A Different Viewpoint on Student Retention

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Abstract: Although student retention, persistence, and graduation is a high priority for institutions and policymakers, graduation rates are not improving. Nowadays, more students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds have access to traditional higher education. In this essay, the author argues that an educational system that fails to prepare many students for higher education and the growing costs of attending college are making it more and more difficult for many students to persist and graduate. He concludes by stating that ultimately, we might need to decide, on a policy basis, who we want to go to college, who we want to succeed, and who will pay for it.

Keywords: Student success, graduation rates, admissions, retention, persistence, dropout, graduation, financial costs, higher education

There is good and bad news regarding student success in US institutions of higher education. The good news is that student retention, persistence, and graduation is a high priority for institutions and policymakers. The level of dialogue about these issues is high and people are interested in finding better ways to help students succeed. The bad news is that we are not doing very well and graduation rates are not improving. I will not take the time to go through the retention and persistence data in this brief essay, as the data are well known and documented.

The reality is that we are letting more students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds into traditional higher education than ever before. This is the result, in significant part, of decades of federal lawmaking to ensure that these students are not disenfranchised and excluded from higher education. The GI Bill, the Pell Grant, subsidized and unsubsidized federal loan programs, and the Lifelong Learning and Hope Scholarship Tax Credits, to name a few, all provide avenues to help alleviate the financial burden of going to college.

My premise has always been that there are a multitude of reasons that students do not either access or succeed in higher education. The first is finance, which is an easy target because of the rapid rise of college costs. My analysis using College Board data found that tuition and fee charges have increased 23% after adjusting for inflation in the five-year period between 2008-09 and 2013-14 at four-year public institutions, 25% at two-year publics, and 11% at private, not-for-profit institutions (Baum & Ma, 2013). Using the same data, I also created a historical trend of tuition and fee charges for institutions (see Figure 1). Adjusted for inflation, my extrapolation

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predicts that tuition and fees at four-year public institutions will double in 17 years, while tuition and fees at two-year publics and four-year privates will double in 23 and 27 years, respectively. To put this in perspective, the cost of tuition and fees at a public four-year university in 17 years will be akin to pulling out about $18,000 today from one's pocket. And that's just for tuition and fees. Room and board will likely cost another $18,000 to $20,000 by that point. All told, the annual, in-state cost of attendance at a public four-year institution will run about $38,000 in the early 2030s in today's dollars. Over a four-year period, this will total about $150,000.

