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When the Students We Have Are Not the Students We Want: The Transformative Power of Learning Communities

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Abstract
Within a 25-year period, the dramatic changes from college education as a "private good" that serves a predominantly white male student population to college education as a "public good"—where almost 90% of high school students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds aspire to attend college—has forced higher education to face a new complex reality: the students present are not the ones we know how to teach. Faced with a series of problems associated with student persistence, retention, and graduation, the challenge for learning community practitioners is to provide evidence to campus leaders that "the magic ingredient" of most successful learning communities—the collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs—does make a difference in student engagement and success. Without evidence and proof, though, learning community programs will not be allocated needed resources. This transcript of a 2007 keynote was given at the 12th Annual National Learning Communities Conference by the statewide director of the P-20 alignment work at the University System of Maryland.

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When the Students We Have Are Not the Students We Want: The Transformative Power of Learning Communities

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Twenty five years ago, the American college population was predominantly white males from affluent families. In those days, a college education was considered a "private good" rather than a "public good," and issues of student access, student retention, and student success were not public policy issues. Today, women have a higher college-going rate than men, and demographers anticipate that by 2020, students of color will account for 46% of the nation's total student population (Seurkamp, 2007).

Economists and policy makers agree that some form of postsecondary education is now essential for the United States to maintain a competitive workforce, a perspective that fundamentally changes the way the nation views colleges and universities. As more first-generation college students, non-native English speakers, and low-income students join the ranks of college-going students, universities and colleges face the challenge of providing greater access for this diverse group of students and the social responsibility of seeing that these students complete their college programs successfully. Today, as we all know, many forces are converging to create increasing demand for universal postsecondary education of some kind, and we see an avalanche of new state and federal policies aimed at improving college readiness and success.

The title of this article may strike some as unnecessarily negative, but the title is intended to serve as a wake-up call to those of us who are being held accountable for student learning and student success. Even with selective admissions programs, more of our students are arriving with greater learning deficits, greater financial need, and more nontraditional approaches to higher education.

Our challenge is to demonstrate, through an evidence-based approach, that learning communities support the students we have and build connections that lead to student success, in spite of the diversity of backgrounds and needs our students bring with them.

I would like to begin by sharing some observations about our higher education policy context and some thoughts about why I believe that learning communities have the potential to be the preeminent "go-to" strategy for fostering student success in college. I say this because we have only recently begun to document the effect of learning communities on student retention and student success. The annual National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reinforces our collective appreciation of the value of our learning communities, but we still need to invest in collecting evidence on the campuses and in the communities "where the rubber meets the road" (Lipka, 2007).

Traditionally, the U.S. higher education system has been among the best in the world. American higher education is remarkable not only for its high quality, but also for its accessibility to millions of Americans.

In a recent report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, released two years ago, the Spellings Commission on Higher Education (2006) focused on three key policy areas: access, affordability (particularly for nontraditional students), and accountability of institutions of higher learning to their constituencies (students, families, taxpayers, and other investors in higher education).

The 19-member commission was charged with recommending a national strategy for reforming postsecondary education, with a particular focus on how well colleges and universities are preparing students for the 21st-century workplace, but it also raised concerns about how well high schools are preparing the students for postsecondary education. While many of us are familiar with the dozens of commission and foundation reports, beginning with the *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983, that call for increasing attention to the quality of our public schools as they relate to the quality of our citizenry and workforce, the Spellings report is the first national commission to focus attention on higher education.

