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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES: Equitable Access to Higher Education

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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

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PART I: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT



Higher education provides extensive benefits to the individual and to society. The research is clear: individuals with college degrees are more likely to be employed and earn more, and are much less likely to live in poverty, than those with only a high school diploma (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). A college education provides some protection in tough economic times. For example, college-educated workers were least likely to be negatively affected by the most recent recession (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). In addition, having a bachelor's degree is associated with higher levels of voting

and volunteerism, as well as with having a healthier lifestyle (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

Serious inequities still exist with culturally and linguistically diverse students in regards to access to college, and to persistence and completion once enrolled. In the past twenty years, more Americans have achieved higher levels of education, but gaps in attainment by race and ethnicity have remained. For example, in 1995, the percentage of women ages 25 to 29 who had completed at least a bachelor's degree was 14%, 10%, and 28% for blacks, Hispanics, and whites, respectively. By 2015, these percentages had increased – to 24%, 18%, and 45% – but the disparities remained (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

The first barrier is getting students to apply. Low income and first generation students may not even apply to college because they lack access to social

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capital: norms for college, college knowledge, and help and advice from their families, schools, and communities (Nagaoka, Roderick, and Coca, 2009). When they do apply, some low income students do not apply to the best colleges. They may lack adequate information about college options and the college admissions process. They may lack adequate counseling from their school guidance counselors, whose caseloads prevent them from offering one-on-one time (Radford, 2013).

Overall, about two-thirds of high school graduates transition to college, and there has been some progress in closing college enrollment gaps. The share of students from the lowest-income households matriculating to college has been steadily increasing, and enrollment among Hispanic high school graduates has also risen significantly. In 2015, 69% of White recent high school graduates enrolled directly in college, while 65% of Hispanic graduates did so, along with 61% of Black graduates. Ten years ago, these gaps were larger. (See Holzer and Baum, 2017; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016.) Still, when they do enroll, low-income and under-represented students are more likely to attend under-resourced institutions such as community colleges, and less prestigious four-year colleges, where

completion rates are low, particularly for these populations. In addition, up to 40% never show up when classes start. Their reasons include “sticker shock” when they learn that the low-interest government loan is not a grant and must be paid back, the mounds of paperwork they may not understand how to complete, and a feeling they do not belong (Kolodner, 2015).

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



THE STUDENT MOMENTUM FRAMEWORK

Fortunately, experts and advocates have been drawing attention to these inequities more strongly than ever before. New research is focused on identifying the policies and practices that can make a difference in helping our most vulnerable youth transition smoothly to college and earn a degree. Students need a strong preparation – academic and nonacademic – for college, and ample information and guidance in the college application and

decision process.

One researcher has developed a “student momentum framework” that maps how students should accumulate the academic accomplishments and developmental experiences that make college success more likely (Barnett, 2016). This framework describes specific education attainment markers, along with college-preparatory experiences, in terms of momentum points. As students achieve these, they add up to a “momentum chain” that provides students with the academic and noncognitive skills, as well as the college cultural capital, that college success requires.

STRONG ACADEMIC AND NON-COGNITIVE PREPARATION

There is considerable evidence that success in college is closely tied to strong academic preparation in high school. Thus, school personnel must work with families to ensure that students enroll in the highest-level high school courses available, and take advantage of any supplemental academic programs or supports. Taking college-level courses while in high school, such as in dual enrollment and Advanced Placement programs, has been shown to positively affect students’ college-going, including

under-represented students (see, for example, Hughes et al. 2012). In dual enrollment, high school students simultaneously take college courses, often from a local community college, in either academic or career-technical subjects. These programs have grown considerably across the country and have varying eligibility rules and fees (the courses are sometimes free). In addition to the benefits of their college-level content, these courses have been shown to help students affectively, in helping them experience the norms of the college classroom and curriculum. One author characterized the student experience as “trying on the role of a college student” which can improve self-efficacy and motivation (Karp, 2007).

Early assessment and transition courses have also become increasingly common in high schools (Barnett et al., 2016). Students are assessed for college readiness in English and math in their junior year and then are enrolled in courses specific to their needs in their senior year. In some cases, the courses have been co-designed by both high school and college faculty to ensure consensus on college-ready standards. It is critical that when students leave high school for college, they are prepared to enroll and succeed in

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college-credit courses. When students are placed into remedial courses upon college entrance, they are much less likely to persist and matriculate.

