Underrepresented Minorities:
Making it to and Staying in Postsecondary Education*

A 2009 report from the Education Trust indicates that, of all freshmen entering two-year institutions in 1999, only one-third ended up with a certificate, associate degree, or transferred to a four-year college within four years. For underrepresented minorities (for example, Latinos, blacks, or Native Americans), the success rate was only 24 percent as compared to 38 percent for other students. And only 7 percent of the underrepresented students who had entered community colleges ended up with a bachelor degree within a ten-year period.

With specific respect to postsecondary education, a consistent set of findings underscores how poorly United States postsecondary education institutions serve segments of the population. In general, students of color make up about 30 percent of students on United States campuses. About 20 percent of the college students designated as minorities were born outside the United States or have a foreign-born parent, and slightly over 10 percent spoke a language other than English while growing up. Slightly over 10 percent of students in higher education are diagnosed as having disabilities and special needs.

The Perspective of a Latina University Student

As a student working at the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, Renata Figueroa indicated interest in exploring the problem of improving the education pipeline to higher education for Latino/a students. She cited data from the Pew Research Center suggesting that 89% of Latino/a students recognize the importance of obtaining a college degree, but only 48% actually plan on getting one. For every hundred Latino/a students in elementary school, only about half receive a high school diploma, eleven graduate from college, four complete graduate school, and only about 0.3% of the initial hundred obtain a graduate degree. In exploring causal factors, she reviewed barriers experienced by Latino/a students who were new to the U.S.A. and those born here of immigrant parents. Below are briefly edited excerpts from her write-up:

There are many reasons enticing the immigration of Latino/a students. In the last couple of years, many fled their homes to escape the violence and terrorism caused by drug wars and political oppression. For others, it is the family's daily struggle to make ends meet that motivates them to find better economic opportunities in the U.S.A.

Immigrating parents have the goal of providing their children the resources that were unavailable in their native country, or that they themselves did not have while growing up. One of the main resources they hope to give their children is a better education. Many of the children lack a quality education or did not complete the equivalence of high school schooling, given that they had to work to help support the family.

Some immigrant families risk their lives in order to enter the United States, leaving family members behind with the possibility of never seeing them again. Once they have reached the United States, the family must adapt to a new living style in which the language and education system are foreign to them. This transition can be too much for a child to bear considering the physical and emotional hardships they endured during the emigration process.

Latino students born in the United States do not experience the problems of transitioning into a new country. However, many U.S. born and immigrant Latino/a students' come from families working for minimum wages or less. This places their children in schools with conditions that compare unfavorably with those enrolling student from predominantly middle and higher income families.

Studies have reported that only about 45 percent of underrepresented students who entered four-year colleges as freshmen had received a bachelor degree six years later as compared to 57 percent of other students. The education pipeline problem is understood to be even greater when one factors in how many students never graduate from high school. And this is particularly the case for some subgroups. For example, in the United States, there are over 50 million students in K–12, with about 17 million in 9–12. About three-fourths of Asian American and white ninth graders graduate from high school within four years; the combined figure for Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans is about half of that.

As a report from the Center for American Progress concludes:

> "America's higher education system has a readiness problem. Students are not ready for college, colleges are not ready for students, and public policy, long focused on making college more affordable, is not yet ready to take on the complex challenge of ensuring people successfully complete college degrees and transition into rewarding careers, as opposed to just getting in."

Addressing the Problem in Terms of Equity of Opportunity and Social Justice

Many facets of family, school, and neighborhood life, including peer subcultural considerations, are all recognized as of major relevance in shaping any student's development, learning, engagement, disengagement, and performance at school. And of particular concern are variables such as poverty, cultural and family considerations, and native language.

Whatever the causes, it is clear that a large proportion of underrepresented students are not experiencing an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This is the case from their preschool years through high school and with respect to going on to and completing postsecondary education.

With this in mind, it is essential to use the lenses of equity and social justice in rethinking education policies and practices at every level. Policies and practices aimed at enhancing equity of opportunity and social justice emphasize a variety of compensatory interventions. These include improving health and welfare, prenatal care, early childhood enrichment readiness to enter K–12, student and family engagement and re-engagement in schools, personalizing instruction to account for diversity appropriately, and ensuring effective student and learning supports are used to enable learning.

One current driver of improvement is concern for preparing all students for the global marketplace. However, so far this concern has not moved concern about equity of opportunity in postsecondary education out of the margins of national and state education policy discussions. For the most part, federal and state policies for postsecondary education preparation, recruitment, access, transition, and retention have been formulated in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner and are disconnected from each other.

