



# Meeting Summary

## College Access and Success

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### States and Postsecondary Institutions Can Take Actions to Improve College Access and Success

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#### College-going and college-completion gaps are increasing

Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust and recipient of the 2009 ECS James Bryant Conant award, made clear in her plenary presentation that in terms of student achievement and many postsecondary indicators, gaps between poor and minority students and their wealthier, majority counterparts are increasing. For example:

- **College-going** has increased over the last 25 years for all racial and economic groups. However, because college-going gains for white students have been greater than those for students of color, the **gap is greater** than it was 25 years ago. College-going among low-income students still has not reached the rate it was for high-income students 30 years ago.
- **Low-income** and **minority** students are most **underrepresented in four-year institutions**, and are more likely to attend proprietary and two-year institutions.
- **Increases in college-going are not translating into increases in college completion.** Gaps between the percentage of majority and black/Latino students completing at least a bachelor's degree are wider today than they were 25 years ago. High-income students are *eight times* more likely to finish college than the lowest-income students. Says Haycock, "Unless you're ready to argue that children from upper-income families are eight times as smart as kids from low-income families, there is no reason for this gap."

#### Potential K-12 causes for the growing gaps

Haycock observes that given the significant Latino population growth rate and the lesser growth among other racial groups, our democracy is threatened by these gaps. Potential reasons for these discouraging outcomes at the K-12 level? Haycock points out that minority and low-income students:

- Tend to be overrepresented in schools that receive fewer state and local dollars
- Are held to lower expectations and are taught less
- Are assigned the least well-qualified and least-experienced teachers.

#### Postsecondary practices also to blame for gaps

However, the blame should not be placed solely at the feet of K-12 education. "Colleges and universities themselves turn out to be very important actors in this drama of shrinking opportunity", says Haycock, who believes changes in distribution of financial aid are part of the problem. While federal and state governments are spending more today on student financial aid, both have shifted grant priorities to wealthier students, while the Pell's buying power has declined significantly. Increases in student aid awarded by public and private universities between 1995-2003 were greatest for the highest-income students. And Haycock also notes, the wealthiest public institutions (flagships and other public research universities) could have protected low-income students from tuition inflation but have chosen not to.

#### Shining a spotlight on better-than-most results

Haycock introduces attendees to [www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org), an online Education Trust tool that allows users to compare graduation rates of similar four-year institutions, as determined by size, median SAT score,

percent of students receiving Pell grants, percent of student body who are underrepresented minorities and other factors. This online resource makes abundantly clear that institutions serving similar students reap very different results, regardless of whether those institutions are research institutions, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), or institutions awarding varying percentages of bachelor's vs. master's degrees. Based on these results, says Haycock, "Yes, we have to focus government aid on students who most need help to go to college, ...but we need to improve colleges as well."

### **What we're learning from postsecondary institutions getting better results**

Haycock indicated seven means by which "unusually successful" postsecondary institutions have achieved higher graduation rates than similar institutions serving similar groups of students:

1. **Creating data-focused institutions:** Postsecondary institutions beating the odds are "data-focused institutions. They don't just look at their data — they act on it," says Haycock. She related the story of a student at Northern Iowa University who continually attempted to enroll in a course required for his major. When he was repeatedly blocked from enrolling in the course due to limited class space, he enrolled in another course not required for his degree, which blocked enrollment for another student who required *that* course for his degree program. By simply analyzing the data and adding just a few sections of those courses, administrators unblocked the path to a degree for these and other students. Haycock also pointed to Kentucky and Nevada research that found that success rates among developmental students were higher if students took the developmental course their first semester, then immediately enrolled in the related credit-bearing course the following semester. This finding led to the adoption of policies in both states requiring students to follow this path.
2. **Constant monitoring of student data:** According to Haycock, successful institutions not only look at six-year or four-year graduation rates, but faculty members, advisors and administrators constantly monitor student data, including early warning indicators such as absences, withdrawals and mid-term grades, and act based on the data.
3. **Taking on drop/failure/withdrawal rates in introductory-level courses:** "It's not just about poor preparation, it's also about course redesign," asserts Haycock, who provided the example of the success rates in college algebra before and after the University of Alabama's redesign of college algebra courses. In these reconfigured courses, students were "talked at" less in lecture courses, and spent more time in labs doing mathematics, working online at hours convenient to them to "get unstuck" *immediately* — not a week later during the professor's office hours. In addition to completely eliminating the black/white gap in student outcomes, the university closed black/white gaps in college graduation rates — black students, in fact, have begun to graduate at slightly higher rates than their white peers.
4. **Not shying from requiring and making demands:** Haycock notes that, over the years, some Alabama faculty teaching the redesigned college algebra course have balked at making the weekly lab time obligatory. Yet every time the university has tried removing the algebra lab requirement, says Haycock, "the data just plummet." Haycock indicates that more successful institutions typically make "optional" practices "mandatory" — such as monitoring of student attendance and requiring student participation in study sessions.
5. **Clearly assigning responsibility for student success:** Florida State University is one example of an institution at which black students have slightly higher graduation rates than white students, due in part to the CARE support program, says Haycock. CARE, which stands for "Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement," is aimed at improving the college success of first-generation and disadvantaged students. The program allows students to matriculate under lower admissions standards, but requires students to participate in a summer bridge program, and continually monitors and supports students on campus (including through specialized first-year math courses). Although CARE students are less well-prepared than non-CARE students, they have higher second-year retention rates and graduate at the same rate than non-CARE students.
6. **Focusing college leaders on student success:** A couple years ago, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) conducted a study examining the role of campus presidents at successful institutions, and found that these leaders shared common practices, including articulating a clear vision and using data, monitoring progress and "walking the talk." What makes the difference at a successful postsecondary institution is the same as what makes the difference at successful K-12 schools — there's a "focus on doing what's right for students," says Haycock.

7. **Reaching out to students who have left:** Haycock relates the story of a former University of New Mexico (UNM) associate provost who found that most students who left UNM were close to degree completion and were not failing, but were “disengaged.” The university began contacting these former students to invite them back, and established a “concierge” service offering a shortened (and no-cost) application for readmission, a summary indicating the courses needed for degree completion, priority enrollment in these courses and supports as troubles arose. As a result of this initiative, of the 3,000 former students contacted, 1,800 completed a bachelor’s degree and 59 have completed advanced degrees.

### Closing thoughts

Haycock shared several closing comments:

- **Setting fiscal priorities:** At this time of fiscal constraint, says Haycock, policymakers must ask themselves, “Can we afford to spend less on the students who need it most? Are we willing to let people buy lottery tickets to send the wealthiest students to college?”
- **High schools:** High schools have some responsibility for getting from “college readiness” to “college entry.”
- **State role in postsecondary goal-setting:** Haycock suggests that since there is, in most cases little state-level accountability for postsecondary institutions, we have not clearly articulated at the state level what colleges should prioritize. The role of defining quality in higher education has thus been filled by *U.S. News and World Report*, which defines college quality by the number of applicants schools turn away — and the result has been “horribly perverse.” As a consequence, people now “conflate selectivity with quality.”
- **The role of courage:** Taking on the “status hierarchy” will require courage. Haycock concludes her remarks with a photo journey documenting the monuments she passes on her morning run in the District of Columbia, from the World War II veterans’ memorial, to the Washington Monument, to the Vietnam Veterans’ memorial, to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, to the Korean War Veterans’ memorial, emblazoned with the line, “Freedom Is Not Free.” Says Haycock, “Preserving our freedoms as Americans has required courage, tenacity and a high level of skill from generations of soldiers. But education today requires the same of us.”

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