

Enhancing Student Persistence: Connecting the Dots*

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Though I have been asked to speak about persistence, I will begin my comments this morning by focusing first on issues of access. Only then will I turn to persistence and policies to promote persistence. I do so because it is impossible, in my view, to separate out issues of access from those of persistence. While it is true that persistence is largely the result of what occurs to students following entry, it is also true that patterns of access also play an important, though indirect, role in shaping persistence.

Moving Beyond Access: Recasting the Debate over Access

As to the issue of access, the current debate over access policy needs to be recast. We have to move beyond thinking of access solely as enabling people to gain entry to higher education to seeing access as providing individuals realistic opportunities to earn a four-year college degree. What matters is not merely whether individuals are able to begin college, but whether they are able to finish college.¹

One way of understanding the importance of access to persistence is to change the question we ask about access from that which asks about the impact of current policies upon people's ability to go to college to three distinct questions regarding the effect of our policies on the quality of access. First, access to what? Second, access in what form? Third, access with what level of academic preparation?

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¹ Should anyone have any doubts that finishing college matters consider the recent US. Census Bureau study that reports that individuals completing a bachelor's degree earn nearly \$1 million more over their working careers than do people with a high school degree. Equally important, the gap is growing. In 1975 full-time workers with a bachelor's degree earned on average 1.5 times what workers with only a high-school diploma earned; by 1999 the difference was 1.8 times as much. And it was nearly as large for those who began but did not complete their degree. Does entry to college matter? Yes! But finishing college matters more.

Access to what?

The likelihood that individuals will complete a bachelor's degree is influenced by where in the higher educational system they enter. Simply put, entry to a four-year college or university is preferable to entry to a two-year college. This is the case because individuals are more likely, other things being equal, to complete a bachelor's degree if they first enter a four-year college or university rather than other types of institutions. It is currently estimated that approximately 65 percent of students who begin in a four-year college or university with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree will earn that degree, whereas only 27 percent or so of those who begin in a two-year institution with the expressed goal of earning a bachelor's degree will do so (NCES, 2002). This does not mean that many individuals may not benefit from attendance at a two-year college. They can and do. Rather it means that the best path to the completion of a bachelor's degree is the direct one.²

Access in what form?

The likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree is also influenced by the form of attendance. Individuals who attend part-time or who have to work while in college are, on the average, less likely to complete a college degree than those who attend full-time or not work while in college. Take for instance the data on full-time and part-time attendance in four-year colleges and universities. Whereas 70 percent of students who attend four-year colleges and universities full-time earn a bachelor's degree, less than 50 percent of those who attend part-time do so. Similarly 75 percent of those who do not work while in college graduate, while less than 40 percent of those who work full-time do so. Though there are some exceptions, such as work-study on campus, it is evident that working while in college or attending part-time serves to detract from participation in education and in turn from the likelihood of completion.

Understandably, the completion of a bachelor's degree is affected by a range of factors that may have little to do with where and how one attends. Nevertheless being able to attend a four-year college or university and do so full-time is more likely to lead to degree completion than other forms of participation. Of course not everyone has the financial resources to do so. Thus the current debate over affordability of college especially for low-income youth. But for that debate to be useful it must consider how affordability impacts where and in what form individuals attend college. Not to consider these issues is, in effect, to move low-income students to forms of entry that diminish their chances for completion of a bachelor's degree.

² Given prevailing patterns of access, it is also true that policies affecting transfer also matter. Quality of transfer programs and system articulation policies all play a part in determining eventual access to four-year institutions.

Access with what level of academic preparation?

But the issue of access understood as being able to attend is only half the story. The other half of the story is that of academic preparation. Evidence abounds that providing access without academic preparation does not provide real opportunity. Level of academic preparation influences not only whether one goes to college, but also where one goes to college and, in turn, the likelihood of completing a four-year degree. This point is reinforced by Adelman (1999) and a recent study by Cabrera, LaNasa, and Burkum (2001) of high school sophomores whose educational careers were followed over thirteen years. As contrasted with well-prepared high school students, of whom 70.3 entered a four-year college, only 16.3 percent of the poorly prepared students entered a four-year college. Equally important whereas 77.7 percent of well prepared students who entered a four-year college were able to obtain a bachelor's degree, only 10.1 percent of the poorly prepared four-year college entrants were able to do so. In other words, well qualified high school graduates were roughly 4 times more likely to enter a four-year college and over seven times more likely to finish when they did so. Similar differences hold true even among two-year college entrants. Of the approximately 24 percent of prepared high school graduates who entered a two-year college, nearly a third, eventually earned a four-year degree. By contrast, of the roughly 57 percent of the poorly qualified students who entered a two-year college, only 2 percent were able to earn a bachelor's degree. In sum, nearly 62 of every 100 well prepared high school graduates who entered a four or two-year college after high school earned a four-year college degree, but only 3 of every 100 poorly prepared students did so. Again, providing access without academic preparation is not real opportunity.

