community college defenders is being just as myopic as those who have ignored them for too long. They are looking at the short-term interests of their colleges (to be seen as successful) instead of the longer-term interest of their students (to be successful).

To be sure, there are valid concerns about the new emphasis on community college completion. Any goal can create perverse incentives. It is true that not every community college student intends to complete a program. Focusing solely on numbers of completions can obscure other issues, such as quality of learning or racial and ethnic gaps. Prioritizing completion rates could present a threat to access if colleges pursue them by excluding poorly prepared students. It is important to consider such admonitions about the completion goal in order to ensure that any new strategies are well designed to support increased learning, not just to churn out more degrees or curtail access. But none is an argument against efforts to ensure that more community college students can succeed.

I am increasingly encouraged, however, by the growing number of community college leaders who, while acknowledging these cautions, are determined to ensure that the scrutiny yields benefits for their colleges and, most importantly, their students. Being ignored convinced them and their students to a fate even worse than scrutiny. Scrutiny isn’t easy, but it offers an opportunity for discovery and change.

Instead of attacking those who point out areas for improvement, these wise community college leaders are taking up the challenge, working with their colleagues to move beyond ambivalence and defensiveness. Instead of focusing narrowly on seeking more money before any reforms are made, these leaders are pursuing a both/and approach. They are vigorously making the case for more resources while not waiting for those resources to be fully delivered. They are starting the hard job of orienting their institutions to provide better opportunities. This is not easy, because even before the current budget crisis that has hit most of the country, community colleges in many states were underfunded. But these forward-looking leaders are realizing that the underfunding cannot justify waiting to do better by students.

“The unmistakable fact is that we must improve our public higher education system in fundamental ways,” wrote Eloy Oakley, president of Long Beach City College, to all 140-some of his fellow presidents and chancellors in California. Oakley was writing in response to a research study on transfer, exhorting his colleagues to take its lessons seriously, rather than dismiss the message as a “red herring.”

“As a former Hispanic transfer student, I empathize with the students…and the barriers they must overcome,” Oakley wrote. “We must recognize that to date we have not been successful in providing ‘real’ opportunities for our underrepresented populations as well as our economically disadvantaged Californians. I do not suggest that my assertion is my fault, but I do suggest that we have a responsibility to improve it. The state of California must make a greater investment in our efforts. However, it is also true that we should not wait for others to change, and [should] do everything we can to make our system more navigable, focused on successful completion, and consistent across all of our 110 colleges. We should also continue to work with our K-12 and public higher education partners to create clear pathways for our students. This is a true systemic problem that affects thousands of students every year, regardless of the state of the economy.”

As a participant in the California Benchmarking Project with the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education, Long Beach City College began several years ago analyzing its student outcomes data, looking especially at equity gaps. In particular, they focused on barriers faced by students less likely to transfer to four-year universities, and how the college’s transfer center could better assist them. Even though the results weren’t perfect, the college’s leadership had the courage to be transparent about them, sharing them with their trustees and in several published reports.

Sanford “Sandy” Shugart, president of Valencia Community College in Florida, also exemplifies the new generation of student-success-minded leaders. His college began the hard work of improving completion rates long before it was that way to vogue, and even before joining the Achieving the Dream initiative. At a community college conference last year, after about a decade of such work, Shugart revealed data showing that his institution had simultaneously improved student success rates while narrowing gaps. As of last year, Valencia eliminated achievement gaps in five of the six courses the college had targeted. Fall to spring retention hit 86 percent, and was even higher for African American students.

Shugart confessed that even he was surprised. “I have been a secret skeptic,” Shugart told the audience at the conference. “Deep down inside, I had doubts that we could move the needle. Now I’ve got hope like I’ve never had before that the vision of equity can be achieved in the American community college movement.”

What was refreshing and insightful about Shugart’s approach is that he did not just run through a litany of “best practices”—though Valencia has adopted many practices with evidence of effectiveness. The real key to Valencia’s success? “We changed the way we think,” Shugart said. “Everything else is details after that. Our job now isn’t to find out who’s college material and who’s not. Now everything raises a question: I wonder what the right conditions are for this person’s learning. The college is what the students experience. Nothing more and nothing less. It’s not the catalog, it’s not the buildings, it’s not the curriculum, it’s not the bud-

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**Financial aid opportunities for community college students generally remain slim—even through these students often have greater need than university students.**

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**Breaking the Affordability Barrier**

How much of the college access problem is attributable to lack of information about financial aid?

By Bridget Terry Long

ALTHOUGH there have been substantial increases in college enrollment over the last several decades, access continues to be a serious problem for some groups. According to the U.S. census, among high school graduates in 2004, approximately 43 percent who came from families earning less than $30,000 immediately entered a postsecondary institution. In contrast, 75 percent of students from families who made more than $50,000 did so. Rigidity so, the barriers most often highlighted by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers as impediments to college entry are costs or affordability and academic preparation.

However, another important culprit that has been increasingly getting attention is information. How much of the college access problem is attributable to lack of information? If students are unaware of the financial resources available to them or the best way to prepare academically, then the aforementioned barriers of cost and academic preparation will be made worse by misperceptions, further limited students.

