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Providing Access To Higher Education For Low Income Students of Color

There is a connection between educational attainment and quality of life in today's economy (Crow, 2009). Yet, access to higher education opportunities are often restricted for low-income students and students of color due to a consistently growing wealth gap. The college graduation rate among children born between 1970 and 1979, who grew up in the top 20 percent of the wealth distribution, was 39.5 percentage points higher than among those who grew up in the bottom 20 percent. For children born a decade later, that wealth gap in college attainment has grown to 48.9 percentage points (Pfeffer, 2018, p. 1053). In order to address access to higher education for low-income students and students of color, I propose a program that will incorporate access to guidance counselors, financial aid, and academic support resources for incoming college students pursuing a two-year degree.

Capital theories such as the human capital theory were developed that analyze why an individual chooses to attend higher education classes. Human capital theory is the idea that college is about the pursuit of knowledge and skills, and students must determine the costs relative to the benefits of attendance. Social and cultural capital allow for the study of other factors, such as students' cultural and social background, in consideration of who gains access to college (Winkle-Wagner, 2020). Therefore, students have to determine whether college is worth the cost by taking social, cultural, and economic background into consideration. Students who

are low-income may not choose to attend higher education courses when considering human capital theory due to financial hardships, making higher education institutions less diverse.

In today's society the graduation rates for low-income students of color have remained desolate. When comparing data from some of the largest cities in the nation, many African American and Latino students attend schools where at least 75 percent of all students qualify as low-income according to federal guidelines (Boschma 2016). In addition, less than half of Pell Grant-eligible students nationwide earn a degree or certificate. Compared to 58 percent of high-income Americans, only 12 percent of low-income Americans have earned a college degree (McCorkell 2019). Therefore, students of color who are low-income need to be provided with more than just financial aid when transitioning to a higher education institution. The proposed program will address financial needs as well as how to provide a more holistic approach to college for low-income students and students of color.

Additionally, the transition into a higher education institution can become an excruciating task for low-income students and students of color. There have been multiple theories developed in order to research transitions in college education. Winkle-Wagner (2020) argues, Rendón's validation theory takes cultural and background experiences into account and suggests that higher educational institutions should value these attributes. Students will be encouraged to pursue higher education when financial burdens are eliminated and when cultural and social backgrounds are taken into consideration. As such, I propose a program to take socioeconomic and cultural background into account, in order to increase college retention and address financial hardships.

The objective of the proposed program is to provide low-income students with access to higher education through a two-year program by offering educational guidance opportunities and

eliminating financial burden. This will require a planning phase of up to one year of time to accumulate federal and state funding, public and private donors, and scholarships to fund the program. The first year of the program will follow a cohort of students who will partake in weekly check-ins with counselors who are familiar with the cultural and socioeconomic background of the students. The students will be given financial aid that was acquired during the planning phase as long as they meet the program requirements. The second year will focus on completing the two-year degree track and will inform students on internship opportunities. The guidance counselors will help students achieve their educational goals and have information on internship opportunities while working with the students for the two years that they will be pursuing a two-year college degree.

A program planning team will be assembled to research resources and administer the proposed program. The team will take one to two years during the planning phase of the program to research funding that will consist of public, private, state, and federal funds. They will begin by applying for a demonstration grant, described as federal funding provided for research towards a theory or approach (USDA 2019). After this, the planning team will explore public and private funding options. These funds will be geared towards scholarships for tuition, room and board, and other educational expenses. Without the planning phase, there would be no funding for the program to be put into effect. By removing financial barriers, students will be able to focus on the completion of their associates degree and the transition into a higher education institution.

The first year that the program is in effect will follow a cohort of first year students who have been selected based on their socioeconomic status and cultural background. These students will be provided with a financial scholarship and paired with an advisor who is college faculty

and will administer regular check-ins with their assigned student. The faculty advisor will provide information on resources for the students and make sure that they are transitioning into the higher educational institution without difficulty. Taking this transition into consideration could ensure the completion of a higher education degree for some students. For example, Schlossberg's marginality and mattering and transition theory can be used to provide student services in tribal colleges to Native American students by taking cultural context into consideration (DeLong). In the case of tribal colleges, student's backgrounds are taken into account to help students establish a sense of security and feel that they are obtaining a quality education while transitioning to college.

While the first year of the program focuses on transitioning to college, the second year of the program will focus on students having academic success and completion of an associate's degree. During the second year, students will continue regular check-ins with their assigned faculty advisor. In addition to providing financial resources, the advisors will provide access to academic support and ensure the program of study is being followed. If the program occurs as planned, the cohort of students in the program will have completed an associates degree while having a smooth transition to college free of financial burden.

Conclusion and Significance

The program will be assessed by looking at graduation rates of the cohort as well as climate surveys based on the student experience with their assigned faculty advisor. These results will be compared to graduation rates of students who are in the same socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds who did not partake in the program. In addition, the academic achievements of these students will be compared to those who did not partake in the program. If

the program reflects increased graduation rates and academic success when comparing groups, then the program will be deemed as effective.

Overall the program is created to address access to higher education for low-income students of color. It will provide a holistic approach to education by focusing on financial aid, educational resources, and student background. While the program is thoroughly planned, it could be limited by funding, finding a host college, or access to personal data when creating the student cohort. If the program can overcome these obstacles, then it could be successful in creating opportunities for students pursuing higher education. If the program is successful, then it may expand into specific groups of students such as ethnic groups, low-income, middle class, etc. In conclusion, this program aspires to further equity in higher education by addressing the educational achievement gap between low income students of color and middle or high class students.

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