



Proceedings of
The Completion Challenge
Helping Students in Higher Education

**A Forum Hosted by the Austin College
Access Network and TG**

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Proceedings of The Completion Challenge: Helping Students Succeed in Higher Education

A Forum Hosted by the Austin College Access Network and TG

For decades, efforts to increase participation in higher education among underserved populations focused on helping students bridge the gap from high school to college. This focus on matriculation, however, ignored what happened once students got in school — a trend starkly revealed by drop-out and stop-out rates among these populations. According to The Ray Marshall Center’s Student Futures Project, for example, just 68 percent of 2007 low-income high school graduates who enrolled in college persisted to 2008; among higher income students, the rate was 84 percent. In recent years, colleges and community-based organizations (CBOs) have initiated programs to help reverse this trend; many have met with significant, if localized, success. In general, however, these two sectors have not worked together to increase the effectiveness and reach of these programs.

To help address this situation, TG and the Austin College Access Network (ACAN) sponsored a forum entitled *The Completion Challenge: Helping Students Succeed in Higher Education*. The event brought together representatives from innovative programs at colleges and community-based organizations in the Austin, Texas area to begin a conversation on collaborative efforts aimed at student persistence and success. The aim was to produce a model for dialog that could be replicated across the country, with each forum producing ideas and initiatives that meet their communities’ needs.

After presentations from student representatives and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, four Austin-based CBOs detailed their efforts and results: the Breakthrough Collaborative, College Forward, Con Mi MADRE, and the

Hispanic Scholarship Consortium. Programs from Austin Community College and St. Edward's University followed. Dr. Victor Saenz of the University of Texas at Austin closed the presentation segment with an overview of the effects of financial aid on student retention among underserved populations.

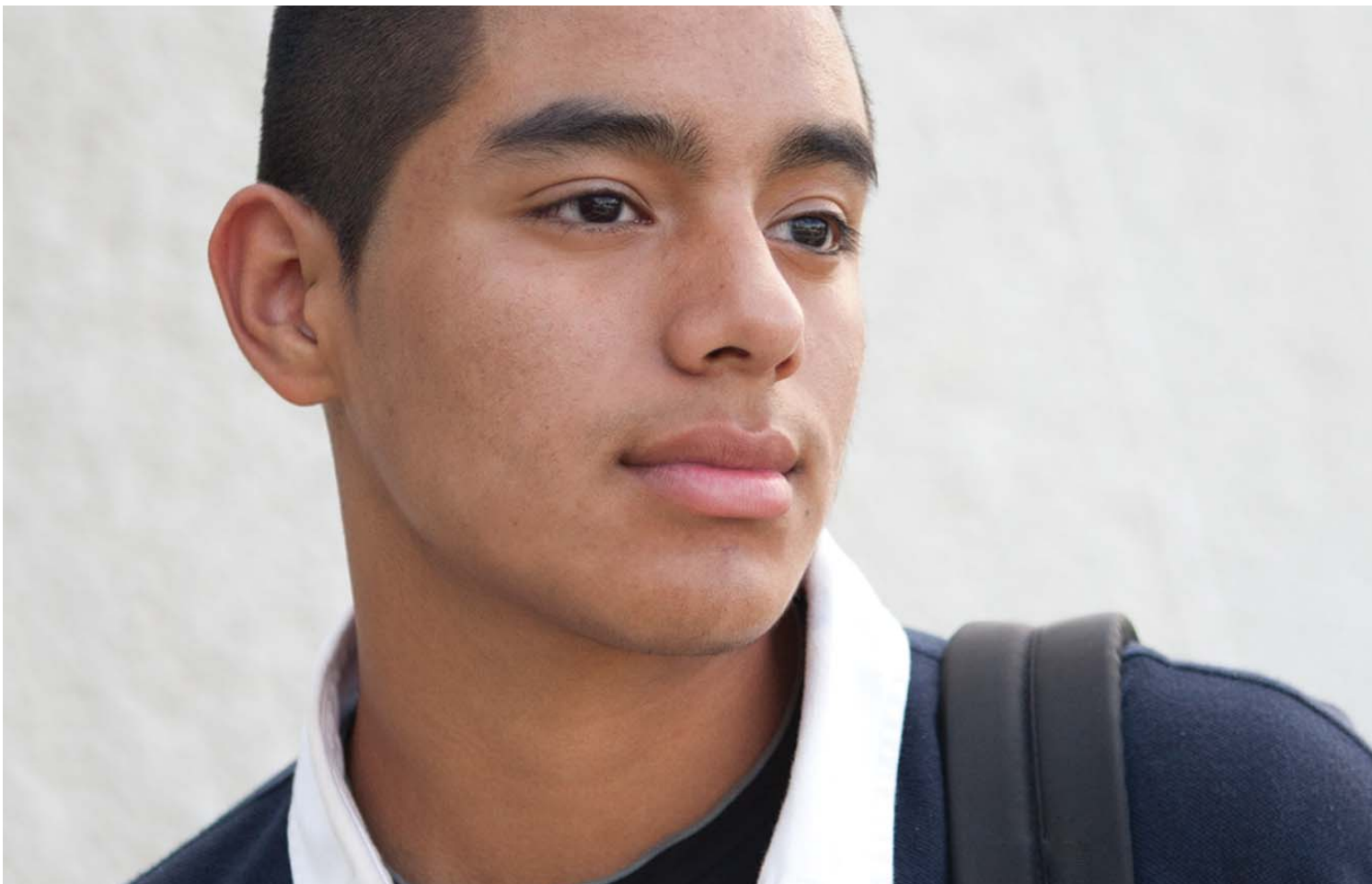
These presentations laid the groundwork for discussion by highlighting successful efforts, conveying plans for future expansion and improvement, and contextualizing these in terms of the challenges faced by underserved populations in Central Texas in 2010. Thus equipped, forum attendees broke into small groups to discuss what students need, what can be done to address those needs, and how institutions of higher education (IHEs) and CBOs can work together to strengthen their efforts on behalf

