



The Need for a Different Type of College Program

With the recent release of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education's report on the status of higher education, the postsecondary education establishment has spent a lot of time in the news lately. Even before the Commission's convening, the past five years have seen the publishing of numerous books about the quality of college and university education in this country. Across the board the information is telling us that there are a lot of problems with our higher education system. First, it's not accessible to many of this nation's young men and women. Second, it does not graduate many of the students who do find a way to access it—particularly low-income students and students of color. And third, it fails to adequately prepare for business and the world of work most of its students who do graduate. It is time for innovation and reform in higher education.

At a time when having a college degree is becoming more and more important, a huge number of students in this country do not have the opportunity to access that degree. The cost of obtaining a Bachelor's degree has become too high for students from low income families. The average price of college has grown much faster than the rate of inflation—average annual tuition at public institutions has risen 268 percent and at private institutions is up 248 percent since the 1976-1977 academic year.¹ To add to the challenge, during this time of rapidly rising tuition costs, student grant aid for low-income students has declined. A recent report released by the Education Trust states that in 1975 the maximum Pell Grant—the largest federal grant program for low-income students—covered about 84 percent of the costs at a public college or university. Now Pell Grants cover about 36 percent.² Financial aid officials at the University of Rhode Island said that in 2006 more students than ever had to face the widening gap between high college costs and inadequate financial aid.³ This is especially troubling for low-income students. "As a result, even among highly qualified high school graduates, low-income students are much less likely to enroll in college than similarly qualified higher-income students. Poor students, in fact, are less likely to enroll in college than wealthy students who

¹ Fetterman, Mindy and Barbara Hansen. "Young People Struggle to Deal with Kiss of Debt." *USA Today* 20 Nov. 2006: 1A+.

² Haycock, Kati for The Education Trust. "Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities." Aug. 2006

³ Jordan, Jennifer D. "Cost of College Just Beyond Their Reach." *The Providence Journal* 5 Nov. 2006: A1+.

are *less* qualified,” Charles Kolb wrote in his July 2006 *Education Week* article, *The Cracks in Our Education Pipeline*⁴

Even public institutions are out-of-reach for many low-income students. A November 2006 *New York Times* editorial described how public universities have shifted away from need-based financial aid formulas to merit-based formulas that heavily favor affluent students. It added that “aid to students whose families earn over \$100,000 has more than quadrupled at the public flagship and research universities.”⁵ Now the average institutional grant to students from high-income families is greater than the average grant to students from low-income families. At both public and private institutions the increase in tuition and fees, coupled with the decline in need-based aid, has made a college education inaccessible to many low-income students. In her report written for the Education Trust, called *Promise Abandoned*, Kati Haycock wrote, “The large unmet need faced by prospective students from low-income families has two major effects. First, many of those ‘students’ never become students at all. Indeed, only about one-half of all ‘college-qualified’ students from low-income families enter a four-year college, compared to over 80 percent of similarly qualified students from high income families. But that’s not the only effect. Other low-income students attend college, but do so in ways that are far less likely to lead to a degree.”⁶

Indeed, for those low-income students and minority students who are able to afford the costs of enrolling in college, most do not graduate. Less than 30 percent of students from the bottom income quartile who begin college graduate within six years, compared to 98 percent of students in the top income quartile.⁷ The numbers are grim when looking at graduation rates by ethnicity as well. “Only about 40 percent of African-American freshmen and 47 percent of Latino freshmen obtain bachelor’s degrees within six years, compared to 59 percent of White freshmen” according to the *Promise Abandoned* report. Unfortunately, many colleges feel their responsibility ends at giving students access to college; the students are responsible for their own success once there. But many low-income and minority students are the first in their families to go to college and find it confusing and overwhelming to navigate the services available to them. “The absence of a friendly face or guiding hand often leads to disengagement and disillusionment” Haycock concludes.⁸

And while a majority of low-income students and students of color are *not* obtaining a college degree, that degree is becoming more and more of a necessity. Nearly two-thirds of all high-growth, high-wage jobs created in the next decade will require a college degree, yet only one-third of Americans have one.⁹ Something must be done to ensure that more students—particularly those from low-income and minority backgrounds—attain the degree that is becoming so vital to individuals and society.

