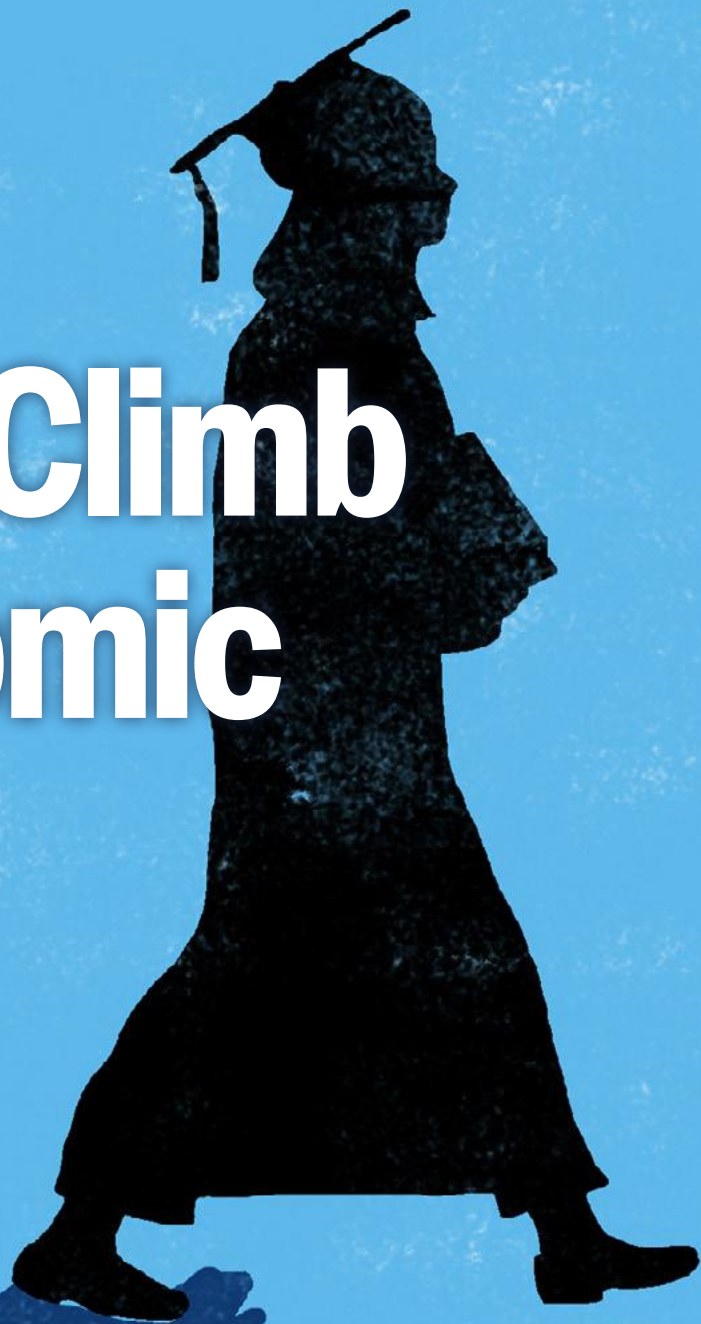


THE CHRONICLE
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Helping Students Climb the Economic Ladder



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Hamline University is proud to partner with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in this special content report entitled *Efforts to Help Students Climb the Economic Ladder*.

Since 1854, Hamline has led the way in this field. We are the first university in the history of Minnesota — in fact, when we began educating students, the area where we lived was known as the Minnesota Territory. Hamline University is older than the State of Minnesota itself, with statehood coming in 1858.

Women were among our first graduates, which was unheard of in certain parts of the world in that day — and unfortunately, uncommon enough in the United States of that time.

We've come a long, long way since those days, but the special relationship Hamline has always had with upwardly-mobile students of every ethnicity, creed and national background has remained the same.

Our emphasis on recruiting first-generation students and students of color is only one example of our commitment to helping all our students prosper. The support our students receive here, from faculty and staff alike, is truly special.

Elsewhere in this issue you will read of one Hamline student who is making a real difference in the world before he even graduates — and after he leaves here, all I can say is “watch out, world, here comes Devin Rodgers.” And that is a very, very good thing.

The higher education community is pivoting to meet the needs of an ever-changing world. I am proud to report, however, that in this particular area — providing opportunity for students — Hamline is far closer to the hub of that pivot than it is to the edge.

We look forward to sharing our story, as well as learning about the excellent work others in higher education are doing to help us reach our shared goal. Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,

Fayneese Miller, Ph.D
President, Hamline University

Helping Students Climb the Economic Ladder

For students from low-income backgrounds, many of whom are the first in their families to go to college, higher education is often seen as the golden ticket to the middle class and economic security. But recent studies have shown that often these students fail to get the needed support to enroll, persist, and ultimately graduate.

As a result, colleges are changing their traditional practices, starting new programs, and looking closely at ways to better serve disadvantaged students. This collection of articles examines these efforts to ensure that the promise of higher ed isn't lost on those Americans who rely on it most.

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For questions or comments about the collection, email ci@chronicle.com

Cover illustration by Gwenda Kaczor for The Chronicle

On the Path to Graduation, Life Intervenes

By SCOTT CARLSON



Laura Cherne, who supports her 4-year-old son, Izayah, won a scholarship to enroll at Indiana U.-Purdue U. at Indianapolis.

INDIANAPOLIS

NOW AND THEN, when Laura Cherne would take out her food stamps at the grocery store or her Medicaid card at the hospital, she would catch someone looking at her askance, at her mixed-race child, at the bare ring finger on her left hand.

In moments like those, she liked to mention that she was going to nursing school. Telling people — and reminding herself — that she had been accepted to the rigorous program at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis eased some of her shame about living hand-to-mouth on public assistance, having a child with a man who was in and out of prison, and taking a path in life less stable than those of her childhood friends.

With the reference to nursing school, strangers saw her differently, says Ms. Cherne, 28. “It would shut them up.”

After high school, in 2005, she took a run at college, at Ball State University. But her parents wouldn’t co-sign a loan, she says, and within a few weeks, she had to leave. She worked menial jobs, suffered from persistent health problems, and hung out with her troubled boyfriend. She got pregnant, and he ended up back in jail.

Three years ago, with big hopes, Ms. Cherne decided to try college again. Today she has a full scholarship here at IUPUI, a 3.6 grade-point average, and a job as a peer mentor. But her margin is razor-thin. She shares a two-bedroom apartment with her 4-year-old son, Izayah, and her father, a recovering alcoholic with cerebral palsy. Her household budget is always in the red. Recently she learned that, compared with her general-education courses, the nursing program would require higher fees and more time driving back and forth to campus, threatening to sink her finances completely.

Low-income students are often one car breakdown, one illness, one unexpected mishap away from dropping out of college and not being able to return for a while, if ever. People fret about rising tuition, and much of the public dialogue about the cost of college — and many of the policy recommendations — revolve around those sticker prices. Yet the biggest barrier to poor students’ enrolling or staying in college is not tuition and fees, but everything else: rent, food, child care, gas, phone bills. Living costs represent more than 70 percent of the total cost of attending a two-year college, the College Board estimates.

