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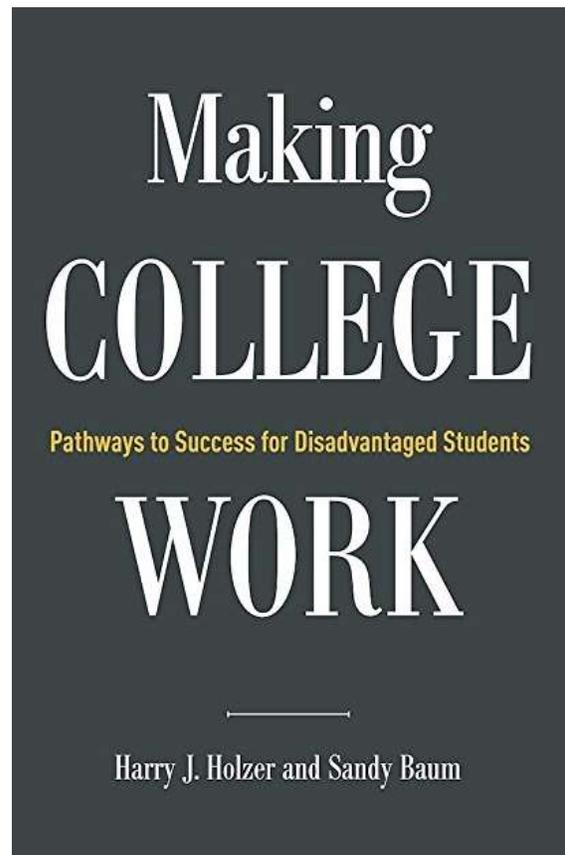
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Making College Work: Pathways to Success for Disadvantaged Students combines diagnosis and prescription in addressing the poor higher education outcomes of disadvantaged students. Among these poor outcomes the authors identify are “low completion rates, concentrations in fields of study with low labor market returns, and debt accumulation among those not completing a degree and/or not finding well-compensated employment afterward” (p. 8). Befitting their respective affiliations with the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, Harry Holzer and Sandy Baum discuss a number of policies and practices—some narrow, some comprehensive, some federal, some at the state and institutional levels—to help narrow the outcome gaps they identify.

The book is divided into two parts of roughly equal length, with Part I (Chapters 2-4) an analysis of existing problems and Part II (Chapters 5-7) containing potential solutions. The authors discuss the personal and institutional factors that help explain low



completion rates among disadvantaged students, why employment rates and earnings differ based on program of study, and financial barriers for disadvantaged students. The authors group their recommendations to address these issues according to their targets: individual students and institutions. However, Chapter 7, which is a discussion of the need for alternative pathways to successful careers (like technical education), does not fit neatly into either grouping. While this structure has its limits because “[i]t is not, of course, possible to draw a definitive line between student-focused and institution-focused policies,” the authors’ analysis is concise, data-driven, and attuned to the path-dependency of American students and higher education (p. 119). To their credit, Holzer and Baum seek to improve the existing higher education system, resisting the temptation to imagine an idealized, yet unattainable, alternative. For example, while some have argued that too many students attend college, the authors note that given the currently limited pathways to successful careers, limiting access is not a viable option. We must instead work to improve completion and workforce outcomes for those attending while creating alternate pathways. When describing the relatively poor outcomes of part-time students, they acknowledge that “many people simply do not have enough hours in the day to go to college full time while meeting their other responsibilities” (p. 230). Even as they offer ideas to help disadvantaged students attend more selective institutions with better outcomes, they know “most will continue to attend nonselective colleges,” making it vital to implement reforms there as well (p. 219).

The authors’ “goal is to bridge the gap between the academics pursuing definitive answers and the policymakers who must make immediate progress on solving these critical problems” (p. 8). In this effort, they succeed admirably. Scholars, college administrators, and policymakers—both state and federal—would benefit from reading *Making College*

Work. Holzer and Baum at times speak directly to scholars, suggesting avenues for further research and possible methods for that work. College administrators may draw inspiration from the examples the authors provide of innovative and successful programs. Because disadvantaged students disproportionately attend community colleges and for-profit colleges, the authors focus on these sectors. Administrators at these types of institution are those most likely to benefit. Policymakers will appreciate the authors’ explicit distinctions among what can be done at the federal, state, and local levels. They will benefit both from the proposals the authors find promising (e.g., increased financial support for and support services at community colleges) and those they find wanting (e.g., a singular focus on lowering the cost for community college students). All readers will benefit from the authors’ succinct summaries of recommended policies and practices.

