INTRODUCTION
Two Distinct Paths and a Missed Opportunity

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When I was in my late 20s, a good friend urged me to use my skill and experience as a diversity educator to form a consulting business in addition to working as a full-time student affairs professional. While at first this sounded like a recipe for taking on too much work, it turned out to be one of the most enjoyable side endeavors of my adult life. I had the privilege of being invited to speak on dozens of campuses around the country, from small, elite liberal arts colleges to large research universities. In my first year as a speaker, I found it curious that the majority of institution officials who hired me wanted to give me a campus tour. In time, however, I realized that this practice falls under a mix of good hosting techniques and campus pride for many institutions, so I began to relax and look forward to these tours. After all, as a lifetime higher education professional, how could I pass on the chance to collect data on campuses around the country?

As the number of speaking engagements continued to grow, I began to notice a pattern in my informal data collection experience. The campuses I visited generally seemed to have some investment in academic retention and student success, which included finishing 30 credits in the first year, four-year graduation campaigns, new technology platforms that enable academic advisers to better engage at-risk students, early-alert systems, learning management systems to help students in their activities outside the classroom, freshmen interest groups by academic discipline, or academic advising centers that conduct intrusive advising for probationary students. These programs were generally spread throughout the institution among units and departments in academic affairs, student affairs, and enrollment management.

Most of the campuses I visited also had some investment in spaces or programs focused on diversity and cultural enrichment. These programs or departments, such as multicultural student affairs offices or identity-based

student centers, engaged students in curricular and cocurricular efforts to deepen their understanding of their own and others' identities to promote a more inclusive and equitable campus environment. Some campuses even offered equity and inclusion centers that specifically focus on privileged group members' identities in an effort to create a campus conversation on White privilege, patriarchy, or heteronormativity.[1]

As I continued to work as a facilitator and speaker on campuses across the country, my full-time job as a student affairs professional began to change as well. In 2008 I was working as the director of a relatively traditional identity- and culture-focused multicultural student affairs department at DePaul University that was suddenly tasked with shifting its focus toward student persistence and graduation programming. I worked with an amazing team of student affairs educators to create a new model of engaging students, incorporate nuanced data into our understanding of risk and success, and develop robust partnerships with enrollment management and academic affairs to create streamlined pathways for higher risk students to pursue timely graduation. Having existed for years as an identity- and culture-focused staff, however, we were reluctant to leave our roots behind. We organically developed an intersectional model that incorporated the strategies and outcomes of student success work into an identity-conscious program design framework, and the results were extraordinary. My years as director of DePaul's Office of Multicultural Student Success propelled me into my current role as the associate vice president for student retention at California State University, Fullerton. At this large, access-focused public institution, I work with an equally amazing team to shape the university itself to promote student success rather than focusing on individual programs and initiatives.

My journey, which started with consulting on dozens of campuses, progressed to changing the course of a department and now involves transforming the shape of a university, has taught me that an intersectional approach is critical if we are going to serve our students effectively. While academic retention efforts and identity development programs are powerful forces that shape the student experience, campus administrators often seem to be missing a key set of strategies that come from the intersection of these two fields. In the current model, students are either being engaged through retention efforts in an identity-neutral framework or in diversity and cultural spaces in an identity-centered framework. This approach often underserves students who are at risk for not making adequate academic progress because of the identities they carry and how these identities shape the way they experience a campus.

