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Supporting First-Generation College Students: Ensuring Equitable Student Success

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Abstract

Student success is increasingly tied to equity-minded policies and practices that ameliorate postsecondary achievement gaps. Educational disruptions over the past few years continue to reshape the education landscape and have continued to illuminate racial and socioeconomic inequities at higher education institutions, deepening the digital divide and diminishing persistence rates. As calls for *success for all* echo across college and university campuses nationally, many institutions are focused on increasing student completion through improved onboarding, credentialing and degree pathways, and advising, all of which is grounded in student-focused teaching, learning, support, and assessment. Ensuring equitable student success becomes, therefore, a central focus of education at all levels, particularly in terms of uncovering ways to support students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and socioeconomically underserved populations. This endeavor is crucial if we are to address the needs of today's ever-evolving and increasingly diversified student populations. Transformation is best supported by starting with a universally understood student-centered mission that determines the creation of a student experience with equitable outcomes and educational value. How success is defined impacts policies and practices, and ultimately affects student outcomes. Student success can be defined as a *holistic phenomenon* that embraces the multiple dimensions of personal development in tandem with the multiple goals of higher education. Identifying the central principles or critical features of learning experiences that are most likely to embrace and implement a comprehensive definition of *equitable student success* can move higher education closer to realizing its intended outcomes.

Supporting First-Generation College Students: Ensuring Equitable Student Success

Educational inequity is an enduring feature of the United States' higher education system, with racial/ethnic and class-based disparities in college access, enrollment, and completion persisting despite years of programmatic and policy efforts to counteract these issues (Brown-McNair et al., 2020). Although students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and socioeconomically underserved populations are more likely to enroll in some form of postsecondary education than in years past, their likelihood of completing a degree once enrolled in college falls far below that of their white and economically privileged counterparts. The differences in college enrollment and college completion among historically marginalized and white and affluent populations have widened (AACU, 2019; Brown-McNair et al., 2020; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; PEW Research Center Report, 2021).

In recent years, the demographics have shifted, with student populations enrolled at today's colleges and universities having dramatically changed from those of previous decades. According to NCES report (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018) one third of college students are first-generation, and this number is rapidly growing. Predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students are often the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework. Research continues to illustrate that first-generation and most historically marginalized students drop out at higher rates and have greater need for institutional support (Center for First Generation Student Success (n.d.); Education Data Initiative Report, 2022; PEW Research Center Report, 2021). A 2022 report released by educationdata.org (Education Data Initiative Report, 2022) that first-generation students have a 92.2 percent higher dropout rate than their legacy peers, and those seeking a bachelor's degree have a dropout rate that is 23.5 percent higher than average. To this end,

educational institutions must intentionally strive to better understand these students' experiences and specific educational needs. Institutions and their governing boards must adopt an equity lens in all decisions and planning to ensure that all students enroll, excel, graduate, and thrive both during and post college.

A Focus on Student Success

Student success is increasingly tied to equity-minded policies and practices that ameliorate postsecondary achievement gaps (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). As noted by the Center for Urban Education (2020) and Berry (2022), equity-mindedness moves away from the vague language of diversity, which often focuses on identifying populations, toward a more focused analysis that considers the systems and supports that students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and socioeconomically underserved populations might need. Essentially, equity-mindedness concerns itself with social justice via culturally relevant and sustaining practices, and an explicitly antiracist agenda.

The significant educational disruptions over the past few years continue to reshape the education landscape and have continued to illuminate racial and socioeconomic inequities at higher education institutions, deepening the digital divide and diminishing persistence rates. As calls for *success for all* echo across college and university campuses nationally, many institutions are focused on increasing student completion through improved onboarding, credentialing and degree pathways, and advising, all of which is grounded in student-focused teaching, learning, support, and assessment. Ensuring equitable student success becomes, therefore, a central focus of education at all levels, particularly in terms of uncovering ways to support students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and socioeconomically underserved populations. A focus on student success *for all students* is not only a moral imperative but also a fiduciary duty and

strategic imperative directly related to institutional sustainability. This endeavor is crucial if we are to indeed address the needs of today's ever evolving and increasingly diversified student populations. Transformation is best supported by starting with a universally understood student-centered mission that determines the creation of a student experience with equitable outcomes and educational value. In that context, the work also requires institutions to design inclusive practices and build learning environments that authentically and effectively facilitate student success through a process what Brown-McNair et al (2020) refer to as advancing and nurturing *engaged inclusivity*.

Defining Student Success: The Critical First Step toward Promoting It

Student success is a term that appears frequently in higher education discourse, and encompasses the following questions: 1) What constitutes student success? (How should student success be defined or described?) 2) How do postsecondary institutions promote student success? (What specific types of educational processes contribute to, or increase the likelihood of student success within the context of a favorable outcome?) 3) How can student success be measured or assessed? (What constitutes evidence that student success has been realized and that certain experiences are responsible for its actualization?)

