

Overview

Risk and Shifting Realities: College Access and the 21st Century Student

Kristan M. Venegas

Continuing to push an access agenda during a time of increased pressure on admissions and decreasing student aid options may seem risky, but few other choices exist for the student populations considered in this special issue. When this volume was first conceived a few years ago, the tenor for college access was much different than it is at the time of this writing. Numerous spaces were up for grabs in traditional community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities throughout the United States. Messages sent to students were that college was affordable and that lots of chances were available to find the right academic and social fit. The main focus regarding college access centered on issues such as information, mentoring, and academic preparation. The most often targeted audience within the realm of college access was low income, traditionally aged students, who typically were the first in their families to go on to postsecondary education. These students were thought of being squarely within a college-going “at-risk” category.

Just a few years later, we are confronting a shifted reality. The students that we once may have thought of as “at-risk” now make up much of the 17.6 million undergraduate students currently enrolled—43 percent attend community colleges, 37 percent are enrolled part-time, 32 percent are working full-time, and 25 percent are over the age of 30. Only 15 percent of currently enrolled undergraduate students live in residential housing and attend a four-year institution (Applegate 2011). Given these changes, the research within this volume no longer represents students who sit at the fringes of postsecondary education. Instead these articles represent the multiple pathways of students who now make up what Lumina calls the 21st Century Student (Applegate 2011).

In what follows, we share how this volume addresses Applegate’s concept of the 21st Century Student and consider the continuing role of information, resources, and academic preparation within the college access conundrum.

Traditional and Nontraditional Students Are One and the Same

Within this volume, Smith’s article on African American women and postsecondary education provides perspective on how “nontraditional” students make it through the academic pipeline. The article that I co-authored with Huerta and Sanchez details the kind of experiences that low-income Latino male students encounter during their

journey to and through the college gates. In each of these examples, readers can glimpse into the obstacles that these students face, but they should see them less as stories of exception based on race or social class. These student experiences are no longer relevant to only nontraditional students, because in less than ten years, these students will be traditional students.

Access to Information Has Not Been Resolved by Technology

Though none of the authors in this volume focus specifically on the role of technology, glimpses of attention to this topic certainly are included. Perhaps the strongest example of this issue is seen in the work of Hallett and Tierney. Their article on homeless youth and social capital reaffirm the challenges that students face when trying to gain access to information about going to college. One could argue that for the student population in their study, the day-to-day maintenance of living was perhaps the greatest obstacle these students face. However, becoming “aged out” of the welfare system or living “doubled up” in a multifamily home, made these students invisible to numerous college information providers. Of course, one can easily point out a number of other student populations, such as undocumented students in the United States, who sit on the same creaky precipice with little knowledge or few options on how to move forward.

Perna’s co-authored article on access to college-going information offers a systematic exploration of how students access information to go to college. With a broad-based study to support it, this work also helps to set the stage for understanding how aspiring college students miss out on key information during their application processes. The Pew Foundation and others have shown that access to technology has increased steadily within the United States. Yet, the ways in which we communicate with prospective college students to gain access to information has not kept pace. The nation must pay attention to the tremendous potential for a greater role of technology as a mechanism for interaction.

Academic Preparation Is Always Going to Matter

After students make it to college, being successful is the next most important and obvious step. Colyar’s article on the classroom experiences at a Research I university helps to underscore just how critical academic preparation is and how that preparation connects to success in school. This may seem like an obvious connection, but again, considering the current emphasis at the federal and foundational level on college completion, the linkages between preparation and persistence factors that equal success are broken.

Academic preparation includes attitude and confidence as well as content knowledge and learning skills. Hong and Jun provide insights from a project focused on improving female students’ persistence in math and science fields by increasing self-efficacy. Such efforts are necessary if we are to overcome gender gaps and shortages in these fields.

Dobbs' article on enriched academic preparation via writing for college-going seniors underscores two key issues. First, that the K–12 system does not adequately prepare urban students for going to college, and second, that these gaps set these kids up for failure when they get to college. Dobbs' article offers just one example of a well-formulated plan to assist these students, although it's not a plan that can be easily "scaled up" to serve the masses.

And Then, There Is Scalability . . .

This core issue of scalability is likely where the next phase of college access will find itself moving. The college access and preparation community is adjusting to the need for greater evaluation and assessment of program impacts. Critical examination of the effectiveness of college preparation strategies, like the ones mentioned by Smith, Dobbs, Perna, and others in this volume, must be an on-going area of investigation. As an educational community, our capacity to serve students will depend on what we learn from these evaluations and how we use that information to develop better programs and resources that meet the needs of underprepared students with college plans.

If we look critically at the current national agenda, we see the growing ambition to identify a large-scale implementable intervention that will solve access and completion problems. Certainly, most of the authors in this volume argue to increase attention to program design on many levels. However, based on these works and others, this author is not convinced that these "big idea" or large-scale plans will lead to the change we hope to see. Instead, targeted and specific interventions that are smart, dynamic, and flexible in their capability to take calculated risks may well be better able to meet the needs of an increasingly complex student population.

References

Applegate, Jim L. 2011. "Graduating the 21st Century Student." Presentation to the National Academic Advisors Association (NACADA). Denver, CO. October 4, 2011. <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/annualconf/2011/documents/drapplegateppt.pdf>

Author Information

Kristan M. Venegas, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Clinical Education in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. She also serves as a Research Associate for the Pullias Center for Higher Education at USC.

Kristan M. Venegas, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Clinical Education

Rossier School of Education

3470 Trousdale Parkway, WPH 604C

University of Southern California

Los Angeles, CA 90089

E-mail: Kristan.venegas@usc.edu

Telephone: 213-740-0507

Fax: 213-740-2367