

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

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Solving
Problems

First-Generation Students



First-Generation Students

For students who are the first in their families to go to college, the educational opportunity can be transforming. But it can also be bewildering, especially for those from low-income families. Cultural and academic challenges often overwhelm a first-generation undergraduate, causing them to fail classes or even drop out altogether.

This collection includes *Chronicle* articles and essays about how colleges and universities can enroll, retain, and graduate more first-gen students.

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But hurdles, such as identifying who they are, remain.

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Colleges Expand Support for First-Generation Students

By KATHERINE MANGAN

TAE-HYUN SAKONG would love to be able to tell his parents why he decided to major in neuroscience, and what it was like to help his biology professor probe a genetic risk factor for Alzheimer's disease.

The Trinity University undergraduate also wishes he could tell them about the anxiety and depression that overwhelm him when he compares himself with classmates who attended elite prep schools and spend spring breaks in Cancun. But his parents, who never went to college, speak little English, and he speaks his native Korean at a grade-school level.

"I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do," he says.

Michael Soto, an associate professor of English at Trinity, understands. A first-generation college student himself, he grew up in Brownsville, Tex., on the border with Mexico. His parents couldn't understand why he decided to pursue a doctorate in English after graduating from Stanford.

"It was probably four years into graduate school that my mom finally stopped asking me when I was going to go to law school," he says.

The support Mr. Soto received as an undergraduate prompted him to become a champion for first-generation students, who now represent about 15 percent of Trinity's undergraduate population.



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Tae-Hyun Sakong immigrated from South Korea at age 7 and today majors in neuroscience at Trinity U. His life is a world apart from that of his parents, neither of whom attended college. “I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do,” he says.

Mr. Sakong, 22, says that if it weren’t for professors like Mr. Soto and James Roberts, his biology professor and adviser, he would have dropped out long ago.

As colleges seek to diversify their student bodies and patch up their leaky pipelines for disadvantaged students, many are expanding efforts to connect students who are the first in their families to attend college with supportive classmates, advisers, and professors. Some colleges have formal, longstanding programs in place, while others offer scholarships or informal support groups. But despite the fact that a growing number of first-generation college students are arriving on their doorsteps, many other colleges are doing little to meet their needs, either because they have trouble identifying such students or because their budgets are strained.

The challenges these students face are daunting. First-generation students tend to work longer hours at their jobs, are less likely to live on campus, and are more likely to have parents who would struggle

to complete financial-aid forms. They’re also more likely to arrive academically unprepared for the rigors of college and to require remediation before they can start earning college credit.

Many feel the tug of family responsibilities, rushing home after class to take care of younger siblings or missing classes to care for an ailing grandparent.

The disparity in household income is striking: Median family income at two- and four-year institutions for freshmen whose parents didn’t attend college was \$37,565 last year, compared with \$99,635 for those whose parents did. *The New York Times* calculated those figures using data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Having lived so close to the margins, “first-generation students tend to be risk-averse,” says Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

“Many of them continue being breadwinners for their families when they go off to college.”

Clearly, these students need extra support to stay enrolled, and colleges have a strong interest in identifying their most vulnerable groups to keep them from dropping out. But identifying first-generation students isn't as easy as it sounds.

COLLEGES USUALLY have to rely on self-reporting, since the Census Bureau no longer tracks parents' education attainment. The Common Application, like many colleges' own applications, asks students about the highest level of education their parents achieved. More than 28 percent of the 800,000 students who used the Common Application last year reported that they were first-generation students. They represent a diverse swath of society. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where about one in five undergraduates is a first-generation student, about 90 percent are white, many from small towns and farms.

Then there's the whole issue of whom to include. Some colleges use the first-generation designation when neither of the student's parents attended college. Others define it more broadly to mean that nei-

“I want them to know that I was once a first-generation college student and that they should set their aspirations as high as they want to.”

ther parent graduated from college, or from a four-year college in the United States. That definition, used for eligibility in some federal-aid programs, would consider the daughter of two community-college graduates a first-generation college student.

However you define them, first-generation students represent a significant share of the prospective students that colleges, eager to trumpet their track records in diversifying their enrollments, are trying to recruit.

Of students who entered four-year colleges as freshmen last year, more than 45 percent reported that their fathers had no college degree of any kind, and 42 percent said their mothers lacked degrees, a survey found. About a quarter of their parents had no postsecondary education, according to the survey by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

The Council of Independent Colleges concluded in a report released earlier this year that small and midsize colleges, with their small classes, involved faculty members, and extracurricular activities, do the best job retaining low-income and first-generation students. The students are more likely to fin-

ish their bachelor's degrees in four years at a smaller private college than they are in six years at a public nondoctoral university, the researchers found.

Despite the higher sticker prices at small private colleges, first-generation students who attend them pay on average only \$1,000 more per year than do similar students at public research universities, mostly because of more generous scholarships, the study found.

Smith College is a case in point. Seventeen percent of its undergraduate students have parents who didn't graduate from college, and it is among the institutions that offer generous perks to qualified first-generation students. Last month, at a campus event for newly accepted students, faculty and staff members who were themselves the first in their families to attend college wore T-shirts proclaiming their first-generation status.

Among them was the college's president, Kathleen McCartney.

“I want them to know that I was once a first-generation college student and that they should set their aspirations as high as they want to,” she says. While first-generation students tend to feel pressure to emerge from college with a clear career path, “I want them to know that if they want to major in philosophy, they should major in philosophy,” she says. She tells students that employers value strong liberal-arts backgrounds.

When elite institutions like Smith, Amherst College, or Harvard University enroll significant numbers of first-generation students, their stories are often splashed across the news. But regional state universities and community colleges have been identifying and supporting these students for decades, through federal TRIO programs, a collection of outreach and student-services efforts geared toward low-income students.

“We have seen this trend of elite colleges and universities that are well endowed actively and aggressively recruiting low-income, first-generation students,” says James T. Minor, deputy assistant secretary for higher-education programs at the U.S. Department of Education.

“They tend to be high-achieving students, and we think that's wonderful,” he adds. “But that, unfortunately, is not the majority of students from that demographic.” He believes the overwhelming majority of first-generation students attend community colleges and open-access four-year public colleges, many of which, he says, have benefited from 50 years of TRIO-funded programs.

Some examples include a “talent search” program that allows colleges to offer intensive preparation for students at underserved schools and the McNair Scholars Program, which encourages first-generation and other underrepresented college students like Trinity's Mr. Sakong to pursue doctoral study.

California State University-Dominguez Hills is a largely minority campus in Los Angeles's South Bay

where more than 60 percent of freshmen are the first in their immediate families to attend college. The university offers a TRIO-funded support program for first-generation and low-income students that includes academic coaching, tutoring, peer mentoring, financial-literacy training, and graduate-school preparation.

“Everyone always asks, Is the student ready for college? But we also ask, Is the university ready for the student?” says William Franklin, interim vice president of enrollment management and student affairs. He was a first-generation student himself who graduated from the University of Southern California after being recruited by USC and a TRIO program called Upward Bound.

“We need to ensure that we work closely with parents,” he said, “and that first-generation students know how to navigate this place when they may not have a parent or sibling to talk to about financial aid, housing, or adding and dropping classes.”

A number of public universities have designated scholarships for first-generation students, but many are deterred by the extra cost of intensive advising and financial support the students typically require.

“The budget pressures that all higher education is under have four-year state institutions, particularly flagships, looking more carefully at the revenue potential of those they enroll,” says Mr. Mortenson of the Pell Institute. According to that metric, foreign and out-of-state students who pay full freight are the most valuable, while, he says, “the lowest priority are the lowest-income students who require an institutional discount.”

Those students, though, make up a sizable chunk of the total prospective student population, and many colleges have concluded that they’re worth investing in.

To help students who are most likely to fall through the cracks, a nonprofit group called the College Advising Corps this year placed about 450 recent college graduates of its 23 partner colleges into more than 500 underserved high schools in 14 states. The new graduates serve as full-time college advisers, supplementing the work of professional college advisers who, on average, are responsible for 450 students (and up to 1,000 or more in states like California), according to Nicole Hurd, founder and chief executive of the advising group.

About 70 percent of the corps’ young advisers are from underrepresented minority groups, and more than half have parents who never graduated from college.

An analysis of the program by Stanford University found that high-school seniors who met with an adviser were 30 percent more likely to apply to college, 24 percent more likely to be accepted by at least one, and 26 percent more likely to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa.

And despite their disadvantaged economic status, three quarters of the students who enrolled in college persisted through the second year — about the same as the national average.