of students. Participants worked in small groups to explore avenues for collaboration and generate strategies for improving retention rates among these students.

A broad range of ideas emerged from these conversations. Participants discussed issues touching on many aspects of student life, from involvement in early education to early intervention for college students in crisis. The dialogue comprised both the depth and character of student need and the ways these needs could be addressed.

Participants identified recommendations that suggested a "phased" approach to implementing promising practices. For example, one challenge faced by practitioners working to increase student success rates in college is a lack of awareness of the

many school, IHE, and community resources specifically designed to help students achieve their postsecondary goals. The first step, therefore, would be to inventory regional education institutions and education-related CBOs to learn about existing resources and their outcomes. This inventory could be fed into a broader database of student supports and used as the basis by which to optimize existing regional assets. Similarly, improving communication within and across the education pipeline would increase the effectiveness of existing programs. Finally, participants considered the importance of student self-advocacy as a critical life skill paramount to college success and discussed programs that encouraged such growth.




Student Success and Financial Aid

The recent efforts by IHEs and community-based organizations to increase college-going and college-completion rates have taken place in an economic and policy context that has worked against them. The cost of college has risen dramatically aid — and especially gift aid — has not kept pace. To fill the gap, students have turned increasingly to nonfederal student loans and, worse still, credit card debt to finance their educations. These options are far riskier than federal loans, carrying none of their benefits (forbearance, deferment, loan forgiveness) while remaining nearly impossible to discharge through bankruptcy. As a consequence

of these trends amid a serious economic downturn, student debt levels have risen, as have student loan default rates.

Not surprisingly, researchers find that students and families tend to overestimate the costs of college. They also underestimate the availability of financial aid, and a large proportion do not file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), leaving aid money on the table. These effects tend to be disproportionately higher among underserved groups. Because of this misunderstanding, financial aid policies are less effective. The misunderstanding has a gatekeeper effect — students who have crossed through this barrier into college while receiving aid are more likely to persist and graduate than those who have not.

