
Student Access, adjustment and outcomes: a profile of factors affecting undergraduate degree attainment

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I. Introduction

As the 1990's come to a close, no other higher education issue incites as much controversy as access. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, all student groups could rejoice in the fact that college was becoming more accessible. Under-represented groups were encouraged to take advantage of higher education opportunities. However, although more and more students saw entry into higher education, only a handful realized their dreams of graduating with an undergraduate degree. If educational policy makers want to preserve access for students, they must understand the complexity of the issues and the context of access. This chapter presents a profile of students in higher education, describes the barriers to college access, and identifies the factors that enhance access.

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II. Students in Higher Education

Despite what appears to be a promising scenario of college participation, access to higher education is still a critical issue for many students. Some would argue that the U.S. already has universal access and that the nation's higher education system is based on choice. In other words, there is some kind of institution that students can attend regardless of academic credentials. However, not all students are evenly distributed among non-selective, selective and highly selective institutions. The issue of choice is significant, as Americans know that greater wealth is found in more prestigious institutions, as well as in graduate and professional schools.

Moreover, a full discussion of access must also include successful college completion. For example, the community college open door policy has increased access to college, but it is well known that two-year college student retention is lower than at four-year institutions. The first-year college retention rate in two-year colleges is 56%, and in four-year institutions, it is 73.2%. Some groups remain underrepresented in degree attainment as compared to their college enrollment. In 1994, Hispanics earned only 6% of all associate degrees, 4.3% of all bachelor's degrees, 3.1% of all master's degrees and 4.2% of all first professional degrees. At the same time, Hispanics represented 7.9% of all four-year undergraduate students, 3.7% of all graduate students, and 4.4% of professional students (Carter & Wilson, 1997).

Access to doctoral study, as well as to graduate work leading to professional degrees such as law and medicine, especially in highly selective institutions, is a particularly critical issue for all. These degrees provide a specialized academic wealth that allows students to become a part of American intelligentsia (Rendon, 1997). In summary, while some groups have made small, but, important gains in college participation and completion rates, the picture could be brighter and more promising if barriers to college access were reduced or eliminated altogether.

III. Factors That Enhance College Access

Despite the barriers, a number of factors have been identified in the literature that actually make a difference in expanding access for students.

A Family "Culture of Possibility"

Access may be conditioned in very early developmental stages through *la familia*. Gandara's (1995) research on the family backgrounds of low-income,

highly educated Mexican Americans has shown that parents of these individuals fostered a “culture of possibility” with respect to achievement and schooling. In other words, largely through story, particularly stories (or myths) of family history rooted in a better life, Gandara found that Mexican American parents managed to exude a faith in the future, while cultivating high levels of possibility and powerfully influencing the aspirations of their children. She argues, “in so doing, they reinforce in their children a self-belief of efficacy which resulted in intense achievement motivation” (p. 112). The “culture of possibility” resonates with the concept of “endurance labor.” By endurance labor, Cuadraz and Pierce (1994) refers to “the relentless drive to persist, in spite of adversity, and many times, because of adversity” (p. 31). Unlike the traditional concept of “cultural capital” which is available to and transmitted by those who have control over linguistic and cultural competence in society (as well as the form of capital that is valued), endurance labor “arises from those who have little control over those regimes of power, but who create, nevertheless, an inner and collective strength to struggle against the very structures that disempower them”. Research based on the stories of student populations abounds with examples of students who grew up not only with a “culture of possibility” but with the “endurance labor” enabling them to prevail, despite the barriers or odds against them.

The implications of this phenomenon are clear. Even before children reach the front doors of kindergarten, despite social or economically adverse conditions, parents can play a key role in their children’s achievement by cultivating a “culture of possibility”, by influencing the aspirations and expectations of their children. By setting the tone for achievement and hope, parents can contribute substantially to their children’s educational trajectories.

School Transformation

Nieto (1996) advocates that changing schools requires speaking about transformation rather than simply reform. In other words, changes are needed both in structures (i.e., policies and practices such as the curriculum, tracking, and teaching) and in the individual and collective will to educate students (i.e., treating students as powerful learners, setting high expectations, instilling the idea of college as a viable possibility, providing encouragement and support).

