

# Questions That Matter



Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice  
to Improve College Access and Success

Proceedings of an Invitational Conference convened by the Pathways  
to College Network, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and  
the Social Science Research Council. June 15, 2006. Washington, DC.

# Conference Conveners



## **Pathways to College Network**

The Pathways to College Network is an alliance of national organizations and funders dedicated to using research to improve college access and success for underserved students, including low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities. Partner organizations work collaboratively to inform policy, raise public awareness, and catalyze change. The Network is managed by TERI (The Education Resources Institute). For more information, visit [www.pathwaystocollege.net](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net).



## **Institute for Higher Education Policy**

The Institute for Higher Education Policy fosters college access and success by informing and influencing the policymaking process. The Institute's major goals are: improving access and success by reducing financial and other barriers for low-income, minority, first-generation, and other disadvantaged groups; assisting governments to advance college access and success; and advising higher education institutions on strategies for advancing institutional goals. For more information, visit [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org).



## **Social Science Research Council**

The Social Science Research Council focuses research on important public issues through its work with practitioners, policymakers, and academic researchers in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. Transitions to College is a project of the Social Science Research Council that examines the extent to which conditions for opportunity and success are available to all American adolescents as they attempt to navigate the transition from secondary school to college and beyond. For more information, visit [www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org).

*The conveners are grateful to the sponsors who made this conference possible. Please see inside back cover for sponsor information.*

March 2007

Dear Colleagues,

Despite decades of investment to equalize opportunities for postsecondary success, individuals from low-income and minority backgrounds still lag far behind in high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree attainment.

The organizations we represent have a deep commitment to using research to inform policy and practice. We have long encouraged educational leaders at all levels to use evidence-based strategies to inform their efforts. As both producers and disseminators of research that is rigorous and relevant to education, we seek opportunities to connect researchers with policymakers and practitioners to discuss challenging issues that, if better understood, can result in needed changes and better outcomes.

Publication of *Questions That Matter: Setting the Research Agenda on Access and Success in Postsecondary Education*, a report summarizing 20 years of research on college transitions and identifying important questions for future study, provided an opportune time for a rare gathering of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Through the *Questions That Matter* conference, we hoped to shape an agenda for future research that would have direct relevance to improving college access and success for underserved students. By fostering productive dialogue among these key stakeholders, our goal was to encourage researchers to consider critically the relevance of their work and also to motivate policymakers and practitioners to use research findings to inform and guide their decision-making.

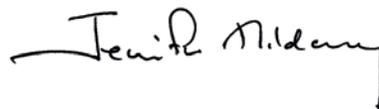
The conference produced a rich array of ideas for future research across four issue areas: college preparation, access, financial aid, and success. Our next steps are to identify the best ways to pursue these ideas and, in doing so, provide new strategies that will increase college success for all students who aspire to postsecondary education.

We invite you to share your thoughts regarding the ideas presented here and welcome your interest in engaging with us in further investigation of these important issues.

Best regards,



Ann Coles  
Director  
Pathways to College Network  
Sr. Vice President  
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Jennifer Holdaway  
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Jamie Merisotis  
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# Questions That Matter

Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice  
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Lezli Baskerville

## Introduction

**The context of American education** is changing rapidly. With evidence mounting that the United States is losing ground as the once undisputed international leader in terms of degree attainment, our education system is facing unprecedented challenges. These challenges are made more urgent by the fact that those who have long been served least effectively by our education system—students of color and individuals from lower socioeconomic groups—are today the fastest growing segment of the school-age population. It is more important than ever that we take action now to increase college access and success for all students.

**On June 15, 2006**, the Pathways to College Network, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) convened more than 135 education leaders, policymakers, policy-shapers, researchers, practitioners, and others from 27 states and the District of Columbia to discuss issues of critical importance to improving post-secondary access and success. The conference was organized around four issue areas identified in a recent report titled, *Questions That Matter: Setting the Research Agenda on Access and Success in Postsecondary Education*.<sup>1</sup> Through plenary and concurrent sessions facilitated by leaders from research, policy, and practice, participants engaged in a series of discussions focused on identifying questions and priorities for future research related to these topics.

**The Questions That Matter report** summarized findings and recommendations of the SSRC project, “Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice,” supported by Lumina Foundation for Education. The Transitions to College project was designed to investigate and document what we know about college transition issues and strengthen connections between research, policy, and practice. The project brought together leading scholars from across the social science disciplines and education research who worked in consultation with an advisory panel of higher education practitioners to identify gaps in

knowledge about making successful transitions from high school to college. The project commissioned and published a series of literature reviews in 10 disciplines, each of which provides a different perspective on college transitions. Through analysis of the literature reviews and extensive discussion among participating scholars and practitioners, the project identified research gaps and articulated questions for future research. At the heart of the *Questions That Matter* report are three fundamental propositions that in turn underpinned the *Questions That Matter* conference:

1. Higher education is crucial for the improvement of the social, economic, and political welfare of all Americans.
2. Higher education is not serving large segments of the American population.
3. Research can identify problems, solutions, and conditions under which progress can take place to increase access and success in higher education.

