Questions That Matter

SETTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA ON ACCESS AND SUCCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Report of the Social Science Research Council Project Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice

WITH SUPPORT FROM LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION
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Foreword

What does research tell us about the ability of all Americans to access, and succeed in, postsecondary education? What research needs to be done next to answer the questions that remain? This report, the product of the Social Science Research Council’s project, “Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice,” begins to answer these questions. It provides a brief overview of the research landscape over the past several decades and presents an agenda for future research by focusing on pressing questions that need to be addressed. American society and its future will be significantly shaped by our understanding—from both scholarly and practical origins—of how postsecondary education transitions work and why, too often, they do not work. These are questions that matter because our society needs answers if it is to make progress towards achieving postsecondary access and success for all citizens.

This report was principally authored by Sheri Ranis and Laura Stein from the Social Science Research Council and Alisa Cunningham and Jamie Merisotis from the Institute for Higher Education Policy. However, it is a reflection of intensive and extensive discussions, reports and research by a group of close to thirty scholars, researchers and practitioners. These individuals served on the Transitions Committee, Practitioners Advisory Group, and as authors of literature reviews; their names are provided in the appendices to this publication. As writers we could only capture a small percentage of the rich, complex, and comprehensive exchanges that our project participants provided. They are truly the authors of this report. We also offer special thanks to Lumina Foundation for Education for its support of the Transitions project. Two former research officers at Lumina Foundation worked closely with Transitions: Derek Price and Heather Wathington. Each of them receives special thanks for contributing enthusiasm as well as intellectual energy to our collective efforts.
Introduction

Over the past several years, there has been substantial national dialogue about transitions to postsecondary education, especially regarding the barriers faced by disadvantaged and underserved populations of students. These discussions have occurred in many arenas, from federal debates about the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, to state-level conversations formulated around structural budget problems, to strategic policymaking within colleges and universities regarding the recruitment and retention of a diverse student body. However, in a striking number of cases these discussions have not been informed by comprehensive research-based knowledge about the complex pathway that makes up the transition to postsecondary education. This is a situation of deep concern. Policy created in a research vacuum does not take into account the successes and failures of previous interventions, the possible new directions offered by evolving theories and models, or the myriad data and evidence that chart the complexities of the access and success story. In short, policymaking detached from the knowledge base is much less likely to achieve its goals.

Responding to the need for research to inform these national debates, the Social Science Research Council’s project, “Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice,” was designed to explore and document existing knowledge about transitions issues and strengthen the connections between research production and policy/practice. In partnership with nationally distinguished scholars, researchers, and higher education leaders, the project reports its findings here, beginning with the following propositions.

1) Higher education is crucial for the improvement of the social, economic, and political welfare of all Americans.

A postsecondary education makes a substantial difference in the lives of citizens who are able to enroll and attain a degree or credential. For individuals, the benefits in terms of employment opportunities and higher salaries are often cited. However, postsecondary education has an array of equally important benefits—public and private—for our society. These benefits range from increased tax revenue for federal and state governments and cost savings on social programs, to broader effects such as reduced crime and a greater tolerance of diversity.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that barriers to postsecondary opportunities challenge our fundamental democratic values. Lack of access inhibits the achievement of the economic and political security that individuals need to function as independent citizens. Moreover, barriers to postsecondary education can disrupt the social stability that
stems from a well-educated and prosperous population. Ultimately, when we educate an increasing proportion of our citizens, benefits accrue to our local communities and to the nation as a whole, as can be seen in Table 1.

2) **Higher education is not serving large segments of the American population.**

There are considerable demographic disparities in college enrollment and completion rates along the lines of race, socioeconomic status, gender and other important categories. Throughout this report we have included tables that serve as statistical snapshots of the crisis America faces in preparing, enrolling, and graduating students from postsecondary education. We know that Hispanic and African-American students are dropping out of high school at rates that are substantially higher than those of white students. High-income students enroll in college at much higher rates than low-income students. Finally, only half of all beginning students graduate with postsecondary degrees within six years, with much lower success rates among low-income and minority populations.

These facts, of course, only depict in broad terms the troubled segments of our population. There are sub-populations within these groups, such as African-American males and rurally located low-income youth, who face as great or greater difficulty in preparing, gaining access to and succeeding in postsecondary education.

These two propositions lead to a third and the most important assertion from the point of the Transitions Project:

3) **Research can identify problems, solutions, and conditions under which progress can take place to increase access and success in higher education.**

Good data, strong scholarship, and a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics behind the transition to college, are essential to improving equality of opportunity in higher education. The Transitions to College project participants believe that persistent inquiry is necessary about what causes these problems, what solutions have been devised, how well they work, and what conditions facilitate their implementation. Moreover, we need to seek this knowledge from a broad range of sources stemming from the multiple disciplines, methodologies, and analytic frames available to us. Without this type of synthesis, our understanding of college access and success will be hindered.

We must also recognize that major shifts in the infrastructure of postsecondary education and its use provide an important new context for research on college going. The past four decades have seen a sharp rise in the number of postsecondary institutions available to serve young Americans, large and growing attendance at two-year institutions rather
than four-year institutions, patterns of multiple-institution enrollment by students as a norm rather than an exception along with stop in/stop out behavior, and the rising participation of adults and returning students ("non-traditional" college goers) in postsecondary education. Currently only about a quarter of undergraduates can still be considered “traditional”—students who transition into college immediately after high school graduation, who attend exclusively full-time, who are financially dependent on their parents, and either do not work during the school year or work part-time.¹

Table 1: “The Array of Benefits to Higher Education”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PUBLIC</th>
<th>PRIVATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>• Increased Tax Revenues</td>
<td>• Higher Salaries and Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Greater Productivity</td>
<td>• Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased Consumption</td>
<td>• Higher Savings Levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased Workforce Flexibility</td>
<td>• Improved Working Conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decreased Reliance on Government Financial Support</td>
<td>• Personal/Professional Mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>• Reduced Crime Rates</td>
<td>• Improved Health/Life Expectancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased Charitable Giving/Community Service</td>
<td>• Improved Quality of Life for Offspring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased Quality of Civic Life</td>
<td>• Better Consumer Decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social Cohesion/Appreciation of Diversity</td>
<td>• Increased Personal Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Improved Ability to Adapt to</td>
<td>• More Hobbies, Leisure Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Use Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2002