Overall, these circumstances lead to four conclusions: 1) awareness and accurate information are essential to the success of financial aid policy; 2) aid programs such as merit-based aid, tax credits, and saving incentives benefit middle-class families and are less effective for low-income students; 3) the increasing dependence on loans to finance higher education stifles access, persistence, success, and career outcomes for these students; and 4) given the likelihood that these circumstances will continue, financial literacy education is essential for low-income students if they are to overcome these roadblocks to higher education.



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COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Breakthrough Collaborative

Founded in 2001, Breakthrough Austin is part of a national collaborative network of organizations with the shared mission of increasing high school and college success. Breakthrough Austin's traditional primary focus has been on reducing the learning loss students experience over the summer — a loss that is disproportionately greater among low-income students. To accomplish this, Breakthrough established a six-week summer program for rising 7th, 8th, and 9th graders with rigorous courses addressing a range of core subjects. The organization also makes a six-year commitment to its students that encompasses a holistic

range of services and employs a case management approach. These services include mentoring, academic enrichment, high school placement counseling, high school transition counseling, standardized test preparation, and college admission and financial aid guidance.

These efforts underline Breakthrough's belief that persistence and success require early involvement and long-term attention to a wide range of student needs. This holistic approach makes a difference — so far, more than 90 percent of Breakthrough students have graduated from high school. By comparison, the 2008 graduation rate among low-income students in Austin

Independent School District (AISD) was 63 percent. The same year, 27 percent of low-income AISD seniors were deemed college-ready; among Breakthrough seniors, the rate was 53 percent.

A long-term commitment to student success must include support for students during their college years, and as Breakthrough students began graduating from high school in 2008, the organization worked to put these resources in place.

From the beginning, the organization has tracked students closely through campus visits, parent conferences, and ongoing meaningful contact with students. This system enables Breakthrough to support students once they're in college — by sending care packages; keeping in touch through e-mails, text messages, and social media; and hosting student reunions. These efforts help students feel connected to a support system they relied on at home, and enable them to share concerns,

suggestions, and camaraderie with fellow Breakthrough students going through similar experiences at other campuses.

Breakthrough's long-term support for students has held promise at the college level, as 95 percent of the organization's first college class persisted beyond the first year. This rate once again far outstrips that of the general low-income student population in Central Texas — just 68 percent. Breakthrough hopes to expand

College Forward: One student's story



Diana Luna

As a first-generation student with a college degree, Diana Luna knows what it means to overcome the odds. The AmeriCorps member and Texas State University graduate moved to the United States when she was less than two years old. Everything was new to the transplanted family, including the educational system; when Diana decided to go to college, her parents were apprehensive.

“They were worried — about money especially,” she said. “They didn’t know about financial aid, and they were nervous about the idea of me being on my own in college.” For many students, such anxieties can present a serious roadblock on the path to college. In Diana’s case, she was lucky enough to have the support of College Forward, an Austin-based nonprofit focused on helping first-generation students achieve a college degree.

The group offers to speak with parents — in Spanish or English — about the steps involved in the college-going process and the availability of financial aid. The information provided by College Forward helped Diana’s parents feel comfortable with her higher education plans. Just as importantly, College Forward helped Diana make those plans possible.

According to Diana, the support network she gained through College Forward mattered just as much as the formal preparation. “After I joined College Forward, a lot of my social circle was centered around the program,” she said. “We really supported each other, we were in it together, we were a team. I feel that I really had something to rely on.”

That strong support network followed Diana into college, first at Austin Community College and then at Texas State University. When Diana needed help with the transfer process, College Forward walked her through it step by step. Once she arrived, the organization worked to set up an alumni group on campus, providing a group of familiar faces to help Diana and her peers feel supported and connected there.