## Conference Goals

**The goal of the Questions That Matter conference** was to build stronger connections among the often divergent worlds of research, policy, and practice in order to maximize the impact of strategies designed to help underserved students enroll and succeed in college. It provided a unique opportunity for researchers and education leaders to work together on developing an agenda for future research that will have direct relevance to improving college transitions for underserved students. Conference dialogue encouraged researchers to consider critically the relevance of their work and urged policymakers and practitioners to use research findings to inform their efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes. Using the *Questions That Matter* report as a springboard, meeting planners structured the conference plenary and breakout sessions around the four key areas addressed in the report: college preparation, college access, paying for college, and college success. Although these issues were separated for the purpose of organizing discussion, their overlapping dynamics were continuously confirmed throughout the conference

deliberations. The breakout sessions were each led by a facilitator and featured panelists representing the perspectives of research, policy, and practice. Session facilitators, assisted by expert recorders, were also charged to help incorporate breakout session discussions into this published report, which is being disseminated widely as an agenda for future research.

## Conference Proceedings

**In addition to breakout and plenary sessions,** the conference included a funders panel in which representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, GE Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education) shared their research priorities for the immediate future. Each foundation has its distinct mission and methods, and it was informative and stimulating to have dialogue among these key funders and the researchers and policy-shapers whose efforts they support.

**Strong conference attendance** attested to the fact that college access and success issues are powerful enough to bring together three diverse groups: policy experts, researchers, and practitioners. Despite each group's intensive work on the same critical topics, they typically do not work collaboratively with one another. A large part of what made the *Questions That Matter* conference so distinctive and successful is that these groups came together, along with funders, to discuss their shared agenda of increasing student access and success. By offering different perspectives on the same issues, participants moved the conversation about the *Questions That Matter* agenda to a deeper level and laid the groundwork for future research in each of the four issue areas.

**To guide the breakout session discussions,** each panelist prepared one key research, policy, or practice question related to the topic. The facilitator introduced the session, asked panelists to address the selected questions, and then invited comment

and debate from the participants. Two breakout sessions on each topic were held for groups of 25-30 participants. The wide-ranging, interactive sessions did not necessarily lend themselves to consensus on specific research priorities, but numerous examples emerged of the type of research that is needed. The summary that follows here attempts to capture the essence of panelist commentary as well as to synthesize the give-and-take of the ensuing discussions into a general set of future research directions.

## College Preparation

**Discussions about college access** almost always begin with dialogue about the issue of preparation, the most important factor contributing to college success. Too many students are poorly prepared for college-level work and need remediation upon entering a postsecondary institution. According to a 2003

*(l-r) Ann Coles, Jennifer Holdaway, Jamie Merisotis*





Colleen O'Brien

report by the National Center for Education Statistics, 28 percent of entering college freshmen enrolled in one or more remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course in 2000.<sup>2</sup> Too few low-income students and students of color are prepared to succeed in college. Even as the overall college participation rate for 18 to 24-year-old students increased by 3.4 percent between 1990-92 and 2000-02 to 44.1 percent, participation by African American students (39.9 percent) and Hispanic students (34 percent), continues to lag behind college-going for Whites (45.5 percent).<sup>3</sup>

**Linkages between K-12** and higher education are still tenuous in research, policy, and practice. Too often, those in the field of higher education blame the K-12 system for graduating students who are underprepared for college-level work, while those in K-12 blame higher education for not providing high-quality teachers. More research focused on the transition from high school to college is needed.

### Panel Perspectives

**P-16 is an “on-again, off-again conversation.”** Despite growing efforts of the P-16 movement in education policy, the K-12 and higher education sectors each have their own rules, culture, infrastructure, financing mechanism, and norms that impede significant progress toward alignment. A necessary, but radical shift would be the creation of a P-16 system around a common set of values that are embraced by both sectors. The upshot of an unaligned system is that for many students the multiple pathways to college are still vague and unclear.

