



Leniece Flowers says she “felt alone” on the road to college. She stands outside her alma mater, Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx. Once a “drop-out factory,” Columbus is now slated for closure by the New York City Department of Education.

A MATTER OF degrees

STORY BY TING YU • PHOTOS BY J.C. BOURCART

A shocking 60 percent of poor or minority college students drop out of college, forcing educators to face a new reality: K-12’s real charge isn’t getting kids into college, it’s making sure they have what it takes to finish

On an autumn morning in 1998, some 3,000 teenagers streamed into the stone-and-red-brick building of Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, ready for their first day of class. Four years later, only three out of five of them would leave with diplomas. The remaining two simply vanished on the road from freshman to senior year. Leniece Flowers (N.Y. ’05), a ninth-grader at Christopher Columbus in 1998, was determined not to meet that fate. “It was a culture that was just really demoralizing,” says Flowers, who remembers many classmates being encouraged to study mechanics or sign up for the military. A standout student, she tracked into Advanced Placement courses and developed close relationships with teachers who encouraged her college plans.

That didn’t make the application process any less daunting. Flowers’ parents—her mother is a corrections officer, and her father is a sanitation worker—never went to college and were

at a loss to help their daughter. “I felt alone in that process,” she recalls.

Knowing that her parents couldn’t afford college tuition, Flowers hunted down scholarships and filled out the convoluted Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on her own, redoing it three times to correct mistakes.

Flowers eventually got into three colleges and decided on the University of Vermont, which had flown her up for a visit. But as a freshman, she felt as alone as ever. She was one of only a small number of African American students on campus and, despite joining several clubs, had made few friends.

To make matters worse, for the first time in her life, Flowers struggled academically. When her first paper came back with a low grade and riddled with red pen marks, she realized she lacked the writing skills her classmates already possessed. “Constructing the actual paper—developing one central idea and focusing on that, and [then] tying everything together—I really struggled because I hadn’t had much experience

doing that,” she explains. “I had written papers, but none of them were research-based. They were short. Coming up with a reference list, that was new. Citing sources, that was new.”

It got harder from there. Flowers had trouble organizing her time and prioritizing assignments. The freedom to choose her own classes was overwhelming. “I would just blindly pick classes and suffer through them,” she recalls. Her grade point average sunk to a 2.5, and she lost one of her scholarships. Socially isolated and depressed, she considered leaving. “I didn’t believe in myself,” she says. By the end of her freshman year, Flowers was in danger of becoming a statistic.

Getting accepted into college was once the hallmark of educational success—tangible evidence of beating the achievement gap. However, new reports show that despite rising college-enrollment rates, huge numbers of low-income and minority students never make it to graduation.

A recent study from the U.S. Department of Education finds that the graduation rate for the lowest-income students (family income less than \$32,000) at four-year colleges and universities is about 41 percent, compared with 67 percent for the highest-income students (family income greater than \$92,000).

According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which tracks graduation rates of all colleges and universities that receive federal financial aid, 60 percent of white college students graduate within six years, while only 40 percent of under-represented minority students (African American, Latino, and Native American students) do so. Most of them drop out without degrees, saddled with thousands of dollars of debt.

In the last 20 years, the United States has plummeted from first place to 12th in college graduation rates for young people, trailing behind Canada, Korea, Russia, and seven other

OECD states. The cost to students, as well as the economy, is high. Those without college degrees have almost double the unemployment rate of those with them. In 2008, numbers from the Labor Department showed that workers with bachelor’s degrees made 54 percent more, on average, than those who dropped out of college. Economists project that by the end of the decade, nearly 8 in 10 new jobs will require workforce training or higher education.

In response, the Obama administration has placed “college readiness” at the heart of its education reform efforts. The Department of Education’s Race to the Top requirements ask schools to show how they increase both college enrollment and the number of students who complete at least a year of college. President Obama has set a goal of boosting the number of college graduates by 8 million over the next 10 years.

