CHAPTER ONE
In Search of the Student-Ready College

In higher education, college administrators and faculty often talk about their desire to identify better and more college-ready students. They want students who come to college ready to learn and ready for the rigors of postsecondary education. On the surface, having college-ready students is a worthy goal. However, this assumes that most students are not ready to handle the rigors of postsecondary education. In actuality, that's not completely true. Most students aspire to college, and many have taken steps to prepare for college. While it is true that a sizable percentage of today's college students struggle academically, even then, these students should have viable postsecondary options available to them. In this search for the college-ready student, we put the burden of readiness and preparation on the student, when in reality, preparing today's students for the rigors of college should be a shared responsibility. Just imagine if we focused on the other side of that coin, and instead of seeking the ideal student, we became the ideal college. The college that was prepared for today's students, regardless of their backgrounds and academic strengths and challenges. What if we became a student-ready college? Interesting concept, isn't it?

But what does that really mean? What does it mean to be a student-ready college? Being a student-ready college requires more than a mission or diversity statement that touts philosophical ideals of inclusiveness. Being a student-ready college even means more than expressed commitments to inclusion and student-centeredness. A student-ready college is one that strategically and holistically advances student success, and works tirelessly to educate *all* students for civic and economic participation in a global, interconnected society.

At student-ready colleges, all services and activities—from admissions, to the business office, to the classroom, and even to campus security—are intentionally designed to facilitate students' progressive advancement toward college completion and positive post-college outcomes. Student-ready colleges are committed not only to student achievement, but also to organizational learning and institutional improvement. At student-ready colleges, all principles and values are aligned with the mission of the institution, and those beliefs are shared among members of the broader campus community. Student-ready colleges offer a holistic approach to leadership that empowers all members of the campus community to serve as leaders and educators.

In this book, we will explore the ecosystem of the student-ready college. We intend to think systemically and to offer an organic model based on ideas and practices we have learned from our years of work with campuses. College campuses often function as an ecosystem. Sometimes it is in good health; sometimes it is not so healthy, but in need of nurturing and change. Growth always occurs one way or another. And the campus ecosystem doesn't exist in isolation. Campuses are part of the web or network of life in a community. Surrounded by and interconnected with other organizations and social structures, businesses and civic bodies, the

campus participates in the life of the community. At the state and national level, the campus is interconnected systemically in a host of ways. Funding, regulations, laws, business practices, health and wellness functions, and the daily stuff of life—food, water, housing, transportation—all connect the campus to its broader community, its state, and the nation. When we think about the meaning and practice of leadership of the student-ready college, it is this environmental and organic meaning that we emphasize.

This book is written by five deeply committed leaders from the higher education community. Through our collective experience and wisdom, we have served higher education in a variety of leadership positions, within academic institutions and alongside them. We have worked with policy and philanthropic leaders who seek to advance and support efforts aligned with increased college attainment. Our commitment to today's students—and the institutions that serve them well—are reflected in our recommendations.

Through this collaboration, we endeavor to highlight the most promising and innovative practices we have witnessed across the community. Although the strategies outlined in this book can be undertaken by individual leaders alone, we recommend a collective approach—bringing together administrators and faculty across the college community to mobilize these efforts. Additionally, we suggest steps for partnering with those outside the campus community, as sustained progress will require partnerships—both internal and external—that can engage in a concerted, sustained effort.

The examples we offer are not exhaustive, but they reflect a range of interventions occurring all across the postsecondary community. But even with these enterprising models and initiatives, there is still a dearth of resources for institutional leaders to draw from. We hope this book adds to the collection of tools and resources that faculty, administrators, policy and philanthropic leaders, and all those who care about today' college students can draw upon for practical solutions.

A New Concept: Student-Ready Colleges

The goal of becoming a student-ready college is not difficult to embrace for most educators. In fact, if this concept were more prevalent, we believe that more people would readily embrace it. After all, supporting students is an aspiration of all campus leaders. Although we suspect that many will resonate with this concept, we also recognize that, for some, enacting our recommendations may pose a challenge. The problem is not really a lack of will; rather, some colleges are simply not structured to support this level of engagement; for others, there is no expectation or requirement to be student-centric; and there are still others who struggle with competing pressures and demands. When faced with these factors, some institutional leaders—even those sensitive to student needs and diversity—may fall back on old subconscious habits, which expect students to conform to traditional norms and standards. This approach often hurts students, as it leads to feelings of isolation and disconnection, the precursors to poor performance and outcomes. Also, this approach perpetuates the status quo—and in the 21st century, the status quo is no longer an option.