What is the point of this exercise? The point is that the current debate, which frequently pits increased funding for Pell Grants verses that for GearUp is misguided. Both access and preparation matter. Our policies must enable low-income students to gain entry to four-year colleges and universities with the skills they need to succeed in college. Again, recent data serve to highlight this point. Only a quarter of low-income youth are academically well prepared for college at the time of high school graduation and only half of those students gain access to a four-year college or universities. By contrast, nearly sixty percent of high-income youth are well prepared for college and over three quarters enter the four-year college sector.

What is needed is not only a new approach to financial aid policies that promote access with a reasonable chance of success, but the forming of a strategic coalition of groups from states, schools, communities, families, and organizations to ensure that all students acquire the academic skills they need to succeed in college. At the same time, schools and higher educational institutions must work together to align their academic programs so that the skills students acquire in middle and high school are those needed for success in college. It is still the case that too many students who pass state-level competency tests in high school are found wanting in college entry assessment tests.

Promoting Persistence in College

Of course, getting into a four-year college is no guarantee of graduating from that college. The most recent BPS data indicate that only 51 percent of students who begin in a four-year institution will complete their bachelor's degree within their initial institution within six years (institutional completion) while another 7 percent do so via transfer. As noted above, some of those who do not finish, in particular those of low-income backgrounds, do so because they enter college with limited academic skills. But even among students whose high school grade point average is B+ to A-, approximately 35 percent fail to earn their bachelor's degree within six years from any institution. Among low-income students, the figure is even higher. My point is simple. Even with adequate academic preparation, many students who begin in a four-year institution fail to complete their four-year degree. Persistence remains a problem, especially among low-income youth.

Institutional Conditions for Student Persistence

What is to be done? What should institutions do to increase persistence and graduation? The good news is that we already know the answer to these questions.³ An extensive body of research identifies the conditions within institutions that best promote student persistence, in particular during the students' first year of college. Here the emphasis is on the conditions in which we place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. Though some might argue otherwise, student attributes are, for the great majority of institutions, largely beyond immediate institutional control. This is not the case, however, for the settings in which institutions place their students. Such settings are already within institutional control, their attributes already reflective of decisions made and of actions taken or not taken. They can be changed if institutions, that is if they are serious in their pursuit of student persistence.

Five conditions stand out as supportive of persistence, namely expectation, advice, support, involvement, and learning. First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed. High expectations are a condition for student success, or as is sometimes noted, "no one rises to low expectations." Students, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education, are affected by the expectational climate on campus and by their perceptions of the expectations of faculty and staff hold for their individual performance.⁴ One of the dirty little secrets of higher education is that many faculty

³ The bad news is that many institutions are not serious in their pursuit of enhanced persistence and graduation. They may talk the talk, but not walk the walk.

⁴ Hurtado and Carter (1996) talk of the hostile climate and Rendon (1994) uses the term validation to describe the impact of expectations upon students.

expect little of their students, at least some of their students, ask little of them as regards learning, and are more than willing to give out high grades in the face of student pressure.

Second, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements and effective advising about the choices students have to make regarding their programs of study and future career goals. Students, especially the many who are undecided about their plans, need to understand the road map to completion and know how to use it to achieve personal goals. It is important to note that most students are either undecided at entry about their field of study or change their minds, at least once, during their college years.

Third, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support. Most students, especially those in their first year of college, require some form of support. Some may require academic assistance, while others may need social or personal support. For others it may mean finding a “safe haven” in a sea of unfamiliar peers. Support may be provided in structured forms such as in summer bridge programs, mentor programs, and student clubs or it may arise in the everyday workings of the institution such as in student contact with faculty and staff advisor. Form aside, what matters is that the provision of support serves to center, not marginalize, students on campus.

Fourth, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution (Astin, 1984; 1993). The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence (Tinto, 1993). This is true for large and small, rural and urban, public and private, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. It is true for women as well as men, students of color and Anglo-students, and part-time and full-time students. Simply put, involvement matters, and at no point does it matter more than during the first year of college when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak.