A spokesman for the advising group said it doesn’t yet have comparative graduation rates, but it hopes to start tracking them soon.

One of those advisers, Erica R. Elder, returned to her high school in Bassett, Va., to provide the kind of boost that helped get her into the University of Virginia.

The challenges she has faced as an adviser remind her of her own struggles while applying to college.

“Everyone always asks, Is the student ready for college? But we also ask, Is the university ready for the student?”

She has encountered students who didn’t see college as a realistic option, and who were ready to give up with any minor setback in the admissions process. Parents who were ashamed about their meager earnings and ignorance about college wouldn’t look her in the eye during financial-aid nights.

But when acceptances started rolling in for students she has advised, she would arrive at school at 8 a.m. to find two or three students ready to greet her. “When they come bursting into my office,” she says, “it’s the best feeling in the world.”

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6 Steps to Help First-Generation Students Succeed

COLLEGES HAVE been experimenting with various student-success models for years, but a sharp increase in first-generation and minority enrollment has given the task a new urgency. At Texas A&M University at San Antonio, where I am president, we are constantly evaluating ways to make our procedures “student centered” and keep our students on track to graduation.

Our institution saw enrollment rise by 21 percent in 2016, when we transitioned from an upper-division campus to a four-year university. We are now one of the fastest-growing universities in Texas. Among our students, 78 percent are first-generation, 70 percent are Hispanic, and 64 percent are eligible for Pell Grants. As we develop new policies to support our students, we try especially hard to help them build upon their strengths and explore possible careers, and to recognize the crucial role their families play.

Nearly a year before our first-year students arrived on campus in the fall of 2016, we invited national experts to help us identify practices that ensure students graduate in a timely fashion. Our data on student performance and graduation rates helped us accelerate new programs focused on academic success and career development for first-year and transfer students. Here are some of the steps we have taken to support student success and improve graduation rates:

This weeklong immersion program for first-year students, held before classes start, is designed to build their engagement and sense of belonging.

JagX: This weeklong immersion program for first-year students, held before classes start, is designed to build their engagement and sense of belonging. Daily sessions examine obstacles faced by first-generation students, and link academic expectations, university traditions, and campus culture with hands-on, personalized learning. Our aim is to give

students persistence skills early on, to improve their chances of graduating in four years.

Jaguar Tracks: Students migrate from JagX to Jaguar Tracks, a four-year program designed to improve career readiness and build student accountability and motivation. Students earn one credit each year. In the first year, instructors are paired with student mentors who help new students navigate academic, social, and personal challenges. The second year focuses on helping students to articulate their own identities and to understand diversity and global awareness. Coursework for the third and fourth years focuses on academic goals, and is taught by faculty members in the relevant disciplines.

While some faculty members initially voiced concerns about fitting in an extra teaching obligation, our need for a student-centered format prevailed after we held a series of discussions and meetings. Those who had expressed concerns became supportive once they understood that the new program was closely aligned with the strategic plan we were developing.

Block Scheduling: Because so many of our students must juggle jobs, classes, transportation issues, and family demands, we have created a compact block system that allows them to take courses in a contiguous, prearranged schedule. For example, a student might have a three-hour block of courses three times a week, rather than having morning and afternoon courses with large chunks of time in between. In an effort to be flexible, we have even offered Saturday courses and courses that start at 6 a.m.

Student Success Coaches: Because data suggest that underserved or underrepresented populations benefit from readily available academic support, we developed a team of eight student-success coaches to help all freshmen, sophomores, and struggling students. We also started an early-alert warning system, in which faculty members post information about attendance, missing assignments, or poor scores. That triggers an electronic alert to coaches, who then contact the student.

Our success coaches serve as a resource hub, easing the transition from high school to college and helping students navigate the university. Through workshops and one-on-one sessions on alternative study skills, note-taking, reading comprehension, and goal-setting, the coaches encourage students to link their personal strengths, values, and interests

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with their intended accomplishments.

Undergraduate Research: Most students from historically underrepresented populations have limited exposure to professional opportunities in white-collar occupations. Our Mays Center for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement helps students make connections. Faculty members also bolster undergraduate research by emphasizing field-based coursework and service learning.

For example, Megan Wise de Valdez, an associate professor of biology, includes undergraduate students in her research on the breeding patterns of mosquito species associated with the Zika and West Nile viruses. Every spring our students participate in an undergraduate research symposium to showcase faculty and student work.

Family First Seminar: Families play a vital role in the success of first-generation students. (I know this firsthand, since I am one myself.) But we were not doing enough to develop the cultural understanding of these students' parents, who told us that coming to campus seemed like a foreign experience. Many did not understand the academic journey their children were about to take. Family First is a nine-week program designed to help parents and other family members better understand university life and student development. Parents receive a syllabus for the seminar and meet with faculty and staff experts to learn about academic success, financial aid, internships, study abroad, and more. Parent-engagement studies have found that family programs can ease students' transition to college by helping them reduce stress, perform better academically, and develop a heightened sense of autonomy and responsibility.

Our student-centered approach is a work in progress — one that requires a relentless commitment to data and a willingness to examine each step in the

student life cycle. We constantly track the progress of all interventions, and make adjustments when necessary.

We learned, for example, that more than 86 percent of the students who met with a coach during the fall of 2016 returned the following semester. Of those students who did not meet with a coach, not one returned. Our data also show a growing trend among traditional-age students transferring from community colleges, so we need to make sure our academic-success programs are relevant for them, too.

Our student-centered approach is a work in progress — one that requires a relentless commitment to data and a willingness to examine each step in the student-life cycle.

Our goal as a public university is to prepare our students — many from underserved communities — for a prosperous future in a fast-paced, complex world. In doing this, we are also adapting to a “new normal” in enrollment trends that other colleges would do well to consider.

Cynthia Teniente-Matson is president of Texas A&M University at San Antonio.

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College 101 for Parents

Helping moms and dads help
their first-generation students succeed

By KELLY FIELD

PHOENIX

THE FIRST REACTION Denny Gutierrez had when his mom said he had to join her for eight weeks of college-prep classes this past fall was “but I have soccer games Wednesday nights.”

“I thought it was going to be a waste of time,” the high-school freshman recalled at his graduation from Arizona State University’s American Dream Academy, in December. “I never thought my mother could understand me.”

But after the first class, Mr. Gutierrez and his mother were already communicating better, he said. They stopped arguing over his low grades and started working together to improve them.



DAVID WALLACE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Denny Gutierrez, a student at Maryvale High School, in Phoenix, started off thinking the American Dream Academy “was going to be a waste of time.” Now, after receiving his graduation certificate, he says the program “should be required so everyone can have this connection with their parent.”

These days, his mom, Gisela Avalos, sits with him when he reads and does homework. She said she listens more than she used to. And she understands now the steps that it will take to get him through high school and into college.

“Our dream has been for him to go to college,” said Ms. Avalos, who moved to the United States from Mexico in 1994 and owns a window-tinting business. If he makes it through, he will be the first in his family to earn a degree.

Ms. Avalos is among the more than 35,000 parents who have graduated from ASU’s American Dream Academy over the past decade. The program serves two purposes: to give parents of first-generation students like Mr. Gutierrez the information and confidence they need to help their children succeed in school, and to sell Arizona State to communities that may be less familiar with the university.

Research shows that family engagement is critical to student success in school and college. Students who have involved, supportive parents are more mo-

tivated, less likely to miss class, and more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Yet surveys also show that many parents of first-generation students aren’t sure what it takes to be effective partners and advocates for their children.

Most college-access programs focus on the student, educating the child as a way to compensate for gaps in the parents’ knowledge. The programs may offer a workshop or two on applying to college, or on applying for financial aid, but they rarely involve parents in substantive ways, said William G. Tierney, a University of Southern California professor who has studied parent engagement.

“Programs frequently give lip service to working with parents, but with limited budgets the vast majority have to focus on direct services to students,” Mr. Tierney said.

That is slowly starting to change, as more colleges and nonprofit groups offer multiweek seminars, savings accounts, and scholarships aimed at getting



DAVID WALLACE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Roberto Esqueda Hernández receives his graduation certificate from Arizona State U.'s American Dream Academy at Maryvale High School, in Phoenix: The classes, he said at the ceremony, taught him “that if some of us couldn't or didn't do it, our children can.”

more parents of first-generation students involved in their children's education.

The American Dream Academy was in 74 elementary and secondary schools in Phoenix and Tucson in 2016. All the schools that offer the program are Title I institutions, meaning that at least 40 percent of their students are low income. More than 85 percent of the parent participants speak only Spanish. For many of the parents who complete the course, it will be their first time graduating from anything.

