Public Community Colleges: Creating Access and Opportunities for First-Generation College Students

By Julia Brookshire Everett

The author defines a first-generation college student and describes the struggle many such students face in obtaining higher-education degrees. Using Heller's (2001) five categories of access, the author outlines how the public community college, more than any other type of higher-education institution, creates opportunities for many first-generation students. Community colleges, however, are not immune to challenges, especially low retention and transfer rates.

Introduction

America's colleges and universities have long been viewed *en masse* as some of the best in the world (Carey, 2004). Carey (2004) wrote that "Higher education, and the promise it represents, has long been one of the main drivers of opportunity, social mobility and economic progress in our society" (p. 1). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2014), approximately 45% of all college students attend community colleges. That number will only rise if President Obama's plan to make a 2-year college education "free" to approximately 9 million students over the course of 10 years is endorsed by Congress and the individual states (Jaffe, 2015). Community colleges have been instrumental in expanding access to higher education by enrolling groups of nontraditional students such as members of ethnic minority groups, low-income, first-generation, or underprepared individuals (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Currently serving 36% of first-generation students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014), community colleges are a good "fit" for such individuals. However, while admitting nontraditional students is an important aspect of the community college mission, if these students are not retained or do not transfer, then neither the students nor the institutions have been successful.

First-Generation College Students

What is a *first-generation college student?* According to Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012), the first-generation college student label was first conceived in the 1960s to determine student eligibility for federally funded programs to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs defined a first-generation student as one whose parents had not *obtained* a postsecondary degree (Ward et al., 2012). Although some modern scholars still use that definition (Housel & Harvey, 2009), others have suggested the first-generation student is one whose parents have not *attended* a postsecondary institution (Ward et al., 2012). Whether he or she attended college or is a college graduate,

in the role of parent, one would mentor the child, provide advice concerning cultural and academic experiences related to college, and provide guidance through necessities such the application process or time management. Students with college-educated parents are at an advantage when it comes to enrolling in and completing college. This assumption is based on an idea known as social capital (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Social capital is "the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in a given social situation" (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008, p. 26).

Access

Access can be defined as the conditions and factors that facilitate and encourage or prohibit and discourage a person from attending college. Although most Americans dream of attending college, access to a college education is limited for various reasons (Bragg et al., 2006). Those reasons might include college costs, discrimination, and precollege academic preparation (Bragg et al., 2006). Heller (2001) divided access into five categories: financial accessibility; geographic accessibility; programmatic accessibility; academic accessibility; and cultural/social/physical accessibility.

Financial accessibility. Financial access relates to the availability of financial resources needed for an individual to attend college (Heller, 2001). The majority of first-generation students are low-income (Tucker, 2014). Bradley (2011) noted that, "While tuition at four-year colleges is increasing at a dizzying pace, community colleges offer an affordable alternative for millions of students" (p. 6). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2014), the average annual tuition at a public, in-district community college was $3,260, yet the average annual tuition at a 4-year public, in-state college was $8,890. In addition, 58% of students attending community colleges received aid, with 38% receiving federal grants, 19% receiving federal loans, 12% receiving state aid, and 13% receiving institutional aid.

Geographic accessibility. Geographic accessibility refers to the distance a student travels to attend college (Heller, 2001). According to Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014), proximity is the most influential aspect of access. Because 90% of the population lives within 25 miles of a community college, community colleges are a convenient choice (Boggs, 2011). Ninety-six percent of 2-year college students are in-state residents and travel a median of 10 miles from their home to the campus to attend college (Cohen et al., 2014; Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006). For students for whom distance was an issue, distance education has helped eliminate some barriers. At public 2-year institutions, almost 10% of students are enrolled exclusively in distance education courses, and more than 17% of students are enrolled in at least one distance education course (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Programmatic accessibility. Programmatic accessibility refers to whether a program of the student's choice is available at the college (Heller, 2001). Community colleges are excellent choices for first-generation students because community colleges offer both