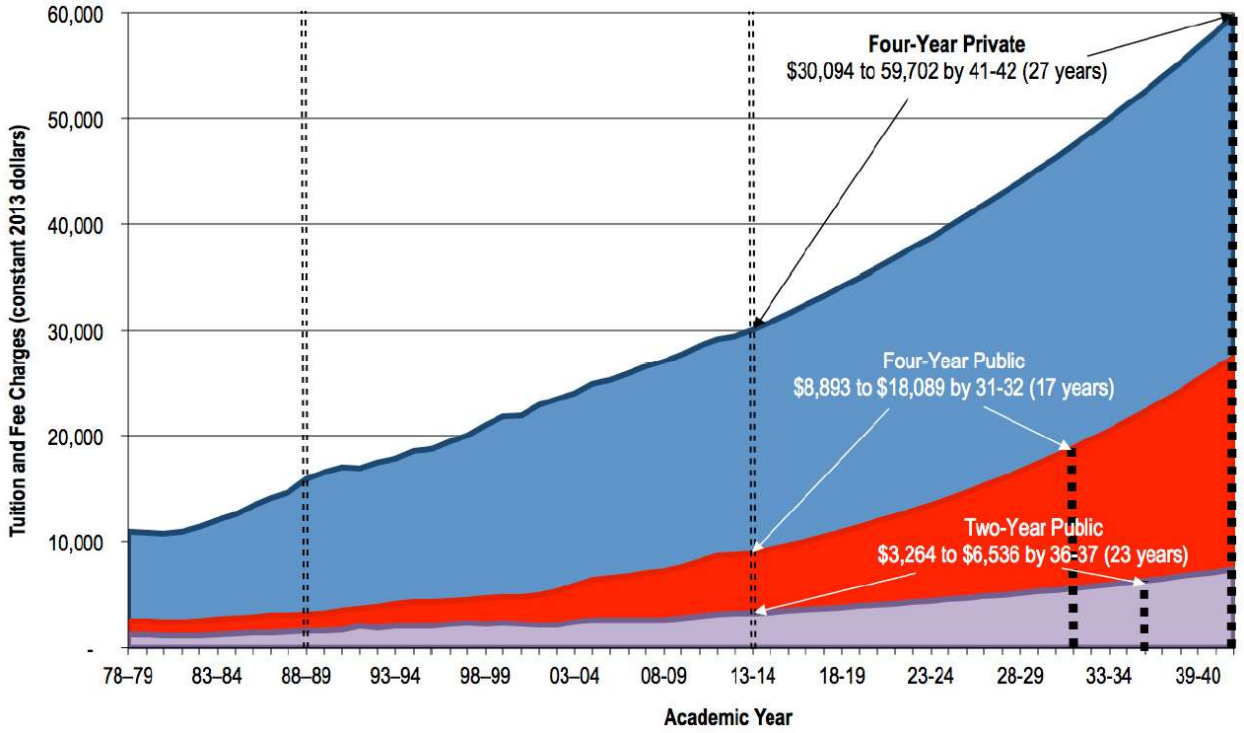

Figure 1. Tuition and fee history and forecast, 1978-79 to 2041-42, by sector (in 2013 constant dollars). Analysis by Author/Educational Policy Institute, 2014 (www.educationalpolicy.org). Historical Data from the College Board Trends in College Pricing 2013.

Note. Future trend used annual multiplier of 2.6% for private 4-year, 4.3% for public 4-year, and 3.1% for public 2-year colleges to arrive at increases above inflation, based on 25-year historical data.

Just imagine walking into a college financial aid office tomorrow morning and coming up with a $150,000 plan to pay for your son's and daughter's college experience at an in-state, public four-year institution. We are not even talking about the four-year privates, which will run about $70,000 a year in today's dollars, on average, and $120,000 for the highest-cost colleges (in today's dollars per year). Those figures total to about $300,000 for a four-year degree at the average private institutions and about half a million dollars for the elite, very selective institutions. Only a fraction of students attends these high-priced institutions, but the message taken from their pricing drives the above-the-fold news around the country (if not the world). It is no wonder that students self-select themselves out of college long before they are even eligible for admissions: they don't think they have a chance.

Most students do not understand how much college costs or how they can finance it. The high cost of college is pushing us to the tipping point (or have we surpassed it?), where the return on investment on higher education has diminished to the point that it may not be a prudent avenue for some prospective students. A 1999 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that only 24% of grades 6-12 parents could estimate the tuition and fee costs of college, compared to just 15% of their children (Horn, Xianglei, & Chapman, 2003). And while 44% of middle school parents had obtained information on college or could estimate the costs, only 16% of middle school students did the same.

To be fair, understanding the labyrinth of higher education is a challenge for all, regardless of income or background. The equivocal and contradictory reports in the news do not make this information much clearer. Just recently *The New York Times* published a report about college still being worth it (Leonhardt, 2014), while *The Chronicle of Higher Education* showcased the lack of gainful employment of recent graduates (Supiano, 2014). The challenge is that many students self-select themselves out of the college pipeline because they either do not believe they can afford it, do not feel they are prepared for it, or worse, simply feel they do not belong there (Hoxby & Turner, 2014; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). As Laura Rendon once wrote, college dropout begins to happen in grade school (Rendon, 1997).

