

Graduating from College: The Impossible Dream for Most First-Generation Students

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Abstract

Some colleges engage in unethical practices to balance their budgets, such as accepting “marginal” students who qualify for loans and government-backed financial aid but not providing these students with the services and programs they need to achieve success. Too many low-income students who are often first-generation students find themselves gamed when they meet with admissions counselors who help them to complete loan applications but neglect to explain the difference between being accepted to college and graduating from college—and the subsequent need to repay student loans. As a response to this negative scenario, 13 high-impact strategies are suggested which increase the chances of helping first-generation students to achieve success and to graduate in a timely fashion.

Keywords: First-Generation Students, Graduation Rates, High-Impact Strategies, Caring

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Introduction

“Picking a college is like picking a spouse. You don’t pick the ‘top ranked’ one because that has no meaning. You pick the one with the personality and character that complement your own” (Brooks, 2004).

Brooks provides a thoughtful reminder of the vitally important bond between student and college. As student advocates for more than three decades, we recognize the value of this bond, especially for students who are the first in their families to attempt a college education (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2015a, 2015b). As such, we object when colleges engage in unethical practices to balance their budgets, such as accepting “marginal” students who qualify for loans and government-backed financial aid but not providing these students with the services and programs they need to achieve success. Too many low-income students who are often first-generation students find themselves gamed when they meet with admissions counselors who help them to complete loan applications but neglect to explain the difference between being accepted to college and graduating from college—and the subsequent need to repay student loans.

We have found these schools are more concerned with tuition payments than students’ welfare and learning. Many first-generation students cannot handle academic requirements and drop out, saddled with debt. Admissions counselors are well aware of the 4- and 6-year graduation rates of their schools, and we believe they have a professional and moral obligation to reveal this information to potential students. They should also indicate evidenced-based programs and services, if any, that are available for students and that have resulted in higher graduation rates of students at risk of dropping out. Regrettably, this type of transparency does not exist on many campuses.

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2013), some colleges have graduation rates below 30%, and some are even below 10%. New York’s Long Island University, for example, has a 4-year graduation rate of 21.7% at its Post Campus, and an 8% graduation rate at its Brooklyn Campus. Similarly, New York’s Mercy College has a low graduation rate of 22.9%. The New York State average, however, is 55.1% for 4-year private, not-for-profit colleges. Whether or not the students graduate, they still have loans that must be paid. We advocate that students avoid schools with graduation rates that are significantly below their state’s average. These low rates suggest that college administrators take students’ money with the unashamed awareness that most of these students will not graduate, and many of them will not complete their first two years successfully.

Exacerbating this problem is the “shell game” many college administrators play, in which they use Pell Grants to supplant institutional aid that they would otherwise have provided to financially needy students (Rivard, 2014). These administrators then shift the funds to recruit wealthier students, offering them generous scholarships. Using poorer students’ Pell Grants as a source of supporting wealthier students is an unscrupulous practice that further undermines low-income students’ efforts to complete their college education. Stephen Burd (2014b, p.1), a senior policy analyst for the New America Foundation, notes, “This is one reason why even after historic increases in Pell Grant funding, low-income students continue to take on heavier debt loads than ever before.” Additionally, Burd’s (2014a, p. 3) analysis indicates that hundreds of colleges nationwide “expect the neediest students to pay an amount that equals half or more of their families’ yearly earnings.”

Another analysis by the Project on Student Debt, an initiative of The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS, 2014), indicates about 69% of graduates from public and private nonprofit colleges in 2013 had student debt averaging \$28,400. “At public colleges, 68% of graduates had \$26,000 in debt on average; at nonprofit colleges, 75 percent of graduates had average debt of \$32,600” (p. 1). Even older borrowers are defaulting at high rates, and defaulting on federal loans can result in hardships, such as garnishment of social security benefits (Ambrose, 2014). Furthermore, a report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York indicates that student debt rose

12% to \$1.08 trillion in 2013 (Mitchell, 2014). Worse, the nation's sharp rise in student debt is being driven mostly by Americans with poor credit and few resources. Almost half of student loan recipients are unable to make payments (Best & Best, 2014). This ticking, financial time bomb not only discredits academe but also destroys the aspirations of students and their hard-working parents. After being aggressively recruited by colleges to pay their bills and after dropping out burdened with loan debt, students and their families find they were manipulated as pawns in a debt-transfer financed by tax dollars.