Let me bring this problem to life through a hypothetical example: fresh-men orientation, an intervention that has come to be seen as a key retention investment. Imagine a well-designed, two-day summer orientation program at an institution whose administrators understand the connection between strong onboarding and strong student persistence in the first year. Now, imagine Christina, a first-generation Latina student, attending this orienta-tion program with her parents ,who possess only limited English capabilities. If the orientation program is designed using an identity-neutral framework, its one-size-fits-all model might run the risk of deeply underserving Christina and her family. For example, an identity-neutral two-day orientation might not have any breakout sessions for first-generation families, where deeper conversations can take place among university representatives, families, and students about the shifting nature of moving from high school to college and the level of family support necessary to foster success in this next phase of life. If Christina's parents assume that college will be just like high school, then their expectations might limit Christina's ability to pursue a leadership position on campus or to study abroad at some point during her undergradu-ate years. Furthermore, an identity-neutral orientation might underserve stu-dents of color by not offering any engagement that prepares them to enter a predominantly White institutional culture. Special sessions that involve students of color and their families in college readiness practices, such as asking professors for help early and often, taking advantage of the campus multicultural center, and finding a mentor in freshmen year, could make a huge difference in Christina's positive first-year experience and her abil-ity to maintain a high grade point average (GPA) and complete the correct amount of credits. Again, an identity-neutral orientation program would not offer these additional sessions. It's not that campuses are without the cross-cultural knowledge to offer intersectional, identity-conscious student success programs, but rather the expertise on students of color and first-generation students is often compartmentalized in diversity units that are not considered part of the retention and student success architecture and, therefore, are not included in the design of orientation programs from the ground up.

In the nearly 10 years I've been visiting campuses around the country, I've seen a steady growing interest in student success and meaningful diver-sity engagement. Yet, I also continue to see these two key investments lie in silos at most institutions, resulting in identity-neutral retention efforts and compartmentalized cultural enrichment programs. These two distinct paths are a missed opportunity and a crisis as our nation faces a growing opportunity gap between students of color and low-income students and their more privileged peers. In this book I contend that an intersectional,

identity-conscious approach to retention and student success is the missing ingredient in the national movement to not simply admit a more diverse group of students into higher education but to support these students so they can thrive and graduate on time. The next section of this introduction contextualizes the student success landscape of higher education, specifically focusing on the opportunity gap, before concluding with a clear discussion of what identity-conscious practices are and their potential to revolutionize our efforts.

Closing the Opportunity Gap: A National Imperative

If you've been reading the newspapers, blogs, and trade magazines on higher education in the new millennium, you've probably noticed a growing, intense focus on college completion. After several decades of asking, Who's going to college? we have begun to ask, Who's succeeding in college? The answers are often shocking and disturbing. More than half of our nation's college students who attempt obtaining a bachelor's degree end up completing one within six years of starting. Even more distressing are the numbers from the community college sector, with less than a third of our students obtaining a credential within three years of starting (Brusi, Cruz, Engle, & Yeado, 2012). When taken as a whole, these facts shake the core of the cliché that college is the best four years of your life. To be less tongue in cheek, the statistics turn back the mirror of accountability on higher education and challenge us to start making dramatic, transformative shifts in the way we engage students so they can be more successful in community college and baccalaureate-granting institutions.

Thankfully, higher education leaders have not been passively watching our students fall behind. In response to the national conversation on student success, leaders from a number of colleges and universities came together in 2007 to design a national effort to accomplish two goals: increase the total number of college graduates in the country and ensure that the diversity of those graduates more accurately reflects the current demographics of the country's high school graduates. They branded this national campaign the Access to Success (A2S) Initiative, received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, and invited their fellow college and university leaders to join the campaign. These leaders pledged that "by 2015 . . . their systems will halve the gaps in college-going and college success that separate African-American, Latino, and American-Indian students from white and Asian-American students—and low-income students from more affluent students" (Engle & Lynch, 2009). Soon after the

beginning of this effort, 312 two-year and four-year institutions had joined the movement to focus on outcomes and not just admission. Today, 22 multicampus university systems are represented in the A2S initiative, with more than 3.5 million students attending these institutions (Brusi et al., 2012). The A2S initiative is the largest concentrated effort to change the outcomes of higher education, now representing one in five students attending institutions of higher education in the United States (Brusi et al., 2012).