Regardless of these heavy financial burdens on college students, I believe the true primary reason that students do not prepare, apply, admit, and succeed in higher education is academic wherewithal. Students who take rigorous coursework are much more likely to finish a bachelor's degrees than others, regardless of ancillary issues such as financial need (Adelman, 1997). The rigorous course work, in effect, serves as a proxy for other important criterion, such as study skills, time management, and organizational skills (Burrus, Jackson, Holtzman, Roberts, & Mandigo, 2013; Kerka, 2007). Students need to know "how" to learn and how to manage their time. They must develop higher order thinking skills and be able to work in isolation and in groups. While many students drop out because of finances, much more dropout because they just don't have the academic-related skill-sets to succeed.

The challenges facing higher education institutions, especially open admissions institutions, is daunting. The deficiencies in student preparation and learning can be broad and vast. The idea that institutions can essentially fix 13 years of schooling through one bridge program, one semester of Freshman 101, or one supplemental course is mindblowing.

Remediation is an example of a concern for students and retention specialists. Data from the NCES illustrate that 21% of first-year undergraduates attending public four-year institutions and 24% at two-year public institutions (2007-08) enrolled in at least one remedial course (Sparks & Malkus, 2013), and the percentages increase for non-White students (Ross et al., (2012). The variation in remedial enrollment between open admissions and very selective admissions institutions is also large: 13% vs. 26%. Remediation does impact graduation rates. NCES data suggest an 8% graduation gap between remedial vs. non-remedial students at four-year public institutions (53% vs. 61%).[1]

[1] This analysis is by the author using the NCES QuickStats data tool. Analysis considered first time Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) in 2003-04 at a four-year public institution who either did not enroll in a remedial course their freshman year, by the six-year graduation rate in 2009. Interesting note: other non-profit organizations have suggested a much larger gap in performance between remedial students and non-remedial students (e..g, 58% vs. 17%, as reported by the Complete College America). However, the author was unable to substantiate these claims by any viable method and their source work was incomplete.

The articles presented in this special issue of *Higher Learning Research Communications* discuss important issues such as prediction of dropout, frameworks for retaining students, and various strategies for addressing attrition, such as counseling, service learning, and academic support services. Given my thesis above, it is not to suggest that remediation, study skill training and time management, and many of the other strategies implored in this volume are not of utility. They clearly are. However, the philosophical question remains about how much we do for whom?

My prior research illustrated, with use of Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) data from the NCES, that students who have these attributes are much less likely to graduate from college:

- attend part-time,
- have a low GPA,
- are of non-traditional age (e.g., older),
- are non-White (with the exception of Asian),
- are first generation,
- are low income and/or independent,
- have a variety of risk factors (including having children, being single),
- delay entry to college,
- attend an HBCU or HSI,
- have lower levels of high school mathematics,
- attend more than one institution (although this can depend), and
- work more than 20 hours a week.

There are more. But these examples get at the crux of the issues that help determine whether a student will sink or swim in higher education. Some students have many of these attributes. Some only one or a few. The chart below illustrates that 66% of first time college students end up attaining a degree within six years, compared to 44% of students with at least one risk factor.[2] Those with multiple risk factors have a much lower change of postsecondary success. Only 34% of those with two or three risk factors, and 30% of those with four or more, graduated with a degree within 6 years.

[2] Risk factors in this analysis of BPS data include: part-time enrollment, delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, not having a regular high school diploma; having children, being a single parent, being financially independent of parents, working full time while enrolled.