That was the case for Roberto Esqueda Hernández and his wife, Maria López de Esqueda, who graduated from the program with Ms. Avalos and her son this winter. The couple grew up in the Mexican countryside, and left school after the fourth grade to work on their families' ranches. Mr. Hernández, who spoke at the graduation ceremony, said that before he enrolled, he assumed he and his wife wouldn't be able to afford college for their children.

“To be honest, I always thought that the middle class had no chance of a higher education,” he told the audience at Maryvale High School, “that

the American dream was to slave like a mule in this country, trying to learn a trade.”

The classes, he continued, taught him “that if some of us couldn't or didn't do it, our children can.”

The early evidence from programs like the American Dream Academy is encouraging. Parents who attend multiweek seminars like ASU's show marked improvements in their awareness of how to help their children succeed in school, as well as how to plan for sending them to college and communicate with teachers and administrators. Even more encouraging: Their children are enrolling in college at much higher rates than are their peers.

It's harder to say if such efforts are having an effect on college-graduation rates. Most of the parent-oriented programs don't track students through college, and those that do haven't been around long enough to claim many graduates.

Surveys do show that a majority of low-income and minority parents want their kids to attend college. But such students remain underrepresented in higher education, especially at four-year institutions.

In part, that's because parents of first-generation

students tend to overestimate how much college costs, and assume, like Mr. Hernández did, that it is financially impossible. At the same time, they're often uncertain how to advocate for their kids or support their schooling.

Alejandro Perilla, director of ASU's Center for Community Development and Civil Rights, says that nearly all the parents who take part in the academy "are 100 percent committed to their children's education." When he asks parents, "Who is your child's first and most important teacher?" they almost invariably say they are. But when he asks, "Do you know how to get your child to college?" most will confess they don't.

"They'll say, 'I don't know what to do with my children,'" he said. "They seem lost."

The American Dream Academy, which offers its two-hour morning and evening classes in both Spanish and English, aims to bridge that gap. It teaches parents how to navigate the educational system, demystifying standards, assessments, and educational tracks, and to negotiate the often intimidating process of applying for college and student aid. It offers tips on communicating with teachers, counselors, and principals, and shows parents how to create a supportive home learning environment and build their child's self-esteem.

In the process, the program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child's school, rather than beneficiaries — or victims — of it, and to get them to plan for their children's future.

That can be a significant shift for the program's mostly Hispanic immigrants, many of whom expect the school to educate their children and can't think too far beyond the next rent payment, said Mr. Perilla.

"This is not a community that plans a lot," he said. "We're changing the conversation from, I trust you, school, to do everything for my child, to, Let's begin to work together."

The academy grew out of the Parent Institute for Quality Education, a nonprofit that started offering nine-week parent seminars in San Diego 30 years ago. The program, which gets funds from California State University, now operates in 36 out of 58 counties in California and has been copied by 11 states.

But the first place to which it was exported was Arizona State University, in 2006. Even today the academy remains the only university-run replica, and the only one that actively promotes a particular college.

The educational materials are branded with the ASU logo, and "there is an expectation that your child will consider ASU," Mr. Perilla said.

At the high-school graduation ceremony, students receive mock Arizona State student-ID cards, and parents are given a certificate granting their children conditional admission to the university (assuming they meet academic requirements). Parent graduates also get two nails: one on which to hang their certifi-

cate, and one to leave empty, awaiting their child's college diploma.

The awards are symbolic and a bit hokey. Still, Mr. Perilla said, they send an important message to the immigrant community that the academy serves: "We want your kid."

In a 2012 national survey of outreach programs, two-thirds of respondents said their programs had a parent component. Most common were college-awareness workshops and financial-aid counseling, which were offered by more than half of those programs. A little over a third of programs offered campus visits and tours.

But parent participation was mandatory in only 20 percent of the programs that included them, according to the survey, by the Educational Policy Institute.

"Most programs start with the student, and then reach out to the parent," said Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy at Excelencia in Education, which promotes education policies and institutional practices that support Latino academic achievement. She worries that the programs' frequent focus on financial aid "sends the message to parents that

The program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child's school, rather than beneficiaries of it.

their primary role is to pay for college," not to prepare for it.

Researchers have a few theories about why programs haven't made priorities of parents, but most of them come down to resources and this: Parents of first-generation students are busy. Students are a captive audience, but their parents often work unpredictable hours or hold several jobs, making it hard for them to attend a weekly workshop. Even those with regular routines may struggle to find child care during the sessions.

Recognizing that challenge, several of the more successful programs have created incentives to reward parental participation. The Family Development Institute, part of the University of Southern California's college-prep program for low-income kids in the neighborhoods around the university, requires parents to attend at least 80 percent of its seminars for their children to be eligible for a full ride. Alamo Colleges, in Texas, which offers \$1,000 scholarships to parents of young children through a partnership with the League of United Latin American Citizens, takes that approach a step further: making

the child's scholarship conditional on the parent's completing his or her credential.

Helen Vera, director of San Antonio College's Services for Women and Non-Traditional Students, said the child scholarship helps the five Alamo Colleges retain their parent students, who are striving toward undergraduate degrees or certificates.

"It keeps them going," she said. "They know, 'I'm doing this for my child.'"

Inversant, a Boston-based nonprofit that provides matched savings accounts and monthly seminars for savers, has experimented with a variety of incentives to encourage parent involvement, including raffles at its seminars and bonuses for regular savers. Parents don't have to save a lot to receive the bonus; they just have to be consistent. Inversant raises the money for the matching and bonuses from corporate and private donors.

"The savings is merely a reinforcement of commitment," said Charles F. Desmond, chief executive of Inversant. "It shows how committed I am to this long-term expectation that my kid will go to college."

Yet even with these efforts, many programs struggle to attract and retain parents. Fewer than half of the parent recipients of Alamo Colleges' scholarships over the past 20 years have earned their college credential and secured a two-year scholarship for their child (some of the parents are still in college). And Bob Hildreth, Inversant's founder, said his group, which has opened 1,000 savings accounts in eight years, has "dealt with recruitment issues and disappointments" from the start.

"I thought by offering to double their money, people would be running across the street to us," he said. "It just isn't so."

One thing that has helped: college-sponsored scholarships, or as Mr. Hildreth puts it, "the big win." Not everyone will hit the jackpot, but the prospect of a full ride to one of five Boston-area colleges serves as a potent recruitment tool, and encourages families to stick with the savings and the seminars.

The American Dream Academy doesn't offer parents any financial incentives, but it does offer modest bonuses — \$40 or so — to instructors who graduate at least 80 percent of their participants. The Parent Institute for Quality Education provides instructors with a \$600 stipend upfront, but docks it if the in-

structors lose more than 30 percent of their participants (they rarely do).

Both programs also depend on the power of personal testimony and peer pressure, using graduates as recruiters, and calling parents before each class to remind them to attend. PIQE's completion rate is above 90 percent, and the Academy's hovers around 80 percent.

In its first semester, in the fall of 2006, the Academy graduated 251 parents from two schools; this past fall, it graduated 1,268 parents from 32 elementary, middle, and high schools. It also graduated 476 high-schoolers this past fall.

Back at Maryvale High School in December, Marcela Lopez, assistant director for the Academy and a "proud Sun Devil" herself, took photos of the graduates. She showed them how to make the pitchfork sign, ring finger to thumb, then led them in a chant. "Now, cinco veces, ASU," she said.

"ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU," the students cheered, hands raised.

In the years from 2007 to 2014, 80 percent of the children of graduates who were seniors in high school went on to college — twice the rate of Arizona students generally. A quarter of the students went to ASU, while half enrolled in colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. The remainder went to technical programs, the military, and out-of-state colleges.

Denny Gutierrez, who wants to study science and engineering, said he's considering Arizona State, Louisiana State University, or the University of Oregon.

In his graduation speech, he said that the class "should be required so everyone can have this connection with their parents."

Mr. Hernández and Ms. Esqueda, who never even made it to middle school, said they wanted to give their youngest daughter, Alondra, the opportunities they couldn't give their older children.

"We didn't know how to help them," Ms. Esqueda said, in an interview after the ceremony. "They didn't go to college."

"College seems more real now," added Mr. Hernández. "I never thought it would be possible, but now I think differently."

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4 Parent-Education Programs and Their Lessons for Colleges

Looking to start or expand a college-access program that focuses on parents? Here are four nonprofit and college-based models to consider, along with their advice on what it takes to succeed.

PARENT INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

How it works:

PIQE was started in San Diego nearly 30 years ago and is the model for the American Dream Academy at Arizona State University. It offers free nine-week seminars in 16 languages to low-income parents of high-school students. It also offers courses to parents in early-childhood development, financial literacy, STEM education, civic engagement, and leadership.