Since its publication, the Spellings Commission report has been seen as both a blessing and a curse—a good example of the caution, "be

careful what you wish for." Unlike K–12 education, higher education has had the luxury of working outside a federal policy arena: there is no No Child Left Behind law for higher education—yet. And while the general workforce issues (public good) are a concern, we also recognize that the opportunity for postsecondary education continues to be critical to success of individuals (private good), particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

Every year data citing the benefits of increased education for individuals are released by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2004, average annual earnings ranged from:

- $19,000 for high school dropouts
- $28,600 for high school graduates
- $51,500 for college graduates
- $78,000 for the holders of advanced degrees (Day & Newburger, 2002)

Recent population studies have found that unless states can improve the education of all students, the percentage of the U.S. workforce with bachelor's degrees will decrease over the next 15 years together with personal income. Baby boomers, the most highly educated generation in history, are expected to retire in record numbers, while minority groups with the lowest levels of education (largest growth segment) will be at the greatest disadvantage. Educators and policy makers have known since the 1980s that we would need a more highly educated workforce, and for the past several decades, they have sent a consistent message urging high school students to attend college.

The good news is that this appeal appears to have worked. Unfortunately, many of these students are not ready for college.

Who is coming? Who are our students?

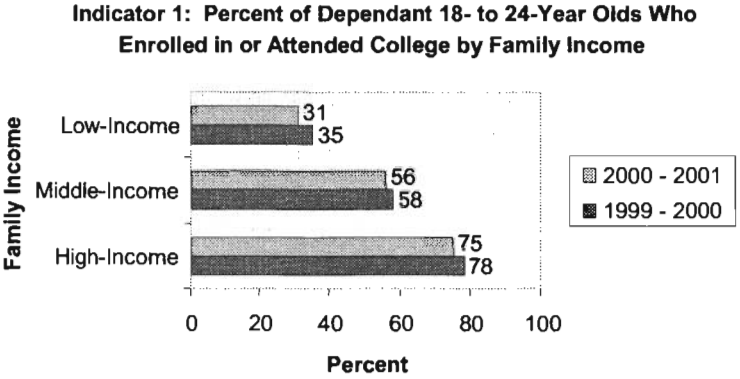
Today's high school students have higher academic aspirations than ever before:

- Almost 90% of high school students of all racial and ethnic groups aspire to attend college.
- Almost 60% of high school graduates enrolled in college right after high school (Mortenson, 2004).

As can be seen in Figure 1, when we break down the overall number into income groups (low, middle, and high), there are distinct gaps between the levels. Only 31% of low-income students enroll in college, compared to 56% of middle-income students and 75% of high-income students, and as the chart indicates, our numbers are getting worse, not better, over the years (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). The Pell Institute has also

determined, not surprisingly, that more low-income students attend two-year colleges, rather than four-year colleges.

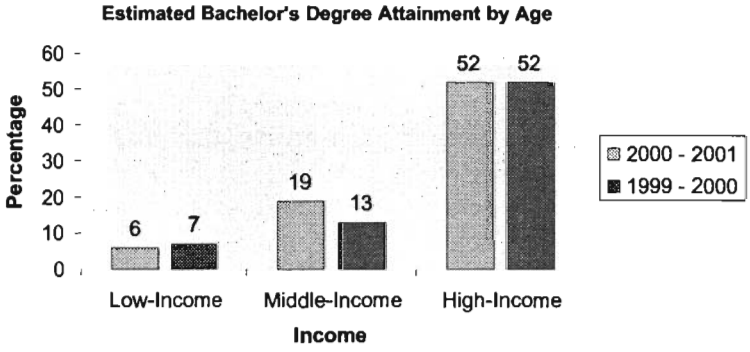
Figure 1.



(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, 2000)

When we look at postsecondary completion by income, we see an even greater gap: only half of all college students graduate—and it is worse for poor and minority populations. In Figure 2, we see that in 2000–2001, low-income students were much less likely to have completed their bachelor's degrees by age 24 than the students in the higher income groups (Engle et al., 2006, p.11).

Figure 2.