But setting an ambitious goal is no guarantee of success. The bottom line is that far too many students who make it to college wind up leaving without a degree. For low-income and minority students—many of whom are the first in their families to attend college—a whole host of pressures can conspire to derail even the most committed among them.

J.B. Schramm is the founder of College Summit, a national organization that partners with schools and districts to promote college readiness. Founded in 1993, the program has served 35,000 students, the majority of whom are low-income and minority. About 80 percent of College Summit’s participants enroll in college, thanks to a model that includes college-preparatory course work and the training of “peer leaders,” students who help to build a college-going culture in the school.

Schramm says the roadmap for increasing college graduation rates is clear. “The key issues are academic preparation, college matching and transition support, and financial aid,” he says. “Students also need skills for handling obstacles and persevering through the inevitable challenges they are going to face. How do you

develop a culture around the will to succeed in college?”

In a world where a high-achieving, driven student like Leniece Flowers struggles to get by, what will it take to make sure many more students have not only access to college but a legitimate shot at succeeding and earning a degree?

Raising rigor

In the California State University system, which requires admitted students to have at least a B average in high school, more than 60 percent of entering freshmen in 2010—that’s 25,000 students—needed remediation in math, English, or both. “Many of the public schools teach what I refer to as ‘almost algebra,’” says CSU chancellor Charles Reed. “The rigor is just not there.”

Sadly, California is not an anomaly. Across the country, it has become painfully clear that what it takes to earn a high school diploma is fundamentally misaligned with what is required to succeed in college. A 2009 national survey of 7,680 middle- and high-school teachers and college instructors by the ACT found that 91 percent of teachers believed their students were graduating college-ready. Yet just 26 percent of college instructors reported that students arrived on campus prepared. In community colleges, 6 out of 10 students require at least one remedial class. A 2006 brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that \$1.4 billion per year is spent providing remedial classes to students who have recently graduated from high school.

Even more disturbing, remediation can sometimes backfire. A Department of Education study found that students who took remedial classes were actually slightly less likely to graduate than their peers who performed at around the same level but didn’t take remedial classes. This is in part because remediation delays the start of credit-bearing courses, pushing the finish line farther away.



“We are fighting a battle to extend the vision beyond 12th grade,” says 16-year teaching veteran Edward Wang (N.Y. ’94) (with some of his students at Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem).

José Cruz of the Education Trust says that institutions need to integrate remediation throughout the curriculum, building support into regular course work through tutoring. And even then, “You can’t make up for a year’s worth of preparation in one term,” he says.

The real answer lies in boosting rigor throughout the K-12 continuum, with primary and middle grades laying the foundation for a challenging college-preparatory experience in high school. “We need to raise the sights above high-school graduation and above achievement on test scores to actual enrollment and credit accumulation in college,” Schramm says. “The power of that move will help schools really focus on what students and their parents want from K-12.”

Until recently, every state had its own idea of what a high-school graduate should know and be able to do. Learning standards varied widely

and “rigor” was a relative term. Given this, the recent adoption of the new Common Core State Standards by 44 states is a promising first step, says Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellent Education, but much more is needed. (See a Q&A with the authors of the Common Core standards on p. 12.)

“Adoption isn’t the end, it’s the beginning,” Wise says. “Everybody just agreed to a set of college standards—now you have to define the curriculum necessary to get there, you have to develop the assessments to decide if students are truly making progress, and most important, make sure your teacher preparation and professional development is aligned to this.”

These are huge decisions that must be driven by hard data, Schramm notes. Right now, he says, educators are basing reforms on anecdotal evidence without knowing what really works. He says that college-enrollment and college-

credit-accumulation data are the two most critical pieces of information to track. They will tell schools whether their students go to college, where they attend, how long they stay, and how they’re faring in courses.

“Sweeping generalizations about low-income students dropping out of college don’t improve K-12 instruction,” Schramm says. “We need to actually find out which students are dropping out and in what courses they are struggling. When we can get that kind of data in the hands of educators about their own students, then we’re going to start to see more accurate goals and real improvements in how instruction is delivered.”