Outcomes:

To date, more than 600,000 parents have completed the program. A 2013 survey of parents who had participated in it showed that 90 percent of the respondents' children had graduated from high school, while 70 percent of those students had enrolled in college following graduation.

Advice:

Parent graduates are the best recruiters; call participants the day before each class to urge them to attend; don't lecture to parents — dialogue and discussion are better; make your curriculum culturally relevant and current, reflecting the latest educational standards.

INVERSANT

How it works:

Inversant, a Boston-based program, provides matched savings accounts and monthly seminars for low-income parents. It also provides scholarships to five local institutions through agreements with those colleges. Inversant raises the money for the matching and scholarships from corporations, foundations, and private donors.

Outcomes:

In its first eight years, 1,000 parents opened savings accounts and saved about \$1 million. Three hundred and fifty students enrolled in college, and 65 graduated. The program's one-year college-persistence rate is 89 percent, compared with 66 percent for Boston Public Schools; its four-year graduation rate is 73 percent, compared with 35 percent for Boston Public Schools.

Advice:

Go to where the parents are — hold events in their communities, at locations that can be reached with public transportation; offer incentives tied to seminar attendance; practice positive reinforcement, offering bonuses for frequent contributions to savings, even if they're small.

LEAGUE OF UNITED LATIN AMERICAN CITIZENS PARENT/CHILD SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

How it works:

A joint program run by Lulac Council No. 2 and Alamo Colleges, in Texas, it provides financial incentives to both parents and their children to get a college education. The Alamo College Foundation annually provides \$1,000 scholarships to 25 parents to enroll in one of the five Alamo institutions. An endowment funded by the league provides two-year, tuition-and-fee scholarships to the children of parents who complete their academic goals.

Outcomes:

Parents maintain an average 3.13 GPA in their first year, with an average fall-to-fall persistence rate of 96 percent. Of the 513 parents who have received a scholarship, 231 have earned a credential — a 45-percent graduation rate. The three-year graduation rate for all Alamo College students seeking certificates and associate degrees is 16.5 percent.

Advice:

Look for partners among community leaders, government agencies, and local school districts, but be selective about the partners you choose; clearly define what you need from your partner, and get it in writing; to improve retention, vet scholarship candidates fully, including through interviews.

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

How it works:

Part of the University of Southern California's Neighborhood Academic Initiative, a seven-year precollege enrichment program for low-income students from neighborhoods around the university, the institute offers 16 Saturday seminars for parents. Parents elect a leadership governance board, attend field trips, and raise money for the program.

Outcomes:

Ninety-nine percent of students who participate in the initiative go to college, and 75 percent of them graduate. Forty-one percent of participants have gone to USC.

Advice:

Mean what you say and say what you mean. The community has a long memory, particularly if promises are made and then rescinded. Create a leadership body of parents to act as ombudsmen between the administrators of the programming and the community. Always come from a perspective of strength. There may be needs in the community, but your parents bring many strengths to the table.

— KELLY FIELD

Let Parents Be Parents

I DON'T REMEMBER much about college orientation. But I remember arriving there.

It was a weekday, which meant taking time off from my summer job to make the short drive to campus. As my Jeep rattled to a stop, I looked around at a sea of late-model minivans and SUVs. Whole families were chattering and unloading luggage, toting overnight bags to the shuttle buses that would ferry us all to the student center and an overnight stay in a dorm.

I settled into a seat, looking around at my future classmates sandwiched between their moms and dads. Eavesdropping on conversations about classes and roommates and the merits of double-majoring, I was overcome with a single, bewildered thought: What on earth are all of these adults doing here?

My parents are loving, supportive people. They were enthusiastic about the whole going-to-college thing, even though they'd never done it themselves, and they sent me off with all the blessings and good will a kid could want.

And still, it never occurred to them — or to me — that they ought to be involved in college.

They had full lives and demanding jobs and a whole additional teenager still at home. And now, thanks to me, they had university bills to pay. Asking them to help manage the logistics of my new life would have been insane.

Colleges expect too much of parents, first-generation and otherwise. Educational institutions' instincts are to educate, to engage, to command interest and attention.

And while this is wonderful in the classroom or the research lab, it is unhelpful when applied to the mechanics of college life. Especially at the public institutions charged with serving a large percentage of low-income and first-generation students, the enrollment experience is littered with dense instructions on how to pay bills; long presentations on how to register for parking; downloadable guides with step-by-step instructions for logging into the clunky portal for Residence Life!TM (which is, of course, different from the clunky portal for class registration).

First-generation parents don't need more instruction on the college process. Colleges need to require less of it.

My bank's online-payment system does not include a webinar or an orientation session; it just

works. My car is infinitely more complicated than my campus parking pass, but I figured out how to operate the car without paging through the manual. It was designed well.

Academic bureaucracy and decentralized governance make the picayune hurdles of campus life seem inevitable. But we can put our shoulders to the wheel when the incentives are right: fundraising websites tend to be quite sleek. Nobody asks donors to go through a five-part tutorial before they can key in a credit-card number.

We ought to apply that same zeal for simplicity to all of the functional pieces of campus life. There's virtue in making coursework a challenge; there is no defense for making class registration a crucible. Drawing a firm distinction between the educational mission and all of the administrative hurdles to get there is key to removing barriers for first-generation students and families.

ADVICE

ERIC JOHNSON

There's virtue in making coursework a challenge; there is no defense for making class registration a crucible.

Consider language. We expect college students to read at a college level, to tackle challenging syntax and glean meaning from richly layered text, dense with allusion and idiom. And that's a fine expectation — for the classroom. It is a disastrous expectation when applied to a list of meal-plan options.

Most news organizations aim for prose at a middle-school level. Marketing firms (and fund-raising offices) aim even lower. That's not because they assume people are stupid, but because ease and accessibility are important when serving a diverse audience.

People have a wide range of education levels and limited time to devote to instruction manuals. We make better use of that time — and communicate a warmer sense of hospitality — when we make our processes easier.

It's all well and good to proclaim, "The University is firmly committed to accessibility" (19th-grade level), but so much better if "We work hard to make college affordable" (fourth-grade). The language we use in policy papers is not the language for speaking to parents.

This may sound like small potatoes, but it adds up. I attend financial-aid nights across my state every year, watching as overworked parents sit in cold high-school cafeterias, straining at the complexities of direct and indirect costs, net-price calculators, grants and subsidized loans, debt projections, and repayment plans. Meanwhile, the reps at for-profit schools arrive with cheerful promises and a sign-on-the-dotted line ease.

That's what we're up against. The places that entice large numbers of first-generation students are the places that ask little of their parents; that speak

in plain terms; that recognize the value of targeted marketing and well-designed user experience to ease the process of enrollment.

To make life easier for first-generation parents — all parents, in fact — let them keep the role they have. Preach the importance of college, and celebrate the value of what their kids are doing. But don't expect parents to become expert advisers on higher education.

Offering care and encouragement as your child enters a new world is a herculean task. It ought to be enough.

Eric Johnson works for the Office of Scholarships and Student Aid at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Originally published February 5, 2017

How Princeton Makes First-Generation Students Feel at Home

By BECKIE SUPIANO

VICTORIA DAVIDJOHN didn't realize that she was elite-college material until she attended a summer program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before her senior year of high school, setting off a whirlwind application process.

So getting into Princeton University was “validating” and “joyful,” Ms. Davidjohn said, but at the same time, “there’s a huge amount of fear.”

Ms. Davidjohn grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and learned English after moving to Lynchburg, Va., in 2008. She is no stranger to culture shock.

Despite her excitement about Princeton, she felt unprepared. So when she received an invitation to attend the Freshman Scholars Institute, which brings selected first-generation and low-income students to the campus for an academic and social introduction to Princeton, Ms. Davidjohn did not hesitate to say yes.

During the institute last summer, Ms. Davidjohn bonded with other incoming students who were just as nervous about starting at Princeton as she was.



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Khristina Gonzalez (left) and Nimisha Barton run Princeton's Freshman Scholars Institute, a program that seeks to provide first-generation and low-income students with the support system they might lack.

She also found her way around the campus before most of her new classmates arrived, putting her in a position to give a fellow freshman directions during orientation. "I felt like I belonged," she said.

Now a rising sophomore, she plans to help out with this year's institute, which starts on Saturday and runs through September 2.