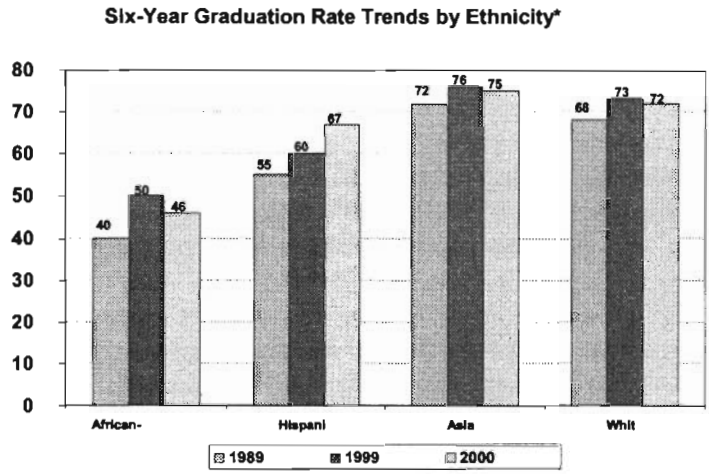


In Maryland, for example, all of the 11 public, degree-granting, four-year universities are held accountable for their graduation and retention rates, and Maryland is not alone among the states. Colleges are either

rewarded or sanctioned based on their performance on these bottom-line accountability criteria; many colleges and universities in Maryland are working to raise the bar.

Chancellor William E. Kirwan of the University System of Maryland has challenged Maryland's public, four-year colleges to cut the achievement gap in half by 2015. Figure 3 reveals why our system-wide graduation rates are of concern.

Figure 3.



(Source: University of Maryland, 2007)

As we in higher education begin to recognize and respond to the new realities, we begin to appreciate the complexity of our higher education policy context. It has become a habit to blame the K–12 schools for not preparing students to be college ready, but the Spellings Commission report focused attention on higher education's accountability with greater urgency. Now we are beginning to look at our own practices in higher education to see where and how we need to improve.

As the statewide director of the P–20 alignment work at the University System of Maryland, much of my work occurs at the intersection of high school and college—work directed at "college readiness, access, and success," and focused on aligning curriculum and expectations between high school and postsecondary education. I convene groups of college faculty and high school teachers, provosts and principals, school board members and university regents, and foundation and federal program officers to address the challenges at critical transition points in Maryland's P–20 education.

I have immense respect for the public school teachers who work with diverse populations under less than ideal conditions. In addition to the acknowledged challenges of underfunded, understaffed public schools in tough urban or rural jurisdictions, the greatest frustration for many teachers is that they are working in the dark. Most states do not have clear alignment between high school and college—the standards for the knowledge and skills required for high school graduation do not line up with the standards of knowledge and skills required to be successful in college or the workplace (Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006).

According to Achieve, a nonprofit group that tracks this information, in 2005–2006 only five states aligned high school academic standards with the demands of colleges and employers (2008). Happily, more states now recognize that alignment is a key to creating stronger pipelines into higher education. Achieve reports that 19 states have aligned standards, and 25 states plus the District of Columbia are in the process of aligning or planning to align their K–12 standards to postsecondary and business expectations.

One of the great pleasures of my job is convening college faculty and high school teachers of various subjects together—high school English teachers and college composition teachers, high school math teachers and college math faculty, high school social studies teachers and college history or government faculty. Those conversations about curriculum, standards, student learning outcomes, assessment, and student engagement are among the most interesting and valuable work I do.

All good alignment conversations begin with a focus on student work samples. In early November 2008, I conducted a series of "composition conversations" with high school and college composition teachers to read and review student writing samples and discuss which papers were or were not college ready. Would it surprise you to learn that a national ACT study found that high school teachers considered grammar and usage skills to be the least important writing skills and only 69% of high school teachers reported that they teach grammar and usage? In contrast, the study found that college instructors consider these the most important skills for incoming students (ACT, 2003).

We find the exact same thing in mathematics alignment. I recently received an e-mail from a faculty member in the math department at the University of Maryland. According to my colleague, many mathematics department faculty are alarmed by the number of students entering the University of Maryland excessively dependent on graphing calculators, to the extent that they freeze if asked to perform simple arithmetic calculations

without calculators. In one elementary algebra class, more than half the class earned below 55% on an arithmetic test.