We consider these outcomes to reflect some colleges' uncaring and unethical policies, which are also bordering on illegal practices. Moreover, some higher-level administrators justify these outcomes as a way of demonstrating to trustees that they have morphed their college from "financial red" to "financial black." Then they use this temporary result as a résumé item for gaining leadership positions at other universities. Our analysis of administrators who engage in this self-serving behavior suggests that when they vacate their previous institutions, newly appointed administrative replacements not only have to deal with the unresolved issues concerning student retention but also have to reinstate the previously cut positions that are essential for maintaining the institutions' survival.

Taking the Ethical Road Less Traveled

Yet, there is another choice. College administrators can use student tuition for student benefit by providing services and programs that have strong potential for increasing the academic success and the graduation rates of incoming students. Reacting to the debt-transfer game that some colleges play, the federal government and a number of states have been changing their financial aid formulas to include graduation rates as part of the granting process. Recently, former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said all states must invest in innovative programs in higher education that increase student success—especially for low-income and disadvantaged students (Rivera, 2015). The Colorado Commission on Higher Education had already approved a new state financial aid distribution policy that increases financial awards when students meet certain credit milestones and decreases awards when students do not graduate in a timely manner. According to Joseph Garcia, Colorado's Lieutenant Governor and Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, "We're saying, schools, it's your responsibility to admit these students and provide services to help them get through" (Rogers, 2013). Other states that are developing comprehensive plans to increase college graduation rates include Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, and Tennessee. All states should support this direction to prevent poor students from being used as part of a bottom-line scheme. We believe when federal agencies, state governments, and accreditation services tie graduation rates to financial aid, college administration and faculty will work more cohesively to support a caring and substantive learning environment for the at-risk students who are aggressively recruited.

Nurturing Students' Potential to Graduate from College

Supporting students who are the first in their families to attend college is vitally important because these students usually experience emotional and academic stress as they attempt to navigate the culture of higher education. With self-doubt and with limited resources at home to provide academic support, these first-generation students often have work-related responsibilities, inadequate writing skills, and other personal and intellectual challenges. Although their academic potential is comparable to their more accomplished (continuing-generation) peers, this potential needs nurturing through a consistent support system.

In a recent survey of senior higher-education professionals with responsibility for data analytical tools, 90% of responders indicated that student retention and graduation rates are of central importance, and 95% indicated that they use data in their student retention programs and tactics. Only 24%, however, reported that data and analytics are readily accessible (Gatepoint Research, 2014). As colleges attempt to "catch up" with their data collection methods, students—especially those at risk of failure—deserve a major commitment to helping them achieve success and graduate in a timely fashion.

While not a panacea, we believe the following high-impact considerations can help first-generation students to stay in school. These 13 considerations extend our previous work that supports students' efforts to achieve success (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2015a, 2015b), and they have been judged to be exemplary by a national committee of experts in higher education. Administration and faculty need to engage in thoughtful conversations about these and other approaches before deciding which ones are well-matched with their campus culture. Then, they should organize their selected approaches so they are working in concert, not as isolated entities. This cohesive direction should support students' learning interests, strengths, and needs. The key word is *cohesive* because without it, well-intended efforts will be splintered and fragmented.

