

Welcome, you are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research conference podcast. I'm the center's director Ann Stevens. In March of 2015 the center hosted the conference Increasing College Access and Success for Low Income Students. This conference brought together a unique mix of researchers, policy professionals and educational leaders to discuss new research and opportunities for low income students.

In this presentation, Thomas Brock discusses research and opportunities in post-secondary education. Brock is the Commissioner of the National Center for Education Research with the US Department of Education.

>> Okay. Thank you for the introduction, that's very kind. I just wanna say, it's really a pleasure to be back in my home state, with so many colleagues with whom I've worked over the years.

I really had a lot of fun just listening to the presentation this morning and getting caught up on all of your work. So you'll notice that the title of my presentation is Reflections and Opportunities. And I stayed away from the typical research term of challenges and opportunities.

>> And I did that deliberately.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that as researchers, we've figured out all of the problems that are affecting post secondary education. But at this particular moment and even more so after listening to all of you this morning, I just feel encouraged honestly about how much progress we've made.

A decade ago, most higher education policy makers and institutional leaders were only beginning to recognize that there was a completion problem that was just beginning to be understood. At the community college level in particular there was a view that all of those students who did get degrees were successfully transferring to other institutions and it was only after NCS began some careful longitudinal work, that we realized that actually was not the case.

Likewise, a decade ago there were only a handful of well designed evaluations looking at the effectiveness of intervention targeting post secondary students. It's a little bit humbling to stand in front of you at this point and to be asked to be a keynote speaker because I thought of you as the leaders of this work.

>> But I thought what I could do during my time this afternoon is just give some insight into how these issues are currently being done in Washington DC and also in the states and then share with you some of how respond. So for the next 20 minutes or so, I'm going to focus on four major questions.

First, just a little background, yet again, on why college access and success is a concern. Secondly, to give you a little more background on the research that IES is supporting trying to find solutions to some of our secondary ills. Thirdly, to spend a little time talking with you about what I and my colleagues see as some major research gaps, but then lastly to talk about where we go from here.

I do also want to give a disclaimer. I certainly am aware that IES was not the only research funder for post secondary education. Many important studies that are being done without IES funding. There's a large philanthropy about 700 miles north of here, for instance, that has been known to make occasional grants in this area in the past.

But I will say IES is clearly the major funder of post-secondary education research, and I think its support for well-designed causal studies in particular has set the standard for the field, not just in post-secondary, but I'd go so far as to say in education overall. But during our time together I will welcome your suggestions also on how IES might play that role more effectively.

In the Q and A period, you're welcome to answer questions but please feel free to challenge me a bit or offer your ideas as well. So why is college access and success such a concern? I think you all know the statistics pretty well so I'll be pretty brief here.

It may be a little disappointing to some of you, particularly some of the undergraduates, at least in Washington DC. You don't hear a lot of discussions about the benefits of college as far as helping people discover themselves, finding

out who they are, finding satisfaction in life, creating an informed citizenry.

I think all those things are acknowledged on some level. But clearly in DC, most of the arguments are really made in economic terms. As some of the speakers already have talked about, over a lifetime adults with a post secondary degree will earn about 50% more than those without a post-secondary education degree.

And their unemployment rate is about half as compared to people without post-secondary education. There's also a lot of discussion constantly in policy-making circles about the need to maintain a competitive work force in order for the US and also for states to remain competitive in this global economy. At the same time, also from an economic standpoint, there is a lot of frustration with the rising cost of college primarily and a pretty view.

Again in Washington and in many states, that neither government nor many students and families are really getting their money's worth out of college. There is a perception of waste. This comes up every time you read a story about some extravagant new student activity center that gets built, but also a lot of disappointment and frustration with developmental education that's made duplicative in what the K to 12 system ought to be doing.

Secondly, there's a lot of worry that students and families are taking on too much debt to pay for that high tuition. And then third, and probably most important, this concern over tuition rates that's what we've been talking about all day. So those first two points may be debatable, depending on your point of view, but I think the third point certainly is more difficult to refute.

