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Belonging: The Gateway to Global Learning for All Students

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I come from a poor family. The hardest time was during my sophomore year, when my family lost our home and my parents lost their business. I was ready to quit. I said to myself, "Why do I think I belong here? No one in my family has ever belonged here." My academic advisor reassured me that the resources for success were available, if I was willing to keep trying. Guidance and mentorship from faculty and staff go a long way in assisting financially challenged students like me to finish college.

—"Maya," a first-generation college student[1]

"Why do I think I belong here?" This question almost led Maya to quit; however, faculty mentors fostered a sense of belonging that helped her become the first person in her family to graduate from college. Moreover, interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds and faculty who presented issues from different cultural perspectives fostered in Maya a commitment to responsible global citizenship. This commitment included—yet transcended—her small-town roots in rural Virginia. Today, Maya is a graduate student studying international higher education, and she is particularly interested in expanding access to higher education for poor students around the world. Her story is one reason why we believe not only that belonging is the key to student success, but also that it is the gateway to global learning.

For several years, we have been analyzing data from the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), a national survey that measures undergraduate students' ability to take a global perspective by examining cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of this key attribute of global learning. The survey also probes the frequency of students' engagement in curricular and cocurricular experiences intended to foster global learning, as well as students' sense of community and the nature of their interactions with faculty.[2] The multi-level framework of the GPI allows us to study connections between the dimensions of student learning and campus environmental influences. Between August 2011 and June 2013, 37,967 undergraduates who were enrolled at more than a hundred four-year institutions completed the Global Perspective Inventory; the empirical evidence presented in article is based on the results.

An uneven sense of belonging

At its best, the college experience involves quality intercultural interactions that have the potential to pervade everything from classroom discussions to leadership programs and recreational activities. In such a context, the sense of belonging that proved so pivotal in Maya's story is the gateway to global learning, providing a secure base from which students can begin to engage the cultural variation that characterizes our diverse, interconnected world. Yet our data show that, far too often, first-generation, transfer, and international students lack this crucial sense of belonging. Just as participation in study abroad programs varies across student demographics,[3] the sense of belonging in college is unevenly distributed among today's students.

The GPI survey was designed to examine six interrelated dimensions of community. Students are asked the extent to which (1) they feel part of a close and supportive community of friends, (2) they believe their institution honors diversity and internationalism, (3) they understand the mission of their institution, (4) they are challenged and supported, (5) they are encouraged to develop their strengths and talents, and (6) they have a strong sense of affiliation with their institution. The survey responses from 2011–13 reveal a consistent pattern. Along all six dimensions, first-generation college students rated their sense of community significantly lower than did students with college-educated parents; transfer students rated their sense of community significantly lower than did non-transfer students; and international students rated their sense of community significantly lower than their peers from the United States (see table 1). While significant differences exist across all six dimensions, the differences were most pronounced in first-generation, transfer, and international students' sense of belonging to a close and supportive community of friends.

<insert table 1 about here>

Faculty-student interactions foster a sense of belonging

The GPI data clearly demonstrate that the quality of faculty-student interaction has a strong, direct relationship to students' sense of belonging. We examined four dimensions of faculty-student interaction: (1) discussion of course topics, ideas, or concepts outside of class; (2) discussion of academic performance; (3) faculty challenges to student views and perspectives during class; and (4) faculty presentation of issues and problems from different cultural perspectives. We found that all four dimensions are strongly associated with students' overall sense of community (see fig. 1).

<insert fig. 1 about here>

Not only do faculty members provide critical academic support, but they also can serve as key sources of social support that enhance students' sense of belonging. Talk of college-level learning often remains abstract without explicitly recognizing what is hidden in plain sight: dedicated faculty members lie at the heart

of a quality education. Individual faculty members can leave lasting impressions on students' lives by modeling habits of mind that help them weigh complex global issues.

Developing the capacity for global perspective-taking—that is, learning to take multiple perspectives into account—can contribute to the formation of a value-based and authentic sense of self. It also can help students relate to others with openness and respect. Rich and meaningful interactions among students and faculty members foster this essential capacity.

