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Whose Fault is it, Anyway?: Who is to Blame for Limited College Access in the United States?

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Access to higher education has been limited for many underrepresented racial minorities (URMs) in the United States. Part of the reason for this has been because of weaknesses in the K-16 pipeline. This article takes a collective impact approach to understanding what K-16 personnel can do to assist URMs through proper curriculum development and implementation. Overall, this article will focus on the proficiency model, how it has been used in the mainstream, and why the proficiency model is important when working together within the K-16 continuum.

Keywords: Collective impact, access to higher education, K-16 continuum, underrepresented racial minorities, proficiency model

In a recent report about the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Tepe (2014) compared the current American structure of college readiness to the Chicago Pedway beneath the Central Business District. She wrote that the construction of the Chicago Pedway in the Business District consisted of engineers working from different sides of the city, and a plan for them to meet in the middle. Unfortunately, when the two sides finally met, they missed each other by 9-inches north-south, and 8-inches east-west. In the report, Tepe wrote that the CCSS are ushering in a new curriculum for schools, one whose sole purpose is to prepare students for college. Her question, however, was whether or not colleges are aligning their standards with those of the Common Core.

In 2011, the number of Postsecondary Title IV institutions was reported to be 7,021 (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). It would be rather idealistic to believe that one set of standards could provide access to higher education all 7,021 schools in the United States. Perna and Kurban (2013) supported this statement in writing that “K-12 and higher education systems are typically characterized by different curricular requirements, assessment systems, and accountability measures” (p. 19). Indeed, there is no single curriculum in higher education that aligns itself perfectly with that of K-12 education, which has become increasingly apparent as the number of students taking remedial college courses has been on the rise (Conley, 2013).

To compound the issue of misaligned K-12 and postsecondary curricula, research has shown that underrepresented racial minorities (URMs) are more likely not to go to college, or to take remedial courses (Atwell et al., 2006; Conley, 2013; Long & Boatman, 2013). This statistic is sobering considering that the United States will become minority-majority by the year 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Indeed, it may be a

triumph that more URM students are enrolling in colleges, but it is not a triumph that URM students are less likely to be accepted into what have been considered elite universities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), nor is it a triumph that URM students are overrepresented in community colleges and remedial courses.

The state of access to higher education in the United States is still in crisis. With consistent numbers of remedial students, and a lack of retention (specifically with URM students), the dream of an equitable education system has not been realized (Brock, 2010; Martinez & Bain, 2013). This crisis, however, has not gone unnoticed. Federal TRiO Programs, Gear Up programs, and scholarships such as the Gates-Millennium all represent public and private programs that have acted in response to the systemic problems in student persistence within the K-16 continuum (Davis et al., 2013; Fields, 2001; Patton, 2015; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). More importantly, these programs are an example of how educators and not-for-profit entities have worked together for the benefit of these same students. Yet while these programs assist students in their path to college, the problem of persistence continues. Moreover, the attention to the problem has caused many others to search for a single solution when one does not exist. Amidst this search for a solution has been blaming, finger-pointing, and a desire to say that one specific group of professionals is the one true source of the problem. In reality, those who cast blame are those creating the problems. Indeed, in order to provide better access and more equitable education, educators across the K-16 continuum must make a concerted effort to educate the children within their community.

Unidirectional Thinking; Unidirectional Problems

The term K-16 represents a continuum between both K-12 and postsecondary schools that provides limited barriers for students as they progress from Kindergarten through the sixteenth grade (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). One of the key images used to describe education has been a pipeline. This idea of education as a pipeline represents the notion that students move from Kindergarten to high school, through college, and graduate with a four-year degree. One characteristic of most pipelines, however, is that it can only move its payload in one direction. Another characteristic – and, in this case, a major problem with the K-16 pipeline – is that it can develop leaks. When referring to an actual pipeline, it is relatively easy to find a leak, diagnose the leak, and fix the leak. Conversely, the K-16 pipeline has leaks that are difficult to find, and not very easy to diagnose, nor ameliorate. Moreover, because the pipeline flows in one direction (i.e., it is an expectation that students do not move from ninth grade to eighth grade), the responsibility of the leak can be cast on those who are closer to the beginning of the pipeline. In the case of whether or not students are prepared for college, many professors have voiced their opinion that they should not be teaching basic skills because their predecessors failed at doing so. One professor, in particular, from Merrow, Tulenko, Glasser, Heus, Isaacs, Wald, and Ryan (2005) television production *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* explained, “I don’t see it as my task in life to give [college students] the skills that they should have been taught years ago.” Unfortunately, this opinion is no exception to the rule. Many college professors say that it’s not their job to provide a fix the problem of secondaryization (Brint, 2011; Stanley, 2010).