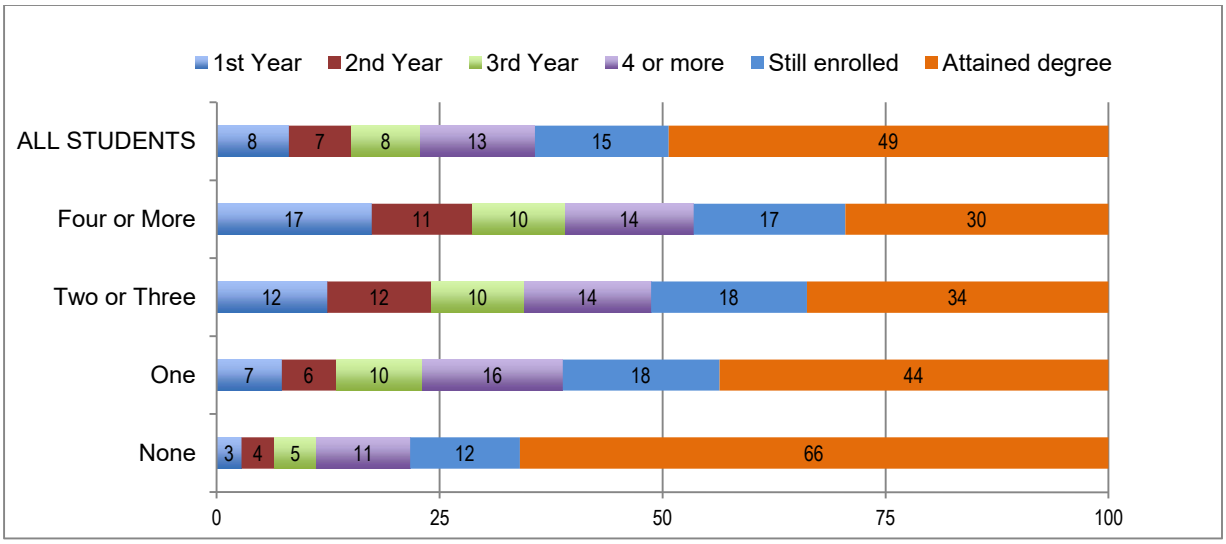

Figure 2. HLRC June Issue 2014, Author's analysis of Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) data for all first time postsecondary students, 2003-04, by 2009 (six years).

In the end, none of these should be used to deny access to college for an individual. That stated, somewhere along the continuum there is a line where students will not succeed. A line beyond where no matter what we do in higher education, we cannot fix the source challenges that face a particular student. The question is whether we want to know where that line is. With regard to public policy and public perception, it seems clear that no one currently wants to find that line. We seem completely content with the status quo and not dealing with the hard and difficult issue of drawing a line.

The reality is that our open system of education is costly. With regard to remediation alone, estimates suggest that the cost of current remediation practices is in the area of $3.6 billion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). I've alluded to the growing costs of higher education, especially with regard to the prices paid by students and parents. Are we at the tipping point of college opportunity?

In the end, what does this all mean? Given this somewhat dreadful information I have showcased, and beyond the policy implications that are handed down from states and the federal government upon which an institution has little or no control, what does an institution do about student access and success?

For starters, I believe the first rule of conduct for an institution is to define for themselves what success looks like and how that success is manifested in a student or cohort at their institution. It is critically important for institutions to understand the nature of success, not just from an academic perspective, but from a social, non-cognitive perspective. In the end, what is it that makes students success at College XYZ? Every institution can run internal multiple regression analyses to provide details on the attributes of graduates compared to dropouts and transfers. Academic data on progress can be merged with social data from institutional surveys to provide such information as study habits, use of time, work, comfortability, and yes, even happiness, to see how those link with academic outcomes.

This information can be used in several ways. First, it can be used to help instructional faculty better understand their students. Second, instructors should have some diagnostic tool to gauge when a student is having academic or other challenges. Third, academic advisors and counselors should absolutely use these data to help describe to freshman students what success looks like. In the workshops that I conduct, I suggest that advisors have prepared a one-page sheet to give to their students that lists that student's various academic and non-academic scores/preferences/habits (from institutional surveys) in one column compared with data of successful students from their college in a second column. Success should be visual and put in perspective. I think it is of great merit to illustrate to a student that, if they study X hours per week, use Y institutional support services, and work with their friends and peers, that they, too, can succeed. Students need roadmaps. Give them one.

