What Evidence from Research Tells Us: Closing Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Access and Completion[1]

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Despite progress in the number of Washingtonians receiving postsecondary credentials, there are persistent gaps in attainment rates for underrepresented minority groups. Notably, the Hispanic population is the state's second-largest racial/ethnic group, but educational outcomes lag behind their white counterparts. Narrowing these equity gaps requires proactive and targeted policies and programs focused on increasing college access and completion for students of color. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, this Research Spotlight presents evidence from research that has shown promising results.

What Works in Postsecondary Education

College access and advising programs for high school students, specifically aimed at low-income students and students of color, can increase college enrollment for these groups. Assisting students in applying for college, understanding financial aid, and developing a college-going mindset can reduce barriers to entry for historically underrepresented student populations. Results from a study[2] of one pre-college program indicate a particularly positive impact on Hispanic students.

Combining frequent advising with comprehensive wraparound student supports, including financial aid, first-year seminars, and assistance with transportation and textbook costs has been proven to aid student retention and boost graduation rates. Participants in the CUNY ASAP[3] program, most of whom were low-income students of color, were twice as likely to graduate with an associate degree as their peers. Emerging research on programs using data-informed intrusive advising, like Georgia State University[4], shows promising results in narrowing equity gaps.

Holistic, cohort-based learning has been proven effective for retaining students of color. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program[5] at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, initially aimed at growing the number of Black men with advanced degrees in STEM fields, has since evolved to include other underrepresented minority students. Through intensive mentoring, financial aid, faculty

"I honestly believe in order to do well in academics you have to be supported in your personal life as well. A lot of times that can affect how you're doing in school."

- *Marlisa, a Black freshman student at Penn State*

support, and professional development, the program has increased retention, grade point average, and matriculation into advanced STEM degree programs for students of color. The approach has been replicated successfully[6] at other institutions and has the potential to narrow equity gaps in other fields beyond STEM as well.

High-Impact Practices that integrate learning within and outside of the classroom have been shown to have positive effects on all students, and underrepresented minority students in particular. These practices include participation in learning communities, service-learning courses, study abroad opportunities, internships, capstone projects, and conducting research with faculty members. Participation in multiple High-Impact Practices[7] can influence students' perceptions of their learning.

Completion grants provide relatively small amounts of funding for upper-level students with remaining financial need. Distributing these grants, ranging from just a few hundred to $5,000, can help students[8] cross the finish line to graduation. Similarly, emergency grants[9] are issued to students to address financial barriers, such as a broken-down car or temporary loss of childcare, that might otherwise cause them to drop out of school. While not specifically designed to do so, completion grants can be implemented to address racial inequities by focusing on underrepresented racial groups with unmet financial need.

"Many of our students have obstacles coming to college, even before they step foot in the front door. Every hurdle mounts up, so if we can just keep their path a little more clear, we just see greater student success."

- *Aliesha, Executive Director, Chippewa Valley Technical College Foundation*

To the extent that students of color are disproportionately from low-income backgrounds or the first in their family to attend college, policies and programs that benefit low-income and first-generation students may also narrow the equity gaps in access and completion. Increasing the availability of financial aid, applying research-based teaching methods, and providing students with holistic support outside of the classroom may contribute to more equitable student outcomes. While there is a growing body of evidence that targeted policies can address inequities in college access and completion, additional empirical research is needed to better understand the effects of specific programs. Implementation of programs in Washington should include rigorous evaluation to establish impacts in the local context.

Notes

[1] Research using rigorous, empirical evaluation methods

[2] Eric P. Bettinger and Brent J. Evans, "College Guidance for All: A Randomized Experiment in Pre-College Advising," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38, no. 3 (2019): 579–99, https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22133.

[3] Susan Scrivener et al., "Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students" (MDRC, February 2015), https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/doubling_graduation_rates_fr.pdf.

[4] "GPS Advising | Georgia State Student Success Initiatives," gsu.edu, accessed June 4, 2020, https://success.gsu.edu/initiatives/gps-advising/.

[5] "Meyerhoff Scholars Program," umbc.edu, accessed June 4, 2020, https://meyerhoff.umbc.edu/.

[6] Mariano R. Sto. Domingo et al., "Replicating Meyerhoff for Inclusive Excellence in STEM," *Science* 364, no. 6438 (April 26, 2019): 335–37, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aar5540.

[7] Ashley Finley and Tia McNair, "Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices," n.d., 68.

[8] "Announcing Our Fourth Scale Project: Last-Mile Grants to Support College Completion," University Innovation Alliance, August 16, 2017, https://theuia.org/blog/post/announcing-our-fourth-scale-project-last-mile-grants-support-college-completion.

[9] "2012-2015 Emergency Grant | Closing Report and Best Practices" (Great Lakes, February 2016), https://home.mygreatlakes.org/mglstatic/community/forms/EG_Emergency_Grant_Closing_Report_2012-15_0216.pdf.