

A Statewide Network Promoting  
College Readiness, Access and  
Success

## POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



research • communication • advocacy • support

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### THE ACHIEVEMENT TRAP:

#### The Plight of High-Achieving, Low Income Students

By Paul J. Dosal

Access to and success in college is at risk for thousands of high-achieving, limited-income students throughout Florida. High school graduates with a 3.0 GPA and a combined reading and math score of 970 on the SAT, although eligible for a Bright Futures Scholarship, have no guarantee they will be accepted into one of our eleven state universities. Due to deep budget cuts across the State University System (SUS) and ever-increasing student demand, students are discovering, in fact, that a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 and an SAT score of 1100 may not even get them into the university of their choice. As ENLACE FLORIDA reported in February of 2008, Florida's system of higher education is on the brink of a serious crisis that may deprive thousands of college-ready, college-eligible students of access to a college degree. Moreover, getting into college is no guarantee that they will attain a degree. Limited-income students, trying to balance the competing demands of employment and study, find their path to the degree delayed or denied by many non-academic issues, particularly the need to work part or even full-time.

Many students have done all that educators have expected of them and more in high school, only to find that they are unable to enter college and complete their degrees because either 1) they can't afford it, or 2) the university can't afford them. Tuition, books, fees, room, and board have increased to such an extent that a full Bright Futures Scholarship covers less than 25% of the total cost of attendance at a state university. Meanwhile, because Florida's student/faculty ratio of 31/1 is the worst in the nation, classes are over-enrolled and students may not be able to take the courses required to graduate in a timely manner. An "Achievement Trap" is blocking the college aspirations of thousands of high-achieving limited-income students in Florida's system of higher education. These students, some of whom are profiled in this special ENLACE FLORIDA report, are often the first in their families to pursue a college degree. They have taken advanced courses in high school and scored high marks on standardized tests; they have earned a Bright Futures Scholarship; they take 3 or 4 classes in college while they work part-time jobs and take out loans to make ends meet. As legislators and education policy makers decide how best to trim the budget and govern the university system, the academic aspirations of thousands of high-achieving students hang in the balance.

Fortunately, we can all find inspiration in the student success stories profiled in this report. Students throughout Florida are breaking through the achievement trap. They are *succeeding* in college despite the many obstacles thrown in their path, showing that the hard work and determination can still triumph in the end. To better understand these personal experiences that can never be reflected in statistics, ENLACE FLORIDA asked first-generation, limited income students to submit essays that describe the obstacles and barriers they faced in their struggle to get into and succeed in college. Over fifty students from seven universities and community colleges throughout Florida submitted essays. They inspired, enlightened, and alarmed us. They shared unimag-

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unable stories of their struggles with dysfunctional families, drug abuse, poverty, and even homelessness. They give us hope because they dedicated themselves to their studies and worked hard to support themselves and their families along the way. They are succeeding despite impediments that would have forced less-determined students out of the dorms and back into the streets. The essays show that our students are talented and determined dreamers, despite their milieu, who deserve our thanks, admiration, and support.

### The Achievement Trap

In September 2007, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and [Civic Enterprises, LLC](#) released a report on the *Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower-income Families*. Education leaders and policy makers at all levels should pay particularly close attention to this report, in which a group of highly respected experts warns that the public education system of the United States is squandering the potential of millions of lower-income, high-achieving students each year. The first two paragraphs summarize the magnitude of the problem:

“In the United States, more than 3.4 million K-12 students achieving in the top quartile academically come from families earning less than the median income. Although the challenges of low socioeconomic status may be difficult to overcome, the presence of these 3.4 million students provides hope to others caught in similar circumstances. Even though they possess fewer resources and often suffer from low expectations in the classroom, many lower-income students still find ways to excel, giving us reason to believe that students can perform at very high levels despite economic disadvantages.”<sup>1</sup>

“High-achieving lower-income students constitute an important, but scarcely understood, segment of American society. At 3.4 million, they outnumber the individual populations of 21 states. They consist of students in poverty and those from working-class families. More than one million of them—or approximately one-third—are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.”

