

STUDENTS FROM POVERTY

Helping Them Make It Through College

More economically disadvantaged students are attending college than ever before. Yet only a small percentage of them actually graduate. As the author points out, helping poor students get into college is only half the battle.

BY ADAM HOWARD

DURING THE SPRING SEMESTER of my senior year of high school, I decided that I wanted to go to college. Like most students at my high school, I came from a poor family, and attending college seemed a nearly unattainable goal. I did not have the resources such as academic counseling and money to make college a reality. I then heard about a school in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, Berea College, that does not charge tuition but instead has students work their way through their undergraduate years in the school's labor program. I applied and was accepted. With minimum scores on college entrance exams and an unremarkable grade point average, I entered college after high school.

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Of the total student population at Berea, half come from families making less than \$16,000 per year, and 80 percent come from southern Appalachia. Berea's mission is to provide a liberal arts education to students whose families would have a difficult time affording it. All students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which made my adjustment to campus life somewhat easier than if I had attended another college. The homogeneity of the students' backgrounds eliminates the cultural and economic disparity that poor students encounter at most other postsecondary educational institutions. Berea provides the environment and necessary systems of support that encourage students to be successful. As Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer point out in their 1996 book, *Beating the Odds*,

Study after study of Berea students shows that they have greater flexibility, increased self-esteem and confidence, a more liberal intellectual orientation, increased cognitive and affective complexity, high moral development, and more. (p. 152)

Although my transition from high school to college was made easier by Berea's uniqueness, I was still faced with the realities that I did not have the academic skills needed for college, the financial means to cover the expenses beyond tuition, or the level of self-esteem and confidence necessary for overall success. I somehow overcame these obstacles and graduated from college. As a professor at Antioch College, I observe students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds encountering similar obstructing realities. The difference, of course, is that they are facing these challenges without the cushions inherently provided at Berea.

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In 1947, the President's Commission on Higher Education published a report that concluded that

American colleges and universities must envision a much larger role for higher education in national life. They can no longer consider themselves merely the instrument for producing an intellectual elite; they must become the means by which every citizen, youth, and adult is enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal and informal, as far as his native capacities permit. (p. 101)

Since then, the demographics of student populations at colleges and universities have changed drastically, and the number of poor students attending institutions of higher education has increased significantly. This increase in college attendance, however, does not negate the continued differences in educational achievement between the affluent and the poor. According to a 1996 U.S. Department of Education report, only 36 percent of poor students attend postsecondary institutions, compared to 88.3 percent of affluent students.

Although more poor students are attending college, according to Lawrence Gladieux and Watson Swail, wide disparities of socioeconomic status separate those who actually complete college and earn a degree from those who do not. In their study of students from all economic backgrounds who began college, they found that half received some type of degree within five years. More than 40 percent of economically advantaged students received a bachelor's degree or higher within these five years, compared to 6 percent of poor students. As the authors point out, it is not enough to get disadvantaged students into higher education. Colleges and universities also need to focus on helping students successfully complete their degree.

Many poor students find upward mobility and break out of the cycle of poverty through higher education. In my own experience, graduating college provided opportunities for me to have a higher standard of living and better employment. But, even though more students from poor families are attending college than in the past, only a small number complete their studies.

As Gladieux and Swail point out, many poor students who drop out of college are worse off than if they had never attended in the first place. These students leave postsecondary education with no degree and, most of the time, a debt to repay. In order for colleges and universities to begin working toward meeting the needs of poor students and increasing the number who graduate, they must improve structures of support. There needs to be a genuine commitment to provide poor students with academic, financial, and social support that will allow them to overcome the obstacles they face as college students.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

ELLEN BRANTLINGER, in her 1993 book, *The Politics of Social Class in Secondary Schools*, maintains that “Rather than being a common ground where all groups meet on equal footing, American schooling, in reality, is essentially stratifying” (p. 1). She further argues that, because of the differences in schooling, students from affluent families are generally more successful in school than poor students. Similarly, Jonathan Kozol, in his acclaimed 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities*, poignantly points out the differences in the educational opportunities available to the haves and the have-nots, and the influences of these differences in students’ levels of academic achievement.

