

How Students Are Making It:

Perspectives on Getting Through College from
Recent Graduates of the Boston Public Schools

Sara E. Stoutland, Author

Ann S. Coles, Editor



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Preface

The Boston area is known globally as a center of higher education, attracting talented and sought-after students from across the United States and the world—and graduating the leaders of tomorrow in every country, field and sector imaginable. But a spate of recent studies about the low college completion rates of Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates has raised an alarm about how our own children are faring in these institutions of higher learning. In fact, only 28 percent of non-exam school graduates from the BPS class of 2003 who enrolled in college had received a postsecondary degree six years later.

For a city with a declining birthrate, an aging population and global competition for skilled workers, this is the worst possible news. For those of us who care deeply about the young people who are being educated in our public school system, it is nothing short of heartbreaking.

This report takes an in-depth look at some of the students behind those statistics—and the numerous and daunting challenges they face. I encourage you to read the quotes from these young people. Many of them are not academically well-prepared for college and find themselves in remedial courses that don't count toward a degree—a discouraging situation that alone can spell defeat. A number of them live at home and have hefty responsibilities for siblings and parents. Most of them have jobs—and only a few are fortunate enough to work at jobs that enhance and inform their studies. Some are afraid to ask teachers for help—others don't even know that's a possibility.

The good news is that when Mayor Thomas M. Menino learned about this very serious problem—in 2008 when the first report about college completion of BPS students was released by the Boston Private Industry Council and the Boston Foundation—he responded swiftly. He issued a community-wide challenge for an initiative that would prepare far more of Boston's students to earn a college degree. The Boston Foundation is honored to be a part of the initiative that emerged from the Mayor's challenge. Called Success Boston, it has the goal of helping BPS students get ready, get in and get through college.

The Boston Foundation has committed \$5 million toward Success Boston, which takes a case management approach to working with students—providing counseling, tutoring and numerous other supports that will help them not only survive—but thrive—in college. In addition, another city-wide and historic partnership, the Boston Opportunity Agenda, has embraced Success Boston as its primary college-completion initiative.

Two-thirds of all of the new jobs that are created in our region require at least some college education. And, since most of those college students coming from afar to attend school here will leave when they have attained a degree, it is imperative that we help our own city's residents take advantage of the incredibly diverse postsecondary opportunities that exist in our area.

We see this report and others that we have published—as well as all of our work in the area of education—as part of a quest to break the stubborn relationship between poverty and poor results for Boston's students. Achieving our goal is important not just to the success of our city's students, but to the success of Greater Boston in the 21st century global economy. Beyond those crucial economic challenges, our quest is also a deeply human one. We simply want the best for the young people of our city—and we want their participation in our neighborhoods and our broader community.



Paul S. Grogan
President and CEO
The Boston Foundation

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
CHAPTER ONE Introduction	11
Background	
Purpose of This Study	
Study Design	
Description of Study Participants	
About This Report	
CHAPTER TWO Self Management	15
Self Management Definition and Background	
Time Management	
Studying Effectively	
Persisting Despite Discouragement	
Seeking Academic Help in College	
CHAPTER THREE Contextual Issues	25
Family	
Employment	
Students' Financial Situations and Pressures	
Other Contextual Issues	
CHAPTER FOUR Academic Information and Advising	31
CHAPTER FIVE Recommendations and Conclusion	35
REFERENCES	39

Executive Summary

As the United States faces growing challenges to its leadership in the global economy and struggles to recover from a severe recession, the nation will need to address the short supply of workers with postsecondary credentials. Despite an increasing demand for college educated workers, college completion rates have remained low. Of all students who began college in 2003-04 in this country, only 40% had received an Associate's or Bachelor's degree by 2009 (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, and Sheperd, 2010).

In Boston, while the region has a higher than average demand for workers with postsecondary degrees, overall college completion rates for Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates are at the national average and for non-examination school graduates, they are far below.¹ Only 28 percent of non-examination school graduates from the class of 2003 who enrolled in college had obtained a postsecondary degree six years later (Sum, Khatiwada, and McLaughlin, 2010). It is clear that more Boston youth need to complete college both for their own economic security and social prosperity as well as the city's.

This study is the third in a series by the Boston Higher Education Partnership to understand the college experiences of Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates and why so many graduates who begin college do not complete degrees. It focuses on the experiences of BPS graduates "getting through" college by giving voice to students' points of view and exploring the similarities and differences in the descriptions of students who *struggled* academically and those who were *succeeding* in college.

Study Design

Using a brief on-line survey to recruit volunteers for participation, this study involved conducting 20-30 minute phone interviews with 53 respondents and

in-person interviews with 15 of these respondents, each lasting about 1 ½ hours. All participants had graduated from a Boston public high school between 2003 and 2008.

Participants were asked how on-campus as well as off-campus factors shaped their college academic experiences. Topics directly related to college included: enrollment patterns; academic advising and other support received from colleges; major and career goals; types of courses and instruction; and financial aid. Off-campus factors included family responsibilities and supports, employment and living situation. Participants also offered their ideas about what high schools, colleges, and others could do differently to ensure college success for BPS graduates.

To analyze differences between BPS graduates who succeeded in college and those who struggled academically, participants were divided into two groups based on their academic achievement. Participants were classified as "strugglers" if they: 1) disagreed with the statement, "In college, I generally feel like I'm succeeding academically;" 2) indicated they were not currently enrolled in college or had not yet finished a semester; or 3) reported generally receiving C's or below in college. Using these criteria, 20 participants were identified as "strugglers" and 33 as "succeeders."

Key Findings

Based on an analysis of the interview data, the study produced three key findings:

1. Many students who were academically succeeding linked their success to effectively practicing *self-management skills*, including managing their time, studying effectively, persisting despite discouragement, and seeking and utilizing academic support.

¹ An "exam school" in the Boston Public Schools is one of three selective high schools in the district that admits students living in Boston based on their grade point average and results of the Independent School Entrance Exam

These are not intrinsic abilities, but skills that can be taught.

Managing their time.

Succeeders seemed better able to assess the demands on their time and then choose course schedules they could handle. They tended to cut back on their work hours if they needed more time to study. For a few, a reasonable course schedule meant enrolling part-time.

Studying effectively.

While strugglers and succeeders reported studying on average the same number of hours a week, strugglers seemed to learn less during those hours. They could not provide details about their study strategies and appeared to lack awareness of their own academic skills as well as those expected of college students. Succeeders seemed to have a deeper understanding of their academic skills as they articulated specific study strategies they used to master course material.

Persisting despite discouragement.

Succeeders tended to be better able than strugglers to focus on smaller, immediate goals rather than becoming overwhelmed by long-term ones. They also would draw on various sources of inspiration to persist when discouraged. Some linked their increasing ability to persist to their growing sense of self as an independent adult.

Seeking and utilizing academic support.

Despite needing academic assistance, some strugglers were reluctant to seek it and others who did seek assistance often had a hard time using help to improve their academic performance. Succeeders seemed to have an easier time asking for help and turning that support into academic gains. For some succeeders, this appeared linked to their knowledge of the college context and the subtleties of professor/student communication.

2. Two off-campus factors, family and employment, played important roles in students' college experiences.

Depending on the individual, these factors could be negative, positive or neutral in shaping a student's

college experience. Many students described their families as emotionally supportive, and a few also received specific advice from family members about coursework or college procedures. Others perceived their families as not supportive for various reasons. The same pattern held for employment. Many students described their jobs as supporting their educational goals, especially on-campus jobs. A few indicated that employment detracted from their education goals, usually due to the high number of hours they worked or inflexible work schedules. Combining all factors outside of college, strugglers as a group encountered more challenges and received fewer supports.

3. Students of varying levels of academic achievement found it difficult to obtain clear and accurate academic information and advice when they needed it. Reflecting on their first few semesters, many suggested that their college had not provided them with essential information in a transparent or timely manner. Some students, who did have early contact with advisors, now realized they had not interpreted accurately the information provided. Students generally agreed that advising and support structures worked well when college staff and students could form trusting relationships, staff reached out to struggling students, and programs provided support *throughout* their college years.

Recommendations

The study's findings suggest four recommendations for improving the likelihood of BPS graduates and other first-generation students completing college degrees.

1. **Self-Management Skills** – Help students, especially those at risk of not completing degrees, develop the self-management skills they need to successfully achieve their college goals.
2. **College Information and Advice** – Improve the structure and delivery of orientation, advising, and support programs to ensure all students, especially those identified as at risk, develop the college knowledge they need to succeed.
3. **Employment** – Expand the opportunities for on-campus employment and college-friendly, off-campus employment.
4. **Families** – Provide families of first-generation students with a working understanding of the benefits of

completing college for their children, the nature of the college experience, and how they can support their children's college success.

These recommendations will be useful to higher education practitioners and policymakers, high school staff and other key stakeholders concerned with increasing the degree completion rates of BPS graduates and students from similar backgrounds, including city and state officials, employers, and community and philanthropic leaders.

