Student Population Analysis: Low-Socioeconomic Students

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Section One

Introduction

A college degree is a proven element lending itself toward upward mobility in today's society. Especially for low-income students, "a four-year degree is the surest path to the middle class" (Warick, DeBaun & Ciramella, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, in a society that believes in education as a means of social mobility, "an investigation into the college experiences and postsecondary outcomes of low socioeconomic (SES) students" (Walpole, 2003, p. 47) is important. As higher education administrators, we must serve as advocates for all students, but this population in particular.

To evaluate what encompasses a student from a low-income background, defining the term "socioeconomic status" is necessary. According to the American Psychological Association (2018), "socioeconomic status encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class" (para. 1). With a definition this broad, it is no wonder so many factors contribute to the success, or lack of success, of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. A college degree can help increase an individual's chance of obtaining a high-paying job, yet "at the same time that a college degree has become pivotal to success in society, access to a college degree is out of reach to many" (Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei & Darnon, 2017, p. 23).

Some may argue that positive change has been made over past years in increasing low-SES enrollment in colleges and universities in the United States, yet, "there is, in fact, less socioeconomic diversity than racial and ethnic diversity at the most selective colleges and universities" (Tinto, 2006, p. 11). Even when the numbers show positive change, in terms of

increased numbers of such underserved students, "these students do not share the same level of success as their higher-income counterparts" (Green, 2006, p. 22) once on campus. Even further, current literature discusses to great extent racial diversity and disparity issues, but "low-SES students are similarly underrepresented, and comparable equity issues exist for this group," (Walpole, 2003, p. 46). The needs of low-SES students still often seemingly fade into the background, and not much attention is paid to them. Knowing this, it is important to take a closer look at some of the trends facing this population in terms of transitional/experiential issues, educational attainment, and outcomes.

Summary of Population

Selection

The first challenge that faces students from low-SES backgrounds is that of school selection. Obviously, considering the population at hand, finding an institution that can fit the budget available is extremely difficult. New data has discovered that "an astounding 75 percent of residential four-year institutions- including 90 percent of flagships- failed NCAN's affordability test" (Warick, DeBaun & Ciaramella, 2018, p. 2). For students relying on financial aid, particularly the Pell Grant, this means that "the average Pell Grant recipient would be able to afford just 139 of 551 residential four-year public institutions across the United States" (Warick, DeBaun, & Ciaramella, 2018, p.2). This severely limits these students' choices, which are already limited by such thing as distance from home, scholarships received, and so many more factors. This illustrates an issue of power and privilege in the U.S., as "affluent students more often choose colleges based on the quality and fit with their goals and interests regardless of sticker price, the availability of financial aid, or distance from home," (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 245) a luxury that low-SES students cannot afford.

On top of the overarching issue of financial capital, low-SES students also have to deal with lack of cultural capital, defined as “specialized or insider knowledge which is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture and to educational credentials,” (Walpole, 2003, p. 49) when deciding on a college or university. Although not always the case, “low-SES parents are more likely to view a high-school diploma as the norm for their children than high-SES parents” (Walpole, 2003, p. 48), and may not encourage their child to attend college, not understanding the payoff or feeling that a college degree is not necessary. For parents who do push their children to pursue a degree, they may not be privy to insider information that comes with applying to college, as parents from higher-SES backgrounds are. While applying, it was found that “lowest SES-quartile students tend to rely largely on their high school guidance counselor for information, while highest-SES quartile students (in addition to their guidance counselor), also draw on the information resources of their parents, other students, college reps, etc.” (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001, p. 5). Low-SES students are not exposed to as many resources as their peers, and therefore have to trust and rely heavily on their secondary school system to make an informed and educated decision about which institution will be the best fit for them both academically and financially.

Experience

Once overcoming the hurdle of college choice and arriving on campus, low-SES students are met with a whole new array of difficulties. To begin with, “scholars have found that students from low-SES backgrounds have lower educational aspirations, persistence rates and educational attainment than their peers from high-SES backgrounds prior to and during college” (Walpole, 2003, p. 47). This is due in part to many factors, one of which being identity management. Identity management is one of the greatest challenges low-SES students face, including “the

feeling of being disconnected or out of place while navigating a high-SES environment" (Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darron, 2017, p. 26). For students walking around on campus filled with indicators of wealth surrounding them, it can be difficult to experience feelings of fitting in. Because of this, low-SES students have quite different emotional experiences than high-SES students, such that "low-SES students are more likely to feel and express greater emotional distress," have "higher levels of self-reported depression," and "demonstrate higher levels of physiological stress markers" (Jury et. al., 2017, p. 26). As if these internal obstacles were not enough, low-SES students "also have to deal with others' negative views of themselves," (Jury et. al., 2017, p. 27), which has implications for their success. When students realize that others view them as inferior, or pass pre-disposed judgements, they feel less competent in their own ability and intelligence, which directly impacts their motivation as well as actual performance. With these views placed upon them, low-SES students "are more likely to be afraid of failure, and thus more likely to endorse performance-avoidance goals in college" (Jury et. al., 2017, p. 28), impacting many elements of their experience, including major choice, which is something that will stay with them for the rest of their life.