But it will take more than merely raising the target to shift the culture of whole schools or systems. Students and teachers must change their mindsets, too. Edward Wang (N.Y. ’94) has been teaching at his Harlem placement

school, Thurgood Marshall Academy, for 16 years. The 6-12 school has a good track record of getting its students into college—Wang estimates about 90 percent of seniors are accepted—but a few years ago the administration took a hard look at the college readiness of its graduates and wasn't satisfied with what it found.

At the time, Thurgood offered a handful of AP classes, but teachers found that only a small pool of students were qualified to take them. Even those who had the grades ended up struggling with the advanced coursework. Wang says alumni were coming back and telling teachers that they felt poorly prepared for college. So Thurgood adopted the rigorous International Baccalaureate Middle Years curriculum for its sixth-through-tenth graders. Wang says the intent was to lay a strong foundation so that high school wouldn't be a time for catch up but rather a true precursor to college-level work.

The transition has been slow. "We are fighting a battle to extend the vision beyond 12th grade," says Wang, who teaches physics and design technology and coordinates the IB program. "It's a less tangible goal for kids to talk about being prepared to be successful—not just, 'I got this many acceptance letters.'"

It has been an adjustment for teachers as well. Due to IB's heavy focus on skill development rather than simple content-mastery, a teacher could be required to give a student up to six grades for different skills in a single class. Veteran teachers who had refined their lessons and units over the course of many years were forced to overhaul their curriculums and assessments entirely. There was also fear that parents might be confused by the new IB report cards, which did away with single letter grades in favor of multiple numeric ratings for different skills.

Nevertheless, the program is gaining momentum as the benefits of IB's specificity and rigor have become evident. "Teachers are actually able to pinpoint a student's strengths

and weaknesses, so it leads to much more meaningful conversations with students," Wang explains. Best of all: "Parents love it. Now they know what actual skills need to improve and how to help their kids. It's shown me that you can't let fear of something new stop you from doing what you know is right for your students."

A good match

When it was time for Leniece Flowers to apply to college, she turned to a guidance counselor at her high school for advice. She had always dreamed of going to Columbia University. With straight As and an impressive resume of extracurricular activities and summer internships, she thought she had a decent shot. But the counselor informed her that even a much less selective public university in upstate New York would be a stretch. Flowers didn't apply

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to Columbia. "No one teaches you to reach," she says looking back.

And disappointment isn't the only fallout. It turns out that reaching for the very best school you can matters enormously when it comes to a student's likelihood of graduating. A 2009 study by researchers William Bowen and Michael McPherson found that students who "undermatch"—meaning they choose not to attend the best school they get into—are much less likely to earn a degree. High-achieving students who went to more selective schools graduated at a rate of 81 percent, compared with 66 percent of those at less selective schools. In other words, matching well significantly increases one's chance of graduating.

This is because, generally speaking, at more selective colleges there is an institutional culture of achievement—graduating is the norm.

The study found that low-income students were more likely to undermatch because of financial strain or a desire to be closer to home. Even when students were well-qualified to gain acceptance to a selective school, they didn't apply and often ended up enrolling at colleges that churn out dropouts.

In the last decade or so, enrollment at for-profit colleges has grown by 236 percent, fueled in large part by heavy recruitment of low-income students and students of color, says a new report from the Education Trust. Although only 12 percent of all college students enroll in for-profit institutions, "they are responsible for 20 percent of black students and a full 24 percent of Pell Grant recipients." That's disturbing

because, according to 2008 IPEDS figures, just 22 percent of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree seekers at these colleges graduated within six years, compared with 55 percent at public institutions and 65 percent at private nonprofit colleges.

Given all this, College Summit's J.B. Schramm says that competent college counseling is essential. He advocates for discarding the traditional model of college counseling offices and information centers—an approach that favors savvy, motivated students who seek out assistance and know what questions to ask—in favor of mandatory counseling. "We have to shift from a 'some kids' approach to post-secondary guidance, to an 'all kids' approach,"

Schramm notes. That means students would start meeting with counselors in the ninth grade, during the school day, "so that there's no opt-out clause," he says.