This disconnect between what students know and can do, and what we expect them to know and be able to do—between the students we get and the students we want—has resulted in some far-reaching consequences.

The first consequence is that more students are taking remedial courses. Approximately one third of entering college students take developmental courses to bring their academic skills up to a level that will allow them to perform adequately in college. When we break down that figure, it is even more troubling. For the 2006 high school graduating class, ACT reported that just over half (53%) of high school graduates have the reading skills they need to succeed in college (ACT, 2007).

Yet reading is fundamental to success in college. According to Adelman (2006), 70% of students who took at least one remedial reading course in college do not obtain a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment. That may explain why 60% of all two-year college students and 25% of all four-year college students are enrolled in one or more remedial courses (Adelman, 2006; Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004; Kridl, 2004).

Remediation is big business, costing at least $1 billion and perhaps as much as $2 billion annually. No wonder public policy makers are holding higher education accountable for getting students out of remedial courses (Bettinger & Long, 2005).

Of particular concern are our historically underserved students (first-generation, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income students) who are more likely to come from struggling schools. If colleges admit these students, we have an obligation to support them in ways that will lead to their success—and so we turn to the untapped potential of learning communities.

What Role Can Learning Communities Play in the Larger Higher Education Context?

The current policy context suggests that postsecondary education is quickly becoming a significant economic and social issue. Access, affordability, and student success are hot-button issues for our colleges and universities. We will be held accountable.

In response, we are trying to work both sides of the street; some of us are working on improving K–12 schools, such as increased attention to professional development and teacher preparation, but the reality is that we need to examine our own institutions, as well. We are accountable and

responsible for the students we admit to our colleges and universities. It is what we do with them when they get here that is most important to us.

If the students who enter our institutions are not prepared to be successful (if they are not the "students we want"), what can we do to transform them into the students we want in our classes? There is considerable research describing the key concepts associated with student success. In 2005, Kuh and his colleagues used the NSSE data to document effective educational practice in 20 colleges and universities that demonstrated above average student engagement. Student success has been linked to student engagement, and student engagement is linked to the amount of time and effort students put in to their studies and other activities and experiences aligned with accomplishing goals – including satisfaction, persistence, and graduation.

The DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) project came up with five clusters of effective educational practice used by the NSSE. The clusters are:

- Level of academic challenge (preparing for class, studying, reading, writing)
- Active and collaborative learning (asking questions, class preparations, working on projects outside of class, tutoring, discussing ideas)
- Student interaction with faculty members (discussing readings or grades, undergraduate research, prompt feedback, outside-of-class activities, committees, etc.)
- Enriching educational experiences (diversity of environment, technology, internships, community service)
- Supportive campus environment (helping students succeed academically, socially, and nonacademically, such as work and family)

Generally speaking, their research suggests that the more students engage in these kinds of activities, the more they learn, and the more likely they are to persist and graduate from college. Our hypothesis is that institutions that promote these kinds of activities will be able to demonstrate greater student success. There is even some speculation that the nature and quality of first-year students' experiences in the classroom, with faculty and with peers, are better predictors of desired educational outcomes than precollege characteristics.

According to the recently published NSSE report (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007), the kinds of activities fostered by learning communities are increasingly recognized as contributing to student success. I would hope that you can see some of your own practices reflected in

this list. Learning communities come in all sizes and shapes, and can be developed on all types of campuses.

One magic ingredient of the most successful learning communities is the collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. We have arrived at these best practices after much trial and error, and we need to place them front and center on the list of strategies being used to address retention and graduation rates. As we think about ways we can collect evidence of student success in learning communities, we should clearly document these areas of intersection between student affairs and academic affairs.

Can We Document Our Successes? What Would That Look Like?

