

STUDENT SUCCESS: It's Not Just for Students

By George L. Mehaffy

STUDENT SUCCESS: AN INTRODUCTION

In recent years, discussions about student success have figured prominently in publications, conferences, and projects in higher education. Many have commented that the growing focus on student success suggests a major shift from access to completion. But the actual shift is even more consequential. What we are seeing is a remarkable transition, shifting focus away from institutions and practitioners to a focus on students.

In the mid-1980s, when accreditation organizations started asking about learning outcomes, I can recall the consternation among colleagues. Learning outcomes? Judging by the reaction, a lot of people hadn't thought much about learning outcomes. This current focus on student success may signal yet another example of that same shift in focus and may provoke equal consternation. In organizations often designed to reflect the interests of practitioners, a focus on students and student outcomes is perhaps radical.

I suspect that this is similar to what we have witnessed recently in the field of medicine. For many years, medicine's focus seemed to be on physicians and the practice of

medicine. Only in recent years has there been a shift in focus to patients. Now, physicians and hospitals alike are increasingly evaluated not by their credentials or their publications but by the outcomes for patients, both in measures of healing and in measures of satisfaction with the experience.

In the two articles below, we develop a rationale for student success and describe a new student success project, Re-Imagining the First Year of College (RFY), now underway within the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). The first article explores the reasons for the shift in focus to provide more emphasis on student success, while the second article reports on granular insights from two campuses participating in the RFY project.

TWO CORE IDEAS

Two core ideas have informed and animated the work on student success at AASCU. The first is that we now know an amazing amount about practices in higher education that tend to result in greater student success. We have research evidence of the effectiveness of practices such as guided pathways, intrusive advising, predictive

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analytics, co-requisite remediation, growth mindset, high-impact practices. These and a host of other programs and practices have proven to make substantial differences in student outcomes.

We are always trying to learn and test new approaches and new strategies, armed with the incredible insights that have been accumulating. Yet as we look out across the landscape of higher education, we see spotty or even lack of use of many of these ideas. The conclusion is inevitable: **The higher education community does not have a knowledge problem; it has an implementation problem.** Proven practices are scattered across the landscape of higher education but seldom implemented in a coordinated and integrated way on an individual campus, let alone across institutions. Even when these noteworthy practices are implemented, they are sometimes enacted in ways that are wildly different from the most successful versions.

The second animating idea in the student success work at AASCU is that not all student failure is the failure of students. Some failure is the failure of institutions using antiquated or outdated policies and practices that are not

In Short

- Economic inequality and educational inequality are linked.
- A new study demonstrates that some colleges increase economic mobility, especially those outside the “elite.”
- We know a great deal about how to promote student success—graduation and career readiness, preparation to be an informed, engaged citizen.
- AASCU’s Re-imagining the First Year (RFY) initiative is applying what we know to increase student success, particularly among low income, first generation, and students of color.

effective, particularly for low income, first generation students, and students of color. We have countless examples of things that institutions can do that contribute to greater levels of student success. We now know that pairing remedial

courses with credit bearing courses substantially increases success; that paying attention to growth mindset changes students' self-image and results in substantial improvements performance; that predictive analytics and intrusive advising can contribute to greater retention and graduation success; that creating pathways provides students with a clear roadmap to degree completion; that redesigning courses, particularly gateway courses, results in greater levels of student success. The evidence is clear and unambiguous. Some student failure is not the failure of students but the failure of our institutions to adjust legacy practices and policies so that an increasing number of students can succeed.