In decades past, people without money just didn’t go to college, and they didn’t really need to. They could get decent-paying jobs and build careers with mere high-school diplomas. Today, jobs with even modest paychecks seem to require some kind of certificate or degree. And that means less-prepared, more-vulnerable students are showing up on campuses, bringing the struggles of poverty, homelessness, and hunger with them.

That didn’t used to be colleges’ problem. Now

they’re grappling with how much it can and ought to be. More institutions are paying attention to how living expenses can affect or compromise a college career — not just in the spirit of charity, but in the self-interest of raising retention rates and maintaining tuition revenue. Just how far should a college go to support its neediest, most precarious students? A social-services role entangles faculty and staff members with students’ personal lives in ways that many institutions haven’t had to deal with before.

“Now that we have opened the doors to higher education,” says Cathy Buyarski, an associate dean for student affairs at IUPUI, “this is a societal issue that has come into the college environment.” Administering an emergency-grant program at the university, she sees students who have been kicked out of an apartment or have run out of money for food. Often they come to her at a breaking point.

“It’s not being able to plan ahead far enough to have a contingency plan,” she says. “It’s living on the edge.”

DESPITE support from mentors and peers at IUPUI, by last year the nursing program started to seem impossible to Ms. Cherne. Considering the extra expenses and demands on her time, she asked relatives if she could live with them. She plotted out how she might rely more on food pantries and other charities. Still she came up thousands of dollars short.

Sitting on a couch in her apartment, she pulls out a piece of notebook paper where she has tallied up her annual income and expenses. Her father’s disability checks, student financial aid, food stamps, and other income amount to about \$24,500 per year. Her expenses (\$800 a month for rent, \$500 for food, and \$170 for phone and Internet service, along with other costs) come to \$24,900. In nursing school, the \$5,000 per semester in financial aid — the lifeline that has to last six months — would be eaten away to only \$300.

She already saves and scavenges wherever she can. “There is not one thing in this whole room that I bought,” she says. The table came from an elderly woman she helped move. The TV was a gift. The couch was discarded by a friend. “People who have money are kind of wasteful,” she says. “We’re resourceful.”

But thrift goes only so far. Ms. Cherne decided last year that despite her hard work, she wouldn’t become a nurse after all.

It’s well established by now that financial resources can determine a student’s fate. Low-income students with above-average eighth-grade test scores graduate from college at lower rates, researchers have found, than do wealthy students with below-average test scores. According to a report by Public Agenda in 2009, more than half of students who left college before graduating said they had done so because they needed to work to make money. More



TY WRIGHT FOR THE CHRONICLE

Laura Cherne, on the campus, listens to a talk about peer mentoring.

than a third said that even if a grant were to cover the cost of their tuition and books, they might not be able to re-enroll.

According to a Federal Reserve survey in 2014, a fifth of American adults had completed some college but had no degree. The two most common reasons cited, particularly among black, Hispanic, and female respondents, were family responsibilities and the need to work. But students who drop out without earning a degree generally have a harder time finding employment and more trouble paying off their loans. Those who put college on hold more than once, researchers have found, are much less likely to go back and finish.

In recent years, policy makers and colleges have put a lot of emphasis on giving incoming students an accurate picture of how much they'll pay and how much that price might go up in the four (or more) years they'll be enrolled. But there are no such estimates for escalating living costs, says Sara Goldrick-Rab, a professor who studies education policy and poverty at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. In fact, she says, colleges too often downplay or ignore that piece of the puzzle.

"Money can absorb so many of your thoughts, if you're worried about how your kid is going to eat or how you're going to get to school."

Many colleges underestimate living costs by \$3,000 or more per year, Ms. Goldrick-Rab has

found, either because they haven't kept up with rising rent and food prices in their areas or they are trying to make themselves look more affordable. Under federal guidelines, colleges can assume that students living at home have no living expenses, which is rarely true for those from low-income families.

As a consequence, some students fall short. "They pay their tuition because they have to," she says. "When the money runs out, it's their living expenses that run out."

Last year Ms. Goldrick-Rab and her colleagues surveyed 4,300 students at 10 community colleges about housing and hunger. More than half of the respondents reported some level of food insecurity in the previous year, with nearly four in 10 having run out of food without the money to buy more. More than half of the students also reported some degree of housing insecurity, meaning that at some point they couldn't pay rent or utilities. More than one in 10 had been homeless.

Many institutions don't want to acknowledge that segment of their student populations, says Ms. Goldrick-Rab. In part, she says, college officials fear bad publicity associated with the cost of attendance. But that attitude could backfire: "We don't want to repeat the mistake of the public schools that said, 'Not our problem'" when students showed up for class hungry, she says. If they go on to perform poorly, policy makers ask the schools why they're not ade-

quately educating students — and demand overhauls in education practices — when the more urgent issues might be outside the classroom.

With the support of some prominent nonprofit groups, more colleges now see helping students with living costs as a key part of their retention strategies. But the solutions are neither cheap nor easy, and don't always grapple with the problems directly.

Beyond Financial Aid is the Lumina Foundation's effort — research papers, webinars, workshops, other resources — to examine and ease the economic pressure on low-income students. The project points to promising programs, at Georgia State University and Middle Tennessee State University, for example, that award microgrants to needy students who are close to graduating. In the past four years, 7,000 students at Georgia State have gotten grants averaging about \$900. The graduation rate for the 60 percent of students there on Pell Grants is higher than that of their peers, says Timothy M. Renick, vice president for enrollment management and student success.

But there's a catch. Rules governing state money prevent the university from helping students with rent or car repairs, he says. "It is a challenge to address the noneducational costs."

Some colleges have joined with nonprofit groups to try to channel public benefits and other support. Skyline College, a community college in the San Francisco Bay Area, teamed up with United Way to open a SparkPoint Center, which offers a food pantry and help with enrolling in public benefits such as health care, low-cost housing, and child care. Students can also meet one-on-one with financial counselors, who coach them on credit-card debt and building a budget. Since opening in 2010, the center has served 4,000 students in more than 30,000 meetings. "We are fully part of the college infrastructure in the sense that we report directly to the dean of counseling," says Heather Smith, the program coordinator. "We are a retention strategy."

At Ivy Tech Community College, in Indiana, administrators are adding support for low-income students bit by bit. On the Indianapolis campus, in an otherwise unused hallway closet, the college stores toiletries, cans of vegetables, and hundreds of boxes of macaroni and cheese, all donated by staff members and students. Ivy Tech also runs an emergency-aid program — about \$25,000 a year, typically doled out in \$200-to-\$300 increments — to help students fix their brakes or replace their glasses. Those who have maxed out on financial aid, however, can't get more money, according to federal rules.

Some years ago, Ivy Tech and Purdue University tried to start a center like SparkPoint, but the project fell apart, says Rachel Boon, executive director of retention and completion at Ivy Tech. The community college, with its 32 campuses, is pursuing part-

4 Strategies to Help Low-Income Students

Oregon State University's Human Services Resource Center connects needy students to agencies that offer rental and utility assistance, food stamps, and child care, among other resources. The center also runs a food pantry and arranges temporary emergency housing for students who have become homeless. Beyond the center, the university subsidizes meals and health insurance for low-income students, and a small convenience market on the campus accepts payments from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Humboldt State University's food-assistance program, called Oh SNAP!, runs a food pantry and, during the growing season, a farm stand where students can get free fruits and vegetables. On Saturdays the university provides a shuttle to local grocery stores and a county food bank. On Wednesdays students can take cooking lessons.