While college professors blame K-12 personnel, K-12 personnel contend that colleges are producing underprepared educators (Stanley, 2010). Ultimately, this unidirectional pipeline is creating a recursive system of blame, one in which responsibility is cast on those who are closer to the beginning of the pipeline. However, evidence shows that the pipeline has no beginning. The system of K-16 was created to be self-sustaining, which means that the pipeline of education is a cyclical one.

Because the system of education is cyclical, this article will be using a collective impact approach toward building strong curricular partnerships across the K-16 continuum. Edmondson, Zimpher, and Hecht (2014) explained collective impact as “the way in which a region or community comes together to hold itself collectively accountable” (p. 1). While this particular type of approach is difficult, and is an attempt to break down silos (Edmondson et al., 2014), it creates a group of stakeholders across a broad spectrum (Kramer, Parkhurst, & Vaidyanathan, 2009). This particular article will focus on the collective impact of personnel within the K-16 continuum.

The State of College Access and Remediation

Since the creation of Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard - and even after the first Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862 - students were classified into three different categories: Top shelf (high achieving students), middle shelf (middle-achieving students), and bottom shelf (low-achieving students; Stanley, 2010). During the late 19th century, low-achieving students were never considered for college acceptance, and middle-achieving students were only accepted into universities under certain academic provisions. Indeed, the sole purpose of the university was to attract and educate high-achieving students (Stanley, 2010).

It should be understood that access to higher education has always varied between state and institution. However, one item is true about a vast majority of colleges in the United States: “an important part of managing enrollment is simply being sure that enough paying customers will show up each fall” (Fallows, 2006, p. 40). Thus came a point when higher education expanded such that it began to service more “middle shelf” students, and even “bottom shelf” students through open-admission colleges. Because many colleges have become *open-admission* institutions, several students of incoming student bodies are placed into remedial education courses (Bettinger & Long, 2009). The decision as to whether or not a student is placed into a remedial course is based on a placement test. At UC Berkeley, students have been required to take the Subject A exam (Stanley, 2010). At certain state colleges, admissions representatives will look at a student’s ACT or SAT scores in order to decide on a remedial strategy. For colleges like Grand Rapids Community College or the University System of Georgia, students are required to take a placement test that decides whether or not the student must enroll in remedial education courses (Grand Rapids Community College, n.d.; Presley & Dodd, 2008). Remedial education has become an important topic in discussing access to higher education because “the remediation placement exam taken when first arriving on campus has become the key academic gate-keeper to postsecondary study” (Bettinger & Long, 2009, p. 737). When these remedial exams become gateways to graduation, one must ask whether or not open access institutions are truly providing access. This question

is imperative when faced with the fact that students who take remedial courses are “less likely to succeed” (Conley, 2013, p. 57).

The issue of remediation is not an isolated issue. On the contrary, many students are not prepared for higher education. Long and Boatman (2013) argued that, overall, “only one-quarter [sic] to one-third [sic] of America’s high school students are at least minimally prepared for college academically” (p. 77). Moreover, the proportion of Black and Hispanic students who are at least minimally prepared is even smaller (Long & Boatman, 2013). The important question that these statistics beg is why so few students are so minimally prepared for higher education. Inasmuch important: why are fewer Black and Latino students prepared for higher education? The most confounding part of remedial education is understanding how the K-16 system—something that has been thought to be the great equalizer—is producing students with a broadly diverse level of preparedness. Indeed, it seems that certain students are pre-destined for failure, while others are pre-destined for success.

The K-16 Curriculum: Is it Aligned?