What We Did—Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice

The Transitions to College Project was designed to bring together and clarify what we know about the shift from high school to college and careers from the various streams of social science research, and to frame and structure a policy-relevant research agenda focused on pressing areas of inquiry that have not yet been adequately addressed. The project aimed to spur the production of more policy-relevant and interdisciplinary research about how to improve higher education access and success for disadvantaged and underserved populations—including low-income students, students who are the first generation in their families to attend college, underrepresented minority and ethnic groups, and other populations who face barriers to this vital transition. The project also worked to identify a group of talented scholars and develop meaningful networks among them in order to facilitate cutting-edge, cross-disciplinary research in this arena.

In the fall of 2003, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) convened a multi-disciplinary committee of scholars and researchers to work on this set of tasks, as well as a Practitioner Advisory Group of higher education leaders to help keep the conversation grounded in real world policy concerns. Nearly eighteen months of research, debate, and discussion were put toward the generation of an agenda for new research on transitions issues that would contribute to scholarship as well as to policy and practice. Our efforts to come up with such an agenda are reflected in this document.

This report is also based on an investigation of the contemporary research literature pertaining to transitions. Because the issues surrounding college access and success are inherently complex, our agenda for new research had to draw on multiple disciplinary, methodological, and policy analysis sources. To do this, the Transitions to College Project commissioned reviews of the academic literature (published 1984 – present) in ten different fields and specialties, including American history, anthropology/ethnography, demography, economics, education research (K-12), education research (postsecondary), human development, law/legal studies, political science, and sociology. Each of these disciplines offered a unique perspective on postsecondary transitions and a distinct tradition of research in the field.

Throughout all of the project’s activities, we organized our understanding of postsecondary transition as an issue area using four overlapping, but generally distinctive topical areas: preparation, access, paying for college, and retention/success. These topical areas framed
our research agenda in a fashion that should aid the future translation of transitions research into a policy context.

- **Preparation.** Examining students’ academic and social preparation, and their accumulation of the information, knowledge, skills and attitudes required for postsecondary success is a fundamental step in the study of the transition to postsecondary education;

- **Access.** Researching what creates barriers to college going, who actually does and does not go, and where students choose to enroll or dropout is essential for understanding transition successes and failures among disadvantaged and underserved youth, as is determining what can be done in terms of policy and practice to eliminate these barriers;

- **Paying for college.** For postsecondary transitions to be maximized, it is important to study both students’ payment of postsecondary education costs and society’s investment in postsecondary education through financial aid and direct monetary support; and

- **Retention/ Success.** Completing courses of study and success in attaining a degree, credential, or improved knowledge are the ultimate tests of successful transitions, but also the least studied of the topical areas examined.

During the process of preparing this agenda and the literature reviews, the project participants also considered five dimensions or aspects of transitions issues that are meaningful frames for analysis: students, parents/families/communities, institutions, policy/evaluation and system-level analysis. Our proposed research agenda is presented within the context of these analytic dimensions in Appendix 1 to this report.

The analysis of the field-based literature reviews and extensive discussions and exchanges among project participants elucidated the gaps in research coverage and highlighted the shifts in the population and structures that make up the American educational system. These gaps and shifts pose new challenges for researchers to understand. Therefore, this agenda reflects the questions inadequately addressed or not approached by past academic work, as well as new questions stemming from newly acknowledged societal and educational realities.

We call for greater documentation, examination, and analysis of the influences, dynamics, and mechanisms at work in transition issue areas. The need for research that is rigorous, contextual, and creative is indisputable. The participants in the Transitions to College Project hope that this agenda will inspire greater investment in academic and policy inquiry on the part of federal agencies, state-level education governance bodies, private foundations, university research centers, and all research producing entities working on issues of postsecondary access and success.
Translation of this agenda into policy discussions will require active participation of both the academic and policy worlds. Researchers, particularly those within the academic disciplines, need incentives to focus their research on questions and topics that are useful to policy discussions given the constraints imposed by their disciplines and the tools and methods acceptable to social science. A targeted and rigorous research agenda that has stable sources of support will not only inform policy, but also encourage the crosstalk and collaboration among academic researchers, practical researchers, policymakers, and practitioners that is vital for progress in understanding transitions, and, ultimately, bring collaborative changes in policy and practice.
Questions that Matter

The following four sections—preparation, access, paying for college and retention/success—are organized in three parts. First, the context for the section’s topic is presented, laying out some brief trends and facts. Next, each section highlights some of the important gaps in knowledge that were uncovered by project participants. Finally, a selection of research questions is provided in order to stimulate future work in the various arenas of research in postsecondary education transitions.

PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

Who Gets Prepared for What and Why?

The Basic Realities

Preparation for postsecondary education is defined as the accumulation of knowledge and skills required for postsecondary success. A number of other factors also influence students’ transition into postsecondary education, such as expectations, family background, access to information, and availability of financial resources.

Preparation takes place in the schools that make up the American K-12 education system. Yet a large percentage of students fail to progress through that system and enter postsecondary school at the customary age of 18. While the percentage of the total population aged 18 to 24 years old who were high school graduates was estimated at about 82 percent in 2002, the percentage of traditionally underserved populations who reach this milestone is far lower—for example, 63 percent for Hispanics and 78 percent for Black, non-Hispanic high school graduates. Along with lower graduation rates, traditionally underserved populations also register relatively high rates of drop out from high school. Table 2 shows that, for the most recent year available, drop out rates are about seven times higher for students in the lowest income quartile than those in the highest quartile, are about three times higher for Hispanics than whites, and are double for African-American students in comparison to whites. At the same time, given the substantial proportion of students enrolled in postsecondary education who do not transition immediately from high school, preparation may also take place in the period between high school and college, whether through GED instruction or other educational experiences.