For the past two years, Tacoma Community College has joined with the Tacoma Housing Authority, in Washington State, to provide rental subsidies to homeless and soon-to-be-homeless students of \$430 to \$1,000, depending on the size of the family. The roughly 25 students in the program have to be enrolled for at least 12 credits per quarter and carry a GPA of 2.0 or higher. The pilot program has a long waiting list and may be expanded in the near future.

The Houston Food Bank, largest in the country, started working with San Jacinto College and Lone Star College this year to offer "Food Scholarships" to 250 students. They get 50 to 60 pounds of food — half of it produce — every two weeks. The food bank is talking with other colleges about serving their students as well. — S.C.

nerships with service organizations like Benefit Bank and Single Stop USA, which do similar work. "We know it's a desperate need," she says.

Ivy Tech has surveyed students who drop out, and the reasons are rarely academic. But needy students aren't just victims of bad circumstances. They also make bad choices.

"I know that the national trends on teen pregnancy are in decline, but I will tell you, at the community college, it doesn't feel that way," Ms. Boon says. "We have a lot of 18- or 19-year-olds on child number two, trying to balance that part of their lives." Personal responsibility is important, but the institution, too, has a responsibility. "You have challenges," she says. "We're here to help you out."

About 30 percent of students in community college are parents — most of them women, and most of those women are single mothers. Finding affordable child care can be one of the biggest hurdles to



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“We have opened the doors to higher education,” says Cathy Buyarski, of IUPUI. The struggle with poverty “is a societal issue that has come into the college environment.”

staying enrolled. Some institutions, particularly in the Northeast and on the West Coast, offer subsidized child care, but spots are usually hard to get. Many cash-strapped colleges have had to cut such programs entirely.

Help for poor students doesn't come just in the form of handouts, but also in life lessons. Here at IUPUI, administrators see some students in tough spots partly because of their own bad decisions, particularly related to spending.

“We are talking about students who have never really had access to money,” says Ms. Buyarski, the associate dean. “They don't know how to budget, and they don't know how to save.”

She recalls a student whose car broke down, so he went to a payday-loan service for money to fix it. Pretty soon he had taken out another loan to pay off the first. “He thought he was doing the right thing,” she says, “but he just wasn't financially literate enough.” Ms. Buyarski provided him emergency aid on the condition that he get financial counseling.

About 40 percent of students here receive Pell Grants. Even though institutional resources are limited, Ms. Buyarski feels that kind of assistance is a moral responsibility for the college. “The folks I run with say, Yes, this is unfunded, but we need to figure this out.”

IUPUI has two new staff members to help. One is a part-time, unpaid intern from the social-work program who helps connect students with public benefits and other support. The other is a full-time

financial coach, Brooke Williams, who started last summer. She counsels students not only on complicated financial-aid questions but also on personal financial crises.

Some students, not used to steady income, get their financial aid in a lump sum at the beginning of the semester. Pretty soon, Ms. Williams says, “it's gone.” They spend it on clothes to “keep up with standards on campus,” or share it with family members who are desperate for money. When they come to her, she says, sometimes it's too late to do much to help.

“You're getting evicted on a Friday, and I am talking to you on a Tuesday,” she says, recalling some of her conversations with students.

“That is not giving me much room to work with.”

Sometimes students turn to one another. When Laura Cherne's car got a flat tire, a fellow student in her scholarship program came over to fix it. Her son, Izayah, wears hand-me-downs from classmates' kids. Ms. Cherne, in turn, has helped classmates land babysitting jobs. The students support one another emotionally, too, she says. The challenges can be relentless.

“A lot of us in this little community have started to have anxiety issues,” Ms. Cherne says. “No matter how hard you are working at school and on your grades, money can absorb so many of your thoughts, if you're worried about how your kid is going to eat or how you're going to get to school.”

After she gave up on the nursing program, Ms. Cherne considered quitting college and trying to get a low-level office job. That would mean a meager but steady paycheck, more time with her son, and no studying until 2 a.m.

But she has decided to stay in college as an example to Izayah. Her new major is sociology, and she expects to graduate next year. She misses the adrenaline and surety of the nursing track, but she is intrigued by possible careers in art therapy or marriage and family counseling, a run-of-the-mill white-collar job, or something she hasn't thought of yet.

Ms. Cherne has a hard time explaining her major to strangers, when even she doesn't know where she's headed. “To not know what that ending is,” she says, “that's just a hard thing to adjust to.”

Originally published on March 6, 2016



J. Emilio Flores, California State U.-Los Angeles

William Covino, president of Cal State-Los Angeles: Students from lower-income backgrounds “come to us with a willingness to work.”

How Public Colleges Enhance Social Mobility

By LEE GARDNER

A stream of happy alumni have been getting in touch this week with William A. Covino, president of California State University at Los Angeles. They're not excited by an athletic championship or a big donation, but by a *New York Times* article that credits the university with being one of the best in the country at providing social mobility for its graduates. Mr. Covino says the alums are reaching out because the article “validates their experience.”

The story points to data suggesting that many elite colleges enroll more students from families in

the top 1 percent of household incomes than they do from the bottom 60 percent. But another *Times* article also noted that certain institutions, including several campuses of the California State University system, do a particularly good job of moving students from lower-income backgrounds into the middle, or even upper-middle classes.

Cal State institutions have very different missions than a Harvard University or a Kenyon College, but can they offer lessons to all colleges that want to do better by their lower-income students?

The primary lesson may lie in seeing poor stu-

dents as opportunities, not challenges. These days many colleges are enrolling more students from lower-income backgrounds, either to provide better access or to bolster enrollment in an environment where competition for top students is fierce. Some colleges have had to play catch-up on supports for such students to retain and shepherd them toward graduation.

While graduation rates for public comprehensive universities often lag behind those of elite private institutions, supports for lower-income students have long been a central part of the thinking at access-focused colleges. “We’ve been doing this for decades,” says Brian Jersky, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at California State University at Long Beach, another institution that did well in the *Times*’s metrics (according to the newspaper’s analysis, 78 percent of Long Beach students from the bottom 20 percent of income distribution ended up in the top 60 percent of income distribution).

Students from lower-income backgrounds bring some built-in advantages to the table, too. “They’re not privileged,” Mr. Covino says. “They come to us with a willingness to work.” Some may show up less prepared for college than students from more affluent backgrounds, but they’re also less likely to arrive locked into a particular major, and that makes them open to learning and more likely open to exploring a variety of career paths, he adds.

IT’S THE MISSION

A number of specific actions help lower-income students succeed academically, including getting them thinking about college early. Cal State-Los Angeles not only sends recruiters to local high schools, but also to middle and elementary schools. Mr. Covino says he visits kindergarten classes and hands out letters to students admitting them to the university, though to redeem the offer, “they have to get taller.” Such outreach seeds younger students with the idea that college is possible.