Research studies and surveys consistently have found a correlation between academic achievement and socioeconomic status. Edward Vacha and T. F. McLaughlin summarize the body of research concerning significant factors placing students at a disadvantage in achievement. Their review clearly demonstrates that the single most consistent factor in academic achievement is students’ socioeconomic status. The work of Arthur Applebee, Judith Langer, and Ina Mullins bears this out: their study of reading scores from the 1986 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that poor students at age seventeen had similar scores on a standardized exam to economically advantaged students at age thirteen. This is the same gap that Robert Thorndike reported in his 1973 international study on reading comprehension.

The significance of this correlation is that students from poor families are less academically prepared for the

demands of postsecondary education than are students from affluent families. According to a 1997 report of the U.S. Department of Education, among high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 1992, fewer than half of poor students were considered to be highly qualified, compared to two-thirds of affluent students. Because they often start with fewer academic skills, poor students most commonly need remedial programs that allow them to develop the necessary academic skills (for example, reading, writing, and oral communication) and behaviors (such as study skills, organization, and time management) to meet the demands of college.

Colleges and universities typically have programs to help students who need academic assistance. Writing centers, tutoring programs, remedial courses, and academic support centers are all designed to help students with their coursework. I believe, however, that these support programs and services need to be more intentionally designed to meet the distinctive academic needs that many poor students have. They also should provide the necessary support for poor students to catch up with students who came to college with the necessary skills and knowledge to be academically successful. In order for these students to succeed, institutions must make a solid commitment to provide the necessary programs and services to meet the needs of most disadvantaged students.

But this commitment is threatened by the current climate in higher education, which Patrick Healy calls the era of tight money and higher standards. In his article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he discusses the decision that the trustees of City University of New York (CUNY) made in 1998 to end their open admissions policy, which was originally meant to enroll more minority and poor students. For that policy, CUNY had developed a comprehensive remediation program called SEEK (Search for Elevation, Education, and Knowledge) to provide underprivileged students, who traditionally lack the skills and knowledge for college-level work, the academic support they needed to graduate from college. The SEEK program was extraordinarily successful in effectively providing the academic support that underprivileged students needed to complete college.

Out of financial concerns, CUNY began in 1998 to cut back its open admissions policies and comprehensive

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remedial programs, which made it very difficult for disadvantaged students to be admitted to the university and, for the ones who did get there, made it difficult to succeed. What set CUNY apart from many institutions was not only that it historically admitted disadvantaged students with limited academic ability but also that it provided the necessary academic support for them to graduate. Indeed, CUNY had helped thousands of disadvantaged students and immigrants to realize the American dream and lift themselves out of poverty. With these recent changes, unfortunately, CUNY simply isn't the same institution..

Berea College, even in the face of tight budgets, has continued to provide poor students the academic support they need—for example, through a course called “Stories: Encountering Others through Literature” for all first-year students. Professors from all the disciplines teach this writing and literature course. They select a theme for the course, and students can choose what they want to study as they develop their writing and reading skills. The main goals of the course are to help students become better writers and readers, to get them more familiar with the library, and to have them work with and become more comfortable with computers. Students who need to significantly improve their reading and writing skills attend tutoring sessions twice a week.

The professors who teach the course and run the tutoring sessions work closely with the college's Center for Effective Communication (CEC). The CEC staff and professors form a partnership in providing students academic support from multiple sources. This also provides students an opportunity to become familiar with the CEC services and staff. When students do not regularly attend tutoring sessions or classes, a designated group of student affairs personnel works with the students to help them get back on track. Through this system, various groups of people are working together to provide students the support they need to be academically successful while they develop their skills and knowledge.

