

**ORGANIZING THE NATION'S INVESTMENT: PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS IN
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

**THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS
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Introduction

More individuals than ever before in our nation's history are pursuing postsecondary opportunities. Over 70% of today's high school graduates enroll in college within two years of completing diplomas. The enrollment of individuals of color and people from low-income families is higher than ever, while still significantly lower than whites and middle and upper income individuals relative to their size. Larger numbers of adults also are taking college courses. The surge in college enrollments is largely a result of workforce demands for higher skill levels and increased recognition of the earnings disparities between people with only a high school diploma and those with college degrees.

Despite the motivation of individuals and children of families from all backgrounds to pursue postsecondary studies, persistence and degree completion rates lag far behind college enrollment, particularly for students traditionally under-served in higher education (low-income, underrepresented minorities, first generation in their families to go to college, and individuals with disabilities). Only 17% of low-income students earn bachelor's degrees by age 24 compared with 52% of upper income students. Degree completion rates for African-American, Hispanic, and Native American individuals are far lower than those of Asian American and whites.

Concern regarding degree completion rates is growing, especially given the substantial investments of federal and state funds, institutional dollars, and individual and family resources in supporting students' participation in higher education. Federal student aid alone totals over \$70 billion this year, the majority of which is education loans, representing a substantial investment by individuals and families as well. Public dollars supporting students who leave college without completing degrees represents a significant loss – to the individuals who fall short of their goals, the taxpayers who don't realize the expected return on investment, and the nation's social and economic well-being.

Improving postsecondary persistence and success is not only an important goal, but also an attainable one. The knowledge and tools already exist for many more individuals to enroll in college well prepared for postsecondary coursework and with the financial and social support they need to complete degrees. In order for that to happen, policy-makers, education leaders and practitioners need to apply what we already know. Key stakeholders also must change the ways in which they work together in order to ensure that all students who begin college maximize the opportunities that postsecondary education provides.

This paper will discuss what families and individuals need to know and do in order to successfully progress along the pathway to a college degree. It will review the challenges that parents and students from under-served populations – those for whom college persistence falls far short of desirable rates - face along this pathway, and will identify several underlying issues that must be addressed in order for families and individuals to overcome these challenges. The paper also will discuss the role that federal and state policy can play in strengthening partnerships among key stakeholders to improve students' college persistence and success. The paper will draw extensively from the author's 35 years of

experience working in college access and retention programs, including TRIO and GEAR UP, as well as from the findings of recent research on these issues.

What Families and Individuals Need to Know and Do

Over the past 20 years, researchers have identified a series of key factors that predict the likelihood of individuals enrolling and succeeding in college. Alberto Cabrera and Helen Caffrey have summarized these findings in a matrix titled, “What we have learned as to what matters most on the path to a four-year degree” (2001). The factors are equally applicable to individuals entering community colleges and successfully completing two-year degrees. The findings summarized in the Cabrera matrix can help both practitioners and policy-makers understand what they are doing right and identify where they need to make changes.

The matrix represents a concise statement of what both parents and families and individuals need to do along the pathway to a college degree/in order to succeed in college. It encompasses factors affecting students from seventh grade through the junior year in college. Factors related to students include the following:

- Educational and career aspirations
- Academic ability and preparation – reading at or above grade level, advanced math courses, writing and reasoning skills
- Schools and teachers with high expectations for students’ achievement
- Socioeconomic status and the accompanying opportunities, both in school and out-of-school (recreational and cultural enrichment, exposure to new experiences and ideas)
- Planning for college – information about college, careers, financial aid
- Financial resources for college costs
- Strong connections to school and college communities with supportive adults and peers who share college-going values
- Self-confidence and a sense of competence as a learner

Factors related to parents and families include:

- Expectations for college, encouragement and support with pursuing college goals
- Cultural capital – having gone to college themselves
- Information about college, careers, financial aid and college costs
- Taking tangible actions to support college aspirations: saving for college costs, campus visits with children
- Involvement in children’s school activities – talking with teachers and counselors, providing support with schoolwork (managing time, homework, projects, research, test preparation, recognizing achievement)

Based on my experience as a practitioner, these factors matter all along the college pathway from middle school to degree completion. Individual preparation, confidence and family support are as important to an upper level college student’s achievement and success as it is to a seventh grader, regardless of family income, race or ethnicity.

