



Affordability and College Attainment in Wisconsin Public Higher Education

JULY 7-8, 2011

159 EDUCATION BUILDING | 1000 BASCOM MALL | UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Overview

On July 7 and 8, 2011 researchers with the Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study (WSLS) convened a group of more than 125 scholars, practitioners, policymakers and philanthropists to discuss the future of Wisconsin public higher education in the areas of affordability and college attainment. Attendees from across the state came together in Madison to consider trends in degree completion rates, particularly for students from low-income families, and discuss evidence-based approaches to improvement.

The workshop was launched by a discussion of the national context and two papers describing patterns of inequality in Wisconsin public higher education. The keynote speaker, Richard Kahlenberg of The Century Foundation, described how admissions and financial aid policies interact to create opportunities for diverse groups. Faculty and students from the Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study discussed new results regarding the impact of need-based financial aid on college student persistence, as well as findings from investigations into the factors promoting success in postsecondary education for Wisconsin undergraduates. In order to promote a practical and policy-focused discussion, meeting participants engaged in small group discussions to react and respond to speakers and the issues they raised. Finally, a closing panel that included a legislator, a financial aid officer, a philanthropist, a student leader, and a researcher offered thoughts for what the future of affordability in Wisconsin public higher education might hold.

Affordability and College Attainment in the National Context

Following brief welcome remarks from WSLS co-director Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor Timothy Smeeding, Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty, began the conference with a talk titled “Differences in Higher Education: Investments, Costs, and Outcomes.” He reminded the audience that despite decades of public policy efforts, college attendance and completion remain associated with family background. Segregation in higher education is widespread; with most students from disadvantaged families attend two-year colleges and less-selective institutions. Smeeding pointed out that only 7 percent of students from the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution will earn bachelor’s degrees, compared to more than three-fourths of those from more advantaged backgrounds. He discussed the importance of high school preparation, reform of remedial education policies, the need for academic advising, as well as the need for adequate financial aid.

Smeeding was followed by Professor Robert Haveman, La Follette School of Public Affairs and Department of Economics at University of Wisconsin-Madison, who described the origins and functions of the University of Wisconsin-Madison “Payback Calculator,” a financial literacy instrument meant to alert prospective students and their families about the magnitude of costs and gains of attending college. The calculator (a demo of which can be viewed [here](#)) is a guide for assessing the value of investing in education and a guide on how to cover up front costs. The calculator shows students their estimated lifetime income with a degree versus their high school diploma, as well as the cost of attendance and the estimated financial aid they will receive. The goal is to help students make more informed decisions about where they will attend college.

Trends in Wisconsin

Sociologist Paul Attewell of the City University of New York Graduate Center continued the afternoon session with a discussion of his forthcoming book, “The Other 75%: Non-Elite Students and the Degree Completion

Problem.” Attewell noted that when many researchers think of higher education, their attention focuses on the private colleges and public universities that stand at the pinnacle of American higher education. The media portrays an image of the average college student as fresh out of high school, living in a dorm, financially dependent on parents, and attending college full-time. Today however, less than one out of every four college students fits the profile of a traditional undergraduate. Most students actually live off campus, commute to school, and work while enrolled. While they are the majority, they remain unacknowledged in our country’s system of higher education.

Attewell contended that frequently public policies applied to undergraduates were developed with a traditional undergraduate in mind, and are usually highly dysfunctional when applied to the other 75 percent of students. He argued we should focus on amending such policies and practices that typically depress college graduation rates. Attewell specifically referred to the way financial aid packages are constructed, which seems to have the children of middle class parents in mind. Low-income students who have been financially independent from their parents since high school are required to file as dependents and forced to ask estranged parents for financial information to fill out the financial aid application. As many students are refused by their parents—or refuse to ask—one in five low-income students don’t ever apply for financial aid.

