

Issue Alert

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Low-Income Students and College Success: More than Money

The Issue

Today's economy demands higher levels of educational achievement in order to obtain employment with a self-sufficient wage. Low-income students, even those who are successful academically, often face the greatest challenges in earning a college degree. Not all of those challenges are financial. While low-income students need enough money to attend

college, money alone is not enough. In addition to support services provided by colleges and universities, parents and community organizations can make a real difference in helping low-income college students persevere and earn the college diploma needed to find a good paying job.

The Million Dollar Difference

More than ever before, post-secondary education is essential to becoming self-sufficient in the 21st century economy. National research reveals that students who earn at least an associate's degree earn higher wages, have lower rates of unemployment and enjoy more career choices than students with only a high school diploma.¹ According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the average annual salary for a worker with only a high school diploma or GED is at least 76 percent lower than the yearly earnings of a worker with at least a bachelor's degree. This adds up to a difference of more than \$1 million over the course of a lifetime.²

Even occupations that have traditionally been unconnected to the educational pipeline are emphasizing the importance of higher education. For example, the national youth organization, Future Farmers of America (FFA), encourages students interested in farming to pursue at least an associate's degree to successfully run their business in today's global economy.

Students from low-income households have the longest journey toward economic self-sufficiency, and

Table 1

MEAN EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR WORKERS AGE 18 AND OVER, U.S.: 2006

All workers	\$45,344
Not a high school graduate	\$24,721
High school graduate, including GED	\$33,419
Some college, no degree	\$38,284
Associate's degree	\$41,475
Bachelor's degree	\$58,866
Master's degree	\$70,813
Professional degree	\$117,033
Doctorate degree	\$104,214

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, 2007 Annual Social & Economic Supplement.

low-income students have the lowest rates of college completion. In fact, a high achieving low-income student is still less likely to earn a college degree than a low-achieving student from a high-income household.³ As one national study summarized,

¹ Crosby, O. (2003). Associates degree: Two years to a career or a jump start to a bachelors' degree. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, 46:4, 1-13.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

³ Fox, M., Connolly, A., & Snyder, T. (2005). Youth Indicators 2005: Trends in the well-being of American youth, (NCES 2005-050). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

“From the time they enter grade school through their post-secondary education, these students lose more educational ground and excel less frequently than their higher-income peers. Perhaps most disturbingly, far too few ever graduate from college or go on to graduate school.”⁴

Only 17 percent of low-income Hoosier students enroll in college (below the national average of 23 percent).⁵ Of those, roughly one-third will earn a

bachelor’s degree. According to a recent report, only six percent of students with the lowest socioeconomic status earn a bachelor’s degree compared to 40 percent with the highest.⁶

As Indiana struggles with a rising child poverty rate (nearly 18 percent in 2006, just under the national average⁷), emphasis is needed on helping all Hoosier youth, and especially those from low-income households, to reach college and earn a degree.

Twenty-first Century Scholars: Lessons Learned

Since 1990, low-income Hoosier students who meet certain criteria have been eligible to receive a college scholarship from state government. Through the Twenty-first Century Scholars Program, these students receive funding to cover the financial equivalent of four years tuition to attend an Indiana public university. The scholarship also may be applied toward tuition at a private university in Indiana.

Seventh and eighth graders who are eligible for the free or reduced-price school lunch programs are eligible to enroll (Table 2).

When they apply, the students pledge to consistently exhibit good citizenship, maintain at least a “C” grade point average, avoid alcohol, drugs and criminal activity and enroll in an Indiana college within two years of completing high school. Students affirm this pledge in 12th grade.

To support Twenty-first Century Scholars in all 92 counties, Indiana

maintains 16 regional centers, offering a range of college prep assistance including academic tutoring, development of study skills, assistance with SAT preparation, career exploration seminars, college

campus tours and parent workshops on college financial aid.