All of this effort has clearly had a profound impact on Diana. In her first year post-graduation, she is working as an AmeriCorps member, serving as coach for College Forward. She sees her service as the perfect way to give back to an organization that has given her so much, while helping today’s students achieve as much as she has. “My heart is here at College Forward,” she said. “I will always be grateful to everyone involved, from teachers to administrators to donors. It makes all the difference.”

its college persistence efforts in the near future to include campus alumni networks at IHEs with significant numbers of Breakthrough students, in order to provide students with more immediate support than the organization can offer from its home base in Austin.

College Forward

Since its inception in 2003, College Forward has worked with 11 high schools in the Austin area to facilitate the transition into college of economically disadvantaged

students. College Forward volunteers (called “coaches” by the program) guide students through a comprehensive program beginning in fall of the junior year. Students choose ten schools to research, then narrow that list to six they’ll apply to. Students also practice writing personal essays, prepare for standardized tests, and learn strategies for staying in college and graduating. Starting in 2005, College Forward incorporated a college persistence program into its services, focusing on economic challenges, academic soft skills, campus engagement, and sensible curricular choices to produce specific outcome-based goals: the reduction

of stop-outs, overall academic improvement, and a shorter time-to-degree. The approach has worked: so far, participants have a 92 percent matriculation rate, an 84 percent freshman-to-sophomore retention rate, and a 77 percent 5-year retention rate.

Con Mi MADRE

The state of Texas is undergoing a dramatic demographic shift. According to state estimates, the Hispanic population will become the majority within a generation, growing from 32 percent of the population



in 2000 to 59.1 percent by 2040. This trend presents a challenge and an opportunity to the state. Historically, Hispanics in Texas have had lower incomes and less likelihood of matriculating and persisting in college; the state cannot maintain its economic prosperity without rectifying this situation.

Con Mi MADRE believes bridging the Hispanic achievement gap requires instilling a college-going tradition, a process that requires the participation of multiple generations. To that end, Con Mi MADRE works with mother-daughter teams to help them navigate the college-going process. The organization has worked with more than 1900 mother-daughter teams since 1992; their overall matriculation rate is 72 percent, with the 2009 cohort enrolling at a rate of 88 percent. Realizing the importance of persistence to the organization's mission, Con Mi MADRE has recently moved to strengthen its success program by employing a range of strategies, including:

- ▶ Expanding *Hermanas Unidas (Sisters United)*, Con Mi MADRE's alumni network, hosting bimonthly alumni gatherings to allow students to share experiences, advice, and support.
- ▶ Hosting workshops for mothers and daughters called *Bienvenidas a Casa (Welcome Home)* in June and December that will address educational finance, budgeting, parental support, and other persistence issues.

- ▶ Developing an alumni website and online social networking presence.
- ▶ Tracking, contacting, and gathering data on alumni through the National Student Clearinghouse database.
- ▶ Encouraging alumni to volunteer on subcommittees dedicated to event planning, fundraising, virtual networking, and membership.

Hispanic Scholarship Consortium

Founded in 2004, the Hispanic Scholarship Consortium (HSC) is dedicated to helping students overcome the most significant barrier to going to college — paying for it — and to helping them succeed in college and beyond. The HSC is composed of more than 30 Austin-area nonprofits and individual benefactors, and has provided more than \$500,000 in financial assistance, mentoring, and personal and professional development to more than 100 students. HSC scholarships are renewable and meant to continue when other forms of aid drop off. HSC also works to instill essential life skills in recipients, including self-confidence, a belief in their potential for success, and the ability to relate to others in a business environment. To that end, HSC has hosted a Scholar Leadership Conference annually since 2006, with high caliber speakers and workshops on networking, interviewing, leadership, and community service.



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SCHOOLS

Austin Community College's ACCHIEVE Program

As part of its efforts to meet the goals outlined in the Closing the Gaps initiative, Austin Community College (ACC) implemented a pilot program in the fall of 2009 to help retain 750 at-risk students. ACCHIEVE is a holistic, intrusive counseling program designed to identify student needs and provide early warning of potential crises to counselors and faculty members. Students initiate the process by completing an action plan, which is then entered into a comprehensive, institution-wide database. Instructors use the database to notify a student's counselor of a retention-threatening issue (e.g., excessive absences, low test scores, or personal concerns). The counselor then contacts the student to create a plan to address the issue. The ACCHIEVE system also includes a database of community resources to which the student can be referred for more help.

