SUMMARY: John Bassett

Heritage University is a private commuter university on Reservation land deeded from the Yakama Nation. Only 32 years old, it has about 1000 undergraduates of whom 55% are Hispanic, mostly children of Mexican farm workers, and 10-15% Native, the others a mix. The mission is to provide high quality higher education to a population largely underserved, since there is no other 4-year college for miles. It has 400 graduate students, mostly in Education. The undergraduates are 90% Pell-eligible, 80% first gen; the average family ability to pay is $150. The average parent has a 6th grade education. Educational attainment in the Yakima Valley is low, but the intelligence and potential of the young people great.

In my four years we have taken a number of steps to improve completion and success rates: 1) improved financial aid practices so through an equity-based formula more students can stay in school; 2) added professional support staff for tutoring and advising to build further on successful TRIO and CAMP programs; 3) built a culture of high expectations, for the worst thing is to let these talented students, through misplaced compassion, graduate by getting over a low bar; 4) hired more full-time (not less expensive adjuncts) faculty who are there all week for the students; 5) encouraged students to identify an area of study sooner, since students who drop out—usually because of competing pressures in their life—invariably have not identified a field of study or a dream to have as a goal; 6) changed admission practices to be more certain that students who matriculate are at a point of their life when they can do the hard work to succeed; 7) built faculty agreement that they must take attendance and report red flags quickly to allow intervention; and 8) started enrolling students in cohorts that take classes together so they can have a peer group with whom they are closely engaged.

Success stories are remarkable. Our teacher prep program, honored at federal and state levels, is a national model and has a 90%+ placement rate. Our business program shows amazing transformational stories of inarticulate freshmen lacking confidence in themselves going out as eloquent, confident seniors with Fortune 500 companies seeking to hire them. Successes include students like Brenda, a dropout from a culture of poverty and gangs. She had a baby but no dreams until a mentor encouraged her through the GED and college. She went on to good jobs on the east coast and now manages a lot of the international marketing for St Michelle Winery. Similar students hold managerial jobs at Costco, Walmart, and elsewhere. Haydee received her diploma Saturday; three years ago you would have given her no chance to have so many companies trying to hire her. Haver Jim, a 43-year-old Yakama native who entered with a not uncommon distrust of western education, has become quite a success story and received his diploma Saturday. He is taking many skills back to his people. I have essays in my iPAD from graduating students—one Native, one Latina—who came out of cultures of drugs, gangs, and poverty and who because of TRIO and University support are headed to great careers.

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The cultures are very different, although poverty and lack of personal dreams are common traits. Native students, like their elders, have a deep natural reserve; they are often not forthcoming. It can take a long time to build up trust with them. These are a community-focused, less individualistic people, yet they can be good business people. Unlike the agriculture-centered Mexican immigrants, they are a fishing people (also hunters and gatherers). They are a people with a more rooted and organic sense of their relationship to the land, which they protect like a family member. They have amazing talents.

While family is important for Indians, I would say that family is the first issue to address with the Mexican population; students do not go to Heritage, families go. You need to have family support for Juana or Jose to succeed at Heritage; and sometimes parents say, “If you were not in college but picking apples, we could have meat on the table.” Heritage knows it must reach children and their families when the kids are little and give them a sense of dreams and opportunities; otherwise over half will be gone before 12th grade and enormous potential lost to America.

Bassett, John
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