*(Esther Rodriguez, Policy Consultant.)*

As reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) approaches, a key question to raise is how NCLB can be shaped to better align and integrate the goals and objectives of a unified education system. While *it is important to avoid a “one size fits all approach”* that would be difficult—if not impossible—to implement, one strategy is to identify core reforms, policies, and programs that the federal government could consider during reauthorization. *(David Hawkins, Director of Public Policy, National Association for College Admission Counseling.)*

One challenge facing researchers on college preparation is that many high school reform efforts are not sufficiently grounded in hard, research-based data. In urban schools, for example, reforms are often initiated without knowing whether they are likely to work, based on scientific research. We need to “unpack” the components of successful reform programs. As is evident from the *Questions That Matter* report, much remains to be tested. For example, the low college participation of African American men is clearly an under-researched question. *We need to know more about students who manage to survive in difficult urban high school settings* and have the ability to go to college, but do not. Research can help increase understanding of who these students are, identify pertinent characteristics, and provide insight into their college-going patterns. *(Barbara Schneider, Distinguished Professor, College of Education, Michigan State University.)*

### Directions for Future Research

**College Counseling:** It is important to consider the effects of varying models of school counseling. Providing counselors with a more supportive environment could increase the chances for their students making successful transitions to college. Moreover, a thorough examination of how students learn about college would enrich our understanding of how best to provide effective preparation and planning assistance.

**Interdisciplinary Focus:** It is impossible to achieve a comprehensive understanding of these issues without embracing insights from multiple disciplines. Data and information about adolescent development from the field of developmental psychology could inform policy and practice related to preparation. A sociological perspective would enhance appreciation for how schools as organizations are structured by both the external environment and by internal social actors. Anthropology could contribute to an understanding of the culturally-based norms and strategies that shape the ways in which students and their families navigate the college pipeline. Working together with colleagues from other fields and disciplines would lead to better, more informed decision making.

**K-12 and Postsecondary Alignment:** The requirements for high school graduation and expectations for entering college are not aligned. Too often, students are forced into remediation as a result of poor preparation for college, not necessarily as a result of poor performance in high school. Research on the effects of successful transition programs and support services for students would be useful in informing this discussion.

**Rigorous Curriculum:** There is an important need for research on the development of effective high school curricula. There is often a disconnect between course titles and content, but programs that require a rigorous curriculum potentially could help to resolve this problem. Several states have attempted curricular reform through mandating a core curriculum. For example, Indiana's Core 40 will become Indiana's required high school curriculum in fall 2007: students entering high school from that time on will be expected to complete the Core 40 as a graduation requirement. By mandating academically rigorous high school courses for all students, the Core 40 requirement is designed to ensure that all students are prepared for success in college, employment, or the military when they complete high school. To graduate with less than the Core 40, a student must complete a formal opt-out process involving parental consent. Research on how these curricular mandates are implemented at the local school level and how they affect individual student outcomes is warranted.

**Role of Federal Government:** With the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should consider which core reforms, policies, or programs merit consideration for inclusion by the federal government during this process.

## College Access

**The SSRC Transitions to College** project recognized as crucial to productive discussions the notion that access must be fair in terms of both the opportunity to enroll and also where and when students enroll. The *Questions That Matter* report underscored that significant gaps

in college participation persist between low-income and racial/ethnic minority groups and other student populations.

### Panel Perspectives

Barriers to access can be defined in terms of the “four A’s”: academic preparation, aspiration, availability, and affordability. **Many underserved students look at four-year colleges as “gated communities” to which they do not have access.** As a growing portion (36 percent) of four-year institutions describe themselves as “highly selective” and as the value of Pell Grants has eroded, low-income students going to college directly from high school are increasingly enrolling in community colleges. Today, the two greatest barriers to college access may be a lack of aspiration—or proactive planning—and perceptions of affordability. Low-income students at under-resourced high schools have the least information about college costs and financial aid. They tend to overestimate costs, are fearful of taking out loans, and are disinclined to go away to school. *(Tina Milano, Executive Director, National College Access Network.)*

Colleges and universities have not always done well in reaching underserved populations, which are now the fastest growing groups in the United States. Some institutions see a push

*(l-r) William Trent, Laura Perna, Nicole Barry*





Scott Thomas

to enroll more underserved students as incompatible with efforts to increase or maintain selectivity. And yet demands for more highly skilled, educated workers are indisputable from a broad economic and social policy perspective, leading to the question, “[What more can institutions and states do to enroll underserved students?](#)” There is a private social and economic benefit for underserved students to attend selective colleges that also redounds to the public good. What policy levers can be used to persuade selective private and public institutions that enrolling underserved students in greater numbers is in their best interests while helping to meet the demand for more highly skilled and educated knowledge workers?

*(Peter Blake, Vice Chancellor for Workforce Development, Virginia Community College System, and former Secretary of Education of Virginia.)*

On the federal level, GEAR UP and TRIO seem to be successful, while on the state level, Georgia’s HOPE Scholarship, AVID, and Florida’s Bright Futures Scholarship appear to be accomplishing their goals. Depending on who is measuring, however, these programs work for some, but not all underserved students. [Over 40 years, gaps in access have not closed but have actually grown wider in some cases.](#) More research on program effectiveness is needed. Moreover, to evaluate any of these policies in isolation from the others potentially confounds the effects or ignores other important variables that affect outcomes. *(Scott Thomas, Associate Professor, Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia.)*

## Directions for Future Research

### **Changing Demographics and Economic Forces:**

The context of changing demographics presents an increasing challenge in addressing access issues. Policymakers, in particular, need to understand how changing economic forces have impact on the demand for educated workers. Researchers can assist in modeling such parameters.

