Best Practice in the First Year: The Best of Times, And Not the Worst of Times[1]

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Today, higher education is being asked to contribute to the reversal of disturbing trends concerning the educational and economic place of our country in the world. *ADDING IT UP: State Challenges for Increasing College Access and Success* summarizes data from various sources to present a fairly bleak picture of the competitive position of the United States in the world today. We have slipped from being first among nations with citizens holding college degrees to tenth; our college students complete their educations at much lower rates than other industrialized nations, and we have persistent disparities in the percentages of completion across ethnic groups.

Fortunately, we know what we have to do in order to address the issues and strengthen our position. Our challenge is that we are being asked to rise to what has become a well-documented occasion for action. From this perspective, we have no choice but to commit to best practices and to implement them on our campuses. Our work has significance beyond the local and deserves as much support as it can get.

This piece will focus on best practices as they are embodied (or not) in first year programs, since success in the first year of college is critical for subsequent success. Once these have been surveyed, we will explore how to contribute to the good of the nation despite ever-tightening money and unsettling financial trends, a reality for many in higher education even before the current fiscal crisis.

We have known for a long time what best practices are. Zelda Gamson and Arthur Chickering first gathered them together in "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education," published in 1987, and currently available on the Web. The principles, which they develop with examples that include learning communities, cooperative and collaborative learning, constitute a handy checklist by which one may evaluate first year programs. Good practice:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,

[1] This article is adapted from a speech I delivered at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, Center for Teaching and Learning Mini-Conference, "Best Practices and Overcoming Obstacles in the First Year Experience" at St. Cloud State University, April 16, 2009.

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3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning

As Vince Tinto points out, "…involvement matters and at no point does it matter more than during the first year when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak." In his landmark book, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, also first published in 1987, Tinto points out that colleges and universities basically have the first six weeks of the first semester to retain first year students. His work suggests the critical nature of a student's introduction to college, especially those who are the most fragile and least likely to succeed.

In many ways, the turmoil today over higher education seems reminiscent of the early 1980s which produced such documents as *A Nation at Risk*. But, as Peter Ewell of NCHEMS pointed out a couple of years ago, the difference this time around is that we know what works and we know how to make it work.

Our task is to assure that best practice reaches the students who need to it most. *"High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access To Them, and Why They Matter* By George Kuh (AAC&U, 2008) documents practices (first year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, service learning and the like) that colleges commonly and successfully use to improve the academic outcomes of their students.

But, as Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U, noted in her introduction to the report "What Kuh's research plainly reveals is that we know what works, but we just aren't providing it to all the students who could benefit. We must make excellence inclusive and expand access to our best educational approaches to all our students, not just to those who are most privileged or most prepared for college learning." Figuring out how to make that happen is our challenge, and, as we will see, the test our nation must pass.

Recently, Kay McClenney and associates, who adapted the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for community colleges and oversaw the administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) throughout the country, developed the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), to assess how often community college students were treated as we know they should be treated in order for them to succeed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to evaluate how frequently six core principles that "guarantee" student success were experienced by community college students during their first three weeks of college (p. 4). The core principles of SENSE come straight out of what we know about best practice, and are equally applicable to community, technical, senior colleges and universities. The SENSE data, therefore, are relevant for all colleges.

Here is some baseline information about SENSE: "The 2008 SENSE field test survey was administered at 89 community colleges during the fourth and fifth weeks of the term and yielded 57,547 usable surveys. The survey was administered in classes randomly selected from the population of all first college-level English and math courses and all developmental education courses (excluding ESL courses)." Eighty-six colleges also chose one, or more, of the three special-focus modules on Financial Assistance, Commitment and Support, Student Success Courses to include in their surveys (p. 19). The SENSE pamphlet contains a wealth of information about the implications of the original data and of the information culled from administering the modules.

The six core principles are not rocket science; rather, they are exactly what one would expect to contribute to success, because they are based on our wisdom and experience of many years. There is good and bad news in the results, and they serve as another series of benchmarks to evaluate the opening outreach of one's college or university to first year students.

#1—Personal Connections. The vast majority of students reported being made to feel welcome and that the institution provided them with appropriate information to register correctly; only 24% had a specific person assigned to them to go to if they needed help (pp. 5-7).

