

Access without Support is Not Opportunity*

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On the surface America's public commitment to provide access to any individual who seeks entry to 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 public and private two and four-year colleges and universities in the United States. 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 over 67 percent today. More importantly, the gap in access between high and low-income youth has shrunk as greater numbers of economically disadvantaged students have enrolled in college; the number entering college immediately after high school having increased by over 60 percent since 1970. By any count, access to higher education for low-income students is greater today than ever.

But scratch beneath the surface of this apparent success and the story about access and opportunity in American higher education is much more complex and a lot less hopeful. Though access to higher education has increased and gaps in overall access decreased, gaps between high and low-income students in college completion generally and of four-year degrees in particular remain. Indeed the gap in the completion of four-year degrees is now greater than ever. Whereas nearly six in ten students from families earning more than \$70,000 per year who begin higher education in either a two or four-year college earn a Bachelor's degree within six years, only one in four do so from families earning less than \$25,000 per year. The gap is ever greater for low-income students from underserved backgrounds. Even among students who begin higher education in a public four-year college or university, less than fifty percent of low-income students earn their four-year degree within six years while nearly seventy percent of high-income students do so. The facts are clear, for too many low-income students the "open door" to American higher education has become a revolving door.

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There are many reasons why this is the case not the least of which is the well-documented differences in the academic preparation of high and low-income youth. There is little doubt that academic preparation matters and that inadequate academic preparation among our students pose daunting challenges to our ability to promote greater success among low-income students.

Of course you already know this and are only too well aware of the consequences for our society of our failing to respond to these challenges. But though your institutions have invested substantial resources in academic support programs, it is my view that too many institutions are really not serious in their pursuit of improved graduation, in particular their low-income students. They have been unwilling to change current practices and move beyond the provision of add-on services for low-income students that are placed at the margins of institutional life. They have been unwilling to make student success the linchpin about which they organize their actions and establish those educational conditions within the institution that we have long known promote success among low-income students.

What are these conditions? What does research tell us about the nature of institutional environments that promote the success of low-income students, in particular those who enter college academically under-prepared? Five conditions stand out, namely commitment, expectations, support, feedback, and involvement.

First and perhaps most clearly, institutional commitment is a condition for student success. Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing success among low-income students, especially from underserved backgrounds, 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 their success. It reflects as well a commitment of all members of the institution, especially the faculty, to see themselves as responsible for the success of their students. Without such commitment, programs for student success may begin, but rarely prosper over the long-term.

Expectations, specifically high expectations, are also 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. Recent data from the National Survey of Student Engagement documents that fact that first year students spend less time on their studies out of class than faculty claim is necessary for success in their courses. More disturbingly, student's expectations for the amount of work they must do to succeed declines over the course of the first year. They simply do not study enough and seem to study less as the year progresses, that is, until the days before final exams. I would argue that this is the case because, despite our claims, universities do not in practice expect students to study much. They do not construct educational activities that require students to expend much effort on their studies, do not provide frequent about their work that requires them to put more effort into their work, and do not evaluate student work in ways that honors greater effort.

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" or more subtly, but no less effectively, in the way we treat differing students as sometimes happens among faculty and students of different gender, income, or ethnicity. However expressed, it is evident that students quickly pick up expectations and are influenced by the degree to which those expectations validate their presence on campus.

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, in particular low-income, first generation college students, are not. It is for this reason that student support services and other programs targeted at at-risk students, such as mentoring, are 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. It is through the affiliations that are

formed in those places of support that important knowledge is gained about the ways to navigate the often-foreign landscape of university life.

Support, academic and social, is another condition for student success. For academically under-prepared students in particular, the availability of academic support, for instance in the form of basic skills courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs such as supplemental instruction and basic skills learning communities is an important condition for their success. 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 acquire, through the affiliations formed therein, the knowledge they need to safely navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the university.

It is important to note that academic support is most effective when it is connected to, not isolated from, the learning settings in which students are asked to learn. The more closely academic support is aligned to the classes in which students are enrolled, the more effect is that support. This is the case because alignment makes it easier for students to apply the support they receive to the immediate task of succeeding in those. Regrettably it is too often the case that academic support, though well intended, is decontextualized. Supplemental instruction, by contrast, provides academic support that is directly attached to a specific class in order to help students succeed in that class. 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.

Feedback is also a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that provide faculty, staff, and students frequent feedback about their performance in ways that enable all parties to adjust their behaviors to enhance the likelihood of success. Here I refer not only to entry assessment of learning skills but also to early warning systems that alert institutions to students who need assistance so that they can be helped before their problems overwhelms them. I also refer to classroom assessment and feedback techniques such as those described by Angelo and Cross 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.

Finally, but no less importantly, involvement or what is now called engagement is a condition for student success. 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.

Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms of the campus. This is the case for two reasons. First, for many campuses the classroom may be the only place students meet each other and the faculty. Least we forget, most low-income 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. In this regard it is noteworthy that even among students who persist, students who are more involved, especially with other students in learning activities, learn more and show greater levels of intellectual development. It is for these reasons that so much of the literature on institutional retention, student learning and development speaks of the importance of building educational communities that actively involve all, not just some, students in learning with others.

It is important to note that what matters is not merely that students are engaged but that they see themselves as valued members of the institution. Though engagement is certainly better than no engagement, what seems to drive student success is the meaning students derive from their engagements. Those reflect, in turn, the values and norms that shape institutional cultures. Simply put institutional climate matters, especially for students from underserved

backgrounds and it matters most clearly in the classrooms of the campus where student learning and success is shaped.

How might these concepts be applied to low-income students, in particular those who enter college academically under-prepared? My colleagues and I at Syracuse University, in particular Catherine Engstrom, have over a number of years studied the impact of basic skills learning communities and pedagogies of engagement on the success of academically under prepared low-income students in two and four-year colleges, most recently with the support of the Lumina Foundation for Education and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Contrary to public perceptions, our research it is possible to address the academic needs of low-income students and enhance their persistence. But doing so requires more than add-ons. It 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.

The basic skills learning communities we studied share a number of characteristics:

- First, the linking of basic skills courses such as developmental writing/reading to content courses such as History or 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. In some cases a Freshman Seminar or Study Skills course is added to provide additional support.
- Second, the use of pedagogies of engagement such as cooperative or problem-based learning that require students to learn together in a coherent interdependent manner. The evidence in this regard is clear. Students who learn together become more academically and socially engaged, learn more, and in turn persist more frequently.
- Third, the linking up of classroom activities to support services on campus. In this way basic skills learning communities serve as conduits to other support services that low-income students might not otherwise access.

Why do learning communities and the environments they construct for low-income students work? Perhaps several student quotes drawn from our studies will help answer this question. One of the reasons they work is the support that arises from the activities of the learning community. Listen to the voices of two students who talk about their experience and its impact on their success.

“In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had discussions about everything...it was like a raft running the rapids of my life.”

Another says:

“When I come to school I was like oh, I’m going to fail ‘cause I haven’t been in school forever... but now ... I’m not afraid to ask anybody for help or what do you think about this? We’ve all been helping each other.”

Learning communities also work because they lead students to spend more time together and more time together learning. Listen to the voices of two other students who talked about how the activities of the classrooms furthered their involvement and learning.

“You know, the more I talk to other people about our class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I’m actually learning ... and the more I learn not only about other people, but also about the subject because my brain is getting more, because I’m getting more involved with the other students in the class. I’m getting more involved with the class even after class.”

Another notes:

“The relationship in classes between accounting and ESL is helping a lot because the accounting professor is teaching us to answer questions in complete sentences ... to write better. And we are more motivated to learn vocabulary because it is accounting vocabulary, something we want to learn about. I am learning accounting better by learning the accounting language.”

Learning communities, or shall I say the supportive learning environments they construct, also promote student success because they help reshape students' sense of their capacities as learners. Listen to two more students who talk about how their experiences in the basic skills learning communities have influenced their views. One observes:

“So you are constantly having to think, re-think, and even re-re-think what’s going on in light of all the feedback you’re getting from all these different points of view. . .you realize you know something, like you’re not dumb.”

“It has benefited me because I have gotten to know people. I am not alone anymore . . . It has helped me feel more comfortable, more confident. The more confident I feel, the better I do . . . I think I have gotten smarter since I have been here. I can feel it.”

By describing some of our research I hope to make a rather simple point, namely to address the needs 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.

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing the retention of low-income students. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most institutions do not take low-income student retention seriously. They treat it, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies but do not change the underlying values that too often frame institutional culture. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as a Freshman Seminar, to help new students persist but do not change the prevailing educational character of the first year of college. This is not to say that these courses are not valuable. They are. The Freshman Seminar, for instance, has a long history of documented success. But such add-ons can

do little to change the overall character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experiences, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition.

What would it mean for institutions to take the retention of low-income students seriously? First and foremost it would mean that institutions would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional academic life and make enhancing student success the linchpin about which they organize their activities. They would move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those educational conditions on campus that promote the retention of students, in particular those of low-income backgrounds. To be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask low-income students to learn, settings that are themselves the product of past decisions already made; decisions that can be changed if institutions are serious.

Nowhere does such restructuring matter more than during the critical first year of college when student success 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 and carefully aligned first-year programs whose purpose it is to ensure that all students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are able to learn and persist beyond that year.

Let me close. 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 simply 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 opportunity.

Thank you.