**College-Going Culture:** Researchers and practitioners need to understand better how to foster college-going cultures in schools. We must also know how to address the issue of student transitions from high school into postsecondary institutions that may not be well-equipped to serve them.

**Common Interest:** Policymakers understand the challenges associated with building a consensus that includes the interests of middle- and upper-income voters, as well as the interests of groups who are not being served well by the education system. It requires a broader vision of the common, public interest. Research on how individuals perceive the value of higher education could help inform the development of successful political initiatives.

**Examination of Best Practices:** It is important for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to examine best practices around issues of access and learn from them. Research that highlights best practices for increasing access is particularly useful for policymakers and practitioners who are attempting to bring more students into postsecondary education.

**K-12 and Postsecondary Linkages:** Like preparation, access needs to be understood as a K-16 issue, not as either a K-12 or a higher education issue. Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners need to conceptualize them together and operationalize and align outcomes.

**Measuring Success:** The tradeoff between access and selectivity often comes into play. Postsecondary institutions are concerned that if they expand access, they sacrifice selectivity. An examination of strategies whereby selective universities attempt to promote high standards and greater access would be useful to institutions apprehensive about changing their policy or adopting a new approach.

**Role of the Proprietary Sector:** The proprietary sector should be examined to determine whether, how, and why it may be serving low-income students more effectively than the public or non-profit sectors.

### **Strategies for Reaching Underserved Students:**

We should examine specifics of what states and institutions can do to enroll greater numbers of underserved students.

**Student Identifier:** An important step toward overcoming the challenges of measuring access and outcomes would be development of integrated data systems that include

student identifiers, despite the controversy that surrounds the concept.

## Paying for College

The third theme of the conference, how students and their families pay for college, is critical to discussions of college access and success. Perceived financial barriers to college cause significant anxiety for students and families, particularly in an environment of rising college costs.

### Panel Perspectives

Research gaps in at least four areas are evident on the topic of paying for college. First, there is a paucity of data on specific student populations that address the question of how well Pell Grants promote access and success. Second, we need to know more about how effective student loan programs are toward the same end, and what their long-term impact is on borrowers' lives. Third, there is a need for rich qualitative data that tell individual stories to policymakers and decision-makers. Fourth, how might early commitment financial aid programs, such as Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program and Oklahoma Promise, affect access and success if implemented more broadly?

*(Donald Heller, Associate Professor and Senior Research Associate, Center for the Study of Higher Education, The Pennsylvania State University.)*

A major divide seems to exist between people's viewpoints on the effectiveness of Pell Grants in increasing access. There is a need for a more clearly articulated sense of students' actual financial needs, including identifying those who truly need financial aid support. It is imperative to fully understand the nuances of how to make college more affordable: "This is a conceptual problem more than an economic problem." Also, while many believe educational choices are enhanced by programs designed to provide low-income students with an early guarantee of financial aid if they meet certain requirements, there is a dearth of evidence to support this contention.

*(Sandy Baum, Senior Policy Analyst, College Board, and Professor of Economics, Skidmore College.)*

Financial aid needs to be easy to understand and dependable for everyone, including part-time students who are often ignored in policy discussions. We need to better understand the total system, including how state aid packages fit in with institutional aid. The National Governors Association will be looking across state lines at state aid packages and the cost of remediation. At the institutional level, we must figure out the balance between merit aid and need-based aid. Work-study programs should help low-income students build job-relevant networks to begin careers in areas of interest. *(Jane Oates, Executive Director, New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and Education Advisor to the Governor.)*

What is the impact of financial resources and financial aid information on younger students in grades 4-10 as they begin to think about education and careers? Lack of resources and reliable information about financial aid act as a "stop sign" in making decisions to take college-prep courses. Who are the key influencers at the point where educational planning decisions intersect with financial aid information? *(Natala Hart, Director, Student Financial Aid, The Ohio State University.)*

*(l-r) Natala Hart, Jane Oates, Don Heller, Sandy Baum, Heather Wathington*





Lashawn Richburg-Hayes

## Directions for Future Research

**Communication:** The investigation of issues of net price and unmet need, and how we describe and communicate this information to families is an area that could have direct impact on students. Increasing knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding financial aid and how to pay for college is likely to result in improved opportunity.

**Effect of Loan Debt:** A better understanding of how loan debt affects post-baccalaureate options for students would benefit both policymakers and practitioners who work directly with students. What research evidence exists as to the impact of student loans on college access and success?