Those of us who have lived through the practice of being assigned students to advise know that students almost never show up at a stranger's office; indeed the models cited for good student advisement in the SENSE report are linked to first years seminar, student club and students mentors (p. 7). Models that require first semester students to attend at least one personal advising session in a College Advisement Center, often depend for their success on a variety of carrots and sticks whose goal is to make these visits to the Advisement Center an assumed part of the fabric and culture of a college.

#2 --High Expectations and Aspirations—68% of students agreed that they had high motivation to succeed in college BUT during their first 3 weeks of college: 32% had turned in an assignment late; 25% did not turn in one or more assignments; 47% came to class unprepared; 29% had skipped a class or two (p. 7).

I recently wrote a practice brief for the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, *The Power of Partnership: How Early College Creates Rich Contexts for Engaging Faculty* for which I interviewed science and math high school teachers and college professors at Brooklyn College who were working together at STAR Early College High School (ECHS) that Brooklyn College had founded with the NYC Department of Education. Both sets of educators realized that, often unbeknownst to each other and certainly not on purpose, the value and reward systems for both students and those who teach them are radically different in high schools and college. First year students arrive at college accustomed to being able to turn in papers late without penalty, are often unprepared for class, and rely on "extra credit" assignments to get themselves through. We all know the reaction of a college chemistry teacher when one of his 150-600 lecture students requests extra credit!

Secondary and post-secondary practices need to be brought in line and both teachers and professors at our ECHS agreed that such alignment would improve student performance and retention. Readers interested in reaching out to feeder high schools might want to use David Conley's *Towards a More Comprehensive Understanding of College Readiness* (2007), a good conversation-starter about equipping students with the generic and disciplinary skills and abilities needed to succeed in college.

#3 <u>A Plan and Pathway to Success:</u> although 76% agreed or strongly agreed that an advisor had helped them choose courses, less than half said that an advisor had helped them set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them (p.9).

Given the profile of community college students, many of whom are underprepared and often adults who work and have family obligations, <u>not</u> spending time with them to plan realistic goals in the context of the unexpected demands of the academic environment virtually guarantees failure. I remember telling my students, years ago, on the first day of the learning community in which I taught, how many hours of outside work would guarantee failure and exactly when they would come to me in tears to announce they were drowning. I then encouraged them to make whatever adjustments they could in their schedules. I also worked with my students to help them figure out reasonable short cuts that would allow them to successfully complete their assignments while they careened from family obligations to jobs to classes.

We are fortunate that now electronic advisement tools and degree tracking software take the scut work out of advising and provide more time for the essential substantive conversations about how to succeed in college.

#4: <u>An Effective Track to College Readiness.</u> Developmental programs that work make sure that students enroll early in the developmental courses they need and then successfully move from developmental to college-level courses. While colleges have made strides in assessment and placement, completion rates indicate that developmental education students are not being served effectively. Creating an effective track to college readiness clearly will require new approaches, implemented at scale, especially given the numbers of students arriving at our doors unprepared for college work (pp. 10-11).

But, regardless of the level of remediation, only 25% of the students surveyed were enrolled in the student success courses that have been proven to make a significant difference in student retention. As well, learning communities that link developmental courses with introductory level content courses are not as prevalent as they deserve to be. In these academic configurations, faculty work together and help developmental students feel they are indeed attending college instead of being re-routed to a way station of unrelated, boring skills courses from which they see no exit. All developmental students have positive skills as well as deficiencies; we must allow them to demonstrate their skills while addressing their deficiencies.

#5 <u>Engaged Learning</u>: we know (and have known for years) that active and collaborative pedagogies that work. Nevertheless,

★ 75% of entering students say they are not enrolled in a student success course.

★ 96% say they are not enrolled in a learning community
★ 85% report never participating in a required study group outside of class.
★ 22% say they never worked with other students on a project or assignment during class, and 69% never did so outside of class.
★ 31% say they never received prompt feedback (oral or written) about their performance from an instructor.
★ 27% report never asking for help from an instructor regarding questions or problems related to class.
★ 71% say they never discussed ideas from reading or assignments with instructors outside of class." (p.11)

This data sadly speaks for itself. We have a long way to go.

#6: <u>An Integrated Network of Academic, Financial and Social Support</u>.

