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At-Risk Urban Students and College Success: A Framework for Effective Preparation

Changes in higher education policy have made it significantly harder for under-represented minorities in urban environments to gain access to or to succeed in higher education. In light of these changes, college preparation programs take on added importance and significance, In this article, the authors establish a framework for effective college preparation programs that serve low-income, urban minority youth. It is important to understand "what works" in order to improve service and to address the unique needs of urban youth.

For the past generation, educators have struggled to develop ways to promote access to postsecondary education for low-income and historically under-represented minority youth, but recent changes in higher education policy have made their task increasingly more difficult. For example, while race-based admissions in the University of California system have been effectively eliminated, administrators at California State University wrestle with a system-wide removal of remedial education. Such changes in policy have made it significantly harder for historically underrepresented minorities to gain access to higher education. Consequently, college preparation programs take on greater significance and importance.

Although there are a multitude of successful programs serving low-income urban youth, little is known about how success is defined. Adequate data about what programs work, and if they work, how they can be replicated are obviously important, as is knowledge of how culture can be integrated into the overall socialization process for urban youth. Neighborhoods in which urban youths grow up provide different signals and support for their social and cultural identity. Moreover, the experiences of youths growing up in an urban environment determine the ways they develop and mold a sense of identity (McLaughlin, 1993). This requires

educators to know how the physical, social, and familial needs are intertwined with academic success. The challenge, then, is to develop, affirm, honor, and incorporate an individual's identity into the organization.

We have developed a framework that identifies effective college preparation programs for low income and minority youth in urban areas. This article first establishes the context of college preparation programs that includes a brief historical overview and the parameters of who benefits most from different services. We then elaborate on areas in which administrators can best assist urban youth to develop academic and personal identities. A sense of self as scholar and individual can be instilled through the development of two concepts: academic and cultural capital. We refine our definition of academic capital by including the development of academic problem-solving as well as test and note-taking skills. We then discuss the variety of extracurricular activities associated with the theories of cultural capital, and we also assert the importance of family involvement in the overall socialization process. We conclude with some general assumptions and recommendations for program success.

Context of College Preparation Programs

American colleges and universities have employed a variety of strategies to increase access and opportunities for traditionally underrepresented ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged groups for nearly half a century, and college preparation programs have grown in comprehensiveness, complexity, and focus. In their attempt to increase student achievement, program administrators began to look at other avenues for change, emphasizing teacher and curriculum development as well as academic advisement and information services.

Chapter I programs began in the 1960s to assist economically and educationally disadvantaged children. These programs, which served about five million students at a cost of approximately $6 billion per year, are increasingly criticized as a fragmented and uncoordinated, adding to the disconnectedness of schools, especially those with large numbers of poor students (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1995). Scholars have argued that a better remedy to the current problems requires a broad approach to curriculum rather than narrowly focused skills training, as well as a renegotiated and more integral relationship with general education.

Requirements under Title I, as reauthorized by the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, expanded Chapter I, and placed greater emphasis on parental involvement to enhance partnerships between home and school (Funkhouser and Gonzales, 1998). Moreover, greater emphasis was placed on policy involvement by parents at the school and district levels, shared school-family responsibility for high academic performance, and the development of productive mutual collaboration between schools, students, and their parents. Private foundations as well as state and federal agencies have created specific programs that address the needs of students, but do not want to waste limited and finite resources on ineffective or inefficient programs.

Whom Do We Serve?

Earlier studies conducted using a national data set identified many factors associated with an increased probability of school failure and dropping out (Kaufman and

Bradley, 1992) were highly correlated with students' demographic characteristics, especially ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Students who match certain conditions are generally at the greatest risk of failure or drop-out, and as a consequence, would benefit most from early intervention programs. In addition, the following concomitant risk factors that increase the likelihood of drop-out:

- Students with families in the lowest SES quartile
- Single-parent families Students with older siblings who dropped out of high school
- Students with average grades of Cs or lower from 6th to 8th grade
- Students who are recent immigrants to the United States
- Students reading at or below grade level

In the past, many studies have attempted to categorize the variety of college preparation programs in existence throughout the United States (Coles, 1993; Fenske, Geranios, Keller, and Moore, 1997; Stoel, Togeneri, and Brown, 1992). Two methods of service can be identified: (1) working with students' academic needs to develop academic skills and competencies; and (2) addressing the cultural needs of students through a variety of extracurricular activities. This approach to college preparation creates an impact at three levels: the students, their families, and their environment. The next two sections explore how academic and cultural capital can be addressed through programs and services respectively.