**Financial Literacy:** Financial literacy is a key issue for underserved students. Many do not have the basic skills necessary to manage the financial aspects of college life. How does financial literacy, or a lack of it, affect students' ability to use financial aid and pay for college?

**Institutional Aid:** An examination of the trend toward greater dependence on institutional aid and less on state aid would inform state-level and institutional leaders about the effects of these programs on student access and success. Specifically, leaders need to better understand how loans and institutional aid affect access and success for different populations.

**Qualitative Research:** Rich qualitative data to help policymakers understand the impact of financial aid would add considerable value to the national dialogue and the body of knowledge. This might include experiments to increase understanding of the financial aid needs of non-traditional students and total need versus marginal need. Other questions might include, how do state aid packages fit within and impact total financial aid effectiveness? What is the role of institutional financial aid in promoting access? What happens to students in terms of financial aid after their first year? When students do not receive aid, what happens to them? How do the politics of financial aid policies affect access and success? How does variability in financial aid offices from campus to campus affect students and access? What is an appropriate balance between

merit-based and need-based aid? What is the effectiveness of different combinations of merit and need-based aid on access?

**Role of Pell Grants:** Research on how well Pell Grants promote college access and success and for what populations could help bring some closure to the debate over the program's effectiveness, so that policy could be created accordingly.

**Role of the Private Sector:** Many newer college financing ideas, such as private scholarship support, public/private funding partnerships, and private support for innovation, have their roots in private philanthropic efforts. A discussion about how the private sector can have a defined role in paying for college, such as leveraging public investment or individual savings, could lead to increased college affordability for students.

**Early Commitment Programs:** Evaluations of state early commitment financial aid programs, such as Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program and Oklahoma Promise, would provide useful information to other states implementing or considering similar programs.

**Transparency of Financial Aid:** Financial aid should be predictable and transparent to the student. Currently, much of it is not. Tax policy, Academic Competitiveness Grants, and SMART Grants are complex and hard to understand, even for professionals in the field. Research on how individuals interpret and navigate these programs would be useful to policymakers and practitioners.

## College Success

Obtaining the end credential—whether a certificate or a degree—results in a greater benefit to both the student and society than simply accumulating credits. As noted in *Questions That Matter*, this is the least studied of the four topics and the most difficult research to undertake.

### Panel Perspectives

Let's consider flipping the usual argument from a lack of student preparedness to a lack of

responsiveness from higher education leaders relative to their institutional readiness. They must prepare for the students who are coming, rather than the students they wish were coming. *(Alma Clayton-Pedersen, Vice President, Education and Institutional Renewal, Association of American Colleges and Universities.)*

Fifty-five percent of students drop out by their second year as a consequence of what did or did not happen during the first year. Students' chances of graduation double, however, if they persist through the first year. We already know what matters in terms of improving developmental education and enhancing the first year experience. **What we have not done is to translate what we know into courses of state and institutional action** that make a difference, especially for underserved students. *(Vincent Tinto, Distinguished Professor, Higher Education, Syracuse University.)*

We should better understand the role of two-year colleges in students' successfully completing four year degrees. Community college faculty should be involved with their four-year counterparts in disciplinary or pedagogical discussions and to address expectations of students' abilities. Transfer advising and articulation agreements are important elements in student success. *(Alfred Herrera, Director, Center for Community College Partnerships, University of California-Los Angeles.)*

We must develop more finely grained ways of capturing what is happening to students, especially those with developmental needs. Now, for example, community colleges cannot tell us why some do not make it through developmental education because there is no data accountability. Achieving the Dream is a multi-year national initiative funded by Lumina Foundation for Education to help more community college students succeed. It is using data to change practice, management, and accountability. To date, nine states are participating. We must create aligned data systems to look at multiple measures across states. *(Michael Collins, Program Director, Jobs for the Future.)*

## Directions for Future Research

**Articulation and Transfer:** Many students

are lost in the two- to four-year transition, and many others attend multiple two- and four-year institutions. An examination of effective articulation and transfer agreements, how students move from two- to four-year institutions, and ways to build a supportive transfer culture within states and institutions would help policymakers and practitioners design policies and practices to increase student success.

**Definition of Success:** The current measures of success are not well formulated. It is important to more fully understand what success is, and a further refinement of its operational definitions would increase understanding of multiple measures of student performance. Transparency in what is meant by student success is critical to informed discussions and comparable measurements.

**Developmental Education:** More research on developmental education would improve understanding of college success. This could include innovative research approaches to teaching and funding, as well as identifying circumstances in which students benefit most from developmental education. Policymakers and practitioners alike, for example, could benefit from a study examining the funding differences between developmental courses and other courses. Also, more exploration of

*(l-r) Vincent Tinto,  
Alfred Herrera,  
Alma Clayton-Pedersen*





(l-r) Michael Collins,  
Bettie White

the overall college experience of students who have taken developmental coursework would be illuminating in terms of their ultimate success.

