A Tale of Two Students: Equal Treatment Is Not Enough
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Cara and Anthony will begin their college careers at their local community colleges in the fall semester. They both graduated from high school the previous spring, and they plan to complete Associate degrees as quickly as they can. Anthony has chosen to attend the community college rather than a four-year institution because his parents can afford to pay the tuition, and he can live with them to help keep the costs low. He attended a good high school, but when he takes the college placement tests, he learns that he will have to take one developmental math class before he will qualify for the required credit-bearing math courses.

Cara started working full-time as a waitress immediately upon graduation from high school. Like Anthony, she lives with her parents, but they cannot afford to help pay her tuition, and they need her income to help pay the rent and necessary expenses for the whole family, including Cara’s baby. While Cara was born in the United States and is fluent in English, her parents speak little English and therefore can work only very low-wage jobs. She doesn’t have a car and must take public transportation to the college and to work if the one family vehicle isn’t available (which is most of the time). Cara attended an inner-city high school with mostly black and immigrant students, where the budget did not support sufficient teachers and resources for the student population. When she takes the college placement tests, she learns she will need to take several developmental writing and math classes before she can begin taking for-credit courses. When she goes to the advising office, the advisor fails to tell her about options for financial aid. On the first day of school, Cara’s boss changes her schedule so that she can’t attend the first two days of class without risking her job.

Who is more likely to graduate, Cara or Anthony?

What barriers do they each face, and what are the sources of those barriers? Are they personal, institutional, societal, or cultural?

To what degree do their situations represent realities for particular groups of community college students?

What responsibility does the college bear for either removing the barriers (when possible) or providing assistance for students who have encountered those barriers?

Beyond Access

Institutions participating in Achieving the Dream, a national initiative aimed at increasing the number of community college students who complete certificates, associate degrees, and/or

A student’s-eye view

“I would say a big obstacle that students face is a lack of educational resources such as tutors or services offered to help students stay encouraged to stay in school. A large part of the population are students who come from urban communities, who don’t have the best educational resources. When they come to college, they’re not up to par, so they need more help.” — Student at an Achieving the Dream college
transfer to four-year institutions, address these and many related questions. Cara and Anthony are not unique. Community colleges enroll nearly half of all U.S. undergraduate students, many of whom are low-income, first-generation college students or students of color. Currently, only 36% of freshmen earn a certificate or degree within 6 years—a number that hides the even lower graduation rates of low-income students and students of color. Clearly, access alone is insufficient when the ultimate goal is higher graduation rates.

Achieving the Dream examines the barriers to equity and college success through the lens of structural inequity—that is, the ways society and institutions are organized that, intentionally or not, create greater advantages for some groups of students than others. Differences in graduation rates at community colleges among different student populations (often called “achievement gaps”) arise from a variety of factors—personal, institutional, social, and cultural. Achievement gaps may reflect structural inequities when disparities are the result of historic and systemic social injustices or the unintended or indirect consequences of institutional or social policies.

The following examples illustrate the impact of some existing structural inequities:

- Low-income students and students of color overwhelmingly attend secondary schools with significantly fewer resources than predominantly white suburban schools. Therefore, these students usually have had less exposure than middle-class students to high quality educational experiences and materials when they arrive at college, leaving them underprepared, through no fault of their own.

- Students who need to work (especially those who need to work full-time) may have difficulty registering for and attending all the classes they need if those classes are not offered during their non-working hours.

- In some places, public transportation is only available during certain hours or in certain places, creating a significant disadvantage for students who can’t afford cars.

- Students who need affordable child care so that they can attend classes are at a disadvantage if no such care is available on campus or near their homes, especially if they don’t have a car.

- Students who live in neighborhoods with no grocery stores may not be well-nourished, especially if they have no car and cannot afford to buy food in the school cafeteria.

- Students whose learning style is a good fit with traditional teaching and learning methods in high school have a significant advantage over those whose style is not a good fit, especially if the same methods are used in college courses (including developmental education).

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**Equal treatment or equitable treatment?**

When patients arrive in an emergency room, they go through the triage process, which sorts them out according to the urgency of their conditions. Some receive care before others. This is not equal treatment, but it is equitable treatment. Resources are allocated according to need so as many as possible are likely to survive their illness or accident. Few would argue that everyone should be treated the same in an emergency room.
On most community college campuses, students of color see few role models to inspire them, as the faculty and administration of most colleges are predominantly white.

Any one of these inequities may affect students’ chances for success. When taken together and added to many others, the odds against graduation become overwhelming. The deck is, in fact, stacked against these students, regardless of their motivation, work ethic, and intelligence. Persistent achievement gaps among particular groups of students are a clue that structural inequities (rather than simply personal problems) are at work. Moreover, when structural inequities create multiple barriers to success, equal treatment for all students is unlikely to reduce achievement gaps. Therefore, Achieving the Dream advocates equitable policies and practices, i.e. policies and practices that:

1. Are rooted in fairness and that do not put any particular group at a disadvantage, and

2. Help compensate for the disadvantages experienced before college and/or outside the college’s sphere of influence.

In a community college—where the desired result is that all students complete a credential that prepares them for good jobs or transfer to four-year institutions—fair and equitable treatment is necessary to help all students attain this result. Fulfilling that mission requires not only helping individual students beat the odds but also working to change the odds by addressing structural inequities that are barriers for whole groups of students. While colleges cannot fix all the structural inequities inherent in society and in their local communities, they can:

1. Closely examine their own policies and practices and change any that create barriers for particular groups of students, e.g., review course schedules to ensure that all required courses are available at times suitable for students who work full-time jobs, regardless of their work hours.

2. Implement policies, practices, and programs that help compensate for the inequities that are beyond the college’s control and that place particular groups of students at a disadvantage, e.g., provide additional support services such as advising and tutoring for those students who arrive at college underprepared for college-level work.

3. Exert their influence to bring about change in community systems (including the public schools) where structural inequities reside, e.g., work with public transportation systems to ensure that transportation to campus is available whenever classes are in session.

This is the work of Achieving the Dream.