(1) Examine the demographic backgrounds of incoming students and involve students in setting goals that are interesting, meaningful, and culturally relevant to them. This instructional direction supports the sociological concept of "social and cultural capital" for students who are the first in their families to enter college and who need extra help in persisting and in building momentum toward graduation (Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2007; Perna & Titus, 2005). Emotional and social support from parents and professors is extremely important for helping students sustain efforts to achieve success and graduate. Of course, faculty and administration must grapple with the dual issue of building students' social and cultural capital and simultaneously maintaining academic standards. We believe highly competent and caring professionals will find common ground that will benefit students.

(2) Guide students each semester to register for courses that reflect a balance of their abilities and interests. This support helps students to retain a great deal of agency in their academic course schedule, especially when colleges adapt a version of the process used at the University of the South (Sewanee). Here, faculty serve as guides by helping incoming first-year students to review Sewanee's course selection process and to complete an academic experience form. Incoming students also have to indicate their major academic interests and courses they would enjoy taking, which they select from a catalog designating courses for first-year students. To facilitate the selection process, they sort these courses into categories: those "in which you have experience and confidence," those "clearly new and intriguing," and those "you recognize may challenge you." According to Terry Papillon, Sewanee's new dean, "There's growing evidence to suggest that close bonds with professors during students' first year of college contribute to long-term success" (Flaherty, 2014). Although scaling this model for larger universities might not be as successful, it has been implemented effectively at Sewanee for both students and faculty. With appropriate adaptations, it can be carried out successfully at other institutions.

Additionally, when colleges accept tuition checks from students with learning difficulties, they need to modify their programs to accommodate these students' needs. For example, students with verbal weaknesses should not be expected to enroll in College Freshman English, Western Civilization, Philosophy, Foreign (Second) Language, or other verbally dominant courses at the same time. Instead, these students' chances of success are increased when their course schedule reflects College Freshman English, Mathematics, Technology, Art, Music, or other less verbally dominant courses. These students should also be encouraged to register for no more than four courses each semester and to take two courses in the summer session, consisting of challenging content to which they can give their undivided attention. This type of balance supports quality of learning, while it reduces some of the frustration and failure associated with too many simultaneous academic requirements.

Students also seem to benefit from the elimination of late registration for courses. Research conducted at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) suggests those who registered for all courses before the first class session were more likely to stay enrolled between semesters and to not drop out during the academic year.

(3) Help struggling students to understand their problems are not unique. Administrators and professors can help by implementing a variation of a modest one-hour program

called Difference-Education Intervention, where the panelists who are speaking are juniors and seniors from different backgrounds. The panelists discuss how they adapted to college life, including how they pursued resources and people to guide them with decisions. First-generation students also join the conversation and express their specific challenges in navigating the culture of higher-education. This low-key intervention has potential to increase retention rates because it helps students who are the first in their families to attend college to develop savvy in dealing with the issues that affect the majority of college students. Specifically, this intervention can reduce the social-class achievement gap, increase grade-point averages, and enhance the use of college resources. For a detailed description and supportive research, see Parker (2014) and Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014).

(4) Motivate students' engagement in learning by considering their emotional and cognitive abilities as vehicles for meaningful learning. Instruction that is engaging highlights knowledge and content goals, considers students' interests, supports coherence among instructional venues, involves students in collaborative work, decreases lectures, and increases applications so students see the results of their hard work and continue their interest in learning. An important aspect of engagement is for students to experience success via their professors' evidence-based instructional strategies and methodologies that support both curricular standards and personalized learning.

According to Nobel Laureate Carl Wieman, a major obstacle to effective learning is lecturing to students, which usually causes passive listening and higher failure rates. A promising antidote is active learning, in which students solve problems, discuss solutions with peers, think logically about course content, answer questions, and engage in other activities while receiving feedback from professors (Freeman et al., 2014; Wieman, 2014). As with any process, engaging students through active learning should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all process. That being said, students benefit from an active learning intervention and its transferability to novel educational settings. For example, Jensen, Kummer, and Godoy (2015) compared an active flipped classroom with an active non-flipped classroom and concluded that learning gains in both college biology sections were most likely the result of a constructivist, active-learning style of instruction instead of the order in which the professor participated in the learning process. Freshmen in both sections also ranked their contact time with the professor "as more influential in their learning than what they did at home."

