College Student Success

Published: September 15, 2009

To the Editor:

David Leonhardt (“At Colleges, Too Few Diplomas,” Economic Scene, Sept. 9) observes, “The only way to lift the college graduation rate significantly is to lift it among poor and working-class students.” To understand effective approaches to raising graduation rates among these students, we must look at colleges where most students are lower income — and often commuters — rather than at colleges where students are middle- and upper-income residential scholars.

The Education Trust has identified only 20 four-year colleges in the United States as having achieved a six-year graduation rate above 50 percent with more than 50 percent of their student population qualifying for Pell Grants, a proxy for low-income status.

Baruch College of the City University of New York is one of those institutions (58 percent graduation rate). Our freshman Learning Communities, robust and year-round curriculum, and focused programming outside of the class (writing, communication skills, academic advisement, career development) boost retention and graduation, as does a faculty deeply engaged in the academic progress of all students.

As we hold colleges to account for graduation rates — as we should — we must also remember that socioeconomics has a profound bearing on student success. Our students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, are bright, ambitious and academically successful, but many lack the on-campus housing and high family incomes that, as Mr. Leonhardt notes, often predict short graduation timelines.

Let’s support colleges that graduate their students while embracing the mission Mr. Leonhardt correctly places at the center of our national challenge.

Ben M. Corpus
New York, Sept. 11, 2009

The writer is vice president for student affairs at Baruch College.