Student Retention Efforts at St. Edward's University

As a small liberal arts college with an annual estimated cost of more than \$35,000, St. Edward's University operates in a very different educational context from ACC. But this difference doesn't relieve St. Edward's of the need to focus on retention.

As recently as 1999, the university's 4-year graduation rate was just 27.9 percent, and its 2-year retention rate just 64.6 percent. Since that time, St. Edward's has worked to improve these numbers through a variety of programs, most of which are coordinated through the Office of Student Planning and Support Services. The office employs nine full-time academic counselors with a caseload of 80 to 85 students each, and offers a variety of academic support resources, including courses on effective academic and self-management skills; a first-year seminar focusing on exploration of a student's major or on helping students choose one; student progress reports for faculty; supplemental instruction and tutoring services; academic coaching for athletes; and an online writing center. Counselors meet one-on-one with each student to discuss individual interests, and each school in the university has an early warning system in place for at-risk students. Finally, St. Edward's has emphasized the importance of advising and retention to faculty members, instituting an advisor development series, a faculty/staff retention committee, and an outstanding faculty advisor award. These strategies have been extremely effective — by 2005, the 4-year graduation rate stood at 51.4 percent, and the 2-year retention rate had reached 76.8 percent.





BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

Culture of College Attendance

Forum participants agreed on the importance of developing a college-going culture among traditionally underrepresented groups. The earlier students see college as both a viable option and a necessity for future success, the more likely they are to go to college themselves. First-generation and lower income students are less likely to experience a family and school life that creates that perception. Like Breakthrough Austin, forum attendees advocated heavy intervention to shape student aspirations from an early age. This intervention should be geared to helping students envision long-term goals, assess their interests and aptitudes, and perceive a path to college for themselves. Furthermore, intervention efforts should start as early as kindergarten and first grade, in order to normalize the idea of college-going as early as possible. They should continue through early, middle, and high school

years and include summer enrichment programs, such as Breakthrough's, to help stem the learning loss and elevate lower income student achievement levels to those of their middle class peers. Finally, they should conclude with dual-credit and dual-enrollment programs to encourage students to get one foot in the college door before they leave high school.

As a necessary companion to these efforts, forum participants also emphasized the importance of increasing family involvement among underrepresented groups. Without the support, encouragement, and participation of parents and other family members, first-generation students are less likely to see education — especially higher education — as a priority. Participants pointed to Con Mi MADRE as a model for this type of outreach, lauding the group's efforts to address cultural barriers as a means to overcome reluctance on the part of parents to see education as a greater need than other family concerns.

Individual Education Plans

Students often lack clear goals as they start college. Lacking direction to provide momentum when difficulties arise, they are more likely to lose focus and ultimately leave without obtaining a degree. For this reason, forum attendees advocated that IHEs require each student to draw up, in consultation with an academic counselor or their advisor, an individual education plan. The plan would set out the student's academic objectives and include built-in, periodic check-in points for the counselor and the student to measure progress, make any needed modifications, and discuss any significant problems or warning signs.

Campus Connections

Just as having a plan gives students direction and focus, feeling at home and connected to an institution helps students feel more emotionally invested in their college experience. Having a social network provides an emotional safety net for students to turn to when they face the inevitable challenges college presents. To help foster the development of this safety net, forum participants supported programs aimed at increasing students' interpersonal connections on campus.

Expanded, mandatory orientation programs would lay a foundation for personal

investment in an institution and create a space for forming friendships from the very beginning of a student's college career. Since students benefit from feeling like they are not isolated from others like them on campus, participants encouraged the creation of peer groups as a support system, especially for minority and first-generation students. Participants also suggested the inclusion of a peer-to-peer mentoring component within these support groups, allowing for accountability not just to authority figures such as instructors, but also to fellow students with whom they may feel a closer connection. Given students' near universal use of social media networks, such networks would serve as



an ideal means of connecting students with similar backgrounds, interests, and challenges. Social media could also be used to better connect students to essential campus services, such as financial aid, health services, and tutoring.