And that guidance should come from someone who really knows a student's true potential. Schramm believes teachers, who have "the close personal relationships" with students, are far better positioned to offer that type of support. "Teachers are the people from whom first-generation students get most of their college expectations and information," he says, "We need our schools to leverage teachers to help kids explore their options and move through the process."

Preventive education

Some high schools are beginning to realize that providing support for the transition to college needs to start sooner and extend beyond handing out diplomas. "It's triage when we're dealing with these issues at the college level," says Tom Torkelson (R.G.V. '97), cofounder of IDEA Public Schools in the Rio Grande Valley. "Look, we have these kids for five, six, seven, eight years. Let's figure out what they're having a tough time with [in college], and how we fix it while they're still with us. Where did we fall down? How do we have to build up and improve our program?"

When IDEA surveyed its alumni in college, it found that students didn't know where to turn when they ran into problems with financial aid. They were unsure how to find tutors or talk to professors when they fell behind in classes. And they couldn't overcome seemingly small setbacks like being short on book money or needing airfare to get back to campus after a break.

The savvy and resourcefulness required to navigate these challenges—sometimes called "college knowledge"—can be the difference between failure and success, especially for low-income and minority students who don't always have the advantage of learning from the experience of parents or siblings. "These

Will Higher Ed Step Up?

Most students decide where to apply based on a college's prestige or reputation. But what about looking at a college's graduation rates? An analysis by the Education Trust found that some higher-education institutions are much more effective than others at graduating their students.

What do the more effective schools have in common? All of them are "very intentional about graduating all of their students," says José Cruz of the Education Trust. "They don't wait for end-of-year graduation rates to figure out what they want to do next year. They're tracking who's showing up for class, who's getting help from support services. It's very different from the passive approach of most higher-ed institutions that have a counseling center, a math tutoring center, a writing center. You walk into them, and you see only a handful of people. The institutions that are doing well are those that are not just putting services in place but aggressively ensuring students are using them."

One such model comes out of Florida State University, which over the last decade has reversed its black-white graduation gap—today, 74 percent of black students at FSU graduate, compared with 69 percent of Caucasian students. The school's Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) is geared toward incoming first-generation and low-income freshmen. Students connect with a mentor and attend a summer bridge program that includes academic classes as well as seminars on studying techniques and managing financial aid. CARE tracks student grades throughout the four years so that faltering students receive interventions quickly.

"There's sometimes a philosophy on college campuses that we bring in good students and then get out of the way and let them do their thing," says Karen Laughlin, FSU's dean of undergraduate studies. "That's not our philosophy. We're a very



nurturing campus, and I think that's what makes the difference at a large public university. Students don't feel lost. They don't feel like a number."

Amherst College in Massachusetts tops the list of private institutions in terms of graduating students. Nearly 97 percent of Amherst students earn a degree within six years. In the last several years, the college has also more than doubled the percentage of low-income students (those who receive Pell Grants) on campus by actively recruiting them and taking their economic background into consideration during the admissions process.

"Diversity is not an issue of political correctness," says Amherst President Anthony Marx, who also serves as a Teach For America board member. "It happens to make education more powerful."

Marx believes a closer partnership between higher education and K-12 is needed. "Certainly at the elite institutions there has been an attitude—for a century now—which is to hold itself above K-12 and to say, 'We will just cream off the best, and we don't need to worry about the system'" he says. "But it is high time for us to engage at a whole new level."

Marx calls for colleges and universities to partner with local K-12 schools in thinking through challenges, and to open their doors to a broader spectrum of students. "We have a responsibility to go beyond our comfort zones and recognize that there are lots of students in this country who are capable of work at the best higher-education institutions that we have not sought out and we have not attracted."

little obstacles that many students figure out how to deal with in college become really insurmountable for some of our students,” Torkelson says.

In addition to its continued focus on ramping up academics such as writing skills, IDEA implements a Road to College curriculum beginning in the sixth grade. Full-time college counselors lead classes on how to overcome “barriers faced by students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes.” That includes helping kids apply to college and coaching them on how to access tutoring and build relationships with the decision makers in the financial aid office. By the time students apply to college, Torkelson says, they have visited around 30 universities as part of the school’s “field lessons” program.