Not surprisingly, ethnic-minority and first-generation students achieve significantly in this active learning context. Eddy and Hogan (2014) found:
a 'moderate-structure' intervention increased course performance for all student populations, but worked disproportionately well for black students—halving the black–white achievement gap—and first-generation students—closing the achievement gap with continuing-generation students.

These positive outcomes seem to be connected to the students' need for a sense of belonging, which active learning encourages through peer discussions, team projects, small-group interactions, and other related activities. Interventions that support active learning are especially beneficial for students who are the first in their families to attend college because these students feel overwhelming pressure to succeed, "coupled with the lack of an education culture at home" (Ross, 2014). Interestingly, active learning is effective not only in college settings but also in elementary and secondary schools, where the instructional emphasis is on learning instead of teaching (Antonetti & Garver, 2015; Jensen, Kummer, & Godoy, 2015).

(5) Incorporate project-based learning where students work in flexible, short-term groups and develop appreciation for in-depth learning and applications of course content and related strategies and skills. When engaged in course projects, many first-generation students demonstrate insecurity with the writing component of these projects, and three ways of supporting their writing efforts are to (1) model the writing process for them, including brainstorming, development of ideas, organization of content, use of effective language, engagement in thoughtful revisions, and editing of writing mechanics; (2) meet with students in small, short-term groups to

share pertinent feedback concerning their developing projects; and (3) encourage students to send email attachments of their first and second drafts so professors can use the comment software function (e.g., “New Comment” menu of Microsoft Word) to provide students with relevant feedback for improving their papers. This support system inevitably results in improved writing, better grades, and increased academic self-esteem, and these positive outcomes can help students to feel successful and to continue their education. Of course, one can argue that this instructional direction sounds like high school stuff. As college professors, however, we need to remind ourselves that first-generation students have probably struggled with the writing process through their high school years and will continue to struggle in college, unless effective writing instruction is supported across the curriculum. Common sense, therefore, indicates that writing support must be a major part of students’ college experience and that smaller class size will motivate both professors and students to focus on successful writing immersion.

(6) Infuse and reinforce “deep” reading, writing, and note-taking in all courses, so that students develop stamina for responding successfully to challenging texts. When this approach is positive and supportive, it results in productive struggle rather than destructive frustration (Snow, 2013). Within this substantive context, sometimes the basic act of handwriting during note-taking can cause intense frustration for students with dysgraphia. Even at the college level, some students continue to demonstrate this specific learning disability and its observable connection to the emotional and physical stresses of writing and spelling (National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d.). Often, this disability co-exists with other disabilities, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and these stresses can result in writing fatigue. One way of resolving part of this problem is to encourage all students to take notes with a laptop, tablet, iPad, iPhone, tape recorder, or other technological devices they are comfortable using. When all students have this option, no one is stigmatized, and those with dysgraphia can focus on the substance of note-taking rather than the frustration of handwriting.

(7) Guide students to enjoy in-depth connections between and among the arts, science, literature, music, history, philosophy, mathematics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, technology, engineering, and other content areas. These culturally enriching experiences are enhanced when professors accompany students on related field trips (in lieu of certain class sessions) that increase their awareness of real-world applications and simultaneously improve their critical thinking skills. A poignant example germane to student debt has taken place at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum (2014-2015) at Michigan State University. The exhibition titled *Day After Debt: A Call for Student Loan Relief* highlights the out-of-control debt culture connected to higher education in the United States. Kurdish artist Ahmet Ogut and other artists have sculpted imaginative responses to the debt crisis and its stresses on college graduates. These sculptures not only promote an awareness of a major societal problem but also encourage contributions to The Debt Collective, which is an initiative for canceling student debt. When students connect art and other content areas to societal issues, they are potentially more interested in learning and more likely to engage in related projects.