Money never hurts. About 83 percent of Cal State-Los Angeles students receive some form of financial aid, and “sometimes they come to us destitute,” Mr. Covino says. In addition to federal and state grants and institutional aid, the university also offers special access to the most disadvantaged applicants. Its long-running Educational Opportunity Program waives some of the typical academic requirements and financial burdens for some first-generation minority students from lower-income households.

Once lower-income students are enrolled, they must often fit their education around a job, or sometimes two or three. Cal State-Los Angeles schedules some classes during early morning and evening hours to help students who work. Last year it opened

a new campus in downtown Los Angeles in part to make its course offerings more convenient for working students.

Leaders at Cal State-Long Beach have had to make their own adjustments to help lower-income students graduate. After the recession, California made significant cuts to its support for public colleges. That led Long Beach to prohibit students from registering initially for more than 14 credit hours a semester to try to make sure courses were available for more students. Limiting the number of courses students could sign up for meant that some “would definitely not graduate in four years,” says Mr. Jersky, the provost — a particular hardship for low-

“Even if every outstanding, privileged institution in the country changed its mission, it couldn’t accommodate the need.”

er-income students. The registration cap was raised to 16 credit hours a semester this year.

That increase came about thanks to a deliberate attempt to look across institutional silos for impediments to student success. Long Beach’s Highly Valued Degree Initiative convenes a number of task forces to examine ways to support students, beat back inefficient processes and policies, and improve retention and graduation. Raising the credit-hour cap, or looking at student data to see which classes should be offered more than one semester a year, are the kind of fixes that “could allow hundreds of extra people to graduate on time,” Mr. Jersky says.

Cal State institutions could do even more to help lower-income students graduate, but they are limited by state budgets that still haven’t recovered from post-recession cuts. With money still tight, “affordability goes down, and it becomes harder and harder for working-class people to come to Cal State,” Mr. Jersky says. But he believes that, ultimately, it is up to universities like Cal State to deliver a high-quality, affordable education and increase social mobility for their students. After all, it’s their mission.

“Wealthy, privileged institutions can pick up some of that slack, but even if every outstanding, privileged institution in the country changed its mission, it couldn’t accommodate the need,” Mr. Jersky says. “We don’t want to be Harvard — we can’t be Harvard. But they can’t be us.”

Originally published on January 20, 2017

Helping Disadvantaged Students Reach the Middle Class

A national coalition seeks to figure out the best ways to tackle the mobility issue

By KATHERINE MANGAN

Gaping opportunity gaps between low-income students and their peers can be plugged only if campuses share data and success strategies, say researchers who gathered here on Monday to kick off a new national effort to help disadvantaged students reach the middle class.

So far, about 200 colleges representing 3.5 million students have signed on to the Collegiate Leaders in Increasing MoBility, or CLIMB, partnership.

The inaugural conference, held at the University of Texas' flagship campus, brought together higher-education economists, nonprofit groups, and college officials who are all seeking ways to increase college completion rates and economic opportunities for underrepresented students. The lead researchers, including Raj Chetty, a professor of economics at Stanford University, hope to glean lessons from colleges with the highest mobility rates.

Policy solutions need to be tailored to specific campuses, and that can't happen until better data are available and shared, said John N. Friedman, an associate professor of economics and international and public affairs at Brown University. Mr. Friedman, one of the key researchers working on the project, started his presentation with a chart showing the steadily declining percentage of children earning more, when adjusted for inflation, than their parents.

Getting low-income students in the door can be a challenge at a time of widespread skepticism about the value of a college degree.

"In rural North Carolina and rural areas elsewhere, higher education is seen as a way to kill a

community," said Margaret Spellings, president of the University of North Carolina system and a former education secretary under President George W. Bush. "Sonny or Precious goes off to college never to be seen again."

First-generation students can also get overwhelmed by the "crazy quilt" of paperwork and requirements they have to navigate through, she said.

"In rural North Carolina and rural areas elsewhere, higher education is seen as a way to kill a community."

Low expectations are another problem. Some educators assume that low-income or minority students either aren't cut out for or will struggle in college, said John B. King Jr., president of the Education Trust and a former education secretary under President Obama. If their high-school counselor was responsible for 600 students, such students might not have gotten the encouragement they needed to seriously consider college, he pointed out. And without better advising, students and their families are sometimes swayed by anecdotes of acquaintances who had a bad experience with college.

Students from underserved groups might be disillusioned, Mr. King said, if a cousin who served in Afghanistan came back, went to a for-profit college and “now owes a bunch of money he’ll never pay off.”

Or if a next-door neighbor who stopped in and out of community college, juggling kids and schoolwork, finally is ready to transfer to a four-year college, but it won’t accept her credits.

“For those people, higher education doesn’t seem like such a good deal,” he said.

Educators should question the conventional wisdom that most community-college students have too many competing obligations to attend full time, said James B. Milliken, chancellor of the City University of New York.

CUNY’s ASAP program, which provides students with a variety of wraparound supports like extensive advising and bus passes, has been cited as a national model because of its success in improving graduation rates. Skeptics have pointed out that it’s relatively expensive and that many low-income students can’t attend full time.

AVOIDING ‘DEAD END’ CREDENTIALS

Colleges should push to ensure that minority and first-generation students enroll in degrees that lead to jobs with good career prospects and don’t settle for short-term credentials of dubious value, several speakers noted.

While recent studies have questioned the value of many short-term certificates that are the fastest-growing credential at two-year colleges, Zakiya Smith, a strategy director for the Lumina Foundation, said certificates can offer a foot in the door for students who doubt their readiness for college.

“Our goal is not just focused on bachelor’s degrees,” she said. “We want people to get some kind of credential that’s not a dead end.” At the same time, the foundation wants to be sure that minority students don’t end up being tracked into lower-value credentials that could hold them back.

Better data about employment outcomes is key if colleges want to persuade applicants to consider college, Ms. Smith said.

If students are already skeptical about the value of college, they may be reluctant to take out loans, especially as sticker prices keep rising. Financial-aid advising should be tailored to students whenever possible, speakers said. A Latina might be more receptive to taking on debt if her family is present in an advising meeting, while an African-American man might respond better if the counselor is African-American or the advice is delivered by a peer.

Making a dent in the problem of unequal outcomes requires fundamentally rethinking the way colleges serve low-income or minority students, one speaker noted. College rankings reward colleges for their selectivity, so the more students who are

turned away, the greater the prestige.

In higher education, “excellence is a function of who you do not admit,” rather than whom you educate, said Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State University, one of the nation’s largest public universities, with more than 71,000 undergraduate and graduate students, not counting those studying entirely online.

By 2025, the nation will need 11 million more people with postsecondary credentials, said Daniel Greenstein, director of education and postsecondary success for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Improving success rates among minority and low-income students is essential, he said, “if you want to keep the lights on.”

By 2025, the nation will need 11 million more people with postsecondary credentials. Improving success rates among minority and low-income students is essential, “if you want to keep the lights on.”

Students from underrepresented groups tend to perform better at elite colleges, but the overwhelming number of minority and first-generation students attend open- or near-open-access public institutions, speakers noted.

One of the biggest barriers they encounter are algebra requirements, Mr. Greenstein said, a problem that can be alleviated if more colleges embrace alternative math pathways that focus on statistics and other skills that might be more relevant to their majors.