What is understood is that different schools have different expectations in terms of rigorous coursework. As Conley (2013) wrote, “some schools hold students to a different and lower standard than students at other schools, even when courses taken have comparable titles” (p. 58). This is not only a discrepancy between states; school rigor can vary between schools located within one mile of each other (Howard, 2008; Kozol, 2005). Concomitantly, the schools that seem to lack rigor are those that house mostly low-income, first-generation, and minority students (Conley, 2013; Kozol, 2005). Thus, a majority of the students who are pre-destined for failure are non-White, low-income, and the first in their families to go to college. Indeed, the K-16 curriculum is only aligned for those who are privileged enough to (1) attend a school with a rigorous curriculum and (2) master each level of the rigorous curriculum that is given to them. Long and Boatman’s (2013) research supported this assertion in writing that the two important predictors of college success are “types of courses students take in high school and how well they perform” (p. 77).

Considering Long and Boatman’s (2013) work, it would seem that the key to improving college access would be for K-12 institutions to create a better curriculum. Unfortunately, the situation is much more complex than that. Acceptance into college does not automatically mean success. Many colleges still implement placement tests that, as mentioned before, can become the gateway to success in college (Conley, 2013). However, through a study by Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2014), data supported that “one fifth to one third of students are likely to be severely misplaced [in remedial education courses]” (p. 388). In other words, students who are accepted into college may still be misplaced in remedial education courses even if they are prepared for their first year of college. While Scott-Clayton et al. asserted that a better predictor for college success are high school grade point averages, they also found that different racial groups are more likely to be placed in different remedial courses. For example, Black students were more likely to take remedial math than Asian students whereas Asian students were more likely to take remedial English than Black students.

Scott-Clayton et al.'s (2014) and Long and Boatman's (2013) research demonstrate disconnects between secondary and postsecondary education as to what is considered important knowledge. While eliminating placement tests would correct one part of the issue, this still would not ameliorate the cultural disparities within the K-16 pipeline vis-à-vis what knowledge is considered to be necessary. In other words, there currently is no streamlined alignment between K-12 and higher education institutions. While the rigor of a K-12 curriculum varies between schools, the necessary skills to succeed in the first year of college vary between each institution of higher education. While both of these problems affect all parties within the K-16 pipeline, there has yet to be a concerted effort in which all of those parties work together.

Why Educators Should Work Together

Many educators, public officials, and administrators have noticed the need for a stronger coalition between institutions within the K-16 continuum. Lyndon B. Johnson was one such official as demonstrated by the Higher Education Act of 1965; an act that not only helped to create certain important financial assistance programs for low-income families, but also to create community outreach programs such as the Federal TRiO Programs (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). One important aspect of the Federal TRiO Programs is their attachment to institutions of higher education. As the United States Department of Education (n.d.) wrote, "The recipients of the grants... are institutions of higher education, public and private agencies and organizations" (para. 2). While not all programs are attached to institutions of higher education, those that do house TRiO programs have seen how necessary it is for colleges to have a presence in secondary education.

The Federal TRiO programs are just one example of how the federal government has created a loose partnership between K-12 and higher education. Yet, as Perna and Kurban (2013) wrote, "federal and state policymakers should... continue to support efforts to improve curricular alignment between K-12 and higher education" (p. 27). Not only has research called for the federal government to step in, but others have stated that the conversation should have focused on curriculum alignment much sooner (Bragg, 2013; Kirwan et al., 2014).

A Look at the Proficiency Model

While there is no single solution to create equal access and abolish remedial education, there does seem to be an educational model that reflects the top-down learning that researchers have asked for. Conley (2013) discussed one such model as the proficiency model.

As Delpit (2012) wrote, all students are born with the same intelligence, but studies have shown that the average number of new words that students hear each day affects students' intelligences. Those who hear a higher average of new words each day will already be at an advantage compared to those who hear a lower average of new words. Indeed, by the time students begin kindergarten, some will already be ahead of others. This is not just an individual student problem; this is a problem with inequity in

entire school districts (mostly limited-income, first-generation, and primarily minority school districts). However, what has succeeded in numerous schools is a proficiency model in education (Johnson et al., 2014). The proficiency approach is a system in which (1) educators create lessons such that “students are likely to achieve a depth of understanding about a specific concept... and (2) educators are objective driven as they strive to help every student achieve mastery” (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 48). In other words, a proficiency model takes a goal and scaffolds a curriculum in a way that students must master one concept before moving on to the next.

