

How Public Colleges Enhance Social Mobility (and Elite Colleges Often Don't)

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J. Emilio Flores, California State U.-Los Angeles

William Covino, president of Cal State-Los Angeles: Students from lower-income backgrounds "come to us with a willingness to work."

A stream of happy alumni have been getting in touch this week with William A. Covino, president of California State University at Los Angeles. They're not excited by an athletic championship or a big donation, but by a New York Times article that credits the university with being one of the best in the country at providing social mobility for its graduates. Mr. Covino says the alums are reaching out because the article "validates their experience."

The story points to data suggesting that many elite colleges enroll more students from families in the top 1 percent of household incomes than they do from the bottom 60 percent. But another Times article also noted that certain institutions, including several campuses of the California State University system, do a particularly good job of moving students from lower-income backgrounds into the middle, or even upper-middle classes.

Cal State institutions have very different missions than a Harvard University or a Kenyon College, but can they offer lessons to all colleges that want to do better by their lower-income students?

The primary lesson may lie in seeing poor students as opportunities, not challenges. These days many colleges are enrolling more students from lower-income backgrounds, either to provide better access or to bolster enrollment in an environment where competition for top students is fierce. Some colleges have had to play catch-up on supports for such students to retain and shepherd them toward graduation.

While graduation rates for public comprehensive universities often lag behind those of elite private institutions, supports for lower-income students have long been a central part of the thinking at access-focused colleges. "We've been doing this for decades," says Brian Jersky, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at California State University at Long Beach, another institution that did well in the Times's metrics (according to the newspaper's analysis, 78 percent of Long Beach students from the bottom 20 percent of income distribution ended up in the top 60 percent of income distribution).

Students from lower-income backgrounds bring some built-in advantages to the table, too. "They're not privileged," Mr. Covino says. "They come to us with a willingness to work." Some may show up less prepared for college than students from more affluent backgrounds, but they're also less likely to arrive locked into a particular major, and that makes them open to learning and more likely open to exploring a variety of career paths, he adds.

It's the Mission

A number of specific actions help lower-income students succeed academically, including getting them thinking about college early. Cal State-Los Angeles not only sends recruiters to local high schools, but also to middle and elementary schools. Mr. Covino says he visits kindergarten classes and hands out letters to students admitting them to the university, though to redeem the offer, "they have to get taller." Such outreach seeds younger students with the idea that college is possible.

Money never hurts. About 83 percent of Cal State-Los Angeles students receive some form of financial aid, and "sometimes they come to us destitute," Mr. Covino says. In addition to federal and state grants and institutional aid, the university also offers special

access to the most disadvantaged applicants. Its long-running Educational Opportunity Program waives some of the typical academic requirements and financial burdens for some first-generation minority students from lower-income households.

Once lower-income students are enrolled, they must often fit their education around a job, or sometimes two or three. Cal State-Los Angeles schedules some classes during early morning and evening hours to help students who work. Last year it opened a new campus in downtown Los Angeles in part to make its course offerings more convenient for working students.

Leaders at Cal State-Long Beach have had to make their own adjustments to help lower-income students graduate. After the recession, California made significant cuts to its support for public colleges. That led Long Beach to prohibit students from registering initially for more than 14 credit hours a semester to try to make sure courses were available for more students. Limiting the number of courses students could sign up for meant that some "would definitely not graduate in four years," says Mr. Jersky, the provost — a particular hardship for lower-income students. The registration cap was raised to 16 credit hours a semester this year.

That increase came about thanks to a deliberate attempt to look across institutional silos for impediments to student success. Long Beach's Highly Valued Degree Initiative convenes a number of task forces to examine ways to support students, beat back inefficient processes and policies, and improve retention and graduation. Raising the credit-hour cap, or looking at student data to see which classes should be offered more than one semester a year, are the kind of fixes that "could allow hundreds of extra people to graduate on time," Mr. Jersky says.

Cal State institutions could do even more to help lower-income students graduate, but they are limited by state budgets that still haven't recovered from post-recession cuts. With money still tight, "affordability goes down, and it becomes harder and harder for working-class people to come to Cal State," Mr. Jersky says. But he believes that, ultimately, it is up to universities like Cal State to deliver a high-quality, affordable education and increase social mobility for their students. After all, it's their mission.

"Wealthy, privileged institutions can pick up some of that slack, but even if every outstanding, privileged institution in the country changed its mission, it couldn't accommodate the need," Mr. Jersky says. "We don't want to be Harvard — we can't be Harvard. But they can't be us."

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