Impatient to Achieve Student Success?

By Mildred García

W e recently received an evaluation on our “Closing the Achievement Gap” initiatives on campus. The evaluators applauded us for our commitment to student success. Commendations were given for the commitment to student achievement from all sectors of campus including faculty, staff and administrators. The evaluating team met privately with students and reported that the campus community takes the initiative to help students before being asked.

One comment in particular, however, caused me to pause. Although there have been recent and steady gains, the team noted that we shared a “productive impatience,” a feeling that we wish things were moving faster. The team praised our imagination but cautioned us that student success towards graduation—especially for under-represented students and those from the low income strata—is a long-term game of steady, incremental success.

Although I understand the team’s well-intentioned caution and the research provided on student success (my own area of research before the presidency), I would argue that our impatience is a critical aspect of ensuring continued and essential progress. A look at what is happening to our students indicates that there is urgency, and the situation is getting far worse instead of better, especially for students of color.

Research by Daniel Solorzano and Armida Ornelas indicates that of every 100 Latinos who begin elementary school, 53 will drop out in the K-12 educational pipeline. Only 47 will complete high school and 26 will pursue a postsecondary education: 17 in community college and nine in a four-year institution. Of the 17 attending community college, only one will transfer to a four-year institution. And of the 26 who pursue postsecondary education, only eight will graduate with baccalaureate degrees. Just three of these college graduates will enroll in a graduate degree-granting program or professional school. And finally, less than one is likely to receive a doctoral degree. These statistics are similar for other underrepresented students.

Our impatience stems from the above reality where we recognize that the vitality and viability of this nation depends on educating the country’s new majorities. We are struck by the loss of men of all races in education and what that means to our society. Impatience also stems from the fact that the talents, imagination and entrepreneurial spirit of so many young minds are not being cultivated to better their future families and communities.

When we truly understand what is happening in our nation—the failure of our schools and colleges to educate and produce productive citizens for a democratic society for all—we see the crisis clearly and work urgently towards comprehensive strategies to stop the tragedy.

It is why campuses like Dominguez Hills are working earnestly to understand the students we serve in order to better serve them. It is why we hire faculty, staff and administrators who not only have the skills and academic knowledge but also have a passion for our mission that embraces every student who enters our doors; supports them to learn, graduate and reach their dreams.

Impatience? You bet impatience! I smile and listen to the student government president, a graduating Latina, when she shares that without the Summer Bridge Program that strengthened her math skills and embraced her in our university before her first fall semester, she is certain that she would not have been awarded a full scholarship for her doctoral program this fall. There are many more like her, and I rather we be impatient and feel that sense of urgency to act rather than accept dispassionately what is occurring on campuses across our nation.

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