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Alumni engaging students from under-served groups in southern Appalachia

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The study explores how alumni can help community colleges in Southern Appalachia to create greater access for people in groups which are traditionally under-served by higher education. Semi-structured interviews conducted with alumni program directors and admissions officers at seven community colleges in the Southern Appalachian Region explore how they use alumni to recruit and retain students from non-dominant groups as well as students from generationally poor families. Examples of “best practices” illustrate ways alumni can help recruit, motivate, and retain students from historically under-served groups.

“Why do so many students with high ability not go to college? We find two reasons identified consistently by investigators: lack of money and lack of desire.”

Ralph R. Fields,

The Community College Movement, 1962

Introduction

The community college has always been concerned with increasing access to higher education. While community colleges now serve more students than any other sector of the higher education community in the United States, it is clear that low income and many minority students are less likely to enroll in college; and once in college, they are less likely to complete degrees (Bailey & Morest, 2006). The situation has not improved significantly for low income, first generation, and non-dominant students from rural areas of the

Southern Appalachian Region. The present study examines the role community college alumni can play in increasing access to higher education from traditionally under-served groups in Southern Appalachia, particularly with regard to the “lack of desire” barrier mentioned in Fields’ quotation.

Historically, community colleges have had a difficult time initiating and developing strong alumni programs (Boyd, Williams, & Pennington, 2009). Alumni programs are, however, growing in number and expanding the functions they perform to support community colleges (Pastorella, 2003) as alumni acknowledge the value of the education and training they received and show a desire to help others recognize the value of a community college education.

Indeed, in addition to financial support, alumni serve community colleges as mentors to current students, academic program board members, and volunteers in efforts such as welcoming new students on the first day of each semester (Boyd, Williams, & Pennington, 2009; Pastorella, 2003). Connecting alumni to the college through frequent contact with alumni and engaging them in community college activities seems to be the most important mission of community college

alumni programs. As Pastorella (2003) noted, “Engaged alumni give, then ask what more they can do to support the alumni program and the college. To keep their interest and spirit alive, having a definite mission is a must” (p. 78).

For over three decades, studies have identified the importance of community colleges for accessibility to higher education in Appalachia (Cottingham & Cooper, 1975). The present study examines whether community college alumni programs can help to recruit students from traditionally underserved groups in Southern Appalachia. Duncan (1999), in a study on the persistence of poverty in rural America, concluded that people who escaped poverty did so through education, and those who broke the cycle of poverty did so through college attendance. Historically, that attendance began at the community college, where the open door admission policy allows anyone who can benefit from the curriculum offered to attend. The community college offers low tuition, courses offered at convenient times and locations, student support services, and a student-friendly learning environment for everyone (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Today, the community college has a responsibility to offer

the hope of breaking the cycle of poverty for a new generation of Americans. The problem is that not everyone is able to take advantage of the community college open door policy. Historically underserved groups such as children from low income families, people who are the first members of their family to attend college, and students of color have been more successful in gaining access to higher education through the community college (Green, 2006).

Yet clearly the data indicates that community colleges fall short of the goal of providing equal access to students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds (Bailey & Morest, 2006). These groups continue to lag behind the rest of society in accessing higher education. Although community colleges do enroll more low-income students than four-year institutions, students from the lowest income quartile are woefully under-represented. “Thus, although community colleges provide access for many low-income and non-traditional students, we are still a long way from universal or equal access to higher education” (Bailey & Morest, 2006, p. 27).

Problems related to access for under-served groups are particularly challenging in Southern Appalachia, a region that includes all of West Virginia and parts

of eight other states, stretching to northern Mississippi. Studies have found that students in the Appalachian Region are often subjected to negative messages about pursuing a college education (Wallace & Diekroger, 2000). The messages often come from family members, and the frequency of discouraging messages has not decreased in recent years. Additionally, Appalachian culture has been associated with self-reliance and resistance to change, two factors which may perpetuate negative perceptions of seeking higher education (Wallace & Diekroger, 2000).

The following study explores how alumni can help community colleges create greater access for people in non-dominant groups which are traditionally underserved by higher education in Appalachia—African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans—as well as dominant group members from families that have been poor for generations and who see little hope of attending college to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Research questions and methodology

Many community college graduates and former students had “a life altering experience” in college where they gained access to

higher education when no other admission was available to them (Pastorella, 2003, p. 75). Therefore, it seems logical that community college alumni would want to participate in recruitment of others in their communities who have had trouble acquiring higher education or who need assistance in achieving life goals.

The present study employed semi-structured interviews with alumni program directors and admissions officers at seven community colleges in the Southern Appalachian Region, including colleges in northern Georgia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, southwestern Virginia, West Virginia, and two in western North Carolina. The research was guided by the following research question: How do community colleges in the Southern Appalachian Region use alumni to recruit and retain under-served populations, including generationally poor individuals and members of non-dominant groups? Fourteen officials were interviewed, including the director of alumni affairs and the director of admissions at the seven participating community colleges.

Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to be flexible while at the same time focusing the dialogue on the interviewees' perceptions of the relationship between alumni and

recruitment of underserved students. Each interview began with the same two open-ended questions: first, what is the relationship between your community college's alumni program and the admissions office; and second, what are your community college's current efforts to recruit new students from traditionally under-served populations such as members of non-dominant groups or people from generationally poor families?

The questions led to customized, follow-up questions which differed from interview to interview. Being asked open-ended, broad questions, participants were encouraged to provide rich descriptions of their experiences. Examples of follow-up questions include:

- Do senior officials at your college openly demonstrate that it is important to reach out to and recruit people from groups which have historically been under-served by institutions of higher education?
- To what extent, if any, does your community college involve alumni in meeting these goals? In what types of activities are alumni involved? In what additional areas could alumni participate?
- Does your community college have a role in breaking the

cycle of poverty for young people from generationally poor families in your service area?

Data from the interviews was reviewed and coded, and themes were developed. Key comments lifted from the interview transcripts and subjected to “member checking” confirmed with each interviewer the comments that most closely focused on the research topic.

Findings

The findings of the study provide useful information for community college leaders dedicated to breaking the cycle of generational poverty and closing the educational achievement gap which has hampered the economic well-being of members of non-dominant groups in America. Offering an open door is not enough to reach historically under-served groups. Alumni represent an untapped resource which can reach out to and encourage those who lack the opportunities gained through a community college education.

Four themes emerged from the interviews conducted in the study:

- a recognition that at most of the community colleges participating in the study, there was no formal relationship between the college’s alumni program and admissions of-

vice; the findings indicate that informal interaction between the two offices is the norm; several alumni and admissions officials felt faculty members were in the best position to ask alumni to make “special efforts” to reach under-served groups in the service region,

- a commitment by each of the colleges participating in the study to reach, recruit, and serve people in traditionally under-served groups within their service region;
- an acknowledgement that community colleges in the Southern Appalachian Region are well-positioned to help the region develop educationally, economically, and culturally by increasing access to higher education among those traditionally under-served by higher educational institutions; and
- a perception that the active participation of alumni could be a vital part of the effort to reach, recruit, and retain people from under-served groups and the generationally poor in the region; often alumni feel more loyalty to faculty members or to their academic program than to the community college as a whole.

Key considerations

Defining community college alumni

It is difficult to find a consistent definition for alumni of community colleges. Most institutions have a broad, all-encompassing definition of an alumnus. Many two-year colleges consider anyone who has participated in degree or non-degree programs at the college an alumnus. At one community college involved in the study, however, alumni are only graduates of a degree program offered by the college. At another institution, the definition involved someone who “found success” at the college or simply benefitted from attending.

At five of the community colleges participating in the study, each academic department might treat former students differently. Some consider anyone who participated in for-credit courses as an alumnus; others considered only program graduates as alumni. As one admissions director said, “Since our community college adds to so many people’s lives, it is our contention that the community college is the most important institution of higher education for most people in this area. Most will never attend another college. It is sensible, therefore, for us to consider them community college alumni even if they did not graduate.”

Regardless how an alumnus is defined, all of the admissions officers interviewed agreed with the general sentiment expressed by Webb (1989) who wrote that, “alumni constitute perhaps the greatest single resource on which an institution can depend” (p. 1). Alumni are a great resource for advocacy and motivation to overcome the “lack of desire” which Fields (1962) found limits access to higher education.

Alumni programs, admissions offices, and faculty

Most of the alumni and admissions officers interviewed indicated there was no formal relationship between the community college’s alumni program and the admissions’ office. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that informal interaction between the two offices was the norm. Indeed, in some instances, the interviewees may not have fully realized the extent of the relationship until they discussed it in the interview. Nevertheless, most admissions officers acknowledged that alumni could be the best recruiters among traditionally under-served populations.