Conclusion

The challenges BPS graduates face in completing college degrees are not insurmountable. Self-management skills can be taught on the college level as well as in elementary and secondary grades. High school and college staff collaborating with community and faith-based organizations can provide families with the knowledge and tools they need to play active roles in supporting their children's college aspirations. Colleges and universities can improve academic advising and equip students with the knowledge needed to successfully meet college academic demands. They also can give students priority for part-time campus employment. At the same time, the city's employers can offer students jobs with the flexibility to accommodate their study demands.

To address these low rates of college completion, in November of 2008 Mayor Thomas M. Menino, the Boston Public Schools, the Boston Foundation, the Boston Private Industry Council and many of Boston's higher education institutions announced a citywide effort to double the degree completion rates for BPS graduates who enroll in college beginning with the Class of 2011.

Known as Success Boston, the initiative calls for BPS and higher education leaders, along with leaders from the nonprofit, business and philanthropic sectors to work together on three areas essential to college success: *Getting Ready* — Removing academic barriers to college success by increasing the curricular rigor of high school and the academic preparation of students, ensuring that students graduate college-ready; *Getting In* — Helping students transition from high school to two- and four-year colleges and universities; and *Getting Through* — Ensuring that students receive the

supports necessary to earn a degree prepared for the workforce.

Success Boston embodies a vision of a city that offers economic security and social prosperity to all its residents. Substantially increasing the college completion rates of graduates of the Boston Public Schools is achievable if education, business and community leaders work together to close the gap between those students who are successful in college and those who have the same aspirations but struggle to earn a degree.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

As the United States faces growing challenges to its leadership in the global economy and struggles to recover from the most severe recession in decades, the nation will need to address the short supply of workers with postsecondary credentials. Despite an increasing demand for college educated workers, college completion rates have remained low. Of all students who began college in 2003-04 in this country, only 40% have received an associate or bachelors' degree by 2009. The rates for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are even lower (Radford et al. 2010).

In Boston, while the region has a higher than average demand for workers with postsecondary degrees, overall college completion rates for Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates are at the national average and for non-examination school graduates, they are far below. Only 28% of non-examination school graduates from the class of 2003 who enrolled in college had obtained a postsecondary degree six years later (Sum, 2010). It is clear that more Boston youth need to complete college both for their own economic security as well as the city's.

To address these low rates of college completion, in November of 2008 Mayor Thomas M. Menino, the Boston Public Schools, the Boston Foundation, the Boston Private Industry Council and many of Boston's higher education institutions announced a citywide effort to double the degree completion rates for BPS graduates who enroll in college beginning with the Class of 2011. Known as Success Boston, the initiative calls for BPS and higher education leaders, along with leaders from the nonprofit, business and philanthropic sectors to work together on three areas essential to college success:

- **Getting Ready** — Removing academic barriers to college success by increasing the curricular rigor of high school and the academic preparation of students, ensuring that students graduate college-ready.

- **Getting In** — Helping students transition from high school to two- and four-year colleges and universities.
- **Getting Through** — Ensuring students receive the supports necessary to earn a degree prepared for the workforce.

Purpose of This Study

This study, the third in a series by the Boston Higher Education Partnership, aims to contribute new knowledge about “getting through” college by giving voice to students' points of view in order to gain insight into what more can be done, especially by local colleges, to enable larger numbers of BPS graduates earn college degrees. This study focused on three questions:

- How do BPS graduates from a range of backgrounds who enrolled in college describe their college experiences?
- What are the similarities and differences between the descriptions of their college experiences of those who are struggling academically and those who are succeeding in college?
- What can colleges and others do to improve the degree completion rates of BPS graduates given the college experiences of the graduates participating in this study?

Based on the findings, the study offers recommendations for improving the college achievement and success of BPS graduates. The recommendations will be useful to key stakeholders concerned with increasing the degree completion rates of BPS graduates, including education practitioners and policymakers, city and state elected officials, employers, and community and philanthropic leaders.

Study Design

To answer the research questions, this study explored students' points of view generally while also comparing those who struggled in college to those who were academically successful.

Using a brief on-line survey to recruit volunteers for study participation, we conducted 20-30 minute phone interviews with 53 respondents. In addition, we conducted a second in-person interviews with 15 of these respondents, each lasting about 1 ½ hours. All participants had graduated from a Boston public high school between 2003 and 2008.

Interviewers asked participants about how on-campus as well as off-campus factors shaped their experiences in college courses. Topics directly related to college included enrollment patterns, support received from colleges, major and career goals, types of courses and instruction, and financial aid. Off-campus factors included family responsibilities and supports, employment and living situations. Participants also offered their ideas on what high schools, colleges and others could do differently to ensure college success for BPS graduates.

To analyze differences between students who succeeded in college and those who struggled, we divided the participants into two groups based on their academic achievement. We classified participants as strugglers if they had: 1) disagreed with the statement: "In college, I generally feel like I'm succeeding academically;" 2) indicated they were not currently enrolled in college or had not yet finished a semester; or 3) reported generally receiving C's or below in college. Using these criteria, 20 participants were identified as "strugglers" and 33 as "succeeders."

We analyzed the findings to identify themes that emerged particularly in relation to similarities and differences between those students identify as struggling in college as compared to those identified as succeeding.

Description of Study Participants

Study participants attended two-year colleges, four-year public colleges and universities, and four-year private colleges and universities: 30% (16) first enrolled in a

TABLE 1:
Participant Characteristics

	Strugglers (n=20)	Succeeders (n=33)
Gender		
Men	25% (5)	27% (9)
Women	75% (15)	73% (24)
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	45% (9)	39% (13)
Hispanic	35% (7)	21% (7)
Asian	10% (2)	15% (5)
White	5% (1)	12% (4)
Other	5% (1)	12% (4)
Parents' Education:		
Both parents less than a bachelor's degree	70% (14)	76% (25)
High School of Graduation		
Non-examination	95% (19)	79% (26)
Examination	5% (1)	21% (7)
College/university where participant first enrolled		
Four-year	60% (12)	76% (25)
Two-year	40% (8)	24% (8)
Transferred to another institution	45% (9)	27% (9)

two-year college; 70% (37) initially attended a four-year college; and 34% (18) had transferred to another institution. Their gender and ethnic/racial make-up generally reflected the proportion of BPS graduates who enroll in a college (Boston Private Industry Council 2007). In addition, 64% had parents who were born outside the U.S. and 40% primarily spoke a language other than English at home.

Despite having similar demographics, the actual lives of the study participants varied considerably. At the time of the interviews, the vast majority (83%) lived off campus, most of whom (68%) lived with their families. Nevertheless, at some point, 34% had lived on campus at the start of their college career. For many living with their families meant staying with their parents, perhaps

helping out with a few family expenses and chores. Others had many more responsibilities. Some spoke of needing to pay “their portion” of their family’s rent. Five participants (two strugglers and three succeeders) were raising their own young children. A few had daily responsibility for siblings. Two participants had been in foster care and one in particular found it difficult to find a place to live when the college residence halls were closed. One young woman (a successer) lived in a homeless shelter at the time of the interview. In addition, a number of participants spoke—sometimes directly, some indirectly—of challenges with mental illness.

A previous study of the college achievement of BPS graduates (Stoutland and Coles 2009) found that the enrollment patterns of students—full-time or part-time, continuously or intermittently—made a difference in their academic success regardless of they type of college they attended. The information in Table 2 shows similar patterns among the study participants. Those participants who were succeeding academically were much more likely to have attended college continuously on a full-time basis, while struggling students were not.

About This Report

This report is a condensed version of the full study, *How Students Are Making It: Perspectives on Getting Through College from Recent Graduates of the Boston Public Schools*, conducted by Dr. Sara Stoutland for the Boston Higher Education Partnership and the Boston Foundation. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the report. Chapter 2 discusses findings related to issues the study participants encountered on campus with a focus on self-management skills. Most participants reported on-campus factors as having the greatest impact on their level of academic success. The difference between strugglers and succeeders was most striking in this area. Chapter 3 discusses participants’ perspectives on non-academic contextual factors, including family, employment and financial situations. Chapter 4 considers students’ experiences with college advising and Chapter 5 presents recommendations for colleges and others and conclusions.

TABLE 2:

Enrollment Patterns of Study Participants

Strugglers (n=20)	Succeeders (n=33)	Enrollment Pattern
35% (7)	85% (28)	Had been continuously enrolled in college since completing high school
50% (10)	33% (11)	Had enrolled part-time (less than 12 credits) for at least one semester
50% (10)	27% (9)	Had transferred to another institution for a variety of reasons
55% (11)	18% (6)	Had stopped out for at least one semester, but had returned or had plans to return
10% (2)	0% (0)	Had dropped-out, were not currently enrolled with no plans to return

CHAPTER TWO

Self-Management

With a few exceptions, study participants—both succeeders and strugglers—perceived themselves to be less prepared for college than their fellow students and needing to catch up both on their academic skills and knowledge of college procedures and norms. What seemed to distinguish the succeeders from the strugglers was their self-reported capacity to catch up. A close examination of the data revealed that those who reported being able to increase their academic skills and college knowledge attributed this increase to their ability to implement strategies that we call “self-management skills.”

