Foreword

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Much of the work of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has focused on examining the structures that support student learning, development, and success—whether they be first-year seminars, learning communities, orientation programs, senior capstones, residential learning initiatives, service-learning experiences, or common reading programs. A second focal point of our work has been understanding the nature of student transitions within higher education, including the transition into college, the sophomore year, transfer between institutions, the senior year, and the transition into graduate study and the workplace. In addition, we have explored the unique populations of students entering postsecondary education and how we might better support their access, learning, and success. To that end, we have published on the needs of students with learning disabilities, student athletes, and students of color.

Nearly a decade after publishing *Transforming the First Year of College for Students of Color* (Rendón, García, & Person, 2004), we turned our attention once again to the needs and experiences of specific student populations, launching a call for a new books series on this topic. In her conclusion to that earlier monograph, Rendón (2004) argued that providing a transformational experience for underrepresented students in the first college year was about more than putting initiatives in place and creating learning environments that would support academic success and retention. Rather, she argued, transformation must "also include a social justice agenda that challenges existing structures and those they privilege, favoring democratic structural changes where power and privilege are shared among different constituencies" (p. 177). In launching the call for this new book series, Rendón's charge was before us, as was the work of more recent higher education scholars.

For example, Estela Bensimon (Harris & Bensimon, 2007; Witham & Bensimon, 2012) has noted that, historically, differential outcomes for racial or ethnic minority students have been attributed to the students' background or experiences rather than institutional values, policies, or practices that might adversely affect learning or success. This same logic might extend to any number of student populations who do not fit the increasingly narrow definition of the typical U.S. college student—that is, students with physical, learning, or intellectual disabilities; GLBTQ students; military veterans; adult learners; international students; and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, among others. In other words, institutions tend to adopt a problem-solving posture when they encounter students who are atypical, creating new programs or policies to remediate perceived deficits within the identified student population. While such efforts frequently lead to improved learning and

increased retention and graduation rates in the target population, they leave the structure of higher education essentially unchanged—meaning that each new student group fights the battle for access and success anew and institutions create a host of boutique programs that replicate services and initiatives found elsewhere on the campus. Problem-solving approaches may also send the subtle, but often unmistakable, message that the student must be fixed in order to fit into the campus community, succeed within a particular program of study, or earn a degree. Students may reject this message (and higher education along with it), or they may experience the kind of doubt that will lead to their failure. Thus, the problem-solving approach may undermine the very success it seeks to ensure.

In exploring the learning and transition experiences of diverse student populations in U.S. higher education, we hoped to move beyond a deficit model. As such, we invited proposals that critically examined some of the fundamental assumptions underlying student success initiatives with an eye toward reshaping campus cultures, policies, and practices to support students from underrepresented or nontraditional populations. We hoped to produce resources about student experiences and needs that took a problem-questioning rather than problem-solving approach. The problem-questioning view shifts the focus of study from the student group in isolation to the student group within the larger social, cultural, and institutional contexts of U.S. postsecondary education. Rather than asking what types of skills, knowledge, and dispositions the student needs to succeed, it asks what characteristics of this environment facilitate (or hinder) learning, success, and development. Instead of boutique programs that serve the needs of specific groups, problem-questioning approaches engender broader cultural transformation that support all students to reach their educational goals. Finally, by focusing on the larger context instead of individual students or groups of students, problem-questioning approaches recognize the inherent value of everyone entering the educational environment.

This first book in our series on special student populations in U.S. higher education focuses on students from working-class backgrounds. In a recent op-ed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wolin (2012) lamented the faded glory of American higher education, noting, "During [the 1960s and 1970s], colleges functioned as crucial mechanisms of democratization and social inclusion. Today they are repositioning themselves as bastions of class privilege and social exclusion" (para. 5). Indeed, even as President Barack Obama and others have called for increased access to higher education, growing income inequality has made this more difficult not only for low-income students but for their middle-class counterparts as well. To the students from low-income and working-class backgrounds, or whose families have fallen out of the middle class, who somehow manage to arrive on our campuses, higher education—especially within selective institutions—may seem increasingly foreign.

Indeed, as law professor and civil rights theorist Lani Grunier (2015) recently observed, pervasive beliefs in meritocracy may lead colleges and universities—particularly those highly invested in the rankings race—to shift their missions from one of talent development to confirming the achievement of those they admit. In other words, "colleges would perform little more than sorting functions, cherry-picking students who have come up the escalator of excellence and arrived at their doorsteps presumably prepackaged and pre-equipped with everything they need for success" (para. 8). To the extent that students from working-class backgrounds arrive on campus without at least some of the requisite packaging, they may find higher education challenging at best and inhospitable at worst.

In their exhaustive study of access to higher education among low-income students, Carnevale and Strohl (2010) highlight a two-prong concern: Low-income and working-class students have lower rates of participation in postsecondary education than middle- and upper-income students, but they are also likely to be concentrated in less-selective institutions where graduation rates are lower and career opportunities are fewer. As a result of this vertical stratification of higher education, the rich (both in terms of real wealth and in terms of educational opportunity or advantage) get richer. Carnevale and Strohl suggest that we need to create greater parity among institutions so that outcomes (e.g., degree attainment, job placement, career advancement opportunities, earning capacity) are equalized across the system. We also need to get larger numbers of low-income students into more selective and better-resourced institutions where they have greater likelihood of achieving their personal and educational goals. The structural issues surrounding the vertical stratification of U.S. higher education are beyond the scope of this volume. Instead, Krista Soria focuses on the latter concern—how do we increase participation among low-income and working-class students and how do we create environments that will retain them and help them succeed?

The current volume opens by describing who working-class college students are and the relationship between the myth of meritocracy and social mobility in contemporary U.S. culture. Using the theory of social reproduction as a lens, Soria explores access to and experiences in the academic and social spaces of the campus. The chapters on classroom and social environments include recommendations for transforming those spaces to better support students from working-class backgrounds. Finally, the book concludes with a chapter on strategies for campuswide reform.

This series is designed to continue the conversation we began more than a decade ago with the publication of *Transforming the First Year of College for Students of Color*. We hope that readers find both theoretical grounding and practical strategies for beginning the process of transformation on their own campuses. As always, we welcome your feedback on this volume and your suggestions for future volumes in this series.

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