**Effective Faculty:** Faculty are an important component of student success in college. Examining how to best educate and train effective teaching faculty in terms of pedagogy, assessment, and curriculum design would enhance our understanding of variation in college success. Research data on student outcomes relative to whether students have been taught by full-time or part-time faculty would inform the discussion and guide practice.

**First-Year College Experience:** The first-year college experience is vital to college success. And yet our research-based knowledge about what the first year should look like, how key gateway courses should be designed, and how institutional resources can best be allocated to ensure student engagement and success, is largely incomplete.

**Impact of Accelerated Learning Options:** As more states and institutions are implementing accelerated learning options—such as Advanced Placement, dual/concurrent enrollment, early college high schools, International Baccalaureate, and Tech-Prep—in order to increase access and success, more research on these pathways is needed. Especially given the increased investment in these opportunities, research can better inform the education community and others about whether students who begin college-level work early actually perform better and are more successful than those who do not.

**Social Class Differences:** Are social class differences related to how students move through the education pipeline? This is a potentially influential variable on the continuity of students' college experiences, but the mechanisms whereby social class affects college success are not well understood.

**Transitions:** A closer examination of transitions at all levels is needed. Transitions from high school to postsecondary institutions, how students move between two-year and four-year

institutions, exploration of the roles of academic and career counselors in enabling transitions, and the influence of articulation agreements on successful transitions are all avenues worthy of further investigation.

**Translation:** While there is significant research and evidence on what works in fostering college success, a challenge exists in translating that research and evidence into policy and courses of action. Translating research into information that can be applied by a lay audience is critical for application by policymakers and practitioners. Research needs to be presented and disseminated in ways that are accessible to individuals outside the academic research community.

## Implications for Future Research

In addition to identifying research gaps and directions for future research within each topic area, conference discussions touched on several broad implications of the ongoing research agenda to advance college access and success.

**Research and data are critical components of informed policymaking and effective practice.** The issue of solid research data arises in nearly every conversation about college access and success. Policymakers and practitioners at all levels continuously ask for more and better information. In the closing session of the conference, Jamie Merisotis, President, Institute for Higher Education Policy, underscored the need for good data and more of it, for reliable measures of existing data, and greater data accountability. Funders who support college access research are themselves consumers of data to help establish goals, target work, and expend resources wisely. Sheri Ranis, Senior Research Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, told participants, “Research is a knowledge base for the Foundation and promotes a sense of urgency around these issues.”

**Several organizations** have been working to respond to this need. The very existence of the Pathways to College Network is predicated on

the idea that evidence-based research is essential if we are to address college access effectively. The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) is a national initiative launched in 2005 to improve the quality, accessibility, and use of data in education. A collaborative effort of 35 national organizations, DQC has the goal of encouraging and supporting state policymakers to improve the collection, availability, and use of high-quality education data to improve student achievement. It provides tools and resources as well as a national forum for promoting greater coordination and consensus among organizations focusing on improving data quality, access, and use.

### **Research must reach policymakers and practitioners in order to be useful.**

Providing research to policymakers, practitioners, and funders is a more complex undertaking than simply putting the research community on notice that more information is needed. It is essential that relevant, understandable research gets through to those who can use it to improve college access and success. Academic researchers typically work in an environment that encourages and rewards research more appropriate for publication in peer-reviewed journals than for use by policymakers or practitioners. Subscriptions to peer-reviewed journals are also expensive, and most teachers and counselors have limited access to this material. Research published by national or regional policy organizations could also be disseminated more effectively, particularly to practitioners and funders. While such organizations generally reach their immediate constituencies well, important and influential work too often does not reach others who could benefit from the information. A re-examination of how research can be made more accessible to those who need it is necessary.

**Collaboration as a community of researchers, practitioners, and policy shapers is essential to advancing college access and success.** Discussions of access and success can no longer take place in isolation. For research to inform policy, and for policy to positively impact practice, these conversations must occur with all stakeholders at the table. Multiple perspectives are essential

to advancing the collective effort. It is important to build both institutional and state capacity to share information and monitor progress cooperatively. An alliance of 38 national organizations and funders, the Pathways to College Network is an example of an effective cooperative initiative that can be used as a model for future efforts.

## **Next Steps**

Since the *Questions That Matter* conference, its conveners—the Pathways to College Network, IHEP, and SSRC—have been engaged in projects and activities designed to inform policy and practice; strengthen communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; and encourage the use of research findings and data in efforts to improve policy and practice.