The impetus for writing this book is a growing awareness that the realities confronting our higher education system have the potential to narrow and threaten opportunity for millions of today's students. Therefore, we desire to work alongside campus leaders and faculty to minimize these threats. As was the case for previous generations of college-goers, the issues of college accessibility, affordability, and preparation remain, but they are further complicated by demographic, economic, and technological changes that are altering how we think, learn, and work. Beyond these compounding factors, we already know that the current educational system does not support existing students well. If left unchecked, these convergent forces could have catastrophic effects on our 21st-century students. We need these students. We need them to succeed. So it is critical that we transform our institutional culture and practices to be student-ready—responsive to contemporary students' needs and realities.

For many institutional leaders, this change will require more than tweaks or marginal changes; rather, it will require an overhaul of institutional policies and practices, as well as individual and shared attitudes and values. To enable and support institutional leaders committed to being student-ready institutions, we offer this practical, action-oriented book.

The Quest for College-Ready Students: A Historical Perspective

Although our goal should be to create student-ready colleges, sometimes we fail to tackle the institutional bureaucracies and deficits hindering progress toward this goal, but opt for a different strategy. This alternative approach removes the onus for improvement from the institution—or other structural impediments—and places it squarely on the student. In this strategy, we focus our energy on searching for the ideal college student—the “college-ready student.” The vision of this college-ready student can take on a range of forms, with high-achieving, self-directed students on one end and students with high potential on the other. Regardless of where we place our vision of the ideal student along this spectrum, there is a belief among many within the higher education community that there simply are not enough of them. As a result, faculty and administrators sometimes lament the challenges of educating today's students and are nostalgic for a prior era in American higher education when the students were (seemingly) different.

Although admittedly there are differences between the students of today and previous cohorts, their similarities are fundamental. Like prior generations of students, today's students arrive at college with a desire to learn and grow both personally and professionally. Regardless of the decade in which they enter college, students believe that a college degree is a prerequisite for a good life. Students have always believed that participating and succeeding in higher education will allow them to tap into greater levels of self-awareness and capability. They also share in the expectation that college will prepare them to live and make a living. Hence, for generations, students have arrived at the doorsteps of our colleges and universities with high expectations and varying academic and personal needs. And historically, our colleges and universities have responded accordingly, seizing the opportunity to nurture and prepare these

students to lead meaningful, productive lives.

Over the years, higher education has always aimed to be responsive to the concerns of its students, but the present day finds too many of us either solemn in our quest to find the ideal college student or too constrained by external forces and demands to think outside of the box. Given this, we long for and reminisce about a golden age in American higher education, when students all came to college well prepared and resources were readily available to support them. But this never was the case; the idea that an ideal student or ideal college existed "once upon a time" is nothing more than a myth. America's colleges and universities have always appealed to students with diverse interests and levels of academic preparation, and resources have always had to be negotiated. The challenge for us today is that our system of higher education has grown exponentially over the last three centuries—and growth continues. As it grows, so do the numbers of students who need additional support and preparation.

Clark Kerr wrote, "an appreciation of the evolution of higher education helps to develop perspective on contemporary issues, since historical context often reveals that our present problems are not all new ones" (as cited in Bullard, 2007, p. 12). In other words, the realities faced by today's college students simply provide a contemporary spin on issues encountered previously. A quick review of the history of higher education reveals that changing student needs have always stretched the system; and the system has, in turn, always adapted to accommodate the realities of the emergent student population. Even going back to the founding of the nation's first colleges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—when going to college was a rarity except for those interested in the clergy—we find that Harvard College provided tutors in Greek and Latin for those underprepared students (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998).

During the 19th century, higher education witnessed one of its most significant shifts with the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts (i.e., the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Morrill Act of 1890). The Morrill Acts gave birth to public postsecondary education and expanded opportunity to thousands of Americans who previously would not have had access to college. With the establishment of these colleges to teach agricultural and mechanical courses, institutions found it necessary to offer preparatory programs for students struggling in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Similar to the expansion witnessed by the Morrill Act of 1862, the Morrill Act of 1890 was the nation's first attempt to ensure college access to all Americans, not just White Americans, as it designated separate land-grant institutions for persons of color and gave birth to today's historically Black colleges and universities (Thelin, 2011; Gasman, 2008). This student growth was accompanied by an increase in the need for additional student supports. In 1894, with a college student enrollment of approximately 238,000, more than 40 percent of college freshmen enrolled in precollegiate programs (Ignash, 1997). Even at elite institutions, such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, sizeable proportions of the student body struggled academically and required additional supports from the institution to ensure their success.