Unfortunately, research demonstrates that students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, have little understanding of college tuition levels, financial aid opportunities, and how to navigate the admissions process. The lack of information among low-income students has important implications for attempts to address the college affordability barrier. For decades, high tuition prices have prompted the federal government, as well as many states and colleges, to create need-based financial aid programs designed to help defray costs for low-income students. However, the existence of a financial aid program alone is not always enough to enable the enrollment of low-income students; the visibility and design of the program also matters.

A recent review of the research on financial aid programs by Susan Dynarski and David Deming underscores the fact that simple and transparent programs appear to be most effective. Similar results have been found in the examinations of other social welfare programs. To reach those in need, particularly among groups who have traditionally lacked good, accurate college information, aid programs must be well-publicized and relatively easy to understand and apply for.

Sadly, that is not how our financial aid system is currently designed. The key issue is that the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the gatekeeper to all federal aid and most state and institutional resources, is long and cumbersome. The 2008 FAFSA was eight pages long and contained more than 100 questions. To answer three of these questions, applicants...
The existence of a financial aid program alone is not always enough to enable the enrollment of low-income students; the visibility and design of the program also matters.

Estimates by the American Council of Education suggest that nearly one million college students who would have been eligible for aid failed to even apply.

On average, meetings with families took only about eight minutes, and that included introducing the project, explaining and getting consent from the family, asking several questions about the family’s background and perceptions of higher education, and then providing the intervention by helping them fill out the FAFSA. Additionally, our project demonstrates that there is a real demand among low- and moderate-income families for more information. Among eligible families, 52 percent expressed interest in learning more about higher education. Even we were surprised at just how large an impact our interventions had. Our analysis suggests that pre-population and assistance with the FAFSA has a substantial impact on the likelihood of submitting an aid application. In comparison to the control group (i.e., Group Three), the likelihood of submitting a FAFSA increased by 39 percent for high school seniors who had received help with the application (i.e., Group One). Among the older participants, FAFSA submissions increased 186 percent for those who had never been to college, and 58 percent for those who previously attended college. More importantly, providing help with the FAFSA and personalized information about aid increased college enrollment rates the following fall. College attendance increased 30 percent among high school seniors.

To put this in perspective, the size of this result is similar to that experienced with the introduction of the Georgia Hope Scholarship, which initially gave students with a B-average in high school a $3,000 grant. To get this same result, we did not promise more aid – instead we simply helped families get the aid that is already available to them. Among young adults already ready out of high school, college enrollment increased 20 percent, with particularly large increases for those with annual incomes less than $22,000. Group One members were also more likely to receive a federal student grant and more financial aid overall in comparison to the control group. These results suggest that direct help with the application process, and providing better information, could be effective ways to improve college access.

The DOE has already taken several important steps to simplify the FAFSA. In June 2009, the DOE announced that starting this January, a pilot program will link the FAFSA to IRS data for renewal students. In addition, the online version of the FAFSA now uses skip logic to eliminate questions that do not apply to some students, and it also gives students instant estimates of Pell grant and student loan eligibility.

Will this improve things? Absolutely. Our results clearly show that the applications were done more efficiently by using information from an IRS tax form. After pre-populating the form, for many families, the remaining questions are relatively straightforward and easy (e.g., gender, citizenship, veteran status, state of legal residence, parents’ education, intended degree, phone number, and driver’s license number). This substantially reduces the time necessary to complete a financial aid application, and it improves the accuracy of the information submitted. Colleges and universities are also excited about this development. With information coming straight from the IRS, there is less need for the institutions to do income verification, which can be a serious drain on staff time and resources.

However, there is still more that could be done. Our FAFSA intervention did more than just pre-populate the tax form. We gave additional assistance to complete the application using our automated software, which prompted the tax professional to ask specific questions, relevant to this population. This was easy for families to submit their completed applications to the DOE. In addition, we addressed the issue of low visibility by reaching out to families in their communities. We also dealt with the issue of misinformation by providing accurate and personalized information about aid eligibility and local college costs.

Another problem with the current system is that many students miss the deadline for state and institutional aid programs by filing too late (after April 1). In our study, participants filed the FAFSA many months earlier for the high school seniors, and almost three months earlier for the adults. While current DOE efforts are a step in the right direction, families will need more assistance from governments, schools and community organizations to develop awareness and assistance programs that could help families to fill out and submit the form. Parents would no longer need to have their tax returns handy in order to fill out the FAFSA, meaning that many would be able to complete the form while attending college information night or other school event.

While our experiment underscores the benefits of simplification and assistance, participants who were only given information about aid without help with the FAFSA did not have higher application submission rates than those who did not receive any help. This suggests that simply informing individuals about their aid eligibility does not significantly improve college access. Instead, the real barrier is the form’s complexity and navigating the submission process.

It is important to note that our project focused on providing particular types of information to students at the end of high school or afterwards. These results are not indicative of efforts to provide information and increase awareness among younger students. In fact, in continuing analysis, we are tracking a set of families who were given personalized aid eligibility estimates based on their incomes when their children were only high school sophomores or juniors. In future years, we hope to have results on whether this earlier information had an impact on whether these students did more to prepare for college academically (i.e., taking more college preparatory courses and the SAT or ACT), and if they were more likely to submit an application for federal student aid.

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