How success is defined impacts policies and practices, and ultimately affects student outcomes. Definitions of success will impact how researchers choose to measure the construct, which in turn will impact how data are interpreted and what recommendations are proposed (AACU, n.d.). Weatheron and Schussler (2021) point to historically hegemonic conceptualizations of student success. These authors call on researchers to carefully consider their definitions of success and associated metrics with a clear focus on diversity and inclusion, to adopt a more holistic view of student success, and to more fully consider how their

conceptions of success impact their research. Moreover, as these authors emphasize, it is critical to ensure that student advocacy is incorporated in all planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.

Success can encompass a combination of institutional and student actions to realize the desired outcomes, including achievement levels, persistence rates, metrics of degree completion, acquisition of content knowledge, skill proficiency and development, analytical reasoning, and post-college employment and earnings. The following outcomes are frequently cited indicators of student success in higher education:

- **Student retention (persistence):** Entering college students remain, re-enroll, and continue their educational pursuits.
- **Educational attainment:** entering students persist to completion and attainment of their degree, program, or educational goal.
- **Academic achievement:** students achieve satisfactory or superior levels of academic performance as they progress through and complete their college experience.
- **Student advancement:** students proceed to and succeed at subsequent educational and occupational endeavors for which their college degree or program was designed to prepare them.
- **Intellectual development:** developing skills for acquiring and communicating knowledge, learning how to learn, and how to think deeply.
- **Emotional development:** developing skills for understanding, controlling, and expressing emotions.
- **Social development:** enhancing the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships, leadership skills, and civic engagement.

- **Ethical development:** formulating a clear value system that guides life choices and demonstrates personal character.

This holistic approach leads toward a deeper understanding of student success and is consistent with many college mission statements and institutional goals, which include outcomes that are not solely academic or cognitive in nature (Astin, 1991, 1993; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). The implications of a holistic definition of student success for one very desirable student outcome—student retention—is underscored by research which repeatedly demonstrates that the vast majority (75-85%) of students who withdraw from college do so for reasons other than poor academic performance, and that most departing students are indeed in good academic standing at the time of their departure (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). If student success is indeed defined as a *holistic phenomenon* that embraces the multiple dimensions of personal development in tandem with the multiple goals of higher education, the next step would be to identify the central principles or critical features of learning experiences that are most likely to embrace and implement a comprehensive definition of *equitable student success* and work toward realizing its intended outcomes.

Establishing a Conceptual Structure for Equitable Student Success

There is a growing body of theory, empirical research, and practical strategies related to student success, with the emphasis on supporting diverse students and increasing equity-minded practice. However, institutions of higher education do not always effectively implement a conceptual structure to build and test theories for improvement and to clarify and articulate what is needed to achieve their student success goals (Bloomberg, 2021, 2024). As Kinzie and Kuh (2017) aptly put it, “To realize improved student success outcomes, a re-envisioned student success framework is needed, one that is grounded in evidence-based policies and practices that

explicitly recognize diverse institutional missions, educational purposes, and organizational arrangements” (p. 20). Baum and McPherson (2019) emphasized the need to understand more about how students learn, how to develop and support effective teaching at the college level, including overcoming the barriers associated with traditional methods of assessment and grading practices which significantly undermine the capacity of schools to serve students with diverse cultural and social backgrounds and identities. A re-envisioned framework for student success incorporates greater attention to institutional responsibility for actualizing student success, promotion of equity-minded practices across the institution including trauma-informed educational practices, and a clearer focus on the critical elements entailed in both achieving and evaluating student success.

Equity and Inclusion: Content, Methodologies, and Policies

In 2021 I published *Designing and Delivering Effective Online Instruction: How to Engage Adult Learners*, with the focus heavily on ensuring equity and inclusion. As I write in my book,

Inclusion represents the extent to which individuals feel valued, respected, encouraged to participate fully, and able to be their authentic selves. Inclusive pedagogy describes curriculum and teaching approaches that encourage learners to have *a sense of belongingness*... Inclusion is rooted deeply in the democratic principles of both justice and opportunity, and educators have a responsibility to ensure that all learners can fulfill their goals of completion. (p. 123).

Embracing equity and inclusion in the classroom requires that educators anticipate individual student needs, consider the delivery and presentation of their content, assign coursework that has real-world meaning, and prioritize skills development — efforts that result

in greater student success. Serving the needs of first-generation students has become an imperative for colleges and universities. So, how can we do better to support our first-generation students? Below are some recommendations for both educators and school administrators to help first-generation college students thrive, as outlined by Bloomberg (2022):

Strive to Really Understand Your Students' Backgrounds

It is reasonable to expect your first-generation students will come to campus unfamiliar with how it all works, uncertain about how to lean on academic support systems, and with unique and challenging experiences compared to their legacy peers. Many students may be juggling life obligations such as working or raising families. For schools to make a positive impact on the lives of these students, their programs and offerings should directly respond to all students' needs. In the case of incoming first-year undergraduate students, outreach is key. Offerings can include providing campus tours tailored to interested first-generation students while they are still in high school or pairing up new and prospective students with students in higher grades.