Factors Affecting Hispanic College Persistence and Degree Attainment

As previously noted, the issue of access ultimately focuses on college completion or degree attainment. Access to professional and graduate programs can only be achieved through the attainment of a baccalaureate degree. For this reason, a discussion on the factors that have been found to have an impact on

persistence and subsequent graduation is necessary in discourse on access to higher education. In an extensive review of factors influencing students' educational aspirations and attainments, Nora (1993) notes that these factors fall within four major categories: (1) educational goal commitments (or educational aspirations), (2) financial assistance, (3) social integration or experiences, and (4) institutional commitments (or institutional fit). Research by Nora and associates (1994, 1995, 1996, 1997) subsequent to that review has identified other factors just as instrumental as those previously cited. Those factors include: (1) environmental pull factors, (2) perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, (3) academic performance, (4) support and encouragement by parents, and (5) academic and intellectual development while in college.

Educational Aspirations

Nora, Castaneda, and Cabrera (1992) and Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) note that educational goal commitments of college students are prominent in affecting these students' intentions to re-enroll in their second year in college as well as in their actual persistence behavior. Students' desires to earn an undergraduate degree and further pursue a professional or graduate degree reflect a mind set that students bring with them upon entering college regarding the importance of college. Contrary to statements made by insensitive and unenlightened individuals, students have high educational aspirations for themselves even as early as elementary school (Rendon & Nora, 1997) and these aspirations remain high (Nora & Rendon, 1990).

Financial Assistance

Studies by Stampen and Cabrera (1988), Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) and Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1992) collectively reflect the importance of financial assistance in the persistence process. Not only have Cabrera et al. (1990) found that financial aid creates an equal playing field among recipients and non-recipients but Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1992) uncovered an intangible component associated with financial aid. Cabrera et al. differentiated between the tangible (or actual awarding of financial aid) and the intangible (attitudes associated with having received financial assistance) components that make up the construct. In all instances, both components were found to directly and indirectly influence Hispanic students' decisions to remain in college. It is believed that the intangible component is not only a reflection of stress reduction that comes from being able to pay for college-related expenses but that it may also represent a student's commitment to their respective institution centering around the notion that the institution provided the financial means to remain in college.

Social Experiences

While much of the research on the influence of social experiences on the persistence of students focuses on informal faculty-student contact (e.g., Pascarella, 1985; Iverson, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1984; Smart & Pascarella, 1986), recent research examines the influence of this factor on the adjustment of students to college and not simply on persistence (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1999). Although the direct influence of social experiences on persistence has been found to be minimal for some student groups, with the exception of Nora's (1987) research on Hispanics at two-year institutions, this factor makes its presence felt on the student's academic performance and, to a limited extent, on persistence decisions (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Commitment to an Institution

Findings related to the impact of students' commitments to their respective institutions on their withdrawal decisions have been mixed, partly due to student samples. In earlier studies by Nora and Cabrera (1993), Nora, Castaneda, and Cabrera (1992), Allen (1988), and Braddock (1981), the influence of a student's commitment to an institution were found to be positively related to a student's decision to remain enrolled in college. However, the studies by Allen (1988) and Braddock (1981) dealt exclusively with African American college students and those by Nora and Cabrera (1993) and Nora, Castaneda, and Cabrera (1992) examined the impact of institutional commitment for a commuter student population comprised of 25% minority students, both Hispanic and African American. In a more recent investigation by Nora and Cabrera (1996), the influence of a student's commitment to his or her institution was examined separately for different student groups. The results indicated that while it was a driving force for non-minority students in their decisions to re-enroll, this factor was not significant in influencing persistence decisions for minorities. While a sense of belonging at an institution largely affects non-minorities, other cognitive and non-cognitive factors are much more propitious in affecting minority students' departure.

Environmental Pull Factors

Environmental pull factors were examined by Nora and Wedham (1991). In that investigation the authors identified three factors that exerted a pulling-away effect not only on the student's decision to remain enrolled in college but also on his or her social and academic integration on campus. Those three factors included family responsibilities such as taking care of a sibling,

grandparent, or an entire family, working off-campus immediately after attending classes, and commuting to college. Nora and Wedham established that those students that could not stay on campus, either because they had familial responsibilities or were having to go to work off-campus, were not able to fully integrate socially and academically and ultimately had to leave higher education altogether. These results were further substantiated by Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, and Pascarella (1996) where the authors found that students who had to leave campus to work were 36% more likely to drop out of college and women that had to deal with taking care of a family member were 83% more likely to withdraw from college. Along this vein, commuting to college was also found to affect student decisions to remain enrolled.