Challenges Faced by Under-served Individuals and Families in Achieving College Degrees

In relation to these factors, under-served students and their families face numerous challenges in successfully navigating the path to a college degree. Major challenges include access to rigorous academic preparation, lack of college planning information and encouragement, inadequate financial aid, difficulties establishing strong connections with school and college communities, and structural barriers that make it difficult for individuals to make smooth transitions from one level of education to another.

With regard to academic preparation, it is difficult or in some cases, impossible, for under-served students to secure the rigorous academic preparation required for college success. Tracking students into college or non-college preparation often begins in middle school. The majority of middle schools still do not offer Algebra I even though research has clearly established it as a gateway to college course. Advanced level high school courses frequently require prerequisite courses in eighth and ninth grade that under-served students don't take or grades that they don't earn because of lack of information or encouragement. Most secondary schools have limited academic support – tutoring or extra enrichment – that many under-prepared students need in order to succeed in more challenging courses. Because students have not received such support in school, they often do not know to take advantage of the assistance available on the college level through writing workshops, math labs and campus learning centers.

Lack of information and encouragement is a pervasive problem, particularly for students whose teachers and counselors do not see them as college material and whose parents or other family members lack personal college experience. Such students and families don't understand the wide range of college options that exist beyond the nearby community college or college admissions requirements. They don't know which high school courses prepare students for college, what admissions tests students need to take, when the college planning process begins (middle school), or what to do if they begin the planning process late. College planning information and assistance in most middle schools and high schools under-served students attend is amazingly limited, which is particularly striking given the high public interest in college rankings, SATs and competitive admissions. Information about the college-going experience for families of students in college also is extremely limited. After the freshman orientation period, tuition bills and balance due statements are the only communications families receive from the college their child attends; parents do not know what courses their child is taking, who their instructors are, what grades they receive or, if they live on campus, what the housing and meal arrangements are.

The inadequacy of financial aid and challenges that families face in securing aid are well documented. According the national Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid, students eligible for financial aid face an average unmet need of \$3,700 after tapping all sources open to them, including grant, loan and work, and family assistance (Access Denied, 2000). Lack of financial resources prevents 47% of college-qualified students from going to four-year colleges and 22% from attending college at all. Despite past efforts to simplify the aid application process, individuals and families from low-income backgrounds continue to report frustration with the aid application process – the complexity of the forms, varying deadlines for different sources, and wide disparities in aid packages students receive, a result of the different methodologies and criteria used to award aid. Other problems resulting in inadequate aid include policies that inadvertently restrict aid for the students to whom it is targeted. An example is student earnings. Students who do not receive sufficient aid and/or must help support their families frequently find their aid reduced the following year because of their earnings. While many students report financial difficulties as their reason for leaving college before completion, college administrators often discount this problem as 'not the real reason.' It may not be the only reason, but evidence clearly suggests that it is a significant factor in need of attention.

Families face many difficulties establishing strong connections with school and college communities – connections that research shows directly affect students’ postsecondary persistence. Evidence of inadequate communications between secondary schools and families abounds. Schools often do not include parents in critical decisions that affect their children’s college readiness and plans. For instance, high schools do not require parental approval of the courses students take or changes in their courses. Many schools do not provide parents with college-planning information before eleventh grade, and rarely mail college or financial aid information to parents’ home, a step that is essential to ensuring that parents receive it. Much of the information provided to families requires them to visit the school to receive it, an option that many low-income parents cannot exercise because of transportation difficulties, work conflicts, or lack of childcare. Similar difficulties exist on the college level, where families historically have not been viewed as critical partners in their children’s college success. Judith Shapiro, president of Barnard College in a recent New York Times Op Ed piece (August 2002) wrote, “By the time their children enter college, parents have become so invested emotionally in their success that they may not understand why it is critical that they remain outside the college gates.” The problem is not keeping parents away from their children but involving parents constructively in supporting their children’s college success. Lack of communication regarding their child’s academic progress in college is a major barrier to families providing support when the child encounters difficulty and need their help. While acknowledging the legal constraints that affect colleges’ communications with parents, many opportunities still exist for colleges to create strong connections with families.

