

Adult Literacy

Critical Skills in Post-Secondary Education and Employment

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Recent investigations commissioned by philanthropic foundations have focused increasing attention on the problem of student retention rates in public colleges. The numbers that have provoked this growing concern among educators are striking: the U.S. Department of Education reports that only 20% of young people who begin their higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years; in four-year institutions, only 4 in 10 students graduate within six years. These statistics, cited in a 2009 report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College* (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009), document a growing and troubling trend in public education. Although higher education may open its doors to admit vast numbers who want to come, keeping students enrolled in college seems to present a much more complicated challenge.

Increasing student retention requires more than the simple middle-class formula—advocating ambition and hard work with the promise of a better future and a better job—that predictably underlies stay-in-school campaigns. The Gates study found that a large number of those who did not stay in school came from “less privileged backgrounds.” These students reported that they generally had borne the cost of college without help from their families (6 in 10); had not received financial aid, loans, or scholarships (7 in 10); and had gotten little guidance in choosing a college (6 in 10; Johnson & Rochkind, 2009, p. 11). Yet, this is the very group to whom a college diploma is so crucial if they are to enjoy the better career and better salary promised by a higher education.

A 2007 study by the Pell Institute, which focused on strategies implemented by large public institutions in recent years to counter student attrition, underscores the particularly challenging circumstances of less privileged college students. This group of students, typically first-generation college students from low-income homes, is vulnerable to both financial and academic changes in college requirements. The study points to “stagnant funding for federal aid such as the Pell Grant and Work-Study programs,” forcing students to spend more hours working to pay their tuition bills than they spend in studying or attending class, with “predictable effects on their engagement and achievement on campus” (Eagle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 47). According to researchers, these same students, uninformed about possible alternate sources of funding for college study, are likely to become burdened by the debts incurred to pay for both school and living expenses. When these students are forced to leave college, they often do so in financial circumstances that are worse than those they experienced before beginning school.

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Many public institutions, like their smaller, private counterparts, have recently reshaped their admissions requirements to increase selectivity in their applicant pool. The Pell Institute report also cites restrictions on or, in some cases, the complete elimination of remedial education services, often imposed by the governing university or state system in the movement toward raising academic standards at four-year colleges. The study found that some institutions with more rigorous admissions requirements had actually seen a corresponding decrease in the diversity of their entering student population, “as low-income and minority applicants, who tend to be less well-prepared academically than their peers” can no longer compete as candidates for admission (Eagle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 47). Although most four-year colleges work with community colleges to initiate programs to help underprepared students acquire the skills they need to successfully transfer to senior institutions, the study warns that more stringent admissions requirements may serve as a form of “sticker shock” that discourages at-risk students from applying to public four-year universities at all (Eagle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 47).

The growing attention to retention rates has produced a number of innovative initiatives on campuses throughout the country. The widespread focus on the first-year experience has generated a literature (and website) devoted to the implementation and refinement of freshman-year learning communities (cohorts of students who are enrolled in two or three required courses together), freshman common reading programs, and orientation projects—all programs aimed at creating a sense of scholarly and social community to smooth the transition from high school to college. Most recently, administrators and researchers have been turning their attention to ways of addressing retention issues in sophomore year. Yet these programs generally target full-time students who attend college during the day and are not available to the more isolated groups of students who attend college in the evenings or on weekends.

Programs instituted to boost retention should, theoretically, serve to improve the success of all students on campus. However, the Pell study revealed that programs fashioned for the general population did not effectively serve the very particular needs of the low-income, underprepared population. In fact, the characteristics of this student group differed so much from those of the broader population as to compromise “the extent to which they [students] can utilize or participate in retention services and programs” (Eagle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 52). According to Thayer (2000), although “strategies that work for first-generation and low-income students are likely to be successful for the general student population as well...strategies that are designed for general campus populations without taking into account the special circumstances and characteristics of first-generation and low income students will not often be successful for the latter.” Research clearly underscores the need for colleges to design retention programs and practices that respond to the particular characteristics of low-income, first-generation college students to dramatically increase the graduation rates of this population along with graduation rates of the general student population (Eagle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 52).

