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# A Framework for Reducing the College Success Gap and Promoting Success for All

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# A Framework for Reducing the College Success Gap and Promoting Success for All

## **Abstract**

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have directed tremendous attention to the goal of improving “student success.” Based on a review of largely discrete existing bodies of literature, this report proposes an overarching framework that policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can use to develop, implement, and evaluate policies and practices for addressing persistent racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in student success. The framework brings order to the wide array of theoretical and methodological approaches that, when considered together, provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways policymakers and practitioners can intervene more effectively to promote student success. The framework was intended to describe avenues and approaches to effective development, implementation, and evaluation of policy related to student success, eschewing the identification of a “single bullet” theory, method, policy, or practice.

After defining student success and explaining our procedures, this report describes the results of a multidisciplinary examination of the theoretical and methodological approaches that researchers have used to inform knowledge and understanding across a range of student success outcomes. Then, the report presents and describes the proposed conceptual model that ties this work together and provides recommended uses of the model for policy, practice, and further research.

## **Disciplines**

Disability and Equity in Education | Education | Higher Education | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

# **A Framework for Reducing the College Success Gap and Promoting Success for All**

## **Executive Summary**

**Commissioned Report for the  
National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success:  
Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success**

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July 2006

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR REDUCING THE STUDENT SUCCESS GAP AND PROMOTING SUCCESS FOR ALL**

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### **Executive Summary**

#### **Purpose**

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have directed tremendous attention to the goal of improving “student success.” Based on a review of largely discrete existing bodies of literature, this report proposes an overarching framework that policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can use to develop, implement, and evaluate policies and practices for addressing persistent racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in student success. The framework brings order to the wide array of theoretical and methodological approaches that, when considered together, provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways policymakers and practitioners can intervene more effectively to promote student success. The framework was intended to describe avenues and approaches to effective development, implementation, and evaluation of policy related to student success, eschewing the identification of a “single bullet” theory, method, policy, or practice.

After defining student success and explaining our procedures, this report describes the results of a multidisciplinary examination of the theoretical and methodological approaches that researchers have used to inform knowledge and understanding across a range of student success outcomes. Then, the report presents and describes the proposed conceptual model that ties this work together and provides recommended uses of the model for policy, practice, and further research.

#### **Conceptual Model**

This report complements existing syntheses of how college affects students by developing a framework for guiding the ways in which policymakers and practitioners could intervene to improve outcomes for students and eliminate gaps in outcomes among students.

Our approach to developing this framework assumes the centrality of various disciplinary perspectives on indicators of student success. These perspectives differ in terms of their foci, assumptions, conceptual models, empirical orientations, and theoretical and methodological approaches. Alone, each disciplinary perspective offers insights into the processes and forces that contribute to student success. Together, they produce a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which policymakers and practitioners could intervene to promote student success.

To produce this report, we reviewed literature that examined 10 indicators of student success. Reflecting our goal of identifying a framework to guide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, we define student success as completion or effective exercise of these 10 indicators of educational attainment. The 10 indicators represent 4 key transitions in a longitudinal student success process.

Transition 1 – College Readiness

Indicator 1: Educational Aspirations

Indicator 2: Academic Preparation

Transition 2 – College Enrollment

Indicator 3: College Access

Indicator 4: College Choice

Transition 3 – College Achievement

Indicator 5: Academic Performance

Indicator 6: Transfer

Indicator 7: Persistence

Transition 4 – Post-college Attainment

Indicator 8: Post-BA Enrollment

Indicator 9: Income

Indicator 10: Educational Attainment

The first transition, becoming ready for college, is measured by educational aspirations or expectations and academic preparation for college. The second transition, enrollment in college, is measured by college access and college choice. The third transition, college achievement, is represented by academic performance in college, transfer among institutions, and persistence to program or degree completion. The final transition, post-college attainment, is measured by enrollment in graduate and professional schools, income, and educational attainment.

With the goal of capitalizing on what scholars in key disciplines agree to be the best existing thinking and research on the components of student success, we limited the review to articles published between January 1, 1995 and June 30, 2005 in top journals in four disciplines: economics, education, psychology, and sociology. At least six conclusions may be drawn from our review of work in these fields:

- Attention to student success in articles published in top journals varies across the disciplines we examined;
- Even within disciplines, differing aspects of student success are examined;
- A wide variety of theoretical approaches to understanding student success exist and these vary by disciplinary perspective;
- Methodological approaches and sources of data for exploring student success also vary and are bound to the theoretical stance employed;
- The unit of analysis varies by disciplinary and theoretical approach; and

- Attention to differences in student success across sub-groups of students varies across the areas we examine.

