

IN THIS ISSUE

States around the nation are looking for more effective strategies to align K-12 and higher education so that all students are prepared to go on to college and succeed there. This issue of *Exchanges* summarizes discussions exploring existing strategies and potential new approaches during a Western regional policy forum, *Pathways to College: Linking Policy with Research and Practice*. In September 2002, the Pathways to College Network and WICHE's Western Consortium for Accelerated Learning Opportunities (WICALO) co-sponsored this policy forum, which drew about 135 policymakers and educators from WICHE's 15 member states and Texas to Albuquerque, NM.

Participants included state legislators, state higher education executive officers, K-12 and postsecondary educators, as well as representatives from several private foundations and national organizations.

Lead organizations from the Pathways to College Network were the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), the Education Commission of the States (ECS), The College Board, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE).

The Pathways to College Network is an alliance of major foundations, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and the U.S. Department of Education, working together to improve college access and success for large numbers of underserved youth. WICALO is supported through a federal grant from the Advanced Placement Incentive Program (APIP), U.S. Department of Education.

This issue of *Exchanges* was prepared by consultant Paul Albright.

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Pathways To and Through College: Linking Policy with Research and Practice

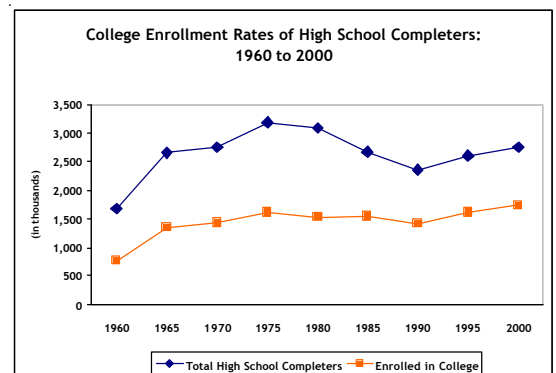
Moving from Access to Success

Encouraging access to higher education without the reasonable prospect of success becomes a false promise. After almost 40 years of effort, postsecondary options are widely accessible to virtually all students who want to continue or expand their education. The difficulty that now confronts institutions and systems is a poor record of students persisting with their education and eventually completing degree or certificate programs. Adversely impacted in particular are students who have been historically underserved and underrepresented in higher education.

As a result, the focus in higher education is shifting from simply providing access to fostering "access for success."

How educational research and practical experience can better inform the policies that frame this "access for success" redesign was the focus of discussions (September 17-18, 2002) at the regional forums convened by the Pathways to College Network, the Western Consortium for Accelerated Learning Opportunities, their supporting funders, and cooperating educational organizations. Researchers, practitioners, and others joined policymakers to explore issues related to the preparation, access, and success of underserved students in higher education.

In setting the scene, Paul Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers organization, cited statistics that show broadening access, a 40-year rise in college attendance, and a recognition by young people of their need for postsecondary education to obtain and hold a good job and to have a fulfilling life.



"The problem is that our public policies and the capabilities of our education system are stuck about half way between 1960 and the 21st century," said Lingenfelter. "We still have an education system that operates on the premise that most students are not cut out for higher learning. We need to develop a system that works in favor of student success for all students. And we

especially need to pay attention to the fact that poor students and students of color are consistently overrepresented in the dropout statistics and consistently underrepresented in the success statistics. They must be better served or the nation is not going to succeed.”

A number of factors currently threaten equal educational opportunity for students from underserved populations. Lezli Baskerville, government affairs vice president at The College Board, touched on several: constricted federal, state, and institutional budgets; escalating college costs; fewer low-income high school students academically prepared to enter and complete college; a more diverse student population in terms of geography, age, and ethnicity; retrenchment in the use of race and gender-based admission and financial aid criteria; shifting financial aid from promoting access to rewarding meritorious performance; expansive borrowing to meet education costs; reliance on standardized assessments; and longer time to degree completion.

U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico indicated in a statement to the forum that Congress would weigh such issues when it considers reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act in 2003.

“More must be done to ensure equal access to higher education as we start reauthorization next year.”

