear that we must also address the growing economic stratification of higher educational participation that increasingly places low-income students at the margins of our higher educational system. We must provide talented students the financial means to attend college in ways that promote, not hinder, their attainment. So too we must deal with the continuing failure of low-income students to successfully transfer between two and four-year institutions. For too many low-income students, even those who aspire to a four-year degree, the two-year college has become an educational dead end. The issue here is not simply one of articulation, but of the failure of transfer programs to promote the attainment of low-income students. Finally, we must attend to the fact that low-income students graduate from four-year institutions at lower rates than do high-income students even after controlling for institution and test-scores. At some point, all our efforts will not close the achievement gap unless institutions take it upon themselves to address the needs of low-income students.

Unfortunately, most universities are not serious in their pursuit of improved graduation rates, in particular those of low-income students. Despite much public posturing, they have been unwilling to change current practices and move beyond the provision of add-on services that are placed at the margins of institutional life. They have been unwilling to make enhancing student success the linchpin about which they

organize their actions and establish those educational conditions within the institution that we have long known promote student success.[6]

Rethinking the Learning Environment for Students

What are these conditions? What does research tell us about the nature of institutional environments that promote student success, in particular for low-income and under-represented students? Six conditions stand out, leadership/commitment, expectations, support, assessment/feedback, involvement, and connected learning.

Leadership/Commitment

First and perhaps most clearly, institutional commitment is a condition for student success. Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student success, especially among low-income and under-represented students, seem to find a way to achieve that end. But institutional commitment, especially from the leadership of the institution, is more than just words, more than just mission statements issued in elaborate brochures; it is the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success. It reflects as well a commitment on the part of the faculty as well as the staff of student affairs to see themselves as responsible for the success of their students (Muraskin & Lee 2004). Without such commitment, programs for student success may begin, but rarely prosper over the long-term.

Expectations

Second, expectations, specifically high expectations, are a condition for student success. Quite simply, no student rises to low expectations. Regrettably, it is too often the case that universities expect too little of students, especially during the critical first year of college. Indeed a recent national study by Kuh (2003) indicates that first year students spend less time on their studies out of class than what we deem necessary for successful learning. They simply do not study enough. It is my view that this is the case in part because we do not expect enough of them nor construct educational settings that require them to study enough.

At the same time, universities will sometimes hold differing expectations for differing students. This may be expressed in the labels we use to describe groups of students, as for instance contained in the term “remedial” students, or more subtly, but no less effectively, in the way we treat differing students as sometimes happens among faculty and students of different gender or ethnicity. However expressed, it is evident that students quickly pick up expectations and are influenced by the degree to

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[6] The Education Trust has produced a series of informative reports on improving graduation rates (Carey, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

which those expectations validate their presence on campus. This is precisely what Rendon (1994) was referring to in her research on validation and success of non-traditional, first-generation college students and what Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) were referring to in their study of microaggressions.

Expectations can also be expressed in concrete ways through formal and informal advising. Knowing the rules and regulations and the informal networks that mark campus life are part and parcel of student success. Yet it remains the case that formal advising remains a "hit and miss" affair; some students are lucky and find the information they need, while others are not. The same can be said of the informal advising, the sharing of accumulated knowledge that goes on within a campus among and between faculty, staff, and students. Again some students are able to locate that knowledge, often through informal networks of peers, while others are not (Attinasi, 1989). Such mentoring, typically referred to a peer mentoring, is a particularly important to the success of low-income and first-generation college students for whom knowledge of the ins and outs of college is not a given.

Support

Third, support is a condition that promotes student success. Research points to three types of support that promote success; namely academic, social, and financial. As regards academic support, it is unfortunately the case that more than a few students enter the university insufficiently prepared for the rigors of university study. For them, as well as for others, the availability of academic support for instance in the form of developmental education courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs such as supplemental instruction is an important condition for their continuation in the university. So also is the availability of social support in the form of counseling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers. Such centers provide much needed support for individual students and a safe haven for groups of students who might otherwise find themselves out of place in a setting where they are a distinct minority. For new students, these centers can serve as secure, knowable ports of entry that enable students to safely navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the university.

As regards the nature of academic support, it is most effective when it is connected to, not isolated from, the learning settings in which students are asked to learn. Supplemental instruction, for instance, provides academic support that is directly attached to a specific class in order to help students succeed in that class (Bowles and Jones, 2003). As a support strategy, it is most often used for key first-year "gateway" courses that are foundational to coursework that follows in subsequent years.

Assessment/Feedback

Fourth, monitoring and feedback is a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that provide faculty, staff, and students frequent feedback about their performance. Here I refer not only to entry assessment of learning skills and early warning systems that alert institutions to students who need assistance, but also to classroom assessment techniques such as those described by Angelo and Cross (1993) and those that involve the use of learning portfolios. These techniques are not to be confused with testing but with forms of assessment, such as the well-known "one-minute" paper, that provide both students and faculty information on what is or is not being learned in the classroom. When used frequently, such techniques enable students and faculty alike to adjust their learning and teaching in ways that promote learning. When implemented in portfolio form that requires continuous reflection, assessment can also deeply enrich learning.