The Morrill Acts introduced the first wave of growth and accessibility in higher education, and the second wave was the result of the GI Bill in 1944. This legislation spawned massive

growth in the postsecondary system, making college more accessible and affordable. The GI Bill is popularly thought to have changed the face of America as well as the face of our nation's colleges and universities (Thelin, 2011). Throughout the 20th century, other seminal legislative efforts—including the Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the Higher Education Act of 1965—helped to make higher education more accessible and affordable for millions more Americans (Thelin, 2011). As a result of these policies, thousands of deserving students enrolled in college, and while many had to adjust to the social dimensions of higher education, several faced academic challenges as well.

The current era of higher education—in the opening decades of the 21st century—presents another watershed moment in our nation's history. As we grapple with daunting realities—stemming from the social, demographic, technological, and economic changes impacting higher education—attaining a postsecondary degree or credential is becoming even more important to support career development and social mobility. To ensure that higher education works well for all students, the system needs to adapt to student needs and realities. There has never been a time when all students enrolled in college were academically prepared, when no students required additional supports to promote their college success, or when the transition from high school to college was seamless for all students. In our present-day quest for the ideal student, we miss opportunities to transform our institutions and teaching practices in support of today's students. Instead, too many of us are beginning to absolve ourselves from responsibility associated with poor student outcomes. We place the blame on either the individual student, the K–12 system, or broader societal challenges, such as poverty.

While inequality and disparities in society and the K–12 system do contribute to postsecondary challenges, higher education also plays a role in creating and perpetuating systemic barriers that impede student progress and success. For example, higher education leaders rarely acknowledge how higher education's expectations, practices, policies, and unspoken rules further stratify and marginalize students. To better support current and future generations of students, higher education must undergo a paradigm shift—one in which faculty and administrators fully embrace responsibility for serving students. History has shown that navigating such change is possible.

A Profile of the 21st-Century Student

To strengthen our democracy, colleges and universities must offer students a high-quality educational experience that teaches them “how to work” and “how to live” in this 21st-century knowledge economy (Wagner, 2010). For centuries, the U.S. system of higher education has been a leader in postsecondary education, boasting some of the strongest outcomes and institutions in the world. U.S. institutions are recognized in worldwide rankings of colleges and universities, holding more than half of the top 100 spots as well as 8 of the top 10. Many world leaders in the sciences and humanities are graduates of U.S. colleges and universities.

Even for those who do not achieve these levels of success, the benefits correlated with earning a college degree have been documented (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). For example:

- Higher educational levels reduce the chances of being unemployed:

  "The 2012 unemployment rates for 25- to 34-year-olds were 9.6% for those with some college but no degree and 7.2% for those with associate degrees" (p. 20).

- Attaining a college degree increases the likelihood of moving up the socioeconomic ladder:

  "Of adults who grew up in the middle family income quintile, 31% of those with a four-year college degree moved up to the top income quintile between 2000 and 2008, compared with just 12% of those without a four-year college degree" (p. 22).

- Adults with a college education exhibit higher levels of civic engagement:

  "In 2012, 42% of four-year college graduates, 29% of adults with some college or an associate degree, and 17% of high school graduates volunteered for organizations" (p. 5).

Even as the value proposition for higher education remains high, student success outcomes and graduation rates are uneven and below average. There are currently more than 20 million students enrolled in over 6,000 postsecondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), but only 4 out of 10 Americans hold a college degree or credential (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Another 25 percent attempted college, but left without a degree (Lumina Foundation, 2015c). We also know that these subpar outcomes disproportionately impact students from traditionally underserved racial/ethnic groups, who represent growing sectors of higher education—fewer than 30 percent of Blacks (28), Hispanics (20), and Native Americans (24) between the ages of 25 and 64 have earned a college degree (see Figure 1.1). And a recent examination of millennials shows that the career readiness among recent graduates is unsatisfactory, with deficits in skills associated with literacy, math, and problem solving (Goodman, Sands, & Coley, 2015).

