

HOW COLLEGES CAN DRIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AND STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Tuesday, June 25, 2019 | Washington, DC

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Lehman College

By José Luis Cruz, President



STUDENT SUCCESS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

At Lehman College, we measure our success by the success of our students and the impact we have on their lives after they graduate. The Bronx faces a number of challenges related to poverty and systemic inequality, and yet, each day, our students arrive on campus ready to uplift themselves. They inspire us to do everything within our power to help them earn a degree. These efforts have led to historic gains in student success for the College, including a six-year graduation rate that increased by 12 percentage points between 2014 and 2018, and a four-year transfer graduation rate that ranks among the best in [The City University of New York \(CUNY\)](#). Recently recognized as one of the top colleges for upward mobility, we at Lehman College are committed to serving as an anchor institution to our students and community. This requires strong partnerships with CUNY and a commitment from policymakers to promote and support equity and a path to economic prosperity.

What Students Need: The Bronx has a greater proportion of people living in poverty (27.9%) than adults with an associate degree or higher (26.93%), and children who grow up in low-income households in the Bronx are among the most likely to earn a low income as adults. The best way to break this cycle is to provide them with access to a high quality college education, and help them earn a degree that leads to a prosperous career. Within three years of graduation, students who earned a bachelor's degree from Lehman made roughly \$45,000, whereas students with a master's degree made approximately \$71,000. The transformative impact of a Lehman education becomes clear when these median earnings are contrasted with the per capita income (\$19,721) and median household income (\$36,593) of the Bronx. In recognition of this impact, Lehman College announced a bold initiative to jump-start educational attainment in the borough in 2017. Through its [90x30 challenge](#), Lehman seeks to double — from 45,000 to 90,000 — the number of marketable degrees and credentials its students will earn by 2030 through its undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as its adult education and professional studies programs that provide cutting-edge certificates for career advancement.

How Institutions Should Respond: Many institutions are beginning to experience demographic shifts that have long been the norm at Lehman. More than 90% of our undergraduate students come from historically underrepresented populations, nearly 60% have a household income of less than \$30,000, more than half are first generation students, roughly 1 in 5 are parents, and the bulk are transfers from two-year colleges. Public colleges, like Lehman, educate nearly 45% of the roughly 20 million undergraduate and postbaccalaureate students attending college, and if they are to remain champions of equity and stewards of upward mobility for future generations, they will need to evolve.

To serve diverse students with distinct needs, these colleges will need to adapt. At Lehman, this has taken many forms. The College partnered with its top CUNY feeder schools to form [the Bronx Transfer Affinity Group](#) to help facilitate the seamless transfer of students from the associate degree to the bachelor's degree. To reduce textbook costs, [Lehman embraced Open Educational Resources \(OER\)](#). In the first year of implementation alone, 169 sections replaced costly textbooks with publicly-accessible materials, saving 1,042 students a total of nearly \$150,000. The College also maintains the [Carroll and Milton Petrie Student Emergency Grant Fund](#), which

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awards emergency grants to matriculated students in good academic standing who are experiencing short-term financial hardship. [The Herbert H. Lehman Food Bank](#) has had nearly 2,180 visits and served 20,000 meals between 2017-18. This is a vital service given that 3 in 4 students at Lehman College experience some form of food or housing insecurity.

Lehman is also examining its own structures and processes to identify where inequities exist and taking actions that benefit our students and close gaps. This includes an emphasis on recruiting top practitioners and implementing best practices. Recent innovations include a redesign of General Chemistry, which through a flipped classroom model has more than doubled pass rates from 35% to over 80%, and a summer mathematics boot camp [that over two years has helped 91% of students](#) to test out of College Algebra. Lehman College also developed its Freshman Year Initiative, [an award-winning comprehensive learning community program](#) that helped raise first-year retention rates to 83.4%, or 20 percentage points higher than the national average. Our School of Continuing and Professional Studies has developed innovative programs in direct partnership with employers, like the [Cultural Competency and Patient Care Certificate Program](#), which teaches students how to work with culturally diverse patient populations. Our [Adult Degree Program](#) provides an entry point for students aged 25 and older through unique academic programs and student services, including prior learning assessment. The College has also strengthened its data infrastructure by developing the nationally recognized [Student Success Dashboard](#), and by joining initiatives like the American Association of State Colleges and Universities Collaborative on Student Success, a pilot initiative that will focus on enhancing teaching, learning, and advising. These efforts will help to ensure new initiatives like [Accelerate, Complete, and Engage](#) are designed to help us achieve our 90X30 challenge. Still, our efforts could fall short without the support of policymakers at all levels.

What Policymakers Should Do: While the importance of a high-quality college education in promoting upward mobility is well known, states have decreased funding for public higher education. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, state funding for public two- and four-year colleges in the 2018 school year (i.e., the school year that ended in 2018) was more than \$7 billion below 2008 levels, after adjusting for inflation. At the federal level, the Pell Grant program today covers only about 28% of the cost of attending a public four-year college. Moreover, accountability metrics at both the state and federal levels fail to adequately consider equity and upward mobility. Given that, state and federal policymakers should:

- Work together to restore their commitment to providing financial support to colleges and universities, so that students do not have carry an undue financial burden;
- Use the Higher Education Act reauthorization to promote equity-minded innovations and accountability; and
- Strengthen the capacity of students, institutions, and policymakers to make informed decisions by making additional investments and targeted improvements in programs like the State Longitudinal Data System and the Integrated Education Postsecondary Data System.

In conjunction with this event, The Education Trust and TIAA Institute invited event participants to share their perspectives on social mobility, race, and higher education. Any opinions expressed herein are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of TIAA, the TIAA Institute, or Ed Trust.