Report on the

National Scholarship Providers Association Conference 2014

Bridging the Divide to Degree Completion: How Scholarships and Environment Empower Students to Succeed

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Conference Overview

The mission of the National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA) is to advance the collective impact of scholarship providers and the scholarships awarded by various fund-granting organizations. The annual conferences provide a platform for universities, not-for-profit organizations, and their supporters to exchange ideas related to scholarship program administration with the overall goal of supporting student success in the pursuit of higher education.

The 2014 NSPA Conference took place from October 14 – 16 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The conference theme for the year was “Bridging the Divide to Degree Completion: How Scholarships and Environment Empower Students to Succeed.” While not explicitly stated, many of the sessions at the NSPA conference this year focused on supporting under-represented and/or high-risk students in their pursuit of a university degree.

Session Notes

Session 1: Implementing a Cloud Based Scholarship Management Solution

Presented by: AcademicWorks and the University of Missouri – St. Louis

AcademicWorks’ solution includes matching applicants to available funds, facilitating a committee review process, and managing the collection of thank-you letters as part of the acceptance process. The system allows for gift agreements to be scanned and shared across campus. The session focused on how UofM moved from a distributed awards model across departments and faculties to a model that allowed for the central management and approval of awards via an online platform. Several key decision points existed for moving to this more common model including whether to continue donor involvement in the selection process and how to limit access to the system. The overall goal is to ensure that funds are being distributed to as many students as possible, and to avoid multiple awards to a single student when other students are equally qualified.

Session 2: Expanding Access and Reducing Barriers – Low-Income Asian American and Pacific Islander Scholarship Recipients in Community Colleges

Presented by: Robert Teranishi, Professor of Social Science and Comparative Education, UCLA and Cecilia Marshall, Director, Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund

Low-income Asian American and Pacific Islander students are less likely to seek help from academic advisors, counsellors, and other support sources on campus. Additionally, more than 40% of students in this group are working full-time to afford their education, which has a detrimental impact on their studies. While this figure may be different in a Canadian university setting, we know that more students than ever are working to afford their educations.

First generation university attendees in minority groups are more likely to persist and succeed with additional supports. This could include a dedicated academic advisor assigned to them upon entrance to the university, and other mechanisms to foster a sense of belonging and engagement with the institution. Additionally, students are more likely to stay at the university if they connect early and meaningfully with a faculty member.
Session 3: Success and Attrition Factors for High Achieving Underrepresented/Underserved Students

Presented by: Barry Nagle, Senior Research Associate, Gates Millennium Scholars Program/UNCF

The Gates Millennium Scholars Program was founded in 1999 and has provided $1.6 billion in funding to date. They provide an opportunity for 20,000 outstanding students to reach their full potential. Their minimum GPA cut-off is 3.30.

Success and Attrition Factors (data presented is based on current and former Gates Scholars)

Demographic Characteristics: Female students earn undergraduate degrees at a higher rate than their male counterparts (91% vs 89%). Female Black and Indian students are more successful than their male counterparts. While the graduation rate for African American students was actually slightly higher than the average (93.4%), the graduation rate for American Indian students was lower (72%). Additionally, students who are dependent upon their parents have a higher graduation rate than those who are independent (90.6% vs. 87.6%).

Student Education Characteristics

High School GPA: Scholars who earned a degree had a higher high school GPA than scholars who did not earn a degree. Degree earners have a mean 3.77 GPA compared to 3.70 for non-degree earners.

Nomination Composite Scores: Degree earners have a higher composite scholarship application score than non-degree earners. This assessment includes both cognitive (curriculum rigour, academic achievement, structure/use of language in essays) and non-cognitive (positive self-concept/self-esteem, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and navigation of social and organizational systems, preference for long-term goals over immediate needs, leadership experience, and community service) areas of evaluation. Additionally, students who had participated in the self-directed acquisition of knowledge and those who had a strong support person available to them were more likely to graduate.

Major Status: Scholars who are pursuing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs graduate with higher rates than non-STEM students. Of particular note are American Indian students, who graduate by a rate of 7% higher if they are pursuing a STEM program.