Perceptions of Non-Validating Experiences

Nora and Cabrera (1996) tested the validity of three assertions regarding students: (1) the influential nature of academic preparedness on withdrawal decisions, (2) the extent to which separation from family and community makes easy a successful adjustment to college, and (3) the role that perceptions of non-validating experiences in the classroom and on campus have on both the adjustment to college and on college-related outcomes such as academic performance and persistence. The first two are discussed later in this chapter. In that study, the authors found that those students that were prone to sense a feeling of exclusion or non-validation in the classroom and on campus affected students' adjustments to college: their academic performance, their academic experiences with faculty, their social experiences on campus, their academic and intellectual development, their commitment to an institution, and indirectly, their decisions to remain in college. Almost every aspect of a college student's life was touched by these perceptions of dismissal by the institution and faculty. In all cases, the effect was negatively felt. Students' grade point averages, their interactions with faculty and peers, their development as students were diminished by a sense of non-validation on campus and in their classrooms.

Support and Encouragement by Parents

In their research, Nora and Cabrera (1996) focused on three factors that heavily weighed on students' decisions to remain in college or to drop out. Those three factors were: parental encouragement, grade point averages, and the student's sense that he or she was developing academically while in college. The authors also noted that while perceptions of exclusion on campus negatively affected the adjustment to college and several college-related outcomes, much of the negative influence was negated by the student's perceptions that his or

her family was supportive and provided encouragement while they were enrolled in college. Nora and Cabrera tested the assertion that “successful adjustment to college included severing previous ties with family, friends, and past communities.” Their findings indicated that such links to significant others were key for the successful transition of students to college. Moreover, parental encouragement and words of support were found to exert a positive effect on the integration of students to college, on their academic and intellectual development, their academic performance and commitments, and finally, on their decisions to remain enrolled in college. In studies of two- and four-year college students (e.g., Nora, 1987; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992, 1993; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Nora, Kraemer, & Itzen, 1997), this one factor has been found to significantly impact on the determination of students to persist. In a recent qualitative study, Rendon (1994) notes that when two-year college students perceive an air of acceptance and faculty behavior that validates their worth in the class, students tend to participate more fully in classroom discussions, interact more effectively with faculty, and reconsider their decisions to drop out.

Academic Performance and Academic and Intellectual Development

Perhaps the most influential factor impinging on students’ decisions to persist in college is their academic performance during their first year in college. While grade point averages were found to influence the decisions by non-minorities to drop out, this factor was three times as influential for Hispanics and African Americans (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Both the academic achievement and the perceptions that cognitive gains had or had not been made while attending college were the most determining factors in making the decision to persist in college. It is believed that, for some college students, their sense of belonging in college and their perception of an academic capital (the ability to earn a college degree) is seriously questioned whenever these students experience a lower than expected academic performance. While some students may be able to “shake-off” a bad semester or year, it may be more devastating for other students. Again, perhaps being in an environment that they already perceive as unaccepting may contribute significantly to their perceptions that they cannot overcome these setbacks thereby overly influencing their decisions to drop out.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The issue of access at all levels of higher education for students is shaped by the social and academic experiences of this group early on in schools, by environmental and social conditions prior to and during their enrollment from pre-kindergarten to high school, and by family. Because those experiences help to shape future aspirations, desires, and post-secondary possibilities (and opportunities), true access to those areas that require a professional or graduate degree, where some are disproportionately under-represented, cannot be addressed simply by focusing on admissions into undergraduate programs at different institutions. True access cannot also be reduced to policies that merely open the doors for a segment of society but do nothing to provide the experiences necessary to remain enrolled until the attainment of an undergraduate degree is made. While some issues are considered as “hot and sexy” topics currently, issues such as curriculum reform, faculty and staff development with regard to diversity issues, retention policies and programs, articulation between K-12 and post-secondary institutions, and financial aid and choice of college have been minimized in important discussions centered around access. Discussions today must not lose sight of the holistic nature of access for all groups of students. These discussions must also focus on building coalitions across different groups and should emphasize the goal of achieving a more diverse society specifically as it is reflected in higher education. With the prevailing attitudes in today’s global society questioning what constitutes “fairness” and “color-blindness,” these access-related efforts may be the only means by which equality and institutional tolerance can be achieved.

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