Since 1995, students have received scholarships totaling almost \$125 million.⁸

The program continues to enjoy successes, challenges and opportunities. For example:

- **Success:** Twenty-first Century Scholars are less likely than other low-income non-scholar students to drop out of college before earning a degree.
- **Challenge:** Twenty -first Century Scholars are still more likely to drop out of college than their middle and upper income peers.
- **Success:** Twenty-first Century Scholars are more than twice as likely as their other low-income counterparts to earn an associate’s degree.
- **Challenge:** The likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree is not much higher for a Twenty-first Century Scholar (34 percent) than for other low-income students who do not receive a Twenty-first Century Scholarship (31 percent).⁹

Table 2

INCOME MAXIMUMS TO QUALIFY FOR 21ST CENTURY SCHOLARS PROGRAM: 2006-2007

Household Size	Maximum Annual Income
2	\$24,420
3	\$30,710
4	\$37,000
5	\$43,290
6	\$49,580

For each additional person in household, add \$6,290.

Source: State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana. Activity and program report for academic year 2006-2007

⁴ Wyner, J., Bridgeland, J., & Di Iulio, J. (2007) Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high achieving students from lower income families. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation & Civic Enterprises. Retrieved on January 23, 2008, from www.jackkentcookefoundation.org/jkcf_web/Documents/Achievement20Trap.pdf

⁵ Education Commission of the States. (2003, October). Closing the college participation gap: A national summary. Retrieved on October 26, 2007, from www.communitycollegepolicy.org/html/Issues/access/pdf/ECSNationalReportComplete.pdf

⁶ Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid. (2001). *Access Denied: Restoring the nation’s commitment to equal educational opportunity*. Retrieved on January 24, 2008, from www.ed.gov/about/bdscmm/list/acsfa/access_denied.pdf

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. 2006 American Community Survey. Rankings 2006.

⁸ State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana. (2007, December). Activity and program report for academic year 2006-2007. Retrieved on January 24, 2008, from www.in.gov/ssaci/news/AnnualReport2006-07FV.pdf

⁹ Indiana Commission for Higher Education. (2007) Snapshot of the Twenty-First Century Scholars Program *Draft*. Retrieved on January 24, 2008, from www.che.state.in.us/Powerpoint/2007/2007-First20Century20Scholars20are—final.ppt

- **Opportunity:** Approximately 35 percent of Indiana students are eligible for Twenty-first Century Scholarships.
- **Challenge:** Fewer than half of those who are eligible actually apply for the program. For example, in 2005, 25,647 Indiana eighth graders were eligible, but only 11,766 applied.¹⁰
- **Success:** 79,523 students signed the pledge and enrolled in the program between 1995 and 2007.
- **Challenge:** Only 43,444 fulfilled the pledge by

their high school graduation.¹¹

The history of the Twenty-first Century Scholars Program reveals that financial aid definitely makes a difference for low-income college students. However, these data also demonstrate that money alone does not guarantee college success. Other academic supports, counseling, social services, mentoring and personal encouragement can help all students, and especially low-income students, earn a college degree.

Best Practices on Campus

Many Indiana colleges and universities implement strategies, consistent with national research, aimed at retaining their students. Those strategies include:

- Designated faculty or staff members as “first responders” to students’ needs, helping students navigate the complexities of the college campus;
- Personalized the college experience for students by encouraging high levels of student involvement and engagement in campus activities;
- Well-developed first-year programs including freshman orientation, freshman interest groups and first-year learning communities;
- Improved instruction in “gatekeeping” introductory courses, especially in mathematics, by reducing class sizes and offering supplemental instruction;
- Early warning and advising systems to monitor student progress and intervene when student performance declines;
- Ample academic and social support services;
- Special programs for at-risk student populations;
- Strong leadership from top administrators who create an institutional culture promoting student success including adequate funding for support programs and rewards to faculty and staff involved with retention programs;
- A central person, office or committee charged with coordinating all retention efforts; and
- An emphasis on using data when designing, evaluating and revising retention programs.¹²

Low income students often face barriers to accessing these resources:

- Low-income students often are not aware of supportive programs and services available on campus or do not understand how they can benefit from this assistance;
- Retention services that are not free can be financially out-of-reach for low-income students;
- Low-income students who live or work off-campus can not take full advantage of on-campus retention programs;
- Low-income students face difficulties with seeking and asking for help because they fear stigmatizing themselves; and
- Low-income students are most likely to “fall through the cracks” when retention services lack centralization, coordination or adequate resources.¹³

¹⁰ State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana. (2007) Need for Project. [Internal Document]

¹¹ State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana. (2007, December). Activity and program report for academic year 2006-2007. Retrieved on January 24, 2008, from www.in.gov/ssaci/news/AnnualReport2006-07FV.pdf