Along with the motivation to succeed, engagement with the learning process, and a deliberate plan for the future, students need

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2 As is the case for many ethnic groups, it is important to keep in mind that measures for Latino students differ by generational status and origin.


4 Note that dropout rates by income level and by race/ethnicity were calculated for slightly different age ranges, and are therefore not directly comparable.
skilled teachers, schools that are culturally-oriented and curricularly structured to nurture preparation for more advanced study, as well as confirmation from caring adults, peers, and community leaders regarding expectations about postsecondary goals. Reforms to our K-12 education system are ongoing through the federal No Child Left Behind initiative as well as many others at the state and local level. If these efforts are successful (and it is incumbent upon us to figure out which reforms work and for whom), they should lead to a larger body of students who are prepared to enter postsecondary education.

Table 2. High school drop out rate, by income level and race/ethnicity, 1993 to 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Race/ethnicity, 18 to 24 year olds</th>
<th>Income quartile, 16 to 24 year olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All 18 to 24 year olds</td>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-- Not available.

Note: Dropouts are persons who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school program, regardless of when they left school. People who have received GED credentials are counted as high school completers. Note that dropout rates by income level and by race/ethnicity were calculated for slightly different age ranges and are therefore not directly comparable.


Gaps and Questions Uncovered

The implications of the gaps regarding what is known about what students need and what they are achieving are clear: the purpose, structure, and accountability of schools—particularly high schools—and the links or lack of them between high school and postsecondary institutions, need to be re-thought. Project participants believe that research on the preparation phase of the transition to college needs to focus on the impact of school systems and education reform. Research must also consider practices within districts and schools such as teacher preparation, district-level reforms to reorient achievement toward postsecondary goals, information flows to students, and mentor/peer group relationships. Models of school organization that spur on transition—based both in middle schools and high schools—should also be an important focus of attention, as should both successful and unsuccessful cases of articulation between high school and postsecondary institutions.
Crucial Areas of Inquiry

Given the current realities of preparation for college a number of questions need to be addressed.

1. Can we demonstrate the effectiveness of academic preparation programs aimed at fostering college going and success among various disadvantaged and underserved subgroups? Examples of such programs include: dual enrollment programs, middle college, vocational/technical policies and innovations (including Tech Prep), bridge programs, and P-16 initiatives.

2. How has student experience and engagement with various direct and indirect K-12 school supports shaped school culture, college pathway formation, and college going among subgroups of students? These types of supports include curriculum enhancement, academic program options, student assessment, counseling, college information sharing including financing, and bridge experiences.

3. What is the impact of the institutional perspective(s) and actions of middle schools and high schools on the formation of college pathways, from developing students’ expectations and aspirations, to preparing students for entry and retention? The role of guidance counselors, teachers, and principals is particularly important for this study. These analyses should compare differences among subgroup populations and varying school contexts.

4. How do relationships with peer groups, mentors, significant adults, and community entities within and outside of high schools impact college preparation and expectations among subgroups of students?

5. How does adolescent identity formation among different racial/ethnic/gender/income groups and sub-groups impact attitudes toward college going?

6. How does family and community culture affect students’ perceptions and decisions about college, their academic ability, and their attainment as they move along the path to enrollment and begin postsecondary education?
ACCESS TO COLLEGE

Who Gets Access to What and in What Form?

Basic Realities

The Transitions to College Project participants define access as enrollment in postsecondary institutions for the purpose of a first degree or certification. Using this definition, there has been substantial examination of the current state of postsecondary access looking at entry by socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and gender. This information has provided evidence that while average enrollment rates have increased over the last thirty years (see Table 3), the gains have not been equally distributed across groups in society. For example, although the rate of low-income high school completers’ enrollment was higher than the rate for high-income students between 1973 and 2003, gaps in participation rates remain. In 2003, about 80 percent of high-income students enrolled in college in the fall after graduation, compared with 53 percent of low-income students. Therefore, significant gaps in college participation still exist between the overall population in comparison to low-income and racial/ethnic minority groups.

In its fullest sense, however, access means fairness not only in terms of the opportunity to enroll, but also in where and when enrollment takes place. Access must also take into account the differentiation in the quality and range of courses of study that are available to students. Different groups of students tend to enroll disproportionately in certain sectors of postsecondary education—in particular, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color are more likely to attend community colleges and for-profit institutions than are their counterparts. There are also the special contingencies and issues facing the growing numbers of cycling, returning, and adult students moving through the postsecondary system.

It is clear that there are multiple barriers to postsecondary access, including: institutional barriers presented by laws, policies, and regulations; the structure of K-12 education, as well as the complex system through which postsecondary education is delivered; parental background, familial, and cultural barriers; and individual-level dynamics. Within each of these categories of barriers there are multiple dimensions to consider that play out differently for each student: parental background, familial and personal expectations for success, the quality of academic preparation received, financial resources available, access to information about applications, programs of study and institutional choice, pressures associated with geographical location, realities of admissions requirements, and emotional, social, and cultural adjustment required by the first year of postsecondary schooling. Although it is difficult to capture the relative importance of each of these dimensions, it is clear that all play a role in students’ decisions to attend college.
Gaps and Questions Uncovered

There is a need for systematic research focused on how different disadvantaged and underserved groups have dealt with these various barriers. Basic questions about political will, representation, and policy intent must be examined. Moreover, it is important to consolidate best practices across the range of policy interventions over the past several decades to address these barriers to access and success.

Table 3: Percentage of high school completers enrolled in college the October following graduation, by race/ethnicity and family income, 1973 to 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Low income</th>
<th>Middle income</th>
<th>High income</th>
<th>White, non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black, non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Low income is the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes, high income is the top 20 percent, and middle income is the 60 percent in between. Includes those ages 16-24 completing high school in a given year. Other racial/ethnic groups are included in the total but not shown separately.

Crucial Areas of Inquiry

Gaps in research on access to postsecondary education raise a number of questions for the future.