The College Board has also called national attention to the alarming numbers of students who are falling into the Achievement Trap. According to the *College Keys Compact*, “nearly one-half of all college-qualified low- and moderate-income high school graduates do not enroll in a four-year program of college study because of financial barriers.” To invest in the skilled workforce that is required to drive a knowledge and technology-based economy, Florida can ill-afford to neglect the academic potential of limited income, high-achieving students. Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, explains: “Our country cannot prosper without fully developing all of its human resources...It would be both morally wrong and competitively foolish to foreclose young people’s options for higher education, based even in part on income.”<sup>2</sup>

Florida is fortunate to count among its many resources, hard-working and intelligent students who have had to take on and overcome significant non-academic obstacles to their success. Too many professors, administrators, and policy makers have little memory or understanding of what it takes for a limited income student from a single-parent household to get into and succeed in college. Yet students like these are the future of Florida. *The fastest growing segments of our student population are limited-income students from Hispanic and African American families living in both urban and rural areas.*

Fortunately, many of these students are succeeding. Many of them enhanced their college readiness because they enrolled in Advanced Placement classes. Florida’s partnership with the College Board has increased AP course offerings around the state and given many students the opportunity to succeed in a college environment.<sup>3</sup> Many of these students earned Bright Futures Scholarships—Florida’s merit-based scholarship program—and the universities offered a financial aid package that made their college education affordable. Some received academic support from tutoring and mentoring programs that helped them succeed in college, even when they had to work full-time jobs. On April 15, 2008, a representative group of these students will travel to Tallahassee for ENLACE FLORIDA Day. They will convey the message that if Florida invests in them, they will invest their talents and determination in Florida’s economic future.

### STUDENT PROFILES

From the fifty-plus essays submitted to the contest, ENLACE FLORIDA members selected three students whose profiles best represent the stories and struggles of limited-income, high-achieving students. The profiles presented herein, however,

<sup>1</sup> The full report can be downloaded at: [http://www.jackkentcookefoundation.org/jkcf\\_web/home.aspx?Page=Main](http://www.jackkentcookefoundation.org/jkcf_web/home.aspx?Page=Main)

<sup>2</sup> <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy/initiatives/low-income>

<sup>3</sup> See “FLORIDA’S AP PROGRAM: State Achievement Masks Disparities at Local Level,” ENLACE FLORIDA Policy Brief, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2008) at [www.enlaceflorida.org](http://www.enlaceflorida.org)

are not a representative, scientifically-selected sample of our university or community college students. Instead and by design, this is a glimpse into the personal lives of a few high-achieving, limited-income students. Our intention is to bring their stories to the attention of policy makers and education leaders in Florida to demonstrate that the path to college success is blocked by many non-academic barriers.

<p><b><u>Profile</u></b>  <b>Female</b>  <b>AP Honors Scholar</b>  <b>University of Florida</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family moved frequently from apartment to apartment, always struggling to pay bills</li> <li>• Family once lived out of a car</li> <li>• Worked 40 hours a week her senior year in high school to help her family stay afloat</li> <li>• 4.8 High School GPA</li> <li>• Worked two jobs the summer before college to help pay for school</li> <li>• Financial aid problems at the university nearly caused her to be evicted from her dorm and lose class credits</li> </ul>
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This impressive student described the Achievement Trap as follows: “When my first grade teacher told our class ‘we could be anything we wanted to be,’ I guess that didn’t include college, which would require her to notify us of the fine print, which would probably read as follows: ‘Offer may be limited only to students from those schools who adequately prepare their students, void wherever students cannot afford to pay tuition, and offer lasts only as long as government supplies of progressive education legislation exist.’ For some, however, the “store” that sells this college education doesn’t exist in their neighborhood or sells classes and degrees at prices they can’t afford. For others such as myself, the concept of a store alone was a luxury and the idea of getting there was shoved behind financial stresses, work woes, second-hand stress from parents, and school responsibilities. It was definitely a struggle to get to the University of Florida and it continues to be a struggle to stay here.”

She also has advice on how universities and high schools can work together to improve college readiness: “It seems that many schools focus so hard on FCAT they can’t extend their vision to the needs of students after high school. Seniors get lazy their senior year because most have already passed the FCAT and that seems to be the only point of importance for schools. In order to bring the focus back to higher education, colleges and universities should work with high schools to develop requirements that polish students enough to make them shine on their applications and show their brilliance as college freshman.”

This Florida State University student is close to realizing her dream. She wrote: “I wanted to go to a major university and

<p><b><u>Profile</u></b>  <b>Female</b>  <b>1300 SAT score</b>  <b>Bright Futures Scholar</b>  <b>Florida State University</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grew up in a single parent home.</li> <li>• Graduated in the top 6% of a high school class of 800+ students</li> <li>• Knows four languages</li> <li>• Her extended family wanted her to stay at a local community college so she could work and help pay bills.</li> <li>• With the additional costs associated with her professional program of study, she usually runs out of her scholarship money by the middle of the semester.</li> <li>• Aims to be the first in her family to graduate from college</li> </ul>
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live the college experience. I wanted to grow as a professional person independently and be successful. I wanted to be the first in my family to graduate from a university.” While she is close to earning her degree, she recognizes the difficulties others will face: “If all schools keep getting more expensive, some students will not be able to attend college at all. There are so many areas where costs can be cut or rearranged. If, however, tuition needs to go up, federal and state financial aid should

be also increasing accordingly. It just seems ridiculous that the state would increase tuition and decrease aid. What is their idea of students? We cannot pay for it and neither can our families.”

<p><b>Profile</b>  <b>Female</b>  <b>Daughter of migrant workers</b>  <b>Hillsborough Community College</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She came to the U.S. as a high school student without knowing a word of English.</li> <li>• Parents moved to the Midwest every spring to get better seasonal work.</li> <li>• Two years after arriving in the U.S. she became the first person in her family to graduate from high school.</li> <li>• Nearly dropped out of college because she had to work full-time to support herself and her family while she studied full-time</li> <li>• Will continue her studies at the University of South Florida.</li> </ul>
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This remarkable Hillsborough Community College student is scheduled to graduate with an Associate of Arts degree in Business Administration on May 8, 2008 and describes it as her “greatest achievement.” She wrote: “My whole family is excited and applauding my effort because they know it was not easy. During my high school years, I faced the challenge of not only learning the English language, but making sure that I was going to pass the FCAT. At the time I wanted to give up. I stayed after school to do extra studies and practices. I said to myself that “one day I will graduate from college”. Since I was the first person to graduate from high school with a diploma, it was kind of like a goal far away. I felt that I should fight for it. After six months, it all worked out. I passed the FCAT! I was thrilled because I saw the result of my hard work and managed to graduate from Plant City High School in May of 2003, two years after I moved to U.S.A.”

### **The Factors that Promote or Obstruct Student Success**

The essays submitted for the ENLACE FLORIDA student essay contest helped to identify a number of salient issues that impact college readiness, access, and success. While providing adequate financial aid to limited-income students may be the most significant factor in promoting student success, there are many other issues that obstruct the path to success in higher education.

#### Parenting and family support

A strong and supportive family network is a decided asset to students aspiring to a college degree. We don’t hear enough praise for the single mother or father raising several children on their own, but they emerged as true heroes in the ENLACE FLORIDA student essay contest. The families struggle to pay their monthly bills, but the parents work hard and insist that their children study equally hard and go to college. One contestant, an FSU student, wrote: “My mother is a strong woman, and taught me not to settle for less than what I deserve. Although she did not go to college, she did make sure that I, being the first of three girls, go straight off to college and not stay home. As do many parents, my mother wanted me to do better than she had and to go beyond where she had stopped.”

A disruptive home environment, on the other hand, can be disastrous. A number of students have struggled with dysfunctional families and communities in which crime, drugs, child abuse and neglect are commonplace. One student described growing up in Liberty City: “I witnessed people getting shot, killed, robbed, harassed, and fighting. It was so depressing being there because everywhere I went I had to look over my shoulders every 2 seconds. There were many times when I have been robbed and even more times I had been harassed and sexually assaulted.” These terrible conditions motivated this student to do well in school and go to college, hoping that a degree would be a ticket out of the community. Yet, the poor conditions of *this* student’s family worked against her: “I ran away as many times as I could until my mom called the police to look for me. I would sleep in cars, at a friend’s house, and even in someone’s back yard. I hated being in that house, but I never wanted to tell anyone because I was scared social services would take my baby sister away if they found out about our household conditions.”

Another student at FSU lost his mother when he was in high school. He was denied financial aid during his first two years, even though he could count on no financial assistance from his estranged father. He had no choice but to work full-time and attend classes full-time while he applied three times for a dependency override, which can be granted to self-sufficient students who can prove extraordinary circumstances. If he did not receive financial assistance, he would have been forced to leave school. Fortunately, he was granted a dependency override on his fourth request and has now entered his third year of college.