Julia Brookshire Everett, EdD, is the Head Librarian/Division Director of the Learning Resources Center at Northeast Alabama Community College in Rainsville, Alabama. She is a member of Rho Chapter of Beta State Organization (AL). everettj@nacc.edu

academic and occupational or vocational programs. Cowen et al., (2014) noted that almost all community colleges offer basic, introductory classes; however, larger community colleges often offer specialized courses in vocational and technical areas. Boggs (2011) noted that community colleges are excellent choices for first-generation students because leaders of these institutions work with local business and industry to develop programs that ensure graduates meet the needs of these industries, including programs to retrain displaced workers.

Academic accessibility. Academic accessibility refers to the precollegiate academic preparation of a student (Heller, 2001). In 1996, a study conducted by Terenzini and associates revealed that first-generation students arrived to college less academically prepared than their non-first-generation counterparts (Paulsen & Griswold, 2009). As high school students, first-generation students are less likely to have access to demanding courses or advanced placement courses; they may thus have lower SAT scores (Saenz et al., 2007). Additional challenges include time management skills and study skills (Jehangir, 2010). When surveyed in Terenzini and associates' study (1996), only 33% of self-identified lower-income students, who were often first-generation students, believed they were prepared for college academic requirements, as compared to 80% of their upper-income counterparts (Paulsen & Griswold, 2009).

Cultural, social, and physical accessibility. Cultural, social, and physical accessibility involves support that students might receive from family, friends, or instructors, such as verbal encouragement or the reevaluation of policies for discrimination (Heller, 2001). Community college students often struggle to balance the responsibilities of college with their full- or part-time jobs, their family or parental responsibilities, or other obligations (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Although some scholars reported that first-generation college students received less encouragement and support than their non-first-generation counterparts (Ward et al., 2012), other researchers found that first-generation college students were provided with encouragement by family and friends (Orbe, 2004). A qualitative study of 79 first-generation college students found that some first-generation college students were supported by their families and communities through gestures such as monetary gifts, shopping trips, or special meals, yet other first-generation college students believed that the topic of college was taboo and that family members were intimidated or jealous (Orbe, 2004). Even when first-generation college students got emotional support or encouragement from their families, they often did not have family members who could provide them with advice and mentoring concerning how college works (Tucker, 2014).

Challenges Faced After Admission

Although community colleges may serve the needs of first-generation college students well, community colleges are not without their challenges. Noting the low retention rates of community colleges, Boggs (2011) wrote, "The open door of the community college has been criticized many times as being a revolving door" (p. 6). Only 46% of students who enter a community college with a specific goal in mind, such as earning a credential or transferring to a 4-year university, actually complete that goal or are still enrolled 6 years later. For minority or low-income students, those rates are even lower (Dembicki, 2012). With 60% of high school students arriving at community colleges needing at least one developmental course, the problems related to retention and student success clearly begin before they enroll in college courses (Dembicki, 2012). For many of these under-prepared students, admittance to a more selective institution might not be an option (Bailey, 2012). Many educators are working, of course, to address the retention dilemma.

Adams (2011) provided successful strategies implemented at 4-year universities that might also be useful to combat low retention rates and lack of academic preparation at the community college level. These strategies included course-placement testing programs, tutoring programs, freshmen seminars, and comprehensive learning-assistance centers (Adams, 2011). A report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) also provided examples of many retention programs; community college personnel who are struggling with the issue can consult those who are successful for guidance.

Conclusion

Most Americans dream of attending college, and community colleges have become the institutions of choice for many individuals, particularly first-generation students. The open admissions policy of the American community college has provided access for various types of nontraditional students, many of whom might not attend college otherwise. However, this policy has resulted in lower retention and transfer rates than those of 4-year counterparts. If selective institutions are not willing to admit these nontraditional students, then educational stakeholders must support community colleges and the unique role they play in the educational schema (Bailey, 2012). Helping first-generation students obtain their educational goals is economically beneficial for both the individual and for society.