Involvement

Fifth, involvement or engagement is a condition for student success (e.g. Astin, 1993; Kuh, in press; Tinto, 1993). Quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence. Involvement during that year serves as the foundation upon which subsequent affiliations and engagements are built.[7]

Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms of the campus, again especially during the first year of college. This is the case for two reasons. First, the classroom may be the only place students meet each other and the faculty. Least we forget, most students commute to college and a majority work while in college. For them and for many others, the classroom is often the only place where they meet other students and the faculty. If involvement does not occur in those smaller places of engagement, it is unlikely it will easily occur elsewhere. Second, learning is central to the college experience and the root source of student success. Involvement in classroom learning, especially with other students, leads to greater quality of effort, enhanced learning, and in turn heightened student success (Tinto, 1997). Even among students who persist, students who are more involved in learning, especially with other students, learn more and show greater levels of intellectual development (Endo and Harpel, 1982; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, in press). It is for these reason that so much of the literature on institutional retention, student learning and development speaks of the importance of building educational communities that involve all, not just some, students.

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[7] For an informative view of how success is understood from the perspective of students see The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2001).

Connected Learning

Finally, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning especially that which is seen to be connected to, rather than isolated from, other domains of their lives (Tagg, 2003). Learning has always been the key to student persistence. Again, involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning and who see learning as relevant to their lives, will spend more time on task, learn more, and, in turn, stay and graduate (Tinto, 1997).

To sum up, students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic, social, and financial support, assess and provide frequent feedback about their performance, and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty in learning. The key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities that engage and validate their presence on our campuses and move them from the margins to the mainstream of institutional life.

Restructuring the Learning Environment for Low-Income Students

How might these concepts be applied to low-income students? Take the case of academically under-prepared low-income students, an increasing number of whom are either recent immigrants or children of immigrants whose language skills are limited. As part of a multi-year study of innovative developmental education programs funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we have been studying the impact of developmental education learning communities on the success of low-income students in both two and four-year colleges.[8][9]Our findings to date are telling. Contrary to public perceptions, it is possible to address student developmental education needs in college and enhance persistence.[10] But doing so requires both curricular and pedagogical changes and the willingness of faculty and staff to collaborate in ways that provide students a coherently linked set of activities and support that further student education. Three features stand out.

- First, the linking of developmental education courses (e.g. developmental English/writing) to content courses (e.g. History, Sociology). Such linkages make possible the immediate application of skills being learned in a developmental education course to what is being learned in the course to which it is linked. This is what practitioners in the field refer to as contextualizing academic support.

[8] For more information on the research project see http://pathways.syr.edu.
[9] Also see Malnarich, et al. (2004) for a thoughtful discussion of learning communities for academically under-prepared students.
[10] See Bettinger and Long (2005).

- Second, the use of collaborative and/or cooperative pedagogies that require that student learn together in a coherent interdependent manner. The evidence in this regard is clear. Students who learn together become more academically and socially engaged (e.g. spend more time together and on task), learn more, and in turn persist more frequently (Tinto, 1997, 1998, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004).

- Third, the linking up of classroom activities to support services on campus. In this way developmental education learning communities serve as conduits to other support services that low-income students might not otherwise access.

By describing some of our research at Syracuse I hope to make a rather simple point, namely to address the success of low-income students within our colleges and universities, especially those from underserved populations, we must stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life, stop our tendency to take an "add-on" approach to institutional innovation, stop marginalizing our efforts and in turn our students, and adopt efforts that restructure the learning environments in which we place them.[11]

Nowhere does such restructuring matter more than during the critical first year of college when student persistence is so much in doubt. It is for that reason that there is much to be gained from a rethinking of the character of the first year and the development of coherent first-year programs whose purpose it is to ensure that all students are able to learn and persist beyond that year. For students who require additional academic assistance, such programs are particularly effective when they are connected to summer bridge programs.

Closing Thought:

Though we have made progress in providing low-income students increased access to higher education, we have been less successful in increasing their attainment of four-year degrees. If anything, the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students has increased over time. In part, this reflects that fact that most universities have not taken the task of promoting the persistence and graduation of low-income students seriously. It is not enough to provide low-income students access to our universities and colleges and claim we are providing opportunity if we do not construct environments that support their efforts to learn and succeed beyond access. Simply put, access without support is not meaningful opportunity.

[11] Such findings mirror other studies that document the impact of learning communities and other forms of collaborative learning environments on a range of student outcomes not the least of which is student persistence (e.g. Taylor, et al. 2004; MDRC, 2005). These environments prove to be particularly effective for students from under-served groups when they include additional supports such as peer mentoring and intrusive academic advising.

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