While helping first-generation and low-income students succeed is a rallying cry across higher education, the challenge plays out differently at elite colleges, where they tend to make up a smaller share of the student body and where sizable numbers of their classmates come from tremendous privilege. And it may be especially acute at Princeton. After all, two prominent alumnae — the first lady, Michelle Obama, and the Supreme Court justice Sonia M. Sotomayor — have been quite candid about the challenges they encountered there.

The rarefied environment of a place like Princeton can undermine first-generation and low-income students' sense that they belong there. And research

shows that that sense of belonging really matters, influencing students' academic as well as social experience of college. So elite colleges must make a real effort to help students from less-advantaged backgrounds feel at home.

At Princeton, two relatively new administrators are spearheading that effort: Khristina Gonzalez, associate dean of the college and director of programs for access and inclusion, and Nimisha Barton, associate director of the Freshman Scholars Institute and programs for access and inclusion.

Their goal is twofold: Empower first-generation students to make Princeton work for them, and make the university more welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds. To do that, the two administrators are drawing on their own experiences, their scholarship in liberal-arts disciplines, and feedback from the summer program's alumni.

"We're up against a lot in terms of history," Ms. Barton said. And universities don't change overnight.

'PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND'

Doug Ashley found that his small Montana high school “had not prepared me very well” for the academic work at Princeton. It did not offer calculus, for one thing, so Mr. Ashley, a first-generation student who graduated this spring with a degree in computer science, took it online.

Mr. Ashley noticed that some classmates in his introductory physics classes had already taken the Advanced Placement version of the course and were expecting an easy A. That left him working hard to learn what some of them already knew. “The hard part,” he said, “was mainly there wasn’t a level playing field.”

That was true socially, too. Mr. Ashley planned to join one of the university’s 11 eating clubs, but it didn’t work out because of an administrative mix-up. Meals provide a key time for busy students to catch up with friends, Mr. Ashley said, and the expense of an eating club, plus the groups’ reputation as oriented toward wealthy students, causes separation, as low-income students are more likely to eat in the dining halls or cook for themselves.

“The hard part was mainly there wasn’t a level playing field.”

Mr. Ashley and other students like him said that there was no stigma around being first-generation at Princeton. But they said other students at the university were sometimes oblivious to what life looked like for their peers from less-advantaged backgrounds.

“Mainly it comes down to minor things where people don’t understand,” he said, like watching classmates take fancy vacations during breaks while being unable to afford to even travel home.

Ms. Gonzalez, 34, knows what it is like to feel out of place in the Ivy League. She was the first in her family to attend an elite institution — both of her parents had earned associate degrees when she enrolled at Dartmouth College, though her mother went on for more education around the time she was there. She recalls showing up to go on a pre-college hiking trip dressed up in her heels and confronting a sea of students in Patagonia — she hadn’t realized that everyone would arrive in their hiking gear.

Ms. Gonzalez, who earned a Ph.D. in English from Brown University in 2012, also sees connections between her scholarship and her administrative work. She examines the relationship between the Victorian novel, English assimilative social-reform movements, and the backlash to those movements. Studying what happened when social institutions were becoming less exclusive in 19th-century

England informs how she thinks about Princeton’s efforts to do the same today.

Ms. Barton, 31, also brings both personal and scholarly experience to her role. The daughter of an American father and a mother who immigrated from India, she spent her undergraduate years at the University of California at Berkeley, a diverse campus where all of her closest friends had immigrant experiences of their own. After college, as her friends started their jobs, Ms. Barton went to Princeton for graduate school and was “just lost.”

Only when she got involved in the Freshman Scholars Institute, first as a resident graduate student, did she find a vocabulary to explain her own experience as a first-generation student. She stayed involved with the program, spending one summer as a writing-center fellow and then teaching the program’s humanities course the summer after defending her dissertation. She began her current position just over a year ago.

Ms. Barton, who earned a Ph.D. in history in 2014, has given some thought to what sorts of students Berkeley and Princeton were originally built to educate, and how that can shape the student experience at each, even today.

Her scholarly interest is immigration, with a focus on the norms set by states and societies that make some people insiders and others outsiders. These days, cultivating a sense of belonging among students who may feel like outsiders is a big part of her job.

It’s an important one, too. “When students don’t have a sense of fit or belonging, that affects their level of engagement with the college environment,” said Nicole Stephens, an associate professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. If they feel disconnected from the campus, Ms. Stephens said, students may be less likely to reach out to a professor when they need help or to make new friends. That, she said, can create a negative, self-reinforcing cycle.

Before beginning her graduate program at Princeton, Ms. Barton had decided to become a professor. But she hadn’t understood that getting a Ph.D. was about research, not learning how to be a teacher. Graduate school was disorienting. “I didn’t know what was wrong with me,” she said. These days, when she hears students say, “I was smart before I came to Princeton. What happened?,” she wants them to know that the problem is not them; it’s Princeton. Ms. Barton learned that only in her late 20s, she said, and hopes her students don’t have to wait as long.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Princeton has been working to recruit less-advantaged students for some time. The university eliminated loans from the financial-aid packages of low-income students back in 1998 (it expanded the policy to cover all students in 2001). Like its peers, Princeton has a number of programs meant to in-

crease socioeconomic diversity on its campus.

But bringing students to the campus and supporting them after they arrive are two different things. That's where programs like the Freshman Scholars Institute come in.

Princeton has been running some form of summer bridge program for so long that the administrators in charge of it now aren't quite sure when or why it began. From what Ms. Barton has pieced together, it seems to have its origins in programming for athletes and minority students. Even five years ago, she said, "the mission was very unclear."

Ms. Barton and Ms. Gonzalez are working to focus and achieve that mission, both by fine-tuning the institute and by expanding on its work.

Students are invited to the institute based on a holistic evaluation meant to uncover which incoming freshmen have had the least exposure to an environment like Princeton's. Selected students are a subset of the university's incoming first-generation and low-income freshmen — distinct but overlapping groups. Those who accept the invitation take two credit-bearing classes and are introduced to many of the university's support resources and extracurricular opportunities.

One way that colleges can help students feel the all-important sense of belonging, said Ms. Stephens, the Northwestern professor, is to make sure they know that "being a good student does not mean being independent." Successful students at elite colleges seek help when they need it.

That's part of what the two administrators want to emphasize to first-generation students. All students need help navigating the bureaucracy and customs of a place like Princeton; it's just that some walk in the door with a support system poised to guide them through it, and others do not. By building such a system for first-generation and low-income students, "we're rendering visible to everyone what your average student needs," Ms. Barton said.

High-school students absorb knowledge, while college students are supposed to create it. That shift can be tricky for anyone, but less-advantaged students may not believe that they have the right to make their scholarly mark — the very thing college will ask them to do, Ms. Gonzalez said. Part of what the Freshman Scholars Institute strives to teach the students, she said, is "how to have your voice heard as a scholar." The idea is not to assimilate first-generation students or turn them into "some kind of mythic Princeton student," she said, but to help them unleash the unique contributions they can make to the university.

After all, one major reason colleges seek a diverse student body is so that all students benefit from hearing from a wide range of experiences and views.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

The transition into college is widely seen as a pivotal moment for students — there's a reason

every message administrators want to convey to them is crammed into orientation. But when Ms. Barton and Ms. Gonzalez met with alumni of the Freshman Scholars Institute as part of their effort to improve it, one of the most consistent messages they heard was that the summer program wasn't enough. It didn't reach all the students who might benefit, and even those who attended wanted support during college, not just on their way in the door.

Based on that feedback, the two administrators developed the new Scholars Institute Fellows Program, which covers all four years at Princeton. It's available to students who completed the Freshman Scholars Institute, those who were invited but couldn't go, those who were considered but not invited, and anyone who self-identifies as first-generation or low-income. One hundred students participated last fall, and the number rose to 155 last spring.

SIFP, as it is known, is based in peer mentorship. Upperclassmen serve as "head fellows," who mentor 10 or so underclassmen with the help of a faculty member.

The program is voluntary, but students who participate are expected to go to events put on by SIFP, like sessions on networking or résumés, or cross-listed events held by the career center or writing center. Students are also expected to attend monthly meetings with their mentorship groups and do a summer enrichment experience, like an internship or study abroad.

Nora Niazian participated in the Freshman Scholars Institute, but even so, she said, "there were a lot of things about transitioning to Princeton that were difficult for me."

This past year, Ms. Niazian served as a head fellow in the Scholars Institute Fellows Program, and she plans to do so again next year as a senior. "If I can make it easier for anyone else, that would be a great thing to do," she said.