Retention programs and practices are needed to target the particular circumstances of at-risk groups. Respondents to the Gates survey stressed, among other recommendations, the need for financial aid to part-time students whose

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work schedule often prevents them from taking advantage of the many support services offered on campus; more flexible scheduling, with more courses offered in the evening or on weekends; and child care options on campus (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009, p. 20). Part of what we need to communicate to this group of students is how important college is to their future, to the kind of job they might get, and to the amount of money they might earn (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009, p. 17). Studies predict that in the years 2004–2014, 33% of job openings will be limited to those who hold a bachelor's degree or higher and 45% to those with an associate's degree or certificate (Twomey, 2010). According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics confirm that college graduates generally have higher earnings and lower unemployment rates than those without degrees (Steinberg, 2010). If we can implement initiatives that help students navigate their way through a course of higher education, then we can equip them to share in a future job market and lifestyle that studies have consistently shown to be dependent on the successful completion of certificate and degree-granting programs.

BROOKLYN COLLEGE: A CLOSER LOOK

A Brooklyn College Task Force report, "Retention and Graduation Success" (President's Task Force, 2010), reflects the increased national attention to retention practices and offers a current glimpse of its student population. As of Fall 2009, 43.5% of the 2005 first-time freshman class had left the college without attaining a degree. For those who entered with a high-school average lower than 77%, 8.7% had graduated within four years, and 28.1% had graduated within six years (compared with 24% within four years and 51.3% within six years for those entering college with an 85–85.9% high-school average). Linked closely to the findings in the Gates and Pell studies, retention rates for part-time students reflect the difficulties these students described in balancing their work and school responsibilities: of those who attempted less than 12 credits in their first semester, 23.6% graduated after six years. Consistent with these data, first-time freshmen with cumulative GPAs of 2.00–2.99 (C through B-) had a six-year graduation rate of 43.5%, compared with a six-year graduation rate of 64.2% of those with a GPA of 3–4 (B through A).

To be accepted at one of the four-year colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), students need, among other measures, to meet the minimum standards for entrance into the first-semester freshman composition course: a 480 on the verbal section of the SAT, or a 75 on the English Regents, or a 7 (out of a possible 12) on the ACT writing test. Those who do not meet at least one of these criteria and who come from second-language backgrounds must take the ACT writing test, with their score determining their admission to a variety of CUNY programs—a four-year college, a two-year community college, or a special CUNY language immersion program (CLIP) program.

CLIP Programs

Students whose ACT test scores are at the most elementary levels (a score of 2) are recommended for participation in CLIP programs. These courses serve students who need intensive practice in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English. Students can stay in a CLIP program for up to one year, paying \$145 for

the 12-week spring and fall semesters and \$75 for the 6-week summer and winter programs. Students may not use financial aid grants for CLIP tuition. These students' places in the CUNY colleges that accepted them are reserved until they have completed the CLIP program.

Community Colleges

Students with ACT scores below 4 enter one of six CUNY two-year community colleges. Historically, these junior colleges have represented the gateway to a higher education, a supportive environment in which students can build and refine the academic skills necessary for the associate's degree offered after the completion of 60 credits or for the transition to a four-year institution granting a bachelor's degree. Community college students are typically older than the typical college student, with 60% working more than 20 hours a week and 25% working more than 35 hours a week (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009, p. 6).

Traditionally, these institutions accepted applications until shortly before the semester began. However, the economic forces that have brought increased unemployment throughout the country have also brought a remarkable increase in the number of applications to community colleges. A 2009 article in the *New York Times* described the surge in applications to two-year CUNY colleges, causing all but one of the six schools to take the previously unheard-of step of closing admissions during the summer months. LaGuardia Community College reported an enrollment increase of 50% over the last 10 years, with applications to all community colleges experiencing a 19% rise from spring 2009 to spring 2010 (DeChillo, 2009, p. A 27). These colleges, once welcoming all who had a high-school diploma or GED, are now faced with the dilemma of maintaining the delicate balance between access and quality. It is probably safe to predict that the students most immediately affected by the growing demand for seats in community colleges, those whose college careers will be deferred if not derailed, are those who are the first in their families to attend college in the United States and on whom the economic burden of paying for classes weighs most heavily.