References

Adams, C. (2011). Colleges try to unlock secrets to student retention. *Education Digest, 77*(4), 19-23.

American Association of Community Colleges. (2014). *2014 Fact Sheet.* Retrieved from http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/Facts14_Data_R3.pdf

Bailey, T. R. (2012, July 6). Equity and community colleges. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 58*(40).

Boggs, G. R. (2011). The American community college: From access to success. *About Campus, 16*(2), 2-10. doi: 10.1002/abc.20055

Bradley, P. (2011). A graduating crisis. *Community College Week, 23*(25), 6-8.

Bragg, D. D., Kim, E., & Barnett, E. A. (2006). Creating access and success: Academic pathways reaching underserved students. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2006* (135), 5-19. doi: 10.1002/cc.243

Carey, K. (2004). A matter of degrees: Improving graduation rates in four-year colleges and universities. *A Report by the Education Trust.* Retrieved from http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/highered.pdf

Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (A first look).* Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program. Retrieved from http://www.ccsse.org/docs/matter_of_degrees.pdf

Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F. B., & Kisker, C. B. (2014). *The American community college* (6th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Dembicki, M. (2012, April 23). AACC calls on colleges to redesign, reinvent, and reset. *Community College Daily.* Retrieved from http://www.ccdaily.com

Heller, D. E. (2001). *The states and public higher education policy: Affordability, access, and accountability.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Horn, L., Nevill, S., & Griffith, J. (2006). *Profiles of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary education institutes, 2003-2004: With a special analysis of community college students.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Horn, L., & Nunez, A. M. (2000). *Mapping the road to college: First-generation students' math track, planning strategies, and context of support* (NCES 2000-153). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Housel, T. H., & Harvey, V. L. (2009). Introduction and overview of book's objectives. In T. H. Housel & V. L. Harvey (Eds.), *The invisibility factor: Administrators and faculty reach out to first-generation college students* (pp. 13-22). Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press.

Jaffe, G. (2015, January 9). Obama announces free community college plan. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from http: www.washingtonpost.com.

See **Public Community Colleges**, 58

educators should have in monitoring teen's social media usage; however, a shift in thought from assuming teenagers are addicted to their devices to understanding their desire to socialize in this way offers a fresh perspective. Educators can take this knowledge and educate teens to use social media appropriately by helping them to recognize potentially dangerous situations and to understand that their presence on social media is not just limited to their social circle. Also, teaching teens how to navigate the parts of the Internet not related to social media is crucial for their future success: They need to learn how to decipher what is credible and what is not, instead of relying on other's opinions. Boyd's research reminds readers that, as technology continues to be a part of the lives of teenagers, educators must embrace each new development in order to help young people use it in positive and successful ways.

Public Community Colleges From page 55

Jehangir, R. R. (2010). *Higher education and first generation students: Cultivating community, voice, and place for the new majority.* New York City, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moschetti, R., & Hudley, C. (2008). Measuring social capital among first-generation and non-first-generation, working-class, white males. *Journal of College Admission, 198,* 25-30.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Enrollment in distance education courses, by state: Fall 2012* (NCES 2014-023). Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014023.pdf

Orbe, M. P. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: An analysis of first-generation college students. *Communication Education, 53*(2), 131-149.

Paulsen, H., & Griswold, J. (2009). Understanding the impacts of socioeconomic status on first-generation students: A case study. In T. H. Housel & V. L. Harvey (Eds.), *The invisibility factor: Administrators and faculty reach out to first-generation college students* (pp. 71-90). Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press.

Saenz, V. B., Hurtado, S., Barrera, D., Wolf, D., & Yeung, F. (2007). *First in my family: A profile of first-generation college students at four-year institutions since 1971.* Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California.

Tucker, G. C. (2014). First generation. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, 2014,* 24-28.

Ward, L., Siegel, M. J., & Davenport, Z. (2012). *First generation college students: Understanding and improving the experience from recruitment to commencement.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.