



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

October 2014

Closing the Achievement Gap: The Context, Part I—National Data, Reports, and Efforts in Public Schools and Colleges

America is another name for opportunity.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The research on the achievement gap is growing exponentially. This is an encouraging development, a sure sign that the education research community understands the imperative to uncover the roots of this challenge and develop a new repertoire of strategies to meet it. This growing body of research, however, includes some contentions that I find troubling.

Foremost among these troubling trends is a growing number of researchers, many of them well-intentioned and thoughtful, who argue that if community colleges are to achieve maximum effectiveness, *they must choose between access and excellence*. Inclusiveness must give way to exclusivity. In this view, the gateways to a community college education have heavy locks and only certain students would be given keys.

I will never accept these claims. They run counter to my ideals, and they run counter to my experience. They debase the ideal of equal opportunity. And they threaten to enlarge and then perpetuate a permanent underclass to whom



our nation will be saying, “We don’t need you.” The fact is that the very foundation of the community college movement is the principle that access and excellence are not incompatible. Inclusivity need never entail a retreat from the highest standards of excellence. It is the “tyranny of low expectations” that damages young minds and wounds young souls. The result is the enlargement of the cruelest of all ghettos—the ghetto of hopelessness.

All students can learn. No student is expendable. Every student is a precious package of untapped potential. These are the simple precepts we will carry with us as we move forward with our campaign to eradicate the achievement gap.

We are up against a mountain of a problem. The latest report from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) can be spun in a way that generates signs of progress. But it is glacially slow progress. The phrase that occurs most frequently in the latest NAEP scorecard is “no significant progress.” When it comes to the achievement gap, the 2013 NAEP results differ very little from the 1990 results. A little progress, of course, is better than none. But we need a new mindset, perhaps one rooted—to borrow a phrase—in “the fierce urgency of now.”

I believe that these years of stagnation provide compelling evidence that the time has come to jettison the traditional triad that divides education into primary/secondary/and postsecondary education. This is an anachronism. And it has unfortunate results. Far too often, we act as though these domains exist in splendid isolation from each other. At Montgomery College, we know this is not true. We have solid evidence: Our ACES program rests on the principle that secondary and postsecondary education are tightly interdependent. It is rooted in cooperation with our colleagues in the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system and at the Universities at Shady Grove (USG). That is why it promises genuine, substantive progress in the fight to close the achievement gap.

I regularly visit primary and secondary schools in our county. I do this to drive home the message that *education is indivisible*. I do this because I know that what happens in our K–12 schools today will have an impact on the Montgomery College of tomorrow. We are all in this



together. As educators, we all have a responsibility to *affirm our solidarity*. We must demonstrate, in word and deed, that the goals and ideals that unite us are far more important than the tensions that sometimes threaten to divide us. This moment demands collaboration rooted in collegiality. It demands shared responsibility anchored by mutual respect.

Some of the most comprehensive and rigorous research on the achievement gap gives powerful support to this view.

It is notable that when the Obama Administration unveiled its My Brother's Keeper initiative, it described the achievement gap as a systemic problem that runs *from pre-K through doctoral education*. The Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3) drew inspiration from this initiative. Its guiding premise is that efforts to close the achievement gap are hindered by *a lack of alignment across the different levels of education*.

Let me note that despite the words "Minority Male" in the name of this collaborative, I found nothing in its recommendations that would not apply to all minority students, in fact to *all* students regardless of race or ethnicity. For example, the researchers state a profoundly important truth: "There is no doubt that boys and men of color possess the intellectual capacity to excel in pre-K and postsecondary contexts when policies and practices support their success." If we substitute "all students" for "boys and men of color" in the previous sentence, it gains comprehensiveness without losing validity.

