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Access Without Support Is Not Opportunity

By Vincent Tinto

On the surface America's public commitment to provide access to any individual who seeks entry to postsecondary education seems to be working. Our higher education system enjoys one of the highest participation rates in the world. More than 16 million students currently enroll in public and private two and four-year colleges and universities in the United States. In the past 20 years, enrollments have grown over 25 percent; the proportion of high school graduates entering college immediately after high school has increased from 49 percent in 1980 to over 68 percent today. More importantly, the gap in access between high and low-income youth has shrunk as greater numbers of economically disadvantaged students have enrolled in college; the number entering college immediately after high school having increased by over 60 percent since 1970. By any count, access to higher education for low-income students is greater today than ever.

But scratch beneath the surface of this apparent success and the story about access and opportunity in American higher education is much more complex and a lot less hopeful. As access has increased so too has stratification of participation by income. For too many low-income students the door to higher education is only partially open because financial constraints limit their choices of where and how they attend college. This is most noticeable in shifting patterns of attendance at two vs. four-year institutions. In 1973, the first year of the Pell Grant program, the percentage of Pell Grant recipients enrolled in four-year colleges and universities was 63 percent. By 2006 it had shrunk to about 40 percent.

Understandably, some measure of the difference in participation can be attributed to well documented differences in levels of academic preparation of low and high-income students and the impact of recent policies that have restricted access to four-year institutions for students with substantial academic needs. There is little question that academic preparation matters and that differences in preparation among students continue to pose daunting challenges to our ability to promote greater equality in college. But even among students with similar levels of academic skills, low-income students are still less likely to attend four-year institutions than are high-income students. Even when they do, they are less likely to attend elite institutions than are high-income students. Indeed there is even less income diversity than racial or ethnic diversity at the most selective colleges. Whereas roughly three quarters of the students at highly selective colleges come from families in the top quartile of the socioeconomic scale, just 3 percent come from the bottom quartile.

Why does such stratification of participation matter? It matters because where one goes to college influences the likelihood of college completion, in particular the attainment of a four-year degree. Data from a six-year national longitudinal study of students who began college in 1995-6 bears testimony to this fact. Whereas 6 in 10 students who entered a four-year institution earned a bachelor's degree within six years, only a little more than 1 in 10 public two-year college entrants did so. Even within institutions income matters. Of those who began higher education in a public four-year college or university in 1995-6, only 48 percent of low-income students earned their four-year degree within six years while 69 percent of high-income students did so. Among those who started in a public two-year college only 7 percent of low-income students earned a bachelors degree while over 26 percent of high income students did so. The net result is that while 6 in 10 high-income students who began

higher education in 1995-6 earned a bachelor's degree within six years, only 1 in 4 low-income students did so.

The facts are clear. Though access to higher education has increased and gaps in overall access decreased, gaps between high and low-income students in college completion generally and four-year degrees in particular remain. Indeed the achievement gap in the completion of four-year degrees is now greater than ever. For too many low-income students the "open door" to American higher education has become a revolving door.

What is to be done? What can we do to more effectively translate the opportunity access promises to low-income students to meaningful opportunity for success in college? Clearly there is no simple or single answer. That being said, it is clear that our nation will not be able to close the achievement gap unless we are able to effectively address student needs for academic support in ways that are consistent with their participation in higher education and do so in the community colleges. Simply put, our success depends on community colleges' success. But closing the achievement gap will be not achieved by practice as usual, by add-ons that do little to change the experience of low-income students in college. What is required is a more serious and substantial restructuring of student experience especially for the many students who enter college academically under-prepared.

This morning I want to focus on three initiatives that in different ways restructure the way we go about the task of helping academically under-prepared students succeed in college. The first of is supplemental instruction. Community colleges, such as El Camino College in California and Santa Fe Community College in Florida among many others have been employing supplemental instruction with great success. Unlike so many academic support programs that are stand-alone entities disconnected from the activities of the classroom, supplemental instruction is connected directly to the classroom. Its goal is to help students succeed in that one class. Least we forget the great majority of low-income students work while in college and many attend part-time.

Unlike the more privileged students in residential universities, many low-income students do not have the privilege of spending time on campus after class. Once class is over they leave campus to attend to other obligations. If we do not reach students in the classroom and align our actions to reshape their experience in the classroom, we will miss the great majority of students who need our support. As importantly, though academic researchers speak of student success as arising in the first year of college or perhaps in the second year, low-income students typically approach success one course at a time. They seek to succeed in one course, then move on to the next. The object of supplemental instruction is to help students achieve that goal, one course at a time. It is important to note that the success of supplemental instruction depends upon the degree to which the activities of the supplemental study groups are aligned with those in the classroom to which they are attached. This is the case because alignment enables the students to immediately apply the support they receive in the supplemental groups to the task of succeeding in the class to which the groups are attached, one class at a time. This typically arises because the supplemental group leaders, sometimes students, sometimes learning center staff, frequently meet with the instructor of the class and/or sit in the class.

This principle of alignment also helps explain the effectiveness of a second initiative that deserves our attention, namely basic skills learning communities. Rather than restructure support to just one course, as is the case of supplemental instruction, basic skills learning communities restructure support to two or more courses by restructuring the curriculum taken by academically under-prepared students. To do so they require students to enroll together in two or more courses that are in content and activities linked so that what is being learned in one course can be applied to what is being learned in another. At the same time, they provide a vehicle for academic support to be connected to all the courses that make up the learning community.