Self-Management: Definition and Background

Drawing on David Conley’s college and career readiness framework (Conley 2010) as well as educational psychology research, the self-management framework we have developed describes students’ skills and knowledge regarding learning and motivation strategies. The effective practice of these skills and knowledge seems to lead to increased levels of academic engagement and outcomes. Self-management skills, as defined here, include:

- 1) **Time management:** accurately predicting how many hours a course will require, including outside study time and commuting time; choosing the appropriate number and type of courses each semester given other responsibilities and commitments.
- 2) **Study skills:** identifying what one already knows and what one needs to know to pass a course; knowing what are and how to create the conditions under which one is able to learn course material.
- 3) **Persistence:** persisting to complete all coursework on a regular basis; finding sources of inspiration when feeling discouraged.
- 4) **Help seeking:** recognizing when one is not doing well in a course and seeking assistance in a timely manner; learning about and utilizing available resources;

being able to communicate effectively with those who can offer assistance.

Self-management skills by themselves do not lead to academic success; rather, it is the effective *practice* of these skills that leads to increased learning and academic skills that in turn leads to higher levels of academic performance. Self-management skills are learned, not inherent. While students may have varying levels of pre-disposition to acquire or practice these skills and knowledge, they are not ingrained, but can be taught (Bail et al. 2008; Christine and Kiener 2006; Cukras 2006).

What led us to self-management skills

Our analysis of the participants’ narratives led us to focus on self-management skills. When asked what high schools could do to prepare students for college, participants had various suggestions: higher academic standards; better instruction; more details about the college application process, especially financial aid; additional career guidance; and more accurate information about college course expectations. Most striking was how many participants, both strugglers and succeeders, remarked that high schools should reduce close adult supervision and instead teach students how to manage school responsibilities on their own:

During senior year, not babying them so much... They said that they weren’t babying us, but they really were. Let us know that college is going to be a lot of work. That it’s more your seeking out help and asking for help yourself, rather than people coming to you to help.

At high school, they held your hand for everything and didn’t teach you how to find resources on your own.

College is not like high school. If you don’t do your homework, the teachers aren’t on you. The teachers don’t care. In high school, they made sure I did my homework.

Maybe like junior year, they shouldn't baby you as much. If you have a deadline, then you have a deadline, that's it. You can't pass it in any later than that... They would warn us, "Oh, it's not going to be the same," but they wouldn't really apply it.

Clearly, study participants suggested that high schools need to do more to teach students how to find resources and seek help on their own, as well as complete assignments without reminders. While analyzing the interviews, we kept in mind students' comments regarding their sense that they had missed learning some important skills in high school. As we did so, the concept of "self-management skills" emerged as a way to describe those missing skills and as central to understanding students' interpretations of which behaviors and attitudes support academic success and which tend to perpetuate struggles.

Time Management

For many, college is one of the least structured times in life. Before college, students are in school for at least 30 hours a week, with a few hours a week of homework. In college, students attend classes 10-15 hours a week; the rest of the required work can be done whenever students are able to and in as much time as they choose. Learning how to manage this unstructured time is frequently difficult for students.

Many study participants mentioned time management as a challenge. Succeeders, however, reported being better able to refine their plans to ensure they had enough time to complete required assignments.

Choosing a balanced course schedule

An important aspect of time management in college is making predictions about how much time required coursework will take. Strugglers often reported difficulties making accurate predictions for themselves:

I would take a lot of ... upper level classes, when I should have maybe been taking two hard classes and three fun classes, like photography or something like that—a 100 level class. I felt bad because I was ... telling professors right to their face. . . "Yeah, I know I'm doing bad ... I'll get better," and then I just stopped showing up to class and dropped out.

This semester, I decided to try to challenge myself. I know I should have taken easy classes to boost my GPA. But I'm trying to get my requirements out of the way, so I just took the classes that I needed, which wasn't such a good idea ... And it's really difficult. And at mid-terms, I had F's.

Both these students had taken more difficult courses than they could manage, despite their awareness of options for less demanding courses. They did not share many details about the process of choosing their schedules, but it seems likely that they did not think through the amount of time and energy it would take to pass the courses they chose. It is also not clear what support college staff offered them to think through these decisions.

In contrast, many succeeders seemed to have a better handle on the multiple factors involved in planning a course schedule. They seemed better able to appraise how much time they would need for each of their responsibilities. When asked how she put her class schedule together, one young woman replied:

I just thought about the amount of homework that I would get ... for each class ... I was also thinking about ... job opportunities. But then, I was more focused on my courses. So doing my schedule, I was thinking about time for eating, time for sleep, and the time to do my assignments. And then I also just tried to make time for myself.

Another pointed out the importance of planning a study schedule. This student worked at least 20 hours a week in addition to carrying a full course load:

A lot of times, [the challenge] was time management. I learned to make a schedule for myself, including when I would study for a class [not just when I had to be in class].

These students thought deeply about their schedules—not just about degree requirements or interest level. They considered how much time the course would take outside of class, how much time other activities, including eating and sleeping, would take, and then considered how to manage their weekly schedule to get their studying done.

Finding enough time to do well

Some study participants, especially strugglers, reported that the high number of hours they worked caused their school work to suffer. A few succeeders who also appeared to have limited financial resources decided to cut back on work hours when they found that work interfered with college success:

I was tired. I was struggling to incorporate the time to study. I finally said to myself, I'm defeating the purpose of what college is by working so many hours and not giving time to study. Sophomore year, I took on a job waitressing, but it was too much and so I'm not doing that anymore.

Right now, I don't take my job seriously ... It's the way I make money. But for me, I feel like my school comes first. If I have to finish a paper and I'm working that night, I'll find somebody else to cover my shift or I'll just call out.

A few successful students decided not to work at all during the school year:

[I decided not to work because] I've seen people struggle with work and school. I don't want too much pressure with work. Homework is important to me. I want time to get it done. Since I have a hard time managing multiple things at once ... I decided not to work during school, because ... I know that if I get a job, I'm going to procrastinate in homework and I won't give enough time and dedication to my work.

None of these students was well-off financially. The first two received no financial support from their families. The last lived at home with her parents, neither of whom had a high school diploma. It is likely that the decision to forego earned income so as to have more study time had consequences for their day-to-day material lives. Possibly the thoughtful decision-making skills these students used to make best use of their time carried over into decisions about how to best use financial resources.

Enrolling part-time

When students could not cut back on their outside responsibilities, some chose to enroll part-time, reducing their course load to have more time to spend on the classes they were taking:

I took too many courses the first semester and it was too much of a course load for me. So now I take two courses a semester. It will take me longer to finish my degree, but less work to do it.

I can focus on my two classes and know what I'm doing. If it was four classes, I'd just be regurgitating information.

Enrolling part-time, however, was not a panacea for improving academic performance. One young man who shared his experience attending part-time said:

The first semester, I took four classes. I was going to study for them and do my thing.

... Then I started having trouble in math, even though it was my strong subject. I went to tutoring for math, but I fell behind in my other subjects. So the next semester, I decided on what I needed—[just] English and math.

Even with a reduced schedule, this student did not complete either course. It may be that he had not yet acquired other self-management skills necessary for college success.

Implications

Succeeders seemed better able than strugglers to recognize how much time they needed for their courses and what strategies would ensure they had enough time to successfully complete their courses. While strugglers had not acquired such skills and knowledge, there is no reason to think that they were incapable or resistant to acquiring them (Christine and Kiener 2006). Strugglers, in fact, might benefit from an institutional setting where they not only have the opportunity to learn time management skills related to completing courses, but also are clearly informed when they arrive on campus as to why these particular time management skills are critical to college success.

Studying Effectively

While making the time to study is important to college success, one must also learn specific material during that time. It is not just the number of hours one spends in front of books or computers nor the amount of information one learns while studying that leads to high academic performance. Rather, one must learn specific

content and concepts related to a particular course. This means being able to distinguish between the overarching concepts and the details and articulating how they relate to one another. It may mean having a sense of how much detail needs to be memorized or how deeply complex relationships need to be understood. It also involves having a sense of what is considered fact in a field and what concepts are open to interpretation. Finally, students benefit from being able to “read” instructors—to get a sense of their particular views or requirements.

For the study participants, it seemed that it was not necessarily the number of hours they studied that made a difference as to whether they were academically successful, but how effectively they studied during those hours. Strugglers and succeeders reported studying the same amount, about 14 hours per week. The range was large but did not vary much between groups. Some reported studying as little as two hours a week, while other reported studying as many as 35 hours. The difference between strugglers and succeeders seemed to be their approach to studying.

Strugglers lack awareness of their academic skills, college expectations, and study strategies

Strugglers often appeared to be unaware of their own academic skills as well as the expectations of college courses. One student who failed to complete several courses reflected:

I don't know if I have the best GPA or not, but I feel like I'm such a step ahead of these other kids in terms of ... the politics and the history... Stuff that they don't see because ... they treat it as a science. I treat it as an art.