IDEA also started an employee-giving campaign called Gimme Five that has raised several hundred thousand dollars to use as emergency loans for its alumni in college. A committee of teachers oversees the program and responds swiftly to requests that come in from students “to make up some small, unforeseen gap that has emerged.”

Schools aren’t the only ones providing this type of highly personalized support. Programs like Urban Students Empowered in Chicago aim to support low-income students of color through the critical transition to college. U.S. Empowered resembles other college-preparatory programs, including College Summit and AVID, a 30-year-old program used in more than 4,000 schools around the country, but its support extends through freshman year of college.

U.S. Empowered works with 15 Chicago high schools, serving 545 students. Ninety-nine percent of the program’s participants have been admitted to four-year colleges, and 83 percent of its alumni are on track to finish.

Participants take a daily class that covers the pragmatic aspects of getting into college as well as five leadership principles—professionalism, ambition, resilience, integrity, and

resourcefulness—that it believes are key to student success.

“By the time they get to college, they know how to study, how to manage their time, how to build relationships with professors,” says Jeff Nelson (Chicago ’04), who founded the program in 2003. They’ve also built up a strong sense of self, so that when obstacles arise, “instead of feeling like they should drop out, that they don’t belong there, they will realize they have been highly resilient in the past and they can be resilient in the future.”

U.S. Empowered’s college freshmen join cohorts that meet online each week so that mentors can check in and help them troubleshoot. “More than anything,” says Nelson, “It creates an environment where our kids no longer feel alone.”

Kewauna Lerma, a sophomore at ACE Technical Charter High School in Chicago, was struggling in her classes and thinking about dropping out when she got an application for U.S. Empowered. Lerma’s parents had issues with drug abuse, and she had lived in and out of homeless shelters throughout her childhood. Some classmates had told her about U.S. Empowered, and she decided to apply after her grandmother and mother implored her to go to college. “They said, ‘I don’t want you to be like us. We didn’t go to college, and look how we’re struggling,’” Lerma says.

As part of the program, Lerma made a remarkable turnaround, raising her grade point average from 2.25 to 4.22 (out of 4.5) in one year and increasing her ACT score by 25 percent. She’s now waiting to hear back from 23 colleges, including top choices University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and University of Chicago. The latter is a reach school for Lerma, Nelson says, “but they give a lot of weight to progress, so it’s certainly possible.”

The program “helped me mold myself,” she says. “I really developed my resourcefulness and resilience.”



U.S. Empowered teaches traits like resilience so that students will persevere through the highs and lows of college life, says founder Jeff Nelson (left, with Kewauna Lerma on the University of Chicago campus).

More and more, traits like resilience, persistence, and tenacity are being talked about as essentials for college success. In two separate studies last year, University of Pennsylvania researcher Angela Duckworth found that self-discipline is a stronger predictor of grades than IQ, and that individuals with “grit”—those who persevere through adversity to achieve long-term goals—are more likely to have graduated from college.

KIPP is among the K-12 schools that have started teaching these critical character skills to students. Cofounder Dave Levin (Houston ’92) says Penn researcher Martin Seligman has identified seven traits connected with happiness and success. “Three of those are as important as IQ in terms of life outcomes, and those are zest, grit, and self-control,” he says.

So how do you cultivate these qualities in students? Levin says it’s

important to name the skills explicitly, to model them, to call out when students demonstrate them, and praise demonstration of character over ability.

“Everything you do should have a character component,” Levin explains. “If you’re doing a long writing assignment, you explain how grit and self-control are part of completing this. It has to pervade and be woven into the entire DNA of a school. We’re constantly trying to get kids to understand—that’s what success

looks like, being able to problem-solve, being able to ask for help.”

