Community Engagement as a Strategy for Improving College Completion Rates

A RESEARCH BRIEF FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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AN EMERGING APPPROACH TO A PRESSING HIGHER EDUCATION ISSUE

The decline in college completion rates among U.S. students has been identified as one of the largest challenges to the economic future of our country. Just 60% of first-time, full-time students who enroll in a four-year higher education institution have a degree to show for it six years later (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Even more disturbing, some of the lowest college completion rates are found among low-income, first-generation, minority, and other underrepresented populations (Ross & Kenna, 2012; Pell Institute, 2016). In 2013, dependent individuals from families in the top quartile for family income were over eight times more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 24 as those in the bottom quartile—77% versus 9% (Pell Institute, 2016).

Low college completion rates are a costly proposition, with enormous impact at the student, institutional, state, and federal levels. The impact on students is obvious: If they don't get a degree, they have made a time and financial investment in higher education without earning the qualifications they sought. At the institutional level, students who don't complete their education skew fiscal forecasts and require their college or university to replace the lost tuition and other expected revenue. States suffer both from lost revenue at their public institutions and from a less educated workforce. Nationally, we stand to lose the ability to compete with countries whose college-educated populations are on the rise (Russell, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Over the years, many academic and co-curricular programs have been created aimed at increasing college completion rates. Scholars are not always in agreement as to what works, and no single strategy is a silver bullet. That said, strong evidence suggests

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that participating in community engagement can affect students' persistence in and completion of their college studies. This research brief offers an overview of the relevant literature and highlights the potential that community engagement offers as a strategy for increasing college completion rates.

LITERATURE ON FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Researchers have been studying the college dropout challenge for many decades. Vincent Tinto (1975) was among the first to articulate a sociological approach with his interactionist theory on student departure. This theory posits that students' drop-out decisions result from a combination of their attributes coming into college and their interactions within the institution's academic and social systems. Researchers have acknowledged that Tinto's work tells us a great deal about college student persistence, although questions have emerged that suggest his theories may not be generalizable to minorities and other underrepresented groups (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Over the ensuing decades, much of the research on college completion rates built on Tinto's work by underscoring the role of two critical factors in helping students stay in college and graduate: academic success and social integration. Many early retention studies supporting these findings asserted that programs designed to connect students with their communities—such as service learning and other community engagement programs—could help foster both academic success (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010; Cress et al., 2010) and social integration (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998).

KEY DEFINITIONS

While there are many definitions of community engagement, the definition offered by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is perhaps the most widely used in higher education: collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. For the purposes of this research brief, the term *community engagement* is used to describe a variety of education strategies that identify and address both real community needs and student learning outcomes. Examples include service learning and civic engagement.

Graduation rate is defined as the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program (Ross & Kenna, 2012). *Retention rate* is the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year (Ross & Kenna, 2012).

Other studies have also shown at least an indirect relationship between community engagement and college completion. Data collected and analyzed by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has identified service learning as a "high-impact practice." High-impact practices are those that have been widely tested and shown to contribute to success for college students. Specifically, NSSE has found that students enrolled in service learning are more engaged in their education through academic challenge and student–faculty interactions (NSSE, 2012). Additional education research confirms the link between high-impact practices and student engagement leading to increased student retention (Kuh, 2008).

RESEARCH LINKING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLEGE COMPLETION

A Deeper Connection

While all of these studies have helped show a connection between student success and community engagement, practitioners have looked for more conclusive research linking community engagement with college completion. Few empirical studies have intentionally set out to show a direct link between participation in community engagement programs and improved completion rates. Additionally, many early studies relied on perception data, and some scholars have questioned the extent to which study designs met high validity and reliability standards.

This research brief calls attention to a deeper relationship between community engagement and college completion by highlighting well-designed studies that specifically track graduation rates among narrowly defined comparison groups of service learners and non–service learners.

Summary of Major Studies

Several major research studies have found statistically significant positive correlations between community engagement and college retention and completion. The positive effect of community engagement on completion holds true across types of school and student populations, including those with traditionally low completion rates, such as low-income students and those at two-year and less selective schools.