When addressing a low-SES student's experience in major selection, several prominent themes emerge. To start, and possibly related to the previously mentioned fear of failure, low-SES students were more likely to choose a vocational major such as education or business, as well as a major with a higher post-college income, than their high-SES peers (Walpole, 2007, p. 42). One can assume from this information that this is due in part to the fear of leaving college without a job, after investing such substantial finances in their future. Similarly, this population of students does not have the extensive freedom to pursue a more "frivolous major" or explore their options as their high-SES peers do; rather, low-SES students are focused on completing

their chosen degree program as quickly as possible and being able to pay their bills upon graduation. With that being said, “low-SES students were less likely to have declared a major by the end of their freshman year than were their high SES peers” (Walpole, 2007, p. 42), illustrating perhaps a lack of direction. With these themes set in place in terms of what these students choose to study, it is important to take a closer look at the “how,” including how students engage both in and out of the classroom.

Engagement

When it comes to low-SES engagement patterns, Quaye & Harper (2015) put it best when saying, “engagement is now commonly understood to be critical to students’ success in college, but considerably less attention has been paid to the reality that engagement is a luxury that affluent students are most able to afford” (p. 237). Generally, “students from low-SES background who attend four-year colleges and universities work more, study less, are less involved and report lower GPAs than their high-SES peers” (Walpole, 2003, p. 63). When looking at other patterns present for this student population, research has found that low-income students are less likely to be continuously enrolled, often are enrolled part-time, are less likely to live on campus, and in terms of work, may work upwards of 30 hours a week (Quaye & Harper, 2015). These are all factors that could, and do, negatively impact success. Looking at engagement and involvement from a theoretical perspective, based on Human Capital Theory, students must consider the trade-off of their time and how they choose to spend it. This decision is often centered around “time spent in paid employment versus time spent engaged in college-related activities” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 240). To these students, “engagement is a higher-order need” and they can only engage in this higher-level activity “after the most basic but essential needs are met” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 240), with these needs being food, shelter,

rent and transportation costs, for example. However, Quaye & Harper (2015) also raise an interesting point in that "using a human capital lens also raises questions about what low-income students know about the benefits and costs of allocating their finite time to employment rather than student engagement activities" (p. 241). Perhaps if students better knew the benefits that came from campus involvement, such as networking opportunities and chances to develop leadership skills that employers so desperately seek, they might divide their time differently. However, this is a deeply-rooted problem, and one that will attempt to be solved in the future implications section of this paper.

Outcomes

Lastly, the educational outcomes of the low-SES student population also differ from that of their high-SES counterparts. Current research shows that retention and graduation rates for low-income students lags much behind high-income students, with 56% of high-income students earning a bachelor's degree within six years, and only 25% of low-income students achieving the same (Tinto, 2006, p. 11). One longitudinal study furthered this point by following an incoming class of freshman through their undergraduate career. This study split the class into four quartiles based on socioeconomic status and measured their graduation rates within six years. The results showed that:

> 46% of first-time, full-time freshmen in the lowest SES quartile completed college within six years after first enrolling in the same four-year institution, compared with 51% of those in the second quartile, 63% in the third quartile, and 71% of those in the highest quartile. (Titus, 2006, p. 382).

This blatantly illustrated that the greater level of SES that one derives from, the higher the likelihood of graduating from college. Clearly this is a prevailing issue when we talk about

access and equity in higher education, and one that policymakers and researchers should further explore.

Current Issue

The most prominent current issue facing this particular student population is undoubtedly increasing access to appropriate and beneficial institutions to lessen the disparity between low-SES students and their peers. As Cox (2016) stated:

> because the traditional college choice model most accurately describes the navigation processes typical of more advantaged students, even after such students are provided with assistance in navigating the college application, financial aid, and enrollment processes, as many as 70% of the students who are accepted to a four-year college reconsider matriculation, enroll in less selective colleges, or never enroll at all (p. 5).

Even when students are met with resources to get them into a four-year degree program, there is still a disconnect happening. Tinto (2006) also noticed this disparity, as "there has been a noticeable shift in patterns of attendance of low-income students in two and four-year institutions" (p. 11). This shift is even more impactful when you take a look at the numbers. The Pell Grant is a U.S. federal subsidy for students with financial need. In 1973-74, the first year of the Pell Grant program, "62.4% of Pell Grant recipients were enrolled in four-year colleges and universities"; today, that number has shrunk to 44.9%, a 28% decrease (Tinto, 2006, p. 11). This is concerning, as the shift for these low-SES student populations is leaning more toward community colleges and for-profit institutions. While these schools hold certain merit, it does raise questions of equity and opportunity for students from low-income backgrounds.