Putting a value on education

Kewauna Lerma worries about how she’ll pay for college. Her mother survives on disability payments, and, over the past year, Lerma has applied for as many scholarships as she can find. “I don’t want to have to drop out if I can’t pay,” she says. Considering the odds Lerma has beaten to get this

far, it's disheartening to realize that it could all unravel when the tuition bill arrives.

College costs increased at about twice the rate of general inflation over the past two decades, and the cost of a four-year education at a public university has risen fastest. The total cost of attending a four-year public university is now \$18,539, up from \$11,552 in 2001, according to the Institute for College Access and Success. At private four-year colleges, costs also shot up, from \$25,237 in 2001 to \$38,257 in 2009.

"College is so expensive that we have priced these kids out of the market; they are not even in the running," says Deborah Bial, founder of the Posse Foundation.

Predictably, borrowing money has become more common. Since the 1990s, the number of students applying for student loans has outpaced the growth in college enrollments by 50 percent, according to researchers William Bowen, Matthew Chingos, and Michael McPherson.

But financial aid doesn't reach everyone who needs it. In the last two decades, many states and institutions have shifted to granting aid based on merit rather than need—a move that mostly benefits students from more affluent families. And current formulas for deciding who receives need-based aid are flawed, says Bial. "We screen out a lot of young people who have tremendous need, who can't afford to go to college but do not show up as being needy enough." The result, she says, is "rich-poor colleges" that enroll wealthy kids and the poorest students who get financial aid. "All the students in the middle are becoming less and less able to afford to go to college. It's too many kids."

The Obama administration estimates that 2 million students who are qualified to go to college won't go because they can't afford it. In a study of several public universities, Bowen and his colleagues found a gap of \$3,665 between the aid given to low-

income students and the actual cost of college—a devastating amount to a family living near the poverty line.

Thanks to the economic downturn, more students than ever depend on federal student aid. Since 2008, Pell Grant funding has doubled to more than \$30 billion, and this year the program faces a \$5.7 billion shortfall. Funding for

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the program is estimated each year by Congress, but with the dramatic surge in the number of low-income students qualifying for aid, those projections have fallen short in recent years.

The good news is that in February Congress voted to meet the shortfall and fully fund the grant program. The U.S. Department of Education set the maximum Pell Grant award at \$5,550 for the 2011-12 academic year. Another step forward is that starting in 2012, the maximum Pell Grant amount will be determined by the Consumer Price Index rather than relying on the whims of Congress. The moves come as a huge reassurance to many higher education institutions—particularly historically Black colleges where two-thirds of all students received Pell Grant aid, compared with 42 percent of students across all four-year public and private institutions.

Some private colleges, like Amherst, have replaced loans with grants and even provide start-up money for students to buy winter clothes and bed sheets. "That is a financial challenge for us, but we think it's an essential challenge to meet," says Amherst President Anthony Marx. "It is a decision not only about the allocation of resources, but about educational and social values."

But for public universities that can't draw from private coffers,

innovative solutions are needed, says Jose Cruz of the Education Trust. He praises programs that allow students to graduate debt-free if they work a certain number of hours for the school. Not only do they earn income, but research shows that students who work on campus have a much higher chance of graduating.

Decisions about student aid need to reflect more than just the bottom line, Cruz says. "It all boils down to: What do you value?"

After a rocky start, Leniece Flowers began to regain her footing. She met with professors who would eventually become mentors and took their advice on how to balance her course load. She also applied to become a residential advisor in her dorm, to get more integrated with campus life. "All these things I learned late in the game," she says.

By the end of her senior year, Flowers had spent four semesters on the Dean's List and graduated with a 3.3 GPA. After completing her corps commitment in New York City, she went on to Columbia University and earned her master's degree in education and sociology.

Flowers, who now recruits teachers for Houston public schools, says her will to succeed and the encouragement of her mentors kept her on track. "That's what it takes to get through college—you have to face adversity and be able to see the bigger picture," she says. "And you can't do it alone." ★

— Additional reporting by Sarah Garland, staff writer at *The Hechinger Report*



What if all children knew they had unlimited potential?

Melissa was once a fifth grader at KIPP. She's now a 2010 corps member.

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