Mike Krause, executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, urged audience members to find out how much high-school graduates in their states earn if they don’t go to college. In his state, which has rolled out an assortment of reform efforts, including free tuition and corequisite remediation for all community colleges, the figure is \$10,000, he said.

“There’s always someone in a Rotary Club meeting who says not everyone needs to go to college,” he said. Unless, of course, it’s his kid.

Originally published on October 30, 2017

The Hidden Strength of Minority-Serving Institutions

By meeting students where they are, these colleges create successful graduates

By CHRIS QUINTANA

It's a notion at the heart of minority-serving institutions' missions: They can bump their students up the economic ladder at a rate nearly double or triple that of predominantly white institutions.

And now there's evidence for that notion, in a finding from a new study released on Tuesday by the American Council on Education. The study pulled from a federal data set and analyzed students' and parents' income from a data set maintained by the Equality of Opportunity Project, a group of academics at different institutions who track inequality in America.

In addition to the finding on social mobility, the study found minority-serving institutions often enroll students with the lowest family incomes, including first-generation students. Those institutions spend less on their students than do primarily white institutions, according to a report on the study.

The Chronicle spoke with the report's lead author, Lorelle Espinosa, assistant vice president in ACE's Center for Policy Research and Strategy, about why the results might seem counterintuitive and what they mean for those institutions. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. Minority-serving institutions — whether historically black colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, or others — work with students who are often coming from a more challenging background, and do it with less money, but it appears from the paper that they're also effectively moving their students up the social ladder. What were your thoughts as you came to see that as a pattern?



AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION

Lorelle Espinosa, of the American Council on Education: "We're not surprised, but we're excited to show that these institutions are moving students up the economic ladder in ways that some may not expect."

A. There's a common misperception that because they're doing more with less, they're also "less than" in some way or that they are somehow not serving

students at the level of some of the more prestigious institutions. They often get lumped into a group that is just paid less attention to, and so we thought this doesn't really gel with what we know about these institutions, even anecdotally. We're not surprised, but we're excited to show that these institutions are moving students up the economic ladder in ways that some may not expect.

Q. What can we glean from the findings, as far as policy goes or for the colleges themselves?

A. One thing, of course, that we think a lot about is how these institutions are funded and at what level they are funded. They have avenues by which they receive funds from the Department of Education and other agencies. So there are streams, but as we point out, a majority of these institutions are operating at a resource level that is below the average for higher education at large.

When we think about where we want to place investment in the future, we're making an argument that investment should be placed here. The reason that's important for the future is because we're seeing this changing student body. These are the institutions that are serving a larger proportion of low-income students, a larger proportion of first-generation college students, and of course students of color. So thinking about the future of our country, these institutions are serving a need that many people are saying we need to get behind.

But if they're not adequately funded to serve that need, then how much can we expect? We certainly don't want to say, "Look, they're doing so well without resources, so just keep the resources low." We want to say is: "Look how well they do even when they are resource-strapped, and think about how much more they could do if they had adequate resources." For the institutions themselves, this is just a great opportunity to share these types of data with their constituencies, and use it to tell their story.

Q. What are these institutions doing right?

A. People like to say that these institutions meet students where they are, and that's absolutely right. They approach students with an attitude that they want to capitalize on their strength and on the value that they bring to their campuses. These students, in particular, often are seen as having deficits because they don't have the academic preparation or they don't have the income or they don't have the ability to go full time — or anything that puts them in that "at risk" category. And it's not that the other institutions don't want their students to succeed because they absolutely do.

Q. If we're talking about social mobility at elite institutions or primarily white institutions, are we more likely to see students at those institutions at a higher rung on the socioeconomic ladder to begin with, so we wouldn't see them climbing as much?

A. There is an argument that could be made that minority-serving institutions have higher mobility because they're starting with students at the lowest economic level. And you're right. Many of the elite schools are not starting with that. But that is the wrong point.

Minority-serving institutions are enrolling these students, and they're doing so with an expectation that they'll meet those students with whatever they are bringing. If they're bringing a K-12 education that isn't college-ready, those institutions have probably the most offerings in terms of developmental education.

“These institutions are ready to meet them where they are with different types of aid policies or different types of offerings that can supplement them, say through food banks.”

Or are they bringing barriers like Pell Grant eligibility or low-income financial barriers? Yes. And these institutions are ready to meet them where they are with different types of aid policies or different types of offerings that can supplement them, say through food banks. Or it could be things like emergency-aid funds or offerings that happen in off hours because the students are also working a lot of the time. They're meeting their population where they are that is unique to the field.

Q. Does this study also challenge the narrative that, counterintuitively, a college degree isn't worth much?

A. Oh, absolutely. It highlights the value of a degree for students that are starting in a low economic quintile or coming out of families that are low income. Also many of these students' parents did not go to college or graduate from college. So for this population in particular, higher education is playing a great role, and should be invested in if we want to see more of our population succeed economically. And of course that gets to the individual benefit. We can't lose sight of the fact that there is great societal benefit when you move these individuals up the economic ladder.

Originally published on June 13, 2018

Basic Training for Higher Ed

What colleges could learn from the military about serving low-income students

By KARIN FISCHER

Daniel Piston wasn't sure he could handle college. He joined the Navy instead, and his success bolstered his self-confidence.



WAS DANIEL M. PISTON college material? A decade ago, as a high-school student in Syracuse, N.Y., Mr. Piston didn't think so. He lacked focus. His grades were so-so. And it wasn't like he was surrounded by college graduates; of his family, only his mother had earned an associate degree.

"The truth is," Mr. Piston says, "I didn't think I was smart enough for college."

After finishing high school, he signed up for an automotive-technology program at nearby Onondaga Community College — a similar course his senior year was the first thing he had been any good at, he says — but, still unmoored, he dropped out after two semesters. He found himself on the doorstep of the local Navy recruiter. The Navy promised excitement, and it offered something else: a life path.

Mr. Piston became a helicopter crew chief, serving missions to support ships in the Persian Gulf and provide humanitarian assistance to earthquake-devastated Haiti. His six years in the Navy instilled discipline, perseverance, and a belief in himself, and, at the urging of his military mentors, he began to think about returning to school. He ended up back in Syracuse, at Syracuse University. In May, the guy who didn't think he was college-worthy graduated with honors. He plans to go on and get a master's, maybe even a Ph.D.

Mr. Piston, now 29, is smart and hard-working, but even so, the odds were against him. First-generation college students like him, kids from low-income families, and racial or ethnic minorities — even those who are plenty bright, with diligence to spare — are less likely than their peers to go to college and even less likely to graduate.

In the military, however, the class divide breaks the other way. Analysis of recruitment data has found that young people from lower- and middle-income backgrounds are overrepresented in the armed forces. The less your family makes, the more likely you are to serve.

College's socioeconomic fault line is hardly a revelation, but it shouldn't be an enduring reality. That's what David A. Longanecker, who just stepped down after 17 years as executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, said on a recent visit to *The Chronicle*: that he didn't believe we ought to accept such inequities. After all, he said, there's another institution out there that takes in 18- to 24-year-olds and prepares them to get jobs and contribute to society. With populations that colleges struggle to reach and serve, the military seems to have more success.