Individual students also face difficulties establishing strong connections with their school and college communities, and with adults and other students in these communities who can provide them important encouragement and support. Schools that under-served students attend are often far from their homes, making participation in after-school activities and support programs difficult or impossible. Many students also have work and family obligations that limit the time they have to connect with others. On the college level, large numbers of under-served students attend college on a commuting basis, limiting to a great extent the time they spend on campus and, therefore, opportunities to connect to other students, faculty and college staff. Because of travel time, work and family responsibilities, commuting students typically leave after attending classes and labs. The large public colleges that most students attend provide few learning situations that are structured specifically to promote such connections, despite the existence of effective models for doing so such as small learning communities.

In addition to those already mentioned, institutional barriers to college persistence include policies at the various transition points along the college pathway - middle school to high school, high school to college, and two-year to four-year colleges – that make it hard for students to make smooth transitions to the next level. Lack of delineation of the skills and competencies students need to successfully undertake the academic work the next higher level is a major issue. Middle school teachers typically have little concrete knowledge of what students need to be able to do when they finish eighth grade in order to succeed in ninth grade college preparatory courses. Similar circumstances exist at the other transition points. High school principals frequently observe that the right sequence of Carnegie units and a high grade point average does not produce a graduate well prepared for college success; yet, high schools receive little direction from higher education institutions regarding the competencies students need in order to successfully undertake regular freshman courses.

Helping Families and Individuals Improve College Persistence

There are two underlying issues that must be addressed in order for families and individuals to overcome these challenges and improve students’ college persistence.

First, the framework within which policy-makers and educators view the challenges faced by individuals and families needs to shift from a deficit model to an asset model. In the deficit model individuals and families are seen as having problems that schools, colleges, policy-makers, and practitioners must fix in order for students to succeed. Another source of the problem in the deficit model is the student's previous level of education, which did not adequately prepare him for the current level, whatever that is. The asset model assumes that individuals and families begin the pathway to college with rich assets – talents, abilities, aspirations, parents' high expectations and desire to support – that combined with the resources and support of schools, colleges and community will enable students to successfully persist to degree completion. Underlying this model is the assumption that it is the shared responsibility of all the key stakeholders, including students and families, schools, college and community for enabling students to achieve college goals.

The second issue related to the need for strong partnerships among the key stakeholders along the college pathway. For individuals to make smooth transitions from one level to the next along the college pathway, strong functional partnership must exist among the key stakeholders who have responsibility for student progress and achievement. Currently, while the importance of partnerships among K-12 and higher education, families and communities, states and federal policies and programs, is widely acknowledged and espoused, these stakeholders function largely in isolation from one another. For partnerships to be effective in supporting students' college persistence, stakeholders must significantly change the ways in which they work together, collaborate, and support each other. Collaboration must be based on a shared belief in the importance of ensuring that all students are able to enroll and succeed in college and common understanding of the preparation students need in order to move successfully from one level of education to another along the college pathway. While changes will be difficult to make because of the differences in the stakeholders' organizational cultures, improved student persistence is unlikely to happen without change. Among the factors related to college success, student financial aid is one of the few places where such a partnership seems to be working. Here federal, state, higher education institutions and private sector entities work together in partnership with families and individuals to make college affordable. Working partnerships in other areas will enable the development of structures, policies and resources to facilitate students' progress toward college degrees.