Belonging and global perspective-taking

Some may wonder whether a focus on fostering a sense of belonging may conflict with the goal of developing global citizens. After all, the term "global citizenship" evokes images of a cosmopolitan, itinerant lifestyle. The GPI survey results reveal a surprising paradox: the more strongly a student is rooted in his or her local institution, the greater is his or her capacity for global perspective-taking.

The survey item "I see myself as a global citizen" encompasses all three dimensions of global perspective-taking—cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. We found a strong relationship between social interactions on campus and students' views of themselves as global citizens (see fig. 2). Students who engage with faculty members outside of class and take classes in which faculty present issues from multiple perspectives are far more likely to view themselves as global citizens (see fig. 3). Finally, students who frequently engage with peers from other countries or with peers from racial or ethnic groups different from their own are far more likely to view themselves as global citizens (see fig. 4).

<insert figs. 2, 3, and 4 about here>

Taken together, figures 2, 3, and 4 show the relationship between the local and the global, demonstrating that, as the German sociologist Ulrich Beck has put it, "the global and the local are to be conceived, not as cultural polarities, but as interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles."[4] Local intercultural encounters are manifestations of larger global processes. Rooted in daily experience, such encounters engender greater self-awareness of one's own culture with a growing capacity to relate to others who display one or more kinds of difference. In our research, students' sense of identity and their sense of social responsibility are the two dimensions that correspond most directly with students' views of their campus as a supportive, challenging, and encouraging community. These intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of global learning locate students' everyday encounters in the broader matrix of global processes.

Closing the opportunity gap

In *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*,[5] the renowned scholar of social capital Robert Putnam contrasts the life stories of rich and poor families to draw attention to a growing "opportunity gap" in

American society. He argues that inequality in America has two meanings: income and opportunity. That is, not only do first-generation college students bear disproportionate costs of a college education, but they also are consequently shutout from the types of quality learning experiences that make a college education an opportunity for upward mobility. As Vicki Madden observes, "once those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds arrive on campus, it's often the subtler things, the signifiers of who they are and where they come from, that cause the most trouble, challenging their very identity, comfort and right to be on that campus." Madden provides a personal example: "I couldn't read *The New York Times*—not because the words were too hard, but because I didn't have enough knowledge of the world to follow the articles."[6]

A sense of belonging is essential for students when they encounter unfamiliar environments and negotiate the doubts, fears, and tensions associated with the transition to college. Faculty members can allay students' fears, assuage their doubts, and help them negotiate an often precarious transition. Advisors can assure them that they are capable of mastering the challenges they face in college—and in life.

Higher education institutions today exist in a policy environment consumed by a focus on increasingly efficiency and cutting costs, which often means cutting corners on quality. A focus on costs and credentials, without discussions about value and quality, creates a mirage of opportunity for first-generation college students. If the opportunity gap is ignored, policy makers should have deep concern whether a college education will fulfill the promise of upward mobility that it has so faithfully kept to past generations.

The GPI data reveal another striking gap: 40 percent of students do not view themselves as global citizens. Certainly, a handful of these students might take issue with the meaning of the term "citizen" as it is used in the relevant survey item. Nonetheless, a significant number of students do not see a clear connection between their daily lives and larger global processes. It is the sense of belonging developed through quality faculty-student interactions, not an individual student's background, that fosters a positive shift in a student's sense of identity and responsibility as a global citizen.

Changing the course of students' lives

American higher education truly is, as Carol Geary Schneider has observed, at a "quality and equity crossroads."[7] Access to liberal learning at its best, with its "powerful vision and reflection born of an awareness of a world lived in common with others,"[8] is essential for all of today's students. Colleges and universities must create environments that optimally and effectively influence and foster global learning. This imperative requires higher education leaders to mobilize and, as part of the national conversation about college-level learning, to draw attention to the growing opportunity gap.