GROWING DISPARITIES

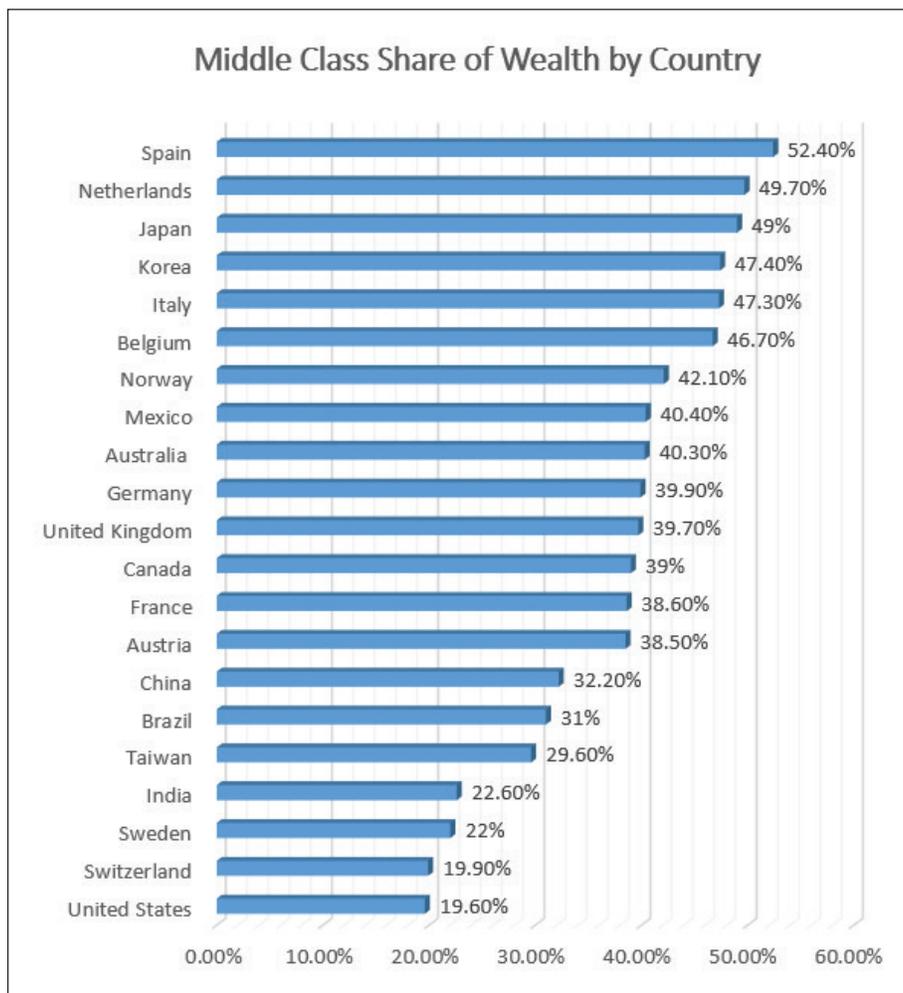
But AASCU's interest in student success isn't animated solely by those two core ideas. Our commitment also grows out of our concern for the vast disparities in our country. Two seem to be particularly pernicious, both in their manifestation and in their consequences: growing economic disparities and growing educational disparities between rich and poor.

Economic inequality may be the most critical issue. The American dream has always been that if we work hard and play by the rules, we can succeed, and if our kids work hard they will be better off than we are. But as the middle-class shrinks (Figure 1), many of our children will not do as well as we did.

Economic inequality challenges the American Dream, breeds suspicion and mistrust, creates anger and violence, chaos in the social order, and disruption in democratic processes. Yet the trajectory of income inequality is disturbing. In the past 45 years, the percentage of total income earned by the lowest 50% of Americans has been steadily decreasing, while the percentage of income earned by the top 1% of wage earners has been steadily increasing (Figure 2).

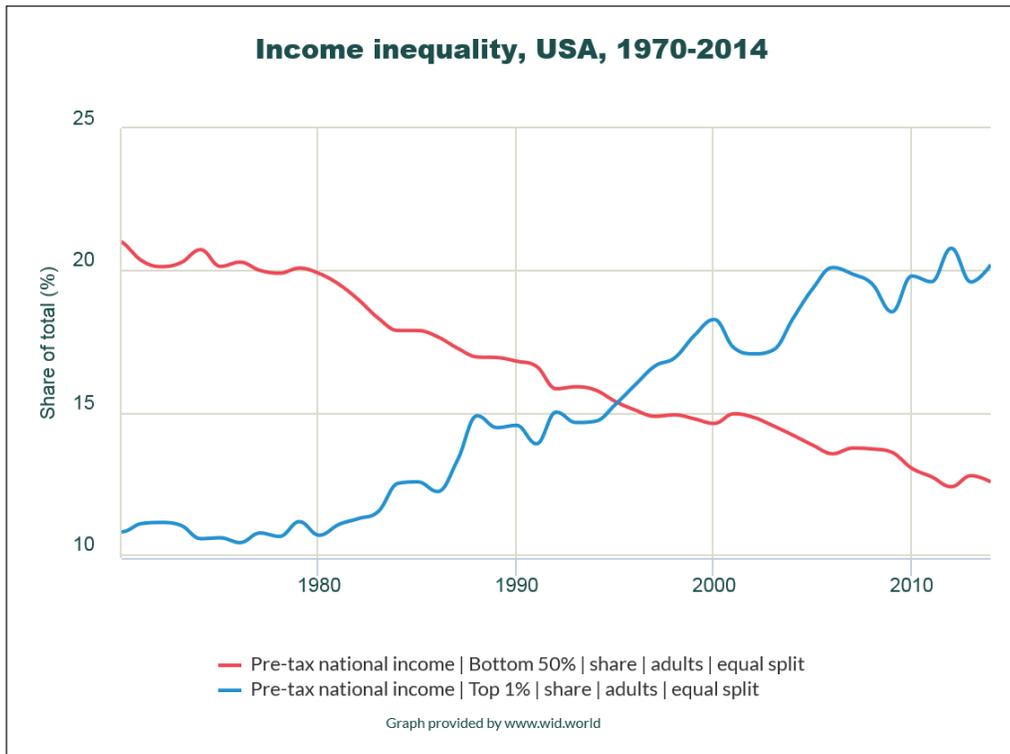
Two segments of our society—the 1% and the group just below, the economically secure—stand in great contrast to the rest of Americans. For everyone else, the lower levels of income distribution are growing, and the middle class is shrinking. Economic insecurity now affects a distressingly large number of Americans. Forty-six percent of adults say they either could not cover an emergency expense costing

