building engaged campuses

How Can Engaged Campuses Improve Student Success in College?

Concern about college access and success in the United States is growing, with reason. There are substantial gaps in educational opportunity and attainment by race and ethnicity, by gender, and most starkly by socioeconomic status: only 12% of students whose families fall in the bottom income quartile earn a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared with 22% of those in the middle quartiles and 73% from the top quartile (Engle and O'Brien, 2007).

Earning a bachelor's degree by age 24 is not the only measure of student success; almost half of all U.S. undergraduates attend two-year colleges, and a more accurate picture would require data that account for students' varied goals and enrollment at multiple institutions. Yet disparities clearly exist in high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion rates. These disparities have a major social and economic impact; the public and private benefits of higher education include improved earnings, health, productivity, and innovation, as well as increased involvement in civic life through voting, service, and giving (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). It may be argued, therefore, that expanding college access and success is vital to the well-being of our increasingly diverse democracy.

Research demonstrates that the educational experiences and environment provided students in college profoundly shape the outcomes of their education. Disparities are not inevitable, as evidenced by campuses committed to civic and community engagement and the success of the low-income students and students of color historically underserved by higher education.

Institutional Commitment

Institutions with a deliberate and explicit commitment to the success of all students graduate low-income students and students of color at much higher rates than their peer institutions. National studies identify administrative leadership as important for communicating commitment and for developing a results-oriented institutional culture in which academic and student affairs collaborate to provide programs and services that engage students, build a strong sense of community, and track internal data to inform ongoing improvement (Engle and O'Brien, 2007; American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2007; Carey, 2005).

Respectful, reciprocal engagement with diverse communities also contributes to educational environments in which all students thrive (Hernandez and Lopez, 2004–2005; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Partnerships with K-12 schools and community organizations focused on boosting academic skills and aspirations for college are valuable for preparing future students and supporting students already in college (Shorr and Parks,

2000). Student success depends in part on institutions' success conveying high expectations of students from all backgrounds and developing an inclusive, multicultural campus climate, curriculum, and "college-going identity" (Oakes et al., 2002).

Student Engagement

Analysis of major national surveys suggests that community-based, participatory educational experiences can positively contribute to students' academic performance and persistence.

- Service-learning is identified as one of six high-impact activities, based on National Survey of Student Engagement findings that it promotes deep/integrative learning and personal development among both first-year students and seniors (Gonyea et al., 2008). Engagement during the first year yields especially powerful benefits for historically underserved students (Kuh et al., 2007).

- Of the five Community College Survey of Student Engagement benchmarks, one of the most consistent predictors of persistence, self-reported learning gains, and GPA is "Active and Collaborative Learning," which includes "participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course" and other activities commonly part of high-quality service-learning, such as "asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions" (McClenney and Marti, 2006).

Several research studies have found positive correlations between service-learning and students' intention to reenroll and/or actual reenrollment at the same institution.

- Compared with students in traditional courses, students in service-learning courses at a private research university reported a greater intention to reenroll, a relationship influenced by the higher engagement and academic challenge also reported by the service-learning students (Gallini and Moely, 2003).

- Among first-time, first-year college students nationwide, service-learning participation had a marginally significant relationship with intention to reenroll, mediated by enhanced interaction with faculty and good academic practices (Keup, 2005–2006).

- First-year students in service-learning courses at 11 Indiana campuses were not only more likely than their peers to indicate that they planned to reenroll, but also more likely to reenroll the following fall, an effect mediated by the educational quality of the course (Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah, 2005).

These findings complement other researchers' conclusions that high-quality service-learning is effective pedagogy, contributing to the intellectual, social, and civic development of students that, along with persistence to graduation, is a key measure of student success.

Implications for Action

Colleges and universities committed to the civic purposes of higher education will support the shifts in culture, curricula, and policies that promote student success. Preparing faculty to offer engaging, meaningful academic experiences that connect students with communities is one valuable component of a more comprehensive approach to change, which can transform American higher education in ways that advance democracy as well as academic excellence.

REFERENCES

American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (2007). *Hispanic student success.* http://www.aascu.org/media/publications/hispanic_success.htm.

Carey, K. (2005). *One step from the finish line.* http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/10D6E141-08E4-42D7-B7E5-773A281BCDB7/0/onestep_.pdf.

Engle, J., & O'Brien, C. (2007). *Demography is not destiny.* http://www.publicagenda.org/Research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=6.

Gallini, S. M., & Moely, B. E. (2003). Service-Learning and engagement, academic challenge, and retention. *Michigan journal of community service learning,* 10 (1), 5–14.

Gonyea, R. M., et al. (2008). *High impact activities.* http://cpr.iub.edu/uploads/AACU_2008_high_impact_practices%20Kuh,%20Gonyea,%20Nelson%20Laird,%20Kinzie%20final.pdf.

Hatcher, J. A., Bringle, R. G., & Muthiah, R. (2005). *The role of service learning on retention of first-year students to second year.* http://www.indianacampuscompact.org/Portals/0/ Retention%20Article%209%2005.pdf.

Hernandez, J. C., & Lopez, M. A. (2004–2005). Leaking pipeline. *Journal of college student retention,* 6 (1), 37–60.

Institute for Higher Education Policy. (1998). *Reaping the Benefits.* http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/m-r/ReapingTheBenefits.pdf.

Keup, J. R. (2005–2006). The impact of curricular interventions on intended second-year enrollment. *Journal of college student retention,* 7 (1–2), 61–89.

Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First nations and higher education. *Journal of American Indian education,* 30 (May). http://jaie.asu.edu/v30/V30S3fir.htm.

Kuh, G. D., et al. (2007). *Connecting the dots.* http://www.nsse.iub.edu/pdf/Connecting_the_Dots_Report.pdf.

McClenney, K. M., & Marti, C. N. (2006). *Exploring relationships between student engagement and student outcomes in community colleges.* http://www.ccsse.org/publications/CCSSE%20Working%20Paper%20on%20Validation%20Research%20December%202006.pdf.

Oakes, J., et al. (2002). The social construction of college access. In W. G. Tierney & L. S. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college* (108–9). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Shorr, L., & Parks, S. (2000). Building community through learning. In B. Jackson et al. (Eds.), *Restructuring for urban student success* (311–27). Philadelphia: Pew Charitable Trusts.

To Learn More:

The Education Trust, http://www.edtrust.org

Lumina Foundation for Education, http://www.luminafoundation.org

National College Access Network, http://www.collegeaccess.org

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, http://www.higheredinfo.org

National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success, http://nces.ed.gov/npec/papers.asp