The second rule of conduct is to be real about admissions. When an institution accepts the registration of a student, they are, in effect, entering a moral, ethical, and legal contract with the student to do whatever they can to help that student succeed. They need to ensure that the student gets the support he or she needs, which means that the institution must have insight into those needs early and often. Conversely, if the institution is not able, willing, or interested in doing so, then they should do the right thing and not admit that student. This sounds harsh, but I see this play out countless times at institutions. After the student is admitted, many aspects of the institution, besides basic instruction, are provided in a distant, noninvasive manner when they should be both intrusive and invasive. In this data age, it is relatively easy for the institution to diagnose the positives and negatives of a student at Day 1. It is up to the institution to identify these issues and provide assistance and not simply expect that students will find assistance on their own. At-risk students, who often are first generation and low-income, are typically the last people to ask for help. Institutions can't just "phone in" this type of support. They have to meet students where they are.

If you travel the similar circles as me, it is rare when I meet someone working at an institution who does not want their students to succeed. But sometimes we do some things that hinder rather than help students. Part of student success may be steering students away from your institution or department. If he or she does not belong there, do not enroll them, do not take their money, and do not burden them with loans that can never pay off. Or, just as bad or worse, the growing burden being placed on parents who are taking out PLUS loans or remortgaging their house to pay for college.

Perhaps one of the most immoral things we can do is to admit a student who seriously does not have the skills to stay in the game. Back to my original thesis, I do not agree with those that say that all students can learn and succeed in college and we should admit anyone who wants that opportunity. We should not. In consideration of the both financial and opportunity costs, we should be more mindful of the moral authority of accepting students who are not likely to succeed. Statistically, most students who apply to college can succeed. But there is also a large group of students that are ill-prepared to succeed at this level. Some students are not effectively motivated to do the work they need to do. Some just do not have the requisite skills to take on the "higher" learning. In many cases, these issues weren't their fault. They are simply outcomes of a system that poorly prepared them for postsecondary education, and in many cases, the world of work. But, nonetheless, here they are at our doorstep. Society has told them that success is difficult without a college degree. This, too, is an injustice, but that is the message we send daily to students. Just because they show up does not mean we can encourage and support them to

finish. For some level of student success, we do better by steering them to achieve their goals somewhere else. Somewhere cheaper; somewhere more appropriate to their interests. But not here.

We are fortunate to be served by a fairly well-articulated system of higher education. However, we have not been similarly well served by the infighting of our tiers. To be fair, we created this problem by forcing the community colleges and universities to vie competitively for public funding separately, so it should not be that shocking that this evolved into an us vs. them dialogue. Instead of playing a game of one-upmanship, we are better served by harnessing our system and using it in series, much the way the original California Master Plan envisioned the articulation between their community colleges and two university levels. Yes, there are clearly equity issues involved in this, but we can't talk about all issues in this one, very small, very trivial article.

In fact, we may be able to serve our at-risk youth better in community colleges that teach better, in many ways, than in universities. In 2001, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission moved its remedial coursework to the community college in order to save money but also to keep higher education for "higher education," and by 2012, 22 states had either eliminated funding or made other moves to relegate remedial class work to the community college system (Huse, Wright, Clark, & Hacker, 2005; Pant, 2012). Some saw this as a knock against college access. In reality, it makes much more sense to let students who are on the academic cusp experiment at a much lower cost afforded by community colleges; institutions that are often in their own communities, that also reduce the extra costs associated with room and board. Virginia, for example, guarantees transfer to all state institutions, including the flagship University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and the College of William & Mary, to students who complete an associate's degree at a specified academic level. This gives more breathing room to students and also significantly reduces their costs during the first two years of their articulated four-year program. In the end, these students graduate with the parchment of the university.

Ultimately, we need to decide, on a policy basis, who we want to go to college, who we want to succeed, and who will pay for it. Without delving more into the much-discussed issue of college costs, the amount carried by students and parents will continue to grow, as will the costs borne by states. The costs associated with sending more students to college is not trivial for our society. Another paper can discuss the philosophy of education and these other important questions. But for the institution, it is critical to understand student success and what to do about it. It isn't about saving all students, but it is about changing the culture of an institution to do what can be done to all students that are admitted. If they come, they should be served with the highest regard for the highest reward.

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