The dissonance between his failing grades and his assessment of the difficulty of course material suggests the student didn't understand the analytical thinking expected in a college course and so inaccurately assessed the quality of his academic work.

A few strugglers offered ideas for what they could do to improve, but these were vague:

Just keep going to classes. That is all I see. Studying hard and doing the work to pass the test. The quizzes, it was a lot to remember. I'd just review everything.

Interviewer: What would need to be different for you to do better?

Participant: I need to find time to study.

Interviewer: Do you have ideas for how to find more time?

Participant: No.

These students were unable, in the interview setting at least, to provide specifics beyond going to class and studying more as strategies for improving performance. A few simply stated they didn't know how to improve.

Succeeders: Deeper understanding of study strategies

Succeeders spoke more in depth about their approach to academic achievement. Some explained how they organized their study time. One stated:

You have to learn ... you have to take breaks. You can't just keep studying all the time. You have to, like, do this subject. Okay, now let's take an hour break, and I'm going to do that subject. And then go back to the other one, and refresh my memory. And I always get a good night's sleep.

This student could clearly articulate the study strategies that worked for her.

In addition to suggestions for organizing study time, succeeders often mentioned specific approaches for learning course material:

Really learning how to learn ... Assessing when you truly know the information by asking yourself questions, back and forth at different angles ...

Really paying attention in lectures. Listening and absorbing, not just writing down what the professor says. I find that sometimes it helps to focus on listening and not writing.

I go over my notes, which is really helpful. And I remember what the professor is talking about. For example, I didn't get the idea behind friction and force. So I read the book and my notes and it helped out.

These succeeders provided specific details about effective study strategies as well as why they worked for them. Their explanations reflect a deeper understanding of how students can effectively use the time they devote

to courses—both inside and outside the classroom—to master material than strugglers seemed to have.

Implications

Knowledge about how to study effectively and skills for doing so can be taught (Christine and Kiener 2006; Bail et.al. 2008). For example, some study participants seemed to lack knowledge about the purpose and expectations of their college courses. Learning to master large amounts of material in a short time frame requires a special—but not obtuse—set of skills. College students who have not yet mastered effective study skills need the opportunity to be exposed to these strategies as well as chances to practice them.

Persisting Despite Discouragement

Strugglers and succeeders seemed to have similar desires to complete college. In both groups, some discussed long-term goals of becoming engineers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Others did not have clear career ambitions beyond finishing college. Succeeders, however, spoke of learning how to focus on short-term tasks and what resources helped them complete these tasks even when they felt discouraged, while strugglers found it more difficult to persist in such circumstances.

Focusing on small, immediate goals

While they had long-term career goals, some strugglers found it difficult to persist in completing smaller, more immediate tasks. One young man had wanted to be an engineer since middle school and yet was unable to finish his community college courses:

It's partly my fault. I know it is, because it's like, I could focus more. You know how you have the light at the end of the tunnel? Well, I don't see it because ... I have like sixty things of ... crap in front of it.

It seems he found it difficult to focus on the assignment at hand because he was thinking about all the obstacles he would face in the future.

Succeeders, on the other hand, tended to focus on what they could do on a daily basis to improve. One young woman had a host of contextual challenges, yet was earning A's with a full-time course schedule while

living in a homeless shelter in her second year of college. In response to whether she planned to continue to be psychology major, she said:

Yeah. Even though it's kind of hard. I have to ... I just have to push more on myself to read. That's something that I have to do. It's not the school, it's me.

Despite circumstances that would leave most people overwhelmed, or perhaps because of them, this young woman focused on the daily work of college—reading—seeing it as her key to academic success.

Another woman who was making progress in college after a few tough years spoke of how she no longer let a distracting home environment interfere with studying:

Like last night ... a whole bunch of [my boyfriend's] friends came over and I needed to finish writing on something and I couldn't because everybody was over ... at the house. So ... it kind of sucks sometimes. That's why if I know I need to study, I'll just leave the house and go to the library or I'll stay in school for like a few extra hours ... so I don't have to go home and get distracted, even though it's really hard sometimes.

This study participant had learned that routinely seeking out conducive study environments allowed her to make academic progress.

Others adjusted their goals when they ceased to provide motivation. A study participant shared how she overcame a time of despair:

At one point, in my sophomore year, I was trying to get straight A's and be in the honors program. I got depressed and I saw someone. I got so I was okay with B's. That was the challenge ... not beating myself up.

So it seems that while long-term goals may be a source of motivation, focusing on short-term, immediate goals may be a more important factor in a student's capacity to complete courses.

Multiple sources of inspiration

All students described courses where they had what they considered inadequate instruction—professors who lectured too much and did not make the material relevant or interesting. Yet, strugglers more often talked about putting less effort into such courses than succeeders. Several students who continued to struggle academically several years into college reflected on

their experiences of completing neither assignments nor courses:

The history of me ... dropping out would be ... half-way point in the semester which is when all the papers would be getting due and I was ... just under so much stress and ... at the same time I felt depressed ... I'd just sit in the class saying, "What am I doing here? Like, this stuff is useless ... why am I learning this?"

There was a history teacher who just read from the textbook ... I took notes, but I wouldn't retain it. I wasn't into it. I didn't grasp the material—just dates and events. It was boring, so I didn't pay it any mind. I think if I put the effort into every class, I could do better. But if I wasn't interested, I would put the notes aside and not study them until I had to cram for the test.

These students, when they became disheartened, seemed to lack strategies to overcome their discouragement. Overwhelmed by all the work, the first young man came to the conclusion that his classes were useless—not worth the stress he felt. The young woman, bored by the presentation of content, didn't put in as much effort as she herself admitted she could have.

Succeeders, by contrast, described completing an assignment or course even though they did not feel like doing so:

If there is an assignment due, I'll try my best to do it, even when I don't want to. I have to do it ... It's my responsibility.

Succeeders also spoke of outside sources of inspiration—friends, family or supportive adults—that enabled them to persist when they wanted to stop. Some students talked about how their friends encouraged them:

My friends at school—we work in groups. We help each other get our grades up. I wanted to give up and relax. But they encourage me to keep going, and we keep going.

A few spoke of how striving peers motivated them to work hard:

When I was motivated, I was in the honors program, and I was surrounded by people who were motivated. I was working twice as hard. I tried to maintain that GPA.

One participant emphasized the importance of outside support:

I think a lot comes from the support of my family, friends and mentors. There is only so much YOU can do, the rest comes down to the people you're surrounded with. My friends try to do their best and so I want to do that too.

Strugglers mentioned situations where they had given up in frustration or boredom despite wanting to achieve academic success. Succeeders, on the other hand, referred to different sources of inspiration that allowed them to follow through on their coursework when their own enthusiasm began to wane.

Link between increased persistence and developmental stage

Both strugglers and succeeders linked their ability to persist to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Some strugglers appeared not to see themselves as adults or the primary person in charge of reaching their goals. One student, just out of high school, not working, and barely earning C's, talked about when she did well in courses:

If I find [classes] interesting, it brings out the best in me ... Since I'm still young, I have lots of distractions. But when it takes my attention, it brings my knowledge out.

Another student on academic probation described one of the reasons for her struggles:

And then, going home and seeing what everybody else is doing. Seeing I have to come back to [college] and do all work, and everybody's just doing play and no work. It's kind of difficult for me, because I was like, "I want to have fun with everybody else."

Neither student seemed to see herself as fully adult, responsible for accomplishing her own goals.

In contrast, some participants who had struggled but were now making progress toward a degree, attributed their progress to a developing sense of adulthood and taking more responsibility for completing goals. One student explained why she dropped out of college after high school and what had changed when she returned several years later:

I was younger, and I didn't really know what I wanted to do. Now that I've been in this field for four years ... I have a goal ... And I need to walk towards that line. So I need to finish. So now it's like, "Suck it up. You don't like the teacher, too bad. You're here. You're paying for these classes..."

These observations provide a reminder that college classrooms encompass students at different points developmentally from late adolescence to fully independent adults (Guiffrida 2009; Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2006). Consequently, among many factors, students' developmental stage may shape what discourages them as well as what inspires them to persist when discouraged.

Research also suggests that colleges and universities with similar student bodies but different structures, policies and practices often have different levels of student engagement and graduation rates (Engle and O'Brien 2007). Thus, it seems likely that a student's ability to remain motivated depends in part on how much emphasis institutions place on creating a campus environment conducive to high levels of student engagement in learning and ensuring all students master strategies for maintaining their motivation.

Seeking Academic Help in College

Colleges offer many types of academic support services. Professors have office hours to provide individual assistance to students, and courses are often designed to encourage peers to study together. Yet, to take advantage of these offerings, students not only need to know that such supports exist, but they also must have the self-monitoring skills to know when they need academic help, how to ask for help, and how to gain enough confidence to do so.