Finally, while an increasing number of colleges do not require standardized test scores (ACT or SAT) for application, some studies have shown that when states require all juniors to take a college entrance examination, college enrollment rates increase (Hurwitz et al., 2015). Such test-taking may increase the number of colleges students can apply to, and may help instill expectancy for college-going.

GUIDING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

- *Provide College Cultural Capital*

In addition to skills, students need college cultural capital – the knowledge and tools needed to set college goals and achieve them. Students and their families must gather information on the college application process, calculate affordability, apply for aid, and choose among colleges.

Data show that low-income and underrepresented students tend to be concentrated in under-resourced public colleges. Some advocates are publicly questioning the commitment

of elite colleges to serving the more vulnerable students. For example, a 2013 article in the Atlantic magazine titled *Why American Colleges are Becoming a Force for Inequality*, argued that many colleges aren't interested in enrolling low-income students, instead directing their recruitment efforts towards "full-pay" applicants (Freedman, 2013).

But, several notable studies point out that students who could qualify for more selective institutions do not apply to them (Hoxby & Avery 2012; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). This phenomenon, dubbed "undermatch," is most common among low-income students and those with parents without a college degree. Such students are also likely to apply to very few colleges.

- *Encourage "Four or More"*

School staff can emphasize with students and their families that they should apply to multiple colleges. Based on research, the College Board recommends that students apply to "Four or More" – one safety, two good-fit, and one reach institution. When students who normally would apply to only one college instead submit two or three applications, their likelihood of attendance increases

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(Smith, 2013). Families should also understand that graduation rates matter – students, particularly those who might struggle, will have a better chance of completion at a college with a track record of getting most of its students through.

- *Avoid Sticker Shock: Explain Tuition vs. Other College Costs*

Poor financial aid awareness is certainly a factor in where many vulnerable students apply. The terminology can be confusing – the “price,” or “sticker price,” of a college refers to the amount advertised on the college’s website. The college may list two amounts, one for tuition and another for room and board; for public institutions, there will also be separate prices for “in-state” versus “out-of-state” students. Families need to know that the total cost of attendance (COA) will add up to more than tuition, room and board; students will also have to pay for books, transportation, and other necessities.

Counselors and other college access staff can help families understand that sticker prices should not be seen as an insurmountable barrier to application; much like passengers on an airplane, enrolled students pay different amounts, depending on scholarships

and discounts from the college’s institutional aid budget. Attending a more selective institution with a higher sticker price may actually cost less and result in better outcomes in the long run. Such institutions tend to have more generous financial aid to offer, which, combined with federal aid and possibly loans, could make the difference in enabling students to enroll. Moreover, they tend to have more on-campus supports and higher graduation rates, so that students can graduate in four years

- *Help Students Complete FAFSA*

To be awarded federal, state, and institutional financial aid, students must submit the Free Applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Unfortunately, many eligible students do not, including approximately one-third of students from families earning less than \$30,000 per year (Holzer & Baum, 2017). Districts in higher-poverty areas tend to have lower FAFSA completion rates. This is an area where schools can make a huge difference in the lives of these students. Offering college nights and/or other opportunities for families can provide the information they need to successfully submit college applications.

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- *Partner with Families*

Schools should partner with families to help all students take advantage of their postsecondary possibilities.

There are many pieces to applying to and enrolling in college, and students and their families will have varying knowledge of, and comfort with, the different aspects. Defining and uniting all the pieces into a student momentum framework may help educators and college access staff make sense of a complex process, and more efficiently identify and target individual student needs. MAEC has a program called *Paving the Way to College and Careers: Families and Schools Together*. We developed this toolkit in 2012 in conjunction with College Summit's *Launch* program. College Summit's new program is *PeerForward*.

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FREE ONLINE COLLEGE PREPARATION AND PLANNING RESOURCES

<http://www.bigfuture.org>

The College Board's comprehensive online resource for families to explore colleges and careers and learn about the college application process, including financial aid.

<http://www.niche.com>

A site with college rankings and student reviews.

<http://washingtonmonthly.com/2017college-guide>

Washington Monthly's annual college guide and rankings focus on which colleges recruit and graduate low-income students, as well as a "Best Bang for the Buck" list of schools that have been shown to help low-income students affordably earn marketable credentials.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/sat>

Students can practice for the SAT with free full-length practice tests and a free customized study plan.

<http://formyourfuture.org/>

From the National College Access Network, resources to help educators and others guide students in the FAFSA submission process.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/your-money/standout-college-application-essays.html>

Examples of stellar college application essays that address work, money, and class.

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