Find Ways to Keep Students Meaningfully Engaged in Their Learning

Ultimately, it is up to institutions to ensure a seamless transition for their students into college and to keep them engaged once they're there. First-generation students bring unique, marketable skills to the table, such as resilience, determination, and self-sufficiency. However, they also need practical guidance that will get them from their acceptance letter to commencement and instill a sense of investment and belonging. To accomplish this goal, we need a solid understanding of where our students are coming from, their individual frames of reference, and ways for them to meaningfully remain engaged in the learning experience. One way to find out what more you can do is to turn to your current first-generation students and ask how to be a better, more supportive resource for both them and their families.

Prepare Students to Navigate Their Post-college Careers

Higher education institutions strive to prepare learners for their careers, and paying attention to the needs of specific students is essential in order to provide appropriate support and guidance. Rise First (Rise First, n.d.), is an organization that serves to bridge some overarching gaps that can exist between first-generation, lower income students and their institutions of higher learning. Through their work, this organization has uncovered a number of specific concerns that first-generation students often raise when they talk about entering the workforce, including:

- **Imposter syndrome**, the act of feeling like a fraud or doubting one's abilities, can create damaging and lasting patterns of under-achievement and failure.
- **Unwritten workplace rules and protocols** can be confusing and debilitating because these are difficult to navigate.
- **Managing finances** is a tangible, practical skill to develop in students for when they enter the real-world workforce.
- **Networking** allows students to set themselves up for success in the workforce. Help students use their time in college by practicing tackling these challenges in a safe space such as pairing students with mentors who can provide opportunities to engage in networking opportunities.

Thinking about engaging and supporting first generation students from enrollment all the way through to completion means focusing, at the forefront, on an established vision and mission about equity and student success. Serving the needs of first-generation students has become an imperative for colleges and universities, and higher education must continue to address not only ways of providing support initiatives for this student population, but also to make it easier and

more intuitive for students themselves to find and access relevant support. As educators we can always do more to connect with our students—simply by asking them what they might need to overcome the barriers with which they are confronted. This will go a long way in ensuring all students feel seen and heard, thereby inspiring us to keep reimagining new ways to honor a diversity of voices and experiences. What will YOU do to make a difference in the lives of YOUR students?

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Author Biography

Dr. Linda Dale Bloomberg is founder of Bloomberg Associates, ILIAD (Institute for Learning Innovations and Adult Development) and Advanced Learning Solutions, and a cofounder of Columbia University's Global Learning and Leadership Institute. She previously served as senior researcher for the South African Human Sciences Research Council and National Institute for Personnel Research, focusing on change management, diversity initiatives, and workplace learning. From 2013-2023 she served as Associate Director of Faculty Support and Development for National University's Sanford College of Education. In this capacity, she coached and evaluated online faculty, develops curriculum for graduate research courses. She currently carries the title of full professor of education in the Department of Global Innovation, Social and Emotional Learning, and Educational Technology, where she serves as dissertation chair and subject matter expert for doctoral candidates. She also serves in an advisory and leadership capacity for the university's community engagement platform and was a founding member of the University's diversity committee and Inclusive Excellence Council. She consults to numerous research and nonprofit advisory boards, including the *Future Talent Council*, Global Advisory Board for Faculty and Staff Development, Mentor in Residence for SAGE Publications, and educational blog contributor to Teachers College Publications. In 2021 she received a diploma in executive coaching from the Goizueta Business School, Emory University, and is qualified as Associate Certified Coach (ACC) with the International Coach Federation. Linda presents regularly at national and international professional conferences on topics related to qualitative research, online learning, and professional development for online pedagogy, and is the author of multiple publications in the fields of qualitative research, organizational evaluation, leadership development, ensuring equitable student success, adult learning, and distance education, and a contributor to The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation (2018). Her two most recent books include the 5th edition of *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (2023) published by Sage and *Designing and delivering effective online instruction: How to engage adult learners* (2021) published by Teachers College Press, Columbia University. This publication was nominated for the 2021 and 2022 Division of Distance Learning for the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) and for the Online Learning Consortium award for Excellence in Instructional and Teaching Practice (2024). In 2006, she received her doctorate in adult education and organizational learning from the AEGIS program Columbia University that was established by Jack Mezirow, founder of Transformative Learning theory. She holds Master's degrees in Counselling Psychology and Organizational Psychology from the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.