Strugglers find it hard to ask for assistance; harder still to make it work

Both succeeders and strugglers believed academic support outside class was critical for college success. Yet, perhaps in part because they had less awareness of their own academic skills and needs in relation to course expectations, strugglers described being reluctant to seek academic support or less able to effectively use the support available. One student explained:

Because now ... I'm struggling. And I don't like going to the Learning Resource Center, because ... it's hard for me to ask for help ... So ... I'm just trying to do the work on my own. And it's really difficult. And at mid-terms, I had F's.

Sometimes, hesitancy to seek help had complicated roots such as being ashamed of not doing well:

I walked by one professor that I had ... I couldn't look at him in the face. I looked the other way ... It felt so bad. And to me, I was like insulting them just by going to class and [then] not finishing it or whatever, or even talking to them. I just felt so like I wasted your time and money. So, I don't deserve ... your help

A few strugglers expected instructors to take the initiative when they were having trouble:

One professor—I really did my work and I still wasn't understanding. And he never tried to have a one-on-one with me.

This lack of initiative may be the result of not understanding that college faculty members expect students to reach out for help and that some busy instructors may require several contacts before they reply.

While a number of strugglers hesitated to seek academic assistance, some did look for help outside the classroom, but found that the assistance offered did not help them improve academically. Sometimes, similar to the issue with study habits, participants didn't know if the assistance had increased their academic performance:

I actually hired a tutor last semester. I don't know if it helped or not.

Others felt the academic support they received did not help them.

The tutoring center was useless, because they were like, "Well, we can tell you if an answer is right or wrong, and then you can work on it again." That doesn't help!

One student was particularly explicit about how the academic support did not help her:

Participant: When I started faltering in my classes and realized I was getting bad grades, I realized I couldn't do everything on my own.

Interviewer: What do you need to do better academically?

Participant: Better study habits.

Interviewer: What would better study habits mean?

Participant: I don't know. I read the whole textbook and I know other people don't do that, but they get good grades. But I don't know what I need to do, so I read the whole textbook. [At the support center,] they'll tell you to organize better. But if I don't know how, it really doesn't help. They say to listen to what the professor says in class. But I do that, and then it might not be on the exam. So I'm not sure how to do better.

This young woman could list study skills recommended by the support center, but she had not learned (or possibly not been taught) them well enough to implement them effectively. She was frustrated because she knew that her current efforts were unproductive, yet the available resources didn't help her improve.

Succeeders: effectively asking for and using help

Succeeders reported being more willing to seek and use help. They seemed able to turn support into increased academic performance, often using their self-monitoring skills. One student described his challenges in organic chemistry:

Participant: The material was new to me. And I didn't understand how to study for that class. In organic chemistry, you have to practice ... I didn't know how to do that.

Interviewer: How did you learn?

Participant: By talking to the professors, to friends, and picking up new tips and applying what I learned.

Some succeeders' accounts of seeking help revealed a growing understanding of how to communicate effectively in a college setting. Students talked about becoming more comfortable asking for help. One student shared her experience the first time she asked for an extension:

Participant: For my last paper that was due, the professor was really nice. She's like, "If you guys need an extension or anything, let me know." I actually had to work that whole weekend, so I emailed her, "Is it okay if I pass it in on Monday?" I think it was due like on Friday. And she's like, "Yes, it's fine. And you can actually bring it in on Wednesday." Since she gave me that extension, I made sure I did awesome on it!

Interviewer: Do you normally have that kind of an exchange with your professors?

Participant: It was actually the first time.

Interviewer: How did you get to this point of it being the first time?

Participant: I don't know, I [thought]: Well, if I'm going to do good on something ... I just have to communicate. I have to make sure they know what's going on. And ... if I need more time, the only way that's going to happen ... is if I ask.

Another successful student told of making amends with a professor after a rough start:

My statistics professor ... kind of intimidated me in the beginning of class. She just explained something in class, but ... I didn't really understand. . . It's like 90 people in that class and I don't want to talk. So I go to her after ... I went to ask her the same question and she like cussed me out. She's like, "I just said this is!!" And, I'm like, damn. . . I'm not being her friend. But then I needed some help, so I had to go to office hours. I just went and talked to her and she just made it, like, way easier. . . Sometimes professors are tired. When they just explained something, they don't want to explain it again.

These students had learned that effective ways to get help included taking the initiative to contact instructors and establishing cooperative working relationships with them.

Implications

The fact that succeeders have an easier time asking for help and turning that support into academic gains may have been a result of being able to more accurately assess their academic skills in relation to course expectations. For some, this seemed to be linked to their knowledge of the college context, including implicit norms and the subtleties of professor/student communications. Students' inclination to ask for help and use it effectively may also have depended on the kind and quality of academic support offered by their college (Cox 2009) as well as the institution's openness to cultural and economic diversity (Gardenshire-Crooks et.al. 2010; Ziskin et.al 2009; Rendon 2006). Finally, it is important to remember that supports that work well for some students may not be effective for others.

Overall, study participants attributed their ability to make progress toward a degree in part to their self-management skills, including time management, studying effectively, persisting despite discouragement, and asking for and effectively using academic assistance. Given the difference in self-reported skills between succeeders and strugglers, colleges would do well to consider how they can support students' acquisition and implementation of key self-management skills.

CHAPTER THREE

Contextual Issues

Factors outside of college shaped the college experiences of all study participants in some way. Family and employment were two major factors that study participants reported. Depending on the particular situation, these factors could be negative, positive, or neutral in shaping their educational experiences. A few participants also commented on the financial difficulties they faced, but most did not share detailed information. With a few exceptions, participants perceived other outside issues, including housing, transportation, and health care as having little, if any, influence on their college experiences.

Family

The majority of study participants described their families as having a positive influence on their educational goals. Some families offered emotional or motivational support. Family members, often siblings, offered help with college procedures or academic issues. More succeeders found their families emotionally supportive than strugglers—79% (26 of 33) of succeeders compared to 45% (9 of 20) of strugglers. Also, close to half of succeeders' families offered specific college advice compared to 30% (6 of 20) of strugglers' families.

Strugglers more often described families who did not provide support—55% (11 of 20) compared to 21% (7 of 33) of succeeders. They offered various reasons for their families' lack of support. Several reported being estranged from their families. A few parents were not convinced of the value of a college degree. For some, obligations to care for siblings and related household chores had slowed their progress toward a degree. In a few cases, while families tried to help by telling them to go to college, students found their families' support frustrating because they could not offer guidance on how to do well in college.

Families offer varied support

Study participants described different ways they felt supported in college by their families. For some, this meant their parents provided a comfortable home environment:

It has been very helpful [living at home]. I come home and there's something to eat. My mother is happy that I'm going.

[My mom said,] "We actually want you to stay here ... and live with us and we'll help you the best we can with food and clothes." And I can't, like, work and study at the same time. I'm horrible at that. So it was cool. Like, my parents WANTED me to stay in the house.

Others found their parents encouraged them to continue in college, especially when they encountered difficulties:

With my mom, if I was struggling, she would always be there to talk to me and calm me down.

Sometimes participants found it helpful when parents took a more authoritarian approach:

My parents are supportive. My parents are on my back. What am I going to do next year? Where am I going to transfer?

A number of participants reported that siblings or other relatives rather than their parents provided encouragement:

My sister has single-handedly helped me. She is training to be a teacher. She says, "If I can't motivate my brother, I can't motivate other kids." She has really pushed me.

Some families—particularly siblings, cousins or aunts rather than parents—provided specific advice related to college.

I did get help from my older brother, when I was unable to get into college. It was a financial issue. They were saying that my mom was making money, but she didn't

have a job. So I went with my older brother to the school and we worked out the situation.

Study participants also spoke of family members providing help with course work:

Since high school, I wasn't the brightest in writing. My brother did a lot of writing. And so my brother proof-read my report ... He encouraged me to do a lot of reading and it increased my vocabulary and that has helped me.

Of those study participants reporting supportive family members, it is interesting how many variations participants reported regarding who in their families offered support and what kind of support they provided.

Families unable to provide support

A number of study participants did not perceive their families as supportive of their educational goals. Some parents believed work should take precedence over college:

[My dad is not] really motivated by ... schooling, because ... he's from Honduras and he has a middle school education ... After my Social Security from my mother stopped, he was like, "Oh, you've got to work ... I can't take care of you."

Most of my family didn't go to college. So it wasn't in their realm of thinking. I couldn't ask for advice ... my mom is like: "School is costing too much, just get a job."

A few families needed study participants to care for younger siblings. This delayed college enrollment for one young woman:

I took a year off, because I was caring for my brothers and sisters. My stepmother was really sick. I knew I wasn't going to be able to do college well. So I decided to take the time off ... It was hard to delay college. When I made the decision—that day I fell into crying. But it was okay. I got used to it.

Another's home responsibilities left her with little time or energy for studying:

Participant: My home life is what is causing me to struggle in college. Work is fine. I'll have to work later in life. But I don't feel like I should have all this responsibility at home.

Interviewer: How much do you help out?