While the gaps in both opportunity and income have widened, they can be bridged for first-generation, transfer, and international students through the development of a sense of belonging. Students

develop the capacity for global perspective-taking as a result of faculty mentoring within a broader campus community that promotes belonging. Like thousands of other first-generation students represented in our national surveys, Maya demonstrates that a sense of belonging can result from a supportive campus environment that encourages interaction across cultures and that fosters in students a sense of responsibility to act as global citizens.
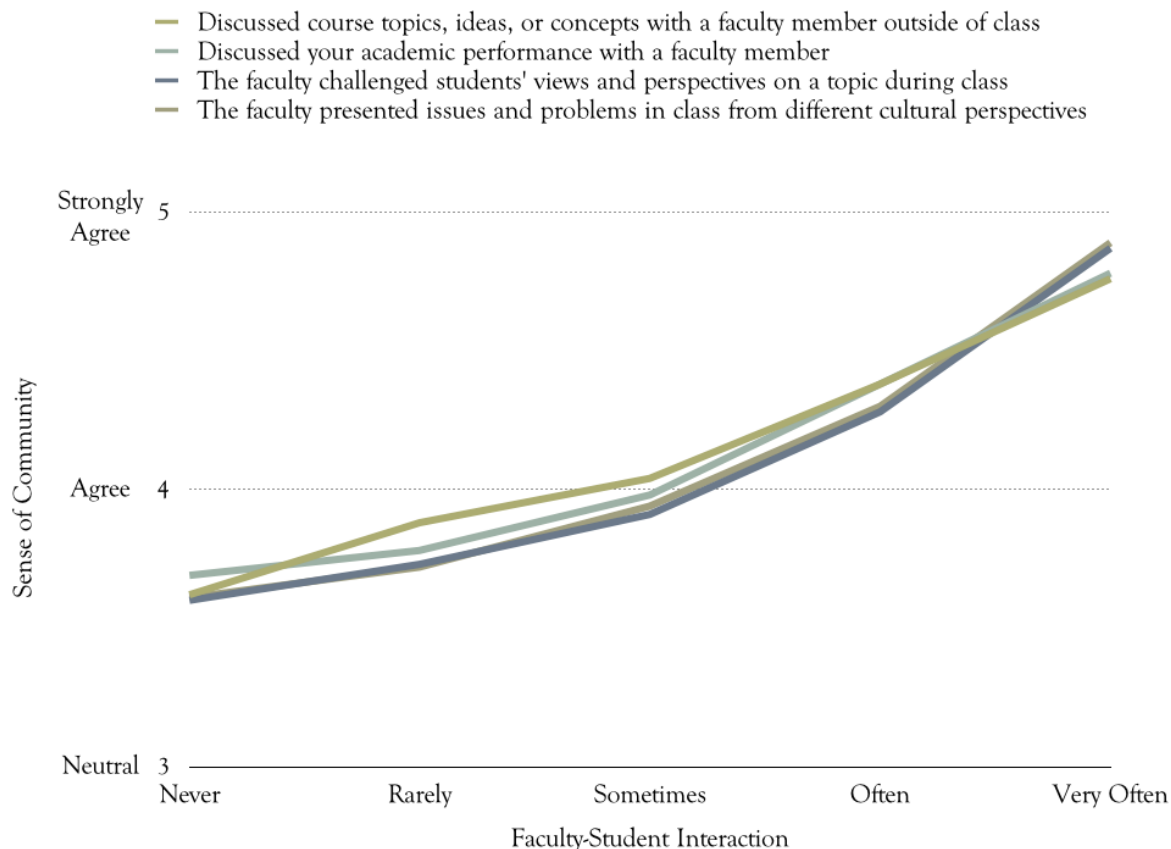
First-generation students not only deal with financial pressures, but they also wrestle with doubts and fears. Fortunately, Maya had an academic advisor who heard her cry for help: "Why do I think I belong here? No one in my family has ever belonged here." Her academic advisor's reassurance that "resources for success were available if [she] was willing to keep trying" literally changed the course of Maya's life. Today, ten million first-generation students ask us the same question, and our answers will literally change the course of their lives.