My colleague Cathy Engstrom and I at Syracuse University have just completed a four-year study of basic skills learning communities on 19 campuses across the country of which 13 were two-year colleges. With funding from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the William and Flora Hewlett

Foundation we surveyed nearly 7,000 students in basic skills learning communities and in comparison classrooms using a modified version of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and tracked their persistence over three years. At the same time, we carried out case studies of five learning communities of which three were in two-year colleges in California and New York. We interviewed over 400 students, some over three years to better understand their experience.

Rather than take up our time telling you about our findings, suffice it to say that basic skills learning communities improve student performance and persistence. They do so, in part, because of the way the courses that comprise the learning communities are aligned in their actions so that what is learned in a basic skills course can be applied in the other course or courses that make up the learning community. Listen to the voice of one student who reflected on her experience:

“The relationship in classes between accounting and ESL is helping a lot because the accounting professor is teaching us to answer questions in complete sentences ... to write better. And we are more motivated to learn vocabulary because it is accounting vocabulary, something we want to learn about anyway. I am learning accounting better by learning the accounting language better.”

Basic skills learning communities proved to be particularly effective when the faculty and staff changed the way they taught the courses. Rather than rely on lecture and drill, they employed pedagogies of engagement such as cooperative learning and problem-based learning. As a result, students not only learned the material of the courses in a connected manner, they also learned that material together. As one student told us, “We learn better together.”

The net effect is that students not only do better, they come to feel better about their capacity to succeed in the future. Listen to another student who reflected on how being part of a basic skill learning community shaped his sense of his abilities:

“It has benefited me because I have gotten to know people. I am not alone anymore. It has helped me feel more comfortable, more confident. The more confident I feel, the better I do.”

Then he adds: “I think I have gotten smarter since I have been here. I can feel it.”

The movement to employ other pedagogies in addressing the needs of academically under-prepared students is reflected in a third initiative that is now underway in California and in several other states to restructure the teaching of basic skills. Let me draw you attention to one initiative funded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching entitled Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC). A multi-site action-research project involving 11 California community colleges, SPECC focuses on teaching and learning in pre-collegiate mathematics and English language courses that make up the great bulk of basic skills courses taught in California. On each campus, collaborative faculty inquiry groups are exploring different approaches to classroom instruction, academic support, and faculty development. Their inquiry into the effects of these approaches engages a wide range of data, including examples of student work, classroom observations, and quantitative campus data. As one participant in the project noted “teaching basic skills is anything but basic.”

Though it is too early to gauge the success of this important initiative, it is apparent that some colleges such as Laney College and Pasadena City College have improved the success rate of their basic skills students. In the latter case the success rates in pre-algebra classes jumped from 53 percent to 74 percent. And all the result of a collaborative process of faculty inquiring into their practice. Can you imagine what changes we might achieve if we were all willing to use evidence to reconsider our own practices and together think differently about what we do. That, as you may know, is one of the primary goals of the Achieving the Dream initiative funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

By describing these initiatives, I hope to make a rather simple point — namely to address the needs of academically under-prepared students, a disproportionate number of whom are from underserved groups and from low-income backgrounds, we must stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life, stop our tendency to take an "add-on" approach to institutional innovation, and stop marginalizing our efforts and in turn our academically under-prepared students and take seriously the task of restructuring what we do.

The fact is that many colleges speak of the importance of increasing the retention of low-income students and sometimes invest considerable resources to that end. But for all that effort most institutions do not take the student success seriously. They treat it, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies, but do not address the underlying climate on campus that marginalizes low-income and under-represented students. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as a Freshman Seminar, but do little to reshape the prevailing educational experiences of students during the first year. Need to address the needs of academically under-prepared students? Add several basic skills courses, typically taught by part-time instructors, but do nothing to reshape how academic support is provided to students or how those courses are taught. The result is that efforts to enhance student retention are increasingly segmented into disconnected parts that are located at the margins of institutional academic life.

Therefore while it is true that there are more than a few retention programs on our campuses, most institutions have done little to change the nature of college life, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition.

To be serious about the success of academically under-prepared students, institutions would recognize that the roots of their attrition lie not only in student backgrounds and the academic skills they bring to campus, but in the very character of the educational settings in which students are asked to learn, settings that are the product of past decisions already made that can be changed if we are serious in our desire to translate the promise access offers to low-income students to real opportunity for success.

Nowhere does such change matter more than during the critical first year when student success is so much in doubt and the classrooms of that year where student first engage in learning. It is for that reason that there is much to be gained from a rethinking of the character of those courses and the development of coherent first-year programs whose purpose it is to ensure that all students receive the support they need to learn and persist beyond that year.

Though we have made progress in providing low-income increased access to higher education, we have been less successful in increasing their attainment of four-year degrees. If anything, the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students has increased over time. It is not enough to provide low-income students access to our universities and colleges and claim we are providing opportunity if we do not construct environments that effectively support their efforts to learn and succeed once access has been gained. Simply put, access without effective support is not opportunity.

Vincent Tinto is Distinguished University Professor at Syracuse University. This essay is adapted from his keynote address in May at the annual conference of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, of the University of Texas at Austin.

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/views/2008/06/09/tinto.

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