▶ COMMUNITY COLLEGES involved in a large pilot study using service learning and peer mentoring as tools to increase retention among low-income students found that participating students were retained at a significantly higher rate than non-participants. The study involved 6,500 low-income students from nine community colleges who were enrolled in one or more developmental education classes. Regression analysis determined that after six semesters, the persistence rate among students who participated in the service learning program was six percentage points higher than among the non-participating comparison group (Berger & Duffy, 2014).

▶ RESEARCH CONDUCTED with 3,458 students at a large urban public research university found that students enrolled in service learning courses were more successful on multiple measures than students who were not enrolled in service learning. The service learners earned more credits, had a higher average GPA, and graduated at a significantly higher rate than their peers. Most significantly, discrete-time survival analysis showed that students in service learning courses graduated at a much higher rate (73%) than those not enrolled in service learning courses (48%) (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013).

Integrating community engagement with high–quality academics is fundamental to achieving increased persistence.

▶ A STUDY INVOLVING more than 8,000 fresh-
men from DePaul University, the University of
Southern Indiana, and the University of Wis-
consin-Parkside concluded that indicators such
as participation in community service learning,
full-time enrollment, and GPA had a stronger
effect on the likelihood of re-enrollment than
students' entering characteristics, such as age,
gender, and race. Logistic regression analyses for
each institution revealed that community service
learning was particularly critical to persistence
at the less selective institutions in the study. This
effect was strongest at the two public institutions
with lower overall retention rates (Reed et al.,
2015).

▶ A SUMMARY OF 333 student course evaluations
at a private research university determined that
students enrolled in service learning classes
were more likely than students who were not

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enrolled in service learning to indicate that their
courses encouraged their continued study at the
university. Other factors influencing persistence
included nurturing of interpersonal skills and
community and academic engagement, factors
also associated with service learning and other
community engagement activities. Using re-
gression analysis, the academic engagement and
challenge embedded in service learning were
shown to influence students' decisions to contin-
ue at the university (Gallini & Moely, 2003).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Higher education faces the significant challenge of
helping all students complete their college educa-
tion in a timely manner. Troubling and persistent
equity issues arise when graduation rates among
low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students are
compared with those of other groups. Particularly
alarming are statistics from large-scale assessments
examining results across institution types. For ex-
ample, the Pell Institute found that "after six years,
only 11% of low-income, first-generation students
had earned bachelor's degrees, compared with 55%
of their more advantaged peers" (Pell Institute,
2008).

New studies have pointed to the potential of
community engagement for LIFG college-goers
to increase retention and graduation rates, but
additional research is needed. A 2010 study of
LIFG students determined that outcomes for
participation in service learning courses included
"building skills in and understanding resilience,
finding personal meaning, and developing critical
consciousness." The study author notes that "All of
these skills correlate positively with persistence and
when intersecting with each other can contribute to
increased persistence among LIFG students" (Yeh,
2010, p. 58).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAMPUS LEADERS

The research highlights compelling data demon-
strating the value of community engagement as a
tool for addressing the college completion chal-
lenge. Although no single strategy can fully rem-
edy the problem of retention and completion, the
data contained in this brief suggests that higher

education institutions can benefit from intention-
ally using community engagement as a strategy to
increase college completion rates.

One important lesson from the research is that in-
tegrating community engagement with high-quality

academics is fundamental to achieving increased persistence. Another is that community engagement may offer especially strong benefits for institutions with lower retention rates. The important and unique role community engagement may hold for these institutions warrants further exploration and pilot testing.

While community engagement can benefit all students, it has particular value for addressing inequities in college completion among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. To have the greatest impact, this strategy will require broadening the academy's traditional thinking about the intended outcomes of community engagement initiatives.

This brief provides justification for campus leaders to include support for community engagement activities in their institutional retention plans. It also indicates a need to think about community engagement in new ways as contributing both to institutional effectiveness and to student success.

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Campus Compact
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Founded in 1997, Campus Compact for New Hampshire (CCNH) is a statewide consortium of college and university presidents and private-sector partners who are united in their commitment to the civic purposes of higher education. As part of a national coalition of college and university leaders, CCNH serves as a catalyst to integrate community service and civic responsibility throughout academic and student life. CCNH is part of the national Campus Compact organization, which encompasses 1,100 college and university presidents representing some 6 million students. Author Debby Scire, EdD, has been Executive Director of CCNH since 2004. Learn more about CCNH at www.compactnh.org.