Here the feedback is a bit better:

★ 29% of entering students say they did not know about academic advising/planning services.
★ 27% report not knowing about face-to-face tutoring.
★ 32% say they were unaware of skill labs.
★ 27% say they did not know about financial aid advising.
★ 15% say they were unaware of computer labs." (p.14)

This last group is a somewhat qualified good news data set. We need to do better, but are apparently reaching most of the surveyed students and informing them about available essential services.

The SENSE survey will join myriad others, nationally administered and normed, system-wide and home-grown, that provide institutions of higher education with good information about themselves and their students. Colleges and universities now have a wealth of data sources about best practices across the country and in their own institutions, and many options for surveying their own practices and effectiveness. In addition, they may choose to introduce and/or enhance existing programs and monitor their value in order to improve the retention and success of their students.

Those interested in systematically refining the first year experience might want to explore The Foundations of Excellence project (FoE) created by John Gardner and his colleagues. For years, Gardner ran the First Year Experience National Conference out of the University of South Carolina and is currently head of the Policy Center for the First Year Experience. FoE helps participating colleges and universities assess how well and how consistently they are applying best practice, and it gives them time to strategize about how to apply them more and better.

FoE began in 2003 and my institution, Brooklyn College, was one of the 23 pilot four-year colleges involved in testing and helping to refine the process. In 2005, FoE was extended to two year colleges. Since FoE began, 147 two- and four-year colleges have participated. In 2008-09, 20 four-year and 10 two- year colleges are involved.

FoE is a highly structured but very flexible process that (I say as someone who has been involved as a participant and then as a Senior Fellow working with a number of FoE colleges over the years), has "evolution" as its signature characteristic. FoE exemplifies what Peter Senge calls "a learning institution." The original materials were developed by a relatively small group of people who probably had among them close to 100 years of experience defining, developing, and refining the characteristics of a valuable first year experience. The original materials were about as state of the art as one can get. But, the founders immediately reached out to pilot participants and modified the materials based on their feedback. And, over the years, materials and processes have continued to evolve and continue to get better—although they were very, very good to begin with. I am astonished, as I return each year to work with new colleges and universities, how much the working website, FoEtec, has changed and how much more sophisticated and deep the faculty/staff and student surveys have become. There is always a new twist to FoE, a refinement that comes directly from the feedback and suggestions of colleges that have worked with FoEtec and the surveys.

FoE gives its institutions time and space to take a long, systematic look at all aspects of their first-year experience; the process includes faculty, staff and students. Participating in FoE means breaking down silos and giving members of the community, who often do not speak to each other about the students they share, an opportunity to spend extended time together focusing on common issues, and coming to shared conclusions about how to enrich the first year to improve the academic and co-curricular experiences of their students. The final product, an action plan, provides a roadmap for improvement that affirms what is working well and develops a vision for needed change; the action plan often begins tomorrow and may extend over a period of several years. At its base, FoE transforms its participating institution by facilitating conversations and common planning that often have not occurred in the past or, if they have, on a much smaller scale.

FoE is a collegial, inclusive and intellectually stimulating self-study process undertaken by faculty, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, assessment professionals, students, admission/recruiting, and all others who interact with first year students. FoE may be implemented collaboratively by neighboring two and four year schools that share students. As well, the FoE process has been linked to accreditation and is recognized by virtually all regional accrediting agencies as an alternative approach to self-study.

At the center of FoE are nine "Aspirational Dimensions" of the first-year experience. Together they comprise a comprehensive overview of the first year. The dimensions, not surprisingly, incorporate universal principles of good practice and give colleges and universities the opportunity to assess how well they are delivering services in the realms of: Philosophy/Purpose; Organization; Learning; Faculty/Campus Culture; Transitions; All Students; Diversity; Roles and Purposes; Improvement. Campus participants in FoE are chosen because of their expertise or interest in a particular dimension, and each group tends to include faculty, staff and students from across the institution. The process begins with the entire FoE group (in large institutions that may include 80-100 persons) creating together a "Current Practices Inventory" which serves several purposes: it gives all participants an comprehensive overview of what already exists at the College—cause often for celebration, surprise at how much already exists, and a good baseline to link complementary programs, combine repetitive programs, identify gaps and areas that need to be addressed, and to identify existing resources. Each dimension has anywhere from two to five Performance Indicators that break it down into measurable components and help focus the attention of each dimension group . As well, comprehensive faculty/staff and student surveys are keyed to each dimension and provide feedback relevant to its main preoccupations. The final action plan is developed to implement the recommendations of all the dimension committees as they have been combined and refined by the steering committee and/or the committee of the whole. Inevitably there is much overlap; more often than not, a clear direction emerges and consensus drives future activity.