Drawing on these six areas of variation in the literature, we propose a conceptual model for understanding student success, rather than a “theory” to describe it. Theories are defined as the interconnections of a series of conceptual models and this is beyond the bounds of our effort here. Conceptual models are used to elaborate relationships in well defined and scoped areas of inquiry. Our model incorporates both commonalities and differences across theoretical and methodological approaches to student success into an overarching conceptual model.

The conceptual model we offer is generic, in the sense that it could be used to understand any of the 10 indicators of student success listed above. Reflecting the guiding assumptions and central conclusions of our review, the proposed conceptual model has six defining characteristics.

***Student success is a longitudinal process.*** The model assumes that student success is a longitudinal process that begins with college readiness, moves on to college enrollment and then to college achievement, and culminates in postgraduate and labor market experiences. The model also assumes that discrete student success indicators are interrelated and part of larger student success processes, so that attainment of any particular student success indicator shapes the process for attaining other indicators of student success.

***Multiple theoretical approaches inform understanding of student success.*** The model assumes that student success is best understood when multiple theoretical perspectives are considered.

***Student success is shaped by multiple levels of context.*** The model assumes that student success is determined by an individual’s internal context and multiple external layers of context. The research consistently shows that students make decisions and take actions that influence their success. But the decisions that students make, and the behaviors in which they engage also are shaped by multiple levels of context. Our model assumes that student behavior cannot be fully understood without considering that student decisions are shaped by four nested contextual layers: (1) the individual’s internal context; (2) the family context, (3) the school context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context.

***The relative contribution of different disciplinary and area perspectives to student success varies.*** The model assumes variation in the contribution of different disciplinary perspectives to current knowledge of student success, as well as to understanding the particular forces that shape student success at each layer of the model.

***Multiple methodological approaches contribute to knowledge of student success.*** The model recognizes the benefits of diverse methodological approaches and data sources, and is intended to be tested using multiple methods. The model allows for qualitative approaches that probe particular aspects of student success predictors, processes, or indicators as well as quantitative examinations of relationships among variables within or across particular layers of context

***Student success processes vary across groups.*** By recognizing the role of multiple layers of context, the proposed conceptual model assumes that the path to student success may vary across racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups based on differences in culture, as well as differences in family resources, local school and community structures and supports, economic and social conditions, and public policies.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The proposed conceptual model offers at least four suggestions for policymakers and practitioners who seek to improve success for all students and to reduce gaps in success among students. The suggestions offer guidance for the development and implementation of policy and practice.

First, policymakers and practitioners must recognize that policies and practices are enacted through multiple layers of context. Therefore, to reduce gaps in student success across groups, they must acknowledge the limitations on success that may be imposed by a student's situated context. Clearly, the effectiveness of policies and practices depends on the ways they are interpreted, enacted, and transmitted. It follows that the effectiveness of a particular policy or practice cannot be assessed merely in terms of its availability to a student; the layers of context that inform the student's understanding and encourage or limit his or her participation in the policy or program must also be considered.

Second, policymakers and practitioners should also recognize that policies and programs interact with other policies and programs and with characteristics of the schools, families, and students. Federal and state policymakers as well as K-12 and higher education leaders have developed numerous policies and programs that are all designed to address a particular aspect of student success. Typically, policies and programs are developed in isolation, with little coordination among them and are designed to address discrete indicators of student success.

Third, policymakers and practitioners should also recognize that no single approach to policy or practice will improve student success for all students or reduce gaps in success across students. Policies and programs that recognize variations in the different layers of context are likely to be more effective than policies and programs that emphasize a one-size-fits-all approach.

Finally, policymakers and practitioners should support a program of research that tests aspects of the conceptual model using multiple methods and drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives. Despite the large number of studies that examine various aspects of student success, our review of research and methods identified few studies that used multiple units of analysis and/or multiple theoretical perspectives or paid enough attention to understanding the contribution of multiple layers of context to the effectiveness of policies and programs. Research is required to test the extent to which the proposed conceptual model might be used to develop and implement policies and practices that promote success for all students and reduce success gaps among students. Future research should also test the relationships identified in the proposed conceptual model using a range of methodological approaches and sources of data, as well as a broader range of student success indicators. Finally, research that tests the proposed conceptual model should draw on the disciplinary perspectives that were the basis for this report (i.e., education, psychology, sociology, and economics), as well as other disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Through a review and critique of research in four disciplines, this report develops a conceptual model to guide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in their efforts to reduce gaps in student success across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The model suggests that closing gaps in student success requires recognizing that: 1) student success is a longitudinal process; 2) multiple theoretical approaches inform understanding of student success; 3) student success is shaped by multiple levels of context; 4) the relative contribution of different disciplinary and area perspectives to understanding student success varies; 5) multiple methodological approaches contribute to knowledge of student success; and 6) student success processes vary across groups. By recognizing these six defining

characteristics, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers will identify more effective approaches to improving student success for all students.