¹² Engle, J. & O'Brien, C. (n.d.) Demography is not destiny: Increasing the graduation rates of low-income college students at large public universities. The Pell Institute. Retrieved on January 25, 2008, from www.pellinstitute.org/files/files-demography_is_not_destiny.pdf

¹³ Engle, J. & O'Brien, C. (n.d.) Demography is not destiny: Increasing the graduation rates of low-income college students at large public universities. The Pell Institute. Retrieved on January 25, 2008, from www.pellinstitute.org/files/files-demography_is_not_destiny.pdf

College Success Through Parent and Community Support

Social and cultural factors can increase the likelihood that low-income college students will stop attending college sooner and in higher numbers before earning a degree. For example, many low income students are contributors to a family's income; thus, trying to work and go to school is a challenge. Also, many low-income students are the minority on campus. Some begin to feel alienated or unconnected to their peers.¹⁴

Parental encouragement is the best predictor of postsecondary educational aspirations and success.¹⁵ Yet, many low-income students are the first in their families to attend college. In this situation, even the most supportive parents can be limited in the amount of information and direct assistance they can provide to their college-bound children.

In addition, a summary of national research finds that youth from low-income backgrounds often are not as well-prepared academically for college as are youth from middle- and high-income households. Thus, youth agencies and other community organizations can make an important difference by teaching what one study refers to as "college knowledge" in low-income communities and by encouraging participating youth to pursue higher education.¹⁶

One example of a community youth organization successfully increasing the "college knowledge" of low-income students is the Center for Leadership Development in Indianapolis (www.cldinc.org). The center serves middle school and high school students with programs that teach study skills, bolster life skills, explore career interests, examine college options and provide information on financial aid. As a result of these intensive college prep programs, the Center reports that more than half of participating students earn a college degree.

Another community example is Project Leadership at the Community Foundation of Grant County (www.projectleadership.org). The program focuses on enrolling eligible students in the Twenty-first Century Scholars program and providing mentors for high school freshman who are already enrolled. Within two months, Project Leadership increased enrollment of eligible students from 17% to 38% by hiring a liaison who promoted the program at community events, spoke with parents and provided

incentives for students if their parents completed the application. In addition, school leaders report the mentoring program is positively affecting students' grades, attendance and behaviors.

In addition, youth-serving agencies can:

- Help eligible students enroll in Twenty-first Century Scholars, and then mentor those students to help them fulfill program requirements;
- Develop a strong working relationship with the youth agency's local Twenty-first Century Scholars regional office;
- Maintain open communication with local schools and teachers to ensure that the youth agency's after-school tutoring program is consistent with what the student is learning in the classroom;
- Encourage students to take coursework that will prepare them for college;
- Ensure the student has a caring supportive adult who will promote college attendance;
- Help students choose an appropriate college, one that meets the student's academic, career, and personal needs;
- Take full advantage of free college-prep resources such as **Drive of Your Life**, **Trip to College**, **KnowHow2Go**, **Learn More**, and **College Goal Sunday** that can help low-income students build momentum toward college success;
- Provide guest speakers and visits to local employers to help youth learn about career opportunities and develop career aspirations that encourage college completion;
- Maintain a mentoring relationship with local college students, helping them become aware of on-campus supportive services while eliminating any hesitation or stigma about asking for help; and
- In addition to youth development, view their programs in the context of college readiness and workforce development.

All Hoosiers, meanwhile, can explore opportunities to volunteer, donate and connect their employers and employees to community-based programs that help low-income students reach college and earn a degree.

¹⁴ Tinto, V. (2004). Student retention and graduation: Facing the truth, living with the consequences. The Pell Institute. Retrieved on January 23, 2008, from www.pellinstitute.org/tinto/TintoOccasionalPaperRetention.pdf

¹⁵ Hossler, D., Schmitt, J. & Vesper, N. (1999). *Going to College*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

¹⁶ Davis, R. & McSwain, C. (2007, July). College access for the working poor: Overcoming burdens to succeed in higher education. Institute for Higher Education Policy. Retrieval at www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/a-f/CollegeAccessWorkingPoor.pdf

Additional Resources and Information

Public debate will continue over whether or not college financial aid from government, university and private sources should be increased for low-income students, and if so, then by how much. In the meantime, students, parents, educators and youth-serving organizations can utilize additional information and resources such as:

KnowHow2GO: An online site that breaks down the college process into four steps and gives practical information on how to get to college.
www.knowhow2go.org

Indiana Pathways to College Network (IPCN): Provides educators and researchers the opportunity to collaborate and produce publications on a number of issues related to college accessibility. IPCN materials are available to the public and can be accessed online. IPCN also provides interested parties with the opportunity to join an e-mail discussion list and sponsors an annual conference designed for those who share a commitment to improving college access.
<http://inpathways.net>

Twenty-First Century Scholars Regional Support Programs: There are 16 statewide support programs for the 21st Century Scholar Program.
www.in.gov/ssaci/programs/21st/pdf/sites.pdf

College Goal Sunday: Conducted at 35 sites from Gary to Evansville and Lawrenceburg to Fort Wayne, the annual February event offers expert assistance in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) that is required of all students applying for financial aid, including the Twenty-first Century Scholars. www.collegegoalsunday.org

Indiana Student Achievement Institute: This nonprofit organization focuses on raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. The program supports teachers to ensure students are able to pass the ISTEP and Indiana Graduation Qualification exams and graduate with a Core 40 Diploma.
www.asainstitute.org

Learn More Indiana: Statewide initiatives to help students of all ages navigate the path to college. Learn More Indiana provides Hoosier families with a number of college and career resources including access to a one-stop website and a free 24 hour helpline, while also providing Hoosier families with up-to-date and easy-to-read publications on related topics. www.learnmoreindiana.org

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG): JAG is a school-to-career program in high schools, alternative schools, community colleges, and middle schools across the country. JAG's mission is to keep young people in school through graduation and provide work-based learning experiences that will lead to career advancement opportunities or to enroll in a postsecondary institution that leads to a rewarding career. www.jag.org/indiana

Drive of Your Life: A free, fun, video game-style Web site that helps middle-school and high school students learn more about themselves, higher education and careers. On the site, students answer a series of questions about themselves to learn what careers could interest them and then go on a virtual drive to learn more about each of those careers – all in their own customized car. If students learn now what it will take to achieve their desired career, they can plan high school courses accordingly and put themselves on the road to college success. A printable “license” summarizes their trip through the Web site.
www.driveofyourlife.org

Trip to College: a Web site for parents of students in grades K-12, providing a free, step-by-step easy to use resource to help families find and fund a college education. On the Trip To College Web site, parents can find a college planning timeline; facts, figures and information about preparing and paying for their child's college education; information on Indiana colleges; and more. www.triptocollege.org

**For additional county and school district data,
visit the Kids Count in Indiana
online database at
www.iyi.org/data**

Indiana Youth Institute Resources

IYI Weekly Update, a free, electronic newsletter featuring useful information such as training opportunities, free resources, new reports about youth, and a “Grant Tip of the Week.” Subscribe at http://www.iyi.org/weekly_updates/subscribe.asp

Kids Count in Indiana Data Book and online database, including state, county, and school district statistics on Indiana children and youth to support grant proposals and program initiatives. Access the database at www.iyi.org/data

Virginia Beall Ball Library, a free lending library of youth development and nonprofit management materials, which can be borrowed easily by youth workers throughout the state, either on-site, online or through our toll-free main number. Search the catalog or sign up for an account at <http://www.iyi.org/library>

Youth Service Help Line, 877-IYI-TIPS, providing free phone assistance to youth organizations seeking quick answers to questions about fundraising, youth development and legal matters.

Free custom research on Indiana youth, at www.iyi.org/datarequest.

IYI's Web site, www.iyi.org, an online source for new reports on children, data for grant proposals, information about IYI's programs and library materials, and links to other valuable sources of youth development information.

Regional trainings, taught by nationally regarded instructors, offered at convenient locations across the state, on topics such as fundraising and working with youth.

Professional Development Grants, mini-grants for qualified youth workers to attend their choice of seminars, workshops, and conferences.

Kids Count in Indiana Conference, an annual fall conference designed to give Indiana youth workers the inspiration, networking opportunities, information and tools they need to serve children effectively.

Statewide assistance, providing free local service in all 92 Indiana counties. Call 1-800-343-7060 for information about how to contact the IYI Regional Field Representative near you.



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