1. How have reform-minded policy interventions affected college going among disadvantaged students? Examples of policy interventions might include small schools and high school reform models such as charter schools, advanced placement and college readiness curricula, and mandated testing.

2. What are the institutional contexts and histories of postsecondary institutions that have traditionally attracted large proportions of low-income students, including accredited and non-accredited proprietary institutions, technical institutes, community colleges and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)?

3. What best practices can be identified between and among high schools and colleges that leverage pathway integration in administrative and policy areas such as information sharing, assessments, curriculum, and credit accumulation?

4. How should we best understand the connections between political disenfranchisement and school quality within communities and their impact on postsecondary attainment? What circumstances must be in place in order for the convergence of interests and political leadership necessary for the adoption of new postsecondary education policies and practices in communities and at the state level to occur?

5. What is the impact of state-based policies and innovations on access to public postsecondary education? Both successful and unsuccessful policy experiments should be considered, including postsecondary financing schemes that could be scaled up for national use and other state-level policies (testing, admissions, state residency laws, etc.) aimed at improving access and retention.

6. To what degree does access to postsecondary education comport with the goals of civil rights laws and the U.S. Constitution?
Paying for College

How Do We Pay for Higher Education?

The Basic Realities
The financing of our postsecondary education system involves a partnership among five major groups of actors: 1) students and parents, who provide individual resources; 2) the federal government, which contributes primarily financial aid; 3) state and local governments, which provide a combination of direct appropriations to institutions and financial aid to students; 4) postsecondary institutions, which use resources from endowments or other sources; and, 5) private sector organizations, which offer both scholarships and loans to students and their families. Understanding the complexity and impact of this financing system requires a comprehensive consideration of both societal-level and individual-level costs and benefits.

The real price of enrolling in higher education—and costs of providing that education—have risen greatly in recent decades. It is also true that the availability and amounts of financial aid for students have increased. As can be seen in Table 4, in inflation-adjusted terms, the average price of attendance for undergraduates increased by about 28 percent between 1992-93 and 2003-04, while the average amount of aid for students who received aid increased at lower rates of less than 20 percent. At the same time, however, the structure of aid available to students has also shifted from need-based programs and practices to those that focus on non-need criteria.

Some headway has been made in calculating the costs and benefits associated with running our postsecondary educational system, including how these costs have changed over time, the variation in price and net price (after financial aid is taken into account) by postsecondary institution type and how that pricing is set, the shifting contributions made to these costs by federal and state governments, students and their families, and private enterprises, and the short term and long term effects of education on income.

Gaps and Questions Uncovered
Despite progress in quantifying costs, there is less understanding about how cost variation and returns differ by state, by major/field of student specialization, or, for that matter, what it costs to pay for postsecondary success on the part of underrepresented groups. In addition, less is known about the different costs and returns associated with need-based and so-called merit-based aid and the state of family savings for postsecondary education. Students and families deserve access to the most accurate information about college costs, including the price of attending college after financial aid is considered. There is also a striking lack of attention to the calculation of social returns to
Table 4: Changes in undergraduate tuition and fees, price of attendance, and selected financial aid average amounts, 1992-93 to 2003-04

postsecondary education or pursuit of a fuller understanding of how to measure efficiency in postsecondary operations. The creative use of existing data resources and the collection of new data must take place to help address these gaps.
Crucial Areas of Inquiry

A better understanding of costs, prices, and financial aid would benefit from several avenues of research. For example:

1. How has demand for need-based aid changed over time, and how have these demand rates differed across socio-demographic groups? What explains these differences?

2. How do different types of aid (need, merit, loans, work study) affect college access and success among students from various social/economic demographic backgrounds, particularly among groups becoming more demographically significant such as recent immigrants? In addition, how do these various types of aid work together? Of particular interest is the impact of aid type on the location and duration of college participation.

3. What constitutes the full net price of college (using both actual and hidden cost accounting) for different populations of students?

4. To what extent do credit constraints and income level directly and indirectly affect college enrollment and success?

5. What is the effect of declining state and federal support to public higher education on institutions and students in terms of institutional mission and student choice? In particular, what is the impact on enrollment?
RETENTION/SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

What Contributes to Two-Year and Four-Year Degree Completion?

The Basic Realities
The topic of postsecondary success is of great significance for transition studies, but it is the least studied and understood area of the four aspects of transition considered by the Transitions to College Project. Measures of degree completion indicate large gaps in performance between first-generation students and students whose parents attained postsecondary degrees, between white students and students of color, and between low and high income students (Table 5). Similar patterns are true for other disadvantaged and underserved groups. The disparities are also evident across combinations of background characteristics; for example, male beginning students who were African-American, Hispanic or Asian were less likely than their female counterparts to attain bachelor’s degrees after six years.

There also are differences in completion rates for students with differing goals, enrollment patterns, employment patterns, and other factors. Just as preparation for college suggests a particular level of skill accumulation, retention and success in postsecondary education programs suggest the acquisition of a higher order of knowledge and skills that allow the individual to either enter the workforce or continue on to more advanced graduate-level education. The achievement of a first certification or degree from a postsecondary institution remains the best and most powerful indicator available to signal readiness to work and train further, although non-traditional student trajectories and enrollment at multiple institutions during the path toward a degree make this harder than ever to track. At the same time, it is important to recognize that certain groups of students, such as adult learners, may have more specific goals for their enrollment in postsecondary education.

Gaps and Questions Uncovered
Both student outcomes and institutional behavior are of concern and need further study. The increase in drop-in, dropout, and transfers among students in young adulthood complicates the postsecondary retention/success picture, as does the recognition that for many under-represented groups, access to and success in postsecondary education may be required and sought later in the life cycle. Adult learners are an increasingly important element in our postsecondary education system. Postsecondary institutions are sensitive to these shifts in demand, and have responded with new programs and delivery systems, but there is little attempt to consolidate and analyze the outcomes of these efforts. In addition, there is room for research on how policies such as transfer articulation agreements impact institutional and student behavior.

