Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

When Access is Not Enough

Author: Vincent Tinto, Visiting Scholar
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Abstract: The author writes that for too many low-income students the open door to American higher education has become a revolving door. In examining what can be done, he recognizes the centrality of the classroom to student success.

Essay:
Over the past several years, the Carnegie Foundation has had the privilege of working with community colleges in California. That work has brought home both the great strength of these institutions and the challenges they face. It has also created occasions for us to interact with others working in this arena, including Vincent Tinto, distinguished university professor and chair of the Higher Education Program at Syracuse University, and a visiting scholar here at the Foundation last year.

In this piece, Vincent shares insights informed by his long interest in student success, especially student retention, and by his recently completed four-year study of basic skills learning communities on 19 campuses across the country, including 13 two-year institutions.

Pat Hutchings
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While many observers applaud the fact that the access to higher education for low-income students has increased over the past two decades and the gap in access between them and higher income students decreased, few have pointed out that the gap in the

completion of four-year degrees has not decreased. Indeed, it appears to have increased somewhat. That this is the case reflects a range of issues not the least of which is the well-documented lack of academic preparation which disproportionately impacts low-income students. The result is that while more low-income students are entering college, fewer are able to successfully complete their programs of study and obtain a four-year degree. For too many low-income students the open door to American higher education has become a revolving door.

What is to be done? Clearly there is no simple answer to this important question. Yet it is apparent that unless colleges are able to more effectively address the academic needs of low-income students in ways that are consistent with their participation in higher education, little progress is possible. But doing so will be not achieved by practice as usual, by add-ons that do little to change the experience of low-income students and the ways academic support is provided. Too many colleges adopt what Parker Palmer calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of student success, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as a Freshman Seminar, but do little to reshape the prevailing educational experiences of students during the first year. Need to address the needs of academically underprepared students? Add several basic skills courses, typically taught by part-time instructors, but do nothing to reshape how academic support is provided to students or how those courses are taught. Therefore, while it is true that there are more than a few programs for academically underprepared students, few institutions have done anything to change the prevailing character of their educational experience and therefore little to address the deeper roots of their continuing lack of success.

Fortunately, there are currently some who have, and their efforts could point the way for other colleges to follow. These are efforts that take seriously the task of reforming existing practice. Among these is the use of supplemental instruction that connects academic support to the classrooms in which students are trying to learn. For example at El Camino College in California, where students—particularly low-income students—approach college one course at a time, supplemental instruction is aligned with a specific class and its goal is to help students succeed in that one course. In other instances academic support is embedded in a course as is the case in the iBest initiative at Highline Community College in the State of Washington.

The adaptation of learning communities for underprepared students in which basic skills courses are linked to other courses in a coherent fashion is another effort that seems to pay off. At LaGuardia Community College in New York, what is being learned is that basic skills courses can be applied to the task of learning in the other course(s) to which those courses are linked. Students participating in LaGuardia's learning communities support one another, while faculty also work with each other and the students, ensuring that assignments across courses are related. The result? Students are more likely to improve in both performance and persistence.

Other efforts that focus on the teaching of basic skills courses are also bearing fruit. In California and in several other states, faculty are coming to together to explore how they

can restructure the teaching of basic skills to better promote the success of their students. An initiative by the Carnegie Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), is one of these. At the SPECC institutions, collaborative faculty inquiry groups are exploring different approaches to classroom instruction, curriculum, and academic support. Their inquiry into the effects of these approaches engages a wide range of data, including examples of student work, classroom observations, and quantitative campus data.

What these and other efforts have in common is the recognition of the centrality of the classroom to student success and the need to restructure our efforts and the support students receive in those places of learning which, for most low-income students, may be the only place on campus where they meet each other and the faculty and engage in learning. Lest we forget, most academically underprepared low-income students do not think of success as being framed by the first year experience, the second year experience and so on as do many academic researchers. Rather it is, in their view, constructed one course at a time. You succeed in one course, then move on to the second course, and so on. If our efforts to promote the success of low-income students, especially those who enter college academically underprepared, are to succeed, our efforts must be directed to those courses and the classrooms in which they take place, one course at a time.

What these and other initiatives also demonstrate is that the success of academically underprepared students does not arise by chance. It does not arise from practice as usual, but is the result of intentional, structured, and proactive efforts on their behalf that change the way we go about the task of providing students the support they need to succeed in college. Without such support, the access to college we provide them does not provide meaningful opportunity for success.

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for the ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING
51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305
http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/