Insight

Each issue, President Sue Henderson will offer knowledge and insights on a topic of interest in higher education.

Sue Henderson, Ph.D., in her fourth year as president has spearheaded transformational change including the implementation of a $350 million West Campus development plan.

Our Economic Imperative

By Sue Henderson, Ph.D., *President, NJCU*

In the final analysis, the purpose of a college education is to give students the wherewithal to thrive in the future—the exact nature of which is unknown to us all. We know that certain skills can quickly become obsolete. We also know, as former President Bill Clinton said: "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet." For this future, we do know that being able to think creatively and critically, articulate ideas effectively, being quantitatively astute, and intellectually curious will be abilities that will put students in good stead. That is precisely what a first-rate liberal arts education provides.

Among the biggest challenges facing American higher education today is our failure to provide those who will be the majority of tomorrow's workforce the education that will give them these skills. Best estimates are that by 2020, 65% of jobs nationwide will require

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post-secondary education.[1] In 27 states and the District of Columbia, the requirements will be higher. Nearly across the board, states have current average attainment levels below those required for the jobs of the future. Closing that gap requires unprecedented success educating students who have been left behind: students who fit the categories of at risk, first-generation Americans, family incomes that place them in the two lowest socioeconomic quartiles, Hispanic and black.

The year 2014 was a watershed in that it was the first time that public schools in America became majority minority with 49.7% of enrollees white and 50.3% black, Hispanic or Asian Pacific Islander. That compares to 63.4% and 36.6% in 1997 and a projection of 45.3% and 54.7% in 2020.[2] Higher education overall has not done well with the populations of students whose numbers are increasing. The emphasis upon selectivity, rejection rates, and *U.S. News and World Report's* rankings combined with the ever-increasing costs have favored those in the top socioeconomic quartiles who are far more likely not to be the very large group of students who are at risk, first-generation Americans, Hispanic or black. Between 1970 and 2015 the percentage of 24 year olds in the top socioeconomic quartile who attained college degrees soared from 40% to 77% while the percentage of 24 year olds in the bottom quartile barely moved from 6% to 9%.[3] The numbers of students left behind and unlikely to qualify for the jobs of the future is staggering. Shifting from quartiles to quintiles, currently 44% of 15-24 year olds fall into the bottom (5th) quintile and 24.3% in the 4th, totaling 68.3%. Only 13.7% are in the first and second quintiles.[4]

Even for those students from the bottom quintiles who make it to college, the deck is stacked against them. Given their academic deficiencies, only the most exceptional of these students be able to do well their first semester. The Educational Advisory Board has found that students whose first year GPA is between 2.0 and 3.0 are far less likely to finish than those who are a 3.0 and above. In fact, they have only a 50-50 chance of graduation.[5] Typically, these students suffer from benign neglect since they are in "good academic standing" and they are not the honors students who are provided additional advising and attention.

These numbers don't square with the cherished ideal of America as the exemplar of upward mobility. While justice would require developing policies and taking actions to ensure mobility for all students, ours is a practical consideration. Our future as a dynamic nation and a world power depends on it. The students who are now in the left-behind categories are the rank and file of the workforce of tomorrow. They will be our health care providers, cultural and civic leaders, entrepreneurs, business executives and so much more. Between 2012 and 2020, for every 100 new jobs, 28 will be Hispanic, 10 black and 24 Asian. Only three will be white.[6] We in higher education must make it the highest of our priorities to find new ways to succeed with all the students we now leave behind. Fortunately, much good work is being done. More is needed. Our country's future depends on it. NJCU

[1] Recovery, Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce
[2] Pew Research Center
[3] Pell Institute, 2015. Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 45-Year Trend Report
[4] U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey: 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement
[5] The Murky Middle Preliminary Findings. Fall 2014. EAB Student Success Collaborative.
[6] http:www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_303htm