Linking Federal and State Policy with What We Know from Research Works to Improve College Persistence: the Pathways to College Network

An important source of ideas for improving college persistence is research-based evidence regarding effective policies and practices. A growing body of research exists, but is often overlooked by policy-makers, educators and others, primarily because it is not readily accessible. Recognizing the value of data for improving policy and practice, in 2001 30 national organizations and funders formed an alliance known as the Pathways to College Network. Pathways is deeply rooted in collaboration among organizations with the capacity to expand college access and success for under-served groups at local, state and national levels. Pathways partners include the American Council on Education, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, State Higher Education Executive Officers, National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, Council for Opportunity in Education, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Aspira, NAACP, and the National Urban League. The funders represent an equally diverse group, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Kellogg, Lumina, KnowledgeWorks, Ford and James Irvine Foundations, and two federal offices – the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

The work of Pathways connects practitioners, policy maker and community leaders with research on effective strategies and promotes resources, activities, and policies with evidence of improving college persistence. For the past year, Pathways has been compiling, and synthesizing research findings into a

comprehensive series of principles and strategies for improving policy and practice that the Network will disseminate through its partners and funders. A panel of distinguished research scholars, including Alberto Cabrera and Vincent Tinto, have provided valuable advice and guidance for this work. Going forward, the Pathways partners will work with their members and constituents to implement evidence-based effective policies and practices and scale up proven models. They also will encourage collaboration and system-building across all levels of education, K-16, to eliminate barriers to college-going and make readiness for college success a fundamental goal of public education. In addition, the partners have developed a research agenda focusing on barriers to college success that are not being addressed and gaps in research that they will advance within the academic and policy research communities.

Many of the strategies identified through the Pathways to College Network address the challenges faced by individuals and families described here, and if implemented, should improve college persistence substantially.

Role of State and Federal Policy in Improving Persistence

Federal and state policy must play a central role in building the partnerships and driving the systemic changes needed to help families and individuals overcome the challenges they face along the path to a college degree. Policy can affect large-scale changes related to providing access to rigorous college preparation, essential planning information and encouragement, expanding parental involvement in supporting students' aspirations, easing the transitions along the college pathway, and enhancing the role of federal financial aid in motivating students and strengthening their connections to the campus community.

Specific policy recommendations related to these areas are summarized below.

Access to rigorous academic preparation for college. States should make rigorous college preparation a universal standard for all high school graduates, just as Texas has done recently. States should mandate that all stakeholders – including students, parents and community and business leaders as well as policy-makers and educators - work together to help students achieve this standard. Stakeholders must be held accountable for student achievement. Federal policy should make ensuring that students successfully pursue rigorous college preparation courses a high priority for TRIO and GEAR UP. Program staff and higher education institutions sponsoring programs should be required to work closely with target schools and districts to improve college preparatory curriculum and instruction, and grant funds should be authorized to support this activity as well as direct services for students.

College planning information and encouragement. States should mandate that all students have a six-year college plan, beginning in ninth grade and going through the second year of college and that schools should actively involve students' parents in developing and monitoring this plan. The Alliance for Excellence in Education provided evidence of the benefits of such a plan in its recently released report, *Every Child a Graduate*. The federal government should authorize funding for college planning advisors for high schools where more than 50% of the students come from low-income families. The federal government also should require that all TRIO and GEAR UP participants have such plans and that program staff monitor students' progress with achieving the goals outlined in them. On the postsecondary level, states should mandate that students' academic advisors be responsible for monitoring their plan through the second year of college. The plan should incorporate the requirements for transferring to a four-year degree program for those students who initially express interest in this goal.