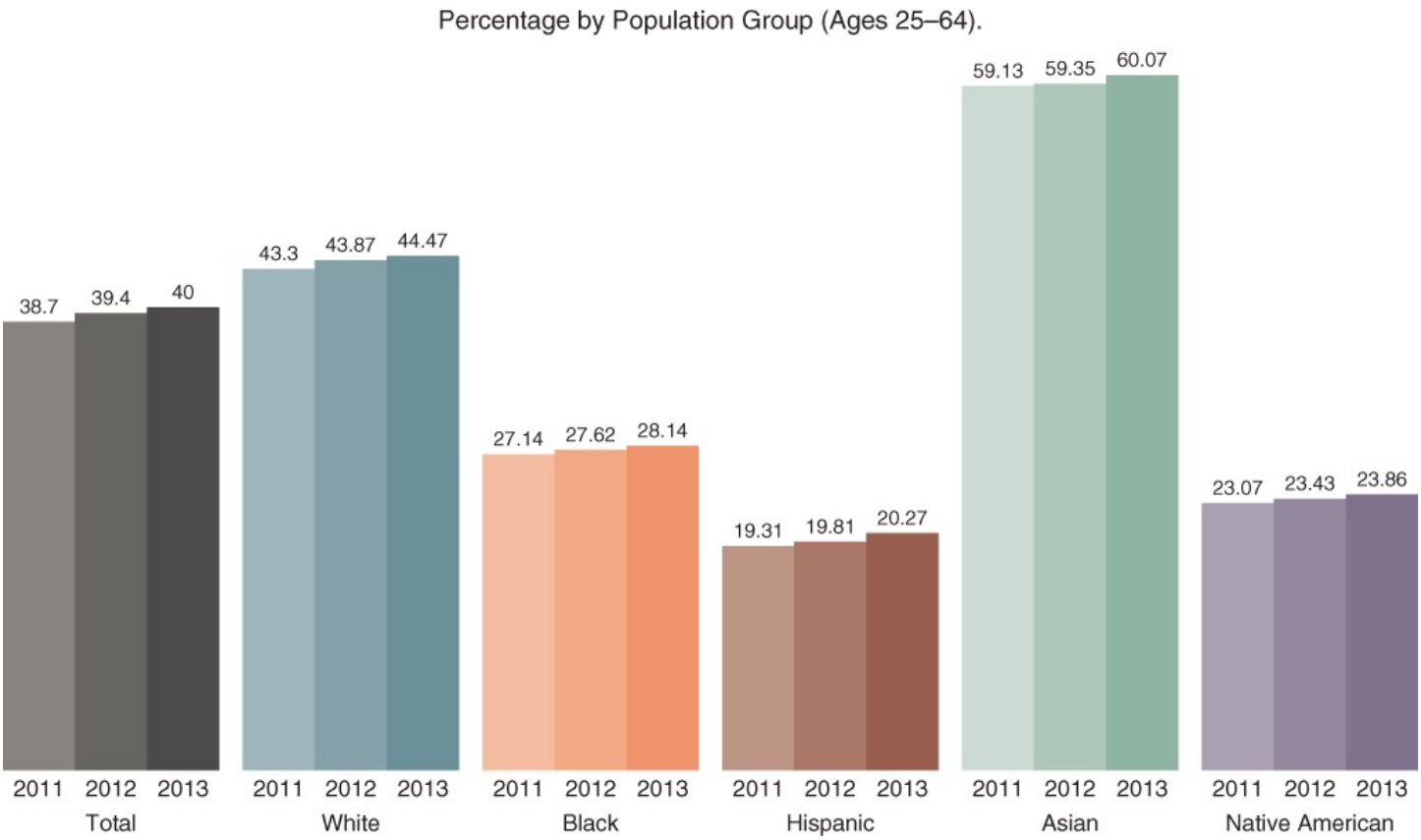

Figure 1.1 Trends in Degree Attainment Rates for U.S. Residents

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2015c.

With the face of American higher education changing, it is imperative that we embrace new models of education and support services that can accommodate today's college students. To serve these students, we must first have a precise understanding of the profile for 21st-century college students. At present, students of color compose more than 40 percent of the student body, and that proportion is expected to increase, with the growth being fueled by Latino/a and Asian students. And over 70 percent of today's college students possess nontraditional or post-traditional student characteristics (Miller, Valle, Engle, & Cooper, 2014), with 44 percent being over the age of 24 and over 25 percent enrolling part-time (30 percent), having dependents (28 percent), or working full-time (26 percent). In addition, growing proportions of these students are from first-generation (52 percent), low-income (51 percent), minority (42 percent), and non-native English speaking (18 percent) backgrounds (Figure 1.2). Also, as the civil rights of those of diverse sexual orientations are advanced nationally, we expect to serve even more students who reflect the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities (Pew Research Center, 2013).

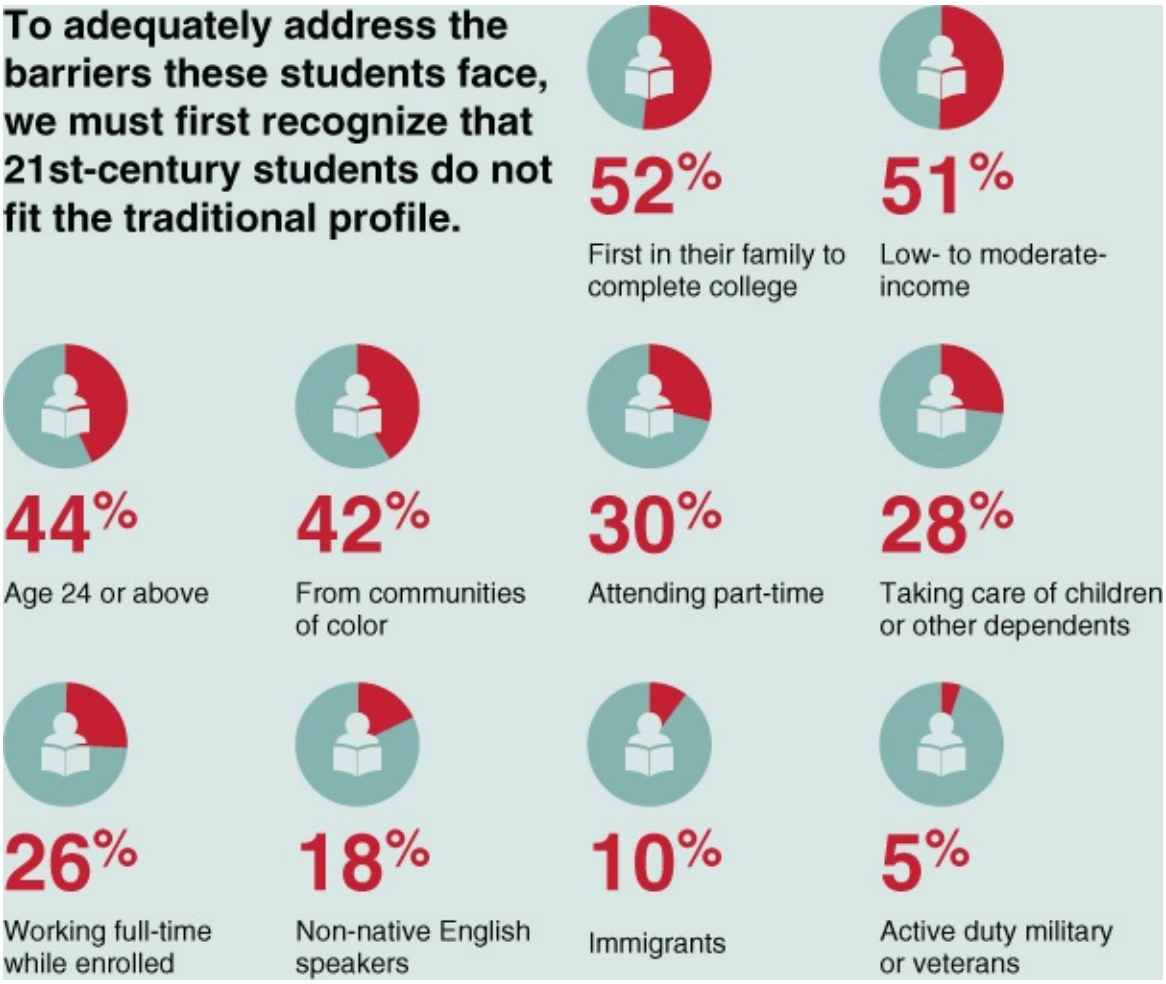

Figure 1.2 Profile of Today's Student

Source: Miller, Valle, Engle, & Cooper, 2014.

Historical trends show that there has been steady enrollment growth among diverse student groups—with these post-traditional characteristics—for decades. But the trends in accessibility have not translated into better student outcomes. In fact, college completion rates for many underserved student groups continue to lag far behind national averages.