Although CUNY's SEEK program as it was previously constituted and Berea's course for first-year students are different, both were developed to meet the specific academic needs of poor students. Both distinctly recognize the importance of creating academic support programs that allocate time and resources for disadvantaged students to build the academic skills and literacy level that they need in order to be successful in college, the same skills and knowledge affluent students commonly already have when they begin college. Of course, some economically advantaged students also need remedial instruction. And, of course, some economically disadvantaged students have no problem tackling the academic challenges posed by college-level work. But in order to serve the many, many poor students who don't have those skills, we need academic support programs like these that are designed with the understanding and recognition that poor students typically come to college less prepared for the academic challenges of postsecondary study than economically advantaged students.

In addition to developing academic support services and programs, institutions need to provide faculty members with the resources and training necessary to create classroom environments that make learning more accessible for poor students who are not fully prepared for the demands of college. The majority of faculty members have not had the necessary training to create teaching and learning environments that respond to different levels of academic skill and knowledge, and to students as individuals. bell hooks, in her 1994 book, *Teaching to Transgress*, challenges postsecondary educators to create these teaching and learning environments by transgressing educational boundaries that confine students to an assembly-line approach to learning. She argues that the teaching and learning in most postsecondary institutions neglect the talents, strengths, weaknesses, and voices of students. Consequently, teaching and learning are defined in terms of the nature of the activity and the knowledge of the teacher instead of in terms of what students know and can do.

The commitment to economically disadvantaged students is threatened by the current climate in higher education, which Patrick Healy calls the era of tight money and higher standards.

Counter to this common understanding of learning and teaching in higher education is what bell hooks describes as *engaged pedagogy*, a progressive and holistic approach to teaching and learning whereby faculty understand students “as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seeking after compartmentalized bits of knowledge” (p. 15). An engaged pedagogy is just one approach to teaching and learning that provides more opportunities for students to do well in the classroom setting. Jeanne Henry, in her 1995 book, *If Not Now*, provides another example of a pedagogical approach that creates a classroom environment to meet the needs of students who have academic problems. She discusses the methods she used at Northern Kentucky University to improve students’ reading and to prepare them for the academic challenges of postsecondary study. Henry’s and hooks’s pedagogical approaches are drastically different from the prominent current practice, which focuses solely on the transmission of knowledge. Their approaches recognize students as individuals who have diverse academic needs.

In order for faculty members to establish different approaches to teaching that address the academic needs of poor students who have lower skill levels, they must have the necessary training and resources. The administration must facilitate the process of providing these resources and training to the faculty. Student affairs personnel are instrumental in making certain that this need for resources and training is a top priority on administrators’ agendas.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AGO, at the peak of the war on poverty, Congress passed the Higher Education Act, which financially committed the federal government to opening the doors of higher education to all, regardless of family income or wealth. Today, numerous federal programs are designed to provide students financial assistance so that they have the opportunity to attend college no matter the financial circumstances of their family. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the federal government allocated nearly \$42 billion for financial aid in 2000.

These financial aid programs, however, have drastically shifted from grants to loans. According to the College Board, grants made up 54 percent of all financial aid in the 1980–1981 school year, and loans made up only 41 percent of aid offered to students. During the 1999–2000 school year, loans had increased to 59 percent of federal aid, and grants had decreased to 40 percent. Furthermore, according to the National

Commission on Responsibilities for Financing Postsecondary Education, financial aid has not kept up with the rising costs of tuition. For example, between 1980 and 1990, college tuition and fees increased 126 percent, while Pell grants increased only 37 percent. Gladieux and Swail also point out that during these years the median family income was stagnant, growing only 9 percent after inflation. The major consequence of the hefty increase in tuition, the minimal increase in family incomes, and the shift in federal financial aid is that higher education is becoming less affordable for the poor. Along with the report of the National Commission on Responsibilities for Financing Postsecondary Education, Michael McPherson and Morton Schapiro’s study calls for an increased national commitment to student financial aid to make college more affordable.

