Enhancing Equity of Opportunity by Improving Access to Higher Education*

> Reducing educational and economic inequalities requires that all children have robust opportunities to learn, fully develop their capacities, and have a fair shot at success.
>
> Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, & Yoshikawa

> African American males with only a high school diploma are three times more likely to be incarcerated by age 34 compared to those with a four-year college degree.
>
> U.S. Department of Education

Studies have long underscored the association between growing up in poverty, the achievement gap, and disparities in school completion and access to higher education (see reference list). The role of schools (preK through college) in addressing barriers to academic success is seen as critical in breaking the cycle of poverty and enhancing equity of opportunity and social justice.

The focus here is on highlighting (1) the importance of improving access to and retention in institutions of higher education, (2) examples of school-based programs designed to address these matters, and (3) ongoing concerns about access and retention.

College as a Key Factor in Reducing Poverty

A report from the National Bureau of Economic Research indicates that, in 2010, 82% of high-income families attended college, while only 52% of those from low-income communities did so. Income also was associated with rates of college completion. 89% of high-income students received a bachelor's degree within eight years, while only 59% of low-income students did.

Not obtaining a college degree is associated with major disparities in annual income. In 2014, average annual earnings were $33,944 for Hispanics, $37,012 for Blacks, $52,171 for Whites and $57,351 for Asians. Hispanic adults with a high school diploma earned $30,329, while those with a college degree averaged $58,493. Black adults with a high school diploma earned $28, 439, while those with a college degree made $59,027 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

In 2008, Haskins reported that a child born into a family in the lower quintile economically who did not have a bachelor's degree had a 45% percent chance of remaining in that quintile as an adult. The same child only had a 5% chance of entering the highest quintile. However, a child born into the lowest quintile who attained a bachelor's degree had a 16 percent chance of staying within the same quintile and a 19 percent chance of entering the top quintile.

Over the past 25 years, Whites, Blacks, and Hispanic college enrollment has increased substantially. Data from 2014 indicates that the rate of college enrollment directly out of high school was 68% for Whites, 63% for Blacks, and 62% for Hispanics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, significant disparities remain in high school graduation rates and in types of institutions of higher education attended. For example, while the overall college enrollment for Hispanics was 16%, they attended two-year schools at a rate of 24%.

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"Between 1976 and 2008, total undergraduate fall enrollment increased for each racial/ethnic group. Asian/Pacific Islander enrollment increased six-fold, from 169,000 in 1976 to 1,118,000 in 2008. Hispanic enrollment rose from 353,000 in 1976 to 2,103,000 in 2008-approximately six times the enrollment in 1976. These two racial/ethnic groups had the fastest rates of enrollment growth, leading to increases in their share of total enrollment between 1976 and 2008: from 2 to 7 percent for Asians/Pacific Islanders and from 4 to 13 percent for Hispanics. Black enrollment rose from 943,000 to 2,269,000, increasing their share of overall enrollment from 10 to 14 percent. White enrollment also increased, but at the slowest rate of all racial/ethnic groups." (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Federal Programs and Initiatives for Increasing Access

In 2016, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as president. These recent events have started a process of fundamental change in the U.S. Department of Education's role in offering financial support for programs and initiatives. For updates about federal efforts to support access to and retention in higher education, see the Department's website for the Office of Postsecondary Education – https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/programs.html.

It should be noted that Congress passed the ESEA in 1965 to enhance equity of opportunity for success at school as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Over the years, federal efforts have included a strong focus on increasing low income students access to higher education. TRIO Programs provide prominent examples. As described on the U.S. Department of Education website:

> "The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for ... low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects. The recipients of the grants, **depending on the specific program**, are institutions of higher education, public and private agencies and organizations including community-based organizations with experience in serving disadvantaged youth and secondary schools. Combinations of such institutions, agencies, and organizations may also apply for grants. These entities plan, develop and carry out the services for students. While individual students are served by these entities, they may not apply for grants under these programs. Additionally, in order to be served by one of these programs, a student must be eligible to receive services and be accepted into a funded project that serves the institution or school that student is attending or the area in which the student lives." The following eight are listed as TRIO programs:
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> - Educational Opportunity Centers – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioeoc/index.html
> - Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triomcnair/index.html
> - Student Support Services – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html
> - Talent Search – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triotalent/index.html
> - Training Program for Federal TRIO Staff – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triotrain/index.html
> - Upward Bound – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html
> - Upward Bound Math/Science – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triomathsci/index.html
> - Veterans Upward Bound – https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triovub/index.html

Exhibit 1 highlights *Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search,* and *Student Support Services.*

Exhibit

Three TRIO Programs

As noted, three of the initiatives encompassed by TRIO are Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services. The following describes there functioning up to now.

Upward Bound was designed to help first generation students transition into postsecondary education. The program targets low-income and minority high school students who are working to improve academic achievement for succeeding in higher education. Academic instruction and tutoring in math, science, English, and foreign languages are provided. Also provided are support services such as counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, and work-study programs to improve the financial and economic literacy of students. There is opportunity to attend a 4-6 week summer program to acquire transition support and knowledge.