Attewell was followed by Robert Kelchen of the Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study. Kelchen, a graduate student in Educational Policy Studies, delivered findings from a working paper co-authored with Sara Goldrick-Rab. He spoke of policymakers’ dual pursuit of equity and excellence, as they try to increase access and diversity in higher education while also increasing completion rates. Although diversity and accessibility rates have been improving, graduation rates remain stagnant. Kelchen and Goldrick-Rab examined the degree to which the characteristics of Pell Grant recipients varied across Wisconsin universities, using tiers of selectivity of admissions. They found that recipients enrolled in universities with the lowest levels of selectivity had lower levels of economic security and financial capital, but were more focused on their futures. They had clearer goals were further along in the transition to adulthood (despite being the same age—around 18—as the students they were compared to). Researchers also found that, compared to university students, UW College and Wisconsin Technical College Pell Grant recipients were more confident in their ability to obtain satisfactory grades in college but had fewer resources and financial aid.

Challenges and Vision for the Future

In a keynote address on the second day of the conference, Richard Kahlenberg of The Century Foundation described the ways in which education, reportedly “the great equalizer,” is reproducing inequality. He reiterated Smeeding’s concerns about trends in segregation in higher education, and emphasized that unequal access to more selective institutions may harm students’ chances for degree completion. Kahlenberg asked why colleges and universities serving more students in need of more intensive advising are allocated fewer resources with which to meet those needs? He called for universities to strive for socioeconomic diversity by supplementing need-based financial aid policies with class-based affirmative action. He further addressed the need to end the practice of legacy admissions. These reforms, he said, would “improve efficiency and avoid wasting talent.” It would also, he said, bring more justice, fairness, and equity to higher education.

The Causal Impacts of Need-Based Financial Aid on University Students

Following an overview of the WSLS research study (see www.fnaidstudy.org), Sara Goldrick-Rab, together with Professor Douglas Harris, and postdoctoral student James Benson described effects of the Wisconsin Scholars Grant on student outcomes over three years. The effects on academic outcomes are displayed in detail in a discussion paper issued by the [Institute for Research on Poverty](#). Overall, the grant accelerated credit accumulation such that on average there was a 28% increase in the proportion of students completing at least 60 credits over two years. In addition, it appears some students benefitted from the grant more than others—the students who entered college unlikely to persist seem to receive a bigger boost from the grant resources.

The researchers discussed ways that the grant seemed to alter students' time use and work behaviors. Grant recipients worked less often and work less-extensively than comparable non-recipients, and were less likely to work off-campus. Instead, grant recipients tended to study more often, and did not appear to invest more time in leisure activities. Preliminary results indicate that an increase in study time—and in particular improvements in the quality of study time—were concentrated among those students who were initially unlikely to persist in college.

Ongoing Research from the Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study

One of the most popular components of the conference was the presentations by WSLS graduate and postdoctoral students. Feedback in discussion groups clearly indicated that providing this opportunity to students was an especially valuable component of the WSLS project.

The papers, currently works in progress, addressed many aspects of the college experience beginning with initial entry. For example, Derria Byrd (Educational Policy Studies) described how the process through which students “learn college” and perceive congruence between their culture and the culture of the institution affects the quality of their academic and social experience. Ryan Adserias (Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis) spoke of the challenges that men from working-class backgrounds face while trying to fit in to the college community. Courtney Luedke (Sociology) described the results of interviews with students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds that suggest that campus residency, enrichment programs, and student organizations are fundamental to the social integration of students. Luedke said that the connections these students built through these endeavors enhanced their opportunities to expand their social networks and their social capital. Robert Kelchen (Educational Policy Studies) tackled the controversial claim that students who attend their “first choice” college are happier and more successful than those who do not. Kelchen finds that students attending their first choice college have similar initial academic/social integration levels and persistence rates to students who did not attend those colleges. Peter Kinsley (Educational Policy Studies) pointed to the need to help students get on the right track early in college, since their initial experiences with course-taking (in particular how fast they begin to accumulate credits) affects their later successes. He indicated that students consider financial issues when making college choices, but juggle these with the needs of their families, as well as their desire to maintain good grades.