According to the College Board, these changes in financial aid and tuition amounts have forced more students to borrow larger amounts of money to attend college than in the past. Because borrowing large sums of money to attend college significantly affects students’ futures, colleges and universities have a responsibility to better inform students and to provide adequate financial counseling to allow them to explore their options. Financial aid staff and student affairs personnel should collaborate in providing students with this counseling through workshops, one-on-one meetings, presentations, and other methods in order to effectively establish lines of communication. This would provide students the guidance to make informed financial decisions about their future and to begin financially planning for life after college.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) does not include this type of counseling in its statement about the responsibilities of financial administrators to students. NASFAA’s recommendations for good practice lay out the central parts of financial aid administrators’ responsibilities: to provide students suitable amounts of financial aid as determined by their levels of need, to inform students about their responsibilities in accepting this financial aid, and to comply with federal regulations. Although these responsibilities are important, they do not address the need to offer poor students the comprehensive financial counseling they require to make informed decisions about financing their college study through loans.

Students can reach informed decisions by looking ahead at life after college only if they have the support they need to explore the various options for financing postsecondary education and to learn important life skills such as budgeting money and managing time. As Gladieux and Swail argue, financial aid is necessary but is not

enough for poor students to be successful in postsecondary education. The scope of financial support in higher education should not be limited to providing poor students the financial aid they need to make college attendance possible. Financial support should be more comprehensive and provide students counseling and advising, helping them not only with the myriad challenges they face in trying to pay for tuition and the other expenses of attending college but with learning skills and making decisions that will help them succeed after they have graduated. Colleges and universities can incorporate this method of providing financial support into existing programs and services they offer to students.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

I ENTERED Mr. Mattingly's seventh-grade English class unable to read or write beyond the first-grade level. My family had moved three times before I reached seventh grade, and each school that I attended kept me from becoming literate. To the school officials, I was a poor child without the intellectual abilities or family support to learn what they thought I needed to learn. As a result of this perception, I did not learn. Even before I reached school, poverty kept me from becoming literate because poverty consumed my life. Both of my parents were unable to work because of poor health and disabilities. When I was an infant, we lived in a church basement because we did not have a home. We ate what members of the church brought us and wore donated clothing. These experiences taught me to survive on as little as possible, to be a child of parents who were ill, and not to believe in any sort of security or permanence.

This literacy of survival did not prepare me adequately for a school environment. Throughout my early years of school, I was in the remedial track because I had been diagnosed with a learning disability. The remedial classes at the third and final school I attended were held in the basement of the school alongside the classes for students who had so-called behavior disorders and for

mentally and physically challenged students in special education. The basement was mostly open, with some partitions separating the classes. The students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders were placed together according to grade level. With few exceptions, we stayed in the basement throughout the day. I have few memories of school during these years.

Fortunately for me, unlike several of my classmates who graduated high school functionally illiterate, this course of education would change once I arrived in Mr. Mattingly's seventh-grade English class. It did not take Mr. Mattingly long to realize that I was unable to read or write. My previous teachers had probably noticed this inability as well but refused or had not known how to address it. Mr. Mattingly asked me to stay after class early in the year and spoke what had never been spoken. He had discovered my secret: my poverty had been misdiagnosed as a learning disability.

From this point until my graduation from high school, Mr. Mattingly worked with me individually to help me reach a strong enough level of academic proficiency for college. He stayed after school with me to provide additional instruction and to offer guidance about the choices that confronted me. As I reflect on this period of my life, I realize that I was faced with many opportunities to make wrong decisions. Many of my peers had dropped out of school and were working. On the surface, they seemed happier than when they had attended school. Some classmates abused or sold drugs, and some had already been incarcerated. Successes in school were rare, and few of us anticipated them. Failure in school was treated as the norm.

Within this context, there were very few paths out of poverty, and these paths were barely visible to us and required individuals to tenaciously construct them. Mr. Mattingly guided me through this construction of a path toward a hopeful future and a life not limited by poverty. He provided me the extra instruction in reading and writing that I needed for college, but his support and guidance were just as important. He provided me the support and guidance my parents could not pro-

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vide. My parents wanted me to be successful in school; they just didn't know how to help me be successful. Through Mr. Mattingly's mentoring, college attendance became a reality for me.