Table 1. Average of sense of community items by parents' education, transfer status, and international status

|	Parents' Education			Transfer		International	
	First-Generation	College Degree	Graduate Degree	Transfer	Non-Transfer	International	US
I have a strong sense of affiliation with my college/university.	3.71	3.87	3.93	3.61	3.88	3.73	3.84
I feel that my college/university community honors diversity and internationalism.	3.99	4.02	4.01	4.01	4.01	3.89	4.01
I understand the mission of my college/university.	3.94	4.00	4.02	3.94	4.00	3.90	3.99
I am both challenged and supported at my college/university.	4.06	4.15	4.18	4.07	4.14	3.99	4.14
I have been encouraged to develop my strengths and talents at my college/university.	4.08	4.18	4.20	4.06	4.17	4.00	4.16
I feel I am a part of a close and supportive community of colleagues and friends.	3.95	4.10	4.17	3.90	4.11	3.90	4.08

1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Figure 1. Relationship between four dimensions of faculty-student interaction and students' sense of community

Legend:
- Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class
- Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member
- The faculty challenged students' views and perspectives on a topic during class
- The faculty presented issues and problems in class from different cultural perspectives

Y-axis: Sense of Community — Strongly Agree 5, Agree 4, Neutral 3
X-axis: Faculty-Student Interaction — Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Very Often