Participant: I'm cooking and cleaning and making sure my siblings and cousins do their homework. I'm tired by the time I can get to my homework.

While not burdened by such responsibilities, a few students found home life not conducive to studying:

Actually, home absolutely guarantees NO studying.

I always lived at home with family. I have younger siblings so it was chaotic at times. It was hard to study at home plus I didn't have Internet access at home.

When advice was not helpful

Some study participants, particularly strugglers, did not find the advice their families offered helpful, because their families did not know how to offer guidance about how to succeed in college. A few expressed frustration with what they perceived as lack of support:

One of the things is pressure ... Since I am the first in my family to go to college ... So many people put pressure on me about how I have to pass and all of this. And I just look at it like ... I'm doing this and not them. . . I get yelled at a lot from my brothers, because ... I don't study or I don't always go to classes. And, it's mainly just pressure . . .

My family is all about, "Go to school and stay in school. School is the most important." This is pressure I don't need now. They can't really help.

Both these participants were struggling in college. Their frustration may have stemmed from the fact that that they needed more support with academic issues and college procedures than they were getting.

Implications

Study participants suggested that their families had varying capacities to support their college goals. A few could offer specific advice on the college process. Many offered motivational and emotional support. Other families, for varying reasons, were not in a position to offer either advice or emotional support. But whatever the situation, overwhelmingly, study participants' families were playing some kind of significant role in their lives as college students.

The finding that the families of these BPS graduates played significant roles in their lives during college is consistent with the national research on families of first-generation students (Turner et al. 2009). For this reason, to further the academic success of these students, it is important for higher education policymakers and practitioners to learn more about students' families and provide information to increase families' knowledge of the college-going process.

Employment

Besides families, study participants identified employment as the other major non-academic factor shaping their college experiences. Similar to college students nationally (Baum 2010), over 80% (43 of 53) of participants worked during the school year. While a few identified primarily as employees, the vast majority seemed to work mainly as a means to pay for college-related expenses.

As long as they worked a reasonable number of hours and had a flexible schedule, most participants did not perceive employment as conflicting with their education goals. Some saw their job as directly enhancing their educational goals because it allowed them to apply what they learned in classes or provided them with education and career direction. This was particularly true for students working on campus.

Some participants perceived their jobs as detracting from their education goals. Those working over 30 hours a week reported having insufficient time or energy to spend on their course work, and a few indicated they had been unable to change their work schedule to accommodate classes. Long hours and inflexible hours led to low grades, frequent course withdrawals, and, for a few, dropping out of college.

Strugglers were more likely to see their jobs as a negative factor than succeeders. Thirty-five percent (7 of 20) of strugglers reported that their job hindered their education goals compared to 9% (3 of 33) of succeeders. Fifty percent (10 of 20) of strugglers compared to 36% (12 of 33) of succeeders indicated they worked over 20 hours a week while in college. In terms of supporting their college goals, only a fifth of strugglers (4 of 20) held on-campus jobs while 44% (15 of 33) of succeeders did. In addition, 16% (3 of 20) of strugglers viewed their off-campus job as giving them career-related skills compared to 24% (8 of 33) of succeeders.

Employment as a means to pay for school and living expenses

Participants valued jobs when they could maintain a reasonable balance between work and academics—jobs where supervisors allowed them to arrange their work schedule around classes:

I worked at a sports stadium 15 to 20 hours a week. It has helped me financially. It hasn't helped directly academically. But my boss was flexible and she would change my schedule if I had a class conflict.

This participant did not see his job as hindering him from making academic progress even though it was unrelated to his education goals.

Employment as detracting from education goals

Most study participants who worked over 30 hours a week were strugglers and reported having insufficient time or energy for studying:

I always worked at least 40 hours. I worked 30 hours in high school. I worked at some type of non-profit or administrative job. I've waitressed—but that has always overlapped with another job. My biggest struggle has been working 60 hours/week and going to school full-time ... If I was able to focus only on school or making myself a better person, I would have better grades.

I don't feel like I'm doing my best work. Because I've been working full-time, and there isn't much time to study.

A few strugglers described the dilemma that many BPS graduates in college may feel. Working so many hours hurt their academic achievement, but their earnings allowed them to attend college:

Other than work and school, I don't have a life. It's both helped and hurt me. It's helped because I couldn't pay for school without it. But I spend so much time commuting to and from [work and school] so I get tired. I stay up all night to do the homework. Then get up a few hours later and have to do the whole thing all over again. If I didn't work, I could do everything in a more reasonable time frame.

A few participants stopped attending classes after a few weeks because their jobs could not accommodate their class schedule:

And, the reason I stopped going ... [was] because I was working at a deli and I was closing and, I already had my schedule. And when I told [him] that I was going to go to school, he really couldn't accommodate my hours. He could only give me 10 hours a week.

Work conflicts seriously impeded participants' educational progress. This student did not return to college until six years later.

These descriptions illustrate why students who work over 20 hours a weeks have lower college graduation rates. They were tired and could not do their best in classes when they stayed up late to study after working a full day. When the choice was not going to class or getting fired, participants chose the former because they could not pay for college without a job.

Employment as supporting education goals: on-campus employment

All study participants who worked on-campus described those jobs as positively impacting their college experience. For a few, working at a convenient time and place or a job where they could study made college easier:

I could put in hours around classes and get something out of that. It was in the same location. I didn't have to travel. So I could work less at the other job.

The job was easy. I could do school work there.

For most, campus employment provided a road into college life in addition to a convenient, low stress job. Some learned about the inner-workings of college and general campus events at these jobs:

I worked in the dean's office, working closely with the associate dean and academic coordinator and professors in the building ... Talking with them helped me to understand more about withdrawing or adding a course, the differences between departments, how they ran classes and coordinated rooms.

I used to work on campus ... as an office assistant. It helped me to get closer to campus and to get to know what is going on in college. Now that I don't work there, I'm clueless about what is going on at college.

For others, their supervisor became their mentor, helping them solve problems and engaging them intellectually:

[My instructor from the student success course] became my advisor, and also my work-study professor ... I was happy to work in the office, because that means I get to see him. If I was having problems or something, I'll go to him and he will just make sure he knew what was going on. He had it figured out. And that's the type of person he was. So I ... went to him ... "Dr. Jones, I need help." And he would advise me.

Working in the dean's office, I had interactions with professors and the assistant dean. The assistant dean became a mentor to me and I wouldn't have known about the scholarship without the assistant dean. There were conversations about different intellectual things and it fostered an environment to think about your interests.

A number of study participants formed relationships with co-workers who were upperclassmen and sought advice from them:

I'm a tour guide at my college. The tour guides are a mix of upper and lower classmen. So I could get advice about classes from them. The head of the tour guides is a recent alumni and so she really knew which ones were the good classes.

Others arranged to study with fellow classmates they met at their job:

I met a lot of students at the library. They would be from my classes and then we'd talk about the assignments and stuff ...

A few had jobs tutoring other students and reported gaining confidence and solidifying academic skills through this experience:

I never thought I could be a tutor. It helped me build relationships with freshman—and I know how important that was to me as a freshman. I've increased my thinking skills. I have to be able to go and explain it so they understand it.

Several gained leadership experience as resident assistants:

I was an R.A. for a whole year. I lived on campus and got free housing. It was a pretty good experience ... I did learn student leadership. I met students outside my

major. I can't say I made too many friends as an R.A., because students look at you as an authority figure.

In summary, students found on-campus jobs had many positive aspects. In particular, they provided venues for gathering information on courses and college procedures. Some jobs also became a place to focus on the core purpose of college—learning skills and sharing ideas.

Off-campus work that supported college and career goals

While on-campus jobs universally helped students, a few study participants described how their off-campus jobs had furthered their college or career goals:

[I work at a medical research institute 32 hours a week]. The job has helped me in college. I took on the management minor because of the job. I never thought of myself as a managerial type. I had a great manager who gave me tasks to make me realize I could be a manager.

They also spoke about how their jobs allowed them to apply the knowledge they gained in college. A student studying for a degree in pharmacy commented:

I'm taking courses about drugs and we need to memorize a lot. Working in the pharmacy, you're using the drugs over and over and you know what it is and what it is used for.

Implications

While work was integral to most study participants' lives, it impacted their educational experiences in different ways. For many, working did not negatively affect their studies, and their earnings allowed them to stay in college. In addition, on-campus jobs and some off-campus jobs seemed to substantively support students' education and career goals. Those students whose jobs required working many hours a week found they had little time or energy for studying. For a few, an inflexible work schedule meant they could not complete their courses.

Participants' descriptions of the various ways that on-campus jobs, even ones with only a few hours a week commitment, support their education goals suggest that college leaders may want to consider increasing campus employment opportunities and structure jobs to support student engagement.

Students' Financial Situations and Pressures

Most study participants did not volunteer detailed information about their financial situations. Given national research findings on the financial challenges of today's college students, it seems likely that many faced financial difficulties which they did not want to share. Also, it is important to note that many of the participants' comments on family and work responsibilities related to their financial situations.