Several students focused on the role that supports played in promoting college attainment. Regina Figueiredo-Brown (Educational Policy Studies) drew our attention to the need for students to have family support while in college, and described evidence that Latino students receive relatively little support, most of which is targeted to males rather than females. Julie Minikel-Lacocque (new Assistant Professor at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, formerly a postdoctoral student with WSL) discussed the ways in which families and student work together to make ends meet on tight budgets, and how those familial relationships affect the use of financial aid. Katharine Broton (Sociology) described evidence that financial support from the Wisconsin Scholars Grant was effective at increasing the aspirations of some students at two-year colleges, such that they aspired to a bachelor's degree rather than an associate's degree. Finally Jesus Renteria (Educational Policy Studies) described ways in which even the most promising students will falter when confronted with significant life events, which were experienced by many students in Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study. These negative events, if not offset by positive experiences, can create emergencies in the lives of students, sometimes derailing their college plans.

Reactions and Responses

Concern with the pervasive and expanding inequality of educational opportunities in Wisconsin dominated many of the discussion groups held throughout the two-day meeting. A college administrator articulated this concern when she said, "Higher education is becoming an engine of division. It is enriching the rich and impoverishing the poor." Yet, many participants lamented that the problems we confront have been around for a long time. As one policy analyst put it, "we have yet to significantly crack this nut."

A common theme that emerged during conversations was the need to better support students in how they spend their money and time during college. As a student said, "There should be mentors or counselors assigned to help these students and make sure they are doing the right things. Either that or there should be mandatory courses on study skills, finance management, work habits, getting students up to college criteria." But participants debated the most effective ways to provide that support. A professor indicated that the approach taken mattered, suggesting that universities and colleges need to convey the sense that "regardless of what happened in the past, we are going to take you and help you get where you need to be."

Undergraduate participants also spoke of the need to help colleges better understand the many challenges they face outside of the classroom. For example, how can we make faculty and advisers more aware of students' life circumstances without hurting the students inadvertently or compromising academic standards? Some proposed providing emergency funding to students, and offering sensitivity training to faculty.

Overall, many conference attendees expressed that students are the best advocates for changes in their own institutions. They asked "how can we equip students with good information to help them figure out what to ask for? How can students have a stronger role in determining what is taught, and where, and what counts for transfer across schools?"

Several discussions emphasized a concern that both researchers and advocates tend to place too much emphasis on the private returns to higher education, failing to sufficiently demonstrate the social benefits.

A few participants expressed the desire for Professor Robert Haveman to generate a “social returns payback calculator” for Wisconsin.

Moving Forward

The meeting’s closing panel spoke to the many ways in which public higher education must do more to meet the needs of students from all Wisconsin families while at the same time enduring significant financial constraints. Representative Joan Ballweg (R-41st Assembly District) suggested that we consider ways to meet the needs of our rural communities and older students. Both Richard George of the Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation and Morna Foy of the Wisconsin Technical College System reminded attendees of the rapid growth of the Pell Grant program and the difficulty in finding new money to address these longstanding problems. George said that we need to “innovate and evaluate,” and Foy added, “while also making a stronger case for the widespread public returns to all forms of postsecondary education.” Michael Moscicke of the Associated Student of Madison contended that students should be told that college is as much ending up with an enjoyable career as it is improving your life and society in general. Dr. Jane Hojan-Clark of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee concluded by stating how there is a tremendous increase in students who are not prepared for college and at-risk students. Many students are playing catch-up when they arrive at college, and while money and resources are helpful they are not the only important need for these students.

Sara Goldrick-Rab concluded the conference by thanking all conference participants for taking the time to attend, and for devoting serious thought and effort to addressing the challenges facing students throughout Wisconsin public higher education. She encouraged everyone to consider attending the 2012 WSLC conference, tentatively scheduled for summer in Green Bay.