Fifth, and most importantly, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning. Learning has always been the key to student persistence. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students, all not just some of their students, are successful in graduating their students. Again, involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on task, especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay and graduate. Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most students are neither demanding nor involving. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most students experience learning

as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Promoting Student Persistence: Institutional Policies

It follows then that there are a number of actions institutions need to take to establish conditions on campus that promote persistence. But some actions, specifically those that address the nature of student classroom experience and student involvement, have greater impact upon persistence than others. To understand why this is the case, it is important to recognize that most students either commute to college and/or work while in college. Relatively few students, or roughly 18 percent of all college students, have the luxury of residing on campus and not work while in college. For these students, indeed for students generally, the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where students meet faculty and student peers, the one place where they engage in learning. If involvement is to occur, and it must, it must arise in and around the classrooms of the campus. It must lead students not only to get involved, but get actively involved in learning with others in ways that enable all students, not just some, to succeed.

For that reason, let me suggest that any institutional policy to enhance student persistence must address issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and the skills faculty bring to the task of educating students. It must address the fact that the faculty in higher education are the only faculty in education who are literally not trained to teach their own students. In the same manner that universities are beginning to require training for new teaching assistants, they should do likewise for new faculty. And they should do so in conjunction with promotion and tenure systems that take teaching seriously. At the same time, institutional policy must provide for incentives and rewards for faculty, as well as staff, to work together to construct educational settings that promote the active involvement and learning of all students. It must encourage the building of collaborative partnerships across campus to tap the many skills of both faculty and student affairs professionals.

In other words, the policy I have in mind must address the core mission of the institution and those responsible for that mission. It must be located at the center, not periphery, of institutional life and must commit the institution to place the assessment and promotion of student learning and persistence at the top of their priority list. In effect, institutions must hold themselves and their various schools, departments, and in turn faculty and staff accountable for enhancing student persistence. Unfortunately, too many institutional programs that seek to promote persistence and learning are at the margins of institutional life. They are often directed by part-time instructional staff or by student affairs staff with little connection to the academic life of the institution. Though those programs may help, they do little to alter the primary experience of college, namely that of the classroom and of learning.

Take the case of developmental education programs that serve the needs of the many under-prepared college students. Too many of those programs serve, in effect, to marginalize and sometimes stigmatize those students by locating them in standalone classes that bear little if any degree credit. Note the pejorative implications of the commonly used term “remedial” that typically describes those programs as if students had to be remediated or fixed in order to succeed. Little wonder that so many provisionally admitted students do so poorly and so many developmental education programs have marginal impact upon persistence. To be effective, developmental education programs and the academic assistance they provide must be connected to the curriculum and to student needs to learn that curriculum. They must serve to include, not exclude, students from the regular curriculum and validate their participation in the intellectual life of the college.⁵

It is for that reason that I have long advocated the use of learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them as an important component of any institutional policy to enhance student persistence. Unlike other so-called retention programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, learning communities seek to transform that the essential character of that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student persistence (Tinto, 1999; Cross, 1998). For under-prepared students, learning communities also serve to integrate academic assistance to the curriculum so that students get academic support and make degree credit progress at the same time. In so doing they greatly enhance the impact of academic support not only on student learning but also on student motivation to persist.

Promoting Student Persistence: State and Federal Policies

What can states, and possibly the federal government, do to assist? I say assist because it is my view that student persistence is primarily an institutional event and therefore primarily the responsibility of the institution. Nevertheless, there are actions the states, and possibility the federal government, can take to increase the likelihood of college graduation

In speaking to these actions, I want to distinguish between those that might be taken states and by the Federal government to increase graduation rates over time, that is of successive entering cohorts, and those that might be taken to increase the likelihood that more

⁵ In some respects, the same may be said of many first year programs such as the widely used freshman seminar. Though the freshman seminar has had some success in increasing persistence, it is regrettable that too many institutions still use the freshman seminar as a separate, stand-alone course unrelated to the academic life of the institution. It is employed as a type of educational vaccine. By leaving the freshman seminar at the margins of institutional life, by treating it as an add-on to the real business of the college, institutions implicitly assume that they can “cure” attrition by “inoculating” students with a dose of educational assistance without changing the rest of the curriculum and the ways students experience that curriculum.

individuals, of any entering cohort, will graduate given entry to higher education.⁶ Though my comments about institutional policy have focused on the latter forms of action, I will speak here of the former, namely what actions can be taken to increase graduation over time.