Of course there are real distinctions between the two institutions. Enlisting promises an immediate paycheck, while in higher education, the costs are upfront and the benefits longer term. Though some colleges are open access, and some recruits wash out of the military, in general the latter has lower barriers to entry. Young people apply to college with

the hope of being selected; to join the service, they simply sign up.

It's also worth recalling that the military hasn't always come by its diversity easily. Integration was by order. Post-Vietnam unpopularity and the move to an all-volunteer force compelled military leaders to recruit far more aggressively — and, some would argue, to focus those efforts on poor and minority populations.

Still, the two institutions have enough in common that the proposition seems worth exploring. Each confers individual benefits, providing personal and professional development, while meeting a public good. For lessons in better attracting and retaining underrepresented students, should higher education look to the experience of service members? The country's future — and therefore colleges' — is poorer and less white. Could Uncle Sam hold the answers, at least some of them, for best reaching that population?

THEY air during the X Games and March Madness, are sandwiched between trailers for the latest blockbuster at the movie theater, pop up in Facebook feeds.

They are ads for the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. They feature the quick cuts of a video game, heart-pounding action, and stirring scenes of burly soldiers protectively cradling crying children.

Combined, those four branches of the military plan to spend about \$575 million in the next year on advertising, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Such vast resources to influence public perception and bring in new recruits dwarf the marketing budgets of college-admissions offices. Yet the real contrast isn't about money, observers say, but approach.

Colleges' marketing efforts have grown in sophistication since the days of simply mailing viewbooks to high-school juniors who made a good showing on the PSAT. Even so, few traditional nonprofit colleges have unleashed the kind of full-throated publicity blitz that the armed forces regularly do. While a university might erect a billboard touting its part-time M.B.A. program or sign on to sponsor a local sports team, typically only for-profit institutions mount mass advertising campaigns.

"There's a sense in traditional higher ed," Mr. Longanecker says, "that advertising yourself is *déclassé*."

He isn't suggesting that colleges buy up all the available airtime on their local television stations. Public institutions, in particular, might face pushback from lawmakers over such a use of taxpayer money. Rather, the military's investment in advertising, Mr. Longanecker and others suggest, is part of a broader philosophy of proactive engagement. It's not just about swaying a largely self-selecting group that has already shown some interest, as colleges tend to

do, but about reaching out to those who might not have seriously considered their next step.

“The military approach is kind of a push approach,” says Sidney Ellington, executive director of the Warrior-Scholar Project, an organization that runs academic boot camps to prepare veterans to apply to top universities. “The college approach is more of a pull. It’s ‘Oh, you go to our website and it’s all there. You can figure it out.’”

Go to the Air Force’s recruitment site, and you’re immediately prompted to enter your ZIP code. Up pops the address and contact information for the closest recruiter, along with directions to get there.

When Mr. Piston, the Navy veteran turned college grad, was considering enlisting, he got in his car and drove the couple of miles to a local recruitment center. There he was able to sit down with a recruiter who explained the enlistment process and helped him figure out the career options he might have in the military. Over several visits, the man answered all the questions that Mr. Piston and his parents had. “It was definitely a positive experience,” he says.

Contrast that with one young woman’s full eight-hour day going from office to office to try to register for classes at a local community college. For

first-generation and nontraditional students unfamiliar with the workings of a campus bureaucracy, such situations can be next to impossible to navigate. If that woman hadn’t been accompanied by her brother, already a student at the college, she might have given up, says Tanya Ang, director of veterans’ programs at the American Council on Education, who shared the story. “We have to make certain that there are no wrong doors,” says Ms. Ang, a former college registrar, “that we’re not turning students away.”

For the military, bricks-and-mortar recruiting offices serve as a front door, with the recruiter a greeter and guide to help steer prospective service members through the enlistment process. In practice and by necessity, college recruiters often “parachute in,” says Brian T. Prescott, of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, showing up in the community once or twice a year for a fair or information session.

Perhaps it is unrealistic for institutions, whether with a regional or national footprint, to have a day-to-day presence, to set up storefronts in places with low college-going rates. The lesson that colleges should take away, says Daniel J. Kaufman, a retired

HEATHER AINSWORTH FOR THE CHRONICLE



At the encouragement of his mentors in the military, Mr. Piston, now 29, enrolled in college. He graduated with honors from Syracuse U. in May 2016 with a degree in health and exercise science.

brigadier general and a former president of Georgia Gwinnett College, is one of outreach.

"We can't just assume they will always come to us," he says. "We need to say, 'We'll go to you.'"

General Kaufman spent five years as provost at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his alma mater, before signing on as the Georgia public college's first president in 2005. Leading a start-up college with an access mission, he quickly realized that early engagement was key.

So Georgia Gwinnett started reaching out to students as young as fifth grade, dropping in on their classes, busing them in for visits, and hosting summer camps focused on math and technology. The college also sought to build relationships with their parents, most of whom had not attended college themselves. The focus wasn't on one-time contacts, but sustained connections.

Being a consistent presence helped establish trust, says General Kaufman, who stepped down in 2013. From an inaugural class of 100, Georgia Gwinnett today enrolls more than 11,000 students. Of the 8,000 full-time students, 57 percent receive Pell Grants, the federal aid for low-income students, a share about 20 percentage points higher than the national average.

By getting out in the community, colleges plant the seed that a degree — from their institution or another — is both attainable and worthwhile. But for teenagers without friends or family members who have taken that path, it can be difficult to cultivate the sense that, yes, they belong in college.

For some, enlisting may be the more instinctive option because they know so many more people who have done it, says James E. Wright, president emeritus of Dartmouth College and a former Marine who advocates to get more veterans to attend elite colleges. "There's kind of a legacy at work."

Or if not, the recruiter serves as a bridge. Often-times recruiters come from communities very much like the ones they work in, allowing them to seem at once relatable and aspirational.

Although college-admissions staffs have become increasingly diverse, they don't always look like the students they hope to recruit. "There's a cultural and social divide," says Mike Haynie, vice chancellor for strategic initiatives and innovation at Syracuse.

That can cut in both directions. A recent study found that admissions officers' own backgrounds may influence their decisions — and potentially penalize less-affluent applicants. In the study, white admissions officers were less likely than their minority counterparts to look favorably on applicants from low-income backgrounds.

But beyond who recruits is what they say to the young men and women they want to encourage to apply or enlist.

Consider some of the slogans, past and present,

touted by the military: "Aim high." "Accelerate your life." "Be all you can be."

Today's Army hopes recruits will choose #TeamArmy. "One day they may be asked what they did to make a difference in this world," an ad intones. "And they can respond, I became a soldier." As the screen goes to black, words flash: "Join the team that makes a difference."

The message is inclusive rather than exclusive, playing on the appeal of being part of something larger than yourself. It also encourages the prospective recruit by underscoring what the individual can contribute, says Mr. Longanecker, the former Wiche executive director. "It says, 'We want you, we need you.'"

Many colleges, too, now have campaigns to promote their institutions. But marketing experts frequently criticize the taglines as generic and ineffectual. "Real Tradition, Real Success." "From Here You Can Go Anywhere."

