

Best Education Practices Found Unlikely to Reach Underserved Students

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Several highly effective educational practices have shown the greatest benefits among students who are least likely to be exposed to them—black and Hispanic students and members of the first generation of their families to attend college.

That irony was highlighted in a report released today by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which also identified some of the good practices, such as senior-year “capstone” projects and keeping groups of students together in multiple courses.

Moreover, the lower a student’s achievement levels when beginning college, the greater benefit he will get from such practices, says the report, written by George D. Kuh, director of Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research.

The report is the sixth issued by the association since 2005 as part of its Liberal Education and America’s Promise, or LEAP, campaign, which seeks to promote the value of liberal education and to steer colleges toward education practices it views as effective.

In a statement to be issued today, Carol Geary Schneider, the association’s president, says the research contained in the new report, “High-Impact Educational Practices,” shows that “we know what works, but we just aren’t providing it to all students who could benefit.”

The report says, for example, that only 17 percent of all college freshmen take part in “learning communities,” in which they take two or more linked courses together, even though involvement in such groups has been shown to improve retention. Just 19 percent of college seniors report having worked with a faculty member on a research project, even though students who have had such an experience report educational benefits such as a greater capacity for deep, integrative learning.

The study found that black, Hispanic, and first-generation college students, on the whole, reap greater academic gains from various effective practices and yet are less likely than other students to be exposed to them.

For example, while 57 percent of white students have internships that their employers view as highly desirable, only 46 percent of black and Hispanic students have comparable internship experiences. And while 36 percent of seniors whose parents had gone to college say they had to complete a capstone course or project, integrating and applying what they have learned, just 29 percent of first-generation college students report having a capstone assignment.

The value that a given college’s faculty members place on an educational activity has a large impact on the odds of students’ participating in it, the report says. For

example, only 3 percent of freshmen become involved in learning communities at colleges where the average faculty member regards participation in them as only “somewhat” important. At colleges where the average faculty member calls freshman participation in learning communities “very important,” 55 percent of freshmen are involved.

Mr. Kuh, an adviser to the LEAP campaign, says in the report that colleges would help more students succeed if they let students participate in the educational activities described at least once during their first year and at least once again in their major fields.

“The obvious choices for incoming students are first-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning,” he says. Such experiences should be organized around the same intellectual content, he recommended, to make it likelier that students will discuss what they have learned with one another outside of class.

Options for students’ later years, Mr. Kuh says, include internships and study abroad.

“Almost every college or university offers some form of every high-impact practice described here,” he says. “But at too many institutions, only small numbers of students are involved.”