Four-Year Colleges

At Brooklyn College, a senior CUNY institution, students with ACT scores above 4 are placed in either the intermediate or advanced levels of English as a second language (ESL). After having taken ESL courses, students take the ACT writing test again, as an exit exam; a passing score of at least 7 allows entrance into the two-semester, mainstream freshman composition courses required of all Brooklyn College students.

For any entering student, adjusting to the academic culture of college can be challenging. For students who enter without the necessary reading and writing skills and who are burdened with working to pay tuition and living expenses, acclimation is even more complicated. In addition, in the last few years, progress from ESL courses to mainstream English courses has become even more difficult as colleges have begun to enforce restrictions on the number of years students can spend in ESL courses. At Brooklyn College, for example, students may spend two years in the ESL program. Therefore, students entering at the intermediate level (the lowest level offered by Brooklyn College) have a maximum of two academic years (along with winter and summer immersion programs) to bring their

English reading and writing skills to a level appropriate for freshman composition. The implementation of these restrictions can be seen both as part of CUNY's drive to raise academic standards and as a response to an ever-growing budget crisis in public education. ESL courses, essential to assuring a student's academic success, are nonetheless costly—they represent more hours than credits earned and delay a student's entry into mainstream courses, adding years to the time needed for graduation.

Brooklyn College offers second-language students academic support through tutoring centers and through intensive immersion programs in reading and writing during the winter intersession and in the summer sessions both before the students' first semester at school and between their first and second years. However, for some students, even those who maintain a respectable grade point average (GPA) in all their courses, two years is not enough time to bring reading and writing skills to the required minimum level. Recently, a student with 25 credits and a 3.1 GPA, who has been in the ESL program for two years but has not been able to pass the ACT reading test, was denied his petition to register for the fall semester and was granted one last chance to take a reading course and test this summer. If he does not attain a passing score this summer, he will be dismissed from Brooklyn College. To what extent this failure is a reflection of the accuracy of the testing instruments themselves or of the many different factors that combine to shape a student's college career is a question outside the scope of this article. Yet what is clear, in looking at the records of students who now are in danger of being dismissed from the college, is how costly the retention problem has become both to students and the society in which they need to function.

Students who take ESL courses also take mainstream courses in disciplines such as mathematics, computer science, art history, and laboratory sciences, maintaining a full-time course load (12 class hours) and accumulating credits toward graduation as they improve their English-language skills. For students who receive Pell grants as financial aid, these ESL courses are calculated by hour, not by credit; for example, a student enrolled in a two-credit intermediate ESL course that meets for six hours a week will have used six credits worth of Pell aid. Thus, the slower progress toward graduation is accompanied by the greater depletion in Pell allowance. In community colleges, with many levels of ESL courses, students may find themselves running out of Pell funds before they finish their degrees. This year, a new regulation that allows students to use their Pell grants for summer study without borrowing from next academic year's funds should help alleviate some of the financial stress of paying for college courses.

PROMISING PRACTICES: RETENTION PROGRAM STRATEGIES AND MODELS FOR REPLICATION

If our concern for retention is inclusive, encompassing the broad spectrum of students in our colleges—both those who fit the traditional definition of college student and those, ever more plentiful, who present very different profiles; for example, those from diverse language backgrounds, those who are older, those who attend part-time, and those who are parents—then we need to find ways of addressing the needs of this increasingly diverse student body. Nonprofit and Jewish vocational service organizations can play a significant role in providing

on- and off-campus supportive services to help college students successfully enroll, remain in school, and reach graduation.

F·E·G·S' expertise, gained through almost three decades of service to secondary school students and decades of service in providing literacy and employment services to adults, easily transfers to initiatives that support those newly enrolling or currently enrolled in post-secondary institutions. Since 1982, F·E·G·S has worked in under-achieving high schools throughout New York City to lower school drop-out rates, provide career guidance, prepare students for college, and provide case management and crisis counseling to address the myriad issues facing low-income students in particular. Currently, F·E·G·S helps 4,500 young adults each year as they work to graduate from high school, obtain a GED, enter college, and prepare for and obtain employment. Additionally, through adult basic education and ESL and GED instruction, it assists 3,000 adults annually who have low literacy, limited English proficiency, and minimal work experience, helping them improve their literacy, attain GEDs, and secure employment as they pursue higher education.