FIGURE 1. THE SHRINKING MIDDLE CLASS



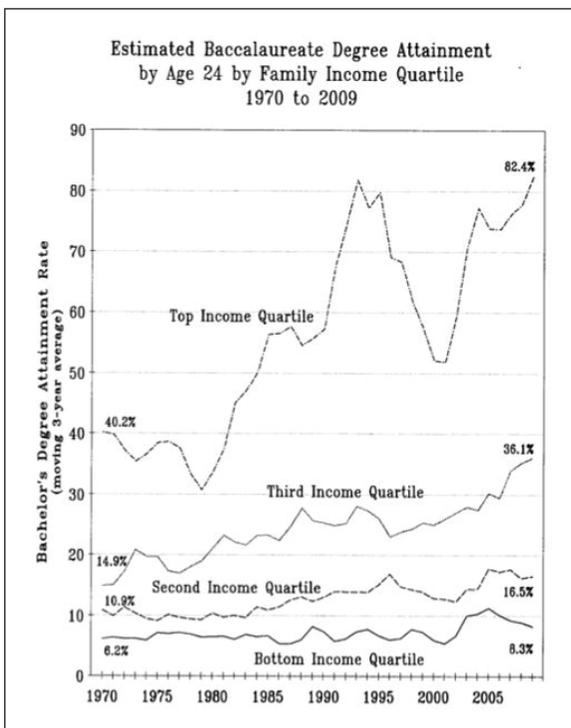
<https://www.fool.com/investing/general/2016/03/13/1-chart-every-middle-class-american-needs-to-see.aspx>

FIGURE 2. INCOME INEQUALITY



Source: World Wealth and Income Database. <http://wid.world/country/usa/>

FIGURE 3. DEGREE ATTAINMENT



Source: The New York Times, "The Reproduction of Privilege," March 12, 2012

\$400 or would have to cover the expense by selling something or borrowing money.

Similarly, educational inequality is a growing and pernicious problem which contributes to our economic and political divides. The chart of privilege that traces the income of the wealthy 1% compared to the bottom 50% in terms of income is mirrored in a chart of educational attainment. Like the distribution of wealth, access and completion in universities reflects the same sharp divides evident in income distribution. A student from the top 1% of income distribution has a 77% greater chance of attending an elite institution (the so-called Ivy League Plus) than a student in the lower 50% of income distribution.

This difference in access to education produces dramatic distortions in degree attainment. In the past 30+ years, the percentage of families in the top quintile of income whose child earned a baccalaureate degree by age 24 went from 41% to 81%. At the same time, the percentage of families from the lowest quintile of income who had a child graduate from college by age 24 went from 6% to 8% (Figure 3).

THE POTENTIAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A crucial way of responding to this bleak picture is to focus on increasing student success, particularly for low income, first generation, and students of color. While these figures about inequality provide ample reason for despair, there is enormous reason for optimism as well. Recent



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research details the role that colleges can play in addressing both educational and economic inequality. Several important new insights have come with the study published this year by Raj Chetty and his associates in Stanford's Equality of Opportunity Project, a massive study of 30 million Americans (Chetty, 2017).

The first insight is that regardless of their family's income, low income students attending an institution tend to graduate and go on to achieve roughly equal economic success with others from higher income families who graduated from the same institution. In other words, attending and graduating from college largely erases differences among the graduating class in terms of family economic background. That's powerful evidence of the importance of a college degree for career advancement and as a tool in mitigating economic inequality, especially if more students from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to and achieve success at more institutions.

