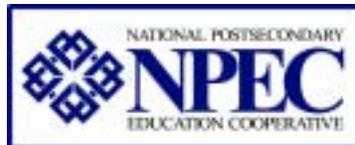Distinct Values

Diverse Voices

Developing Vision

Promoting Broad Access and Student Achievement: A Test of the Public Will

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PROMOTING BROAD ACCESS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:
A TEST OF THE PUBLIC WILL

A new study, supported by the Education Trust, *Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities*[1], provides an excellent overview of the reason that the focus on student success in college is a timely one. It notes that college has become less affordable for a growing segment of the population over the past three decades, a period during which the value of a high school diploma or of anything less than a college degree has fallen. It notes that this same period has been characterized by an increasing representation of minorities in the U.S. population but also a growing gap in educational attainment between whites and minorities. It finally points to a combination of financial aid policies at the federal, state, and institutional levels and a drive by more colleges to enroll the most desirable students as the major factors that have adversely affected the chances of low-income students obtaining a college degree.

As the president of an historically black university, I have seen firsthand how these policy directions have affected low-income students in general and specifically African Americans. The issues addressed in the Education Trust study are those I have regularly addressed in public statements and legislative testimony, and through other means. Unfortunately, financial aid programs that help middle class and upper income families at the expense of low-income families have been politically popular and difficult to change. So has the lure of institutional prestige, which has resulted in growing competition among selective institutions to enroll students from the relatively small pool of well-credentialed students. Not many minority or low-income students fall in this category, which has resulted in resources being lavished on students who already would be successful in college rather than an expansion of the pool of underrepresented students receiving college degrees. At the same time, however, I see a slowly growing recognition that we have pursued a course that jeopardizes our social and economic future. While overdue, the change is welcome.

The five papers concerning student success in college that have been commissioned by NPEC[2] address in some detail many of the issues highlighted in the Education Trust study. Three

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[1] Haycock, K. (2006). *Promise abandoned: How policy choices and institutional practices restrict college opportunities*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

[2] Braxton, J. M. (in press). *Faculty professional choices in teaching that foster student success*.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (in press). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*.

Perna, L. W., & Thomas, S. L. (in press). *A framework for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all*.

Smart, J. C., Feldman, K. A., & Ethington, C. A. (in press). *Holland's theory and patterns of college student success*.

Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (in press). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*.

consider research, on a comprehensive range of factors affecting student success. Two of these focus extensively on the action implications of this research, while the third is devoted primarily to establishing an agenda for future research. A fourth paper adapts a popular theory of personality types in stressing the importance of matching student personality type with campus climate and choice of major. A fifth paper stresses improvement of classroom teaching as a vehicle for promoting student success and the use of incentives to encourage good teaching.

There are a number of sound suggestions for policies at the federal, state, and campus levels in the research papers that have been commissioned. There also are a number of thoughtful suggestions for further research. It may be useful to organize these according to policy area, and I have done so for this response.

Student Financial Aid

This policy area has implications for practice at all levels. There are at least three elements of student financial aid policies that research suggests are important (see Tinto and Pusser and Kuh et al.).

- The amount of aid available to students with unmet need must reasonably approximate that need. Need-based student financial aid is again receiving attention after a decade or more in which aid was directed toward programs that benefited middle income students and their families. The findings of the commissioned papers reinforce the idea that it is in the nation's best interest to again begin emphasizing need-based aid and ensuring that it again be sufficient for accomplishing the goal of promoting access for students from low-income families. My own observation is that it is very important that as much of the need-based aid directed toward low-income students as possible be in the form of grants. We are simply asking low-income students to assume too much debt to make greater dependence on loans a viable option. Many low-income families do not qualify for loans, and students from such families are understandably reluctant to assume very much debt. Loans should be the tool of last resort in a relatively simple financial aid package for low-income students.

- The need for some flexibility in aid programs is an important recommendation of the research (see Kuh et al.). Aid that is timely and available to fill relatively small gaps between aid and expenses and for dealing with unanticipated circumstances may prove to be critical to keeping many students in school, even when they already have larger aid packages available. Such need would seem ideally to be met through a flexible loan program at either the state or national level. Again, this recommendation coincides with the situation at my campus. Most students we serve have very little margin for error in the way they finance their education. If anything unexpected happens, either in school or with their families, there is little financial cushion to permit them to make alternative arrangements. Hence, some flexibility, even if it is in the form of loans, should be available as these situations arise. Administratively, it would be optimal if campuses

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had the authority on behalf of federal and state programs to make emergency awards when student or family circumstances change.