Deferment: Students who defer or take time off during their program twice or more, whatever the reason, are significantly less likely to graduate than students who defer one time or not at all. Students who did not defer graduated at a rate of 95%. Students who did defer graduated at rates between 39% and 91%. A check-in is required between the Foundation and students who are on deferment. Additionally, the longer the deferment, the lower the graduation rate. Students who return from deferment within six months graduate at a rate of 86% while students who take a year off graduate at a rate of 68% and students who take more than one year off graduate at a rate of 59%. Most of the students are lost in 1st/2nd year. The major factor that leads to disenrollment is family and issues that pull them back home.

Engagement: The overall engagement formula for the Gates Foundation is: Academic + campus + community + programs. Students who have engaged highly in the campus community were found to graduate at a higher rate than their peers who graduated at a lesser level. The program instituted a campus engagement component that had some effects on engagement in their program, including a mentoring component.
Sessions 4 and 5: Increasing Scholarship Awareness among Low-Income, First Generation to College Families and Children’s Savings Accounts as Scholarships – Silver Bullet or Leverage?

Presented by: Robert Hildreth, Executive Director, FUEL Education and Dave Zagunis, Executive Director, La Vida Inc.

This session discussed the details of a cohort scholarship program (FUEL Education) – a group of students at one university, called a ‘posse’, who support each other throughout their degree. The program encourages monthly family savings, which are then matched by the scholarship program. This equips low income, high achieving students with the resources and preparation necessary to enter university.

Family engagement is one of the main engines driving students’ access to post-secondary education, financial aid and scholarship applications, and overall persistence in university. In addition to matched savings, FUEL provides parents with information on accessing post-secondary that helps them make informed decisions about their children’s higher education. Families have saved $600,000 since 2009. Before joining FUEL, 76% of parents had never saved for college. The program boasts over 150 students in college or university, with a persistence rate of 92% amongst FUEL program alumni.

Other programs offered by FUEL include ‘Savings Circles’ and the ‘Let’s Get Ready’ program. Savings Circles are monthly workshops for parents of high school students and include dinner and raffles for attending. There have been over 300 of these meetings hosted since 2009. Families who attend the workshops receive a financial incentive, and graduating seniors who attend a given number of sessions receive a laptop upon graduation. The overall goal of Savings Circles is to promote early saving for post-secondary education, coupled with informed family-oriented decision making.

The Let’s Get Ready Program is run by university students for high school students and includes intensive university-prep training. This program provides early support in high school which extends throughout their post-secondary studies. Students are selected for this program by their Guidance Counsellors and show potential for high achievement but do not have guidance systems already in place. Students enrolling must have at least a 3.00 GPA, commit to attending the monthly sessions, and agree to have their grades checked by the program regularly.

Session 6: From College Intending to College Attending: Strategies to Mitigate Summer Melt

Presented by: Ben Castleman, Assistant Professor of Education and Public Policy, University of Virginia and Lindsay Page, Research Assistant Professor of Education, University of Pittsburgh School of Education.

There are several factors that keep students from enrolling at a university once admitted, which include lack of sufficient financial aid, and too much red tape, paperwork, and bureaucracy. The two to four month gap between when students have the support of their high school staff and when they arrive at university in the fall is particularly problematic, especially for high-risk students.

The university instituted a text messaging system for use throughout the summer to remind incoming students about major events and deadlines, when tuition fees were posted, when registration becomes available, on-campus events, and orientation week. Texting was particularly effective because only about 3% of high school students email daily, while about 75% of high school students text daily. Students could respond and chat with an advisor or book an appointment, all via text.
Session 7: Unique High Achieving Students – Unique High Achieving Needs: How do scholarship programs work to meet these?

Discussion facilitated by: Jessie Kasynski, Manager of Student Affairs, President’s Leadership Class, University of Colorado at Boulder and Natalie Jansorn, Director of Grants and Higher Education programs, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

The President’s Leadership Scholarship program offers a $1,000 merit scholarship, access to several other affiliated scholarships, a four-year academic curriculum, experiential education requirements, a minor in leadership studies, and dedicated program staff.

