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"Oversight Hearing - Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education"

Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, & Related Agencies

When it comes to equipping and empowering students to be successful, four key influences are in play: family, institution, community and self. I call these the "**Four Pillars of Student Success**;" each represents the individuals or communities that influence students' life choices. When all four are aligned in support of educational success, we see positive outcomes.

**Pillar #1: Family.** The first teachers and primary caregivers of students are the family. Regardless of its structure, a student's family has a huge impact on how they value education, and how they perceive themselves as capable of achieving their goals and accessing financial resources to pursue them. Many gap students have parents/guardians with low levels of educational attainment and limited experience (if any) navigating the career planning and college entrance processes. This often results in a lack of family encouragement or involvement in plans to enroll in college or to persist to graduation. Low income families often consider college beyond their reach because of their perceptions of how much it will cost. Nearly twenty percent of Appalachians live in poverty and more than three-fifths have mean household incomes below \$50,000, so the price tag for a college education is a constant and growing challenge for the region's students. Even if they are able to access grants and/or student loans, conflicting commitments to family and/or employers often pull students' time and energy away from the academic demands and social experiences of college, decreasing the likelihood of success.

**Pillar# 2: Institutional.** Each institution that a student moves through on their educational journey has a different but vital role to play in ensuring they have adequate life skills and receive rigorous instruction, career planning guidance, academic advising and extra supports when needed. Gap students that lack adequate family and community involvement may depend on institutional involvement at higher levels. Unfortunately, gap students are often held to lower expectations by K-12 teachers, and are, too often, steered away from taking more rigorous courses - an essential ingredient of college readiness. Compounding the problem, school counselors are stretched far too thin, as indicated by the national average counselor-to-student ratio of 457: This further limits access to the needed guidance that gap students can't find elsewhere, making them less likely to take the right steps to prepare for life after high school. On the other hand, when gap students are in an environment of high expectations and high support, they rise to the challenge.

**Pillar #3: Community.** Students are also influenced by individuals and groups outside the family unit, such as employers and faith- or community-based organizations. In the formative adolescence years, the influence of this pillar increases, with the strongest of voices being those of peers. Students in communities with low educational attainment often feel alienated from friends who choose to not pursue postsecondary education. The disconnect between students' everyday culture and personal educational attainment goals, along with a lack of sufficient role models in their community and on college campuses, can negatively impact the likelihood of earning a degree.

**Pillar #4: Student Self.** The pillars of family, community and institution individually and collectively form the contours of a student's self-esteem and have an impact on their ability to assess and monitor their own behavior and skills. If a student has adequate self-actualization, he or she is able to recognize what they need to be successful, see where they are lacking and then find the appropriate resources to address those gaps. When a student's influencers don't support their educational success, the student is less likely to establish sufficient goals or maintain a commitment to college. If they persist toward their goals independent of these pillars, they may experience social alienation, inadequately plan for college and career, and develop ineffective study habits.