Strugglers and succeeders reported paying for college in somewhat different ways. Seventy-five percent (40 of 53) of all participants reported receiving grants, and 62% (33 of 53) said they had taken out loans. Just under half (45%) paid for tuition and fees with their own earnings, while approximately 20% had parents who helped pay their tuition. Strugglers more often used their own earnings to pay tuition and fees: 58% (11 of 20) compared to 38% (13 of 33) of succeeders. This difference suggests that strugglers may have shouldered greater financial responsibility for their college costs than succeeders.

A few participants discussed their financial difficulties and the strategies they used to address them. One young woman described multiple strategies—taking out loans, living with relatives, and enrolling part-time—none of which she seemed to find satisfactory:

It hasn't always been the easiest with the finances. There have been times that I thought I wouldn't be able to continue or would need to continue part-time. The first year I lived on campus, and I got a loan. Now I'm living with my sister but she's moving soon. So I'll have to live on my own, and I don't know if I'll be able to go to school full-time.

Others spoke of challenges they faced paying for books:

The financial challenges were always there. I had to buy books. In the beginning, I bought them at the book store, then on-line. Then at the end, I waited until I went to class to make sure I really needed the books.

Another student spoke about a student loan:

Participant: I got a Direct Student Loan from [my college] for \$3,500 and it's going to kill me.

Interviewer: Does the aid cover expenses?

Participant: It covers my classes, but not books. That is the reason why I might not go this semester. It's \$600, and I can't do it.

Sometimes, the last dollars were so hard for students to find that not enrolling became a real possibility.

Other Contextual Issues

Housing

While the majority of study participants lived with family members or independently, about a third had lived on campus for at least a year. Participants who had the opportunity to live on campus reported a positive experience, while some who could not live on campus expressed regret. Succeeders were slightly more likely to have lived on campus than strugglers—39% (13 of 33) compared to 25% (5 of 20) of strugglers. Approximately half of those students who began their college experience living on campus at some point moved off campus. At the time of the interview, only 21% (7 of 33) succeeders and 10% (2 of 20) of strugglers lived on campus.

Regardless of where they lived, study participants perceived several advantages to residing on-campus. The immersion into college life made it easier for participants to be part of the college community:

I don't have to worry about catching the bus. I meet a lot of people. People don't even know the commuters. They say, "Oh, they commute." I can participate in more clubs.

I'm a commuter so it's hard to bond with other students since I'm not on campus so much.

It also was conducive to studying:

I'd have no luck at passing classes if I wasn't [living on campus]. I'm not the type of student to get out of classes and just do it.

[A commuter reflected]: When there is a lot of work assigned, I wish I could stay longer in the library. I have to leave earlier, since I live at home.

Commuting to college

Among those who commuted to college, there was little difference between strugglers and succeeders in how they got there. Fifty-five percent used public transportation, while 36% drove their own car. Sixteen percent found the length of their commute cumbersome; these students reported traveling at least an hour and half each way.

Health care

No study participants reported lack of health care as an obstacle to pursuing their education goals. With one or two exceptions, all reported having health insurance as required by Massachusetts law. Some had chronic health issues, especially mental health issues, but everyone who did was receiving medical care.

Support from faith-based organizations

Some participants reported receiving support for college from members of their church: 26% (9 of 33) of succeeders compared to 16% (3 of 20) strugglers. One participant described relying on his church instead of his family for advice and financial support:

I don't get advice from my family. Most of the advice I get is from my church. My church gave me a scholarship the first year. It helped me get books and a laptop for school. Anytime finances became an issue, they would help out.

Another participant, while having a supportive family, also received advice from church members:

A lot of people at my church are doctors and lawyers and they know how to help me. The other day I went to the dentist and [I told her] I was studying organic chemistry. She said, "I remember those days. I wouldn't want to go back." But she was able to help me with little problems. I see where I could be in the future if I stick with it.

Implications

In summary, participants described family and work as playing prominent roles in their lives. In addition, with a few exceptions, strugglers generally gave accounts of contextual situations that presented more challenges and offered fewer supports than succeeders. It seems likely that these contextual issues were at least part of the reason why some strugglers were not making academic progress.

When considering what they could do to improve the degree completion rates of BPS graduates, colleges and universities would do well to keep in mind the prominent roles that contextual factors, particularly family and work, play in the lives of first-generation and low-income students.

CHAPTER FOUR

Academic Information and Advising

Both succeeders and strugglers had mixed experiences with academic advising. Just over one-third of both groups reported receiving effective advising, while two-thirds reported either unsatisfactory advising or neglected to mention an academic advisor when asked about guidance they had received from college faculty or staff.

What students know and what faculty and staff assume they know

Many study participants spoke of their lack of college knowledge when they entered college and their frustration when college staff assumed they had this information.

Telling you about how the GPA works and how grades are based. I'm only learning this stuff now and I should have known since freshman year.

Professors expect people out of high school to know everything. But people come from different backgrounds. Some don't know anything. I didn't learn some things until I was junior or senior, that I wished I'd known as a freshman ... Like how to write research papers using APA or MLA; financial aid stuff; more feedback on degree application. I'm just beginning to learn this. I wished I'd known it earlier.

Reflecting on their early college experiences, these participants concluded that college staff had assumed they knew about various college procedures such as the importance of grade point averages for graduation or the intricacies of financial aid. They imply they would have had an easier college experience if they had had more explicit information earlier.

Little contact with academic advisors, reliance on written materials

Despite needing accurate information about college, several students observed that they had had little or no contact with an academic advisor. One student had never been assigned an advisor:

I didn't have a specific advisor at [my first four-year college] and I don't have one yet at [my current college] ... At [the first college], I'm not sure why I didn't have an advisor. I wasn't told where I should go and meet. During orientation, they didn't tell me where to go. I was involved with a lot of clubs. And there was someone who I had worked with in the past, and I got advice from him.

Another participant never met with his assigned advisor since the advisor was on a different campus.

Participant: This counselor was on a completely different campus in a completely different city ... that wasn't helpful. How am I going to talk to somebody who's a shuttle ... a whole 20 minute drive away?

Interviewer: Could you contact him via phone or email or ...?

Participant: I tried that. Phone, that doesn't work very well. I think I emailed him once. I never got a reply. I'm like, "Well, that was pointless." Then later on, I found out that professor was in his last semester there.

In place of meeting with an advisor, a number of participants—both strugglers and succeeders—reported obtaining all their information on course selection from their college's web site or course catalog. The exchange below illustrates several students' experiences with course planning:

Interviewer: So do you have an advisor at school?

Participant: If you asked me the lady's name, I probably couldn't tell you. I go to an advisor, like when I sign up for classes, but I don't go to the lady who I'm assigned...

Interviewer: How did you know you needed those classes?

Participant: Because every major has certain core classes that you need—like your English, your math, your science, your history...

Interviewer: And did you know about this because you spoke to someone or you read about it?

Participant: They have a list of all the majors and all the classes you have to take. So I went by that.

Another participant described having little contact with college advising staff despite being unsure of her major:

Interviewer: Who helped you with the switch in choosing another major?

Participant: I decided on my own. There's an advising office. We have to have somebody sign us off to change the major.

Interviewer: So how did you get to the life science major?

Participant: I didn't know what I wanted to do ... after the forensics. So I was like, "Well, maybe I'll just do life sciences because, if I finish the program, it's general, so I can do probably anything, or not something specific." So that was why.

Interviewer: Did you know about any services on campus that could help you think more deeply about what you wanted to do?

Participant: No. I mean they just have the advising office. I think they have a class called "Career/Life Planning." I didn't know about it till probably last semester or something.

Interviewer: Okay. Did anyone tell you what courses you needed to take in order to graduate from [this community college]? Was it clear to you that if you did this, this, and this that you would graduate within two years?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: That didn't happen?

Participant: No.

Recent research sheds light on a possible reason for these students' limited use of college services. Community college students were more likely to use avail-

able support when they learned about those supports through personal contact rather than printed material (Karp et al. 2011). Neither participant above reported opportunities to build relationships with staff who could give personalized and timely advice.

Ineffective advising

Some participants who had contact with an academic advisor did not find their interactions helpful. A number reported getting confusing information from advisors, seemingly because advisors didn't know what students did or did not understand. One participant received misleading information about how his courses fit into his degree program:

Participant: At [the community college], advisors were not helpful. After first semester, I decided I want to do nursing. I'd take certain courses and then I'd go back, and I hadn't taken the right ones for a pre-req. It was just being new and actually having to pick your courses, since in high school you didn't have to do that. I didn't know the difference between a prep (i.e. developmental) course and a college course.

Interviewer: So they would tell you to take a math course and you'd sign up for a prep course, and then at the end of semester, you'd go back and discover you were supposed to have taken the first level of college math?

Participant: Exactly.

Interviewer: And the advisors didn't know you didn't know.

Participant: Yes.

This student's lack of knowledge of the differences between a developmental course and a regular college course was common among study participants. The advisor being unaware of the student's lack of knowledge was also a common observation of participants.