As a head fellow, Ms. Niazian brings her hard-won knowledge of how Princeton works to younger students who may not be able to get the answers they need from parents or others in their communities back home. For instance, Ms. Niazian said, it took her two years to understand how the financial-aid office's "summer savings expectation" works, but now she can explain it as well as anyone can. "I've had to navigate a lot of these things already," she said.

The program has also become a big part of Ms. Niazian's social life at Princeton. She didn't join an eating club for financial reasons, and SIFP "helps to kind of fill that void," she said. "A lot of what is happening at Princeton now," she said, "is we're starting to establish a low-income, first-generation community."

Originally published July 7, 2016

Why the Fafsa Is a Barrier to First-Generation Students

I FILED MY first Fafsa form during my senior year of high school with a vague understanding that it somehow related to financial aid. I was told that the form, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, was necessary, and that I could fill it out quickly.

But no one told me that completing it would take time and materials that not every parent would have, or that it could determine which colleges I could afford, or even that I had to complete it annually. The form quickly became a tremendous barrier and source of stress for my family. Like so many other students across the country, I didn't receive the support I needed to complete the Fafsa, a complicated application that does not seem to be designed with students in mind.

As a first-generation college student, I had to gather information for college readiness on my own, either by conducting research or by flagging down teachers, friends already in college, and my guidance counselor for their insights. While my parents — who received only a high-school education in Mexico — gave me the motivation to advocate for myself and to pursue a higher education, they were unable to help me fill out the form.

The form quickly became a tremendous source of stress for my family.

My high school held a workshop for parents in mid-January 2015, which presented the only opportunity that the families of some of my classmates would have to get help with the form. Parents were told to bring tax information and other identification and employment papers. Just 15 minutes after the workshop began, I received a call at home from my parents, who already were facing a host of problems: The Fafsa was too complicated, my mother didn't have a Social Security card, and the purpose of such an extensive form was unclear.

I immediately drove to the school to help, but once I arrived, I was astonished to find that I, too, found the presentation on the screen impossible to understand. The language seemed to be written by and for government regulators. For example, because my mother is undocumented, we did not know how to fill out the line asking for a Social Security number. Nor did we know how to respond to a question about taxable college grants and scholarships. It took an overwhelming hour and a half for the three of us to complete the application.

I strongly suggest that those who administer Fafsa simplify the complex language and use wording that every high-school student can understand.

Unfortunately, the challenges did not end after we had muscled through the Fafsa, or after I had made it to college, where I struggled to understand my financial-aid situation after my first semester. I first attended a private college with the help of a New York State Tuition Assistance Program grant and some aid from the college. However, after I had started my first semester, the college reduced the amount of financial aid it had originally offered, derailing my plans of graduating with a degree in psychology.

I transferred to Dutchess Community College, part of the State University of New York, as a freshman. It was so frustrating for my dreams to be placed on hold. But I'm not letting my disappointment in a flawed system get in the way of those dreams. By next spring, I will graduate from Dutchess with an associate degree in science. Then I'll transfer to a SUNY college to complete my bachelor's degree in psychology.

Eventually I want to earn a Ph.D., so I can become a school guidance counselor and a resource for the next generation of confused collegebound seniors. I want to offer others the kind of help I never received in high school. In the meantime, I believe the Education Department should help schools, students, and parents by dramatically simplifying the Fafsa.

Amairani Perez-Antonio is a sophomore at Dutchess Community College.

Originally published September 18, 2016

ADVICE

AMAIRANI

PEREZ-ANTONIO

Tips to Help First-Generation Students

WE ADVOCATE for first-generation college students because we once were first-generation college students. Our parents' academic careers ended at eighth grade. To put ourselves through college, we worked jobs requiring hard, physical labor. We take it personally when low-income students, often the first in their families to attend college, are lured with loans, then left to flounder.

Many colleges have four-year graduation rates below 30 percent, some below 10 percent. Yet most of their students have loans that must be paid, whether or not the students graduate. We advocate that students avoid colleges with four- and six-year graduation rates significantly below their state's average. Low graduation rates suggest that administrators take students' money aware and unashamed that most of the students will not graduate and may not even complete their first year.

Those schools are a discredit to academe, undermine the aspirations of students and their hard-working parents, and financially cripple them. According to a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, student debt rose 12 percent in 2013, to \$1.08 trillion. Worse, that increase is being driven mostly by Americans with poor credit and few resources. Not only is that debt a financial time bomb; it's also an abuse of public trust.

It doesn't have to be this way. Colleges could use tuition dollars to provide services with strong potential for increasing academic success and graduation rates. The federal government and a number of states have been changing their financial-aid formulas to include timely progress toward graduation. For example, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education approved a new aid policy that increases financial awards when students meet certain credit milestones and decreases awards to institutions when their students do not graduate in a timely manner.

As Joe Garcia, Colorado's lieutenant governor and executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, put it, "We're saying, Schools, it's your responsibility to admit these students and provide services to help them get through."

First-generation students often grapple not only with self-doubt and a lack of academic advice from family members, but also with work-related responsibilities, inadequate writing skills, and other personal and intellectual challenges. Although those students' academic potential is comparable to their more-ac-

complished peers, that potential needs to be nurtured through a consistent and cohesive support system.

To help those students stay in school, administrators and faculty members need to work collaboratively in developing a comprehensive retention plan that is well matched with students' learning interests, strengths, and needs. While not a panacea, the following considerations can help:

- Use the backgrounds of incoming students to support their "cultural capital." Involve them in setting goals that are interesting, meaningful, and culturally relevant to them, and that translate into their personal and professional lives. Professors and advisers should encourage students to engage in cultural activities that connect them to one another and to their college. Joining clubs and attending concerts and other events can build cultural capital. Those activities also support a sense of belonging, which is vitally important for first-generation students to stay in college and graduate.

- Guide students to register for courses that reflect a balance of their abilities. For example, students with verbal weaknesses should not enroll in English, Western civilization, philosophy, and a new language all at once. Instead, their chances of success are increased when their course schedule reflects a balance of English with science, technology, art, music, or other less verbally dominant courses. Those students should also register for no more than four courses each semester and should take two courses in the summer session.

- Organize a panel of juniors and seniors from different backgrounds to discuss how they adapted to college life, including how they pursued resources and people to help guide them in decisions. First-generation students can join the conversation and express their specific challenges in higher education. As reported in a recent study in Psychological Science, such low-key intervention has the potential to increase retention rates, helping students academically, emotionally, and socially.

- Support students' writing efforts by (1) modeling the writing process for them; (2) meeting with them in small, short-term groups to share pertinent feedback; and (3) encouraging them to send email attachments of their first and second drafts, then using the comment software to provide them with constructive feedback. Such support tends to improve writing, grades, and stu-

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**JOSEPH SANACORE and
ANTHONY PALUMBO**



JASON GREENBERG FOR THE CHRONICLE

dents' academic self-esteem.

- Nurture students' well-being. In a 2014 report from Gallup, in partnership with Purdue University and the Lumina Foundation, college graduates were found to be more likely to be engaged at work if they'd had professors who fostered their excitement in learning, supported their efforts in an internship-type program, encouraged them to pursue their passions, and demonstrably cared about them.

- Require rigorous courses with clear goals that offer students readily accessible and adequate support.

- Emphasize to students how crucial it is to attend class. In "The Empty Desk: Caring Strategies to Talk to Students About Their Attendance," Rose Russo-Gleicher, a social worker and adjunct professor of human services, suggests dealing with student absences directly — speaking with students privately about their attendance problems and demonstrating empathy by listening attentively and supporting their efforts to improve.

- Carefully monitor students' engagement and

progress, and intervene quickly and decisively if things aren't going well.

Male students are particularly at risk of not completing their college education. A recent report from the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, "Projections of Education Statistics to 2014," described the growing gender gap in college enrollment and completion.

Administrators, faculty, and staff should never underestimate what a brave and intimidating leap first-generation college students are taking. Helping them succeed is a fundamental responsibility, and requires as much dedication and planning on our part as students are pledging on theirs.

Joseph Sanacore is a professor of education at Long Island University, and Anthony Palumbo is a novelist, essayist, and educational historian. They both serve as student advocates.

Originally published May 18, 2015

One College's Push for 'Educational Parity'

By VIMAL PATEL

THE EXPERIENCE can be transformative. Freshmen at Washington University in St. Louis can explore Venice, Florence, and Rome, eat black truffles, and tour museums. "It's the greatest teaching experience I have," says Rebecca Messbarger, a professor in the department of Romance languages and literatures who has led the trip.

But some students can't go. They don't have the money.

"I'm anguished when I have students who come to me and say they can't afford this," Ms. Messbarger says. "They have to sort of out themselves as being from a low-income background. If you only have 15 students in the class, and one kid isn't going, the reason is going to be apparent."