However, the Chetty study also found that some institutions reinforce inequality, even as others change the equation for students and their families. Chetty and his associates found that some institutions take in a disproportionate number of students of enormous economic privilege and then, not surprisingly, produce graduates who continue to enjoy rare economic privilege. In Chetty's study, the elite schools, the so-called Ivy Plus schools, draw 14.5% of their students from families in the top 1% of family income, while only taking in 3.8% of families from the bottom 20% of family incomes. The probability of attending an elite private college is 77 times higher for children in the top 1% of income compared to children from families in the bottom 50% of income. Too few students from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to "elite" education.

Another finding of the study was even more disturbing. Access to higher education by disadvantaged students has fallen at the mid-tier public colleges that have produced the highest mobility rates. That reduction in access is probably a combination of increasing costs which exclude the poorest students, and perhaps some increases in admissions standards to boost prestige. Whatever the reasons, a reduction in access to higher education at these institutions by

disadvantaged students reduces opportunities for economic mobility, further perpetuating gaps in both education and income across the United States. At the same time, the most hopeful finding of the study was that some institutions take in students who are less advantaged and graduate them to lives of greater economic opportunity and privilege. These institutions take students from the bottom 20% of income distribution, and after those students graduate, a significant number of those poor students moved to the top 20% of family income.

In the pantheon of status and rank that plagues American higher education, it's not the so-called elite institutions that enjoy that success. It is the institutions in the middle that have demonstrated the capacity to provide economic mobility for thousands of students. For example, the best-performing institution in the United States for economic mobility, according to the Chetty study, is California State University, Los Angeles. Systems like the California State University system and the City University of New York system, as well as hundreds of other AASCU institutions, are particularly effective at increasing economic mobility, reducing the disparities in both education and income that have reshaped the landscape of American society. This confirms the critical importance of access and completion, underscoring and supporting AASCU's historic commitment to student success, particularly for low income, first generation and students of color.

Finally, we are also haunted by student failure. Despite my current role in an association, I still attend commencements with some regularity. They are always joyful occasions as students and their families mark the occasion of the completion of their studies. But I can never participate in a commencement ceremony without some feeling of sadness, because in that moment of celebration, I am also reminded of the students we leave behind. Far too many of our students, who begin college full of hope and expectation, somewhere along the way end up leaving college, often with broken dreams, shattered egos, enormous debt, and little hope.

RE-IMAGINING THE FIRST YEAR (RFY)

As we began seeing new insights emerge about programs and policies that can increase student success, set against a backdrop of growing inequality and massive student failure, AASCU decided that we had to act, to focus on the first year, where much of student failure in college occurs. Two years ago, we created the Re-Imagining the First Year (RFY) project, a major three-year initiative involving 44 AASCU campuses to identify and test a series of programs, strategies, and tools that could increase retention rates and success for first-year college students.

The project broadens the focus from whether or not students are ready for college to also determine whether or not our institutions are ready for today's students. Supported by both the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Strada (formerly USA Funds), RFY is a project about student success in the first year but it is also a project about inequality.

The project is aimed at ensuring the success of all first-year students, but particularly those who have historically been underserved by higher education: low-income, first-generation, and minority students. RFY seeks to inspire redesigned approaches that work effectively for all members of an increasingly diverse, multicultural, undergraduate student body, increasing overall student success rates while eliminating the achievement disparities that have plagued American higher education for decades.

The campuses participating in the RFY project were asked to attempt substantial change at scale by innovating in at least 4 areas: institutional intentionality, curriculum, faculty and staff, and students. The purpose of asking for innovation in four areas was to underscore that student success requires massive, broad institutional transformation. The participating campuses were also asked to create and share with the other 43 campuses their data on their first year students. Finally, the campuses were asked to form teams and to send at least a four-person team each year to one of AASCU's Academic Affairs Meetings. This would allow the team both to work together as a learning community and to make presentations and share the work with other AASCU institutions. We also requested each team include individuals with specific roles, such as the provost, student affairs, institutional research, etc. to ensure broad cross-campus representation.

In 2017–18 the second cohort of students in the 44 campuses will complete their first year, we will delve deeply into the findings and conclusions of this work. However, we already have some early, tentative findings to report. Not to anyone's surprise, we have discovered that student success work is enormously challenging, for it requires multiple, simultaneous innovation across the campus. This can't be a single pilot, a boutique program in one small part of one college. A commitment to greater student success requires a radical transformation of the entire institution. That takes leadership and courage at many different levels. Virtually every aspect of the institution's practices needs to be reviewed to see if they have a negative impact on student success.