- Students and their families need to understand well in advance of the time that they are eligible to enroll in college that there is enough student aid available to allow them to afford college and that it can be accessed relatively easily. This issue is voiced consistently in the commissioned research papers (Tinto and Pusser, Kuh et al.) and will have to be addressed through a big publicity program that is properly a partnership among governments and school systems. Again, I would stress the importance of grants in the affordability calculations that low-income families and students make when considering college. Low-income families need to clearly understand that if their children prepare adequately for college, there will be a reasonable chance of paying for it without jeopardizing the family's financial future through having to incur significant debt. Grants are much more appealing as a motivator than are loans or any other complex packages that require families with little or no college experience to navigate a set of often-confusing programs, policies, and deadlines.

Precollege Academic Preparation

There is widespread agreement that improving the academic preparation of students for college needs to be a priority. Assuming that the problem of affordability is addressed to a reasonable degree, there are a number of components of potential policies in this area.

- Alignment of college requirements and coursework in high school and even earlier is a recurring theme of the research (see Tinto and Pusser and Kuh et al.). The requirement for action, at least in theory, lies primarily with the states and local school systems. However, the entire problem of enforcing reasonable standards for promotion and graduation has proven too political for states and school boards to address in a manner that would be grounds for optimism about their ability to enforce standards for college preparation. Instead, it is likely that some type of early, continuing, and voluntary testing and feedback program may be the most feasible answer to improving preparation for college, and that is one of the recommendations of the commissioned research (Tinto and Pusser). Such a program would likely be most effective if operated by institutions of higher education for the benefit of students throughout the educational pipeline. Although not the ideal situation, it should be independent of other testing programs to which students are subjected. While it is tempting to suggest that another testing program might be too much, a low-stakes program operated by colleges might serve as a dose of reality in a system in which there is not much real local assessment of success in preparing students for college but a lot of high-stakes testing that may not be relevant for assessing college preparation.

- Motivating students to prepare for college is a combination of knowing that college is possible, developing a value system that leads one to desire the benefits of college, and being willing to work to gain those benefits. This may be the most difficult aspect of preparing for college because government and educational institutions make up only one

of many influences in an individual's life. With respect to at-risk populations, these institutional influences are probably less important than those in the family and community, which may be a major impediment to developing a long-enough time horizon to understanding the importance of preparing for college for the typical individual. This also is the consensus of the researchers studying the topic of student success (see Tinto and Pusser and Kuh et al.). Again, it may be that the most appropriate vehicle for influencing personal attitudes is for colleges to engage in large-scale outreach efforts to encourage students and their families to recognize the possibilities that a college education bestows. There probably is no substitute for bringing prospective students to campus beginning as early as middle school and for ensuring that these students are continually exposed to role models with whom they can identify. We do this at our campus for a variety of groups, but primarily for inner city students. It helps for them to see and talk to students who came from similar circumstances and to understand that college attendance is possible for them as well.

- While the researchers do not specifically address the question of how campuses can improve academic preparation of high school students, one approach would be to bring some coursework into the high schools when the schools lack sufficient staff or staff with the qualifications to teach key courses (i.e., bridging academic gaps). Another approach would be summer programs for students who are about to enter college but who are at risk of failure when they arrive there. States are in a position to support deficiencies that school systems identify. We take both approaches at our campus, with some state and federal support for our summer efforts. We would like to expand the courses we offer in the high schools, but the logistics (scheduling, distance, admission, etc.) of such offerings are an obstacle as is funding support.

Campus Programs That Promote Student Success

A great deal of the research reviewed in the commissioned papers deals with the topic of how to address the needs of students who require assistance and encouragement after they have enrolled. This is perhaps the aspect of promoting student success that has been most studied, both historically and recently. The impression one gets is that campuses know what to do and that all but the most selective institutions have at least some programs in place that attempt to promote student success. It might be tempting to just give up on the idea that we can do better than we are already doing and that the real answer must lie in precollege preparation. However, it probably is the case that things need to be done better on the campuses. The observations below help to focus attention on how this can take place.