There is one caveat with the proficiency model, however: it can only work if the goal—in this case, what colleges expect from students in their first year—is shared with K-12 educators. Conley (2013) wrote that the proficiency model was one that needed “to be developed and defined by high school and college instructors working together” (p. 60). In order for this to happen, colleges must become transparent in order to create a better K-16 pipeline. Indeed, this type of top-down curriculum alignment already exists in CCSS as they were created in a way that mirrors the proficiency model (Conley, 2013; Conley et al., 2011). However, as Tepe (2014) wrote, CCSS has yet to be adopted and implemented in the higher education system. Despite “several [researchers] from the K-12 and higher education communities” (Tepe, 2014, p. 5) reviewing the standards, the proper alignment of the standards between secondary and postsecondary institutions still does not exist.

CCSS is an example of how K-12 and postsecondary professionals were able to work together as to create a proficiency-based curriculum. Concomitantly, CCSS has proven to be much like the Subject A exam that has been used at U.C. Berkeley (Stanley, 2010): it shows the communal desire for students to persist to college, but does not show the proper alignment needed to fix the leak between the twelfth grade and the thirteenth grade. CCSS is also a reminder to many educators of policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, both of which were created to single-handedly fix problems within education (Long, 2013).

The one part of CCSS that is backed by research, however, is the proficiency model that rests at the center of the standards. By using the proficiency model to educate students, it becomes more likely that students will succeed because they have the knowledge that is necessary to advance to a higher order of thinking. However, no matter how much curricula are aligned across the nation’s K-12 schools, the alignment will remain meaningless if institutions of higher education lack uniformity in their expectations for first-year college students.

Whose Fault is it?

To point at one group as the fault of the leaky pipeline is to believe that only one solution can fix the K-16 pipeline. Indeed, much like one person cannot fix access to higher education neither can one solution. Although the proficiency model makes logistical sense, it should not be seen as the sole solution to the problem. Much of the political discussions around proficiency models such as CCSS have become binary. There are those who say it works, and those who say it does not work. From Stanley’s (2010) point of view, there will always be remedial students. What K-16 professionals

must do with underprepared students is a different argument entirely. However, the imperative is that K-16 professionals are doing something together rather than working at odds with each other.

The proficiency model is important because it is a demonstration of how K-16 professionals have worked together through collective impact. It is an example of K-16 professionals taking ownership of a problem rather than casting blame. Much like the Ouroboros, or the snake eating its own tail, casting blame within the K-16 pipeline is self-destructive. By taking a collective impact approach to solving a problem, stakeholders must respect one another in order to provide better solutions to an apparent problem. While pointing the finger at once relinquishes fault, it also creates fault—a fault that will continue to be passed in an endless circle.

It is also important to understand that the proficiency model cannot provide a culture of respect, appreciation, and value for students; nor can it create a school devoid of bias. Johnson et al. (2014) wrote, “students in high-performing urban schools perceive that they are respected appreciated, and valued” (p. 53). This relates to the achievement of underrepresented minority students in higher education despite their continuing growth within our nation. Currently, underrepresented minority students are contributing heavily to the leaks in the K-16 pipeline. This is by no fault of the students, but rather through the contention caused by a lack of professional ownership. If students – all students – are not provided with a culture of respect and appreciation without bias, then the proficiency model cannot succeed.

Teaching students in a manner that allows them to master a task only makes sense. As does the idea that all K-16 professionals should have a vested interest in all students’ success. Indeed, the only person to blame for a lack of access to higher education is the person who is casting blame on someone else.

Conclusion

Today, it is difficult to say that the K-16 education continuum is servicing all students in the United States of America. While URMs are not progressing along the K-16 continuum as far as their White counterparts, a number of educators are casting blame at each other. In order to better serve their students, educators must work together through collective impact. By working together, teachers will be more capable of providing a better foundational education to their students.

Teachers across the K-16 continuum have created a curriculum through collective impact called the Common Core State Standards. These standards, however, have not been adopted across the entire K-16 continuum. While it is difficult to say that CCSS is the best curriculum to use, studies have shown that the proficiency model (that from which CCSS was formed) has been successful at emphasizing foundational skills that are necessary for all students. More importantly, CCSS stresses the importance of creating a curriculum both across the K-16 continuum, and with the help of personnel across the K-16 continuum.

While this article does not support CCSS, it supports the theory behind it. Ultimately, when K-16 personnel work together to create a curriculum that uses the proficiency model, students will be better served.

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