**Some Students Need Extra Help. Here’s How We Can Provide It.**

By Harry J. Holzer and Sandy Baum August 25, 2017



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

These days, it should come as no surprise that improving higher-education outcomes requires tempering high aspirations with sometimes harsh realism. Students need more options and pathways to success, and more active guidance toward the best decisions considering their individual prospects and labor-market realities.

Some 20 million students were enrolled in colleges and universities in the fall of 2015; almost 90 percent of high-school graduates in the United States get some postsecondary education, including over three-fourths of those from low-income families.

And college degrees generally pay off very well. Median earnings for adults ages 35 to 44 with bachelors’ degrees are 67 percent higher than earnings for those with only high-school diplomas. On average, students with associate degrees earn 25 percent more than those with no college experience.

But [outcomes are bleak](http://www.chronicle.com/article/United-States-By-the-Numbers/240889) for too many students. About 40 percent of all students at four-year colleges, and over 70 percent who begin in two-year colleges, have not completed a degree or certificate six years later — and completion rates are much lower among minority and disadvantaged students than others.

And, as we document in our recent book, too many of those who complete credentials earn associate degrees in liberal or general studies, which have essentially no labor-market value unless the student transfers to a four-year college and earns a bachelor’s degree. Most students enrolling in community colleges [expect to transfer](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Clearing-the-Path-for-Transfer/238769) to four-year institutions, but only one-fourth actually do, and less than half of them graduate.

We’ve tried to keep all doors open for all students, but we’ve created a system that provides inadequate guidance and poor options for many, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of them arrive at college unprepared for academic work, [burdened by financial difficulties](http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-the-Path-to-Graduation/235603) and a lack of knowledge of the world of higher education, and obligated to work full-time to support their families.

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The characteristics of the institutions students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend often compound their difficulties. Community and technical colleges receive too little funding from states relative to four-year institutions. They also face too little incentive to respond to labor-market forces by expanding capacity in occupational or work-force programs in fields with strong labor-market demand, such as health care or information technology. Courses in these fields require expensive equipment and instructors but generate the same revenue as other fields, so cash-strapped colleges find it challenging to expand teaching capacity in these areas.

In addition, many institutions provide students with too little structure, allowing them to wander aimlessly, with little direction or knowledge of what they want to do, and with very little academic or career counseling to guide them. Thus, many end up in general studies. Choosing a path to a certificate or associate degree in a high-demand occupation increases a student’s chances of earning a credential with high labor-market value, but most are never told of these possibilities.

Changing these outcomes will require more and better supports for students with barriers to overcome, but it will also require strengthening institutions so they have the structure and the resources needed to foster success among their students. It will require helping students make better choices about which college to attend and what to study — and about whether a purely academic path right after high school [is best for them.](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Should-Everyone-Go-to-College-/236316)

For instance, developing ["guided pathways"](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Can-Guided-Pathways-Keep/239886) in community colleges that better structure students’ programs of study, and expanding [work-force programs and sector-based partnerships](http://www.chronicle.com/article/In-Coal-Country-Community/240563) between colleges and local employers, have great potential. We need more public funding for community colleges, and also stronger incentives for them to improve their students’ job opportunities — perhaps by tying their state funding levels to graduates’ employability. Well-designed regulation of the for-profit sector, where too many students pile up huge debts in return for modest outcomes, is also crucial.

Evidence is accumulating that [restructuring developmental education,](http://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Building-Remedial-Ed-s/98) by tailoring requirements to what students plan to study and integrating this work with for-credit classes, can increase academic success.

More dollars for students to cover their expenses are, of course, important. But simplifying the financial-aid system, making it more flexible, and building in better incentives for student performance could make it much more effective. Experiments that allow financial aid to be used for noncredit programs in high-demand fields, with carefully designed limits to protect program quality and integrity, have the potential to strengthen opportunities for students.

Early education for all students about careers and the labor market is essential to helping students reach their goals, as is developing a range of high-quality career and technical pathways that start in high school — [including apprenticeships](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Colleges-Need-to-Embrace/240248) and other forms of work-based learning — so students with weaker academic skills can also earn credentials and get good jobs.

Policy makers and postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to implement constructive change; opening the doors of college to all who can benefit is a good start — but it’s far from sufficient. We must meet students where they are and recognize the impact of their circumstances on their chances for success.

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