Expanded Definition of College Readiness

In 2008, the state of Texas adopted new College and Career Readiness Standards in an effort to raise standards of achievement in the core subjects of English/language arts, mathematics, social science, and science. This ambitious measure was intended to ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared to study at the college level. While forum participants approved of this laudable and necessary goal, they also believed it insufficient to ensure college success.

College readiness, in other words, involves more than simple academic preparedness. The new standards acknowledge this reality in a chapter covering cross-disciplinary skills; however, little has been done to implement the recommendations described there. In addition, a crosswalk with the cross-disciplinary skills would quickly reveal how many of these skills were identified by forum attendees as essential. For example, participants argued that the concept of college readiness should be expanded, and that these standards should be supplemented with an assessment of students' social-emotional intelligence,

leadership, and self-management skills. These factors should be emphasized since they affect persistence and success as much as academic preparation.

Community College Transfer Rates

For many low-income, first-generation, and nontraditional students, community colleges offer an affordable, accessible entry into higher education. But an overwhelming majority of community college students do not move on to four-year schools to earn bachelor's degrees. According to a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics, of students who entered community college for the first time in the fall of 2003, just 11 percent had transferred to a four-year school three years later (Source: *On Track to Complete?*, 2009). Participants argued that, to address this situation, community college students — or at least those who enroll with the intent of earning a bachelor's degree — should have a transfer plan in place. Furthermore, while many community colleges have articulation agreements in place with at least one four-year school, these should be expanded to give students more options. Schools should also provide students with equivalency guides detailing exactly how courses will transfer and which courses are required for which degrees at the destination school. Finally, both types of institutions should provide more proactive assistance to students to help facilitate the transition.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Intervention

For many students, college presents opportunities for growth, maturation, and self-discovery; but it also requires focus, self-management, and strong social and emotional support structures.

The pressures and demands of higher education prove overwhelming for many, who leave without completing a degree. The factors that cause students to drop out are myriad. Students work to pay their way through college or just to support themselves while there; for some, the jobs they hold to support their studies become a higher priority than the studies themselves. Or they have family issues or obligations which take precedence over their studies. They can feel challenged academically and panic, stop trying, and eventually fail. They have substance abuse or addiction issues; they spend too much time having fun and not enough time hitting the books; they have emotional distress; they feel out of place.

These problems, while serious, need not sound the death-knell of students' higher educational pursuits. In some cases, challenging situations spiral out of control because students do not perceive an institutional culture in which IHEs are able to or care to address their problems. In others, faculty and staff members who could and would assist are unaware of a student's difficulties until it is too late to do anything about them.

To improve this situation, forum participants felt IHEs should work to make students aware of resources available to them in the community. They suggested colleges proactively share information with CBOs, while being mindful of the limits of doing so under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. They argued for proactive counseling for students with a C average or below.

They also believed schools should go even further, implementing early warning systems designed to address student problems at

a stage when assistance can still make a difference. IHEs and CBOs must cooperate in order to maximize the potential benefit of such early intervention, with CBOs making schools aware of the services they offer and colleges matching individual students with the particular resources they need.

In order to be successful, IHEs must have a method for determining student needs, alerting relevant parties, and encouraging students to take advantage of available resources when they are required. The method must be comprehensive and integrated into a college's system for keeping track of students' progress. In other words, early intervention requires the development of a comprehensive

database of IHE- and community-based support services available to students in jeopardy of leaving.

As noted above, in 2009–10 ACC was in the process of developing such a database. Forum participants viewed this as a key strategy in the campaign to increase student retention rates, pointed to ACCHIEVE as an exemplary model for creating such a program, and wished to see this model fully developed and implemented at campuses across the country.