According to the A2S midterm report, there have been tremendous gains on the access goals of the initiative, and as a result, students of color and low-income students are being admitted to a variety of institutions at greater rates than before the initiative was launched (Brusi et al., 2012). When examining the student success goals, however, a number of gaps remain in the achievement patterns of various student groups. For example, only one in five underreppresented freshmen in community colleges earn a certificate or associate's degree, compared to one in three of their peers (Brusi et al., 2012).[2] In baccalaureate-granting institutions, underrepresented minorities are 16% less likely than their peers to earn a degree within six years (Brusi et al., 2012). Low-income students also face achievement gaps at community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions across the country.

One extremely provocative finding of the midterm report is that underrepresented minorities and low-income students have actually experienced success gains at all institution types—but their gains have not kept pace with those of their peers (Brusi et al., 2012). For example, if an institution manages to improve its overall success metrics by 10%, but underrepresented minorities and low-income students were previously behind by 14%, then even after everyone improves by 10%, the 14% gap still remains firmly intact. The A2S midterm report states,

> It is important to note, however, that more than 60 percent of systems have improved graduation rates for underrepresented minorities and more than 40 percent have done so for low-income students. . . . success gaps have remained stubborn not because success rates have not improved for underrepresented students, but rather because they have not improved fast enough relative to their peers. (p. 13)

To close the opportunity gap, institutions must invest in strategies and programs that are specifically designed to promote student success in the populations that are lagging behind.

Taken as a whole, the A2S initiative is the best study we have of the current terrain of risk and success in higher education. The results from the midterm report (Brusi et al., 2012) demonstrate that the challenge facing us

Shifting the Discourse: From Achievement to Opportunity

Although much of the national discourse frames the gap problem as an achievement gap, I prefer to join the growing trend to focus on the opportunity gap instead. This is not simply a semantic shift but a strategic attempt to shift the locus of the problem from individual students and their collegiate achievement to institutions of higher education and their administrators' willingness to capitalize on the enormous opportunity they have to empower every student they admit to thrive in college and graduate in a timely manner. A narrow focus on student achievement comes at the exclusion of questions of institutional responsibility to address policy, systems, and environmental factors that contribute to student achievement or failure. Because campus admissions criteria are supposed to be linked to a student's ability to succeed within the rigor of a specific curricular environment, every admitted student should have the opportunity to become engaged on campus; make meaningful connections with faculty, staff, and peers; and graduate ready for postbaccalaureate life. The opportunity gap represents the reality that higher education is currently structured in a way that produces significantly lower outcomes for students of color, low-income college students, and first-generation students.

is in closing the opportunity gap for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. However, to do this, we are going to need a different playbook from the standard retention and student success manual colleges and universities appear to be using today.

Identity-Conscious Approaches: The Missing Ingredient

I began this Introduction with a reflection on the current landscape of retention and identity investments at most colleges and universities: identity-neutral, campuswide retention efforts that are distinct and separate from identity-centered diversity and cultural enrichment programs. These two parallel paths represent a missed opportunity to take the depth of knowledge and skill from diversity and cultural programs and employ them in a retention and student success ethos. We must provide students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students with retention and success services and programs that are designed with their identities in mind.

The foundational philosophy of this book is that programs and services have to begin with a clear picture of who they are trying to serve before the curriculum or plan is developed. If an identity-neutral framework is employed in the program design, then students whose identities are inextricably tied to their risk will be underserved by these efforts. Consider the orientation example from the start of this Introduction. Christina's Latina identity and her first-generation status are at the heart of how she experiences orientation. An identity-neutral orientation that ignores Christina's key components will not serve as a student success mechanism for her onboarding and first-year experience. Rather, Christina and her family might actually leave orientation feeling overwhelmed, insecure, and underprepared for making a successful transition to college. The findings of the A2S midterm report (Brusi et al., 2012) support this philosophy as the vast majority of the efforts under way at member institutions are identity-neutral in nature, and the resulting gains for privileged students have outpaced the gains for marginalized students.