Successful applicants are intellectually curious, demonstrate leadership potential and a commitment to others, make meaningful contributions to their academic program and to their university, are top scholars in high school, and range from involved to too involved in extracurricular activities.

The President’s Leadership Scholarship program has a unique way of defining leadership, including identification of a problem and the solution proposed. Additionally, extracurricular involvement is defined as anything outside of the curriculum including leadership in the family and work environment, as not all students have the privilege of being involved in typically-recognized extracurricular activities. The program looks for those who perform acts of leadership but may not necessarily be leaders in the traditional sense. An act of leadership can be defined as persistence or stick-to-it-ness. For example, a student who played a varsity sport but was bumped down to the junior varsity level their senior year. However, instead of quitting that student stayed on the team and performed to the best of their ability.

Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship Foundation provides, among other funding, a stipend for parents from away to visit their students during the year or to come with them to help them move in when this might not otherwise be financially feasible.

Session 8: Requiring Interventions for Scholarship Recipients to Increase Student Success

Presented by: Ann Lyn Hall, Executive Director, Central Mexico Community College & Bob Durham, Director of Scholarship Services and Financial Aid, College Now Greater Cleveland Inc. & Erin Mack, Compliance and Financial Literacy Specialist, St. Edward’s University

Students who received scholarships from the university and deemed to be higher risk for not graduating (ie first generation post-secondary attendees, African American students, and American Indian students). These required additions included peer coaching, mentoring and financial literacy training. These students were offered regular, in-person touch points for advising. Additionally, they were paired with volunteer professionals, who acted as mentors throughout the student’s degree. Students with these mentors had a 93% retention rate from 1st to 2nd year.

They have found that when a student has a strong connection to someone on campus, they are more likely to be successful. Additionally, renewal requirements for awards are based on more than satisfactory academic progress. Renewal requirements included the provision of a thank-you letter to the donor, attendance at a set number of special events, and the completion of financial literacy sessions (ideally in-person) as well as regular check-ins with their academic advisor on progress and attendance. These requirements were listed for the student before they accepted the scholarship.
Ideas and Recommendations

Many of the sessions I attended focused on the importance of students, particularly those who are at a high risk of not completing their studies, making connections on campus with other students, faculty, and staff. Students who make these lasting connections are more likely to succeed academically and persist to graduation. Hosting connection-making events like an annual ‘Scholars Banquet’ for current students with scholarships, in addition to the current ‘Dalhousie Scholars Reception’ for incoming scholars, would both celebrate the academic achievement of a hardworking group of students and help them continue to make connections with key university faculty and staff.

- Recommendation: Introduce new and enhance current connection-making events for current students.

Meaningful connections between the student, their family, and the university should start before the student begins their studies and extend throughout their degree. While not directly related to recruiting a new student to the university, providing financial literacy information to prospective students and their families encourages early planning for post-secondary while also forging connections with university staff. The Registrar’s Office is piloting ‘Financing Your Education’ sessions this winter in several high schools and communities across the Maritimes. Additionally, a touch point early in the academic year by the Assistant Registrars who manage Awards and Financial Aid, with information about how the Awards Office can help students (scholarships, bursaries, financial planning, student loans, temporary loans and more) would encourage students in financial distress to seek assistance early and before withdrawing from university.

- Recommendation: Introduce financial literacy workshops and resources for prospective and current Dalhousie students.

The First Year Advising team has launched a variety of excellent summer activities for incoming students. Because of the unique needs of Aboriginal and African Canadian students, investigating additional summer outreach options specifically for these groups of students, with a focus on options that do not require in-person attendance, is advisable.

High risk students would benefit from the assignment of an academic advisor and/or faculty coach (based on their program of study) who could serve as their main point of academic contact for the duration of their degree. Many of the organizations who presented sessions I attended made attending a set number of advising sessions per year mandatory for scholarship renewal. Leveraging Dalhousie’s extensive alumni network to pair high risk students with successful alumni in a mentor/mentee relationship could provide an additional point of contact for our students while maintaining a connection between the alumni and the University.