When the M2C3 Collaborative diagnoses the barriers limiting student achievement, it gives special emphasis to "the lack of collaboration across levels of education." There is a lack of synchronicity. Stated differently, the persistence of the traditional triad stands in the way of unified, coordinated strategies. We are trapped in the past, clinging to an antiquated system that hinders holistic thinking. I do not mean this harshly. We are all creatures of habit and all influenced by social and institutional structures that have prevailed so long that they seem to represent the natural order of things. But all social progress has required breaking free of tradition and freeing *ourselves* from intellectual straightjackets that inhibit bold, creative thinking.



The M2C3 Collaborative implicitly recognizes this need. It calls for a shake-up to address the problem of the lack of collaboration throughout the education continuum. It maintains that “the federal government should require school districts, community colleges, and public four-year institutions to partner in designing curricula that create seamless pathways for students to matriculate across each sector.” And, it adds, financial strings should be attached. These researchers know that a powerful jolt will be necessary to create a culture of collaboration among education sectors long habituated to splendid isolation.

The report concludes with an even stronger call for a new era of collaboration. And this, it states, is the prerequisite for redressing “the inequities that have hampered educational opportunities—and ultimately life opportunities”—for millions of students. We need, above all else, “sustained partnerships with school districts, community partners, researchers, colleges and universities, policymakers, and other key stakeholders.”

This is a statement that underscores the rationale that educators cannot go it alone. And they should not. For what is at stake here goes beyond the success or failure of this or that group of students. What is at stake is our future. What is at stake is the integrity of our national commitment to equal opportunity. What is at stake is the vitality of our economy and the destiny of our democracy.

All of this confirms that we have been—and remain—on the right track. We are moving aggressively forward in order to forge a culture of cooperation with our community college colleagues, the K-12 system, policymakers, the business community, the philanthropic community, and the concerned citizens of our county and state. It is in this spirit that the Maryland State Department of Education adopted the Common Core State Standard in English/Language Arts and Mathematics in 2010. Indeed, a curriculum based on these standards is being implemented throughout the MCPS system. The Common Core should facilitate greater alignment among K–12 schools, postsecondary education, and workplace needs. I am encouraged by these signs, though I’m cautious as I see opposition to the Common Core expressed in some states across the country.



This unified effort will be central to everything we do. And it is the force that will power us toward the day when the achievement gap will be seen, not as a persistent problem, but as a distant relic from a time when the education community was needlessly splintered.

This optimism is confirmed by the research-rich book—*What Excellent Community Colleges Do*—by Joshua Wyner, founder and executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. In his discussion of underserved students, Wyner notes that “at all educational levels, when students enter unprepared it's commonly viewed as someone else's fault—and problem.” His message is clear: *This must end.*

Wyner then provides examples of communities that have overcome this syndrome by forging close partnerships among the community college, K–12 school districts, and four-year colleges. Among the communities he singles out for recognition are the following.

- *El Paso Community College in Texas.* The dramatic decrease in first-year community college students needing developmental education courses is a direct result of a partnership between El Paso Community College, 12 K–12 school districts, and the nearby four-year college. The primary focus of this partnership is an intensive summer preparation program for students whose test results show that they need some help before entering El Paso Community College.
- *Valencia Community College in Florida.* The rising number of Valencia College students completing their degrees and advancing to four-year schools coincided with the development of a program—DirectConnect—forged by Valencia in partnership with other local community colleges and the University of Central Florida (UCF). This program guarantees admission to UCF for students who receive an associate's degree at their schools. The key to success, notes Wyner, is that *UCF and Valencia staff collaborate to advise students, align curricula, and track student success.*
- *Northern Virginia Community College.* In 2012, Northern Virginia Community College President Robert Templin proposed what many still regard as a radical plan to reduce the cost of a four-year degree by more than 40 percent. The idea was that,



“Students complete one year of college while in high school through Advanced Placement Courses, spend two years at the community college, and complete their last year at a public four-year college.” This plan is still new, still controversial, and still meeting resistance. But two public universities have agreed to consider this “three plus one” arrangement in such career fields as nursing, IT, and fire science. The resistance of many colleges and universities can be explained in a single word: money. Most states continue to cling to policies that create *fiscal disincentives* for colleges and universities to accept two-year transfer students. These financial disincentives become stronger under a plan that would have four-year institutions accepting a transfer student for a single year.