Academic Capital

Providing students with the means to prosper in a rigorous academic postsecondary environment requires adequate preparation and success in their high school core courses (math, English, physical sciences). Educators who focus on curricular programs that equip students with academic skills make efforts to provide specific educational opportunities, training, and experiences. The assumption is that properly equipping children with knowledge and skills will increase their opportunities. Of the many in-class activities and services that have been studied for the past decade, two that impart adaptive skills and competencies for all children are exemplified: academic problem solving and test preparation

Academic Problem Solving

One of the most frequent approaches to promoting competence is the acquisition of problem-solving skills. Literally hundreds of programs offer academic preparation that improves access to higher education for disadvantaged students. The largest of these is the federally funded Upward Bound program. Located on more than 1000 college and university campuses around the country, Upward Bound programs, with a $537 million dollar budget, serve roughly 730,000 students and are designed to teach students the elements of successful academic skills.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is one example of a program that has shown success. Chosen by teachers or counselors to participate, AVID students spend one extra class period a day in their high schools, usually taught by a

teacher in the student's own school. The class has at least two explicit objectives: the first is to teach students basic skills such as how to take notes, how to study, and how to complete various homework assignments. The second helps students understand how to navigate the college application process, from preparing for entrance examinations to submitting application materials, visiting college campuses, and ensuring that the courses taken in high school are geared toward college attendance and not vocational preparation.

Test Preparation

Because many African American and Hispanic youth do not test as well as their white and Asian counterparts on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), other programs have focused not on the academic curriculum but on successful preparation for college entrance examinations. Indeed, some institutions have developed partnerships with test-taking companies (e.g., Stanley Kaplan). This type of program is geared to students who are likely to attend college, but need to improve their SAT scores. The outcome is that those students who take the exam will be more likely to go to a more prestigious institution.

Academic skills are certainly worth addressing, and this approach may be successful at conveying how to master specific academic tasks, but, in order to ensure academic success at the postsecondary level, a college preparation program must do more than teach facts and figures to a group of disenfranchised urban youth. In addition, educators need to address the cultural processes that give advantages to some and disadvantages to others.

Cultural Capital

The teaching of skills is insufficient for students who have been previously labeled "at-risk" and are at the educational margins of society for one reason or another. When education is seen as a tool that can be used for or against children, then one must bring into question the roles different groups have in the process (Tierney, forthcoming).

Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital framework (1977) has been important in studies that focus on how class status plays a role in educational achievement. He claims that the cultural capital of middle and upper-class students gives them privileges of economic security, organizational contexts, and personal support systems. His notions are based on the assumption that cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities are possessed and often inherited by certain groups in society, and that these are distributed socially. Distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted by the families of each social class, and, as a consequence, children of upper-class families inherit substantially different skills, abilities, manners, styles of interaction, and facility with language.

One way that working-class and minority youth can enjoy the same advantages as their more affluent and privileged peers is for educators to act in a manner that generates a socialization process producing the same sorts of strategies and resources employed in privileged homes and institutions. This necessitates that services be designed to transmit nonacademic skills that help the student negotiate the pathway to college through out-of-class activities as well as through the involvement of the family.

Out-of-Class Activities and Services

The cultural capital approach identifies the loci of risks at two primary points of potential intervention for underrepresented students: the family and the community. The recommended action is to re-engineer the school environment and to work in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and parents to promote desired outcomes, increase and identify available resources, and address potential risks for school failure. Following are some examples of typical extra-curricular activities that programs have implemented:

- College visits
- Career days
- Field trips to museums, plays, and concerts
- Motivational seminars
- Admissions and financial aid workshops
- Mentor programs
- Summer bridge programs

Providing these services is based on the belief that it is the acquisition of a framework and strategies for solving problems that contributes to long-term adjustment. Activities are meant to provide students with the skills and abilities to move successfully from one academic environment to another. Students taught to think through alternative solutions and their consequences will obtain the necessary tools to confront and overcome new situations and unfamiliar environments.

Two Examples of Successful Transition

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) and AVID are examples of programs that have understood this educational imperative and have been moderately successful in implementing a design that addresses these issues. NAI, a program located at the University of Southern California, is an example of a culturally responsive approach to education that encompasses both family involvement and the affirmation of the community. It focuses on targeting students at an early age, as well as on normative school transitions such as moving from middle school to high school, and from high school to college. The environment and the teacher are prepared to be responsive to the local community, thereby benefiting all students in the classroom setting.

NAI begins the socialization process in the 7th grade, enabling teachers, counselors, and other staff members to help students develop the skills for successful transitions from middle school to high school, and ultimately through college. A university-based program, NAI strives to provide children with (a) a safe, supportive environment that affirms local identity and demands academic excellence; and (b) transitional and coping skills to enhance students' capacity to deal effectively with stresses and changes in an educational environment.

As mentioned previously, the AVID program works to teach students basic academic survival skills such as note-taking and critical thinking, but it also shows them how to navigate the college application process. Again, instilling in students the cul-

tural capital needed to understand "how the world works" is necessary to prepare them for academic survival and overall success beyond their days in high school and college.

In many respects, a teacher in the AVID program assumes the role that has been dramatically reduced in inner city schools due to fiscal shortfalls—that of the guidance counselor. The demise of guidance counseling in American high schools has led to a reduction of much needed services for potential college bound youth. As a result, decreasing numbers of counselors are often required to do an increasing amount of work (McDonough, 1994). Indeed, scholars have found that 90% of the counselor's time is spent doing work that should encompass half their time (Gutkin and Crowley, 1990), and that some college preparation programs have been successful at identifying and addressing the deficiencies of college counselors through other measures.