Enhanced and better integrated data collection will be vital in support of these new studies, especially with regard to designing better
Table 5: Percentage distribution of 1995-96 beginning postsecondary students according to the highest degree attained and 6-year persistence status by 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Still enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All beginning students</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native *</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some postsecondary</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent family income percentile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest quartile</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle quartiles</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest quartile</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance intensity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always full-time</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always part-time</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of first institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Rounds to zero.

* Sample size was too low to break out by gender.

Note: Details may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Total persistence and attainment rates include students who transferred out of the first institution they attended.

measures of both system-wide student persistence and institutional retention that take into account the comprehensive picture of postsecondary enrollment. Certificate/degree completion cannot, unfortunately, always be equated with knowledge and skill acquisition across the board because our postsecondary system exhibits so much variation in terms of the quality of instructional delivery and resources. The high degree of specialization in majors and concentrations also complicates matters. However, it is crucial to acquire the data and means to track advanced skill accumulation in such generic and vital categories as critical thinking, written and oral communication, and computational skills both for purposes of remediation as well as to be able to verify the attainment of appropriate postsecondary-level knowledge and skills on the part of all students. Ideally, these types of outcome measures would complement attainment-oriented measures of retention and graduation.
Crucial Areas of Inquiry

Given the current gaps in knowledge about student outcomes and institutional behavior leading to success in postsecondary education, there are a number of opportunities for future research that would be constructive in developing future strategies for improvement.

1. What kinds of generic skill accumulation matter for degree completion? What kinds of metrics should be used to monitor and measure attainment of these advanced skills?

2. What actions by postsecondary institutions facilitate postsecondary success? These might include instructional resources, student programming, faculty mix, or investment strategies. How do institutional resources and inputs such as policy, academic culture and organizational structures created to support student success, affect college retention and success? How do these vary by institutional category?

3. How does the phenomenon of transfer work between and among high schools and postsecondary institutions? This includes mechanisms such as comprehensive transfer advising, articulation agreements, common course numbering, and university resource centers for students located at high schools and community colleges.

4. What do we know about the effect of curriculum, pedagogy, and major specialization on college retention and success and its variation between and among postsecondary institution categories?

5. How do peer group relationships and mentor relationships (both naturally occurring and program prompted) work for college students? How do these interface with postsecondary success?

6. How do local and state imperatives shift and impact policy and practice concerning success? Examples such as remediation and transfer policies at public institutions can be examined to illuminate the interactions and dynamics of policy and student outcomes.
Research Imperatives

The research agenda highlighted in the previous sections represents a vision of the types of efforts that could make a true impact on the development and assessment of postsecondary education policy and outcomes. In developing this agenda, the efforts of the project participants focused on determining what is known and what has changed in order to be able to look ahead and identify what the future focus of both academic and applied research should be. Along the way, project participants came to some general conclusions about what kind of research should be encouraged and how best to accomplish that kind of work. These views coalesced as a series of research imperatives that are a key part of the Transitions Project’s message about new directions in research.

We want to see consistent and clear use of terms and definitions by researchers, increased use of longitudinal studies and mixed methods designs, expanded and creatively linked data flows, and new concentration on disaggregated, population-specific studies as well as systemic or macro-level studies. We would like to see contributions from all of the various academic disciplines doing research in postsecondary education transitions, including cross-disciplinary sharing of information and approaches. We hope that academic and practical researchers can work together to translate the findings of new research efforts into the context of policy discussions. Finally, we believe researchers should acknowledge the need to make the case for postsecondary education and consider doing so a research challenge of vital importance.

**Better classifications and conceptualizations of postsecondary education**

Inquiry about transitions to college and postsecondary success requires better classifications and conceptualizations of contemporary postsecondary education. We are calling for a more conceptual and reflective approach to notions of access, retention, success, and opportunity that takes into account the multiple pathways individuals take to postsecondary attainment and acknowledges the variability of how these terms are defined by different consumers, communities, and policymakers.

**Incorporation of powerful research designs, mixed methods, and comprehensive data**

In order to understand the functions of a complex, multi-tiered educational system, we need to marshal our most powerful research tools. We call for the following:

- **An increased emphasis on targeted longitudinal research designs, reflecting both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with sufficiently large samples to allow for sub-group comparisons;**
Movement toward the establishment of nationally representative databases that permit student-level, institutional, regional, state-level, and national analyses;

Encouragement of studies of the role of age, timing, and life cycle using demographic methods, including linking data sets on employment and health to postsecondary educational attainment;

Demonstration and evaluation projects that consider program and policy interventions and their ability to fill both specific goals for underserved populations as well as impact broader system-level change; and,

The use of mixed-method research designs in these kinds of studies.

Using these research methods will strengthen the context for research on postsecondary transitions. At the same time, we know that descriptive statistics have a place in the presentation of research results given the desire of policymakers to see clear, easily understandable data. We believe descriptive statistics must be developed and set in a framework that refers to the more rigorous research methods so that the significance of the research is not misinterpreted.

Social heterogeneity and under-researched populations

The complex social and economic variables shaping transitions require examinations of racial, class, ethnic, gender, and special population classifications to generate better understanding about how increasing social heterogeneity influences postsecondary education outcomes. Traditionally, disadvantaged populations have been understood in terms of their status as students from low-income backgrounds or being the first-generation to attend college. Yet numerous other barriers to postsecondary transitions exist, many but not all of which overlap with these conventional definitions.

It is essential, then, that researchers make appropriate and contextualized comparisons of college access and success among populations that are either underserved or face unique barriers. These populations include but are not limited to the following:

- Asian-Americans
- African-Americans
- Native Americans
- Dropouts/pushouts
- Undocumented students
- Urban youth
- Rural youth
- Foster children
- Adopted children
- English as second language learners
- Court supervised minors
- Incarcerated populations
- Latinos
- Immigrants
- Migrants
- GLBT5
- Disabled populations
- Children in poverty level families
- Adult learners

5 GLBT refers to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered population.
We also urge the pursuit of inter- and intra-group comparisons and the consideration of the impact of socioeconomic status (SES), gender, linguistic status, family status, and other cross-cutting variables on members of the groups listed above.

