

FOREWORD

Nearly twenty years ago, I began my career in higher education at King's College—a Catholic liberal arts college in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I worked in the division of student affairs, in the office of multicultural and international affairs. Given my interest in diversity and equity, landing this job right out of college was a dream come true. I was excited and eager to make a difference! I worked at King's for nearly four years, and while I think I made a difference, the impact the job made on me was probably more significant.

At King's, my work focused on students, in particular racial/ethnic minorities and international students. Nearly all of these students were low-income and first-generation, and for a few, English was their second language. Prior to taking the job I had of course been a student myself, so I assumed working with students would be easy. I was surprised to find it wasn't. I quickly learned that working in service to students was definitely different than just being one. I realized that my position necessitated a heightened level of awareness and sensitivity to their needs. Even though I possessed many of the demographic characteristics of my students—namely, coming from a low-income, minority background—I still had a lot to learn.

I embraced each and every opportunity to learn about the institutional policies and practices for helping disadvantaged students get to and through college. I often found myself going beyond the borders of the division of student affairs and partnering with faculty and other institutional leaders in my attempt to make the campus more responsive to the needs of diverse students. In doing so, I realized that even though some faculty and staff desired to support these students, they had absolutely no clue of where and how to start.

During my time at King's, it was impossible to anticipate how critical those experiences would be in shaping my understanding and

approach to work that would come later. But as I look back, nearly two decades later, I recognize that King's informed and deepened the commitments that drive my work today with the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). At IHEP, we focus on issues of college access and success with an emphasis on policy and its effect on underserved student populations. As a part of our work, we monitor trends in higher education, such as the ever-increasing diversity of college campuses. For example, today's students are noticeably more diverse than previous generations in terms of race, socioeconomic status, age, and family educational background.

The growing diversity of our colleges and universities is important, as these institutions should reflect the diversity of the broader society. Given that fact, our institutions must educate all students to be productive members of society, offering them opportunities to contribute to the workforce and economic development. However, we are falling short in this regard. The college attainment rate is too low, and for those from diverse backgrounds the numbers are even lower, resulting in equity gaps that have the potential to further stratify society and weaken the US economy.

In this book, *Breakthrough Strategies*, Sister Kathleen Ross offers a blueprint for helping to close these attainment gaps by increasing students' academic engagement. The book is geared toward faculty and the teaching strategies they can use to better educate today's low-income, first-generation students, whom she calls the "New Majority." Having cofounded Heritage College (now Heritage University) to provide educational opportunities to the families of the geographically isolated Yakima Valley, Sister Kathleen has firsthand knowledge in helping today's students and deeply understands the importance of education for reducing poverty and increasing opportunity. In my roles at IHEP and the US Department of Education, I have had the privilege of working with Sister Kathleen and the Heritage team. Through the years, I have watched her commitment to expanding opportunity and success for her students position her as a key voice for change in her region, among peer institutions, and nationwide.

In many ways, King's College and Heritage University are similar. They both were founded by religious orders to serve the low-income

and working-class families of their respective regions. And over time, with increasing need and greater diversity, the institutions welcomed other groups of students. Many colleges and universities today are experiencing similar trends, requiring more institutional leaders to invest time and energy into learning about the New Majority and how to create learning environments that optimize their success. This book, informed by Sister Kathleen's years of experience and by her deep commitment to serving low-income students, offers instructive tools and strategies to maximize the success of today's students.

College leaders tend to bifurcate issues of student success by relegating efforts of diversity and inclusion to student affairs, thereby allowing faculty to focus on such issues only as their interest dictates. Or, faculty are given mandates to address issues of equity without being provided the tools or skills that may be intuitive to the student affairs staff steeped in this work. These strategies have never been optimal, and today, with an increasingly diverse student body, a disjointed approach to student success is not viable. Instead, faculty and student affairs professionals must work more cooperatively. Faculty, in particular, must have a centralized role in student success efforts and must be given the charge along with the tools necessary to be successful in this role. After all, faculty members are the primary point of contact for students and can provide a strong connection between learning that occurs both inside and outside the classroom.

Although more faculty need to be engaged in student success, momentum is already building for support of faculty-led efforts that increase students' academic engagement, such as the use of high-impact practices that promote curricular change and the use of new instructional approaches. Many faculty are becoming more responsive to the cultural dynamics and experiences that students bring with them to the classroom and aim to create inclusive classroom cultures, where student differences are recognized as strengths. Some faculty are also reflecting on their own cultural experiences and biases using the classroom experience to not only engage students, but also develop their own capacity to see and appreciate difference. In this book, Sister Kathleen narrates the experiences of such faculty members who have been involved in Heritage University's Breakthrough Strategies Project.

It is refreshing to see faculty from Heritage University taking proactive steps to foster student success. The benefits of improving the educational attainment of the New Majority are important not only for individual students and society, but also for the institutions where they enroll. Institutions that devote time and target resources to better support these students have a much better chance of achieving optimal results around institutional and student success goals.

This book offers examples and strategies that can increase student engagement and success. These strategies, developed and tested at Heritage University, can be easily replicated and scaled at other institutions seeking to increase the academic success of the New Majority and other students. This work is not easy, but the return on investment will be great, in terms of both increasing students' academic progress and fostering a campus culture that understands students and supports collaboration and learning.

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