

IMPACT

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Increasing retention rates of under-resourced first-generation college students

The Situation

Idaho was identified in an Economic Policy Institute (EPI) report as one of 10 states with the highest share of low-wage workers; defined as those who earn less than \$23,000, the federal poverty line for a family of four. According to the report, 31% of Idaho workers earned \$23,000 or less. When comparing the low-wage workforce with the total workforce at a national level, four-year graduates are underrepresented in the poverty workforce (11%) while high school graduates and those with less than a high school education are overrepresented (54%). A five year average for 2006-2010 from the Census Bureau shows 41% of Idaho's 25 year olds were high school graduates or had less than a high school education while only 25% had earned a bachelor or graduate degree. Workers with lower levels of education comprise a disproportionate share of low-wage workers.

The Idaho Economic Development Summit in 2012 focused on defining the role of higher education in economic development, specifically in moving students from high school to college and from college into the workforce. Attending college is a significant life decision and adjustment for most students. Those from working-class families who are first in their families to attend a university may find difficulty succeeding in an environment that emphasizes individual initiative rather than the interdependence of being part of a larger community. Expressing yourself, setting goals, making future plans and learning to lead are common expectations of a college environment yet under-resourced students are likely to have had less life experience or encouragement in practicing those skills.



The first group of students to complete the *Investigations into Economic Class* course at Walla Walla Community College.

Our Response

In a project funded through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Nez Perce County Extension co-facilitated the *Investigations Into Economic Class* course at Walla Walla Community College (WWCC). The innovative curriculum of the course is designed to increase the retention rates of first generation, low-income college students. The Gate's Foundation funding allowed for student support services including child care, transportation vouchers, and textbook and college credit assistance.

When talking about getting out of poverty, money or financial assets would seem to be the most important resource. While certainly significant, financial resources alone have not proven to be the defining characteristic of a life without poverty. The strength of other resources or quality of life indicators is often under-emphasized as a tool for change. The *Investigations* course compels students to complete and

summarize a self-assessment on 11 resources. The students are then guided through a process to apply that abstract information to the concrete realities of their lives. The 11 resources studied are financial, emotional, cognitive, language, support systems, physical, spiritual, integrity/trust, motivation/persistence, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. Hidden rules are the unspoken cues and behaviors of a group. The *Investigations* course used the hidden rules of each economic class to discuss strategies and appropriate behavior for successfully getting your needs met in various settings with diverse people.

The more resources a person has in all areas, the easier it is to make changes and to live well. Because the resources are interconnected, students are prompted to develop future life plans that include using their higher level resources to build up their lower level resources.

Program Outcomes

A total of 98 students from under-resourced backgrounds who were ready to develop and define their own plans for moving out of poverty enrolled in the 10-week course and 75 successfully completed the class over a five-quarter academic period. At the end of each quarter, students formally and publically communicated their personal learning experience and plans for their futures during a celebration ceremony.

An evaluation team from Washington State University calculated 2010-2011 retention rates from the *Investigations* class and compared them to an existing WWCC Study Skills class as the control group. The *Investigations* class showed a 68% yearly retention rate while the traditional study skills/strategies class showed a 45% retention rate. The Washington State Community college system overall has a 40% retention rate.

Efforts are underway to incorporate the *Investigations* course into WWCC's regular course offerings. With the goal of creating a regional program, the *Investigations* course was offered at Lewis-Clark State College (LCSC). Faculty in LCSC's Student Success Program plan to adapt the course's concepts into their Study Skills/Career Introduction class.

Under-resourced students are often hardworking and self-sufficient but do not necessarily know how to get help or attention when needed. The *Investigations* class provides students with the knowledge and skills to enable them to navigate systems of higher learning, middle class culture and campus community norms.

"The Investigations class is very informational and will help me succeed in my goal of ending poverty in my family. I only have the fall quarter left at WWCC and then I will have my associate's degree. Then I will transfer to Lewis-Clark State College to obtain my

Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice. Getting out of poverty will be the biggest accomplishment for my family and me." – Rosa G., WWCC

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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