

From The Editor

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Opportunity Matters: A Journal of Research Informing Educational Opportunity Practice and Programs*. This is the first issue of a new peer-reviewed research journal published annually by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

In *Opportunity Matters*, we will publish research-based articles, quantitative or qualitative in nature, that examine issues relevant to educational opportunity programs, such as:

- the demographic profile of students served by educational opportunity programs with attention to the needs of special populations or subgroups (i.e. immigrant students, out-of-school youth, males of color, rural students).
- the factors (i.e. academic, social, economic) that affect college access and success for low-income, minority, and first-generation college students as well as students with disabilities.
- the programs and practices that improve college attendance and completion rates for underrepresented populations (i.e. curricula, pedagogies including the use of technology, counseling practices).
- the methods used to evaluate the effectiveness of educational opportunity programs and/or the outcomes of program evaluation studies.
- the larger policy contexts in which educational opportunity programs operate and the impact of policy and legislation on the delivery of services to target populations.

Our primary aim in establishing this journal is to provide a scholarly forum for the discussion and dissemination of research related to educational opportunity programs and the populations they serve, primarily low-income, first-generation, and minority college students, as well as students

with disabilities. We offer this journal at a critical juncture in the development of our knowledge base about educational opportunity practice and programs. While there has been much attention in the research community to the challenges faced by underrepresented students in terms of access to and success in college, there is a paucity of research about what works to help these students overcome barriers to their participation in higher education. After decades of experience working with underrepresented populations, there is much to learn from educational opportunity practitioners about how to solve these seemingly intractable problems. With the introduction of this journal to the field, we aim to encourage more researchers to rigorously study educational opportunity programs, practices, and outcomes.

It is also our goal in publishing this journal to help make research more accessible and useful to practitioners in the educational opportunity field. We want to encourage and enable these professionals to use research to inform program practice as well as to conduct research themselves. As the field has evolved from a small core of dedicated pioneers to a large and growing community of opportunity professionals, there is a wealth of information that practitioners can and should contribute to expand the body of knowledge about educational opportunity practice and programs. In this era of data-driven decision-making, it is also vitally important that practitioners bring their professional knowledge to bear on conversations

about the appropriate role of research in program evaluation, accountability, and improvement.

With that in mind, the inaugural issue of *Opportunity Matters* features five articles from noted educational researchers and experienced practitioners alike. Several articles are actually the product of collaboration between researchers and practitioners, including the articles by Williams and Perrine and Raymond and Black. Together, the contributors to this issue exemplify our goals to develop the research base on educational opportunity programs and to foster a community of practice among scholars and practitioners dedicated to better understanding the issues related to college access and success for underrepresented populations.

The first three articles share a common focus on the impact of learning communities on improving retention among low-income, minority, and first-generation students, particularly during the initial transition to college. The first article, *Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students*, features research by Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto from Syracuse University. Tinto, a Senior Scholar with the Pell Institute, has been widely regarded as the leading expert on college student retention for decades following the publication of his landmark book, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. In their article, Engstrom and Tinto present the results of a large-scale, longitudinal study of the impact of learning communities on the success of academically underprepared, low-income students in community colleges across the country. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, their findings strongly support adapting the learning community model to basic skills instruction to improve learning and persistence for this population. Their research shows not only that learning communities do work, but how they work by identifying critical strategies that faculty and staff must employ to create safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments for low-income students.

Rashné Jehangir, an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota, offers further evidence for the effective use of learning communities with underrepresented populations. In her article, *In Their Own Words: Voices of First-Generation College Students in a Multicultural Learning Community*,

Jehangir proposes a model that fuses learning community pedagogy and multicultural curriculum to address the isolation and marginalization that first-generation college students often experience during the critical first year of college. Drawing on students' experiences in a Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) offered by a TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program, Jehangir demonstrates how a challenging academic curriculum that connects with students' diverse backgrounds and fosters interaction between diverse students in the classroom can help first-generation college build bridges of social and academic integration on campus that ease their transition to and persistence in college.

In their article *Can Leadership Development Through Civic Engagement Activities Improve Retention For Disadvantaged College Students?*, Kate Williams and Rose Perrine, from Eastern Kentucky University, expand the scope of the learning community model beyond the classroom and the campus to include civic engagement activities, such as community service and political advocacy. Based on students' outcomes in a leadership development course offered as part of the first-year experience by an SSS program, Williams and Perrine argue that involving low-income and first-generation students in the larger community through civic engagement activities can actually increase their engagement in the campus community, thereby improving their persistence in college. According to Williams and Perrine, the use of such courses can help colleges and universities meet their responsibility to develop responsible citizens while also fulfilling their commitment to retain and graduate their students.

The article by Kim Raymond and Karen Black from the University of Northern Colorado shifts our focus to another crucial point in the access pipeline for under-represented students—the transition from undergraduate to graduate studies. Raymond and Black, the former director of the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at UNC, developed and administered a tool to assess the graduate school readiness and preparation needs of low-income, first-generation, and minority students on campus. The results of their study demonstrate support for the use of their assessment tool to understand the service needs of McNair-eligible participants. Furthermore, they make important recommendations for

improvement at both the program and institutional level relative to the graduate school preparation of low-income, first-generation and minority students on their campus that will likely resonate on other campuses as well.

Finally, the article by Heather Eggins and Diana Tlupova offers an international perspective on the access problem for underrepresented populations—and possible solutions. In *The Drive to Attract More Students into Higher Education: Access Initiatives from the United Kingdom*, Eggins and Tlupova highlight two major government initiatives recently implemented to widen access to higher education in the U.K, the Aimhigher program and the Education Maintenance Allowance program. In discussing the details of the implementation and evaluation of these two initiatives, Eggins and Tlupova note parallels with U.S. programs, particularly the Federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs, as well as policy implications that may be informative in the U.S. context. This article reminds us that the U.S. is not the only country trying to find viable programmatic and policy solutions to the access problem. It also helps us understand how other countries have learned from and adapted the U.S. experience, and how the U.S. can now learn from a new generation of educational opportunity policies and programs.

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In their 2004 article, *Doing Research that Makes a Difference*, Estella Mara Bensimon and her colleagues argue that “the results of research reported in journal articles are generally read by other researchers. Most of these articles have no influence whatsoever on the actions of practitioners. Consequently, the knowledge obtained through research tends to remain unnoticed and unused by those for whom it is intended.” In offering this journal, The Pell Institute aims to do its part to close the chasm between research and practice, publishing articles that place research methodologies and results within the context of educational opportunity programs as well as draw on the expertise of practitioners who know *opportunity matters*.



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