

# Trend: Shrinking Opportunity

KATI HAYCOCK AND DANETTE GERALD

In recent months, there's been a surge of attention to issues of access and success in higher education. The U.S. Education Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education talked about it. State policymakers are proposing new goals and accountability systems to address these issues. Even the mainstream press has been increasingly critical of higher education's perceived turning away from its longstanding promise to serve as a means for hardworking low-income students to learn their way into the middle class.

Now it seems that instead of serving as a bridge between the "two Americas," higher education is widening the gulf.

Many college leaders seem perplexed by this critique. In their minds, the main factors that contribute to both the access and success problems are beyond higher education's control.

Those leaders aren't all wrong. Let's take a look, first, at the access side of the equation.

**Access.** Though most young Americans now aspire to go to college, the levels of college preparation, especially among poor students and students of color, remain low. Although American elementary schools are getting ever better, we've not yet managed to turn the corner in high schools. Too many low-income and minority students aren't placed in the right courses, their teachers are less likely than others to be experienced and well-educated, and the assignments they get are often watered down. Not surprisingly then, disproportionate numbers of these students aren't even close to graduating with the skills they need to be considered "college-ready."

Preparation is by no means the only barrier. Federal and state policymakers also have to shoulder some of the responsibility. They have walked away from their obligation to make college affordable for students who absolutely need adequate financial assistance in order to enroll. In 1994, states disbursed 87 percent of their financial aid dollars in the form of need-based grants to low-income students. By 2004, just 73 percent was devoted to need-based grants, with the balance distributed based on criteria other than need.

That said, analyses commissioned for two recent Education Trust reports—*Promise Abandoned* and *Engines of Inequality*—show very clearly that colleges themselves are independent actors in the drama of shrinking opportunity in America. Both

public and private colleges have shifted how they use their own financial aid dollars.

Once aimed almost exclusively at covering the costs of admitted students from low-income families, these resources are increasingly used to help institutions buy their way up the college rankings ladder. Between 1995 and 2003, for example, America's private colleges increased the average amount of institutional aid that went to students from families earning more than \$100,000 annually from \$1,359 to \$4,806—an increase of over 250 percent. Over the same time period, the average institutional grant to students from families earning less than \$20,000 per year increased by a mere \$1,794, from \$3,246 to \$5,240—an increase of about 50 percent. Though the dollar amounts are smaller, trends in public universities between 1995 and 2003 were much the same: up 50 percent for students from families earning less than \$20,000 per year, but up 227 percent for students from families with incomes over \$100,000 per year.

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Surprisingly, these patterns are even more marked in the nation's public flagship universities and in other public research universities—arguably the institutions that are already so prestigious that one would assume they don't need to buy their ways farther up the food chain. Although these institutions play a special role in educating future academic, political and business leaders in many states, their turn away from low-income students and students of color is among the most pronounced of all. During the same eight-year period, from 1995 to 2003, these public universities decreased the average institutional grant awarded to the lowest-income students by 2 percent, from \$3,756 to \$3,691, while they increased the average grant to the highest-income students by 19 percent, from \$3,223 to \$3,823.

Certainly, these prestigious public universities are also affected by problems that exist in high schools serving high concentrations of poor and minority students. They are affected, too, by shifts in government aid away from the poorest families. In truth, however, what these institutions spend on student aid from their own resources swamps what federal and state governments provide. Had they chosen to, they

could have cushioned low-income students from the effects of rising tuition and shifting government priorities. But they chose not to. Indeed, the shifts in institutional aid in the research universities from lower- to upper-income students were more pronounced than changes in the distribution of either federal or state aid.

**Success.** The breadth and diversity of college-educated Americans is threatened not just by problems on the access side, though. There are big problems, too, with college success. Both minority college freshmen and those from low-income families are far less likely than other students to earn the degrees they set out to attain.

Once again, when asked about these numbers, college leaders are quick to point fingers... at high schools and at increasingly stingy governments. Even when their six-year graduation rates fall below 30 percent, institutional leaders typically claim that “this is about where other institutions that serve students like ours fall as well.”

But here too, it turns out that colleges themselves are very important actors in student success. The Education Trust’s *College Results Online* web-tool ([www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org)) makes it possible for users to take a look at disaggregated graduation rate data for virtually any four-year college in America. More important, users can see how these numbers compare with the graduation rates of the 15, 25 or 50 institutions most like theirs.

The results show whopping differences among institutions with the same mission, the same size and other characteristics and, roughly speaking, the same kinds of students. Certainly, preparation plays a role in college success—no question about it. But *College Results* demonstrates that institutions that bring in students with very similar academic profiles have vastly different levels of success getting them out with a degree. Take, for instance, the six-year graduation rates of the groups of institutions below:

- Penn State, the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Minnesota are all selective public flagship institutions that serve students with similar characteristics, but their graduation rates—84 percent, 75 percent and 60 percent, respectively—are quite different.
- Montclair State University in New Jersey, Old Dominion University in Virginia, and Kennesaw State University in Georgia are smaller, less selective institutions that serve roughly the same kinds of students, yet their graduation rates—58 percent, 48 percent and 32 percent, respectively—vary as well.
- Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina, Prairie View A&M University in Texas, and Coppin State University in Maryland are all Historically Black Colleges and Universities that serve similar students,

but their graduation rates—49 percent, 31 percent and 20 percent, respectively, are also substantially different.

In other words, what institutions do to ensure that their students are successful matters a lot.

**Learning from Success.** Over the past two years, we’ve taken a look at practices of colleges that have been unusually successful in both access and success, compared with institutions just like them. We also partnered with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in a process that involved identifying member institutions with strong records of achievement and studying their practices.

Each successful institution, of course, has gone about things differently. But there are important cross-cutting lessons.

One is the importance of leadership. At campuses that are more successful in getting students through, presidential leadership makes that issue a high priority for every academic unit. Goals and data are public; progress is monitored and rewarded.

Another lesson may be found in the importance of examining and analyzing data on student progress. Successful institutions look hard at their data to identify choke points that slow student momentum and they go to work opening up those bottlenecks. Sometimes doing so is as simple as adding a few more sections of key courses; other times, it’s about redesigning those courses so they better meet students’ needs.

Institutions truly committed to both access and success are also looking much harder at how they use their own aid resources. They know that for some students, aid isn’t a luxury, it’s a necessity. And they put those students first.

Certainly, like leaders in almost every other field, college leaders today have to make a lot of tough choices. In the public sector, those choices have been made more challenging by state officials who don’t accord higher education the priority they once did. Governing boards obsessed with improving their institution’s standings in college ratings guides don’t help.

Still, you can tell a lot about leaders by the choices they do make. Leaders of successful colleges choose to improve and they go about it with relentless zeal. They know that one special program won’t do the trick, so they take a more comprehensive approach to facilitating student achievement. They make student success the focal point of everything they do, and they never give up.

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*Kati Haycock is president of the Education Trust. Email: [khaycock@edtrust.org](mailto:khaycock@edtrust.org). Danette Gerald is the trust’s assistant director for higher education policy. Email: [dgerald@edtrust.org](mailto:dgerald@edtrust.org).*