- Part-time students, for example, rarely graduate. Even when these students take twice as long to complete degrees or certificates, no more than a quarter ever make it to graduation day (Complete College America, 2014).
- Minority students still struggle to graduate—less than 30 percent of African Americans (28 percent), Native Americans (23 percent), and Latinos/as (20 percent) complete college (Lumina Foundation, 2015c [Figure 1.3]).
- Low-income students are only half as likely as their higher-income peers to earn a bachelor's degree, even though attaining this degree substantially increases their chances of moving out of poverty (Lumina Foundation, 2015c [Figure 1.3]). If low-income young adults earned bachelor's degrees at the same rate as their higher-income counterparts, the United States would rank even higher among the top developed countries in the world.

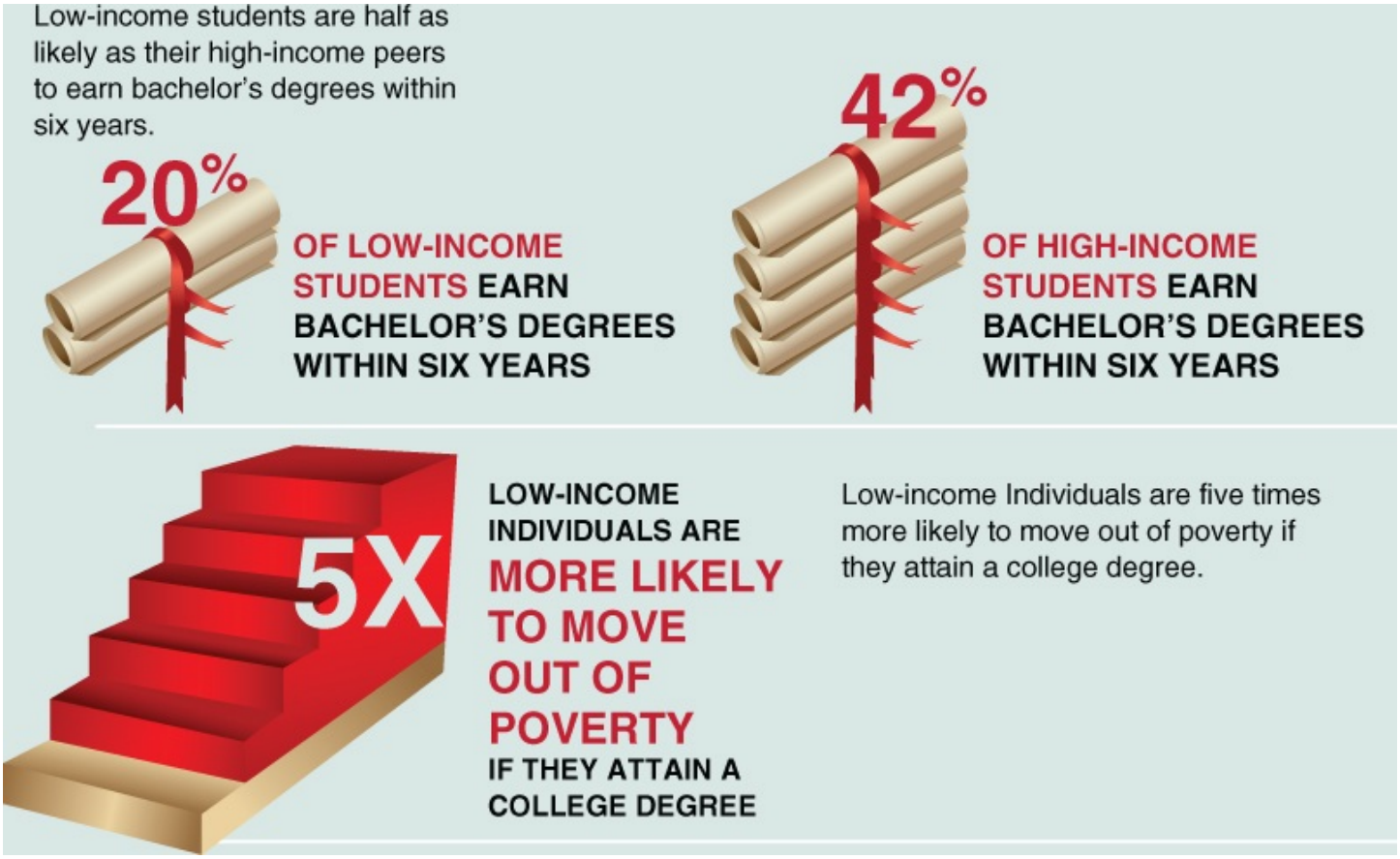

Figure 1.3 Attainment Rate for Low-Income Students

Source: Miller, Valle, Engle, & Cooper, 2014.

