

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

March 28, 2014

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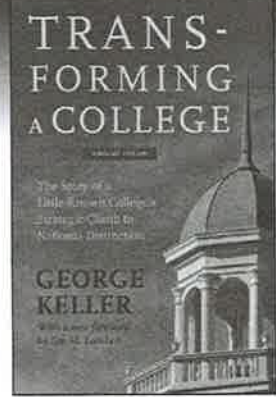


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Transforming a College

The Story of a Little-Known College's Strategic Climb to National Distinction
updated edition

George Keller

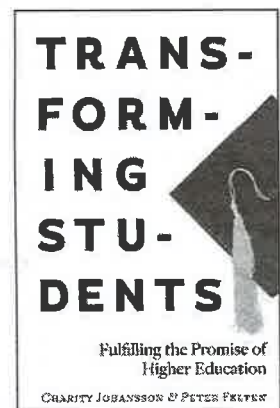
with a new foreword by Leo M. Lambert

Ten years after the publication of *Transforming a College*, Elon University continues to thrive as a school that reinvented itself and its community around the idea of inspiring and guiding students. George Keller's now-classic account has been used as an inspiration and playbook for many other institutions.

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—George D. Kuh, Chancellor's Professor of Higher Education Emeritus, Indiana University

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Charting a New Life Course— to College

By JEFFREY AARON SNYDER

“IF PRINCETON hadn’t found my brother as a basketball recruit, and if I hadn’t seen that he could succeed on a campus like that, it never would have occurred to me to apply to that school—never.” So said Michelle Obama this past January, helping to launch a new White House initiative that focuses on expanding higher-education opportunities for low-income students. “There are so many kids out there just like me,” the first lady continued, “kids who have a world of potential, but maybe their parents never went to college or maybe they’ve never been encouraged to believe they could succeed there.”

“It’s our job,” she underscored, “to find those kids.”

In the event the first lady is not in the room to offer guidance to the staffers charged with putting the White House directives into action, somebody should slip them a copy of Beth Zasloff and Joshua Steckel’s new book, *Hold Fast to Dreams: A College Guidance Counselor, His Students, and the Vision of a Life Beyond Poverty*.

The authors are a husband-wife team—Steckel, the guidance counselor and main researcher; Zasloff, the principal writer. Steckel began his career as a guidance counselor at a private school on New York’s Upper East Side, but he grew “increasingly uncomfortable with the ways his advocacy gave a leg up to students already in a position of significant privilege.” Drawn to the challenge and promise of working with students for whom “the issue was not college choice but college access,” he took a job at the Secondary School for Research, an “underfunded, unknown” public school in Brooklyn. When he arrived, in the fall of 2006, Steckel discovered that none of the previous year’s graduates had continued on to a four-year residential college.

Hold Fast to Dreams traces the trajectories of 10 of Steckel’s students, bringing to life “what it is like to be a low-income student of color trying to get to—and through—college in America today.” The book is an informal ethnography, based on participant observation and interviews as well as the richly textured and poignant material provided by student emails and personal statements on applications.

Steckel’s most urgent assignment at the Secondary School is to convince his students that college is a viable option for them, a live and attractive possibility. The title of the book, then, is ultimately misleading. Rather than “hold fast” to their dreams, Steckel wants his students to transform them, charting a different life course guided by the beacon of college.



For many of Steckel’s students, a single campus visit is enough. A tour, an interview with an admissions officer, a brief chat with a student—those kinds of experiences give his students the opportunity to be acknowledged and to see themselves as “college material.” At the State University of New York at Albany, a cashier at the food court asks two of Steckel’s students for their meal cards. Delighted to be mistaken for university students, the two young women dance back to the bus, one of them singing, “I’m a college student, I’m a college student.”

Leveraging the admissions contacts he made during his counseling stint at the well-heeled private school, Steckel proves to be adept at guiding his students through the “complicated, high stakes” application process.

The “consuming drama” of applying to colleges is exacerbated by the life circumstances of Steckel’s students. Rafael works full time at a drugstore to help make ends meet; Michael and his family bounce between homeless shelters; Aicha’s undocumented status makes it virtually impossible to apply for financial aid. In spite of the hardships, Steckel’s students are admitted to a range of institutions, including local community colleges, SUNY and CUNY institutions, and small East Coast liberal-arts colleges.

The students who head off to the leafy cam-

pus of liberal-arts colleges in New England and New York struggle to feel at home. They frequently watch from the sidelines as their first-year peers plug into shared networks of summer camps and private schools or compare notes on trips to Europe. They find their coursework highly demanding, especially the writing assignments, and they feel an acute tension between the pull of family responsibilities and the allure of “self-advancement” away at college. One student faces the terrible prospect of having to take her family’s grocery money to pay for an expensive required textbook.

STECKEL’S ACCOUNT of his professional work is searching and unvarnished. He reports that he is sometimes overwhelmed by feelings of “confusion, guilt, and anxiety.” It is instructive to watch Steckel, a Duke alumnus, confront his basic assumption that residential liberal-arts colleges—the more prestigious, the better—will offer the best available education to his students. Liberal-arts colleges turn out to be a good fit for some but a mismatch for others. After a rocky start at Bates College, the energetic and outspoken Nkese eventually hits her stride,

discovering a passion for gender studies, studying abroad in Germany, and founding the Caribbean Students Association.

The precocious and highly disciplined Ashley, in contrast, leaves Williams College after a frustrating year on the pre-med track. Happy to be home where she can help her mother look after her younger siblings, Ashley enrolls in a nursing program at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Steckel worries that the move to a professional program at an institution with less cachet and fewer resources will diminish her opportunities for growth, self-discovery, and career advancement. But Ashley finds the practical orientation of her education invigorating, relishing the chance to apply her knowledge in regular hospital rotations. Steckel, in turn, is forced to re-evaluate his belief that top students should always aim for top-ranked schools.

Steckel, who demonstrates how a strong relationship with a guidance counselor can make a world of difference, must have been pleased to learn that “reducing inequalities in college advising” is a major priority of the White House’s college initiative for low-income students. Given that the ratio of students to guidance counselors is one thousand to one in schools serving predominantly low-income and minority populations, this is a pressing and formidable task. ■

REVIEW

Hold Fast to Dreams: A College Guidance Counselor, His Students, and the Vision of a Life Beyond Poverty

By Beth Zasloff and Joshua Steckel
(The New Press)

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is an assistant professor in the department of educational studies at Carleton College. He is completing a book titled The Making of Black History: Race, Culture, and the Color Line in the Age of Jim Crow, to be published by the University of Georgia Press.