Some collaborative activities practiced or suggested include:

- A letter from the college which encourages alumni to

participate in all college activities, including recruitment of new students,

- Alumni Day—a one-day event in which alumni do community service work,
- The chair of the Alumni Advisory Committee speaks at graduation not only to welcome graduates to the status of alumni, but also to ask for their help in supporting the college by encouraging others to attend, and
- Various alumni join staff members from the admissions office in visiting every high school in the service region. The alumnus acts as a role model of success and emphasizes that the community college is affordable to every student who is willing to work hard.

Faculty members who chair academic departments or who chair advisory committees were identified as often being the best person to ask alumni for help in recruiting new students, particularly for vocational and technical programs. Students who had found success in a better-paying job as a result of the community college were very willing to serve as recruiters for the discipline or program in which they participated. According to several of those interviewed, many students feel

more loyalty to faculty members in their academic program than to the community college as a whole. Many alumni and admissions officials felt faculty members were in the best position to call on alumni to make “special efforts” to reach under-served groups in the service region.

Alumni and recruitment of traditionally under-served populations

Alumni have often been acknowledged as a great student recruitment resource for community colleges. At one college which participated in the study, the college president speaks directly to graduates: “You are our greatest advocates for reaching others; please help us.” Less prevalent has been recognition of the role alumni might play in recruiting and retaining students from traditionally under-served groups. Every community college official interviewed for the study gave some acknowledgement to the potential benefits of reaching out to under-served groups within the college’s service region. There is no question that “generational poverty” exists and is wide-spread in the Southern Appalachian Region. While several mentioned programs the college currently offers to reach and assist students who are the first from their family to attend college (e.g., TRIO, Up-

ward Bound), all agreed alumni could help make contact with the most difficult to reach groups. As several people mentioned during their interviews, a happy alumnus is the community college's best recruiter.

Several people interviewed suggested alumni could play an important part by acting as role models. Alumni with family or friends caught in generational poverty could encourage family members to follow the same "pathway to success by encouraging them to also take advantage of the opportunities offered here." Several of the colleges represented in the interviews make a point of using alumni pictures with captions in their marketing materials, as well as in catalogs and websites. Additionally, individual faculty members in vocational programs were often mentioned by those interviewed as a source to initiate the contact between program alumni and community members from under-served groups.

At one community college participating in the study, alumni are not used at all for recruitment. As a result of the interview, however, admission and alumni officials expressed interest in what other community colleges are doing through alumni recruitment. Another community college said their alumni recruitment efforts had been focused in a local city.

Officials there were quick to point out that generational poverty in Southern Appalachia is not exclusively a rural problem. The service region includes a city (over 200,000 people) which has the highest poverty rate in their state. At both colleges, officials expressed an interest in expanding their college's efforts to use alumni to reach all under-served populations in their service region.

Recommendations and best practices for alumni and recruiting

Community colleges and institutions of higher education in general have an obligation to serve the public good. While the "public good" is an abstract concept, not as easily measured as degrees conferred or changes in individual income, there is little doubt that community colleges are central to the creation of economic and social benefits for America (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). To maintain a central position, however, community colleges must benefit all segments of society, including the generationally poor and members of non-dominant groups. The findings of this study indicate that community college officials in the Southern Appalachian Region have a commitment to the creation of economic and social benefits for people in

groups traditionally under-served by higher education. Further, senior officials, as well as admissions and alumni leaders, recognize the role alumni can play in the recruitment and retention of students from traditionally under-served groups

To see how community colleges can benefit under-served groups, the representatives from Southern Appalachian community colleges interviewed for the study were asked about their best practices for using alumni in student recruitment.

- Since students from generationally poor families are almost always first generation college students, they tend to drop out of college faster and more easily than other students. It is the job of every community college employee to help these students achieve success once they come “in the open door.” Alumni are positioned to be of great help in the effort to recruit students and help them successfully persevere. Two of the community colleges participating in the study bring successful alumni to the college to talk about the importance of good study habits and academic persistence.
- The Director of Enrollment Management at one com-

munity college worked with the alumni office to begin an initiative to reach under-served populations. A community with a higher level of poverty is selected to receive a mass mailing postcard which features pictures and stories of successful alumni from that community. In this way, people see first-hand the impact community college attendance can have on a person’s life.