Perhaps no university has struggled as publicly over the last two years with its lack of socioeconomic diversity. Washington University had become, by one measure, the nation's least economically diverse top college, even as it is one of the wealthiest, with an endowment of some \$6.9 billion.

To change its reputation, university leaders last year announced they would spend \$25 million annually toward the goal of doubling the university's share of undergraduates eligible for Pell Grants, a gauge of financial need, from 6 percent in 2014 to 13 percent by 2020.

Washington University is on track to meet its goal; about 13 percent of the freshman class entering this fall appear to be Pell-eligible, officials say. But increasing the numbers was the easy part.

Now administrators and students are wrestling with how to do a better job of supporting low-income students once they enroll. Student activists who pressured the university to increase its share of Pell recipients are now turning their attention to making sure those students get the same opportunities as their affluent peers.

The students call this "experiential parity." Not having money often prevents students from low-income backgrounds from joining fraternities and sororities, attending campus social events, and taking advantage of academic opportunities like study abroad — all of which come with fees usually not factored into financial aid.

Ms. Messbarger is pressing administrators to provide more financial aid for study abroad; leaders acknowledge that the university's record of supporting students who struggle to afford the opportunity is

"hit or miss," as the provost puts it.

"The promise of inclusion and access," Ms. Messbarger writes in an email, "must extend beyond the classroom door to all aspects of the education we offer."

Structural Change

Improving parity of experiences matters, administrators agree.

"This is something we needed to do," says Holden Thorp, Washington University's provost, who has led the campus's efforts on socioeconomic diversity.



SID HASTINGS FOR THE CHRONICLE

Holden Thorp, Washington U.'s provost: "This is something we needed to do. All of private higher education has to take this very seriously because we can't let the narrative be that we're not a ladder of opportunity for everyone."

"All of private higher education has to take this very seriously because we can't let the narrative be that we're not a ladder of opportunity for everyone."

Mr. Thorp says the university has already taken some actions, including giving low-income students summer financial aid for certain classes and scholarships for preorientation programs.

The university is also creating an Office of Student Success, which will consist of a new associate provost, an assistant dean, and a recent graduate, Scott Jacobs, who has advocated for more support for low-income students. Each year a pair of undergraduate representatives presents a pressing issue to

the Board of Trustees. The topic Mr. Jacobs and his classmate picked this year was creating experiential parity for low-income students.

“You need more than just a commitment to socioeconomic diversity, which we’ve made,” says the assistant dean, Harvey Fields, “You need a structure and a system to be put in place that can address it consistently. That’s what this new office is poised to begin to do.”

Alex Rutherford, a rising sophomore, says attending Washington University as a low-income student can be a “culture shock” — surrounded by peers whose parents are doctors and lawyers, and who can take frequent, extravagant vacations. She’s pleased with the direction the university is headed, but says it “hasn’t had enough eyes and ears on the ground to actually make programs for low-income students successful.”

As an example of how good intentions aren’t always enough, she cites an effort that provides her and other low-income students with free tickets to cultural events like the university’s Lunar New Year



COURTESY OF ALEX RUTHERFORD

Alex Rutherford, a rising sophomore at Washington U. in St. Louis: “We exist in the shadows. People don’t know there are low-income students in their midst, which makes it harder to come forward.”

Festival. But the tickets come with assigned seats, usually away from their friends. “If we’re trying to be inclusive and give students opportunities,” Ms. Rutherford says, “that doesn’t seem like a good way to do that.”

Ms. Rutherford also rushed to join a sorority but couldn’t afford the annual dues, which at some Greek organizations can amount to hundreds of dollars. The sorority had financial aid available, but only after she became a member, meaning she would have had to come up with the dues for the first semester herself.

Administrators say they are aware of some of those barriers, and want to learn more. Mr. Fields says one goal is to take inventory of all the academic and social experiences available to university students and how much they cost. “We then would want to look at ways to address them,” he says. “I don’t know all of those ways yet. Some might include dropping the fee altogether and the university absorbing it.”

Culture Change

The university’s interventions to create experiential parity may have limits. As long as students from low-income backgrounds remain a clear minority, they will confront cultural gaps on the campus.

Jonathan Williford, who grew up on Chicago’s South Side, is ambivalent about his experience at Washington University. On the one hand, he was exposed to people and ideas he had never encountered before. On the other, the constant barrage of economic privilege, he says, was “tiring.” Students, for example, would often refer to his on-campus housing, Rubelmann Hall — an older dormitory — as “the projects.”

“The more I heard it,” says Mr. Williford, who graduated in May with a bachelor’s degree in educational studies and applied linguistics, “it started to tick me off. There aren’t memory-foam mattresses in the projects. No one really stopped to consider that, for many students, Rubelmann may have been better than they were used to.”

Eventually, he says, the slights add up and create doubt: “One of the things that hurts academically the most is, as the little things pile up, you begin to wonder why there aren’t people like you around, and that maybe you don’t belong here.”

Ms. Rutherford says it’s the university’s responsibility to reduce the stigma of coming from a lower-income background. A good start, she and other students argue, would be for the university to create an on-campus center that could double as a one-stop shop for resources for low-income students and a central hub where students could hang out.

“We exist in the shadows,” she says. “People don’t know there are low-income students in their midst, which makes it harder to come forward. Increasing visibility will make it easier to be a low-income student on campus.”

Ms. Messbarger, the professor who has led the trips to Italy, says the university has the power to change the course of a student’s life.

Last year one of her best students could not afford the trip. Ms. Messbarger wrote Mr. Thorp, the provost, pleading for help to give her and another student the chance to see Italy.

Mr. Thorp found the money.

“In high school she had studied and loved Latin, and had never been abroad,” Ms. Messbarger says. “When we entered the Colosseum, she turned to me and said, ‘This is the best day of my life.’”

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How Smith College Shrank Its Graduation Gap

MANY HIGH-SCHOOL seniors this month are learning the status of their college applications. Was I accepted? Will I fit in? Will I succeed? For some, the news will end months of anxiety; but for many students who are the first in their families to go to college, the next step will feel equally daunting. I know because I was once one of them.

My father worked as a machinist in a factory, and neither of my parents went to college. Despite my achievements inside and outside the classroom, my high-school guidance counselor discouraged me from applying to top colleges. I had to persuade him to support my application to Tufts, a great university in my hometown. Thanks to generous financial aid, I was able to attend while living at home. After graduation, with a professor's encouragement, I headed to a doctoral program at Yale and a fulfilling career as an academic. It could have been otherwise for me, and it is otherwise for so many American students.

Studies show that first-generation students are less likely than their peers to graduate in four years or to graduate at all. UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute reported a 14-percentage-point gap in graduation rates for first-generation and other students. Many first-generation students come from low-income families and are eligible for federal Pell Grants. The Education Trust compared the graduation rates for Pell Grant-eligible and other students and also reported a 14-point gap.

At Smith College, where I am president, a long-standing, collegewide commitment to student access and success has narrowed the gap in graduation rates for first-generation, Pell Grant-eligible, and other students. In some years the graduation rates for our Pell and first-generation students have exceeded those of their peers. Here are five lessons we have learned.

Make admissions decisions in context. Admission officers should evaluate applicants in the context of available opportunities. Did the high school offer Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, honors or college-prep courses? Did the student have access to affordable SAT prep? Did she or he have to work to support the family? Applicants who haven't had the advantage of strong academic preparation often demonstrate their talents

through deep commitment to activities at school and in their communities through organizations like College Match, Schuler Scholars, and Upward Bound. Context matters in recommendations, too. Teachers and college counselors at underresourced schools might not have time to write a two-page, single-spaced, detailed recommendation for each of their students, as their counterparts at private schools do. Instead, they might convey in five key sentences that the student has what it takes to succeed; often, that is enough.

Go beyond school counselors. First-generation students and low-income students are more likely to attend high schools with guidance counselors

who are stretched thin or who may not grasp the potential of the students they advise, much like my guidance counselor. To bridge that gap, colleges can partner with community-based organizations like Minds Matter, Summer Search, or Bottom Line. These organizations, and many others, provide coaching and mentoring for students from underresourced schools with the goal of encouraging them to apply to a broader range of colleges, including those that might seem a stretch. This is what the best-resourced high schools, public and private, do for all their students.