As with ACCHIEVE, forum participants recommended the database system include an intake step, in which students file an academic plan and complete an interest

and satisfaction inventory, such as those offered by Noel-Levitz®. Faculty would have access to this precollege assessment and would file alerts within the system when a student issue — excessive absences, failing grades, or evidence of personal issues — comes to their attention. Qualified staff members could note information relevant to student circumstances as well. From there, the student's counselor would schedule a consultation to determine a course of action that addressed the student's situation, obtaining the student's buy-in for the plan and directing the student to the campus and community resources needed to avoid a negative outcome.



CBO/IHE Communication

As noted above, both schools and CBOs have worked to improve student persistence and graduation rates; but they have not necessarily collaborated with outside partners in these efforts. In part, this may result from a lack of awareness within IHEs of the resources available within the community to help. Participants thus pointed to the need for improved communication as the first step in building stronger relationships between the two sectors, emphasizing the need to help colleges “learn the language” of CBOs in order to take advantage of the services offered by them.

Much as the current forum brought IHEs and CBOs together to share information about student needs and take inventory of available resources, participants wished to see this model reproduced to solve distinct needs in communities around the country. The dialogue could be geared to the creation of a narrowly defined partnership for specific programs, or to bring together multiple educational institutions and community organizations to generate a broader range of discussion and creative collaboration. In either case, key stakeholders should be identified and included in any discussion to ensure that meaningful partnerships emerge. Faculty members must also be brought to the table, since they have the most regular contact with students of any segment of the school community.

Individualized Counseling

Forum participants also recommended a greater level of individualized counseling for students and increased training for staff members and faculty in advising roles.

Attendees advocated a K–12 counseling model, with students assigned to individual counselors for the course of their tenure at an IHE, at least to the extent this is possible from a personnel standpoint. Students should be immersed in the network of resources available to them as early as possible, with staff members from other offices making up cross-departmental teams assigned to individual students as well, so that the network also remains part of the student’s fabric of support. Students should feel as though they have an “army of advocates” available to answer questions; despite the emphasis on technology to facilitate problem resolution, schools should place more emphasis on human communication. To help add to the pool available to this army, schools should use older, successful students as mentors, as well as CBO peer group “student posses” oriented toward resolving issues commonly faced by students in the group.

Student Self-Advocacy

Finally, forum participants advocated equipping students with the skills to seek what they need without the close guidance of others. Arguably, this may be the most important skill to impart — teaching students to rely on themselves for help when no one else is providing it. Students from underrepresented groups often have a confidence gap when compared to their more middle class peers; imparting self-advocacy skills can help to fill this gap. By providing students with consistent, accurate information about higher education and training them to persist in seeking answers to their questions, IHEs and CBOs can help them build the self-confidence and determination they need to persist to graduation.

Financial Aid

In the spring of 2010, the United States was in the midst of the worst economic downturn in a generation, presenting dire funding challenges for IHEs and education-related nonprofits across the country. This situation led to personnel cuts and elimination of academic and support programs; most significantly, it also led to reductions in available student aid, a trend which disproportionately impacted students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. On top of that, the cost of college has continued to rise precipitously, while employment opportunities shrank dramatically in the last two years, leading to higher student loan default rates — the highest since the early 1990s.

These circumstances will not be resolved anytime soon. Without addressing these issues, however, improvements in college success rates will remain iterative rather than systematic in nature. Given concerns about default rates and weighty student loan burdens, forum attendees pointed to the acute need for increased counseling for student loan borrowers. Students should have greater awareness of their earning potential when taking out loans; colleges should have a mechanism in place to ensure this is the case. Further, when a student takes out a supplemental second loan during the semester, that action should trigger a required counseling session to discuss the reasons for and advisability of the additional loan. Finally, participants noted that financial aid policies are geared toward the traditional-student population, while nontraditional students make up increasingly larger percentages of college cohorts. They called for recalibrated aid policies that better accommodate the different needs of these students.

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Other related publications available through TG:

Accelerating Latino Student Success at Texas Border Institutions: Possibilities and Challenges

Bridging the Gaps to Success: Promising Practices for Promoting Transfer among Low-Income and First-Generation Students

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