**IHEP has invited academic researchers to participate on advisory committees** for specific projects. Staff members have spoken about the role of policy organizations to classes of doctoral candidates in higher education and

*(l-r) Monica Martinez,  
Michael Pavel,  
Clifford Adelman*





Vivian Louie

IHEP has also been working with several universities to develop a program for doctoral candidates to gain work experience at IHEP. Partnerships are being developed with university higher education centers to collaborate on policy projects. IHEP is also working with associations such as ASHE and NASFAA to help integrate more policy-oriented sessions into their national conferences.

**The Pathways to College Network has responded in several ways** to the research outlined in the *Questions That Matter* report and discussed at the conference. In 2005-06, SSRC, which provides leadership for Pathways research initiatives, brought together teams of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to develop a portfolio of research projects addressing the themes of college preparation, outreach, access, and success. Working with SSRC, the Pathways to College Network subsequently secured funding for three projects that will address some of the critical issues highlighted both at the conference and in the report.

**SSRC is coordinating two Pathways to College Network projects and is directly leading the research on a third project.**

These include development of a research-based toolkit to assess elements of college access programs; research on the roles and influence that young people, families, and communities have on college access; and an exploration of differential learning rates among college students from racial minority and less-advantaged family backgrounds.

**In the second phase of the Transitions to College Project, SSRC is building on the *Questions That Matter* report** to seek a deeper understanding of a number of key issues relating to transitions to college. With the guidance of an expert advisory committee, SSRC has commissioned interdisciplinary reviews on class and racial/ethnic stratification in higher education; questions of gender; challenges facing English Language Learners and undocumented students; as well as a systematic review of the strengths and weaknesses of data available for the study of transitions. SSRC is also sponsoring

postdoctoral research projects on how theories of human development inform our understanding of transitions; the impact on community colleges of the ending of remediation at the four-year colleges of the City University of New York; and a review of policies designed to facilitate transfer between two- and four-year institutions.

**Building on the momentum of the conference**, the Pathways to College Network, IHEP, and the SSRC are continuing to collaborate closely and have begun to lay out next steps to help move the *Questions That Matter* agenda forward. As of this writing, the group is in the process of identifying a few select topic areas that emerged from the conference as important for future research. Early in 2007, a small group comprising the conference conveners, researchers, and practitioners will gather to discuss the issues in depth and begin to formulate specific research projects.

**Recognizing the importance of developing and nurturing future researchers** who are interested in matters related to the *Questions That Matter* agenda, the group is also in the early stages of developing a research fellowship program for young scholars interested in college access and success issues.

**The Pathways to College Network will continue to strive to advance research** that is both rigorous and relevant to policymakers and practitioners by coordinating, directing, and assisting in the dissemination of findings from ongoing research projects. Pathways will also work closely with SSRC, IHEP, and other partners to develop additional projects that address the issues raised in the *Questions That Matter* report.

## Conclusion

**The overarching goal of the *Questions That Matter* conference** was to begin to forge stronger collaborative relationships among researchers, practitioners, and those who shape and make policy in order to advance college access and success. The discussions of June 15, 2006 helped move

the *Questions That Matter* agenda forward by identifying areas for future research and providing a basis on which the convening organizations will build future cooperative work. While the scale of the conference and the number of voices represented inevitably made it difficult to achieve consensus on a specific set of research priorities, the conversations laid the groundwork for further integration of the realms of research, policy, and practice. The *Questions That Matter* conference was therefore an important step in ongoing endeavors to improve educational opportunities for all students.

## Epilogue

**In addition to the work of the convening organizations, others have recently engaged in important efforts** to connect research, policy, and practice to improve college access and success. In November 2006, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC), a voluntary partnership of postsecondary institutions, associations, government agencies, and organizations funded by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, held a National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success. This symposium was a three-day discussion of what constitutes success and what factors impact the chances of success for different types of students in different types of postsecondary institutions. One of the panelists, Bridget Terry Long, Associate Professor, Harvard University, provided useful suggestions for how research on student success could be made more relevant for policy, practice, and future research.

**Go Beyond Studying the Problem:** Too often, researchers are rewarded for identifying problems, but another step is needed: solutions. Researchers need to not only highlight barriers and describe past events, but they need to provide possible solutions to the important problems that they identify.

**Make the Right Recommendation:** Researchers and those who read the studies must be careful to identify the root causes of problems. In other words, it is important to be

careful asserting whether a given pattern is due to correlation or causation and to be extremely cautious when interpreting variables that may on the surface appear to be causally related. Remember that context matters, and one size does not fit all: Student success processes vary across groups, and it is important to note that the role of factors such as family, community, and policy context will differ by student. While identifying general barriers is important for an overall understanding of the problem, scholars need to take into account student differences when designing an appropriate policy or program.

**Push the Literature to the Next Step:** Push models beyond serving as “general maps that represent the multiple contexts in which educational outcomes are determined” to models that incorporate more of the theories of how different parts interact with each other. Urge scholars to create more specialized models that apply to a particular circumstance or type of student. Move beyond the disciplinary “silos” and organize information by particular issues related to student success, rather than by a particular perspective or discipline.