It sounds relatively easy to create metrics of success for the first year; however, it turns out to be wickedly complicated. For example, we thought that the metric "selecting a major" would be simple. But does selecting a major mean that the student checks off a box on a form? Is selecting a major a thoughtful, informed decision, and if so, how is that recognized? Do meta-majors count as majors? Or should we even have that metric? Should all students have a major selected by the end of their first year? The quest for appropriate metrics revealed large gaps and widely varying capability of our 44 campuses to provide the data that we needed. Some institutions simply did not have the capacity to provide the data to us without a major effort; the data problem is a huge issue.

So, too, is leadership turnover. In the first 24 months of the RFY project, we have had a change in 17 of our RFY leaders, 9 of whom were provosts, and among those leaving the role, most also left the institution. Leadership turnover is a key problem in institutional transformation.

We have also discovered that success is not a simple steadily rising line. There are plateaus, even slippage, as the work unfolds. So the work requires lots of data and constant attention, as well as a willingness to change directions when something doesn't appear to be working.

And student success is a long-time commitment, not a quick fix. Georgia State University, one of the early pioneers and notable achievers in student success, has been engaged in this work for 10 years.

But the work of RFY, so far, has not only identified issues but also revealed a significant gap in much of the current work. As we have watched the 44 campuses select specific innovations, programs and practices, the collection of new approaches is impressive: guided pathways, gateway course success, intrusive advising, predictive analytics, co-requisite remediation, growth mindset, and a host of others. Yet if you look at that array of innovations, there is an enormous gap, what might be called the doughnut hole. Little if any of the innovation actually focuses on teaching and the classroom. If there is not success in the classroom, the rest of the work doesn't help. The students we particularly care



about—low income, first generation and students of color—are not deeply involved in co-curricular activities; they tend to go to class and then go to jobs or attend to family responsibilities. Getting to these students in class is not only the best place to reach them; it may be the only opportunity to reach them.

Therefore, in a supplemental grant for RFY, we are experimenting with one way of impacting the first year classroom with the use of high impact practices (HIPs) in the first year. We think that HIPs have to be implemented for first year students with different assumptions and expectations than HIPs used with more experienced students. Emphasizing HIPs in the first year will help fill in the gap, the doughnut hole, especially for underserved students. It's one of many ways to address the critical issue of the importance of the classroom in student success.

The final insight of this work takes me back to the beginning. We are tyrannized by legacy practices and outdated policies. While there is enormously important work underway, often it is to fix instead of re-imagine. If we were to really re-imagine the first year of college, we might consider a radical revision, dramatically different from its present form and different from the next three years of the undergraduate experience. We might imagine the entire first year as a set of learning communities, with active learning, group work and real products, and engaging experiential activities. Central to all would be explorations of work and careers, the obligations and benefits of democracy, and what constitutes a meaningful life. But re-imagining the first year, like all institutional transformation journeys, starts with first steps. And we're both hopeful and pleased to see so many institutions embarked on this voyage of discovery.

THE BROADER AGENDA

Our work on Re-Imagining the First Year is one program of several that we are undertaking to support student success. There's no question about the importance of this work to students and their families. Supporting students to obtain a baccalaureate degree is life-changing. The success of a single individual in a family not only opens up that individual's life but creates new opportunities, enriches his or her perspective and provides greater economic security.

Yet far too often, the current discussion about student success focuses almost exclusively on the benefits for students. That's too narrow a lens. The idea that a focus on student success is only beneficial to students ignores the economic reality for many of our public institutions. As state support erodes, and likely will continue to erode in the years ahead,

campuses increasingly rely on tuition as a primary source of operating revenue. So it seems that student success and institutional success, at least for state colleges and universities, are inextricably connected. Campuses cannot expect to be financially sound if they are not able to attract and retain students.

Student success is also inseparably linked to our success as an economic competitor in a global economy. Higher education plays a vital role in preparing the workforce of the future. By 2025, at current rates of production, we will have 11 million jobs that require a college degree that will not be able to be filled. We need greater student success to fill vacant positions but we also need degrees that prepare students for an uncertain job market with rapidly-changing skill demands.

Finally, student success is linked to a strong and vibrant democracy. What last year's national election revealed were enormous fractures in our body politic. We saw ourselves as a nation divided, with many divisions along economic and educational lines. We know that individuals with college degrees stay more informed, vote more often, donate more frequently to causes, volunteer more regularly and participate in many ways in the life of their community.

The argument for student success is simple: focusing on student success (defined as graduation and increasingly as a strong start in a career), particularly for low income, first generation, and students of color, can make a profound difference in the lives of students and their families, in the success of institutions, in our ability to compete in a global economy, and in nurturing a vibrant and inclusive democracy. □

RESOURCES

- Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N., and Yagan, D. (July 2017). *Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility*. NBER Working Paper No. 23618. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/coll_mrc_paper.pdf