- Community college alumni often serve on boards of organizations that support low-income families. As one alumni director said in her interview, colleges can use these alums to work through the systems that help the less fortunate: United Way, Department of Family and Social Services, and Child Support Enforcement Agencies.
- Admission officials often visit local high schools to discuss the benefits of attending the community college, to explain financial aid and scholarships that are available, and to present workshops to help low income students complete financial aid forms.
- An alumni “success story” is featured on two of the community colleges’ websites each month, and campus display

cases feature alumni success stories.

- Two community colleges engage alumni to attend local events and serve as representatives of the college to talk about the college and their experiences with the community college generally or with specific academic programs at the college.
- One Alumni Officer said that alumni are a more dependable and broad-based way of recruiting and retaining students from lower socioeconomic groups. She pointed out that special programs to retain economically poor students are usually funded through state and federal grants; the services often end when the funding stream is no longer available. “Alumni, on the other hand, are always available and willing to help.”
- At one community college in the Southern Appalachian Region which has made a special commitment to providing access to “those who would otherwise never go beyond high school”, one leader at the community college has been designated to represent the interests of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at “all leadership-level, mission-associated” meetings.
- To be sustainable, programs that ask alumni to help with recruitment of new students and retention of current students must (a) have the support of the college president, (b) be included in the college’s strategic plan, and (c) have a strong and consistent budgetary commitment. Three of the officials interviewed mentioned the importance of being part of the college’s continuing strategic plan. The benefits of working with alumni to increase the number of people from under-served groups may not be seen for several years, but the effort needs to begin with the commitment of college leaders to that objective.

Conclusion

There is a need for community college leaders in the Southern Appalachian Region to reframe traditional paradigms related to recruitment of underserved groups and the role alumni might play in those efforts. As suggested by Pastorella (2003), the first step is for alumni directors and admissions officials to work together to establish a mission and then to know what alumni can do to help underserved people connect to the community college. In addition to a long-term commitment to helping the generationally

poor and members of non-dominant groups, community colleges in Southern Appalachia need to make a long-term commitment to recruiting and cultivating alumni relationships for the purpose of assisting the college with recruitment of under-served populations. By making the goal a part of the strategic plan, community colleges can avoid the problem experienced by one of the institutions which participated in this study.

At that college, the priorities of the institution changed when there was a change of presidents. While the previous president had a commitment to involving alumni in recruitment, the new president changed the focus of the alumni office. Additionally, as the current financial challenges facing the nation were beginning to affect one community college participating in the study, staff members of the alumni office were re-assigned to other duties, in part, because the success of an alumni effort is hard to measure and difficult to demonstrate in the short-term. A long-term commitment is clearly needed to see success from efforts to reach under-served populations through college alumni.

Colleges with alumni programs which currently focus solely on raising money should ask themselves which policies and

rules keep alumni from assisting underserved students through direct recruitment and serving as advocates for the college. Additionally, alumni efforts on behalf of the under-served cannot end with recruitment. Despite indications that members of under-served groups, including students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are attending community colleges in greater numbers, these students are not achieving the same level of success as higher income students (Bailey & Morést, 2006; Green, 2006).

Young people from generationally poor families and students of color often have not completed a college preparatory curriculum in high school, and their transition to the community college has not been smooth. These students are more likely to delay entry into the community college, attend part-time, and persist to reaching educational goals on a sporadic basis. Many of the alumni of the colleges participating in the study could identify and empathize with these challenges. Such alumni are well-positioned to help retain students and help them reach their educational goals.

Clearly, community college alumni can be great assets not only in recruiting students from traditionally under-served groups but also in helping them persist. Once students from traditionally

under-served populations are recruited to campus, alumni can be of tremendous assistance in helping these first-generation college students overcome the insecurity and confusion which often keeps people from advancing. At several of the colleges in the study, alumni were already involved in welcoming new students at the beginning of each semester and discussing their shared feelings and experiences. Additionally, alumni can help college officials understand the structural barriers faced by underserved students. They can even provide insight on the policies, programs, and curricula which either place underserved students at a disadvantage or help them succeed at the community college (Green, 2006).

Community colleges in the Southern Appalachian Region

face a difficult task. With fewer resources than many other institutions of higher education, they enroll many students with significant financial, educational, social, and personal obstacles. Leaders at these institutions acknowledge a special role to play in addressing generational poverty in Appalachia. They know that access to higher education is a key to finding a way to break the cycle of generational poverty, and the community college provides that access. They also know that alumni provide an effective and affordable way to reach the traditionally under-served. The experiences of academically successful low income, minority, and first-generation community college alumni should be fully engaged to recruit generationally poor Americans to the community college.

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