- Recommendation: Explore the feasibility of pairing high risk students with an academic or faculty advisor upon admission.
Additional Ideas and Recommendations from Conference Networking Events

Confusion exists for students and their parents, especially first generation university families, around the renewability of scholarships, bursaries, and other awards. For example, many families assume that a one-time entrance scholarship is renewable or could be renewable for the same value in future years provided that the student continues to progress academically.

- Recommendation: review and revise Dalhousie’s entrance scholarship letters and scholarship guide (accompanying information booklet with scholarship offers for entering undergraduate students) to clarify the difference between entrance and renewable awards.
- Recommendation: enhance the MoneyMatters website to include an electronic copy of the scholarship guide, and easy-to-understand information on scholarship renewability.

The scholarship application process at every university is different. These distinctions may create confusion for students applying to more than one university. Additionally, Dalhousie’s application process is different than most other Atlantic Canadian universities in that we require an application for all entrance awards and not just major entrance awards. Students without support at home or at school, and first generation families without adequate background knowledge, may miss important application deadlines. We currently email all admitted students with a reminder to apply for scholarships, provide information and applications to guidance counsellors, and promote the scholarship application process during our Winter Information Sessions across the country. However, after two years of a mandatory application-based process, many students are still missing the application deadline or choosing not to apply because they feel that they will not receive an award.

- To ensure that as many Aboriginal and African Canadian students complete the scholarship application, and as an additional point of outreach, work with the Black Student and Native Student advisors to call students who have self-identified on their applications for admission.
- Liaise with the Black and Native Student Support Workers in high schools in addition to Guidance Counsellors to promote the scholarship application process.
- Build relationships with other community organizations serving under-represented communities (ie Pathways to Education in Spryfield) and offer to give tailored ‘Financing your Education’ sessions to students and their families.
- Create a short ‘Dal Scholarship Application’ how-to video similar to those used by First Year Advising to describe the scholarship application process, including tips and hints for a strong application (ie. answers all questions completely, make sure you provide requested supporting documents, what the difference is between the required and optional sections, the timeline for receiving a scholarship offer, etc.)

In an informal review of Aboriginal and Indigenous Black students’ applications for admission and scholarships for former Vice President Student Services Dr. Bonnie Neuman, many Aboriginal and Indigenous Black students applied for admission after the March 15th scholarship application deadline, and thus were not considered for entrance scholarships and bursaries.

- Consider Aboriginal and Indigenous Black students who self-declare ancestry on their application for admission for grades-based entrance scholarships after the official deadline.
A difference exists across universities around grade levels and course loads required to renew a renewable scholarship. Many scholarships that are given at least partially based on academic merit require a full course load of 30 credit hours over two terms to be eligible for renewal. Currently, only students who have accepted IB or AP transfer credits are eligible for a reduced course load. Given the increasing costs of post-secondary education, many students find it necessary to work throughout their degree. Along with the challenges of transitioning to university, and creating time for involvement in extracurricular activities on-campus, a full-course load may not be possible for all students.

- Some US and Canadian universities are following a ‘stepped’ renewal course-load for their students (ie 80% of a full load in first year, 90% in second year, and 100% in third year). Investigate the budgetary implications of instituting a ‘stepped’ renewal course-load and/or scholarship GPA for scholarships funded from operating dollars.
- Work with External Relations to reach out to the donors of the Forsyth Family Scholarship (awarded to a Black Nova Scotian student) to encourage them to allow for a reduced course load for renewal purposes. Currently this scholarship requires 30 credit hours completed over two academic terms for renewal, with a 3.00 GPA.
- Currently the First Nations and Indigenous Black scholarship allows for a reduced course load and lower GPA for renewal – consider extending these conditions to all scholarships awarded to these groups.

Future NSPA Conferences

It was a pleasure to attend this year’s NSPA Conference. The sessions and networking opportunities were extremely informative and prompted, in addition to the ideas discussed above, several procedural improvements that I will be implementing in our undergraduate entrance awards program next year.

The 2015 National Scholarship Providers Conference is scheduled for October 12 – October 14, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina.