

Five years ago I released the first edition of *Higher Learning: Maximizing Your College Experience*. It was an intentionally slow launch; the aim was to form partnerships with schools and programs that would incorporate the book into their overall support strategy. While the market research indicated that the number of people choosing college was growing, I was somewhat skeptical about students seeking out a book about college success on their own. I reasoned that in many cases, they might not look for something like *Higher Learning* until they were already in academic trouble. That was not the plan I wanted to pursue. So rather than mass commercial markets, I reached out to high schools, colleges, and programs directly, hoping that their vision to inspire and inform their students would intersect with my goal of providing a cost-effective resource that offered strategic and motivational insights about college completion.

Thousands of copies later, we are moving in the right direction. There's still much to be done, and many more programs and students to reach, but the word is getting out. Students are studying the strategies and staying on track. They are more aware of campus resources and developmental opportunities. They connect with each other and incorporate tutoring and scheduled study sessions into their regular routines. They push themselves to stay focused. They help each other. They graduate with strong transcripts and a ton of life-changing experiences, large and small.

Schools and programs that work with first-generation and/or lower-income students are achieving greater successes, too. More of their students are getting accepted to colleges and universities. More efforts are being made to ensure that their students leave campus with a degree in hand. More financial resources are being made available to lessen their families' burdens. More internship and professional development opportunities are being created to further their growth. We are paying more attention to students' needs, and we are answering many of the college completion questions of previous generations.

Still, there is work to do.

I recently read an article that indicated that the number of Black men who applied to medical school in 2014 was less than the number that applied in 1978.¹ That headline certainly grabbed my attention, and led me to the full report from the Association of American Medical Colleges. Sadly, it turned out that 1978 and 2014 were *good* years, relatively speaking. Most other years yielded even lower figures, including a dismal stretch between 1999 and 2011.²

Clearly the path to medical school doesn't begin once one completes college. It is nurtured in undergrad through meaningful mentorships and intensive training opportunities. It happens in rigorous high school classrooms, and through multiple conversations with guidance counselors, ensuring a larger number of students graduate with college level skills and backgrounds that include summer programs, shadowing opportunities, test prep, and volunteer hours. It happens in elementary and middle schools, helping students be as excited about science and math as they are about football and superheroes. When brown boy after brown boy announce at their kindergarten graduation that they want to be a doctor when they grow up, do we believe in them enough to show them the way? When they don't say doctor, have they already internalized messages about the future that society projects for them? These questions circled in my mind during my son's recent kindergarten ceremony.

If we do indeed believe in the power and possibility of education for all then we have to be willing to step up and create the necessary change. While the United States has made considerable strides in helping college access become a reality for traditionally underserved populations, vast resource and experiential inequities persist. This continues on our campuses. Nationally, the graduation rate for all college students is fifty-nine percent.³ For certain target populations, including African American males, Latino students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the numbers dip below fifty percent. In some cases, quite significantly.

It's going to take a major effort from multiple forces working together to transform this present reality and improve the rate of college completion for all students. High schools and college prep programs will have to reach students and parents with more information and opportunities. Colleges and universities will have to step up their student support and monitoring systems, remaining committed to campus diversity in the process. Federal and local government agencies, along with nonprofit foundations and philanthropic supporters, must continue to fund and expand outreach programs, research, and awareness campaigns. Fellowships, internships, and mentoring opportunities must provide further “real world” experiences to undergrads, nurturing and encouraging them to complete their degrees. Churches and civic groups will have to continue inspiring young people to be high-achievers, and reward their efforts through scholarships and community recognition. Parents and students must commit to getting on the road to college sooner, as early as elementary school, gathering as much information as possible along the way.

Higher Learning aims to be an active part of this process by empowering students with the information and tools necessary for graduation. My goal is to help young people be knowledgeable consumers and strategic self-agents, well-versed in the “insider information” about college culture. I may not be able to launch new government-sponsored scholarship programs or control how every college manages their student support services, but if I can inform students and families about the various opportunities that are out there and outline the things that they can do to be in the best possible position to graduate from college on time, with a strong GPA and a wealth of life experiences to show for their efforts, then I know I'll be bringing an important difference-maker to the table.

This book is not a blueprint or a step-by-step “one-size-fits-all” solution. Rather than rigid recommendations, the ideas discussed in the pages that follow are *considerations* for each reader to review, remix, and incorporate into their individual toolkits. Not every suggestion will fit every student or institution. What's most important – as I will cover

throughout the book – is that you be consistently committed to maximizing *your* experience. In doing so, you will constantly ask yourself how you can achieve and experience more, and you will be able to look at the many points covered in *Higher Learning* to help shape the answers that are right for you.

I've written this book with current college students in mind, particularly those in their first year. The book is certainly not just for them, however. High school students have greatly benefitted from working through *Higher Learning* as a college prep activity, then continuing to implement the strategies once they begin their college careers. Collegiate upperclassmen – including the growing population of nontraditional learners (students beginning or returning to their college careers later in life) – should also read and revisit the strategies, particularly as they prepare for each new semester, and ultimately, as they begin to seriously think about how to best use their degrees and experiences for life after college.

As you will see, the ten strategies covered in the book are woven together into a culminating planning program that I call “FOCUS” – Fundamentals of Collective Undergraduate Success. The FOCUS program encourages you, through a student organization or a small network of peers, to create personalized planning maps for your four years of college, then to develop a proactive collaborative support plan to guide your group to graduation. Toward this end, throughout the book, you will be prompted to answer questions, make lists, and reflect on different ideas so that you actively engage the strategies and begin visualizing and shaping your college career. We can't simply talk about what it takes to get through college. We must actually begin *walking the walk* together, helping you to develop the necessary vision and skills. Thus, *Higher Learning* is not just a book to flip through one time, but an interactive process to continuously revisit – via the book and our online resources – helping you manage your college routine, day after day, year after year, until your diploma is in hand.

Higher Learning is also not just about study skills. Everything you do on campus – your financial management, relationship decisions, campus activities, roommate situation – is all connected. To that point, as I went back through the first edition to make edits and updates for this one, I was struck by a thought that I couldn't shake. I've looked at these pages so many times over the years that I know them all too well, and yet, this book is not at all about me. It's about *you*. I've tried to make it something that you will actually read because I believe that if you do so, and if you stick to what it outlines, you will be better for it, and we – as a community, as a nation – will be better for it. It's such a simple and remarkable concept. You have the power to seize this opportunity in front of you, to confidently step on campus, to know exactly what you should do to be a successful college student, and then to do it with the support of peers, mentors, family, and friends. That's my challenge to you – dare to dream and then boldly do. This book will be your guide, but only if you follow through and do your part. So make that happen, and then go higher!

Brian Peterson

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¹ See <http://diverseeducation.com/article/76800/>

² See https://www.aamc.org/download/439660/data/20150803_alteringthecourse.pdf

³ From the National Center for Education Statistics. *IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cva.asp. Standard graduation rate data is based on six years of college, rather than four, accounting for students taking additional semesters of classes (possibly due to a change in major, for example), or taking a break from school for financial or other reasons. Research shows that typically, if a student does not complete their degree within six years, the likelihood of finishing is not high.