It is important to note that some of these groupings are not terribly informative or useful for unmasking important differences in access and outcomes, unless they are properly disaggregated by national origin group and generation (for example: African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos). In other groupings, more information is needed about the differential impact and interaction between multiple characteristics that have been identified as being barriers to access and achievement (for example, the interplay of language and ethnicity for immigrant youth). Some categories are valuable as comparisons that might help untangle key variables such as race and family (for example, adopted and foster children.) Other groups are important to examine because they are the focus of specific policies, programs, and interventions that need to be studied (for example, urban and rural youth, incarcerated populations, welfare recipients, and disabled populations). Finally, there are categories that are emerging as new populations of interest in postsecondary participation about which little is known (for example, lagging African-American and Latino male postsecondary entry and success).

**Incorporating system perspectives**

Studies that look at the interplay between the larger forces or dynamics at work in transitions issues should make up a crucial line of work, yet they are almost nonexistent in the contemporary research literature. Examinations of the interactions of demographics, governmental policies, institutional behavior, and individual reactions, or work that takes a full system view of the transition between high school and postsecondary experiences are largely absent. However, education policy and practice is not determined in isolation from wider societal trends, public policies, local factors, and the interactions among them. Studies of particular and persistent systemic structural barriers such as under-funded school districts, poor student preparedness, housing/community impacts, poor health conditions, and shifting labor market opportunities at the community, regional, or societal level can explore the ramifications for educational opportunity and the impact on students, institutions, and policy. Other studies that fit this category might include examinations of the interaction of postsecondary institutional responses and student responses to shifts in federal policy approaches to poverty, health, and labor. It will be important for researchers stretching themselves in this direction to understand that these various system perspectives push beyond customary understandings of higher education’s structures, operations, and outcomes and ask for creative
thinking about how these publicly-situated institutions evolve and interact in a complex society.

**Communicating the bottom line**
The larger purpose of the creation and accumulation of better quality knowledge is the pursuit of improvements in policies and practices involved in transition/attainment. The research community needs to consciously link its work to achieving society’s goals for the postsecondary system. In a sense, the research community needs to set the context for the communication of that work to the policy world. This would involve active collaboration among academic researchers, practical researchers, and policymakers to help further this goal.

It is vital to examine what constitutes social returns to higher education at the individual, institutional, and community levels. Examples of this kind of inquiry might include community impact studies on the presence of higher education institutions and the links with local public health and safety; exploration of the multiple compelling public interests and social returns of a diverse postsecondary student body as these are played out in legal standards and practice; or, analyses of the variations in economic benefits/returns to higher education for individuals originating from different tiers of postsecondary institutions, different areas of study, or from varied pathways to postsecondary education (transfers, variations in time to degree attainment).
In Closing

The Transitions to College Project aims to spur the production of more policy relevant and interdisciplinary research about how to improve higher education access and success for disadvantaged and underserved populations.

By outlining a new research agenda and highlighting a series of research imperatives to guide future work, the Transitions Project hopes to contribute to the many ongoing discussions by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners committed to improving postsecondary education access and success. Next steps for the project include disseminating this report to as wide an audience as possible, as well as identifying a group of talented scholars and developing meaningful networks among them in order to facilitate cutting-edge, cross-disciplinary research in this arena.

Participants in the Transitions to College Project hope to stimulate progress along a number of dimensions, including an expansion of the theories and models that provide a foundation for research in postsecondary education transitions; an improved working relationship between academic researchers, practical researchers, and policymakers; better application of academic research for policy purposes; and the broader dissemination of that in-depth knowledge to policy and practice.

All of this is in pursuit of the ultimate goal: to improve postsecondary access and success for all Americans.
Appendices:

1. Committee on Transitions to College, Practitioner Advisory Group
2. Authors of Transitions to College Project Literature Reviews
3. Research agenda topics re-sorted by subjects of study: students, parents/families/communities, institutions, policy, and systemic analysis
4. Examples of research priorities for the social science disciplines
5. Report, website, and publications of the Transitions Project
APPENDIX 1:
Membership of the Transitions Committee and Practitioners Advisory Group

COMMITTEE ON TRANSITIONS TO COLLEGE
Kevin Dougherty, Columbia University
Luis Fraga, Stanford University
Margaret Gibson, University of California, Santa Cruz
Patricia King, University of Michigan
Barbara Lee, Rutgers University
Jamie Merisotis, Institute for Higher Education Policy
David Mustard, University of Georgia
Michael Nettles, Educational Testing Service
Margaret Terry Orr, Columbia University
Julie Reuben, Harvard University
Barbara Schneider, University of Chicago
Claude Steele, Stanford University
Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University
William Trent, University of Illinois

PRACTITIONERS ADVISORY GROUP
Jacquelyn Belcher, Georgia Perimeter College
Gordon Davies, National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy
Alfred Herrera, UCLA Center for Community College Partnerships
Alice Ilchman, Jeanette K. Watson Fellows Program
APPENDIX 2:
Transitions to College Project
Literature Reviews

*Summaries of the literature review essays are available at:

**American History**
Scott Gelber, Harvard Graduate School of Education

**Anthropology**
Jill Peterson Koyama, Teachers College, Columbia University

**Demography**
Vida Maralani, University of California, Los Angeles

**Economics**
Bridget Terry Long, Harvard Graduate School of Education

**Education Research (K-12)**
Anne-Marie Nuñez, University of California, Los Angeles

**Education Research (Higher Education)**
Deborah Faye Carter, University of Michigan
Sara Goldrick-Rab, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Rachelle Winkle Wagner, Indiana University

**“Fifth Sector” Research**
Derek Price, Independent Consultant

**Human Development**
Anastasia Hansen, University of Minnesota

**Law/Legal Studies**
Jesse Perez Mendez, University of Texas
Karen Miksch, University of Minnesota

**Political Science**
Hawley Fogg-Davis, Temple University

**Sociology**
Ruth Lopez-Turley, University of Wisconsin
Regina Deil-Amen, Pennsylvania State University

*Forthcoming
APPENDIX 3: Research Agenda Topics Re-sorted by Subjects of Study

This appendix provides a distinct perspective on potential research topics for postsecondary education transitions, by sorting the research questions by the units of analysis: students, parents/families/communities, institutions, policies, and system-wide issues. The importance of these perspectives came out of discussions with scholars, researchers, and postsecondary education leaders throughout the duration of the Transitions to College Project.