### College Knowledge

Good and effective advice is a valuable commodity that is not distributed in equal measure to our students. First generation students must rely heavily on the advice from teachers and counselors to take the right courses, select a college, and apply for financial aid. Second-generation college students benefit from the college knowledge their parents obtained by earning post-secondary degrees. For limited-income, first generation students, the quality of advice they get from teachers and counselors often determines if, when, and where they go to college. Counselors to student ratios are therefore extremely important in opening appropriate pathways to college.

In one essay, a student offered high praise to the high school teachers and counselors who persuaded her that college was a viable option for her. With her mother also pressing her to apply to college, one high school counselor advised her about the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (C.A.R.E.) at Florida State University. "C.A.R.E. implements programs to prepare certain middle and high school students for college as well as programming to help entering college students in their adjustment and academic success throughout their time in college."<sup>4</sup> The student learned of this program only two days before the application deadline. Her mother seized the opportunity and faxed in her daughter's application.

Within a month, the student had been admitted to FSU through the C.A.R.E. program.

### Work or Study?

Far too many limited income students are compelled to work far too many hours while they are full-time college students. Many of them have federal work-study assistance, and these jobs of 10 to 15 hours can provide some valuable learning experiences. Students can and do work their way through college, just as they have done for generations. But one full-time engineering student at USF works three part-time jobs and nevertheless maintains a near-perfect GPA. He recognizes that he could be more involved in extra-curricular activities on campus or pursue other academic opportunities if he received more financial aid. This student urges policy makers to "reward students who achieve high academically despite hard financial circumstances."

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### Financial aid is critical

Limited income students learn in high school that a Bright Futures Scholarship awaits them if they reach certain academic benchmarks. It is a necessary but insufficient component of their financial aid packages. To finance their college education, limited income students can only afford their college education if they cobble together a financial aid package that includes 1) other scholarships, such as state need-based aid, 2) a Pell Grant from the federal government, 3) student loans, 4) work-study, and 5) another part-time job.

### College Readiness is Critical

The Advanced Placement program and Dual Enrollment courses offer limited-income students the opportunity to learn in a college-level environment while potentially earning college credits, which reduces their time to degree. The state of Florida's partnership with the College Board, which has provided incentives for schools and teachers to expand AP course offerings, is largely responsible for recent increases in AP enrollment and test-taking, especially among Hispanic and African American students.

### Access is at Risk

The freeze on freshman enrollment, followed by cuts in overall enrollment, will make it more difficult for students to get into Florida's eleven universities. In February, Chancellor Mark Rosenberg warned that universities may have to cut enrollment by as many as 17,000 students in the fall of 2008.<sup>5</sup> Admissions standards are rising everywhere, with the result that "many students find themselves squeezed out of a system they had long taken for granted," according to the *Miami Herald*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://care.fsu.edu/>

<sup>5</sup> "Budget Woes Could Shrink SUS by 17K Seats," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 13, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen McGrory, Oscar Corral, and Hannah Sampson, "Budget Cuts Lock More out of State Universities," *Miami Herald*, April 2, 2008.

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### Success is at Risk

The budget crisis has also forced universities to trim costs by imposing freezes on hiring and possibly cutting academic programs. The quality of higher education is therefore at risk, for Florida currently ranks last among all states with a student/faculty ratio of 31/1. Carolyn Roberts, chairwoman of the Florida Board of Governors, explained: “Students not only are prevented from attending the universities from which they are qualified to attend, it also means that if they are accepted, they are sitting in classes that are very crowded, and dealing with advisors who are overworked.”<sup>7</sup>

### **A CALL TO CONVENE A HIGHER EDUCATION SUMMIT**

While the students profiled in this report demonstrate that hard work and determination can overcome formidable odds, the state of Florida can do more to facilitate their access to and success in college. To resolve the Achievement Trap and the many other issues confronting our system of higher education, ENLACE FLORIDA repeats its call for Governor Charlie Crist, Speaker of the House Marco Rubio, and Senate President Ken Pruitt to convene a higher education summit of state representatives, senators, the Board of Governors, the State Board of Education, and representatives of our eleven universities and our 28 community colleges. This higher education summit should be organized to give policy makers time to engage in serious and deliberate reflection on the state of our higher education system and its strategic direction. All issues, challenges, and opportunities should be put on the table for discussion and resolution. Only bold, innovative, “out of the box” thinking will resolve the many threats to college access and success.



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**ENLACE FLORIDA** is a statewide network funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and managed by NCCEP to promote college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented students through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support.

For more information, go to: [www.enlaceflorida.org](http://www.enlaceflorida.org)

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.