

A Success Model for Low-Income Students

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Abstract

The writer examines the impact of integrating the academic and counseling services on the success of low-income students and delineates a model organization for the delivery of such services.

[A]t a time in which higher education has never been more important to the economy, nor the economic returns to its citizens any greater, the current generation of low-income young Americans today face diminished educational and economic opportunity as a result of lack of access to a college education. . . . Averting this crisis will require reasserting access to college as a national priority because the future economic strength of our nation and the opportunity of its citizens are at risk (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), 2001, p.1).

Today's community college serves as the entry point to well-paying technical jobs as well as the entry point to the baccalaureate degree and beyond. What, then, can be done to ensure that low-income students have access to and success in community colleges?

Research, both theoretical and empirical, tells us that there is no one student characteristic that will predict student success – not academic preparation or lack of it, not finances, not socioeconomic status; rather, a holistic accounting of student adjustment to both the academic and social environment of the institution is needed. I propose a model student services organization that integrates concern for the academic with the adjustment and development issues to help ensure student success.

Of course, the question of how to finance programs such as this is always an issue. My student services colleagues are always concerned about funding for the student services divisions of their institutions. There is no FTE-like formula that will generate dollars for student success programs. And grant-funded initiatives are always faced with the question of sustainability once the grant funding terminates. Yet, when programs like the one presented here can demonstrate an impact on enrollment by before-and-after benchmarks, they can make the argument for funding based on direct, measurable impacts on FTEs.

Access to the community college can sometimes be oversimplified into a dichotomy of student ability to pay versus academic preparation. For example, a student who is not academically prepared can't be successful even if he or she can afford the cost of higher education, and no matter how well prepared, a student with no money cannot enroll. This generalizes the situation and enmeshes it in political rhetoric that discounts the complexity of low socioeconomic status (Burd, 2002). We must be careful not to equate or confuse low-income status with other social statuses. To do so can be inaccurate and introduce confounding factors that are unrelated to income and may require other student services interventions. For instance, low-income single parents – of either gender – may face challenges as parents that are unrelated to income. This is not to say that low-income status is unrelated to other factors, however.

Here I present a plan for low-income student success in the context of many factors, namely affordability, counseling, academic preparation, and college organizational variables.

Affordability and Access

Affordability can be defined from two points of view. From the student point of view, it may be stated as, "Do I have the money to pay for tuition and books?" From the point of view of the government, it is the government's willingness and ability to supply tax revenue to support the needs of higher education; this includes student financial aid (Finney & Kelly, 2004).

Some states still rely on low tuition rates to encourage access to their community colleges. Recently, tuition rates have begun to increase, and some states have begun programs to increase financial aid. This trend is combined with a policy to award financial aid based on merit rather than need, yet research indicates that such programs will result in a decline of low-income enrollment, as low-income students are rationed out of the pool of available dollars (Finney & Kelly, 2004; St. John, et al., n.d.).

Regardless of the state's tuition policies, the question remains: how will the student pay for tuition? In order to get access to financial aid, students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as the standard application for federal, state, and institutional aid. The American Council on Education (ACE) (2004) reports that students attending community colleges are less likely to apply for aid than students who attend other institutions, accounting for 60 percent of students who do not apply. From a policy perspective, the report concludes that "no student should miss the opportunity for vital assistance because he or she lacks necessary information, is misinformed about the nature of student aid programs, or is unable to navigate the financial aid application process" (p. 8). This begs the question of how counseling affects low-income student access.

The Role of Counseling

While financial aid and the student's ability to pay may seem to be obvious and most necessary conditions for access, these factors may not be sufficient. Once the student achieves some level of ability to pay, he or she must then have access to classes that meet his or her needs, which usually involves counseling.

The impact of counseling is spread across all other conditions for access. It impacts accessibility to financial aid, addresses academic preparation issues, and is a component of the college organizational variables. Cook and King (2004) give a comprehensive analysis of access to higher education for low-income adults in an ACE research paper. In their analysis, they state that people who most need adult education to improve socioeconomic status are the least likely to get it. Given the complex life situations faced by low-income individuals, counseling can be a significant factor in their higher education success. Interestingly, the authors demonstrate the importance of counseling by presenting focus group data that underscores the lack of good counseling often experienced. Because low-income students are characterized by a lack of skill in negotiating bureaucratic situations, counseling is an especially important part of helping to navigate higher education institutions. Students need to know about their academic needs as well as preparation for career opportunities. Cook and King (2004) argue, "Enrolling in college courses can be overwhelming for them...Without a knowledgeable counselor to help guide students through...colleges and universities, low-income adult students are likely to become discouraged and subsequently discontinue their education" (p. 27).