(8) Use office hours as opportunities for listening to students’ perspectives and individualizing instruction related to individual and team projects. Office hours provide a warm context for demonstrating a genuinely caring attitude toward students’ well-being. In a recent Gallup survey (partnered with Purdue University and Lumina Foundation), college graduates were more likely to be engaged at work if they had reflections of professors who nurtured their excitement in learning, who supported their efforts in an internship-type program, who encouraged them to pursue their passions, and who cared about them. If this type of emotional support while in college has potential to sustain graduates’ engagement at work, common sense would suggest that it also can help motivate students to complete their college education. Regrettably, of the graduates who responded to the Gallup survey, only 14 percent remembered having professors who provided this type of emotional support. Although most professors understandably have a deep interest in their content areas, they sometimes forget that people are primarily emotional and secondarily intellectual and that

the best way of reaching their minds is through their hearts. Additional information about the survey is found in Gallup-Purdue Index Releases Inaugural Findings of National Landmark Study (2014).

(9) Require “success-orientation” seminars where students not only receive support for academic learning but also accrue credits toward their college degree. These types of seminars should include practical aspects of navigating the culture of higher education, such as where pertinent offices are located, how to make an appointment to meet with a professor or adviser, what constitutes plagiarism, and other student concerns. More specifically, first-year students benefit from learning and applying note-taking strategies (e.g., interactive two-column and three-column approaches), reading/study strategies (e.g., PQ4R), and critical thinking skills (e.g., dialectical/generative approaches to critical/creative thinking). There is always a risk in these generic seminars of presenting many skills and strategies but providing insufficient time to apply them to content area materials. One remedy for this problem is to design the success-orientation seminars with a focus on disciplines; then, professors are invited to present specific approaches that have helped their students achieve success in their content areas. This methodology is especially helpful when the professors present pertinent resources and guide students to apply newly learned strategies and skills to the resources, thereby increasing transfer of learning. Also complementary to academic learning are emotional considerations like mindfulness meditation, which can reduce stress and increase engagement. Harris (2014) suggests getting started with just five minutes a day of meditation, which includes (1) sitting with your spine straight and your eyes closed; (2) focusing your full attention on the feeling of your breath inhaling and exhaling through your nose, chest, or belly; (3) realizing that as your mind wanders, focus your attention back to your breath.

(10) Be sensitive to class attendance and reinforce its importance during class discussions and individual conferences. Russo-Gleicher’s (2011) suggestions for dealing with student absences include: noting attendance problems early in the semester and speaking with students privately about this issue; conveying empathy by listening attentively to students’ issues and demonstrating feelings for their situation; conveying hope by supporting students’ efforts to improve their attendance, for example, matching peer tutors with students who have been absent because of medical problems or a death in the family; and offering choices that support students’ self-determination.

(11) Organize social events that bring students together and make them feel connected to their community of learners. Social integration (or social involvement) is vitally important for retaining students, especially ethnic minority students. It helps them to “fit in” socially, thereby increasing their persistence at a higher rate than students who feel they do not “fit in.” Townsend (2007) provides an excellent synthesis of related research.

(12) Reconstruct aspects of the academy to accommodate prescriptive analytics on a descriptive level, thereby analyzing how students are performing and, when necessary, applying appropriate interventions to improve instruction and retention. Professors can determine how courses are progressing by monitoring the rate of change in students’ engagement, which involves their contributions in class, their performance on assignments, and other outcomes related to course content and process. By observing and monitoring students’ progress, professors can identify students who are at risk of failure and can modify instructional methodologies to accommodate their learning needs and cognitive styles. In content area problem-solving, for example, professors can pose an “open” problem, which provides students with sufficient space for solving it in creative ways: spatially, verbally, numerically, or a combination of these and other processes. This broader context is enriched when professors encourage the whole class to join the conversation and become interactive members of the learning community. When this discourse becomes a routine part of classroom practice, it demonstrates respect for individuals’ perspectives as it helps everyone to determine if there is evidence that students understand the underlying concepts of the problem being solved. It also inspires students to continue their engagement and resilience in learning as they refine their problem-solving strategies. Meanwhile, it helps professors to reflect on the effectiveness of their scaffolding of students’ engagement and to determine if certain students might need extra help.