These facts show that the American system of higher education simply does not work well for everyone, and far too many students encounter challenges all along the educational pipeline that lead to the end of their formal education (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4). These trends are unacceptable, especially at a time when a more educated workforce and citizenry are so desperately needed. Educating all of America's students, especially underrepresented students, is a national imperative, as it can lead to positive impacts for individuals and entire communities.

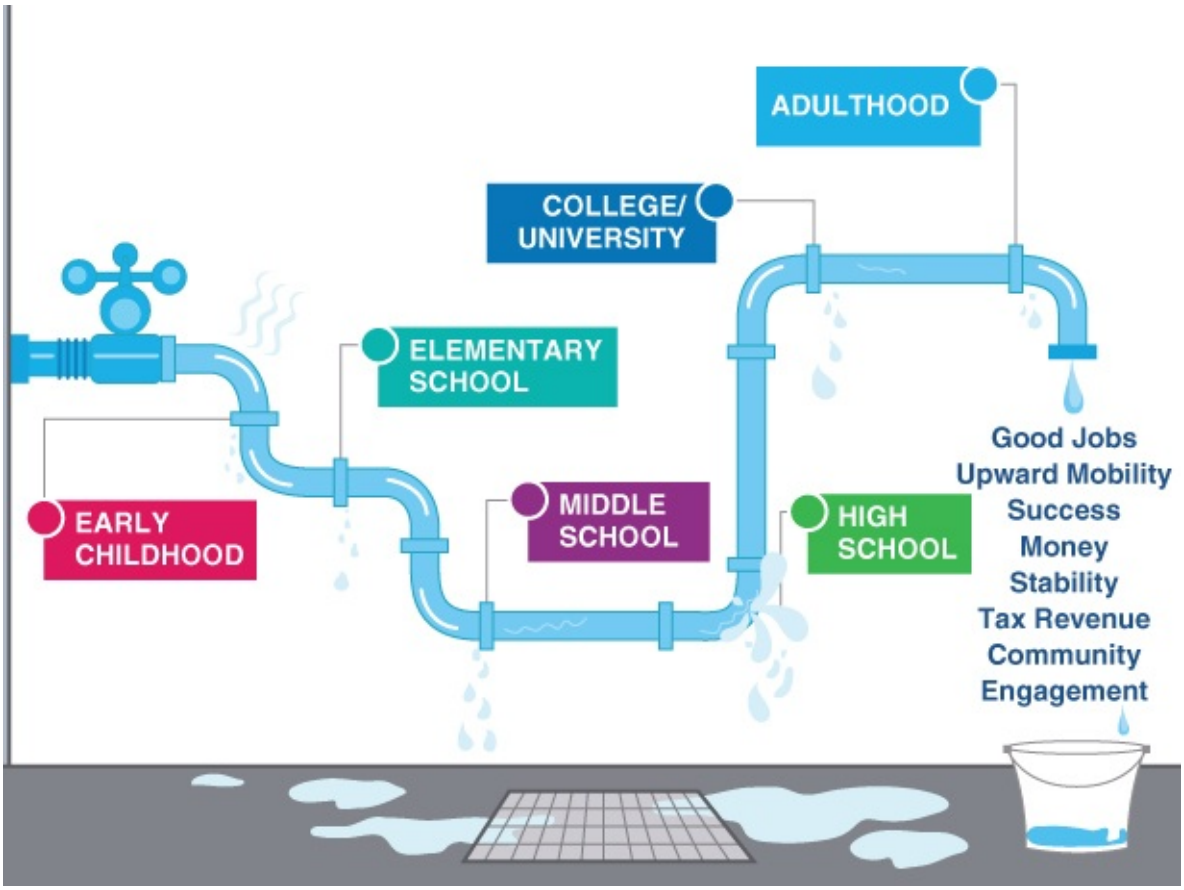

Figure 1.4 The Reality of the Education Pipeline

Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2013 (Reprinted from Literacy Connects).