And any marketing is on the institutional level. Higher education as a whole doesn't have its own brand identity; there's no "Got Milk?" for college. That means prospective students could be subject to messages from more than 4,000 colleges, compared with the military's five branches. The surfeit of slogans could be confusing or cancel one another out.

When there is a clear message, it often stresses rankings, highlighting the share of applicants with top test scores or grades. Selectivity is baked into the system: A college's reputation is largely measured by how many students it turns away.

Taken as a whole, Mr. Longanecker says, that signals to people, "We're a special place, so show us that you'd fit."

There's another narrative that swings in the military's favor: Rightly or wrongly, military service comes off as more of an adventure.

It's no accident that many military recruiting videos resemble adrenaline-charged video games. The military is selling excitement, plus a paycheck. Higher education? Two or four (or maybe six) more years of schoolwork. Debt. Delayed gratification. Even with climbing walls and lazy rivers, higher education has a hard time matching those thrills.

AND that's just recruitment. If first-generation and low-income students make it to college, they're still less likely to get through and earn a degree.

Seven years after her active duty in the Army, Martha Kinney decided to go to graduate school. Ms. Kinney, who goes by Murph, had stayed on in the Reserves, where she served as a battalion training officer, spearheading both basic training and continuing education for the soldiers in her command.

While doing doctoral coursework in European history, she was asked to be a teaching assistant for several large introductory courses. What she saw ran counter to what she'd learned in the Army about how



DUSTIN CHAMBERS FOR THE CHRONICLE

Daniel Kaufman, a retired Army general and former president of Georgia Gwinnett College, focused there on building sustained relationships with local families through programs like summer camps.

best to learn.

Students would come to her completely lost. They didn't understand what they were being asked to do on a particular assignment or how they were being evaluated. They couldn't tell an "A" paper from an "F." Sometimes they hadn't learned the basic skills needed for a project.

"We had these world-class intellectuals teaching the classes," says Ms. Kinney, now an associate professor of history at Suffolk County Community College, in New York, "but the students didn't understand a thing."

In Army parlance, they were being asked to run before they could walk.

The military prepares its forces differently, Ms. Kinney and others say. From the beginning, new recruits and their commanders map out a clear career path. It's both highly structured and studded with short-term goals: a certificate here, a credential there. Check-ins are frequent; mentors evaluate progress and, if necessary, help service members recalibrate.

Though education is necessarily distinct from vocational training, aspects of the military's approach seem readily adaptable to campuses, particularly to the community colleges and less-selective institutions that enroll the largest share of low-income and first-generation students.

When Ms. Kinney started teaching 15 years

ago, she relied more on her Army experience than on anything she had learned about teaching in grad school. The idea of scaffolding skills was key, building up from the easiest concept to the most complex. In the military, new recruits don't immediately jump to doing live-fire exercises. They break down the component skills and run through simulations.

Likewise, before Ms. Kinney handed out her first big writing assignment, she would talk in class about what makes a good paper and review a similar essay that earned a top grade. Students would practice things like citations. Only then would she send them off — with a checklist of what she expected — to complete their papers. After they were done, she asked them for feedback, to shape how she handled the assignment the next time around.

In pedagogical circles, Ms. Kinney's strategy is known as transparent teaching, the idea that instructors should be explicit with students about what they're being asked to do, why, and how the assignment will be evaluated. All students can be successful, the thinking goes, if they understand the unwritten rules of college.

"In the military, you just cannot say, 'That soldier can't learn.' You figure out how to inculcate skills," Ms. Kinney says. "It doesn't seem right to say that a student can't learn."

Ms. Kinney isn't the only veteran to apply her armed-forces experience to her academic career.

General Kaufman at Georgia Gwinnett asked professors to take attendance and to call students who missed more than a few classes. In the military, sleeping in and skipping a morning of boot camp isn't an option.

Steven Oluic, dean of arts and sciences at Lakeland Community College in Ohio, encourages a similar attendance policy because, he says, students who are academically ill-prepared can least afford to miss class. But he also wants to send another message: Your professor cares that you show up.

Mr. Oluic, who traveled the world and earned a Ph.D. during a 27-year Army career, says he occasionally gets resistance from faculty members who argue that students are adults who should take responsibility for their own behavior.

"Yes, they're adults," says Mr. Oluic, "but they're adults who need guidance."

THE MILITARY doesn't have the luxury of allowing its recruits to fail — after all, their safety, and that of their unit, rests on their performance.

"If a soldier can't load an M-16," Ms. Kinney says, "you've got a problem. If a student can't write, those are different stakes."

But it's becoming apparent that the stakes are high for higher education, too. Colleges, like the military, are refining their strategies to answer ever more sophisticated demands.

At Lakeland, an emphasis on academic counseling is part of the college's revamped first-year experience, which Mr. Oluic likens to basic training. New students and soldiers alike, he says, "need structure and need discipline."

As in the military, coaching at the community college begins early. New students now sit down with an adviser during their first weeks on campus to design a plan for the rest of their time there. They set long-term career goals and map out a course of study to help them reach those objectives.

The military also emphasizes peer-to-peer mentoring, assigning more-seasoned members of a unit to work with new recruits, says Charles G. Krulak, a former Marine Corps commandant and retired president of Birmingham-Southern College. The buddy system serves as the "first line of defense" against retention or performance problems, General Krulak says. If your partner is falling down on assignments or struggling with tasks, "you're on them like ravens on roadkill."

For Mr. Piston, the Navy veteran, mentorship was about more than encouragement. Advisers

Be All You Can Be ... on Campus

Colleges struggle to reach low-income and minority populations, but the military seems to have more success. What strategies might colleges try?

Aspirational advertising: Not just swaying a self-selecting group that has already shown interest, but appealing to people who may not have considered their next steps.

Inclusive messages: Rather than highlighting selectivity, playing on the idea of being part of something larger than oneself and underscoring what one individual can contribute.

Diverse recruitment teams: Bridging a perceived cultural and social divide between campus staff and the prospective-student population.

Consistent outreach: Building relationships with children and parents to establish a presence in the community.

Smoothen sign-ups: Easing the process for prospective students to apply and register for classes.

Structured advising: Mapping out a long-term plan studded with short-term goals.

Steady mentorship: Providing guidance and encouragement, whether from advisers or peers, to keep students on track.

Transparent teaching: Clarifying expectations for assignments and academic success.

helped him identify goals and piece together a long-term plan to achieve them.

It took a year and a half of preparation before he reached his permanent duty, as a helicopter crew chief. He spent four months learning naval aviation and five weeks training as a rescue swimmer. He attended survival school in the Maine woods. Some of the drills were brutally physical, while other times the work, like learning the science of helicopter flight, was punishingly mental, requiring hours of study each night. Even after he got his long-term assignment, he continued his education, qualifying to become an emergency medical technician.

With each new credential, Mr. Piston says, his confidence grew. In fact, he says, his success instilled in him a belief that he might just be able to handle college.

If some of that sounds familiar, it's because higher education has been adopting similar approaches. Community colleges especially are experimenting with guided or structured pathways,

aligning courses to lead to certificates, degrees, and jobs, and providing careful, consistent counseling to keep students on track.