In the most comprehensive study of how the poor make it to college, Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer found that the most influential factor in poor students' beating the odds of attending college was the positive influence of their mentors. In numerous accounts, students in the study explained the multiple ways mentors made going to college a reality for them. They point out that

In the simplest terms, the recipe of getting to college is mentorship—one arm around one child. . . . What mattered most is not carefully constructed educational policy but rather the intervention by one person. . . . Sometimes the mentor was a loving relative; other times it was someone paid to offer expert advice. In either case, it was the human contact that made the difference. (pp. 65, 139)

When I attended Berea, my peers told story after story of teachers, school administrators, family members, religious leaders, community leaders, and others who provided them the necessary support and guidance to make it to college. Through these relationships, they developed the level of confidence to explore beyond the educational limitations established by poverty. Almost everyone I met at Berea said they wouldn't have made it to college without the positive influence of a mentor. Today, I hear the poor students attending Antioch College echo similar points of view. In so many supportive ways, mentors make attending college a reality for poor students.

For most poor students, the social support and guidance provided by their mentors prior to college no longer exist once they enter college. They enter a new environment and are forced to look somewhere else for the support they received from their mentors. Some poor students are fortunate enough to find this source through professors, peers, student affairs staff, and others. When I was at Berea, I developed a wonderful relationship with a professor, Dr. Janet Fortune, that

provided me the same kind guidance and support that I had received from Mr. Mattingly. But neither poor students nor educational institutions should have to rely on this haphazard endeavor of providing students the social support they need. Schools must develop well-thought-out and effective support structures such as mentoring programs, one-on-one advising, counseling, group sessions, and comprehensive orientation programs that focus on the particular social challenges that poor students face while attending college.

Some of these social support programs and services, such as advising and counseling, are already established at colleges and universities. But as with academic support services and programs, the structure and methods of providing social support to students should be couched within the particular emotional and psychological needs of poor students. This means that advisers and counselors should have sufficient training and resources to better support poor students. Antioch College provides me with resources and training opportunities on issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation to further educate me so I can be a better adviser to my students, but it does not provide me the same resources and training opportunities to address class issues. From talking with colleagues from other institutions and noticing the lack of discussion in professional journals and gatherings about supporting postsecondary students who come from poor families, I don't think Antioch is different from most colleges and universities. In order to better support poor students, advisers and counselors need to be aware of the specific social challenges poor students face. This doesn't require new advising and counseling programs; this requires an institutional commitment to work toward a broader awareness of the social challenges that poor students face.

If mentoring is the most influential factor in getting poor students to college—and I believe it is—then the support and guidance provided by mentoring should still be available to them while they are at college. I know that Dr. Fortune provided me with the necessary guidance and support to keep me at college that my parents, who never attended college and didn't fully understand the culture of higher education, just couldn't provide. At Berea, one of the systematic ways

mentoring is provided is in the stories course described earlier. Students have the option of taking this course for one semester or during their entire freshman year. If they choose the full year, the course provides additional opportunities for students and the professor teaching the course to develop a closer relationship. The class meets in residential halls in the evenings and in the cafeteria during lunch. The discussions during their meetings are at times about college life in general. The students have more opportunities to meet individually with the professor. The course provides a structure for students to develop stronger and closer relationships with professors who can provide them the additional support and guidance they need to be successful at college.

RELATIONSHIPS

JEAN ANYON maintains that class status is defined by relationships: with the labor market, with economic and political structures, with others, and with educational institutions. Our lives and experiences are shaped by these relationships. Consequently, the experiences of the poor are very different from those of the affluent. The task for education, therefore, is to account for these differences in students' lives and experiences while establishing their overall program—both within and outside the classroom. By accounting for these differences, colleges and universities can provide learning environments for economically disadvantaged students that allow learning to most deeply and intimately begin.

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