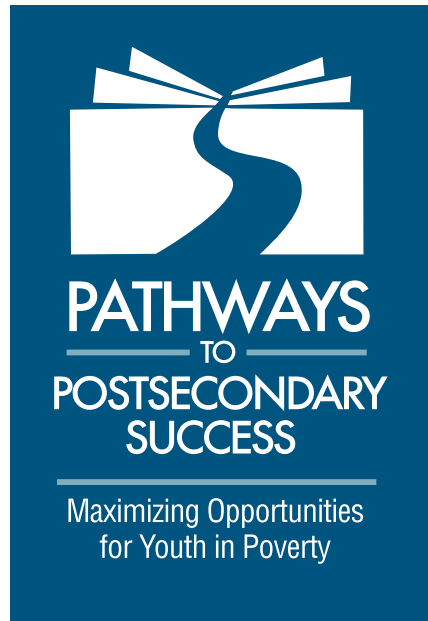


# Pathways to Postsecondary Success

*Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within the context of the country's economic downturn and its need for greater postsecondary participation, *Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty* was designed to provide scholarship and policy recommendations to help improve educational outcomes for youth in low-income communities. This final report of the five-year *Pathways* project provides findings from a mixed-methods set of studies that included national and state analyses of opportunities and obstacles in postsecondary education (PSE) for low-income youth, detailed case studies of approximately 300 low-income young adults preparing for or pursuing PSE in three California counties, and the development of a set of indicators to monitor the conditions in community colleges. This project was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

### Research Questions and Focus

The overall project examined questions that are relevant to policymakers, higher education leaders and faculty, K–12 personnel, and others who help students prepare for and succeed in postsecondary programs. These questions include:

- What barriers and supports do low-income students experience in their attempts to earn postsecondary credentials?
- How do students access and interpret information that is integral to college navigation, such as how to enroll, apply for financial aid, decide which courses to take, and choose a major of study?
- What are the differences between low-income students and their middle- and high-income counterparts with respect to their pathways to college and their college entrance and completion rates?
- What conditions are necessary in colleges to ensure student success?

While we report on national data, our study has a particular focus on California, which is the state with the largest number of community colleges. The majority of low-income students in California who pursue PSE begin in community colleges, and thus our work takes a special interest in this sector. And while we did not set out to understand the effects of the Great Recession on the postsecondary pathways of low-income youth, the start of our study coincided with this significant economic downturn. This crisis impacted education and the labor market in some very complex ways. Thus, we have interpreted our study's findings in this context and we encourage readers to do the same.

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, we argue for a more comprehensive notion of postsecondary success for low-income youth. This requires a better understanding of their lived realities, as well as knowledge of the critical transitions they face preparing for and completing college. We highlight some promising supports in this report, as well as the obstacles students face in accessing them. With this knowledge, we believe that institutions can build interventions and supports that better address students' needs and goals. Ultimately, the improvement of student success in higher education will require a stronger commitment to the institutions that predominantly serve low-income students from K–12 through college.

## **Key Findings: What Matters Most?**

Our study revealed *five key things that matter most* for understanding and improving low-income students' success in postsecondary education.

### **1. STUDENT VOICES MATTER.**

Having numbers that show how many students enroll and persist in postsecondary education is important, but unless we understand from students why these outcomes occur, we run the risk of misunderstanding patterns and implementing ineffective interventions. Hearing student voices is essential to understanding their pathways to and through postsecondary education. Listening to students we learned that:

- Education is a powerful force in the lives of low-income youth. It not only expands their economic opportunities but also changes how they perceive themselves, their futures, and what they are able to contribute to society and their families.
- Financial difficulties, family instability, transportation problems, and a lack of childcare frustrate many low-income students' attempts to fulfill their goals. This is especially the case for students who are not connected with support programs in community college.
- When low-income students experience caring educators and high quality instruction in high school or college, these factors make a difference to their engagement and persistence in education.
- Low-income students' pathways through community college do not follow a linear model from entry to transfer. Rather, their pathways are often non-linear and may involve experiences with developmental education classes, various academic or certificate programs, and stopping out due to financial and other constraints.

## 2. DIVERSITY MATTERS.

Low-income youth are a diverse group with a wide range of experiences. Paying attention to the similarities and differences in this population of students can help us better plan college success initiatives. Focusing on diversity we learned that:

- Almost half of community college students are older, work full time, and are parents. This so called “non-traditional” population is quickly becoming the majority in community colleges, and programs need to orient around their needs rather than see them as a diversion from the norm. In California, there are also significant numbers of students from immigrant families in community colleges and the particular constraints they face as they navigate their educational pathways must be considered.
- Over half of California’s youth in the 18- to 26-year-old range are enrolled or have been enrolled in some kind of postsecondary education. However, there are substantial differences by racial group, with Asian Americans being most likely to pursue PSE and Latinos and African Americans being least likely. In all racial groups, women pursue PSE at higher rates than men. However, women, especially single mothers, are more likely to be living in poverty, and low-income women earn less than low-income men.
- A bachelor’s degree has a significant return in the labor market for low-income young adults. There are, however, disparities between men and women and between individuals from different racial groups with respect to participation in full-time employment with benefits and with respect to earnings.