The FoE process is, frequently, institution-changing. This is not to imply at all that colleges and universities complete the FoE process and throw out everything they have done before. Rather, they build upon what works, eliminate what does not work, identify and introduce what needs to be done, organize themselves as an institution instead of being, as one college president characterized his rather prestigious university many years ago, " a group of departments linked by a common plumbing system." FoE results in a more focused institution that is more intentional about how it approaches the first-year experience, and, often, the following years as well.

One policy, for example, that sometimes emerges from the FoE experience is an early alert system for first-year students. This can be a hard sell because it asks faculty to spend time identifying students in trouble, and assumes, as it clearly should, that by six weeks into the term a professor has enough grades on hand to identify students in trouble. The key is to give faculty a quick and easy electronic way of identifying students in trouble. The goal is to create a process that is neither time-consuming nor cumbersome.

Early identification has several advantages. It helps academic advisement reach out to first-year students and bring them in for a conversation during their first semester at the College. Many students have no idea they are in trouble, despite their low grades. But, as I pointed out earlier (and as the SENSE data underscores), the cultures of secondary and post-secondary education have not been aligned. Some first-year students arrive at college thinking that they can hand in late work (despite many syllabi stating unequivocally that late work will not be accepted) and/or that they can hand in "extra credit" work to pass the course.

So, letting students know in a timely way that they are in trouble and need to shape up according to college standards has big advantages in terms of retention. And, if students need tutoring, an advisor can send them immediately to the Learning Center to get it, while they are still taking the course and still have a chance to pass it. Usually, the difference in GPA and retention for those students who respond to the early alert notice and those who do not is significant enough to convince faculty to participate in identifying these students and encouraging them to seek help.

As well, early alert systems allow colleges to create study skills programs during intersession for first semester students who had been identified as being in academic trouble. Once an institution becomes intentional about identifying students in need, reaching out to them and tracking their success takes all kinds of forms. At Brooklyn College, for example, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies created a program called "Seven Habits for a Successful Academic Career." She contacted honors students and invited them to share, with students in academic trouble, their "secrets" to success. This turned out to be a win-win experience for both the honors and the pre-probationary students. They loved spending time together in structured seminars, and, as we know, being told what to do and how to do it by a peer often carries more weight for students than when an adult offers the same advice.

Last year, I was involved in a project that explored the link between best practice and costs, with the goal of developing an instrument that would demonstrate whether or not student success programs paid for themselves and, at best, contributed to the fiscal well-being of the colleges and universities that housed them. Of course, if a student success program does not contribute to retention and increased accumulation of college credits then it should be replaced by a program that would pay for itself by applying best practice more effectively.

"Making Opportunity Affordable (MOA)" is an ambitious, multi-year project with myriad goals funded by the Lumina Foundation. Jobs For the Future is a partner in MOA, focused primarily on state policy towards higher education. In 2007-2008 I led a team for Jobs For the Future on a small project called "Investing in Student Success (ISS)." ISS explored how to link the costs of college and university student success programs with measurable student gains.

We asked for assistance in identifying likely participants from national higher education leaders such as George Kuh, Kay McClenney, and John Gardner. They and other colleagues suggested colleges from across the country that had developed exemplary first-year programs—models of excellence in public and private higher education, including community colleges, senior colleges and universities of all sizes.

In "Investing in Student Success" we wanted to see if it were possible to calculate return on investment for first-year student success programs by linking costs with retention; for the pilot we were willing to "stack the deck" with proven programs to demonstrate how calculating a return on investment could, because of the institutions we picked for the pilot, be used to demonstrate as well that money spent on these programs was a good investment when one calculated their impact on retention to the second year, and (possibly) their eventual contribution to higher graduation rates. Since some of the results would inevitably be shared with the administrations (at least) of participating colleges we also wanted as much as possible to assure that participation in the pilot was not going to come back and bite the brave souls who had volunteered their programs—limit collateral damage, as it were.

Because my interests went beyond the strict boundaries of the goals of "Investing in Student Success," I collected the 10 best practice commonalities among the participating programs. They were:

1. Most heartening, academic affairs and student affairs were on the same page. They understood that they shared the same students and the same goals, and they worked together to offer coordinated and intentional curricular and co-curricular initiatives.