The examples cited here could easily be multiplied. But the salient point is incontrovertible: communities that are reducing the number of marginalized students are those that jettison the triadic division of education and move toward a collaborative system that breaks through arbitrary and artificial divisions. This process remains in its infancy. But strong empirical evidence suggests that the maturation of this process could prove decisive in eradicating the achievement gap.

Research by the Lumina Foundation provides the exclamation point for this claim. Lumina is supporting large-scale efforts in 55 metro regions “to help adults return to higher education, to increase college access and attainment among Latino students, and to give all underserved populations a greater chance for postsecondary success.”

The spring 2014 issue of *Focus*, the Lumina Foundation’s quarterly publication, looked at the work underway in three of those cities. Each story is inspiring, each a tribute to the ideal of community-wide commitment, and each a powerful refutation of all who contend that the achievement gap is an intractable problem that will stand as a permanent feature of our national landscape.

I will provide a condensed version of just one of the uplifting stories *Focus* tells.



Shayleene Barrera arrives for orientation at Santa Ana College, 40 minutes south of Los Angeles. By noon, she has honked the horn of a UPS van, listened to her heart through a stethoscope, and paraded through campus for a pep rally with 1,200 of her peers.

Shayleene Barrera is five years old.

She is participating in Kinder Caminata (the Path from Kindergarten), a program that each year introduces thousands of underserved kindergarteners to the excitement of college education. The program is one of the linchpins of a community-wide commitment to “Education First,” a slogan that is posted on city limit signs.

In Santa Ana, “Education First” is more than a mantra. It is vital enterprise that spools from kindergarten through middle school, high school, the community college, and the campuses of California State University-Fullerton and the University of California-Irvine. The catalyst for all of this is the Santa Ana Partnership, a collaborative program in an Orange County community where learning runs head on into poverty.

The force of nature behind this program is Sara Lundquist, an administrator at Santa Ana College. Her typical day is a blur of visits with college colleagues; with one or more Santa Ana K–12 schools; with faculty, and staff at Cal State-Fullerton and UC-Irvine; and with Santa Ana’s business and civic leaders. She coordinates a panoply of partnerships that have helped write thousands of success stories across Orange County.

The latest addition to this matrix of partnerships is Santa Ana ¡Adelante! This program promises tuition-free entry to Santa Ana College and transfer to either Cal State-Fullerton or UC-Irvine to every student who completes the requirements outlined in the sixth-grade College Going Pledge.

Talk about seamlessness! This is an example of the power of cohesion, the power of a community dedicated to ensuring continuity throughout the entire K–20 educational spectrum. This is togetherness in action. It is potent. And it distills the message I have been striving to



drive home: The eradication of the achievement gap depends on recognizing our interdependence. It depends on harnessing the power of collaboration. It depends on uncommon dedication to the common good.

The literature on the achievement gap, as I noted in the opening of this report, is voluminous. All of it is worthy of attention. But it is my conviction that we must focus on strategies that are producing results. Strategies that are lifting up those who have been left out. Strategies with the potential to make the next NAEP report card—in 2017—one that heralds the startling news that the achievement gap is closing and closing fast.

I believe the strategies that will make this wild-eyed vision a clearly visible reality must be rooted in efforts to replace barriers with bridges, divisiveness with togetherness, and old myths with new realities. I will say it again: Education is indivisible. Our actions must reflect this fact.

None of this will be easy. All of this will test us. But speaking on behalf of this College that I love, let me say that we do not shrink from this responsibility. We welcome it. We welcome this opportunity to prove that Ralph Waldo Emerson was right. We welcome the opportunity to prove, at long last, that America *is* another name for opportunity.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. Can alignment efforts by K–12 systems and higher education help to address the achievement gap?
3. How might our county, our state, our nation be different when the achievement gap no longer exists?