*(l-r) Lezli Baskerville,  
Luis Fraga,  
Heather Wathington,  
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## Endnotes

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## Appendix A: Facilitators and Panelists

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## **Appendix C: Crucial Areas of Inquiry from Questions That Matter Report**

### **College Preparation**

1. Can we demonstrate the effectiveness of academic preparation programs aimed at fostering college going and success among various disadvantaged and underserved subgroups? Examples of such programs include: dual enrollment programs, middle college, vocational/technical policies and innovations (including Tech-Prep), bridge programs, and P-16 initiatives.

2. How has student experience and engagement with various direct and indirect K-12 school supports shaped school culture, college pathway formation, and college going among subgroups of students? These types of supports include curriculum enhancement, academic program options, student assessment, counseling, college information sharing including financing, and bridge experiences.

3. What is the impact of the institutional perspective(s) and actions of middle schools and high schools on the formation

of college pathways, from developing students' expectations and aspirations, to preparing students for entry and retention? The role of guidance counselors, teachers, and principals is particularly important for this study. These analyses should compare differences among subgroup populations and varying school contexts.

4. How do relationships with peer groups, mentors, significant adults, and community entities within and outside of high schools impact college preparation and expectations among subgroups of students?

5. How does adolescent identity formation among different racial/ethnic/gender/income groups and subgroups impact attitudes toward college going?

6. How does family and community culture affect students' perceptions and decisions about college, their academic ability, and their attainment as they move along the path to enrollment and begin postsecondary education?

### **College Access**

1. How have reform-minded policy interventions affected college going among disadvantaged students? Examples of policy interventions might include small schools and high school reform models such as charter schools, advanced placement and college readiness curricula, and mandated testing.

2. What are the institutional contexts and histories of postsecondary institutions that have traditionally attracted large proportions of low-income students, including accredited and non-accredited proprietary institutions, technical institutes,



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community colleges and historically black college and universities (HBCUs)?

3. What best practices can be identified between and among high schools and colleges that leverage pathway integration in administrative and policy areas such as information sharing, assessments, curriculum, and credit accumulation?

4. How should we best understand the connections between political disenfranchisement and school quality within communities and their impact on postsecondary attainment? What circumstances must be in place in order for the convergence of interests and political leadership necessary for the adoption of new postsecondary education policies and practices in communities and at the state level to occur?

5. What is the impact of the state-based policies and innovations on access to public postsecondary education? Both successful and unsuccessful policy experiments should be considered, including postsecondary financing schemes that could be scaled up for national use and other state-level policies (testing, admissions, state residency laws, etc.) aimed at improving access and retention.

6. To what degree does access to postsecondary education comport with the goals of civil rights laws and the US Constitution?

### **Paying for College**

1. How has demand for need-based aid changed over time, and how have these demand rates differed across socio-demographic groups? What explains these differences?

2. How do different types of aid (need, merit, loans, work study) affect college access and success among students from various social/economic demographic backgrounds, particularly among groups becoming more demographically significant such as recent immigrants? In addition, how do these various types of aid work together? Of particular interest is the impact of aid type on the location and duration of college participation.

3. What constitutes the full net price of college (using both actual and hidden cost accounting) for different populations of students?

4. To what extent do credit constraints and income level directly and indirectly affect college enrollment and success?

5. What is the effect of declining state and federal support to public higher education on institutions and students in terms of institutional mission and student choice? In particular, what is the impact on enrollment?

### **College Success**

1. What kinds of generic skill accumulation matter for degree completion? What kinds of metrics should be used to monitor and measure attainment of these advanced skills?

2. What actions by postsecondary institutions facilitate postsecondary success? These might include instructional resources, student programming, faculty mix, or investment strategies. How do institutional resources and inputs such as policy, academic culture and organizational structures created to support student success, affect college retention and success? How do these vary by institutional category?

3. How does the phenomenon of transfer work between and among high schools and postsecondary institutions? This includes mechanisms such as comprehensive transfer advising, articulation agreements, common course numbering, and university resource centers for students located at high schools and community colleges.

4. What do we know about the effect of curriculum, pedagogy, and major specialization on college retention and success and its variation between and among postsecondary institution categories?

5. How do peer group relationships and mentor relationships (both naturally occurring and program prompted) work for college students? How do these interface with postsecondary success?

6. How do local and state imperatives shift and impact policy and practice concerning success? Examples such as remediation and transfer policies at public institutions can be examined to illuminate the interactions and dynamics of policy and student outcomes.

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The full report of the SSRC Transitions to College project, *Questions That Matter: Setting the Research Agenda on Access and Success in Postsecondary Education*, can be found online at <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/knowledge/publications/QTm.pdf>.

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