

Widening the Funnel

Maine Looks to Put Students on the Path to College

COLLEEN J. QUINT



Many Maine students are “tracked” away from postsecondary education, either explicitly through the courses they are steered toward or implicitly with the messages sent by teachers and staff.

Maine faces a unique challenge. State residents earn high school diplomas at one of the highest rates in the nation. Yet the percentage of Maine adults who hold college degrees is below the national average. An “educational funnel” is at work.

Consider:

- 87 percent of Maine high school freshmen graduate from high school in four years;
- 67 percent of those graduates intend to go to college;
- 55 percent enroll in college the following fall;
- 23 percent of Maine’s adults hold bachelor’s degrees.

Maine loses kids at every step of the way as they move from high school into college. And, like many states, Maine faces significant challenges ensuring that those who do go on to college persist to their degree.

But Maine has also been developing some promising practices to open up that educational funnel, which could have applications elsewhere in New England as well.

For example, of the more than 750 Maine students awarded scholarships and other support by the Portland-based Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute during the last five years, fully 95 percent have stayed in college, despite their low levels of parental education and high levels of financial need.

One reason the program is successful is that, unlike private scholarships that are offered on a one-time basis upon graduation from high school, Mitchell Scholarships are paid out on a multiyear basis. That way, students and families don’t get caught up each year trying to replace scholarships offered only to incoming freshmen. In addition, leadership development, career exploration and community service opportunities offered to Mitchell Scholars ensure rich experiences that most would not be able to access on their own. Perhaps most importantly, by assisting individual students with their individual needs—for example, helping them navigate the labyrinth of the transfer process, holding the scholarship for a year if a student takes a

leave of absence and responding directly to emails with news of academic success or academic struggles—the institute provides the scaffolding that helps to ensure success.

Another Mitchell Institute initiative, the Great Maine Schools Project, provides support for professional development and innovative approaches to teaching and learning as part of an ambitious effort to graduate every Maine student “college-ready without remediation.” Funded by a \$10 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the initiative is now exploring new scheduling structures that allow for community-based and classroom learning. Some schools are creating “early college” programs, which expose students to collegiate experiences while they are still in high school. Others are developing high school experiences in which teachers help students make the connection between what they are learning now and how it can be used later. One high school has even decided to require all seniors to at least *apply* to college, in hopes of opening doors to possibilities students might not know exist.

Who me?

One of the greatest challenges we face is that too many Maine children lack the social capital to think we’re talking to them when we start a conversation about postsecondary education. Their parents feel similarly disenfranchised. When York County Community College and Wells High School launched an early college program this past fall, the partners decided early on to focus on the student “in the back of the class.” They identified students who lived in poverty and had low aspirations, but who they thought would benefit from a college-level learning experience while still in high school. When the parents of these students were invited to an information session, one parent asked: “Are you sure you didn’t make a mistake? *My* kid has been selected to take classes in college?”

This is not surprising. Mitchell Institute research shows that many Maine students are “tracked” away from postsecondary education, either explicitly through the courses they are steered toward or implicitly with the messages sent by teachers and staff. This

tracking constitutes one of the most significant barriers to students going on to college, partly because it short-changes them academically and partly because it reinforces low expectations held by students, parents and teachers. These students and their parents need to be convinced that they are capable of more than they think. But educators cannot reverse the tide of low educational attainment on their own.

Despite different perspectives and different constituencies, 30 or so individuals from across Maine's education, business, political and community spectrum have joined together in a statewide effort to develop ways to boost the number of Mainers holding college degrees. Their Maine Compact for Higher Education positions itself as a "do tank" rather than a "think tank." And their focus is on the student, whether "traditional" 18- to 24-year-olds or adults. The compact expects to announce later this spring several specific action strategies, including initiatives to boost financial resources for students and build a statewide early college system. It also expects to

undertake a multiyear public information campaign designed to change perceptions, attitudes and, ultimately, behaviors about college-going in Maine.

Speaking with one voice

Though Maine faces unique challenges, all the New England states should be working to ensure that students are adequately prepared to enroll in college and persist through to earning degrees. And indeed, New England-wide conversations have begun about how the region can better prepare all students for college success.

At a recent conference titled *College Ready New England* and sponsored by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, there was much discussion about preparation and transition—about focusing on students in the back of the class and about creating seamless Pre-K-16 systems. One Vermont legislator noted that education competes not only with health care and other high-priority items for legislative attention, but also with itself. The K-12 system competes with higher education for scarce resources. Within higher educa-

tion, community college systems and university systems, and the campuses within each, all jockey for position. And private institutions clamor to remind everyone that they're there and they need help too. Their individual messages become muddled. As one legislator observed: "When you speak with one voice, I can hear you."

Given projected dramatic decreases in Maine's high school populations over the coming decades, colleges will be better served by working together to ensure seamless transitions for students and improvements in persistence than by fighting over scarce resources, whether dollars or students.

Wouldn't it be great if Maine were able to use the synergies created by these initiatives to reverse the trend in educational attainment—and set an example for other states at the same time? True commitment to kids ... a focus on the students who need us the most. It just may be that simple.

Colleen J. Quint is executive director of the Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute.

WELLNESS

Committed to Student Success

As a federal student loan guarantor, American Student Assistance's® (ASA) mission is to help students succeed in education financing and repayment. That's why we've created a series of innovative "Wellness" programs that prevent student loan delinquency and promote overall financial health - through graduation and beyond. Contact Bob Cole at 800-999-9080 or at rcole@amsa.com to learn how *Wellness* can help your campus.



www.amsa.com