2. There was a sustained and virtually universal move from inchoate, almost random approaches to the first year to comprehensive and coordinated programs. At the very least, the goal had been articulated even if the execution may not have been there yet.

3. There was a clear pattern of strategic hires and infrastructure reorganizations to achieve the goal of intentional and coordinated first year programs.

4. Colleges of a certain size were developing university college models or "Offices of the First Year" that offered all services comprehensively under one roof, or, at the very least, had mandated coordinating functions.

5. Advising and counseling had evolved into proactive outreach. Seen as a good to be encouraged and embraced, they were identified as areas where money should be invested-- once the college was sure that advisement was all that it should be. Many had participated in training programs to assure that advisors had appropriate backgrounds in student development and understood the academic requirements they would help students fulfill; many provided the technological support to make the jobs do-able.

6. There was virtually a universal commitment to FYE seminars. They ranged from small scale to full credit courses. They came in all shapes and sizes and fulfilled a number of different purposes, but the value of such seminars was widely recognized.

7. The use of learning communities in different formats was varied and growing. It was clear that the value of linking courses thematically had become a given in these exemplary programs. Many linked their learning communities with first-year seminars as well. Team approaches to these linkages included involving faculty, counselors, librarians, and student mentors. The learning communities often included a service learning or internship requirement of some kind.

8. As a group, the participating colleges were relentlessly self-assessing. They asked for and analyzed data and used that data to celebrate or improve their programs.

9. Seven of the 13 ISS colleges had participated in FoE. Generally, they were serial participators in virtually every national project that they could find. They understood the value of learning from their peers and being on the forefront of movements. They knew they could learn from the work and experience of others and had developed the broad overview that helps institutions make knowledgeable decisions.

10. Finally, they all had a clear commitment to addressing the issues of serving an underprepared, often over-extended student body.

We were impressed by how enthusiastically program directors and deans welcomed the opportunity to prove that their often beleaguered first-year programs, frequently the new kids on the block under attack from the old guard, really worked. They wanted concrete evidence that their programs were contributing to the fiscal as well as academic health of their institutions. We were unprepared, however, for the range of budgetary sophistication and how easy or difficult it was for particular participants to collect and insert retention data into a pretty straightforward universal budget template developed for the purposes of the pilot.

We of course entered this endeavor knowing that "universal" linked to "American higher education" was an oxymoron, but since we were not doing comparative studies and were willing to be flexible to accommodate the budget assumptions of various colleges, we were pretty sure we were on solid ground. In some cases, we were not. Although we had assumed a close connection between good academic programs, good assessment, good data and good budget practice, we learned that there were, actually, many relationships among them. Some of the colleges had data at hand and submitted our budget template by return mail. Others had data gaps or took weeks to tease out our requested information from much larger data bases. Others had difficulty relating budget data to the student retention data. Often, budget allocations are historical; as well, the - process my not be widely shared internally and may not seem logical or transparent to an outsider.

I believe that it behooves faculty and staff involved in, for example, first-year programs to become familiar (if they are not already) with how budgets are allocated at their institutions and to identify the data they need to collect to prove to those doing the allocating that their programs are making important contributions to the fiscal health of their institutions. It can be revelatory to learn, for example, that a program can pay for itself through the retention of even a dozen students from the first into the second year. The budget template developed by the Delta Project on Post-Secondary Education for this initiative will eventually be posted on their website, along with detailed instructions about how to use or adapt it to local circumstances.

The take-away is that we know what good practice is, we have myriad examples of good practice at work, and we know we can create the systems, infrastructures, and policies to support good practice. We know we have the faculty and staff committed to the work.

But, we have to do it, and/or if we are doing it, bring it to scale to reach the students who most need assistance. We must support the spread of good practice because the stakes are so high that failure is not an option.

In "The Big Fix," David Leonhardt points out that in *The Race Between Education and Technology* by Goldin and Katz, "The…central fact is that the United States has lost its once-wide lead in educational attainment. South Korea and Denmark graduate a larger share of their population from college — and Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom are close on our heels"….“Goldin and Katz are careful to say that economic growth is not simply a matter of investing in education.… [but their] thesis is that the 20th century was the American century in large part because this country led the world in education. The last 30 years, when educational gains slowed markedly, have been years of slower growth and rising inequality." We have extended access, but we have not resolved how to support students through retention and graduation. We must broaden our use of best practices to support students and to help them overcome the obstacles they face if the United States is going to thrive as it has in the past.