Community colleges and for-profit institutions that award associate degrees and certificates serve the same student population, including low-income students. At community colleges, 20 percent of students are from families with annual incomes under \$25,000; 22 percent of students at private two-year colleges are from that income group even though tuition is much higher at the private institutions (Pell Institute, 2004). The for-profit institutions have higher access and retention rates in part because of their attention to the details of keeping students enrolled. Although these institutions may have a different motivation for maintaining high retention rates, as a dropped-out student does not generate revenue, the students benefit by obtaining their degree and learning career skills (Burnett, 2003).

In a comparison of community colleges to for-profits, Bailey, Badway, and Gumpert (n.d.) conclude that student services at community colleges are "notoriously lacking" and do not deliver high-quality service in navigating the institution and in making choices, especially for students with weak academic skills, which generally includes the low-income population. "Community colleges can certainly learn from the more coordinated and intensive student services and counseling found at . . . high quality for-profits" (p. 54).

Heisserer and Parette (2002) examined advising models (including counseling services) for at-risk students, which includes low-socioeconomic-status students. Citing Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Glennen, Farren, and Vowell (1996), they suggest that "contact with a significant person within an institution of higher education is a crucial factor in a student's decision to remain in college" (p. 69). Academic advising and counseling can address low self-esteem, self-confidence, and adjustment issues that characterize these students, as well as the career uncertainties of these students who may not have had career role models with whom they relate.

Academic Preparation

A characteristic of the low-income population is inadequate academic preparation for college-level work, resulting from several social factors. Academic preparation per se may not be the limiting factor to higher education for low-income students and may be wrongly identified when the real issue is the complex nature of low socioeconomic status (ACSFSA, 2001). When low-income students participate in the Federal Title IV programs, they participate in programs that actually go beyond academic preparation to include counseling support (ACSFSA, 2001). These programs address what Boulard (2004) reports in his article on William G. Bowen's Mellon Foundation study of income and access to higher education (in press). Bowen suggests that

being prepared for college is a cumulative process that occurs during the life of the student and includes motivation, expectations, and knowledge of the college admissions process, all of which are negatively impacted by low socioeconomic status.

Another method to address the lack of academic and social preparedness for low-income students is pre-freshman orientation programs. Santa Rita and Bacote (1997) reported on a study of one community college program for low-income and minority students. The program included both counseling and remediation in composition, reading, and math and was studied for one cohort of students. The program significantly increased students' adjustment, academic performance, and persistence. Although it is just one study of one cohort of students, it indicates that programs targeted at academic preparation, with counseling, can benefit students in need.

College Organizational Variables

All of the preceding factors act in concert within the institution to have an effect on students. Counseling, remediation, and accessibility to financial aid are surrounded by the college's organizational, or structural, factors that affect both the interface with the student as well as the delivery of student services. Glenn (2004) reports on a study by Person (2004) which shows that first-generation college students (who can include low-income students) are more likely to complete an associate's degree if they attend a college with a bureaucracy that is easy to navigate. Person suggests that community colleges could be more sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged students in their organization.

The study included interviews with students of similar demographic characteristics who attended community colleges and private nonprofit and for-profit two-year schools. The for-profits were easier to negotiate with more streamlined curricula, classes that were offered at more convenient times, and one-stop centers that combined advising and counseling, so students did not have to go to different offices to access services. Many, if not most, low-income students have life circumstances that demand time and energy, so minimizing the opportunity cost of the college experience is significant to them.

Being assured that courses in the curriculum will be offered when the student can take them, and being aware of that early in their program, enables students to plan their lives outside the demands of the college. Closely monitoring individual student progress and intervening when necessary can aid students in weathering the unavoidable stop-out, or prevent it from occurring in the first place.