RESEARCH TOPICS ON STUDENTS:

1. Examine how stratification by ability, gender, race, and other student characteristics affects college outcomes.

2. Document and analyze student experience and engagement with various direct and indirect middle school and high school supports (curriculum, program options, assessment, counseling, college information sharing including financing, and bridge experiences) and their impact on school culture, college pathway formation and college going by subgroup.

3. Examine adolescent identity formation among different racial/ethnic/gender/income groups and sub-groups so that we can identify how college attitudes are formed among different populations of students.

4. Explore how access to accurate, timely, and easily accessible information about the costs and benefits of education and college preparation affects access and success in college for different student populations.

5. Examine how different types of aid (need, merit, loans, work study) affect college access and success of students from various demographic backgrounds.

6. Explore how take-up rates for need-based aid changed over time and how these rates differ across demographic groups. What explains these differences?

7. Analyze the economic benefits/returns to higher education for individuals matriculating from different tiers of institutions and different areas of study, as well as from varied pathways (transfer, time to attainment).
RESEARCH TOPICS ON PARENTS/FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES

1. Examine how family and community culture affect students’ perceptions and decisions about college, as well as their impact on academic ability and attainment once students are engaged in postsecondary education.

2. Study peer group relationships, mentor relationships and community entities within and outside of high schools and how they impact college preparation and expectations. Concurrently, examine peer group relationships and mentor relationships for college students and how these interface with postsecondary success.

3. Create more demonstration projects that link schools, families, and peers that target cohorts of students in subgroups of class and race/ethnicity.

4. Examine how the transition to college is affected by student and family culture. For example, how early in the process do children/parents make the decision to go to college (or not)?

5. Study the impact of families, parents, and peers on financing and college retention disaggregated by class, race/ethnicity, and other key subgroups.

RESEARCH TOPICS ON INSTITUTIONS

1. Analyze the institutional histories of postsecondary institutions including accredited and non-accredited proprietary institutions, particularly those that deal with specialty populations, such as technical institutes, two-year colleges, and HBCUs.

2. Document the institutional perspective and actions of middle schools and high schools (particularly the role of guidance counselors, teachers, and principals). Determine their impact on college pathway formation from developing students’ expectations and aspirations, to preparing students for entry and retention. These analyses should be undertaken as comparisons of differences among subgroup populations and varying school contexts.

3. Document institutional perspectives and actions taken by postsecondary institutions (including instructional resources, student programming, faculty mix, and investment strategies) to facilitate and support postsecondary success.

4. Examine the practices between and among high schools and colleges, drawing on institutional theory, to identify ways to leverage pathway integration through information sharing, assessments, curriculum, and credit accumulation.

5. Document how teachers in grades 6-12 develop their knowledge about college and how they form expectations for their students through teacher preparation, other supports, and personal experiences. How do they activate their knowledge sharing in teaching and informal advising?

6. Evaluate how institutional resources and inputs such as policy, academic culture, and organizational structures created to support student success affect college retention and success.

7. Analyze the phenomenon of transfer in the context of inter-institutional relationships.
RESEARCH TOPICS ON POLICY:

1. Examine the connections between political disenfranchisement and school quality within communities and their impact on postsecondary attainment, through analyses of both K-12 and public higher education.

2. Analyze the convergence of interests and political leadership that is required for policy change and adoption in communities and at the state level.

3. Investigate the impact of policy interventions that indirectly positively or negatively impact subgroup population differences in college going as well as affect postsecondary institutional behavior such as desegregation, choice and charter schools, accountability (including NCLB), small schools, and high school reform models.

4. Investigate policy successes with impacts on students and institutions taken into account – dual and concurrent enrollment, middle college, vocational/technical policies and innovations (including Tech Prep), bridge programs and P-16 initiatives – in directly targeting college going for various subgroups and in fostering traditional and non-traditional college going and success.

5. Study the effect on institutions and students of declining state and federal appropriations to public higher education in terms of institutional mission and student choice.

6. Examine state-based policies and innovations, both successful and unsuccessful, and their impact on access to public postsecondary education. This would include postsecondary financing schemes that could be scaled up for national use and other state-level policies (testing, admissions, state residency laws, etc.) that are aimed at improving access and retention.

7. Explore the multiple compelling public interests and social returns of a diverse student body as these are played out in legal standards and practice.

8. Evaluate the degree to which access to postsecondary education comports with the goals of civil rights laws and the U.S. Constitution.

RESEARCH TOPICS WITH SYSTEM-WIDE PERSPECTIVES:

1. Explore the effects of college ranking systems on individual and institutional decision-making.

2. Create better distinctions and measures concerning individual, institutional, and community returns from postsecondary education.

3. Study persisting systemic structural barriers such as under-funded school districts, poor student preparedness, housing/community impacts, and shifting labor market opportunities at the community, regional, and societal level to be able to look at the ramifications for educational opportunity and the impact on students, institutions, and policy.
4. Study the interaction of postsecondary institutional responses and student responses to shifts in the social system such as federal policy approaches to poverty, health, and labor issues.

5. Analyze the economic benefits/returns to higher education for individuals matriculating from different tiers of institutions and different areas of study, as well as from varied pathways (transfer, time to attainment).

6. Evaluate how structural and system level-barriers such as credit constraints and income level directly affect college enrollment and success.
APPENDIX 4:  
Selected Examples of Research Priorities for the Social Science Disciplines

AMERICAN HISTORY  
Work needed on:
- The social costs and benefits of institutional stratification and expansion in the postsecondary sector;
- Comparing educational experiences of both well studied and understudied populations in terms of biculturalism, community control and social integration; and,
- The impact of institutional prestige/status on the content of student knowledge and the post-graduation value of a college diploma.

