

For immediate release

March 30, 2007

College Access Success Formula:

New Report Documents “What Works for First-Generation Students”

Washington, DC – Raising aspirations, navigating the admissions process and robustly supporting the transition to college life are all essential parts of the college access formula for first-generation students, according to a new study by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

“Straight from the Source: What Works for First-Generation College Students” offers a comprehensive look at the college access struggles of students who are the first in their families to pursue post-secondary education. Based on intensive focus group interviews with students in Dallas, Edinburg, El Paso, Houston, Kingsville, and San Antonio Texas, the report is a best-practices road map for policymakers and college access professionals across the country.

“As these students make clear, it is not enough to raise first-generation students’ hopes and dreams,” said Colleen O’Brien, Director of the Pell Institute and a co-author of the report. “To make the successful leap to college, disadvantaged students need intensive help with the admissions and financial aid processes and a real comfort level with both campus life and college academic support resources. And once they are in college, the challenges to stay enrolled are just as significant.”

Nationally, about 35 percent of all college undergraduates (6.5 million current students) are first-generation. About 61 percent of all high school graduates have parents who lack college degrees but only slightly more than half of those high school grads actually move on to college.

The report, funded with a grant by the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation (TG), reveals the academic, financial, familial and work issues first-generation students confront on a daily basis as they strive to succeed in college. Some of the key findings include:

- First generation students need to understand why college matters and build trust with the people delivering the information;
- The message that a college education can move the entire family forward is particularly salient;
- Involving parents and family members early in the process prepares everyone for the challenging transition;
- Students' pressures to earn money for both family and college conflict with their need to spend more time on academic work.
- Prior exposure to college life and, once enrolled, access to college-based support services are extremely important to first-generation students.

All of the first-generation college students interviewed for the report were recent alumni of federally-funded pre-college access programs – TRIO's Talent Search and Upward Bound. Two-thirds of the students in the TRIO programs are both low-income and first-generation, with the remainder in one category or the other. O'Brien said these students were the ideal interview subjects because they could look back on their relatively fresh experiences with both vivid recollection and pragmatic insights into the college transition process.

“The students we interviewed said they were fortunate to participate in pre-college access programs and noted that many of their non-participant peers were at the mercy of schools and counselors who lacked the resources to effectively guide them into college,” O'Brien said. “Many of our recommendations address ways to expand access services beyond the limited population already being served.”

Congressman Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness, said “the Pell Institute’s report enhances our understanding of the complexities of life for first-generation students.”

“Congress now has the opportunity to turn these insights into some effective strategies as we move forward in reauthorizing the federal Higher Education Act,” he continued. “We appreciate this timely, valuable addition to our information base.”

Supporting the educational aspirations of disadvantaged students ought to be a national priority, agreed Jacob Fraire, TG’s assistant vice president. “This report reinforces and builds on what we know about helping students succeed despite very limited financial resources and significant social and cultural barriers,” he said. “Through the students’ own words, the Pell Institute authors have captured crucial ideas that will help policymakers and practitioners better address their needs.”

“When you read this report, you immediately see that the disadvantages of first-generation status are palpable,” said Arnold Mitchem, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education. (The Pell Institute is the research arm of the Council.) “Many of these kids are smart but just don’t think college is for them and believe that it is financially way beyond their reach.”

“In America every year hundreds of thousands of qualified students fail to achieve their full academic potential, and this failure represents both a terrible waste of individual talent and a blow to our skilled workforce,” Mitchem said. “The Pell Institute’s report should be required reading for anyone who wants to improve the college access environment.”

For an online view of the entire report, go to www.pellinstitute.org. For a printed copy of the report contact Jennifer Engle at: Jennifer.engle@pellinstitute.org For more information contact: Susan Trebach (202) 347-7430 ext 107 or (cell) 703) 346-8438