Lastly, these numbers are troubling because it assumes that just because a student is from a low-income family, they will not achieve success, which of course is not true. Highly talented

students are slipping out of the educational pipeline solely because of their family's financial status. In fact, Warick, DeBaun & Ciaramella (2018) stated, "every year, 500,000 students in the top half of their high school class- 47% of whom are low-income- do not complete a postsecondary certificate" (p. 10). These high achieving students are, for one reason or another, missing out on the opportunity to obtain a higher degree altogether. As practitioners, we need to work more diligently than ever to grant access for these students to more prestigious institutions. "Equity demands that students have the opportunity to pursue the postsecondary path of their choosing, regardless of income, race or family education experience," (Warick, DeBaun & Ciaramella, 2018, p. 10) and the time is now to promote such equity.

Implications for Practice

Current implications for future practice can be draw from this literature to help better serve students as part of the low-SES population. While "providing economic resources to low-SES students and facilitating their access to higher education are necessary steps for reaching more equality in higher education," (Jury et. al., 2017, p.34) such steps are not sufficient. As practitioners and administrators we must find ways outside of providing a larger pool of money for these students to help better engage them, motivate them, and support them through to graduation.

One example of this would be to continue to look into low-SES student success stories, learning from programs and resources used that helped to serve them. It will be increasingly important to "investigate the experiences of academically successful minority, low-income students and how these students succeed despite deficit thinking and limited curricular options" (Green, 2006, p. 26). One program that has generated a reputation of success is that of specifically tailored learning communities. Quaye & Harper (2015) encourage the use of and

participation of low-SES student in learning communities because “low-income students often grow up in families that emphasize interdependence and working in groups may be culturally relevant to their experience” (p. 249). Particular success in this area has stemmed out of Syracuse University, where researchers have found that learning communities specifically adapted to serve under-prepared low-income students has served as beneficial for its participants. This just further goes to show that “the ability to address the needs of these students requires we do more than simply tinker at the margins of our educational practice” (Tinto, 2006, p 13); rather, we must fully immerse ourselves in programming that students can take part in through their everyday lives, and that will encourage them to persist in their studies.

Another example of a very simple practice that can be implemented toward low-SES students is a recognition by administrators and faculty of the “unique challenges that low-SES students face in attending college, particularly in balancing work, study and activities” (Walpole, 2003, p. 66). A basic understanding of the different obligations that these students hold in comparison to the more traditional student can go a long way and can be as simple as a note written in the syllabus, more lenient attendance policies, or offering a more personal, one-on-one approach to teaching. While admitting students from this population is half the battle, “once students are admitted, institutions should work to ensure that students make a successful transition to the campus academically and socially” (Walpole, 2007, p. 87). This could also include encouraging students to get involved on campus, explore majors in the more “traditional liberal arts disciplines,” and other activities that low-SES students might generally shy away from (Walpole, 2007). Many of these students do not know the full wealth of resources and opportunities available to them, and it is up to practitioners to ensure that they get the most out of their collegiate experience as possible.

Lastly, implementing practices of cultural relevancy is a great instrument to use in keeping these students engaged. Because so many of these students value work on such a high level, connecting classroom material and its application to work-environments can serve as particularly useful way to support these students. Connected with this is the idea that “if activities are created for outside of the classroom, they must be created with a recognition of the conflicting demands of work and study and be offered at times that students are available” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 247). This is a great practice to implement that will benefit not only low-SES students, but students from any kind of non-traditional background. Administrators must remember that students exist outside of the bubble of campus life and take these outside responsibilities into consideration.

Potential Future Study

An interesting future study to further examine this student population would be to compare the GPA and overall graduation rates of students who work off-campus versus those who are involved in on-campus extracurricular activities. The study would examine students from each category, segmented based on number of hours involved per week. For example, students who work 10-20 hours per week would be compared to students involved on campus 10-20 hours per week, etc. As a two-part study, this would examine multiple key factors.

First, it would work to answer the question of if certain differences exist between these experiences. Are students involved on campus performing better academically and developing better transferrable skills than those who hold a paying job? Do certain support groups exist in either environment that the other is lacking? What are the demands of each experience and how do these translate to a student’s overall success moving toward graduation?

Secondly, the study would also provide insight on what the optimum number of hours spent, either working or involved on campus, is for student success. If students seem to be performing better academically while working or involved, due to increased motivation and time-management techniques, but then this drops off after a certain point, what does this say about the maximum number of hours students should be spending on other activities outside of class? What should faculty be expecting from their students considering these outside obligations? How can we encourage students to make more of their college experience outside of the classroom, but not overwhelm themselves? These are all questions that will served to be answered in the second part of the study.

Findings in this study could also serve for implementation of new practices on college campuses, such as paying student leaders for their involvement in organizations. If the study shows that on-campus involvement has a greater payoff, both in academic success, graduation rates, and after graduation, in real-world, applicable skills gained, then something must be done to help provide access to these experiences for all students. Taking an unpaid position within a student organization may not be possible for the low-SES student who has to choose between that and holding a job that will pay his rent; however, if a stipend was provided for students holding a certain level of responsibility within an organization, this door has now been opened for low-SES students. Some may still choose to pursue other avenues of employment, but for those who would like to follow their passion into a particular student organization, the possibility now exists. This study would help provide implications for practices such as these, and their feasibility on current college and university campuses.

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