

What Colleges Can Do Right Now to Help Low-Income Students Succeed



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Sara Goldrick-Rab AUGUST 28, 2016

In the fall of 2008, a team of researchers began studying some 3,000 Pell Grant recipients who had enrolled in Wisconsin's 42 public colleges and universities for the first time that year. At age 18, they were ambitious, committed (all began full time), and entirely unaware that, six years later, fewer than half of them would complete a degree of any kind.

What they also did not know (yet) was that the research team, which I led, would follow them on their college journeys. In an effort to better understand why some

students from low-income families, for whom the grants are intended, finish college and others do not, we took an uncommonly deep dive by surveying them from the start, examining their financial aid and academic records semester after semester, and talking with 50 of them in person year after year. We stuck with those students, even when college wasn't working out as planned, and even when they dropped out.

Our findings contrast sharply with the stories often told by people working in higher education. In essence, we learned that, with apologies to the Who, "the kids are *not* alright." Nor do they — even the 18 year olds — resemble "kids."

Here are five things we learned:

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1. The way the federal government measures students' financial need is misleading and even flat-out wrong. It overstates a family's ability to pay for college by ignoring debt and the hardships that go with it, and grossly understates the actual costs of attending college.
2. Although colleges often expect families to financially support their children while they attend college, the reverse is happening — low-income children are supporting their parents, grandparents, and even siblings, all while being unable to buy their books.
3. Against a backdrop of increasingly fancy residence halls and sushi bars in campus cafeterias, a significant fraction of students are going without sufficient food or housing.
4. Working in college is an American tradition. But 2016 is not 1975. Many students without jobs are searching for work they can't find. Others are holding down two or even three minimum-wage jobs to try to make enough, and too many students are working the graveyard shift because it pays more, going from work straight to class without a night's sleep.
5. Loans are supposed to let students afford college now, focus on their studies, and pay the piper later — but that's often not how they work in reality. Loans affect students long before they come due. With prices at an all-time high, taking a loan for college has become a necessity rather than a choice. Yet the prospects of graduating from college, let alone getting a good job afterward, are uncertain.

Feeling forced into borrowing is contributing to stress during college. To make money through work and minimize their loan exposure, students sacrifice participation in the sorts of academic and social activities that build networks and learning, the kinds of

activities that increase the economic returns of their degrees. And yes, it contributes to resentment and distress when the loans must be repaid.

These are the new economics of college — and they are harsh.

In debates about paying for higher education, it has been argued that Pell recipients are the only ones getting a good deal, since the Pell is a grant. But when the Pell program began, it was supposed to cover the cost of attending college. Not anymore.

Nine out of 10 Pell recipients graduate with debt. Of the Pell recipients who attend public colleges and universities — two-thirds of all Pell recipients — just 48 percent who start college full time complete a degree or certificate of any kind within six years. Of the remaining 52 percent, one in three leaves with a double burden: no credential and an average of \$9,000 in student-loan debt.

Price, not intellect or effort, is the primary sorting mechanism in today's colleges. As students move from one year to the next, class materials should get harder and students should need to study more. In a system like that, a degree would say something about ability. But that is not what's happening today. Time after time, the failure to complete college does not reflect intellectual inability but rather an inability to pay.

When college does not work out just because the money isn't there, families and communities view the results as a powerful warning sign. They see the broken promises of public education in this country.

Fortunately, there is plenty that higher education can do to remedy this unforgivable situation. We don't need to wait for state or federal policy makers to step up. Colleges can do a lot right now.

First, colleges can do a better job of assessing students' readiness to learn. Placement tests are popular, and grades can be markers of performance, but those things don't tell us if students' basic needs are met. Remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, housing, safety, and sleep must be assured before we can move on to higher-order tasks.

Second, colleges can listen to students and give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they are sleeping in class not out of boredom but out of exhaustion. Maybe they don't have their books not because they don't care to buy them, but because they didn't get enough aid to pay for them. Maybe they really do need another loan because if they don't get it, their mom will need them to drop out and go to work.

Finally, it's time to think big. Beyond the perimeter of every institution is a community. We know education takes a village. It also takes a village to fight the poverty and financial stresses that prevent college success. So engage the village. Local food banks, social workers, housing authorities, transportation agencies — they are your partners.

Wishing that college were affordable, or simply asserting that financial aid works, doesn't make those things true. All over the country, millions of people are struggling to make ends meet, and undergraduates are no exception. Helping students succeed, and fulfilling the promises of our educational system, requires listening and learning from them.

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