But graduating more college students is not enough on its own. In many cases, even those students who do graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree leave college unprepared for success in the workforce. Too many American students aren’t getting the education that they need. In his 2006 book Our

⁴ Kolb, Charles E.M. “The Cracks in Our Education Pipeline.” *Education Week* 12 July 2006: 56+.

⁵ “Public Colleges as ‘Engines of Inequality.’” *The New York Times* 23 Nov. 2006.

⁶ Haycock, Kati for The Education Trust. “Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities.” Aug. 2006.

⁷ Mortenson, Tom. “College Affordability for Students from Low and Lower-Middle Income Families.” A presentation for Scholarship America in Minneapolis, MN 19 Oct. 2006.

⁸ Haycock, Kati for The Education Trust. “Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities.” Aug. 2006.

⁹ Marklein, Mary Beth. “Should Government Take a Yardstick to Colleges?” *USA Today* 14 Nov. 2006.

Underachieving Colleges, Harvard's Interim President, Derek Bok, wrote, "... colleges and universities, for all the benefits they bring, accomplish far less for their students than they should. Many seniors graduate without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers. Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, non-technical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education. Few undergraduates receiving a degree are able to speak or read a foreign language. Most have never taken a course in quantitative reasoning or acquired the knowledge needed to be a reasonably informed citizen in a democracy. And those are only some of the problems."¹⁰ A recent study of the corporate perspective on the readiness of new entrants into the United States workforce concluded that only about one-quarter of four-year college graduates are excellent in the most important skills: oral and written communications, professionalism and work ethic, and critical thinking and problem solving.¹¹ If our college graduates are to compete with college graduates from around the world, we have got to start doing a better job of preparing students for business or any sector of the workforce they choose.

The evidence points to the need for a different type of college program—one that all students can afford, that provides them with the support and guidance they need to get them to graduation day, and that ensures students leave with the skills they need to be successful in the business world. The good news is that this can be accomplished. Experts indicate that there are ways to increase the graduation rates of low-income and minority students, and to better prepare all students for success in their work after college. But doing this will require a commitment to change the way students are educated and operate with a spirit of innovation.

Research by the Education Trust suggests that colleges which undertake well-designed efforts to retain students can have positive effects on graduation rates.¹² But up to this point most colleges have not prioritized raising the graduation rates of low-income and minority students. Making this a priority means finding ways for students to be successful in their academic work and getting students engaged in their college experience. Both of these measures are related to higher graduation rates. As Kati Haycock describes in her report, *Promise Abandoned*, "It matters whether institutions focus on getting their students engaged and connected to the campus, particularly in the critical freshman year. It matters whether there is a genuine emphasis on the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning, because academic success and degree completion go hand in hand. It matters whether administrators and faculty monitor student progress, taking advantage of new data systems to tease out patterns of student success."¹³

In their book Student Success in College, George Kuh and his colleagues talk about ways of getting students more engaged in their educational experiences. "Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. ... internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge. As a result, learning is deeper, more meaningful, and ultimately more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they

¹⁰ Bok, Derek. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹¹ Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Society for Human Resource Management. "Are They Really Ready To Work?: Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce." Oct. 2006.

¹² Kolb, Charles E.M. "The Cracks in Our Education Pipeline." *Education Week* 12 July 2006: 56+.

¹³ Haycock, Kati for The Education Trust. "Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities." Aug. 2006.

are.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, many college graduates feel their undergraduate courses lack any real meaningful engagement with the world of work.¹⁵ If we want to keep students in school until graduation day, and if we want them prepared for work post-graduation, we must make their college experiences relevant to the world of work. The study *Are They Really Ready To Work?* concludes, “The education and business communities must agree that applied skills integrated with core academic subjects are the ‘design specs’ for creating an educational system that will prepare our high school and college graduates to succeed in the modern workplace and community life.”¹⁶