I mentioned a moment ago the longitudinal studies that the NCS has sponsored, and these data in fact are from some of that work, beginning post-secondary students longitudinal survey. But this was really the data that I think began opening up people's eyes to learn that after six years of entering a four year institution, only about 60% of those students go enter college with the intention of getting a degree will ever do so.

From that institution or any institution. And if you look at students entering two year colleges or community colleges only about 33, 34% of those students will ever earn a degree from any institution within a six year period. Now both sets of figures obviously indicate there's a lot of room for improvement.

Especially in the two year sector. But I will say also in Washington, at least right now, there's increasing recognition that there's a lot of variation in the four year sector too. And as you look at some of those more broad access institutions in the four year sector, those that have relatively low levels of selectivity, their outcomes in fact, often look very similar to those in community colleges.

So we've heard already about some of the reasons riveting factors to these low completion rates so I'll just say very quickly that in their argument could be framed really I think in two ways there are characteristics that students bring with them that are certainly responsible in some ways with lower outcomes that we see.

Insufficient academic preparation, probably topping the list. There are however, I do believe important, an number of institutional factors as well. We hear a lot these days about the misalignment between high schools and colleges in terms of what students are being asked to learn, how students are being assessed.

And then what the expectations are once students actually get to the college environment. The common core state standards among other initiatives was supposed to take care of that but you turn on the news any day of the week you can kind of hear how that's turning out, at least at the moment.

There also is a lot of uncertainty just over how to teach these underprepared students basic skills, basic reading, basic writing, basic math skills an increasingly widely held view that we simply don't know how to teach these young adults who had not acquired those skills at the high school level.

Thirdly, there's a widely held perception that the advising and support services offered by many broad access institutions, simply not adequate. It's not up to the job, given the needs that students were coming into these places with. And then finally, I think an increasing disappointment, perhaps, is starting to set in that technological solutions,

which, even just a couple of years ago were kind of seen as the salvation perhaps of higher education simply have not panned out quite to the degree that was hoped.

In particular the massive online open courses other technological software that conceivably might be able to make higher education available to many more students, much more cheaply, just hasn't been adopted at the kind of scale that any of you anticipated. So, what type of research is IES supporting to address some or all of these issues.

Since the year 2006, when IES first created its post-secondary education portfolio it's funded 61 grants in this field totaling \$134 million. This includes three research and development centers. Which are funded at about \$10 million each. And I can tell you more about those later if you're interested. But most- funded has been individual grants of the types that you've heard this morning in the various presentations.

Most of the work that we've funded though falls into two major camps of fully half, actually slightly more than half, of all the grants we've made have been around questions of college access. Programs, for instance, that are looking at college prep for high school students. Things like the Avid program, international baccalaureate program, try to understand their effectiveness in preparing students for college.

Also, in this category I would put programs to help students learn about the college application process and apply for financial aid. We've heard some good examples of those today. And then finally interventions that are designed to begin exposing students to the college environment and in some cases even help them start earning college credits while they are high school students, and probably the best known example there is the early college high schools.

The second major category, where we have funded is in this area I would call college transition. And overwhelmingly these grants tend to be focused on developmental education and ways to improve it or perform it. Or they tend to focus on what you might call first year experience programs.

So ways to kind of ease students into the college environment and help them understand the new academic and social pressures of college. The things in the other category, it's a little bit of a grab bag. Excuse me, it includes things like studies of how to measure student learning in particular subject areas like college biology.

It also includes a number of brands focused on understanding better the economic returns to a college degree, or the returns to particular major fields. Quite a active body of work. So I would call really all of these studies, in some ways, the first generation of post-secondary education research.

Encouragingly, I think we have begun to see some concrete examples of some of these studies, or collections of studies beginning to influence policy and practice. I think Dev-Ed reform, which we're seeing pretty much all around the country, clearly is an outgrowth of the realization of some research, much of it IES funded that has shown that students who were placed in developmental education often receive very little benefit from it and in some cases are even harmed by developmental education.