Relevant programs exist in many federal offices. Within the Department of Education alone, major programs are managed by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Office of Postsecondary Education, and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education. The lack of integration among the offices and programs is common knowledge. A similar disconnect exists between these offices and relevant programs offered by other federal agencies. The impact of the disconnect has been the emergence of a host of fragmented practices.

For more on policy and practices for addressing equity of opportunity for postsecondary participation, see

> *>How the Common Core must ensure equity by fully preparing every student for postsecondary success: Recommendations from the Regional Equity Assistance Centers on implementation of the Common Core State* Standards.
> http://eac.wested.org/resource/how-the-common-core-must-ensure-equity/

>*From Aspirations to Action: Increasing Postsecondary Readiness for Underrepresented Students: Resource Toolkit* from the Smaller Learning Communities Program, U.S. Department of Education http://www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/postsecondarytool7-3.pdf

>*Expanding Underrepresented Minority Participation: America's Science and Technology Talent at the Crossroads.* National Academy of Sciences.
http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12984/expanding-underrepresented-minority-participation-americas-science-and-technology-talent-at

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Renata's Perspective on Family Considerations
(edited excerpts from her write-up)

Considering that many Latino parents are not familiar with the education system in the United States, the type of practical support they can provide their child to excel in school is limited. For the most part, immigrant Latino parents do not speak English. In some families, both parents work and multiple shifts are not uncommon. Therefore, little parent help with homework, projects, college applications and the like is available.

Not having involved parents may motivate a student to take the initiative for her/his own education and just have parents sign required paperwork. On the other hand, without support at home, some students may feel that succeeding in school and obtaining a higher education is not for them.

Paying for college is an obstacle that prevents many from getting a higher education, especially when their parents' income is just enough to sustain the family. Since there is a lack of accurate information about different ways to pay for college, these students believe it will be an additional economical burden if they decide to continue their education. The problem of helping make ends meet and increasing the financial strain by adding college expenses can lead some students to prioritize their family's economic needs by going to work rather than college, without considering the larger benefits that obtaining a college degree will have for them in the long run.

A cultural factor related to family is that Latino/a parents want to keep their children as close to home as possible and continue the tradition of strong family bonds. Moreover, families that still hold native traditions believe that girls must become housewives and not pursue an education and boys must work as soon as they are old enough to do so. In these instances, many Latino/a students heavily weigh family communal expectations and values when considering college.

Despite all this, many Latino/a students see getting an education can both improve their life and also financially assist their families, thereby making them proud after all the sacrifices they have made.

Some of the Recommendations that Have Been Made

Despite all that has been discussed, proposed, and implemented to date, equity of opportunity and social justice remain elusive for too many underrepresented minorities. Because of the growing recognition that reducing the high rate of secondary school dropouts represents an economic necessity as well as a public health and a civil rights imperative, we expect increasing attention will be given to enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school. It is unclear, however, that this attention will spill over in ways that increase the number of underrepresented subgroups of students who are able to move on and succeed in postsecondary education.

To address the inequities related to postsecondary education, policies and practices have stressed programs to bolster recruitment, access, transition, and retention. The emphasis is on:

- cultivating early attitudes, a college-going culture, and readiness
- recruitment outreach including involvement on K–12 campuses of postsecondary institutions and K–12 students coming to postsecondary sites
- financial aid such as scholarships and loans
- first-year transition programs including welcoming and support networks;
- academic advising before the first year
- monitoring to provide further advice, learning supports and special assistance for problems

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Renata's Perspective on the Impact of School Settings, Teachers, and Peers

Based on her own experiences and review of the literature, Renata pointed to the concerns summarized below:

Stereotypes about Latinos (e.g., lack effort in their work) are sometimes infused in teachers, leading them to consciously or unconsciously treat Latino students differently. This difference in behavior can be subtle, such as not answering the students' questions, not offering important learning opportunities, not offering enough support). It can also produce self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., teachers' low expectations lead Latino students to internalize the low expectations resulting in poor academic performance). As a result, even students who go to college often are unprepared for rigorous courses in higher education, and this contributes to high Latino dropout rates.

English language learning raises other dilemmas. Since many Latino students are born and raised in Spanish-speaking families, English is their second language. Therefore, K-12 schools offer English Language Development (ELD) programs to help them improve their verbal and writing skills. In some schools, these programs are provided alongside the school's English-based curriculum; in others, students take all required subjects within the ELD program until they have met the English language standards. In both instances, the English language learners tend not to interact with English speaking classmates. This form of segregation works against access to insider information from knowledgeable peers about such matters as how to successfully navigate the country's education system and makes it harder for them to integrate into the school culture and find the necessary resources and motivation to succeed in school.