ANTHROPOLOGY/ETHNOGRAPHY  
Work needed on:
- The role of social class in college going and other more nuanced studies that push past commonly used racial, ethnic, and gender classifications;
- The milieu and cultural contexts perpetuated within postsecondary settings and their impact on sub-groups of concern; and,
- The social construction of practices and policies that perpetuate stratification, such as sorting tools (testing, tracking) employed during both secondary and postsecondary schooling periods.

DEMOGRAPHY  
Work needed on:
- The role of age, timing of entry, and life cycle in postsecondary educational attainment;
- Public policy interventions that target different stages in the lifecourse and how these influence college going; and,
- Accumulating detailed longitudinal data sets that will facilitate the use of demographic methods.
ECONOMICS
Work needed on:

- Analytic testing of traditional demand models taking into account imperfect information as played out in higher education choice situations;
- The differential effect of aid on individuals and groups by race, gender and age, such as the role of excessive loan burden and its longer-term consequences on careers, family and marriage for different groups and populations; and,
- The returns to non-traditional pathways in postsecondary education such as community college degrees and certification for groups differentiated by race, gender, age, and other categories.

EDUCATION RESEARCH K-12
Work needed on:

- The role of K-12 contextual and institutional factors on college access and success;
- Evaluation of high school reform models’ impact on college readiness and success;
- Evaluation of pre-college access and preparation programs; and,
- Longitudinal studies following K-12 students past college entry, with particular attention to understudies groups such as Native Americans and students with disabilities.

EDUCATION RESEARCH (13+)
Work needed on:

- Conceptualizing and modeling the multitude of transitions into and within college, with attention to new structural and behavioral realities presented by new populations such as adult and distance learners;
- Testing models of retention against different subgroups including newly emerging populations of interest such as adult and distance learners; and,
- Investigating the institutional factors that affect college success for subgroups of students, particularly in large public universities and community colleges.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
Work needed on:

- Meta-analyses and more integrative literature reviews about best practices in counseling programs, drop out prevention and other student-centered interventions that impact different student subgroups;
- More synthetic theoretical understandings of adolescent identity formation and the connection between identity and learning, resilience planning and decision-making; and,
• Examining the possible systemic factors behind achievement gaps and dropout behavior as well as the availability of student-centered interventions.

**LAW/LEGAL STUDIES**

Work needed on:

• The equity of state aid schemes as financial access to postsecondary schooling becomes the subject of judicial attention;

• Postsecondary academic preparation by K-12 public schooling as a state education mandate open to litigation similar to standardized testing and K-12 equity financing; and,

• Policy and practices associated with affirmative action rulings.

**POLITICAL SCIENCE**

Work needed on:

• How political theories about access and equity can inform notions of disadvantaged and higher education studies more broadly;

• The connection between political disenfranchisement and school quality/equity goals within local communities; and,

• Less visible disadvantaged populations such as immigrants and those experiencing rural poverty and the educational policies that impact them.

**SOCIOLOGY**

Work needed on:

• Policy, evaluation, and system-wide dimensions of college financing and its impact on access and success by subgroups;

• Institutional stratification within the postsecondary system and its relationship to understanding access issues, financing, and successful completion of postsecondary training; and,

• The impact of families, parents and peers on financing and college retention disaggregated by class, race/ethnicity, and other key subgroups.
APPENDIX 5: Report, Website and Publications of the Transitions Project

*Questions That Matter*, the final report of the Transitions to College Project, is available online at http://edtransitions.ssrc.org. Also available in hard copy from the SSRC (by telephone at 212-377-2700 or by email at edtransitions@ssrc.org).

*The Transitions to College Website* features:

- A user-friendly searchable database of more than 2000 resources on transitions to college, including books, journal articles, reports, and policy briefs;
- Summaries of the literature reviews commissioned by the Project, which describe the state of the social science and non-academic research in the field and identify areas where further research is needed;
- Links to more than 150 websites that relate to college access and success; and,
- Bulletin board announcements with new research, upcoming events and conferences.


*Teachers College Record*, a Web-based publication, will feature a special issue on transitions to college with:

- Selected essays from the suite of eleven discipline-based literature reviews discussing recent and contemporary scholarship on transitions to college;
- A synthetic essay bringing together the major themes and findings from select reviews by Vivian Louie; and,
- An introduction to the special edition by executive editors, William Trent, Margaret Terry Orr and Sheri Ranis.

Available Fall 2005 at http://www.tcrecord.org/.

*Items and Issues*, an SSRC Periodical, will feature:

- An essay on non-academic research on transitions issues by Derek Price and Sheri Ranis
- Other short pieces related to the Transitions Project

The Social Science Research Council is an independent, nonprofit organization working to address a range of important public issues, improve the quality of scientific research, and support the training of younger researchers. The SSRC has projects on every continent and brings together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers throughout the world. Council activities encourage innovation, build research capacity, and help social scientists engage broader constituencies. [http://www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)

The Institute for Higher Education Policy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization whose mission is to foster access and success in postsecondary education through public policy research and other activities that inform and influence the policymaking process. These activities include policy reports and studies, seminars and meetings, and capacity building activities such as strategic planning. The primary audiences of the Institute are those who make or inform decisions about higher education: government policymakers, senior institutional leaders, researchers, funders, the media, and private sector leaders. [http://www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org)

Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based, private, independent foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. Through grants for research, innovation, communication and evaluation, as well as policy education and leadership development, Lumina Foundation addresses issues that affect access and educational attainment among all students, particularly underserved student groups. The views expressed in this report are the authors’ and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation or its employees. [http://www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org)

The Pathways to College Network is a national alliance of organizations committed to using research-based knowledge to improve postsecondary education access and success for the nation’s many underserved students, including underrepresented minorities, low-income students, those who are the first in their families to go to college, and students with disabilities. The Pathways Network is managed by The Education Resources Institute (TERI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to facilitating access to educational opportunities for people from all backgrounds. [http://www.pathwaystocollege.net](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net)