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Closing the College Graduation Gap: National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report

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Cover Page Footnote

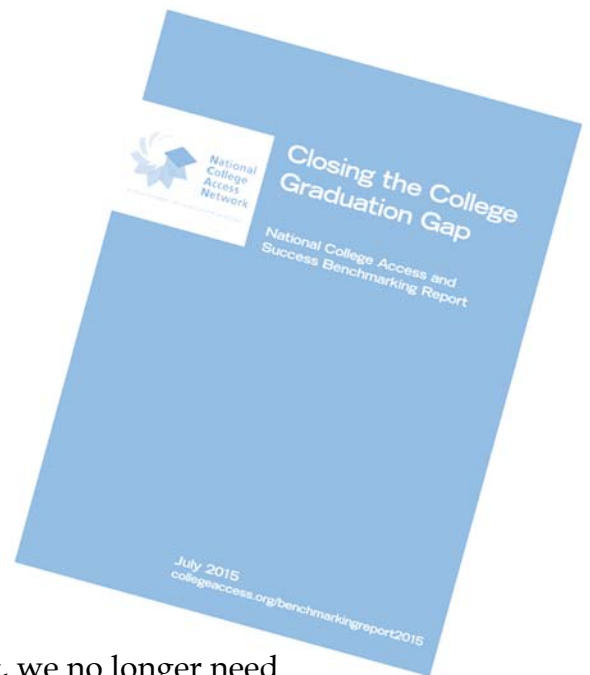
NCAN would like to thank the Kresge and Michael & Susan Dell Foundations for their invaluable support in pursuing and completing this report. NCAN would also like to thank the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, and specifically Jill Indugula, for their assistance with analyzing the data in this report.

Preview

Closing the College Graduation Gap: National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report



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Introduction

National College Access Network (NCAN) member organizations provide college access and success services to students who have been traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education. NCAN students are typically low-income, often of color, and frequently from families without a history of college-going. For the more than two million individuals that NCAN members assist annually, these services are often the key that unlocks the door to postsecondary education, changing lives and communities.

Postsecondary opportunities are critical not just as a matter of equity (because a student's ZIP code or skin color should not predetermine their educational opportunities) but also of economics (because the United States faces a significant shortage of degrees of all kinds in upcoming decades). Given the importance of our work, the time is right for NCAN members and similar organizations to consider: How much of a difference are we making for those students?

We must answer that question with data, which have become a crucial part of the college access and success support equation. Thanks to decades of research, program experimentation, and technological advance-

ment, we no longer need to wonder whether these supports “work” for students. Virtually every organization—whether a community-based nonprofit, a public high school, a university-based outreach program, or a state higher education agency—can obtain the data about whether the students they assist enroll in, persist, and complete a postsecondary credential. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) provides these data affordably to public schools and other nonprofit entities that have obtained students’ permission to access their records. The NSC’s data reveal whether students reach the ultimate goal of postsecondary completion and provide almost real-time information to the organizations supporting students. This

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allows them to adapt program strategies that are not sufficiently effective or to reach out to students who have left higher education without having earned a credential. Furthermore, the data allow us to change the national college access and success conversation from debating the perceived merits of various service delivery models to measuring actual student outcomes.

Summary of Findings

Last December, in order to further that measurement, NCAN presented the results of the inaugural National College Access and Success Benchmarking Study. Working with the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), NCAN aggregated student data from 24 members, examined students' postsecondary access and success milestones, and compared NCAN-served students' progress to national results. The results were encouraging. Students served by NCAN-member programs outperform expectations for college enrollment and completion, demonstrating that current national lower levels of postsecondary attainment for poor and minority students are not destiny. Specifically, the study showed:

College enrollment rates for NCAN students were comparable to students who attended higher income high schools.

The first-year postsecondary enrollment rates for the 2007, 2008 and 2009 NCAN cohorts were 71%, 70%, and 70%, respectively. The rate for the 2013 cohort was 65%, but only six months of postsecondary enrollment data were available at the time of analysis. These

marks compare favorably to enrollment rate benchmarks released by the NSC for high-income high schools and exceeded greatly those enrollment benchmarks for low-income high schools.

NCAN students' six-year college completion rate for the high school class of 2007 (54.8%) was approaching the national rate for all high school graduates in that year (59.7%).

The 59.7% represents the national completion rate for students who were age 20 or younger when they enrolled in the fall of 2007.

These results support the conclusion that NCAN's members are making progress toward closing the college knowledge, opportunity, and completion gaps for the students they serve.

The enrollment and completion rates comprised an "NCAN Benchmark" against which programs can measure their own outcomes. These benchmarks are important because there is not currently a reliable annual source for data on the outcomes of low-income, first-generation students. Federal data collections and surveys are either too incomplete or too infrequent when it comes to providing a clear picture of the performance of underserved students.

Next Steps

The inaugural National College Access and Success Benchmarking Study is an important first step, but there is considerable room for expansion and improvement in this line of research. As of this writing there are 362 NCAN members, just 24 of which submitted data for

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the first round of benchmarking. NCAN was clear that the sample for the study was not statistically representative of all NCAN members, let alone all underserved students nationally, but the more participating programs there are, the closer the study will come to a more representative sample of both populations.



An additional limitation of the first round of the study is the limited number of variables for which data were collected. For example, NCAN collected data on whether students received a Pell Grant or an organizational scholarship and whether their expected family contribution was above or below \$5,000 (unfortunately, the sample sizes were not large enough for these variables to draw reliable conclusions about whether they were correlated with higher postsecondary enrollment and completion rates). These variables are not sufficient to disaggregate enrollment and completion outcomes by student-level characteristics and identify gaps between different groups of students. Consequently, the second round of benchmarking asks programs to report student gender, race/ethnicity, Hispanic ancestry, first-generation status, and more. Not only will these data allow for the disaggregation of results by student groups, asking programs to provide them will reinforce the importance of tracking these data in general.

Future rounds of the benchmarking study could also potentially provide some insights for the field. Although the data collected from programs reveal which students enroll and

complete, it falls short of explaining why they do so. By collecting data on, for example, the types of services received by students, and the intensity of those services, NCAN might be able to conduct statistical analyses that illuminate which services, or combination of services, is most strongly correlated with enrollment and completion. The possibilities in this line of research are nearly limitless.

Conclusion

With the results from the first National College Access and Success Benchmarking Study, we now have broader evidence than ever before that college access and success programs help the low-income, first-generation students that they serve to close the postsecondary enrollment and completion gaps. Worth noting is that even had NCAN-served students' enrollment and completion outcomes not been so encouraging, there is intrinsic value in conducting this research. Using data, rather than hunches, to better understand performance is important for both NCAN's member programs and NCAN itself.

As encouraging as this new evidence is, it is also incomplete and raises questions requiring further research. Recruiting more member programs to submit data and collecting more data points to analyze will enhance future releases of the report and make it more robust and useful to NCAN members and the college access and success field. The 2014 National Benchmarking Report opened a window through which to view the significant success member-served students are experiencing in college, and NCAN looks forward to working closely with our members to continue to improve this resource and research.  

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