As a result, even students who go to college often are unprepared for rigorous courses in higher education, and this contributes to high Latino dropout rates.

Retaining Students in Higher Education

The Education Trust has stressed that disparities with respect to the retention of low-income and underrepresented minority students by colleges are alarming. With specific respect to retention, it is noteworthy that a survey of community college students who were recipients of the Federal Pell Grant program (for low-income students) indicated that the sample completed their studies at the same rate (32 percent) as other students; those who transferred to four-year colleges graduated at the same rate (60 percent) as other students.

With specific respect to retaining minority students, Watson, Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) offer the following:

(1) *Academic Preparedness.* Research shows that between 30 and 40 percent of all entering freshmen are unprepared for college-level reading and writing. . . .

(2) *Campus Climate.* While researchers agree that "institutional fit" and campus integration are important to retaining college students to degree completion, campus climate mediates undergraduates' academic and social experiences in college. Minority students inadequately prepared for non-academic challenges can experience culture shock. Lack of diversity in the student population, faculty, staff, and curriculum often restrict the nature and quality of minority students' interactions within and out of the classroom, threatening their academic performance and social experiences.

(3) *Commitment to Educational Goals and the Institution.* The stronger the educational goal and institutional commitment, the more likely the student will graduate. Research shows that congruence between student goals and institutional mission is mediated by academic and social components, and that increased integration into academic and social campus communities causes greater institutional commitment and student persistence.

(4) *Social and Academic Integration.* The process of becoming socially integrated into the fabric of the university has also been found to be both a cumulative and compounding process, and the level of social integration within a given year of study is part of a cumulative experience that continues to build throughout one's college experience. The establishment of peer relations and the development of role models and mentors have been defined in the literature as important factors in student integration, both academically and socially.

(5) *Financial Aid.* For many low-income and minority students, enrollment and persistence decisions are driven by the availability of financial aid. In 1999–2000, 77 percent of financially dependent students from families with less than $20,000 in family income received some financial aid, with an average award of $6,727. In contrast, 44 percent of those from families with income of $100,000 or more received aid, with an average award of $7,838. Low-income and minority students who receive grants generally are more likely to persist than those who receive loans. However, given the rising costs of attending college, it is unlikely that low-income students will be able to receive bachelor's degrees without any loan aid. At the same time, the research also suggests that the shifts in aid from grants to loans and from need-based to merit-based programs adversely affects both enrollment and persistence for minority students. Reversing these shifts may be needed to increase college access and success for low-income and minority students.

Moreover, as a 2011 National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition report suggests the following as sources of encouragement and motivation to enhance ability and/or desire to persist in college and stresses that lack of support in any of these areas can be a barrier to continuing education:
- Family support in embracing the value of education
- Students' hope of giving back to their communities
- On-campus social support
  >retention of a strong cultural identity
  >opportunities to maintain active connections to home communities
  >supportive and involved faculty
  >institutional commitment, including:
  >>financial support (scholarships and fellowships, e.g., the College Assistance Migrant Program [CAMP] scholarship) and knowledge regarding how to obtain and manage financial aid (e.g., financial counseling sessions)
  >>resources for child and family care (especially for single parents) and retention programs designed specifically for the underrepresented populations
  >>academic programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of the students
  >>>academic, summer-bridge, and orientation programs
  >>>coursework with cultural connections
- Pre-college academic preparation, including access to information technology necessary for successful transition to college.

For more recommendations about enhancing postsecondary success, see

> >*Promising and Practical Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Success* from the
> U.S. Department of Education
> http://www.ed.gov/college-completion/promising-strategies/tags/Underrepresented%20Students

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Renata's Perspective on Financial Accessibility in Addressing the Pipeline Problem

The government is aware that one main reason Latinos do not pursue higher education is due to affordability concerns. For Latinos born in the United States, the government has taken some measures regarding the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For example, there has been an increase in Pell Grants of up to $900 per student in order to help cover college expenses, as well as an expansion of the eligibility criteria for federal funding to include more low and middle-income students.

To motivate Latino students who were born in the United States to apply for governmental financial aid, FAFSA was simplified to make it easier for students to complete the application by adding the option of electronically transferring their tax information from the Internal Revenue Service. In 2014, the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act introduced a new method of loan repayments that do not to exceed 10% of the student's monthly income; if after 20 years the loans are not repaid (10 years for public service workers), the loans are excused. With these changes, the government hopes to encourage Latino students to attend college by easing some of the financial strain of higher education. These measures seem promising in theory, but are still insufficient when considering that college tuition rates are increasing.

Recently the focus has been on trying to help immigrant Latinos afford higher education through the Dream Act. The Dream Act provides immigrant students the opportunity to receive state financial aid and educational institution aid in order to decrease their out-of-state tuition rate (California Student Aid Commission, 2015).