The military's emphasis on cumulative certifications has its higher-ed corollary in the movement toward stackable credentials, the idea that the components of a degree can be broken into courses that build on one another and have immediate applicability. Students can at once work toward a degree and acquire skills that help them land a job or promotion. Many strategies being embraced by colleges today were long on the periphery of educational practice, and have been brought in from the cold by greater attention to completion.

Kay M. McClenney, a former director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, is leading a national pilot project on pathways. She compares a pathway to a highway marked by clear signs with multiple off-ramps to appealing destinations. By contrast, for too many years, many institutions were "cafeteria colleges," she says, where students "wandered in, sampled some things, and then were out the door."

"They accumulated credits and debt," she says, "without getting a credential."

Some of the strategies being adopted by colleges today resemble military practices, Ms. McClenney says. Technical colleges in Tennessee have increased completion rates by embracing a less-flexible structure, while the City University of New York provides students in remedial courses with intensive tutoring and advising. Like the armed forces, colleges

are becoming more data-driven, undertaking regular assessment and using feedback to improve their performance.

But Ms. McClenney, whose grandson is training to be a member of the Special Forces, cautions that there are limits to the applicability of the military model. "We don't want to turn into drill sergeants," she says.

While some students may benefit from greater structure, it wouldn't be appropriate for colleges to take on the military's degree of control. Too tightly delineating students' pathways could tip over into tracking. And no one would celebrate a disproportionate share of low-income or minority students ending up in dead-end or lesser-paying jobs. "That could exacerbate," Ms. McClenney says, "what we're trying to fix."

Surveys asking military personnel why they decided to enlist find time and again that one of the top reasons is that they want an education. They want to go to college, but they join the military. Why?

There are financial reasons, of course, benefits that defray the cost of attendance. What's at work, though, seems to go beyond money. The military can take someone who has been floundering and give that person focus and self-assurance. It's as if, to see themselves as students, they have to become soldiers.

For colleges, the challenge may be to get more young people to see themselves that way in the first place.

Originally published on October 23, 2016



GWENDA KACZOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

Closing the Graduation Gap for First-Generation Students

Tips from Smith College on how it learned to better support such undergraduates

MANY high-school seniors this month are learning the status of their college applications. Was I accepted? Will I fit in? Will I succeed? For some, the news will end months of anxiety; but for many students who are the first in their families to go to college, the next step will feel equally daunting. I know because I was once one of them.

My father worked as a machinist in a factory, and neither of my parents went to college. Despite my achievements inside and outside the classroom, my high-school guidance counselor discouraged me from applying to top colleges. I had to persuade him to support my application to Tufts, a great university in my hometown. Thanks to generous financial aid, I was

able to attend while living at home. After graduation, with a professor's encouragement, I headed to a doctoral program at Yale and a fulfilling career as an academic. It could have been otherwise for me, and it is otherwise for so many American students.

Studies show that first-generation students are less likely than their peers to graduate in four years or to graduate at all. UC-LA's Higher Education Research Institute reported a 14-percent-age-point gap in graduation rates for first-generation and other students. Many first-generation students come from low-income families and are eligible for federal Pell Grants. The Education Trust compared the graduation rates for Pell Grant-eligible and other students and also reported a 14-point gap.

ADVICE

KATHLEEN MCCARTNEY

At Smith College, where I am president, a longstanding, collegewide commitment to student access and success has narrowed the gap in graduation rates for first-generation, Pell Grant-eligible, and other students. In some years the graduation rates for our Pell and first-generation students have exceeded those of their peers. Here are five lessons we have learned.

Make admissions decisions in context. Admission officers should evaluate applicants in the context of available opportunities. Did the high school offer Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, honors or college-prep courses? Did the student have access to affordable SAT prep? Did she or he have to work to support the family? Applicants who haven't had the advantage of strong academic preparation often demonstrate their talents through deep commitment to activities at school and in their communities through organizations like College Match, Schuler Scholars, and Upward Bound. Context matters in recommendations, too. Teachers and college counselors at underresourced schools might not have time to write a two-page, single-spaced, detailed recommendation for each of their students, as their counterparts at private schools do. Instead, they might convey in five key sentences that the student has what it takes to succeed; often, that is enough.

Go beyond school counselors. First-generation students and low-income students are more likely to attend high schools with guidance counselors who are stretched thin or who may not grasp the potential of the students they advise, much like my guidance counselor. To bridge that gap, colleges can partner with community-based organizations like Minds Matter, Summer Search, or Bottom Line. These organizations, and many others, provide coaching and mentoring for students from underresourced schools with the goal of encouraging them to apply to a broader range of colleges, including those that might seem a stretch. This is what the best-resourced high schools, public and private, do for all their students.

Partner with community colleges. For many students, community colleges provide a pathway to a four-year degree. At Smith, we have collaborative agreements with four of them: Miami Dade and Santa Monica Colleges, and Greenfield and Holyoke Community Colleges in Massachusetts. Some of our 100 community-college transfers are traditional-age students; some are older, and they bring their life experience into the classroom and into the social life on campus. Regardless of age, our community-college transfers are admitted in a process as competitive as the one for first-year students. They

use campus resources and supports at the same rate as traditional students, and graduate into the same range of jobs, careers, and postgraduate programs as their classmates. Don't think of transfers as an add-on; see these students as the valued members of your academic community that they can be.

Help families see beyond the sticker price. A common misperception among first-generation students is that public colleges are more affordable than private ones. In fact, studies have shown the opposite is often true, especially for qualified low-income students. Colleges need to make a strong statement to families that higher education is within reach for their children. Financial-aid calculators help. As important, colleges need to send admissions representatives to as many high-school financial-aid events as possible and to national programs such as College Goal Sunday.

Level the playing field. Many first-generation and low-income students start college with less preparation than their peers. Mentoring is a powerful way to close that gap. One example is our Achieving Excellence in Mathematics, Engineering, and Sciences program, which connects students with faculty and peer mentors, engages students in faculty-supervised research, and creates a network of academic and social support and encouragement. Students in the program perform as well as peers in gateway science courses, persist in the natural sciences at higher rates than their peers, and participate in natural-science honors and independent research at rates equivalent to their peers. One of our students joined a biology professor's lab during her first year on campus. She has conducted summer research and presented her work at academic conferences. She aspires to be a professor — and then a college president.

In his 2018 discretionary budget, President Donald Trump proposed deep cuts to the Federal Work-Study and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant programs — cuts that would make it harder for students with backgrounds like mine to attend college. The new ideas, people, and experiences encountered in college can change a person's life trajectory.

The federal government and higher education each have a key role in building an educated work force, economic prosperity, and equity for all. Social mobility through education is an essential part of the American dream. We can and must do more to make this dream available to all qualified students.

Kathleen McCartney is the president of Smith College.

Originally published April 16, 2017

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From breaking news to key insights to real-world advice, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is dedicated to serving academic leaders and professionals. Our newsletters, subscriptions, special reports, and exclusive data projects provide a comprehensive view of the latest trends and critical issues affecting academe. For more than 50 years, higher-education professionals from around the world have trusted *The Chronicle's* in-depth reporting and analysis to understand their world and make informed decisions.

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