U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, New Mexico

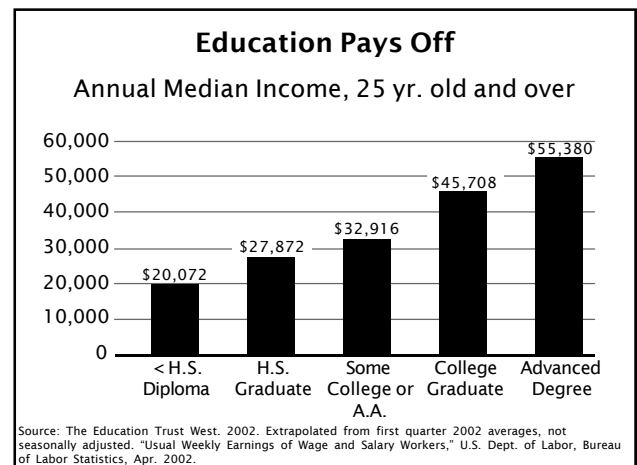
As new national and state policy is formulated in the coming year, it is hoped the way will be cleared to implement sound student support programs based on good evidence. “We should learn from our failures and find a better way because we simply can’t afford to abandon this concept of ensuring access to success,” said David Longanecker of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE).

Better Preparation = Greater Success

What’s the point of high school? Some in higher education respond that high schools exist to prepare graduates for postsecondary education,

training, and the workforce without the need for remedial, “catch up” work. As expressed by Gabe Jenkins, senior policy and data analyst at the Education Trust—West, a successful high school experience is preparing a person for “life” because “being ready for work and ready for college mean the same thing in today’s economy. Postsecondary education today is simply common sense.”

Academic preparation is the most important factor in whether a student will persevere to complete a college program. “A rigorous high school curriculum is the single most important factor in college completion,” according to Jenkins. In contrast, poorly prepared high school students are at a serious disadvantage at a critical juncture in their lives.



Statistics from the most populous state, California, were illustrative. More than one-half of California’s community college students require remediation or basic skills courses; 46 percent of incoming students in the California State University system need remedial work in English and mathematics; the percentage of minority-group students needing remedial work is even higher at 65 percent. Experience has shown a student needing considerable remedial work is least likely to complete a college program.

“We continue to channel most students, especially students of color and poor students, into low rigor curriculum and doom them to lives on the margins,” said Jenkins.

Such sharp criticism has triggered responses to better prepare high school students to succeed at the postsecondary level.

The Texas plan of “Closing the Gaps by 2015” has established a college preparatory curriculum as the “default” for students entering high school in 2004-05.

Presently, this Texas curriculum is one of three options with a “minimum” program as the current default.

Legislation requiring all California students to complete a curriculum necessary to enter that state’s four-year colleges failed, but the effort has had impact. The Los Angeles school district has made this college prep curriculum the default unless students, with their parents, opt out of it. The San Jose school district found math scores went up, achievement gaps narrowed, and dropout rates stabilized after it implemented a rigorous curriculum. San Jose shifted professional development funds from training remedial teachers to helping them teach higher-level, more rigorous material.

Higher education has a stake in improving the preparation of its future students, reminded WICHE’s Longanecker. “In fact, higher education is the primary customer of secondary education. Most high school graduates go on to college and more should. And they have to be prepared to succeed when they do go on.”

State Representative Danice Picraux, majority leader of the New Mexico House of Representative, added that challenging high school students to rise to a “higher order of learning might help solve the access to success issue.”

Linking Success to Access

For many students, open access has not translated into college success. “Access to success, particularly for at-risk students, remains today in America more rhetoric than reality,” said Longanecker.

“We had assumed that providing access to entry into higher education would lead to success — that students who attended would complete and succeed, that persistence was natural,” he added. “What we learned was that attrition is natural, that success is the unnatural act. Our graduation rates aren’t as bad as they are often made out to be, but these numbers remain internationally noncompetitive and the

number of students who begin in community colleges and don’t finish are particularly sobering.”

Part-time students, those who hold down outside jobs of more than 15 hours per week, and students who are the first in their families to enter college are less likely to complete their programs. In addition, students in community colleges are less likely to continue their education to the bachelor’s degree level.

What can be done to guide more students to a successful conclusion of their educational endeavor?

Financial considerations and early intervention strategies — especially by teachers — came to the fore in discussions on the “access to success” theme. State legislators and higher education policy leaders both referred to shifting the traditional funding that is based on enrollment levels to financially rewarding programs and institutions that retain and eventually graduate their students.

“If we want persistence, then we should pay for persistence. But that is not what we pay for today. We pay for initial attendance, not for ultimate success.”

David Longanecker, Executive Director, WICHE

Longanecker pointed to the British model in which funding is based on “completed enrollments, not initial enrollments.” The result is that British students tend to complete their courses, which eventually cumulate as completed educational programs.

Longanecker argued that the “signals” to institutions would be much stronger if “their base budget depended on student success, rather than hoping that the small performance funding increments, generally 1-2 percent of total funds, will turn the other 98 percent around.”