As mentioned earlier, *ADDING IT UP: State Challenges for Increasing College Access and Success,* one of several documents, this one published by Jobs for the Future, generated under the auspices of Making Opportunity Affordable, reinforces the conclusions of Goldin and Katz, that the nation's competitive advantage is slipping away source for attribution. Here is the data in more detail:

"According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),the United States now ranks tenth among industrialized nations in the percentage of 25-34 year olds with an Associate's degree or higher, and stands as one of the only nations where older adults are more educated than younger adults."
Also, "the United States ranks near the bottom of industrialized nations in the percentage of entering students that complete a degree program."
"According to the U.S. Census, disparities in educational attainment persist across racial and ethnic groups, even as the nation's population becomes more diverse. Today, 42 percent of whites ages 25-64 have an Associate's degree or higher, compared with 26 percent of African Americans and 18 percent of Hispanics." -

ADDING IT UP… points out "… the United States will have to "ramp up" just to keep up when it comes to degree production." The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) estimates that the nation will produce, under ordinary circumstances, approximately 48 million new undergraduate degrees between 2005 and 2025. "But, the United States needs to produce approximately 64 million additional degrees over this period to match leading nations in the percentage of adults with a college degree (estimated at 55 percent) and to meet domestic workforce needs—a gap of 16 million degrees." -

Closing this gap will depend on reaching out to and supporting the higher education aspirations of those who have been historically underserved by higher education. "NCHEMS estimates that increasing the percentage of adults with college degrees among

African Americans and Hispanics to that of whites would produce more than half of the degrees needed to fill the projected gap." - Their point is simple and stated clearly: increasing college access and success across the board and including all ethnic groups is a national imperative.

Two other reports from the Making Opportunity Affordable project, prepared by the Della Project on Post-Secondary Education put in stark context where we are and where we need to go. "The Growing Imbalance: Recent Trends in U.S. Postsecondary Education Finance," tracks the ever-increasing disparity in available funds between the public sector, which educates 74% of the students in public higher education and the private sector. As Scott Jaschik points out in his review of the report, spending per student at public community colleges and master's institutions has gone down as enrollments have grown while increases in support for these institutions have been small. As well, "the institutions that spend less and are heading downward in spending per student are the very institutions that are enrolling a disproportionate number of the minority and first generation college students whose success in higher education is crucial to the country's economic success."

The second Delta report, "Trends in College Spending: Where Does it Come From? Where Does it Go?" traces the decline in federal and state contributions to higher education as well as decline in the percentage of funds allocated directly to academic programs. This data comes as no surprise to those who have spent their lives working in the public sector. A few years ago, the President of a large public university was quoted as ruefully noting that his institution had evolved from being "state-funded to state-supported to state-assisted to state-located." When I retired from Brooklyn College the percentage of public funding had declined to 25% from the origins of the City University of New York where education was free for the citizens of New York City.

A focus on recruitment and, especially, retention is a necessity if public colleges are to survive and support themselves and contribute to the well-being of the country. Indeed, the recently announced Obama agenda for higher education and the guidelines for the use of the economic stimulus in higher education include not only access but foci on retention and graduation as well to reverse the slide. President Obama has put forward Martha Kanter, chancellor of the Foothills-deAnza district in CA as the under-secretary for higher education; she is well-known for encouraging the widespread use of best practices to support students.

We find ourselves in a situation where the documented decline of support at public institutions of higher education has had and will continue to have a documented negative impact on the economy. Projections suggest that the consequences, if we continue on this course, could be dire. Our situation demands change and we know exactly how we have to change our practice and how many additional students we need to graduate with quality degrees in order to reverse direction. The data demonstrate the direct and clear relationship between quality universal higher education and the well-being of our country.

So, in the midst of some bad news, there is good news. The circumstances and the need have been acknowledged by the government and we, as educators, know what best practice is and have documented its positive impact. Volumes have been written about good models and how to implement them cost efficiently. As faculty and staff engaged in the first year, we are on the front lines of this battle; we need to use all our knowledge and tools to provide the best education possible for all our students—that is our exciting and important challenge.

Resources

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