Sense of Community determined by taking the mean of the six community items in the GPI (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree): (1) I have a strong sense of affiliation with my college/university; (2) I feel that my college/university community honors diversity and internationalism; (3) I understand the mission of my college/university; (4) I am both challenged and supported at my college/university; (5) I have been encouraged to develop my strengths and talents at my college/university; and (6) I feel I am a part of a close and supportive community of colleagues and friends.
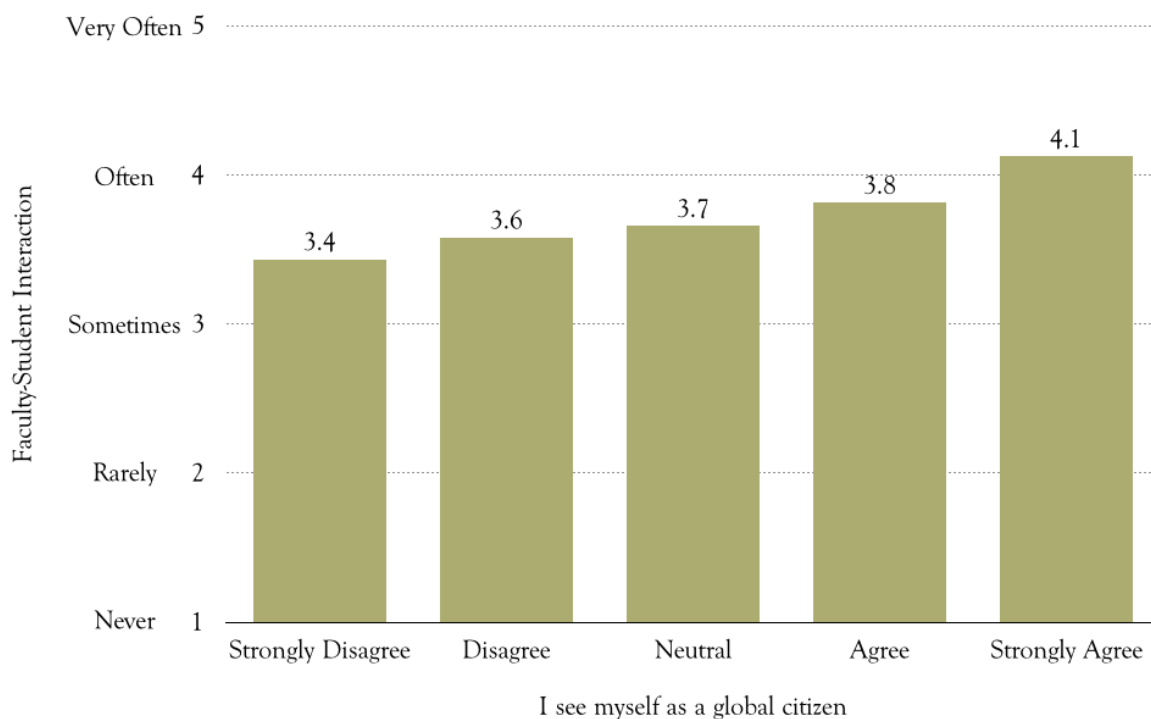
Figure 2. Relationship between students' views of themselves as global citizens and their social interactions
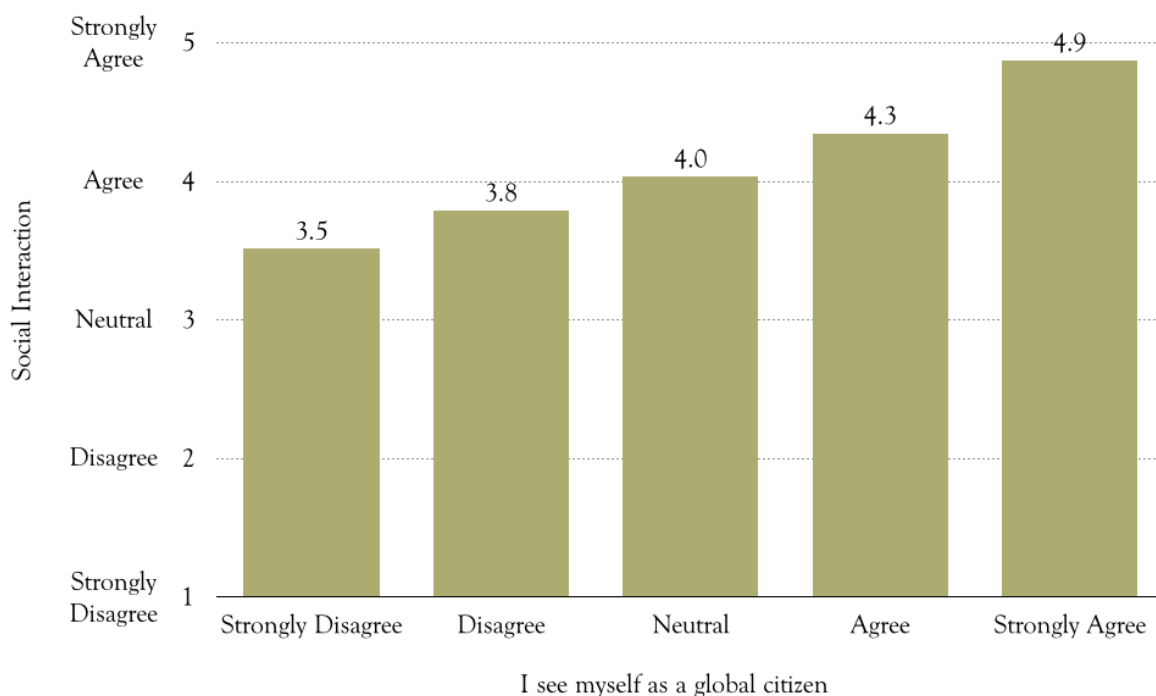
Social Interactions determined by taking the mean of the seven social interaction items in the GPI (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree): (1) Most of my friends are from my own ethnic background; (2) People from other cultures tell me that I am successful at navigating their cultures; (3) I am able to take on various roles as appropriate in different cultures and ethnic settings; (4) I prefer to work with people who have different cultural values from me; (5) I intentionally involve people from many cultural backgrounds in my life; (6) I enjoy when my friends from other cultures teach me about our cultural differences; and (7) I am open to people who strive to live lives very different from my own life style.
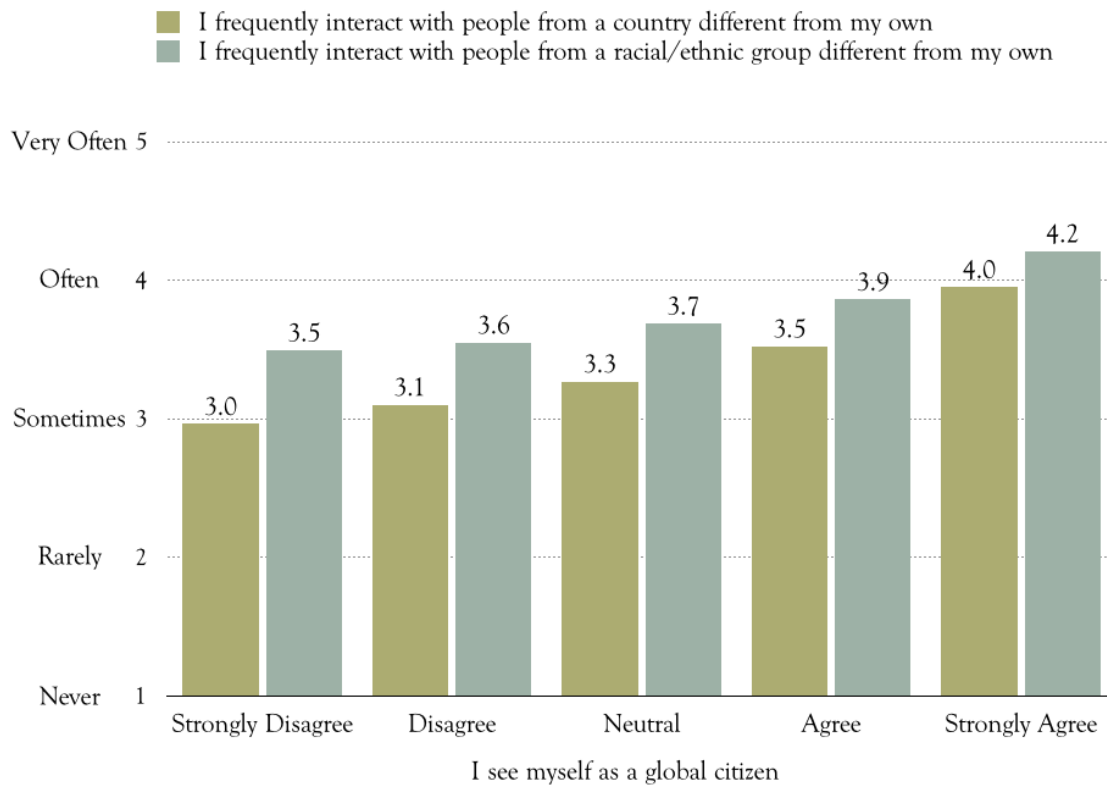
Figure 3. Relationship between students' views of themselves as global citizens and faculty-student interaction