Reports indicate that, compared to non-participants, Upward Bound students are more likely to enroll in college, apply for financial aid, and complete a college degree. It also has been suggested that the program enhances student and parent academic aspirations, increases enrollment in challenging courses, and increases credits earned in core academic subjects (Ward, 2006).

Educational Talent Search program focuses on providing support to both minority and nonminority disadvantaged students who have demonstrated the ability to academically succeed. The program provides support services such as tutoring, career exploration, aptitude assessments, and financial aid counseling to improve awareness of financial assistance options related to enrolling in postsecondary schooling.

As compared to non-participants, participants were more likely to apply for financial aid and enroll in higher education (Pell Institute, 2015; Ward, 2006).

Student Support Services Program directly funds institutions of higher education to implement programs that assist students in meeting basic college requirements and promote completion of postsecondary education (e.g., provide academic tutoring, advice and assistance in post-secondary course selection, financial aid assistance. provide academic enrichment and development).

The Student Support Services program is reported to have a statistically significant positive effect on student success, persistence, and retention. The participants are reported as more likely to remain enrolled in higher education, earn more college credits, and attain higher grade point averages. Peer tutoring, cultural enrichment, workshops, and instructional courses were the most effective aspects of the program.

Also see the *AVID* program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) – http://avid.org/about.ashx and *First Things First* – https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=WWCirdpft08.

Programs that Support Students at College

While college enrollment has increased, supports for transition to and retention at college are constant concerns. Colleges report a variety of efforts to address these matters. Our Center has addressed the nature and scope of needed interventions in several works.

For a brief summary of our Center's analysis, see

>*Interventions to Support Readiness, Recruitment, Access, Transition, and Retention for Postsecondary Education Success*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intsupportread.pdf

For an example of what many institutions of higher education are doing, see the following discussions about programs at UCLA:

>*First Year Transition into Higher Education: One Student's Experiences*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/college.pdf .

>*A Student-initiated, Student-run, and Student-funded Center for Retaining Underrepresented Minority University Students*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/retentucla.pdf

For other resources on these matters, see the links included in the Center's Quick Find on *Transitions to College* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm.

Continuing Barriers

Despite the best efforts so far, students who come from economically disadvantaged homes continue to experience significant barriers to accessing and staying in college. The two most fundamental barriers are inadequate financial resources and the quality of the schools they attend preK-12.

Financial barriers. For many students, college remains out of reach because of insufficient financial aid coupled with soaring college costs. Those who qualify for student loans fear incurring large debts. The need for immediate income also is a factor. Those from low-income families often are pressured to find a full time job to help the family survive or for personal financial reasons.

It should be noted that federal Pell Grants, targeted for students from low-income families, previously covered half of a student's education. However, in the past three decades, access to Pell Grants has declined significantly and the future status of the program is uncertain.

The percentage of college costs covered by Pell Grants has decreased from 67 percent in 1975-76 to 27 percent in 2012, according to the Pell Institute's "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States" 2016 report. In constant Consumer Price Index dollars, the maximum grant only increased by less than $1,000, or an 18 percent increase compared to average costs of college, which increased by 128 percent.

Quality of schools. The reality is that students who are most in need of high-quality schools usually are enrolled in schools that are far from satisfactory. For example, schools with the highest poverty populations tend to be assigned the most inexperienced teachers. Such schools also have a shortage of "in-field" teachers, particularly in math and science (Haycock & Peske, 2006). Another example is the limited access such students have to advanced courses.

To enhance chances for admission to competitive colleges, students enroll in advanced placement and college prep courses. However, there is a disproportionate amount of students who are not offered these courses, especially in low-income minority communities. Studies indicate that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are less likely to be enrolled in high schools that offer advanced courses, such as physics and calculus, and even if these courses are offered, they are less likely to participate. Furthermore, there is a lack of access to courses that prepare students for advanced courses (CRDC, 2013, 2014).

Concluding Comments

It is clear that students from low-income families experience many barriers to accessing and successfully completing college. The deficiencies of their pre-college schooling certainly play a significant role. So do financial considerations. (It is estimated that high-income families invest about seven times more on college than low-income families.) Given the implications, it is essential to improve policies and actions that address inequities in accessing and staying in post-secondary education.

Our Center stresses that:

- At all levels of schooling, greater attention must be devoted to preparing students for higher education and providing immediate supports for those who are not doing well.
- Recruitment for higher education must begin early, with potent outreach to and academic, financial, personal, and social supports for underrepresented groups of students.
- Transition programs should include careful monitoring of students so that additional supports are provided quickly for those who are not doing well.
- Ongoing monitoring is necessary to enhance retention rates.
- Family and peer support should be mobilized when problems arise.

As always, the reality of individual differences means that programs must be personalized as much as feasible. At the same time, our Center stresses that focusing student/learning supports primarily on individual students usually does not address the needs of the many and results in a set of fragmented and costly interventions. Ultimately, intervention programs must be unified and developed into a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports (see Adelman & Taylor. 2018).

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