Some ideas from the states:

- ▶ Financial incentives based on student retention will work to “drive the behavior of individual campuses,” said Robert (Tad) Perry, executive director of the **South Dakota** Board of Regents.
- ▶ **New Mexico** State Senator Pete Campos said he expects his state will be funding schools not by recruitment and retention rates alone but also

for completion rates. As explained by Bruce Hamlett, executive director of the New Mexico Commission on Higher Education, the state is trying to move from an exclusive enrollment-based funding model to one that includes degree-completion funding as an incentive to graduate more students.

- ▶ **Ohio** was cited for having funding formulas that reward persistence and completion.
- ▶ **Texas** officials have agreed conceptually on supplemental funding for community college certificates awarded and providing students with credit for demonstrated competencies that are valuable in the workforce although they might not have resulted in formal certificates. Discussions now center on how to place those concepts into operation, said Don Brown, commissioner of higher education in Texas.
- ▶ **Oregon** representatives described their Proficiency-based Admissions Standards System (PASS), which links college admissions to school-reform legislation. Schools are required to offer performance-based certificates, as well as academic grades, and these proficiencies are factored into college admission decisions. PASS has the potential to expand access for non-traditional students, increase the admission rate for all Oregon residents, and boost the likelihood of their graduation in four years.
- ▶ **Arizona's** Board of Regents is focusing on student persistence and graduation rates after it became apparent that the state's relatively low tuition is not bringing about the access that had been hoped for or needed. "An important component of our population (Latinos) is not being served. Miss that and we will miss the next wave of economic development," commented Linda Blessing, executive director of the Arizona Board of Regents.

The importance of well-trained teachers was viewed as essential in motivating and retaining college students. Preparing teachers to instruct heterogeneous classes is a key element.

"The best way to narrow the gap between high- and low-achieving students is to develop the capacity of teachers to differentiate instruction for individual

students," said Professor Bruce Matsui of the Claremont (CA) Graduate University. "Competent teachers are requisite for sustainable improvements. We do great harm by not attending to these strategies for teachers." An attitude that "all teachers can teach all students" has greater benefit than "all students can learn."

Regardless of background or economic status, students can and will rise to the challenge of high expectations, argued Irwin Coin, who directs the Upward Bound Program at Arizona State University. The education practitioner is the one who transforms policy objectives into real-life accomplishments by individual students.

Longanecker pointed to research that "serious human contact" by a teacher, mentor, counselor, or program director is key to successful early intervention. Mentoring needs to be long-term and should incorporate cultural competence and peer support.

In his videotaped remarks, Senator Bingaman said the value of mentoring and other support services, especially for students from underrepresented groups, needs to be addressed as part of the federal Higher Education Act reauthorization.

Integration of Financial Aid Policy

College attendance and persistence are price sensitive, especially for low-income and other underrepresented groups. Research indicates that the combination of tuition and financial aid is a factor in whether and where students enroll and can influence their remaining in school. A price change might affect which college that middle- and high-income students attend while the same change may determine whether low-income students attend college at all, reported Skidmore College economic professor Sandy Baum.

The intentional integration of federal, state, and institutional financial aid policies (augmented by aid from private foundations), offers the best hope that the aid will work effectively for students and their families.

Sandy Baum
Professor of Economics, Skidmore College

Neither federal nor state officials are fully aware of each other's policies or their impact on students, observed Longanecker. "Finance policies must be much more clearly integrated if students and their families are to understand what college will cost them. Too often, decisions about state aid and tuition are made at different times, often by different decisionmakers, and seldom with the other intentionally in mind," he added. Professor Baum noted that different missions and multiple objectives complicate this "partnership" of government, institutions, and foundations and can lead to confusion and possible conflicts.

Baum argued only the federal government has the mission and capacity to influence a national policy of targeting available financial resources – its own and those of other entities – toward expanded opportunities for those with the most limited means. In this way, dollars can have maximum impact on educational choices that affect benefits of a well-educated populace: increased productivity and tax revenues, reduced poverty, and less expenditure for welfare and criminal justice systems.

Some states have integrated tuition and financial aid programs and are moving toward balancing merit and need-based aid. State programs that were pointed out for further examination included Indiana, Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Recent research indicates that student debt through borrowing is less of a deterrent to achieving higher learning than it might appear. Conversely, working more than 15 hours outside classes may inhibit a student remaining in or completing college.

"Ironically, borrowing more is correlated with higher persistence," said Longanecker. "But, maybe that isn't so ironic because borrowing is often the substitute for working, and working a lot reduces substantially the likelihood of persistence." Some participants were concerned that sizable loan debts deterred college attendance by Latino students and others from low socio-economic status.