Faculty-Student Interaction determined by taking the mean of the four faculty-student interaction items in the GPI (1 = Never; 5 = Very Often): (1) Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class; (2) Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member; (3) The faculty challenged students' views and perspectives on a topic during class; and (4) The faculty presented issues and problems in class from different cultural perspectives.

Figure 4. Relationship between students' views of themselves as global citizens and frequency of interaction with people from a different country and racial/ethnic group from their own

Legend:
■ I frequently interact with people from a country different from my own
■ I frequently interact with people from a racial/ethnic group different from my own

I see myself as a global citizen	Country	Racial/ethnic
Strongly Disagree	3.0	3.5
Disagree	3.1	3.6
Neutral	3.3	3.7
Agree	3.5	3.9
Strongly Agree	4.0	4.2

Y-axis: Never 1, Rarely 2, Sometimes 3, Often 4, Very Often 5

Notes

1. "Maya" is a pseudonym for a participant in the Developmentally Effective Experiences for Global Learning research project led by Chris R. Glass.

2. For more detailed information about the survey, see Larry A. Braskamp, David C. Braskamp, and Mark E. Engberg, *Global Perspective Inventory (GPI): Its Purpose, Construction, Potential Uses, and Psychometric Characteristics* (Chicago: Global Perspective Institute, 2014), https://gpi.central.edu/supportDocs/manual.pdf.

3. Mark H. Salisbury, Michael B. Paulsen, and Ernest T. Pascarella. 2011. "Why Do All the Study Abroad Students Look Alike? Applying an Integrated Student Choice Model to Explore Differences in the Factors That Influence White and Minority Students' Intent to Study Abroad." *Research in Higher Education* 52 (2): 123–150. doi:10.1007/s11162-010-9191-2.

4. Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 73.

5. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

6. Vicki Madden, "Why Poor Students Struggle," *New York Times*, September 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/opinion/why-poor-students-struggle.html.

7. Carol Geary Schneider, "Toward that Second Century: Making Liberal Education Inclusive," Association of American Colleges and Universities, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.aacu.org/about/cgs/2014/dqp.

8. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1988), 4.