## 3. ASSETS MATTER.

Deficit approaches blame low-income students for their lack of success, or they blame educational institutions for failing students, often without recognizing the challenging fiscal, policy, and practical constraints they operate within. In work designed to improve student success, it is essential to focus on both student and institutional assets. Our research uncovers the remarkable strengths students bring and the many positive programs that exist in educational institutions. This asset-based approach helps us understand how to design programs that better tap into and foster students’ strengths in order to support college success. Focusing on assets we learned that:

- Low-income students are highly motivated. Despite many hurdles, low-income students enroll and often persist in college, albeit not always in traditionally defined ways. The motivation they exhibit will likely serve them well in their educational pursuits, as well as in the labor market.
- Many low-income students in two-year institutions are pursuing higher education with a goal of transfer.
- In spite of a challenging budget environment, community colleges are providing a tremendous service to students with a wide array of educational interests and needs.

- Community colleges have launched important innovations, such as support programs and learning communities, that can provide models for assisting a larger number of students to reach their educational goals.

#### 4. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN K–12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION MATTER.

Postsecondary success is not a story that begins once a student sets foot on a college campus. High quality K–12 schooling and a host of college preparatory resources and activities must be provided in order to ensure college-going success for all students. Exploring low-income students’ experiences as they transition out of K–12 schools we learned that:

- Nationally, more than three quarters of low-income youth do not complete a college preparatory curriculum in high school. Our qualitative data reveal that this should not be surprising considering how little they describe learning at school about preparation for college. Instead, they tend to rely mostly on personal networks, and what they learn is often inaccurate.
- Nationally, the majority of low-income youth do not go directly into PSE after high school. Those who do not enter right away have lower completion rates.
- Most low-income students who enter PSE require developmental coursework where they repeat concepts they should have learned in high school or earlier. In particular, a dramatic number of community college students require remediation—and when they are placed there they often feel stuck and yearn for more engaging instructional methods and curricula—pointing to a need for greater articulation across K–12 and PSE segments.
- Given that most low-income students in California begin their postsecondary education in community colleges, high school educators need more and better information about this sector to aid student success. This information should include enrollment procedures, academic assessment and placement processes, financial aid, and other student support services within community colleges.

#### 5. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS AND CONDITIONS MATTER.

To ensure that low-income students’ college aspirations are affirmed and their academic needs are met, institutional supports are essential. As students persist to and through college, they face critical transitions along the way, and certain conditions function as a “guard rail” for keeping them on the path towards college completion. Focusing on key institutional conditions and supports we learned that:

- The K–12 sector in California has experienced significant budget cuts that have resulted in very high student-to-counselor ratios and reductions in mentoring programs and supports for students. Meanwhile, national data show that mentorship is critical for low-income students’ entry into college.

- Because most community college students need remediation, the supports and conditions that help them move quickly through developmental education curricula are integral to their success. Students need information and support around placement testing because it carries such critical consequences for their trajectories in community college.
- A key support for students' persistence in college is financial aid. Low-income students often struggle with the complicated financial aid process, and this can cause them to stop out of school or enroll part time. Financial aid information needs to be streamlined so that students have an easier time accessing financial support.
- Information is critical to students' successful pathways to and through college. Currently, there are points along these pathways where students are not receiving the information they need. High quality advising is essential and yet, due to staffing cuts, community colleges cannot always provide students with sufficient time and attention to help them plan for their futures.
- Students not connected with programs like learning communities or counseling often encounter a lack of coordination at key transition points in their paths towards PSE success. Support programs that integrate information, financial assistance, and academic and emotional support—so that students do not have to seek out these services separately—seem to be more effective. Many programs are oriented around full-time students; more programs are needed to meet the needs of students who attend part time.

In sum, low-income students are a diverse group who bring many assets to the educational enterprise. Their talents need to be fostered in order for them to realize the gains that education can bring to them, to their families, and to society as a whole. Supporting low-income students in postsecondary education requires an institutional commitment to their success, high quality curricula and instruction, ongoing advising and mentoring, integration of support services and resources, and streamlined pathways to completion (West, Shulock, & Moore, 2012). To support student success, four provisions—maps, compass, fuel, and tools—are necessary to help students understand their pathways and stay on track as they navigate their college experience. We observed many positive examples of these elements in our research. The challenge is to make these conditions a reality for more students.