

May 29, 2007

For immediate release

College Retention Programs Designed for Low-Income Students Yield Best Overall Results

Washington, DC – Public university administrators who think they must choose between a diverse student body and prestigious admissions selectivity should think again, says a new report from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

Colleges and universities that design and implement student retention programs with the challenges of low-income students in mind can improve college graduation rates without narrowing access. “Demography is not Destiny: Increasing the Graduation Rates of Low-Income College Students at Large Public Universities” reveals retention strategies that help some institutions succeed beyond all predictors and points to the pitfalls that can hamper retention efforts elsewhere.

“The solution for higher student retention rates is not to raise admission standards,” says report co-author and Pell Institute Director Colleen O’Brien. “But to be successful at helping students graduate requires a commitment of resources, energy and leadership throughout the campus and a clear understanding of the students who are the targets of your efforts.”

That understanding of student needs is frequently absent, says O’Brien, who, with co-author Jennifer Engle, led the study of 14 public universities. When colleges and universities don’t understand the academic, financial, cultural and social barriers students face, they invest in retention without sufficient impact.

Moreover, many institutions don’t even know how their low-income students are faring because they only calculate overall retention rates. O’Brien said it is vital to start with the right data to make the appropriate policy and programmatic decisions.

“Demography is not Destiny” documents research conducted by the Pell Institute on public universities with relatively high numbers of federal Pell Grant recipients, an indicator of low-income students served. Researchers predicted each institution’s graduation rates based on a number of factors, including the academic quality of the incoming students and the economic diversity of the student body. It turns out that some of the institutions were performing better than expected in terms of graduation rates, despite serving academically and demographically diverse student populations, while others were performing below expectations.

“This report demonstrates that if colleges and universities make a real commitment to retention, they can achieve results,” said Martha Lamkin, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education, which funded the research. “What an institution does for its students makes the difference.”

Higher performing institutions helped students succeed by:

- **Personalizing the undergraduate experience** by making early contact with students in first-year programs, closely monitoring student progress through advising, “reducing” class size through supplemental instruction, and providing individualized support in special programs.
- **Emphasizing the teaching mission** acculturating new faculty to it and by rewarding faculty through promotion and tenure for supporting it.
- **Creating a shared sense of community** by promoting student involvement even at largely commuter campuses.
- **Developing an institutional culture that promotes success** with strong leadership, clear goals and commitment of resources.

The report cautions that it is not enough to put these lessons into practice. Even successful institutions had retention programs with unintended barriers to low-income student participation. For example:

- Many services were available only during business hours when low-income students were working off-campus.
- Low-income students couldn’t afford the required fees for some retention services, including orientation, or could not support retention-related costs such as transportation or taking time off from work.
- Services that weren’t well advertised or widely available went unnoticed and unused by low-income students who aren’t as college-savvy as their peers.

“Colleges and universities will see themselves in the profiles offered in this report and find strategies that will work on their campuses,” O’Brien said. “To ensure success for all of their students, institutions have to keep the needs of their low-income students in mind when putting these strategies into place.”

“Demography is not Destiny” also offers several recommendations for institutional leaders and policymakers to improve retention and graduation of low-income students:

- ***Track the progress of low-income students in relation to retention and other benchmarks when possible*** to improve the delivery of services and students’ outcomes as well as to ensure the efficient use of limited resources. The U.S. Department of Education could further strengthen support for such tracking by providing the incentive of federal money to institutions that address achievement gaps that are identified as a result.
- ***Implement provisional admissions programs (such as admitting some students with lower SAT/ACT test scores and monitoring progress) to increase economic diversity***, as many of the institutions in this study had. Evaluation research that shows that participants in such programs have similar or higher persistence rates as the overall student population despite entering with lower high school GPAs and/or SAT scores.

- *Reward institutions that provide an excellent education for all while maintaining access for low-income populations.* Systems and states may need to create better incentives and reward research universities for serving both access and excellence missions.

To read the full report, go to: www.pellinstitute.org

For more information, please contact Susan Trebach, 202-347-7430. For printed copies of the report, contact Jennifer Engle at Jennifer.Engle@pellinstitute.org.