Foundation representatives who were present noted how "scholarships" are insufficient in today's higher education milieu. Private funders have moved beyond providing individual stipends to influencing policy change that uses financial aid more effectively.

"Scholarships alone will not compensate for a lack of preparation or support for students who might not otherwise consider college."

Carrie Besnette, Daniels Fund

Building Stronger Early Outreach

The aim of parental, family, and community engagement strategies is to enroll a greater proportion of at-risk students in higher education and to help them complete their programs. Various strategies identified by the National Center for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) include greater cultural understanding, more inclusive processes at schools, and training for parent and community leaders.

Many "early outreach" efforts have been undertaken. The emphasis now is to assess these programs to ascertain their strengths and weaknesses and to retarget them appropriately.

A comprehensive system where "college knowledge" is imparted to students and parents early was endorsed. State higher education officials from New Mexico and South Dakota said this communication should start with in middle school. Georgia was cited as an example of a state working toward a comprehensive system with the legislative establishment of an Educational Coordinating Council that includes the governor and agency heads who are not allowed to delegate their assignment.

Community partnerships were highlighted as a potentially effective means of providing educational goals for underrepresented students and their parents and helping to provide them with a long-range plan for high school completion and postsecondary education. Such partnerships also can influence the creation of new policy and ensure that existing policies are implemented as intended.

Some policy contradictions were pointed out as impediments to successful outreach. In some cases, it was noted, higher education institutions may espouse access while also become more selective on admissions. The result "raises the bar" and can limit access for underserved populations.

The Pathways to College network is examining the use of social marketing techniques to reach at-risk students.

The purpose of social marketing is to change behavior as well as beliefs concerning an issue. Effective campaigns generally include a call to action, the use of advertising and public relations, community partnerships, targeted communications to stakeholders, and referrals to resources.

Preliminary findings are that there is no powerful, compelling national strategy on college access, there is a lack of message delivery in popular culture, and the most effective strategies for delivering these messages (especially radio) are underutilized.

Other outreach initiatives that were highlighted at the workshop included a national social marketing campaign by the NAACP and a focused poster campaign in Cleveland, OH to draw more students in to see their advisors.

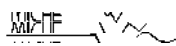
The Influence of Research and Practice on Policy

The findings of researchers and the experience of educational practitioners have a tendency to mix with policy objectives much as water mixes with oil – not especially well. The task is to focus research and practical experience to explain clearly what works and does not work in the educational enterprise.

As pointed out by Linda Blessing of Arizona’s Board of Regents: “It is essential for practitioners and public administrators to be able to provide good, informed background for decisionmaking. Demonstrating what really works will successfully help drive policy if you can communicate it clearly. If you can’t demonstrate impact you will lose financial support in these days of shrinking resources.”

Establishing a consensus agenda and deciding the policy objectives is a critical step.

The Western Policy Exchange is a long-term commitment by WICHE to support better informed decision making through collaboration with a wide range of partners. Updates on all WPE initiatives are available at www.wiche.edu or contact Cheryl Blanco, director of policy and research at WICHE, 303.541.0224. *Western Policy Exchanges* is published by WICHE.



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“You must define your policy objectives. Once you do that then use the research, use the practitioners to help you to define the path to get there. If you do it in random form, you waste all your energy and you get nowhere.”

Robert (Tad) Perry
Executive Director, South Dakota Board of Regents

“Researchers and practitioners need to understand the politics of policymaking.”

Bruce Hamlett
New Mexico Commission on Higher Education

“Simply presenting good data and analysis doesn’t move the ball very far forward. We need to work with decisionmakers so they can buy into the issue and the data and then they can buy into the changes that need to be made.” He recommended practitioners gather evidence and build coalitions of support before entering policy debates. “One practitioner and a great idea is going nowhere without the consensus building.”

The basic premise of linking research and practice to policy, Hamlett said, is to “stay on message, keep it clear, be consistent, and repeat it and repeat it.”

Finally, New Mexico Majority Leader Picraux said research findings must relate to “how it really is going to affect kids because it is that larger social picture that we (legislators) look at.”

What’s Next

This policy forum was the first of three convened by the Pathways to College Network to examine policy initiatives in a K – 16 environment that increase access to and success in college for underserved populations. In May 2003, Pathways will host a policy forum in the Northeast in collaboration with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The third forum will be in Fall 2003 in cooperation with the Southern Regional Education Board. Presentations from the Western forum as well as this Exchanges publication are available online through Pathways (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net>) and WICHE’s Advanced Placement Incentive Program project, WCALO (<http://www.wiche.edu/Policy/WCALO/index.asp>).