In their study of college professionals who work with students in TRIO programs, Wallace, Ropers-Huilman and Abel (2004) asked those professionals about how those programs were incorporated into the institution. Generally, the TRIO professionals felt they and their programs were "on the margins" of the institution. They felt the programs and their impact on students were not understood by their colleagues. This results in a lack of recognition and status for the programs and, significantly, for the students they serve. Collaboration with and inclusion of the professional staffs of these programs with the academic community can and should take place in order to avoid that situation, and help to give the students a sense of belonging in the college community.

Interestingly, the study participants stated that when the academic faculty and administrators recognize the programs, they feel that the programs and the students have great value and are included in the institutional culture.

Institutional Organization Plan

The success of low-income students in higher education is a complex issue influenced by many interdependent variables. For this reason, institutions should use a holistic approach in order to enable increased success. There is no single solution that will, by itself, address the broad issues associated with low-income student success. Programs for intervention should address the issues of affordability, counseling, academic preparation, and college organizational variables in such a way that the student can seamlessly navigate the bureaucracy and the institution can efficiently and affordably deliver the services.

Counseling should be the foundation upon which a success model is built. Without counseling, other services will be underutilized, either because of a lack of awareness or a disinclination on the part of the student to seek out such services. Accordingly, counseling in this case includes not only the traditional career, academic, and social adjustment across-the-desk encounters between student and counselor but is expanded to include recruiting and advocacy for the program with appropriate populations.

The Money

By definition, this population is in need of financial aid, and ironically, financial aid is underutilized by this population. Counselors must gain and share access to information on the full complement of financial aid available, including public and private sources of grants, loans, and scholarships. Aid for this population is need-based; however, there may be instances where merit-based aid could be available and, given that many states and institutions are moving toward merit-based aid, the

need-based student may be able to take advantage of merit-based aid.

Adequate funding for the institution is also related to affordability. Student affairs staff must advocate for student affairs operations in the larger context of the institution. For this reason, the student affairs executive should report directly to the president, with the same rank as vice president for academic affairs and vice president for administration. The student affairs unit will implement a management model that uses accountability metrics to measure and support the operation of the student affairs unit and its impact on students as individuals and local economic development. This, in turn, is information useful to policy makers when considering funding for higher education.

The Bridge

As part of the community outreach activities, the student affairs unit should target low-income populations with programs for academic preparation and remediation. This population may not really be under prepared academically, but instead may be socially challenged in motivation and expectations regarding higher education. Counselors should administer assessments and, when necessary, counsel and advise students into appropriate remediation and/or adjustment interventions. (These adjustment intervention programs are, of course, well funded and staffed.) Career counseling is an important component of this program because the low-income population may not have career role models to emulate.

The Model Access Center

While the community college of today is technology focused and desires to deliver services to students 24/7 by electronic means, our model program for low-income students must still be human centered.

Counselors should meet students on the campus, in person, and engage in off-campus outreach programs in the community. All counselors should serve as generalists who are familiar with the wide range of services that are available to low-income students. This means that no counselors would be assigned exclusively to work with low-income students; they would work with all students.

This accomplishes three things:

- all counselors develop an awareness of the needs of the diversity of students in the community college;
- students will not tend to be segregated by socioeconomic status and viewed as “program” students; and
- counselors are not limited to serving one population, thereby having to forego contact with the other student populations

This approach fosters a richer, more diverse working environment for the counselor.

To be a resource for the generalists, some of our counselors will be designated as specialists for certain populations, including our low-income students. These specialists will be familiar with the complete array of services that can be available to their assigned population, such as financial aid, TRIO, and other grant or institutionally funded programs for the population. Counselors will also be aware of the limits of available services and be familiar with community-based services to which the student may be referred, such as licensed counseling, transportation assistance, child care, etc.

This model access center is a one-stop center. The student will not have to leave the center to receive services determined to be needed by the student. The student will be able to receive counseling, take assessments (career and academic), complete application forms (admission application and domicile form and financial aid for example), and receive referrals to academic advisors all at one location with one counselor.

No Single Answer

Low income is associated with a variety of other social factors that can prove to be barriers to access even if the student can overcome the affordability barrier. An organization’s response to improving success for its low-income students should consider the large body of empirical literature on the subject. By developing programs that target the subject audience, yet integrate the low-income student into the mainstream student body, access and retention efforts can be enhanced and encourage student development and/or adjustment. Counseling and enabling a relationship between the student and someone at the college form the foundation on which access and retention efforts should be based.

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