Significant internship experiences are one way of doing this. In his book *10 Things Employers Want You To Learn In College*, Bill Coplin says, “Internships have the most educational potential because inherent in the idea of an internship is that learning will occur. First, the organization offering the internship is likely to take some responsibility for making sure that you learn something and not just do gofer work. Second, courses that integrate field experience are better suited for skill development. If the internship experience is part of a class and there are structured assignments and time for reflection on skills, you can make giant strides” in many of the skills employers want their employees to have.¹⁷

Not only do these types of learning experiences lead to more student engagement and higher rates of academic achievement, but they are also learning experiences that better prepare students for success in the workforce. They provide opportunities for students to acquire basic knowledge and skills while cultivating applied skills. The authors of *Are They Really Ready To Work?* push for institutions of higher education to consider incorporating more of these types of learning experiences into their curriculum. They said “educators should consider assessing current curricula in response to deficiencies in graduates’ skill levels and businesses future needs. They should research promising models for incorporating more hands-on and practical experience for students in the curricula and seek ways to involve community organizations and businesses to pilot workforce-applicable learning opportunities.” They highlight internships, work-study programs, and job shadowing as a few examples. They also recommend colleges and employers forge stronger relationships. “Employers need a better understanding of the classroom environment, and academics need a better understanding of the workplace. Employers and academics should work together to make instruction meaningful and internships relevant to workplace needs.”¹⁸

But regardless of the programs in place to increase student engagement and academic success, the likelihood of graduation rates increasing significantly is low without mentors and advisors to support students—especially low-income, minority, and first-generation—throughout their four years. But national studies of student satisfaction indicate that advising is the area of the college experience that students are least satisfied with.¹⁹ If we are to have more college graduates in this country, all students need “support throughout the education process... whether it is passing 9th grade, graduating from

¹⁴ Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt and Associates. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

¹⁵ Oblinger, Diana G. and Anne-Lee Verville. *What Business Wants from Higher Education*. Phoenix, Arizona: The Oryx Press, 1998.

¹⁶ Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Society for Human Resource Management. “Are They Really Ready To Work?: Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce.” Oct. 2006.

¹⁷ Coplin, Bill. *10 Things Employers Want You To Learn In College*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2003.

¹⁸ Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Society for Human Resource Management. “Are They Really Ready To Work?: Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce.” Oct. 2006.

¹⁹ Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt and Associates. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

high school, learning about college or other high-quality postsecondary options, navigating scholarships and aid programs, or getting help in a tough subject in college.”²⁰ We need a college program where each student has a deep, meaningful relationship with an advisor or mentor who gets to know the student, their interests and working styles, and who can lead students to appropriate people and places that can assist the student with specific academic struggles. Advisors should also help students to see each element of their college experience as a piece of a puzzle. When all of the pieces are put together something greater is formed. This too helps to increase student engagement and satisfaction with their college experience.

A recent New York Times Magazine article titled, *What It Takes to Make a Student*, stated that “when educators do succeed at educating poor minority students up to national standards of proficiency, they invariably use methods that are radically different and more intensive than those employed in most American public schools.”²¹ The author was writing about high schools, but all of the previously shared data points to the same conclusion for colleges. The low-income and minority students of this country need a college program that is willing to be “radically different”. Derek Bok said this a different way when he wrote, “Our society is growing ever more complex, requiring greater skill and knowledge from its public servants, its professionals, its executives, and its citizens. Our college graduates face increasing competition from ambitious, intelligent young people overseas, eager to claim whatever skilled work can be digitized and outsourced to distant places around the globe. Sensing the opportunities, governments in other advanced and developing countries are beginning to pay more attention to improving their universities. In such an environment, the moment has surely come for America’s colleges to take a more candid look at their weaknesses and think more boldly about setting higher educational standards for themselves.”²² We’ll know that there is a college program that is thinking boldly when all students can access it, successfully complete it, and then enter the workforce with the skills their employers desire.

²⁰ DC College Access Program, DC Education Compact, DC Public Schools and the DC State Education Office. “Double the Numbers for College Success: A Call to Action for the District of Columbia.” Oct. 2006.

²¹ Tough, Paul. “What It Takes to Make a Student.” *The New York Times Magazine* 26 Nov. 2006.

²² Bok, Derek. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.