Expanding parental/family involvement in supporting students' college aspirations. As a means of expanding parental involvement in supporting their children's college goals, states should launch social marketing campaigns linked to extensive, easily accessible career, college and financial aid planning resources. Campaigns should target middle and early high school parents and students with messages about the connection between postsecondary education and careers, financial aid availability, the steps needed to prepare for college, and the benefits of early planning. Indiana, Oklahoma and North Carolina have campaigns, supported with both state and federal (GEAR UP) funds, which other states can replicate. Campaigns should include messages for students and parents through the first two years of college, targeting those students who attend in-state public institutions and where fewer than half of the students attending complete degrees by age 25. On the federal level, GEAR UP and TRIO programs should be required to develop specific parent engagement plans with measurable outcomes and held accountable for achieving their outcomes. In addition, Congress should investigate options for requiring postsecondary institutions to communicate directly with the parents of dependent federal student aid recipients regarding students' academic progress.

Easing transitions at key junctures along the college pathway. States should mandate that P-12, higher education system (two- and four-year, public and private), and financial aid agency leaders form a working groups to resolve the challenges and issues that make it difficult for students to move easily from one level to the next, well prepared for the more advanced level. Since workforce development is a major goal of public education, states should include a corporate leader and a parent leader in such work groups. The work of such groups should focus on aligning curriculum to support progress through successive levels and transitions along the P-16 pathway. Systems need to be put into place to align middle school curriculum with college preparatory high school work, and high school completion requirements with the competencies required for regular first-year college work. Georgia, Ohio, Maryland and North Carolina have the most experience with P-16 alignment issues, and the progress they have made can inform the work of other states. Such alignment work also should be a priority for FIPSE and Title II AP funds. In addition, promoting the transfer of students to four-year degree programs should be established as a priority for TRIO Student Support Services projects at community colleges and Title III, Developing Institutions grant recipients. In order for key stakeholders to be accountable for student progress, states need to take leadership in integrating information and data systems that track students' along the P-16 pathway and into the workforce. Florida has established such a tracking system from which others could learn, and Ohio is in the process of doing so. Because of the complexity of establishing such systems, federal support should be provided to assist states with doing so.

Enhancing the role of federal financial aid in motivating students and strengthening their campus connections. The federal government should undertake a study of the feasibility of making an early Pell grant commitment to low-income students. The study should consider such options as committing a minimum award to all students who apply and qualify for Pell grants as eighth or ninth graders and attend college within a year of high school graduation, regardless of their family income at the time they enroll. Such an early award would motivate students and their families to plan early in high school for college. The Indiana 21st Century Scholars program makes such a commitment to eligible students and might serve as a model for a similar federal program. The Federal Work-Study program should be modified in order to make it more attractive for recipients to work on campus, thereby becoming more connected to the campus community. The hourly wage rate for Work-Study should be increased to make it competitive with the rates students can earn off campus. In addition, institutions receiving Work Study funds should be required to have a plan for promoting this option proactively with recipients and increasing the number of recipients using their awards. (Students frequently do not use their Work-Study awards because they can earn a higher hourly rate with an off-campus job.) Finally, the federal government should provide a financial reward for institutions that retain and graduate Pell grant recipients at high rates. Such a reward could be in the form of an increased allocation of Student Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG) funds based on the number of students returning the following academic year.

All of these policy recommendations will require strong, working partnerships across sectors – between state and federal governments, higher education systems and public school districts, among colleges, universities and schools, and with community, parent and corporate leaders. Nurturing effective partnerships requires senior leadership to make clearly stated commitments to collaboration and experienced staff dedicated to managing the relationship-building, joint planning and decision-making that successful partnerships require. In addition, there must be recognition that successful partnerships require long-term commitment of time and resources allocated specifically to support partnership development as well as the activities undertaken collaboratively. Policy-makers need to address the requirements of effective partnerships in both the authorization and appropriations processes. These requirements suggest that support for partnership-building must be integrated into all aspects of the Higher Education Act. If GEAR UP is going to have the long-term transformational impact envisioned by policy leaders, it can no longer be considered a demonstration program. Rather, Congress must make a long-term commitment to supporting the partnerships launched. Similarly, partnership-building between the higher education institutions, community organizations and the schools served must become an integral part of the TRIO pre-college programs as well as FIPSE and other Title II and III programs.