Non-profit institutions have also been initiated to help low-income students cover college costs, such as the POSSE Foundation, Gates Millennium Scholars Foundation, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund among others, that place students in renounced universities and help them cover tuition costs. At a more local level, states are attempting to increase educational awareness among Latino students and their families. For example, states are promoting outreach programs that provide personalized academic and financial counseling to students, explaining the implications of higher education in terms of future benefits, and providing support to low-performing schools to ensure success of their Latino students.

In 2007, College Board initiated the College Keys Compact initiative that would include the collaboration of schools and colleges with the purpose of making higher education more accessible to low-income Latino students. This initiative focuses on various school efforts, such as having a standard curriculum for challenging courses that would prepare students for higher education, increasing college awareness programs that target students and parents, educating faculty and staff in teaching their students about the college processes and financial aid, and having educational institutions fund campus fairs, tours, and fee waivers in hope of motivating Latino students to become college-bound.

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Concluding Comments

It has long been argued that access to quality education K–16 is key to closing the economic and social gap. Given this, it is undeniable that underrespresented minorities are part of a large cadre who deserve a better system of student and learning supports to enable them to have an equal opportunity to succeed at each level of their formal education.

Should we be optimistic about improvements?

The Education Trust thinks so. In 2013, they highlighted data from the U.S. Department of Education and stated:

> "Over the past three years, the number of black and Latino undergraduates enrolled in four-year colleges grew far faster than the enrollment of white students, and success rates for both groups also increased. Certainly, more improvement is necessary. Success rates (i.e., six-year graduation rates) for both groups still lag those of white students. And even with the recent increases, the current graduation rate for black students is still below their rate in 2006 by 2.2 percentage points. But if more colleges and universities can match the improvement patterns seen at the leading institutions ..., closing the college completion gap is within our reach."
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> (http://1k9gl1yevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Intentionally_Successful.pdf)

In 2014, the U.S. Education Department released its *Projections of Education Statistics to 2022* predicting that, between 2011 and 2022, Black and Hispanic enrollment growth in higher education will surge by 26 and 27 percent, respectively. Enrollment by American Indians and Alaskan Natives are projected to remain at the same level. Whites and Asian Americans enrollment is expected to increase 7-percent. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014051.pdf

These projections reflect some promise and the need for much more improvement. Policy and practice designed to enhance the ways schools create readiness for postsecondary education have yet to be comprehensively conceived and well informed by research. One area in need of greater attention is the development of a full continuum of supports encompassing the most promising interventions. And because the emphasis on readiness at all levels of education focuses mainly on skills, policy must enhance the priority given to practices for enhancing students' attitudes about preparing for postsecondary education and their daily motivated engagement in school opportunities.

It is clear that there is considerable agreement about an array of factors that should be proactively addressed in efforts to improve recruitment and enhance access. At the same time, research findings on what interventions are most effective are debated. As a result, policies and practices continue to reflect a combination of limited planning, traditional wisdom, adaptation of successful commercial marketing strategies, and insufficient financial support.

From our perspective, we stress that it is time to move beyond piecemeal and marginalized policy and fragmented practices. The need is to develop a comprehensive and cohesive system of interventions that address barriers to students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school at every stage from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary. Establishment of such a system is a public education, public health, and civil rights imperative.

Renata's Perspective on Research Needs

Clearly, future research must explore the wide range of factors that affect whether underrepresented minorities will make it to and graduate from institutions of higher education. Renata was particularly concerned that too little research focused on factors influencing Latino students' motivation for schooling. She explored parental engagement, socio-cultural influences, school climate, teacher and peer transactions, and she stressed the need for more research on how such factors "mold" motivation across a Latino/a student's academic career. In this connection, she noted the lack of research on how siblings decisions to attend or not attend college influence a student's motivation for higher education.

She was also concerned that too little attention was being paid to the impact of traumatic experiences (e.g., crossing the border without documents, having a parent deported). She stressed "This is especially relevant for the portion of Latino students who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder after having escaped political and drug warfare in their country of origin. In addition, there have been a growing number of immigrant Latino children being placed in detention centers when arriving to the United States."

Note: The Center has shared in greater detail its perspective on interventions to support readiness, recruitment, access, transition, and retention for postsecondary education success. See

>*Interventions to support readiness, recruitment, access, transition, and retention for postsecondary education success: An equity of opportunity policy and practice analysis.* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf

>*Native American students going to and staying in postsecondary education: An intervention perspective.* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/native.pdf

For more on developing a comprehensive support system, see

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System.* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf

>*2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports.* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

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