

Chapter 3

A Dream Realized: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College

Nate Bryant

Salem State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the characteristics and challenges that low-income students face culturally, socially, and academically, and identifies services that have a positive impact on their retention. Low-income students are defined as students whose total family income is below \$50,000 a year. While higher education institutions boast about the increase in low-income students enrolling in college, the data show that the retention of these students is not as praiseworthy. Colleges and universities have not been nimble in meeting students where they are academically. Rather, they expect students to navigate the institutional structures and cultures that pre-date the changing demographics of higher education. Recognizing the characteristics of low-income students in relation to education, and understanding the challenges they face, will be helpful to higher education institutions as they create programs to meet the needs of this most vulnerable population.

INTRODUCTION

“A Dream Realized: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College” introduces the reader to the stark realities of the plight of low-income students as they enter and attempt to assimilate and navigate the higher education landscape. Poor academic preparation and lack of parental and their own knowledge about college put low-income students at a distinct disadvantage. The result is lower expectation than their peers about the likelihood of earning a degree (Choy, 2001; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). In 2013, only one in five low-income students completed a four-year degree by the age of 24--comparable to data on graduation rates from 1970 (Korn, 2015). Meanwhile, upper income students saw a 55% increase of degree completion in the same time frame

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The topic of accessibility and diversity in the 21st century university cannot be fully understood without knowing the complexities of the family dynamic and how it impacts access and retention for low-income students. Family obligations, which include work and childcare responsibilities, make it difficult for low-income students to stay focused on educational objectives and limit their ability to get involved on campus or become acclimated to college life (Bryant, 2016). Because of such responsibilities, most low-income students attend college close to home, are commuters, take a reduced course load, and take a leave to accommodate family needs (Choy, Horn, & Chen, 2000; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). Terriquez and Gurantz's research identified financial obligations to family as the primary reason for low-income students leaving college. Terriquez and Gurantz's research supports the research conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996), which found that compared to their peers, low-income students attempted and earned fewer credit hours, took fewer liberal arts courses, studied significantly less, and worked more hours per week.

These tendencies have a negative impact on academic performance. Low-income students who work significant hours are caught in a dilemma. Working long hours affects their academic performance and jeopardizes their academic standing; however, in order to remain enrolled in college, low-income students are forced to work to help subsidize the cost of their education (Arnold, Chewning, Castleman, & Page, 2013). Additionally, the income earned as a result of their employment may also be needed to help with family expenses. This affects their availability to participate in extracurricular activities and/or seek additional academic support.

The chapter begins by explaining how these characteristics of low-income students, along with traditional higher education institutional structures and the lack of informational, social, and cultural capital, can impede their retention in college. It then focuses on how multi-layered retention programs, through a combination of academic and theoretical capital-generating services such as counseling, advising, tutoring, mentoring, learning communities, cohorts, financial aid counseling, financial assistance, mid-semester evaluations, early registration, and academic workshops, can effectively serve at-risk students. Among the strategies that have been proven to help low-income students is the Bryant Supply-Support-Succeed (SSS) Model, which posits that giving low-income students programmatic support, enforced by supportive relationships, can result in academic success. Further, the chapter looks at types of college retention programs and their ability to foster academic success on a larger scale, and offers solutions and recommendations to institutional leaders for ways to retain low-income students and provide a supportive pathway to degree completion and graduation.

BACKGROUND

The literature on low-income students has shown that this population is not retained at college at the same levels as its middle- and upper-class peers (Bryant, 2016). The research also indicates why. The unique characteristics that low-income students possess prior to enrollment in college (e.g., poor academic preparedness, limited parental knowledge) coupled with the responsibilities they have while being enrolled in college (e.g., family commitments, work responsibilities), negatively affect retention.

Three areas of research help to explain the primary factors impacting the retention of low-income students: the unique characteristics that low-income students possess; the institutional structures and cultures of colleges and universities and how these structures and cultures impede retention; and the theoretical perspectives on student success, or capital theories.

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