- **Reward good teaching.** One of the NPEC-commissioned papers (Braxton) makes that its single focus, and appropriately so. The paper provides recommendations by which states and campuses would alter the academic reward system by giving increased recognition to good teaching. Interestingly, even though good teaching is the fundamental function of institutions of higher education, most researchers give it about the same priority as the many other activities in which campuses engage when studying

student success. However, in light of the changing demographics of the college-age population, the higher education community needs to face the fact that there is a trade-off between prestige and taking seriously the goal of skillfully teaching students from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Most faculty at even moderately selective campuses like working there because the students they see every day are pretty well prepared for college work. Campuses aggressively compete for not only the best students, but also for faculty who have strong records of scholarship and research. Teaching tends to be a secondary consideration in the hiring of faculty by any campus with an up-and-coming profile or those that already have arrived. And, of course, public officials, the press, and the general public bestow prestige on those campuses that have strong student profiles and engage in graduate study and research to a significant degree. It is unlikely that campuses in these categories will arrive at the point any time soon when they are willing to enroll the typical high school graduate or to recruit faculty whose strength is teaching the typical high school graduate. Indeed, a growing concern of more selective campuses is that their student bodies to a decreasing extent are representative of the young population as a whole. Unfortunately, there are only so many top-flight minority and low-income students to go around, so recruiting these relatively few students has become a preoccupation of these institutions. Meanwhile, the size of the pool of underrepresented students going to college is not impacted.

- **Support teaching-oriented campuses.** Braxton's recommendation to reward good teaching has a much better chance of making a difference at teaching-oriented campuses—community colleges, urban institutions, liberal admissions institutions, historically black campuses, etc. These campuses not only reward faculty for good teaching, but they admit students who more often than not need good teaching to be successful. However, these campuses, which educate the vast majority of undergraduates, typically are not considered prestigious despite the difficult work they do and do not get priority for funding support. It would seem that states should adopt policies that reward campuses that reward good teaching and admit a broad cross-section of the college-age population. Moving underrepresented groups and low-income students ahead one generation at a time would seem to be a more realistic goal than force-feeding such students to campuses where their chances of success are limited. The entire emphasis of one of the commissioned papers (Smart et al.) is on reducing such mismatches between students and campuses as a means of promoting student success. Recognizing the important role that liberal admissions campuses play through increased funding would be an appropriate way to reward good teaching.

- **Some campuses do it better.** The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is supporting the Graduation Outcomes Project, which already has produced a study that provides a good deal of guidance to campuses wishing to improve the prospects for success of their students ("Student Success in State Universities"). The study examined campuses that had higher than expected graduation rates relative to the profile of the students they admit. The findings go well beyond identifying best practices, instead focusing extensively on the leadership and management culture that contribute to student success. The research of the commissioned papers, while emphasizing the importance of leadership and campus culture (Tinto and Pusser and Kuh et al.) do not provide guidance on how to optimally develop these areas. The AASCU study shows that the major attributes influencing student success can, for the most part, be emulated by campuses that want to make

serious attempts to improve the prospects for success of their students. It would seem that such efforts provide more guidance to campuses as to how to increase the probability that students will be successful than would simply the listing of best practices that is the outcome of most research efforts.

Avenues for More Research

As noted above, perhaps the most fruitful avenue of additional research is not any of the myriad of topics about which research traditionally has been concerned, but rather questions of how to influence campus culture in a way that makes the typical array of best practices cited by researchers truly effective.

In addition, a number of specific areas of research have been identified in the NPEC-sponsored research reports that are worthy of support, particularly through federal research programs. These include the following:

- Can professional development programs for K–12 teachers result in improved preparation for college for at-risk groups of students?

- Do faculty development programs result in better teaching and improved learning at the college level?

- Can well-structured assessment programs improve teaching and increase student academic success?

- Do certain types of financial aid programs increase the likelihood that low-income students and students from underrepresented groups will attend college?

- What are the most effective means of providing feedback to students and high schools about preparation for college?

- What impact does reliance on part-time faculty have on student probability for being successful in college? While a growing problem nationally, it is a particular problem at my campus, where one-quarter of the full-time-equivalent faculty is employed part time but the student body generally needs small classes and a lot of contact with faculty to be successful.