In developing the foundational philosophy of this book, I found myself interacting with numerous colleagues throughout the country who work in diversity and cultural centers whose administrators have struggled to understand the difference between what they already do and this alternative framework of identity consciousness. To offer some clarity, I've termed the basic pedagogy and curricula of diversity and cultural centers *identity centered* to distinguish it from identity-conscious pedagogy, curricula, strategy, or practice. Identity consciousness is not the same thing as identity-centered engagement. In an identity-centered program or curriculum, the identity itself is the focus of the intervention. For example, a Latino men's program can be developed as an identity-centered initiative if the outcomes of the program are all tied to a deeper or more complex understanding of one's Latinoness or masculinity. Alternatively, this same program can be an identity-conscious student success program if it is designed from the ground up with the students' racial and gender identities in mind, but the intended outcomes are tied to student success, such as term-to-term credit completion, yearly persistence, engagement in high-impact practices, or timely graduation. The identity-conscious student success program for Latino men might start with what appears to be a traditional diversity or cultural engagement curriculum, but this only establishes a foundation for further dialogue and skill building tied to retention and student success.

Although the difference between identity consciousness and identity centeredness might appear to be semantic on the surface, it can manifest itself in a profound way when examining outcomes. Identity-centered initiatives in cultural centers can often be considered successful if the right number of students are involved in the program, if they gain a greater appreciation for

their cultural identity as well as other concepts of power and privilege, and if key learning outcomes are met. The success metrics for an identity-conscious retention or student success program must be tied to institutional success metrics, such as yearly persistence, high-performance GPA groupings, or timely graduation rates. These markedly different outcomes demand appropriately different uses of time and energy in a student-focused program.

How to Use This Book

This book is for higher education professionals in every arena of the academy: student affairs educators, faculty, and staff in academic affairs or enrollment management units. It is intended to be a practical how-to manual for higher education professionals who are interested in closing the opportunity gap at their institutions. Each chapter offers a different identity-conscious student success curriculum or strategy, such as parent programs for students of color and low-income students, women of color leadership development curricula, and hunger and homelessness initiatives for low-income students. In the spirit of applicability, the contributing authors focus their chapters on usable program development guides rather than lengthy reviews of the literature or research. There is a rich scholarly tradition on college students, retention, and identity development. This book is intentionally focused on the how-to practicality of program implementation to respond to the crisis higher education is facing rather than on research and theory. It is our hope that you'll find this book inspirational and pragmatic and that reading it will provoke you to take action and create change.

This edited volume can be read as a whole, cover to cover, or if you are a higher education professional with an immediate need, you can flip to a chapter to access information about a specific population or curriculum. Because higher education is a very diverse landscape, these chapters are designed for professionals at community colleges, access-focused comprehensive universities, research-focused universities, and small liberal arts institutions. Often retention and student success efforts are considered irrelevant at elite, highly selective institutions that often have 95% four-year graduation rates. However, this book is particularly useful in these contexts as students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students often face numerous psychosocial risks that can dampen their engagement in, and enjoyment of, the college experience at elite institutions. The strategies and programs in this book can help students at elite institutions not just survive but thrive in higher education.

This book is also meant to help you take action on your campus, so each chapter ends with a list of action items that you can follow to launch a

particular strategy in your community. In an effort to establish a sustained dialogue on identity consciousness, student success, and closing the opportunity gap, we've also provided contributors' biographies at the end of this books, and we urge you to connect with them to begin a partnership for equity and change.

I hope you enjoy reading these chapters as much as I've loved collaborating with a passionate, skilled group of higher education professionals to create this book. Let's work together to ensure that the next century of American higher education is a century of success for all our students.

Notes

1.Throughout this introduction, I use *privileged* student or group member for individuals who carry identities that confer unearned advantages on them in the collegiate experience, such as Whites, wealthy people, or students whose parents have baccalaureate degrees from U.S. institutions.

2. A2S uses the term *underrepresented* to indicate Black and Latino students as well as low-income students. The issue of numerical representation as a measure of risk is complex and highly debated, as this framework frequently omits Asian American and Pacific Islander students from the analysis. While we are firmly committed to the inclusion in this book of Asian American and Pacific Islander students as students of color and students who face unique risks in the White institutional culture, the methodology of the A2S limits its focus to Black and Latino students as well as low-income White students.

References

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