

A New Federal Strategy to Prepare Disadvantaged Students for College
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Testimony for the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
January 16, 2014

A college education offers substantial benefits, especially for children from poor and low-income families. Since the 1980s, the median family income of adults in their prime earning years has increased only for those with a four-year college or advanced degree. Equally important, young adults from families in the bottom fifth of the income distribution who achieve a four-year college degree are nearly 80 percent less likely to wind up in the bottom fifth themselves than are their peers who do not achieve a four-year degree.

A primary reason that disadvantaged students have trouble both getting into college and completing a degree is that they are not academically prepared to do college work. One scholar's careful analysis of data from nineteen nationally representative studies shows that the achievement gap between students from high-income and low-income families has grown in recent years and is now much larger than the gap between white and black students. This rising inequality in K–12 achievement based on family income parallels growing disparities in college enrollment and completion between students from high income and low-income families. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics shows that only 11 percent of students from the bottom fifth graduate from college, compared with 53 percent and 38 percent of students from the top two fifths.

There are four major federal programs that attempt to better prepare disadvantaged students for success in college. These include Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, Talent Search, and Gear Up. All of these programs have been evaluated, although the quality of the evaluations varies. The best evaluation is that of the oldest program, Upward Bound. Most of these evaluations have shown that the program has modest or no impact on college enrollment or college graduation. The best evaluation which meets the Institute of Education Sciences standards for top-tier evidence shows no major effects on college enrollment or completion.

Half a century and billions of dollars after these federal college-preparation programs were initiated, we are left with mostly unsuccessful programs interspersed with modest successes. Preparing disadvantaged students for college is a major challenge, with no well-tested solutions in sight. That said, there are hints in some of the programs about what could make a difference: summer programs, mentoring, tutoring, parent involvement, and similar activities have sometimes been associated with higher college enrollment. These may be the threads from which we can begin to weave together a new kind of intervention program.

The Obama administration has been funding and expanding social programs that have good evidence of success and reforming or terminating programs that have proven unsuccessful—a major strand of innovative social policy. The administration has formulated evidence-based social initiatives to prevent teen pregnancy, boost parenting skills, enhance employment and training, encourage community-based social innovation, and reform education. We need intense evidence-based solutions to the problem of preparing disadvantaged students for college as well. Thus we recommend a dramatic change in the way federal college preparation programs are

funded, using an approach similar to that of the Obama administration's other evidence-based initiatives.

We propose a five-step reform. First, we propose that the \$1 billion the federal government spends annually on college preparation programs be consolidated into a single grant program. In this sense, the change we propose is similar to the Obama administration's reform of Head Start, in which every Head Start grantee in the country risks losing its money if it does not perform at a high level. Similarly, in order to keep their federal funding, current grantees would need to show, based on rigorous analysis of their performance, that they are helping disadvantaged students enroll in and graduate from college.

Second, the U.S. Department of Education should publish a funding announcement which states that any two-year or four-year college, any local education authority, or any nonprofit or for-profit agency with a record of conducting education interventions is qualified to compete for grants from the college preparation funds. Sites with existing programs could apply for funds, but their applications would be considered on a competitive basis like everyone else's.

Third, the Department would make clear that evidence supporting the proposed intervention would be a crucial factor in determining the awards. Applicants would have to: demonstrate that they were using evidence-based interventions; demonstrate that their organization has a history of conducting programs that improve some measure or measures of college preparation, for example, by raising high school achievement scores or boosting performance on college readiness tests; present a detailed plan for evaluating their program, including how they would use data as feedback to improve it.

Fourth, the Department would be able to decide how to distribute the money among various approaches to helping disadvantaged students prepare for college. It would have the flexibility to use up to some maximum percentage of the funds (perhaps 20 percent) to support approaches, such as the current Student Support Services program, that help disadvantaged students once they arrive at college.

Fifth, the Department would use up to 2 percent of its annual funds (\$20 million) to plan a coordinated program of research and demonstration, featuring large-scale random-assignment studies, that would determine whether well-defined interventions or specific activities (such as mentoring, tutoring, etc.) actually increase college enrollment and completion. All entities that received funds under the grant program would have to agree to participate in the Department's demonstration and research programs.

Social policy should be based, at least in part, on evidence, and everything we know leads to the view that many, if not most, social programs produce modest or no effects. The Obama administration's reform of Head Start shows that a major ingredient of evidence-based policy is to reform or terminate ineffective programs. We should apply the same tough-minded approach to college preparation programs.

Based on: "Time for Change: A New Federal Strategy to Prepare Disadvantaged Students for College," Ron Haskins and Cecilia Elena Rouse, The Future of Children policy brief, Spring 2013.