Need for more than traditional academic advising

Just as many strugglers were not able to effectively use academic support, so they were unable to utilize advising. One participant on academic probation reported:

You have general advisors that would help you just

get through the regular bureaucracy of the school. They were very personable, one-on-one people. I really appreciated them. But I stopped talking to them. I haven't really since ... I think I'm beyond that. I got the gist of it.

Another participant had followed through on the advice to transfer from a four-year college to a two-year but continued to withdraw from or fail courses:

I got advice from student support services. They were helpful in my decision making. I wasn't doing well at [the four-year college] and they talked about going to [a community college].

While these students found advice on course selection or transferring to another college helpful, it didn't go far enough. Strugglers often reported lacking information not just about college procedures but also about course-level expectations. Since some reported frequently turning in assignments late, they also would have benefitted from an early warning system linked to advising.

Students' views on effective advising

Many study participants saw the value of effective advising and had a sense of what kinds of services would have allowed them to receive accurate information in a timely manner. Some, while noting their lack of college knowledge, described positive relationships with their advisor:

She was helpful and understanding ... she gave me motivation to want to finish school, because sometimes I felt like I couldn't do this, and I didn't want to ... go to school anymore. And, so ... she helped out a lot.

I have an academic adviser who has helped me. She mapped out my four-year plan, so it gives me something to look forward to when I register.

Other participants discussed what constituted an effective advising relationship:

For the advisors here, I think that it'd be beneficial for the relationship if everyone saw the students as individuals, with true potential to be successful, to be real contributors to society. And to be as objective as possible when it comes to students [who are] not doing as well ... To be encouraging.

Many study participants noted the effectiveness of staff

reaching out to them. One participant, who had a rough college start, had turned a corner due to course instructors communicating with a staff member designated to help students at risk of failing:

Participant: At my community college, they came to you and made you make an appointment to go see that person. I was falling behind in my classes. And the professors told that person, and she came and found me. She told me that I was falling behind. So I went to see her, and now I'm back on track.

Interviewer: How did that person help you?

Participant: I talked about why I was falling behind—I had responsibilities at home. So we worked out what to do about it.

Besides college, this participant had responsibility for raising her younger siblings. When a staff member whose job focused on helping struggling students approached her and offered guidance, the student was able to change her situation and get back on track academically.

In other cases course instructors reached out and provided participants support at a crucial moment such as the following:

The teacher would not let me fail. She literally chased me down the hallway. She said, "You're smarter than that. We'll sit down and figure it out." If she hadn't chased me down the hall, I never would have passed.

These participant observations illustrate the effectiveness of college staff initiating contact with students. This practice is consistent with research findings on the importance for first-generation students to have "validating agents," that is, faculty or staff who take the initiative to reach out to students, assist them with learning more about college, and encourage them to believe in themselves (Rendon 2006) as well as faculty "going above and beyond" (Guiffrida 2005).

Several study participants who had been part of a summer bridge or first-year program stressed the value of receiving information and guidance throughout their college years:

After the summer, [the program] continues for all four years. [The director] is our advisor. He gets our mid-term grades and advises us and helps us to achieve our goals. There is constant communication between the

program advisor and the student until graduation. He finds us summer internships.

While effective advising is essential at the start of college, these students suggest the importance of such support to make informed decisions for academic success all through college.

Implications

Many study participants, with various levels of academic success, did not experience an advising or support structure where they could obtain college knowledge easily. Yet, they seemed to generally agree that advising and support structures were effective when staff members and students formed trusting relationships, staff reached out to students when they were struggling, and programs were structured to ensure that relationships continued throughout students' college years.

CHAPTER FIVE

Recommendations and Conclusion

All the BPS graduates who participated in this study wanted to earn a college degree. Most were the first in their family to go to college, and many reported beginning college feeling under-prepared academically and short on information about how to “do college.”

The most striking feature distinguishing study participants who succeeded in college from those who struggled was their knowledge and use of self-management skills. Study participants who were succeeding reported generally being better able to manage the academic challenges that came their way, including managing their time, studying effectively, persisting despite discouragement, and seeking and using academic support.

The role of self-management skills in college success is a particularly important finding for both high school and college staff. Because such abilities are not intrinsic but can be taught, high schools and higher education institutions can take an active role in helping students develop self-management skills that subsequently will increase their academic success. There also are steps colleges and universities can take to better connect students to academic advising resources and provide them with timely information on college procedures.

The study participants’ situations outside of college varied. Some had families who were able to provide multiple forms of support, while others needed to support their families. Most worked, generally to pay for at least some living expenses or college costs. Some found that employment hindered their educational goals, while others found that it enhanced them or was at least neutral. A few suggested their financial situation limited their success, while for others it was less of a concern. While most reported some challenge arising from outside factors, strugglers tended to remark more often than succeeders on the negative influence of outside factors.

Recommendations

The study findings point to a series of actions higher education institutions and high schools can take to improve the chances of BPS graduates and other first-generation students completing degrees

Self-Management Skills

Help students, especially those at risk of not completing a degree, develop the self-management skills they need to successfully achieve their college goals.

Possible Actions

- Offer students a credit-bearing first-year course focused on the development of self-management skills and strongly encourage first-generation students to take it. Offer a similar course to college-bound students in 12th grade.
- Provide course instructors with professional development on how to incorporate instruction in self-management skills into their courses, particularly effective study skills for mastering the material covered in their courses, aimed at students at risk of struggling academically. Provide support staff with professional development regarding the self-management skills needed to succeed in college and the ways they can help students learn and practice these skills. Place emphasis on staff teaching students to use campus resources and supports effectively.
- Reach out and provide individualized support to at-risk students in a timely manner, including giving students feedback regarding their early- and mid-semester academic performance as well as how effectively they are practicing self-management skills. Keep in mind the importance students place on personal interactions when designing these supports.
- Make support services such as tutoring, career counseling, and academic advising readily accessible to *all* students, including those with limited time

on-campus because of work, family, or other outside responsibilities.

College Information and Advising

Improve the structure and delivery of orientation, advising, and support programs specifically to ensure that all students develop the college knowledge they need to succeed.

Possible Actions

- Compile and analyze data to learn which students are at risk of not passing specific courses, or not completing degrees and why. Use this data to develop interventions for improving student achievement.
- Create a process for early identification of students who are at risk academically and offer individualized advice and support that will enable them to stay on track academically.
- Develop a campus-wide system for regularly evaluating the impact of orientation programs, academic advising, and support services on the persistence and academic progress of students, particularly those at risk of completing degrees. Make improvements based on evaluation results.

Employment

Expand opportunities for on-campus employment and college-friendly, off-campus employment.

Possible Actions

- Increase the number of on-campus jobs for students. Advise students about the ways they will benefit from working on campus, even if the wage rate is somewhat less than off-campus employment.
- Make campus work-study wages competitive with off-campus wages.
- Encourage on-campus and off-campus supervisors to mentor their student employees regarding their education and career goals.
- Recruit off-campus employers to offer career-related, college-friendly jobs to students at local colleges and universities.

Families

Provide families of first-generation students with a working understanding of the benefits of completing college for their children, the nature of the college experience, and how they can support their children's college success.

Possible Actions

- Invite and encourage parents/guardians of first-generation high school students to visit college campuses with their children as part of the college exploration and application processes.
- Offer college orientation programs and other special events to help parents and other family members of first-generation students feel comfortable with the campus environment. Design such events to provide families an understanding of what the college experience involves and how they can support their children's education goals.
- Identify a campus staff member to serve as a liaison to parents/guardians of first-generation students. In addition to being available to their address questions and concerns, this person could reach out to and provide information to parents/guardians *throughout* their children's college experience.

Conclusion

Why some students succeed in getting through college while others from similar circumstances give up before completing degrees has been a perplexing question for educators and others in Boston and elsewhere. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by graduates of the BPS as they begin college—and the differences between those who are successful in meeting those challenges and those who struggle academically and, in many instances, drop out.

The challenges BPS graduates face in completing college degrees are not insurmountable. Self-management skills can be taught on the college level as well as in elementary and secondary grades. High school and college staff collaborating with community and faith-based organizations can provide families with the knowledge and tools they need to play active roles in supporting their children's college aspirations. Colleges and universities can improve academic advising and equip students with the knowledge needed to successfully

meet college academic expectations. They also can give students priority for part-time campus employment. At the same time, the city's employers can offer students jobs with the flexibility to accommodate their study demands.

Mayor Menino's goal of doubling the number of Boston's public school graduates completing college degrees is ambitious and admirable. It embodies a vision of a city that offers economic security and social prosperity for all its residents. Substantially increasing the college completion rates of graduates of the city's schools is achievable if education, business and community leaders work together to close the gap between those students who are successful in college and those who have the same aspirations but struggle to earn a degree.

The new knowledge gained from this study as well as the efforts of the Success Boston partners to improve the college preparation, transition, and persistence provides a strong foundation on which to do so.

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