If so, professors can meet with these students individually, or they can refer them to fast-track developmental education courses that are credit-bearing.

(13) Learn and apply these and other high-impact approaches through effective professional development for administrators, professors, mentors, and tutors. A variety of approaches can be effective for learning about evidenced-based strategies that support students' efforts to achieve success and to graduate in a timely fashion. These approaches include study groups, face-to-face workshops, online sessions, and blended learning. An often-neglected but important part of professional development is students' participation (Sanacore & Piro, 2014), which provides opportunities for gaining insights about students' personal and academic stresses and for determining appropriate methods and strategies to help students overcome them. When possible, students should be invited to become active participants in professional development activities.

Some Final Thoughts

For these and other high-impact considerations to work cohesively, we believe administration and faculty need to incorporate more “C” words: **commitment, compassion, cooperation, consistency, context, and caring.** Because caring is the cornerstone of success in any institution, it represents an essential step in transforming an institution (Hammond & Senior, 2014). Moving in this direction promotes a positive teaching and learning culture, which is especially needed for students who are the first in their families to attempt a college education. This comprehensive support also instigates a provocative question: Have the students been underperforming, or has the system been underperforming?

To help first-generation students succeed in college, administrators and professors must realize that 51% of public school students nationwide (new majority) are from low-income families (Southern Education Foundation, 2015) and that those who attempt a college education will need a teaching-learning context that is sensitive to their demography. Of vital importance is a support system that provides regular (required) access to a dedicated adviser with a small case load, a dedicated career and employment services staff member, and dedicated tutoring services. These types of support are key components of the highly successful City University of New York experiment, which helps a substantial number of students to graduate from community college (Scrivener et al., 2015).

Not surprisingly, male students are increasingly at risk of not completing their college education. In a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), a growing gender gap in college enrollment is indicated. The report predicts that females' rate of increase in earning college degrees will outpace that of males' for every type of degree. For example, the projected increase for the Associate's Degree is women-21% and men-9%, and for the Bachelor's Degree, it is women-22% and men-10%.

If President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Program (2014) is effective, then more ethnic minority males will not only graduate from high school but also be better prepared to handle college-level requirements. This potential outcome is more likely to be realized when My Brother's Keeper Program engages students in the rigor of working hard. In a recent national survey of 1,347 high school graduates—men, women, Whites, African Americans, Hispanic Americans—most respondents said they would have worked harder if the expectations were higher. Disaggregated by ethnicity, 53% of African Americans and 50% of Hispanic Americans answered affirmatively to the question: “If my high school had demanded more, set higher academic standards, and raised expectations of the course work and studying necessary to earn a diploma, I am certain I would have worked harder” (Achieve, 2014, p. 14). Students in elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges are more apt to work hard and to meet challenging expectations when their learning environment is stimulating, engaging, and supportive (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).

Society benefits substantially from college graduates, as they contribute socially, culturally, and economically (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2015a, 2015b). Educated citizens are able to grow beyond their low-income status and to push their families into the middle class. They are more likely to have higher earning potential, greater job satisfaction, healthier lifestyle choices, health-care coverage provided by employers, and higher expectations for their children to earn a college degree. These are only a few of the reasons to work deliberately in promoting a high-impact commitment that supports students' efforts to complete their college education. Undoubtedly, this momentum will boost America's global competitiveness as it lessens the struggle and mistreatment of first-generation students, whose voice is often marginalized in higher education.

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