Partner with community colleges. For many students, community colleges provide a pathway to a four-year degree. At Smith, we have collaborative agreements with four of them: Miami Dade and Santa Monica Colleges, and Greenfield and Holyoke Community Colleges in Massachusetts. Some of our 100 community-college transfers are traditional-age students; some are older, and they bring their life experience into the classroom and into the social life on campus. Regardless of age, our community-college transfers are admitted in a process as competitive as the one for first-year students. They use campus resources and supports at the same rate as traditional students, and graduate into the same range of jobs, careers, and postgraduate programs as their classmates. Don't think of transfers as an add-on; see these students as the valued members of your academic community that they can be.

Help families see beyond the sticker price. A common misperception among first-generation students is that public colleges are more affordable than private ones. In fact, studies have shown

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the opposite is often true, especially for qualified low-income students. Colleges need to make a strong statement to families that higher education is within reach for their children. Financial-aid calculators help. As important, colleges need to send admissions representatives to as many high-school financial-aid events as possible and to national programs such as College Goal Sunday.

Level the playing field. Many first-generation and low-income students start college with less preparation than their peers. Mentoring is a powerful way to close that gap. One example is our Achieving Excellence in Mathematics, Engineering, and Sciences program, which connects students with faculty and peer mentors, engages students in faculty-supervised research, and creates a network of academic and social support and encouragement. Students in the program perform as well as peers in gateway science courses, persist in the natural sciences at higher rates than their peers, and participate in natural-science honors and independent research at rates equivalent to their peers. One of our students joined a biology professor's lab

during her first year on campus. She has conducted summer research and presented her work at academic conferences. She aspires to be a professor — and then a college president.

In his 2018 discretionary budget, President Donald Trump proposed deep cuts to the Federal Work-Study and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant programs — cuts that would make it harder for students with backgrounds like mine to attend college. The new ideas, people, and experiences encountered in college can change a person's life trajectory.

The federal government and higher education each have a key role in building an educated work force, economic prosperity, and equity for all. Social mobility through education is an essential part of the American dream. We can and must do more to make this dream available to all qualified students.

Kathleen McCartney is president of Smith College.

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Colleges and the Language of Class

IT WAS orientation week at a selective liberal-arts college for women that I'll call Linden College. Students from many walks of life were welcomed into the community, celebrated for the kind of people they were and the dreams this college's education would enable them to achieve. All of you, said the dean of admissions, have "résumés already bursting with high-school accomplishments," and here, too, "you will become overcommitted." The president of the college celebrated alumnae in high-status white-collar positions: elected politician, business executive, author. At a session on women and money, a professor enjoined students to start thinking about something called a budget; one example she gave of smart money management was saving for a spring-break trip to France. Warm welcomes and sage advice. But, combined with other routine remarks and practices on campus, they delivered an implicit message to low-income students: Even though "you're all Lindies now," you do not really belong.

Elite colleges are under increasing pressure to enroll low-income, first-generation students — and, with substantial resources for financial aid and student programming, those colleges may be good places for those students in many ways. Research shows that such students do better on those campuses than at less-selective colleges and universities — and stand to gain a great deal in economic stability.

On the other hand, it's easy to see how they might feel out of place at an elite college, with its manicured lawns, impeccably maintained historic buildings, and dining-hall food that may be fancier and more plentiful than what's served at home. Certainly low-income students remain a very small minority on these campuses. Recent figures show that a classroom of 30 at a college with high graduation rates will include perhaps five Pell Grant recipients. By contrast, around 22 students in that classroom will be from the highest income quartile.

In 2008, I began two years of research at Linden, where Pell Grant recipients made up roughly 20 percent of those enrolled. I wanted to understand how these students experienced college. I interviewed students, administrators, and faculty members, and spent time on campus hanging out and going to parties, classes, breakfasts, campus orientations, workshops, and club meetings.

What I found is that although the institution ex-

plicitly welcomed low-income, first-generation students, as did individual faculty members and administrators, underlying messages about social class and belonging undercut those welcoming efforts. I call this the semiotics of class morality — simply put, the idea that our social standing is often associated with judgments about better or worse, more and less qualified, and that these connotations are communicated in a pervasive way. This semiotics shapes low-

income, first-generation students' relationships with their college and their friends, and their lives in the classroom and even as alumnae.

Although my observations were developed from research at one particular campus, they are

not limited to that location. In talking with students and alumnae from other campuses, I have heard many similar examples, and I see echoes of these concerns in my current research with low-income, first-generation students who are organizing clubs to address these problems at colleges across the country.

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LIKE AMERICAN society more broadly, elite colleges tend to present affluence as the norm and, whether by implication, comparison, or simple omission, working-class and low-income lives as disadvantaged and culturally lacking — even unintelligent. Low-income, first-generation students get the message that they are not only less typical members of their college communities, but also less legitimate ones.

I saw this taking place in a number of ways. First, those orientation talks, and other public presentations describing typical students and alumnae, were centered on middle- and upper-income experiences and accomplishments. That message was reinforced over time. For example, a panel of alumnae spoke about the way that résumé building, multitasking, and professional work would bleed into personal time as familiar, inevitable parts of a successful life. In those ways, as one student said, students learned "what we are educated not to be." In materials given out to graduating seniors one year, "bad" table manners were illustrated with a cartoon exchange between a woman in overalls speaking in a twang about hog farming and a man in a suit who looked uncomfortable. The relative values of the white-collar and blue-collar worlds was clear.

Second, the daily practices at the college, as at others like it, are deeply classed — not necessarily

classist, but much more easily recognizable and acted upon by middle- and upper-income students. For example, students seeking advice at the career center were often asked in an expectant tone about parents or other relatives who might be able to connect them with summer internships or give insights about law school. Or they were presumed by peers to have expendable cash, like “only” \$10 for social fees or lunch off campus. Such exchanges left some students feeling both misunderstood and excluded.

Moreover, faculty members and administrators often act on the understanding that their students feel entitled to ask for help and to be strong self-advocates. This is especially important when it comes to asking for exceptions. While more-affluent students have often grown up to understand rules to be somewhat flexible and to know how to ask for an extension, a second chance, or a reconsideration, low-income, first-generation students are often re-

Moreover, few faculty members feel comfortable talking about class inequality among students, whether in class discussions or in advising.

luctant to ask for help or unaware that such behavior is common practice.

In both of those ways — the presentation of “typical” students as middle- or upper-class and the interactions based on the assumption of such backgrounds — students from low-income, first-generation backgrounds are delegitimized as college community members.

That is not to say that the existence of lower-income students on campus is not acknowledged — it is even celebrated as a mark of the college’s diversity. Its website proudly indicates the percent of students receiving aid and the average grant amount, and new students are reminded of their classmates’ widely varied backgrounds. But the very calling out of that diversity communicates implicitly which students are the norm and which are the Other, the exceptions. Such statements make some students feel that they are not deserving or should do something “extra” to earn their place. As one young woman told me, “I think people think the college wants more diversity, and so that’s why I got in, not because I’m smart.”

In talking about percentages of students receiving financial aid or who are first-generation, and in framing those students as diverse, administrators also treat class as an essentially abstract concept, removed from

the actual circumstances and realities of students’ lives. Beyond these abstracted formal presentations, class is rarely talked about. Students told me that inequality is rarely discussed among peers or even close friends, except in an academic sense, as something that happens off campus to other people and is encountered, for example, through volunteer work or books. Moreover, few faculty members feel comfortable talking about class inequality among students, whether in class discussions or in advising. This creates a silence around class as a set of lived experiences and lets those college practices and messages communicate, if unintentionally, even more clearly that low-income, first-generation students are outsiders.

ELITE COLLEGES have high graduation rates, suggesting that the discomforts faced by low-income and first-generation students at elite colleges are not enough to derail them entirely. So what’s the big deal? First, the stress may foster mental, emotional, and even physical health problems with long-term effects. Second, students who feel less than welcome may make less use of resources, whether in college or the alumni network — losing out on exactly the advantages that these colleges are supposed to provide.

Moreover, a false understanding of their students may lead faculty members and administrators to miss the real issues and the crucial ways they can offer support. In a current interview project, I have spoken with students who are homeless when dorms are closed, hungry when they can’t make limited dining hours and can’t afford meals off campus, or struggling with trauma or other issues that result from growing up in poverty. They live in luxurious campus settings, but their families and “real lives” at home are not magically transformed by virtue of their student status. If faculty members and administrators do not perceive these issues as real problems affecting their students, they can hardly offer the practical or emotional support needed.

Low-income, first-generation students are already wrestling with questions about how their past, present, and future align — asking themselves who they are in their families, home communities, and college campuses. College administrators and faculty members should be having similar conversations with an eye toward how they can help students manage these transitions. Until the contradiction between welcoming and delegitimizing those students is removed, colleges will not be truly inclusive.

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