Secondly, there is a big effort underway within the Department of Education to begin simplifying the FAFSA. This is direct outgrowth of the work that Eric Bettinger and Bridget Long and others have done. Also people like, Sue need to simplify the FAFSA and describe some potential benefits to students.

As Eric can also attest, the wheels move slowly in the Department of Education, so don't expect to see that six item FAFSA any time soon. But I think it will happen in my lifetime, so let me just say that. So, the next question then. Where are some of the research gaps, given all of the things that we are funding?

Well, I could have actually made a very long list, but I thought I would focus on what I see as four principal gaps, areas where are not seeing many proposals come into and are not funded very much work, for whatever reason. First, I wanted to call out a population group, the older, non-traditional student.

Out of the 61 grants that I mentioned to you, actually only 7 grants focus specifically on older students. And by older, I don't mean old old. I don't mean old like me, I mean over age 22. Almost all of the grants that we have funded tend to

look at the traditional aged student.

And there's nothing wrong with the traditional aged student, I too was one at one time, but if you look at the statistics nationally, about 36% of all students in college now are over the age of 22. And if you look at broad access institutions in particular, in many cases the majority of those students are over age 22.

And these students are frequently working, they're frequently raising families. I think it's fair to say that they may have different needs and expectations than the traditional age student. And I would suggest that we're probably not gonna make a significant dent in the college completion problem, until we begin understanding these students.

And perhaps serving them effectively. The second area where I have seen a significant gap is in intervention studies, for students that are a little bit further along in the college pipeline. So as I mentioned, we have a lot of work about getting into college and a lot of work focused on that freshman year with developmental education sequence.

But it seems that once students are through that sequence, the research tends to stop. And if we look at longitudinal data, there are many reasons to think this is probably another pretty significant omission or problem. We see, for instance, that especially in broad access institutions, students tend to change majors frequently.

They often take courses in the wrong sequence. We see a very high dropout or failure rate in particular programs of study, particularly in the STEM fields. And increasingly we see a longer and longer time to degree. If you go back to that set of bar graphs I showed early on, I showed those who hadn't completed in six years, but then there's a pretty significant percentage that was still engaged in their studies.

And if you're working toward a two year degree and you're still working at it after six years, it kind of underscores that there may be some issues, some problems there to be addressed more effectively. The third area where we begin to see some gaps is in what I would call more comprehensive or systemic reforms.

And by this I mean efforts to really rethink the high school or the college experience more broadly. I think there are different ways that we could, as a community, begin thinking more comprehensively and more systemically. Certainly, there's just the idea of more multi-faceted interventions. As you actually heard today and as you look across the IES portal portfolio we tend to see studies of an enhanced counseling or guidance intervention or an enhanced financial aid intervention.

It's rare that we see these things put together with other kinds of academic supports. On the systemic side, I think there continues to be a lot of need to think about ways to better align high school preparation with college expectations. But also for community college students in particular, ways to better align the course taking in community colleges with transfer issues, particularly in states with good four-year public colleges and universities.

Far too often, students are not able to transfer over those courses successfully. And they end up, not necessarily back at square one, but considerably far back from earning a degree. Further back than they can or should be. And then the last area where we continue to see some gaps in research for funding is in good cost analysis or cost effectiveness research.

And I will tell you, in Washington as well as in the states, even if you have a really good intervention idea, a really good test, you can show clear proof that this intervention has made a difference for students. If you can't talk with policy makers meaningfully about what it would cost to do this intervention at scale, it pretty much is a conversation stopper.

This one, at least, is a relatively easy fix. At IES, we're beginning to require cost studies or cost analysis, or cost effectiveness analysis. Particularly for research grants that are focused on effectiveness and efficacy. May I also just say we're trying to build up some resources for researchers to better understand these methods.

And just last year funded a training workshop that's housed at Columbia University which provides a free summer workshop lasting about a week, I believe, to learn these methods, if there's any interest among those of you in the

room. So where do we go from here? Well, in just a few weeks IES is going to be announcing its fiscal year 2016 research and training competitions.

