



OPINION

Mentoring helps low-income college students succeed

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Micheal Johnson, left, and Kedrick Hoyt, 11, joke around as they pose for a picture at a park in Plano, Texas, Wednesday Jan. 13, 2010. Johnson a volunteer with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program is mentor to Hoyt.

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In 2013, only 9 percent of individuals from low-income families had obtained a bachelor's degree by the age of 24. In contrast, approximately 77 percent of those from high-income families achieved this milestone.

Persistence in higher education is an uphill battle for low-income, first-generation students. Despite government efforts to make college more affordable, the graduation gap has yet to close for those from different socioeconomic groups. It points to a growing debate: When hard dollars fail, what can help these students achieve postsecondary success?

Mentoring has a proven track record in helping low-income students graduate high school on time, with research showing that the longer a relationship lasts, the greater the value. For youth struggling with low self-esteem or exposure to circumstances like abuse, neglect or violence,

having a positive adult role model gives them one-on-one attention and encouragement that makes a difference. Take high school graduation, for instance: In the state of California in 2014, the low-income completion rate was 76 percent. Compare that to data from professional mentoring providers like Big Brothers Big Sisters, which serves a primarily low-income population yet saw 99 percent of participants graduate on time from the Orange County and Inland Empire agency, and 96 percent from the Greater Los Angeles area.

Fifteen years ago in January, President George W. Bush issued a proclamation that marked the inaugural National Mentoring Month in 2002. Thanks in part to this annual public awareness campaign spearheaded by MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, mentoring has entered the conversation as an effective tool for underserved youth in achieving developmental milestones. Today, we celebrate its success on a national scale in addressing recurring behavior problems like delinquency while encouraging positive development in the form of better school attendance, extracurricular activities and postsecondary educational pursuits.

But as economically disadvantaged youth populations achieve greater life milestones, it becomes time to address the next barriers they face in entering productive careers and earning living-wage jobs. Relationships built through mentoring are incredibly effective tools in understanding the often complex needs of this demographic.

Going back to the issue of college persistence, the Obama administration's aid reform, loan management and greater Pell Grant investment provide more opportunities than ever for educational funding. What administrators fail to recognize, however, is that financial hurdles are just one challenge that low-income, first-generation college students must overcome. Though their families may support academic pursuits, there's often little to no support system at home when it comes to navigating college bureaucracy. In addition, this

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cultural barrier lends itself to parental pressures to begin earning money for the family. Schooling is seen as a break in the household system, rather than a means to create future success.

In the United States, this demographic is nearly four times more likely to leave school after the first year than those from more economically advantaged backgrounds. What happens when a young 20-something drops out of school with partial course credits, no degree and no professional work experience? They are no better off than they were with a high school diploma — only now, they could potentially be thousands of dollars in debt.

Just as mentors help coach and motivate youth to succeed throughout high school, they can provide the same consistency and guidance at the college level. One-to-one mentoring has been found to increase persistence and completion by 4 percentage points.

The beauty of mentoring also lies in its ability to give young adults exposure to alternative options. A 21st-century commitment to success focuses not just on education, but also enlistment and employment through certified vocational programs — the three “E’s.” When mentors are able to continue a relationship with high school students beyond graduation, they are poised to help identify strengths that will take them in a direction where they’re set up for success.

Professional mentoring organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters — which has historically supported youth to the age of 18 — are stepping up to support mentors in this 21st-century commitment to help break the cycle of poverty. This January, with \$1 million in funding commitments from major foundations, the chapter serving Orange County and the Inland Empire became the first California affiliate formally to extend its services to all high school graduates in its program regardless of GPA, post-high school plans or income level.

To move the needle for those hoping to rise above poverty and create systemic socioeconomic change, we need to provide academic, career and social guidance that can instill long-term values that will carry over from high school to a productive career. In short, a mentor.

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