Summiting the academic mountain: The challenges of first-generation college students

Over the preceding 100 years, the educational system in the United States has been increasingly successful at providing educational access and attainment to a progressively diverse set of high school students. More recently, a much improved record of access to the post-secondary educational system also has been highlighted by the United States Department of Education. These successes have been dampened by the sobering low completion rates by students who are (disproportionately) the first in their families to attend college, and males of color. Contemporary approaches to data analytics at several institutions have suggested three or four risk factors that have variable impacts, but in nearly all cases, decrease graduation rates: financial need; being first in their family to attend college; underprepared in reading, writing or math; and, being a single head of household. Perhaps more worrisome, several studies are now convincingly demonstrating the troublesome and more complex effects of a long list of psychosocial factors that more variably affect subpopulations of students and their success. The impact of these factors differ within the educational landscape but are overrepresented in students who are first in their family to attend college. Regional efforts to establish meta-majors, develop structured pathways, co-requisite enrollment of developmental and mainstreamed coursework and metacognitive educational approaches are having a positive, but variable, effect on the educational gains of all students.