And there are some important opportunities that I'd like all of you in the room to be aware of. First, as we do every year, we're going to be requesting applications for our education research grants program, which includes a topical focus on post secondary and adult education. Most of you are pretty familiar with this.

It supports field initiated studies. It supports a wide range of research goals ranging from exploratory research, often just looking at administrative records data, for instance, to identify factors that might actually help explain why students are more or less successful in earning degrees. And all the way to large scale effectiveness trials for interventions that are fully developed and already have at least some indication of promise.

A second program that we will be continuing is our researcher practitioner partnership program. And I particularly want to highlight this for the many practitioners that are in the room today, and I'm really glad to see all of you. This is a grant opportunity that really tries to put the research questions and needs of practitioners first.

It's your agenda that should be setting the researchers' agenda. We view these grants in part as a seed funding to try to encourage researchers and practitioners to work more closely together on issues that really are a concern to educators, not just in post secondary, but at all levels of education.

But also I think these grants provide a very good opportunity for researchers who have done studies and are somewhat puzzled at the results to maybe go back and work more closely with practitioners to understand why and perhaps how some of these interventions might be retooled to become more effective in the future.

The third opportunity I wanted to make you aware of is a special competition, hot off the presses, this is actually already on the IES funding page. It's a state evaluations program, which is specifically geared this year to look at three topics, one of which is evaluation of college and career standards.

So evaluations within this particular program do need to be at the K-12 level. But if any of you are working with states or in a state agency in which you have a major that's trying to help prepare students to be more college ready, it would clearly qualify under this particular topic.

These are among the largest grants we make, up to \$5 million over a five year period, specifically for rigorous impact studies. The clincher in what may be hard, admittedly, for some of the academics in the room is that there's an early deadline of two and ten. And that is because this money has to be spent in this fiscal year.

But there is good news in that too, in that compared to some of the highly competitive IES programs I think there might be a little more opportunity here to apply for and get a grant successfully. The last program I wanted to mention to you is a new competition that we're just gearing up to introduce.

And it's called research networks focused on critical problems of policy and practice. We plan to fund a research network focused specifically on college completion, and the idea behind this new program is that we will fund up to four research teams to form a network. Each of the teams in the network will have funding to do their own study focused on college completion.

It might be a development study to create a new intervention or it might be an efficacy study to test the effectiveness of an intervention that is already in place. There is a lot of flexibility in exactly what researchers might propose to us but we are hoping for proposals that will address some of the research gaps I mentioned a few minutes ago.

In particular, research that might focus on college students as they move through the college pipeline. They could certainly start at developmental education but we don't want these projects to end there. This might also include efforts to look at more comprehensive, more systemic interventions. In addition to providing money then for individual research teams as part of a network, we will provide some supplementary funds that would support activities to really support all of the activities of network members.

This might include more development around new measures, exploration work, joint dissemination activities, research syntheses, things of that sort. So our intention with this new program, it's quite deliberately to bring the best minds together to identify strategies that might increase college completion, and we also are trying to try a new mechanism that might give a little bit more flexibility and encourage more collaboration than is typical under most IES grants.

So just to conclude, I want to say using the resources we have available, IES is making post secondary access and success a significant priority. I also just want to repeat what I said at the beginning. I am very encouraged and my colleagues are very encouraged by the contributions that many of you in this room are already making to this work.

Including, importantly, discovery of strategies that don't work. I'm very hopeful and my colleagues are very hopeful that you'll join us in developing some new ideas in advancing the field's knowledge around how to increase college access but I think perhaps more importantly at this stage, to really ensure how, when students get to college, we can make sure that they benefit from that experience fully and that they come out with degrees on the other end.

So thank you.

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the director for the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis and I want to thank you for listening. The Center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States. Our mission is to facilitate nonpartisan academic research on domestic poverty, to disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars.

Core funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the center, visit us online at poverty.ucdavis.edu.