Serving Students? Responding to Markets? Competing Tensions in Higher Education

Throughout the history of higher education, the community has responded to significant changes to the landscape; however, these responses have not consistently been student-driven or student-centric. Often, the community's response has been led by an economic-based or market-driven approach, known as academic capitalism (Giroux, 2014; Manning, 2013; Park, 2012; Andrews, 2006; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic capitalism refers to the "market and market-like behaviors on the part of universities and faculty" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 11) to gain additional resources and, sometimes, even prestige.

The economic factors occurring outside of the academy make the shift toward academic capitalism feel inevitable for higher education. With the decline in state government support, for example, academic capitalism is used to justify transforming academic and nonacademic functions into profit-making ventures. Academic capitalism manifests in different ways and can vary within and across campuses. But most commonly, it leads to the development of alternative income streams (i.e., competitive research grants, training, rental of facilities), outsourcing (i.e., of bookstores, contingent faculty labor, dining services, and health care), and diversification of academic programs (i.e., online and distance education; Slaughter &

Rhoades, 2009; Volk, Slaughter & Thomas, 2001).

Although discussed as a fairly new concept within the field of higher education, permutations of academic capitalism have always been present. Non-profit universities, in fact, have always engaged in for-profit activities, most notably through athletics and campus bookstores. But now, this phenomenon is spreading and quickly becoming the "new normal." Institutional priorities are being shaped using this concept more readily, as campus leaders find that their decision making is being influenced—implicitly and explicitly—by the tenets of academic capitalism.

As academic capitalism becomes more influential in the higher education enterprise, more people are becoming acutely aware of the opportunities and limitations of this approach, as it has the potential to be both helpful and harmful. Given this, it is important to ensure that this approach is not detrimental to the institutional ethos and does not compromise key components, such as teaching and learning. It is also necessary to ensure that this market-influenced approach has no adverse effects on underserved students. As a result, higher education leaders must not allow corporate functions and market forces to "reign supreme over the fundamental tenets of higher education" (Giroux, 2014; Manning, 2013; Andrews, 2006; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997); instead, the need for short-term profitability must be balanced with long-term investments in students and learning.

Even with a more conscientious approach to academic capitalism, some argue that market concepts are simply incongruent with the core functions of higher education and will ultimately prove detrimental to academic freedom and teaching, thereby compromising student outcomes and success. In *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education* (2011), Côte and Allahar argue that these market approaches have commodified education and learning. "Students have become consumers, colleges have turned into vendors, and research is being commercialized in applied fields marking a new era in higher education as an entrepreneurial institution" (Chait as cited in Bullard, 2007, p. 2).

On the other hand, some higher education leaders believe that market-centric approaches can be complementary to student-centric approaches. When approached with this perspective, student success and academic principles serve as the foundation for institutional culture and leadership; then academic capitalism becomes a tool or strategy that drives resource generation, leads to opportunities for faculty collaboration and development, leverages institutional partnerships, and, most important, creates pathways and support structures that benefit students. The synergy derived from having these two concepts operate in concert, instead of at odds, actually aids the quest for the ideal student, because it transforms the institution into a student-centric or student-ready college, where ideal college students are nurtured and developed.

Becoming more student-ready or student-centric can lead to tremendous market advantages, but only when institutional leaders make it a priority to know, understand, and respond to the needs of their students. When institutional leaders understand the similarities and unique qualities of 21st-century students, in comparison to students from previous generations, they can take steps to deliberately align institutional strategies in support of them. In reality, the most responsible

market solution for achieving long-term financial and learning outcomes is to be a student-ready college.

The Path Forward: Taking Steps to Transformation

Policymakers and the general public habitually criticize American higher education. One could make the point that as long as higher education has existed in the United States, people have always been critical. Criticism extends from educators and their policies and practices to the impact of education, or lack thereof, on students. Certainly there are elements of truth in some of the criticism, but there are ways to address these critiques and improve the higher education system. In this book, we are turning away from criticism and thinking about improvement as growth and progression. We intend to offer a useful corrective, but we do so from a positive vantage point that offers new questions and opens new perspectives on what it means to create a student-ready campus.

This book is written for all campus educators, but it is intended to spur action primarily among campus leadership and decision makers. We hope that readers will take from this book a set of principled recommendations that will offer a framework for aligning attitudes and behavior with the steps needed for success. Acknowledging that we are making the case for cultural and organizational change, we speak with humility. We know this work is hard, and it takes bravery and passion to even consider what we recommend. But through our work, we have encountered many courageous men and women ready to tackle the challenges, but unaware of where or how to start. We believe that the best time to start is now, and the best place to start is where you are as you turn the pages of this book.