First, states should hold institutions accountable for improvements over time in learning and persistence in ways that are sensitive to the diversity of institutions and institutional missions that make up state systems of higher education. But rather than employ an elaborate formula to determine yearly budgets, accountability should be based upon improvements over time that are reported publicly and which result in the distribution of additional funds to those institutions that have shown improvement. Those improvements should be not be measured, however, by aggregate institutional rates of completion, as is typically the case, but by improvements over time of rates of persistence and completion for different segments of the student population (e.g. low-income, students of color, etc.). My reasoning is simple. The use of aggregate rates of graduation may lead some institutions to respond to accountability pressures by reducing the number of low-income and under-prepared students they admit hoping that restricting access will immediately improve aggregate graduation rates. The end result would be to punish, in effect, those institutions that retain their commitment to serve the most needy students.⁷

Second, within the context of accountability, states should strengthen incentive programs that provide institutions resources to develop and pilot innovative programs designed to improve, over time, student learning and persistence, especially for low-income and under-prepared students.⁸ As they do so, states should establish support systems that provide

⁶ Perhaps an example might highlight the difference between these two forms of action. Take the issue of financial aid policy. It is estimated that the purchasing power of the average Pell Grant has declined markedly over the past two decades.(Mortenson, 2000). One result is that in order to attend college an increased proportion of students, especially those of low-income backgrounds, have to work while in college and/or attend part-time. Both behaviors tend to reduce the likelihood of completion. Consequently, over time, one would expect not only that rates of entry would decline, but also that rates of completion would also decline among successive cohorts. Among any given entering cohort, however, the effects of diminished purchasing power of Pell Grants on the likelihood that individuals among the cohort will graduate should be much smaller since individuals tend to adjust the form of their entry according to their assessment of costs. In other words, for most, but certainly not all, individuals the effect of the changing value of Pell Grants is largely taken up in their form of entry and can therefore be considered a “constant” in subsequent analysis of persistence among members of the cohort.

⁷ Similar problems arise with those accountability and incentive systems that reward institutions for meeting graduation targets. Take for instance the case of Pennsylvania. Under the guidance of Secretary of Education Hickok, the state created a \$6 million grant program to reward colleges and universities that graduate at least 40 percent of their in-state students within four-years. When the first set of grants were awarded, no state college received a grant. All sixty-five institutions receiving awards were private.

⁸ Here I would include incentive programs to strengthen transfer programs in two-year colleges, in particular those that serve under-represented and low-income students. Though transfer abounds, too few low-income and under-represented students benefit from those programs.

institutions information about and support for the development of innovative projects. The results of funded programs should be highlighted on state sponsored websites and widely shared among state institutions so that institutions can learn from one another.

Third, states should provide funds for the development of programs within universities that enable future faculty to acquire the skills needed to educate the student they will someday teach. Indeed, there is more than sufficient reason for states, professional associations, and accreditation agencies to work together to establish preparation guidelines for faculty who intend to teach in higher education. If we can agree on the need for preparation guidelines for student affairs professionals (e.g. ACPA, NASPA), we can surely agree on the need for similar guidelines for people who are given the responsibility of teaching college students.

As to the federal government, I think it best, despite recent speeches by the President Bush, Senator Lieberman, and comments by the staff in the Office of Education, that the federal government limits its involvement in matters of accountability. That task should be left to the states and to the various associations and accreditation agencies that now dot the higher education landscape. Instead the federal government should rework current financial aid policies so as to promote the types of access that further persistence. And it should do so with an eye toward closing the gap in both access and graduation than now divides our nation.

Equally important, the federal government should also expand its investment in programs, such as the highly regarded but much under-funded Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, that have direct impact upon institutional innovation. And as it has in the past, it should continue its funding of longitudinal studies of access, persistence, and graduation that enable the nation to gauge its progress in addressing these important issues and to raise questions as we have here today.

Closing Thoughts

It is telling that over the past century, during a period of dramatic growth in the higher educational system that rates of persistence and graduation have not changed substantially hovering as they have around the fifty percent mark. Though we have made some recent progress, for instance in shrinking the gap in access and graduation between various groups in our society, those gains have been modest. In my view this is the case because most of our efforts have themselves been modest and have yet to substantially change the structure and practice of higher education. As regards institutional policy, we have added-on programs and made changes at the margins of institutional life, but have yet to address the center of that life and the practices that spring from it. It is to that center that we must direct our future policies.

At the same time, though we are well aware of the interlocking, longitudinal processes that shape student access and persistence from middle school through college, of the pathways students must travel to eventually gain access to and succeed in college, we continue to place our resources in categorical efforts that are poorly articulated between levels of the educational system. The same is true with in our conversations about access and persistence. We continue to treat them as if they are largely separate issues. They are not. If we are to make progress in addressing the continuing issues of equity in higher education, our research and our policies must allow us to understand and act upon the interplay between events and policies in one sector with those in another. Our students understand these linkages. So should we.

Thank You.

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