There is much to commend in *Making College Work*: the authors’ realistic assessment of barriers to implementation and change, their understanding of the inability of any given policy to fully solve such a complex problem, and their willingness to critique popular policy ideas. The authors acknowledge the problems that readers would likely face in attempting to implement the policies and practices they discuss. For example, the cost of the reforms may be a barrier. As the authors note, “we are not able to put price tags on the proposed reforms” (p. 219). Furthermore, they recognize the limits of the proposals they discuss, noting “The changes in policy and practice that we describe here, even as components of a comprehensive change, are not likely to solve all of the problems we have described” (p. 227). While acknowledging that the proposals they discuss are no silver bullet, the authors are not reluctant to critique prominent efforts that have attracted public attention. In discussing federal and state-level proposals to eliminate tuition or fees at community colleges (America’s College

Promise and Tennessee Promise, respectively), Holzer and Baum note that such policies often fail to address living expenses and could lead students to attend community colleges who might otherwise attend four-year institutions with better outcomes, “attract [academically unprepared] students who otherwise had not planned to attend college at all,” and overburden already under-resourced community colleges (p. 133). Even their critiques are balanced. For example, they note for-profit institutions’ “focus and guidance toward specific occupational credentials and jobs” as a strength, even as they note the sector’s poor outcomes. They recommend stronger regulation (p. 87).

While Holzer and Baum discuss a variety of policies and practices, their discussion is more introductory than comprehensive. In summarizing the literature, they do not go into great depth on any one program or policy. Consequently, these would not be not immediately actionable or replicable without consultation of other sources. For instance, they repeatedly praise the City University of New York’s successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and urge community colleges to “implement the supports and services provided in ASAP... in ways that are affordable and suited to their own populations and institutional characteristics” (pp. 156-157). With mentions in four different places, it is perhaps the example they discuss at greatest length. Yet, even here, readers will need to turn to other sources to understand ASAP’s history and implementation to obtain the level of detail needed for replication and adaptation. The book’s greatest value, then, is not in providing readers a how-to manual, but instead providing readers a cogent analysis of problems and exposing them to a variety of policies and programs for further research and possible implementation.

The book’s greatest weakness is a lack of definitions. As indicated by the subtitle, the

book focuses on “disadvantaged students,” yet the authors do not provide an explicit definition of what they mean by this term. While they most frequently refer to low-income students, the authors at various times discuss other characteristics and groups, such as: “individuals who leave high school unprepared for the challenges ahead” (p. 7), “under-represented students” (p. 8), “older adult students” (p. 9), and “minorities and students from lower-income families” (p. 17). They note in Chapter 2 that high school achievement, “family income, race, gender, and age as reflected in independent student status matter a great deal” for postsecondary outcomes (p. 36). There is, of course, overlap between these various categories—one may be an older, low-income, minority student, for example. Yet, by occasionally using phrases like “disadvantaged or minority students” (p. 11) and “both older and disadvantaged students” (p. 19), the authors imply a difference between these categories for the purpose of the book’s argument and analysis. In the conclusion, they come close to providing a straightforward definition when they note problems “are most severe for students from disadvantaged backgrounds—primarily those from low-income or minority families and older students who return to college for additional education or training—than for other students” (p. 213). However, even here the “primarily” qualifier indicates this definition is inexhaustive. The authors’ argument would have benefitted from a clearer definition and consistent use of this central phrase.

Despite this weakness, *Making College Work* makes a compelling argument about the existing outcome gaps for disadvantaged students and exposes the reader to policies and practices that could help at least narrow these gaps. The book is an appealing combination of rigor and readability. The authors recognize the tension between urgency and certainty on this topic, but conclude that even as “[m]any questions remain about the most promising

approaches, we know enough to push forward with significant systemic reforms in the higher education system” (p. 231). Even when it cannot provide definitive answers, this book

fulfills its purpose well as a call to action amid uncertainty, arguing convincingly that we know enough to do something and too much to do nothing.

About the Reviewer

Brad Crofford is the legislative assistant at the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, where he works on higher education policy, among other issues. He holds a master’s degree from the University of Oklahoma’s David L. Boren College of International Studies and degrees in politics and communication from Southern Nazarene University. His academic book reviews and articles have appeared in *Political Studies Review*, *African Studies Quarterly*, *International Affairs Review*, *The Journal of Retracing Africa*, *Ufabamu: A Journal of African Studies*, and *The Journal of Global Affairs*.



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