If we, in higher education, want to be part of the solution we need to begin by collecting evidence to document our best practices, define what we can and cannot do. Many of you are familiar with some of the research on learning communities. Tinto (1997; Tinto & Love, 1995) has done important research suggesting that learning communities are effective for enhancing student success at community colleges. In 2005, Bloom and Sommo published a study that used a random assignment research design to study the effects of learning communities, with particular attention to the effects of faculty collaboration and coordinated writing assignments. Some of these studies are particularly noteworthy because they demonstrate the impact of learning communities on success of women, students of color, and other students in fields in which they have been historically underrepresented. More recently, a study supported by the Lumina Foundation reached similar conclusions, confirming that low-income and academically unprepared community college students appear to benefit from being placed in learning communities, including linked classes mutual support (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). These studies help create a culture of evidence for sustainable learning communities.

It is up to all of us, not just the academic researchers in the field of higher education, to begin to collect evidence that will support this hypothesis. In addition to student engagement, there is another key component that contributes to student success and that is the way colleges and universities allocate resources to provide those engaging learning opportunities.

So here is a one-sentence summary of my message:

> **If we believe that our learning communities make a significant contribution to student engagement, which, in turn, leads to student success as demonstrated by**

student persistence, retention, and graduation, then we need to collect the evidence that proves it and pass it along to the campus leaders. If they are making good decisions based on evidence, they will allocate more resources to the programs that work.

I followed a strand of conversation on the learning communities' Listserv that was exploring using learning communities with developmental students. One entry described a 13-credit course linking reading and math, emphasizing problem solving and journal writing. Another described linked courses at Penn pairing reading, studying, and listening with developmental algebra and freshman orientation, and described very creative, engaging exercises using scavenger hunts and a "marshmallow golf tournament." I entered the conversation and asked if anyone knew if the students in these linked classes perform better than students who did not have the advantage of these programs. Did they pass their math and reading courses on the first try? Did they move successfully into credit-bearing courses?

What do you think I got in reply? Silence. Nothing. It left me wondering why. Do we not think it is our job to record this information? Do we think our only job is to come up with great teaching and learning strategies to share with our colleagues but leave the data collection to someone else? These folks are doing the hard work of higher education—creative programs to engage students—but it will go nowhere in the policy arena unless we can present evidence of effectiveness.

This morning I have tried to guide us on a journey through the policy environment in which our learning communities are situated: Who are our students? Why are they coming to us so underprepared? What are we doing about it? As much as we might wish it, we are not islands. Learning communities have a critically important role to play in addressing some of the most challenging and urgent issues facing higher education.

A lot of education policy gets done on a "just-in-time" basis, or more likely, at the request of legislators or accrediting bodies, or other external accountability forces on a deadline. I am suggesting that we find a way to demonstrate that learning communities are part of the solution to a persistent and challenging problem for higher education.

Can we collect evidence in our own learning communities that links engagement and success in college, particularly for our students who may be at risk of premature departure or underperformance, such as first-generation students, transfers, and students from historically underserved backgrounds? Retention and graduation rates are benchmarks commonly used to look at success, but what do they really tell us?

Those of us who work with learning communities recognize that there is more to student success than strong preparation and that institutions can structure learning environments that encourage student engagement.

According to one estimate, 29% of all first-year students and 22% of seniors report participating (or planning to participate) in some type of learning community (defined as an experience where students take two or more of the same courses together) (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Those are significant numbers. It is time to get serious about collecting data on those students and sharing what we learn with our campuses and our colleagues.

Begin with whatever is already being collected on your campus. Student affairs and academic affairs are collecting different kinds of data, and they can inform each other. Learning communities are at the intersection of these campus segments, so we should be able to merge the findings to make meaning. If we are proactive in collecting data and setting targets for ourselves, we can model for our institutions new ways of using these data to make better choices and decisions.

I believe that learning communities can be one of the most important strategic tools campuses have to transform the new and diverse populations of students who are coming into higher education into the engaged and successful students we all want in our classes.

I would like to close with a quote from a speech given by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 at Howard University. He said, "It is not enough to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through the gates."

I believe learning communities can provide the keys to those gates for all our students. It is up to us to prove it.

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