To deliver these services, F·E·G·S has developed the CareerFirst[™] program model, an approach that recognizes that, in addition to academic and employment support, these young people need significant support and assistance in their social and emotional development as they face myriad challenges in their families and communities, at school, and at work. CareerFirst[™] provides the following services:

- Academic services such as tutoring, homework assistance, GED classes, and post-secondary education planning and transition services
- Career development services including career exploration, job readiness training, job shadowing, internships, and job placement
- Supportive services including mentoring, counseling, and personal skills development with a focus on close mentoring, using the primary person model relationship with an adult who is dedicated to supporting student success; the advisor plays a key role in aiding social and emotional development, honing students' communication skills, decision-making abilities, and awareness of risky behaviors while, at the same time, giving students "hard" academic and employment services

F·E·G·S is currently working to build "Bridge to College" services that follow and support young persons and older adults during this transition to college and throughout their college career. The F·E·G·S model, as it has done so successfully in the secondary school system, can equally be part of the solution to retention in higher education. F·E·G·S is particularly well positioned to work with this at-risk population because of its extensive knowledge of youth development and counseling strategies, adult and family service supports, case management capacity, ability to support academic advancement, and its significant experience providing career preparation and direct job placement. College students need to work while they are in school, and employment services are already a critical part of the F·E·G·S model, enabling students to pursue and persist in their post-secondary education.

Practical solutions to address the needs of underprepared students for the transition to college and for those already enrolled in college—full- or part-time—to achieve overall college success include the following:

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Transitional Support: (College Readiness)

- College preparation courses provided in the final years of high school
- Replication of other successful high-school transition initiatives that allow high-school students to take college-level courses on college campuses, giving early exposure to the culture of higher education
- Prior to enrollment, specialized guidance in college selection and fuller understanding of the financial aspects of college enrollment: managing debt, availability of grants, loans, work study programs
- Workshops and individual counseling to help students navigate various on-campus college services, processes, and offices, such as admissions, financial aid, bursar, registrar, and student support services
- A cohort-based model in which smaller groups of students can create peer networks within their college
- For adults in GED classes: employment/education models to map transition to enrollment in post-secondary education while managing family responsibilities

Academic Support

- Academic remediation prior to college enrollment and placement test preparation to enable students to start college in credit-bearing courses
- Ongoing academic tutoring with flexible hours tailored to students' schedules and individual needs; tutoring structured through a "drop-in" center that is time and schedule sensitive
- Workshops on time management, study skills, self-advocacy, and meeting academic expectations to succeed in college-level classes

Employment and Financial Literacy

- Financial education to help students navigate the financial aid process and learn ways to balance the monetary demands of college and life
- Financial support in the form of stipends (for books, travel, cost of living, etc.) to diminish obstacles that hinder student progress
- Job placement services that are sensitive to students' academic priorities and long-term career goals
- Accessing tuition reimbursement as a job benefit from places of employment
- Child care support for parenting students

Social-Emotional Support

- Needs-based assessment at the point of enrollment for those at risk of dropping out
- Ongoing and structured case management, outreach, counseling, and supportive services (including referrals) for students and their families to address both the social and cultural obstacles experienced in college
- Teams or cohorts of students linked together to create a peer support network
- Social events organized by student leaders to encourage students to learn from the strengths of their colleagues and communities
- Referral to social services such as child care, housing assistance, family counseling, substance abuse and mental health services
- Proactive advisement to ensure retention throughout the first two years of post-secondary education

Build Institutional Capacity and Support

- Consistent communication between college and Jewish vocational service staff to identify students at risk and encourage referrals for services before they drop out
- Professional development for college faculty, staff, and administrators to develop their ability to proactively identify and support struggling students
- Career guidance and the development of employment potential related to the course of study pursued by the student before and at the point of graduation

CONCLUSION

F·E·G·S, with its history of and extensive experience in serving disconnected youth and adults with nontraditional educational backgrounds, including those who are recent immigrants to the United States, is ideally positioned to implement programs that address the needs of this at-risk student population. Increasing the retention rate of these students is vital not only to their own future well-being but also to the stability and soundness of the economy in which these students will come to play an essential part.

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