AVID instructors constantly focus on the importance of college and how one can get there. The classroom is replete with encouraging materials, motivational signs, and slogans about college. In short, the instructor takes an individual interest in each student under his or her supervision, and tries to create the conditions so that the students will go to college. Such work might involve instilling the cultural capital needed to survive in what many urban youth perceive as an alien environment (the college campus) or it might focus on psychological and emotional support structures for adolescents who do not have an adult in their lives who has gone to college or understands how to go about getting into college. The consolidation of efforts by those adults who hold significant positions in students' lives, then, becomes essential. In the next section, we examine the need for increased efforts at collaboration between families and educators to effect change in students' lives.

Family Involvement

Family involvement has become an important issue in American education today, and the need for parents to be involved in their children's education is regularly emphasized in popular magazines and periodicals. The popular sentiments are echoed in the academic literature, and, as mentioned earlier, increased family involvement has been mandated through federal programs. Few researchers dispute the notion that children are shaped by their families, although invariably there are differing opinions on exactly how the family affects children. For example, some researchers focus on the effects of family status (Clark, 1983; Delgado-Gaitin, 1991; Lam, 1997), while others emphasize the importance of family processes (Lam, 1997).

Previous research showed that students' academic achievement in elementary and high school improved when their parents attended parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings, and helped their children in selected courses (Peterson, 1989; Stevenson and Baker, 1987). Clark's (1983) study on African American families in the inner city found that sponsored independence, high support, high expectations, close supervision, and respect for the child's intellectual achievement characterized poor black parents of high scholastic achievers. This finding is consistent with White's (1982), who found that when socioeconomic status was defined by measures of home atmosphere, such as parents helping children with homework, higher family SES correlated much more highly with academic achievement.

In a qualitative study on family and school relationships, Annette Lareau (1987) found that social class provided parents with different resources for complying with teachers' requests for parental participation. As a result, middle-class parents were more likely to participate in school activities. She further found that middle-class and working-class parents differed more in the ways that they promoted educational success than in their educational values. Working-class parents typically surrendered the responsibility for education to teachers, while middle-class parents did not.

In his study of the effects of social class on parental values, Kohn (1977) found that the higher a parent's social class, the more likely he or she was to value characteristics indicative of self-direction and the less likely to value characteristics indicative of conformity to external authority. Kohn suggested that this pattern was related to the different conditions of life faced by parents in different socioeconomic positions: parents with high SES were more typically independent, freer from close supervision, and more likely worked at nonroutine tasks. Hence they were more likely to value characteristics such as independence and self-direction in their children.

Challenges to Working with Parents

Given our conceptual framework and literature review, we would like reiterate to counselors and program administrators the importance of working with parents and addressing any unique needs of low-income families. For example, by asking such parents to attend school events (PTA meetings, open house night), to help in the classroom, or to participate in Saturday programs, teachers make demands on the time and disposable income of parents. Attending afternoon parent-teacher conferences might require transportation, childcare arrangements, and job flexibility. Middle and upper-income parents may have more time and disposable income than working class parents.

The time and income afforded by higher-class jobs may affect parental attitudes and definitions of teacher and parent roles, while the absence of these resources will alter and challenge traditional notions of parental involvement in schooling. Defining education as a cooperative responsibility between parent and teacher may lead to increased participation by middle-class parents. However, alternative understandings of some urban parents and their strategy of trusting the teacher to educate their children may lead to a deflated participation by parents that does not promote success.

Although working and middle-class parents want their children to succeed in school, their positions in society may lead them to employ different strategies to achieve that goal. Thus, social class positions and class cultures become a form of cultural capital. Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, and Villanueva (1996) assert that while parents of low-income and minority children have high aspirations for their children, they frequently have insufficient knowledge and resources to assist their children in meeting higher education goals. "Although AVID parents support their children's college goals, they don't know the details about required courses, and tests, application forms and deadlines, scholarship possibilities and procedures. Although they understand that their children need to go to college to be successful, they express some ambivalence about them leaving home" (p. 158).

While the strategies employed by middle-income parents—actively participating in supervising, monitoring, and overseeing of their children's schooling—promotes success, differences in definition and strategy have had a significant impact on low-income families and their children. It behooves counselors, policy makers, and administrators to recognize differences in the definitions and expectations of families from a wide variety of backgrounds, and to address them in order to better serve and incorporate family involvement in the curriculum. In our final section, we offer some challenges to administrators and also propose some general assumptions and recommendations for future programs.

Challenges, Recommendations, and Assumptions

Challenges

Is a six-week immersion program on a college campus prior to a student's senior year really effective in preparing an individual for what he or she will discover during the freshman year? At a time when fiscal resources are tight, policy makers, foundations, governments, and schools cannot afford to fund programs if they are ineffective. More often than not, funding agencies want to know the actual numbers of students served to justify refunding such projects, and this leaves staff members spending an inordinate amount of time and energy ensuring that reporting the number of students fulfills the proposed objective.

It is misleading to think that simply by bringing students onto a college campus for one summer will better prepare them for the transitions that await them. Most organizations that run programs are limited to offering services in the summers, either between the junior and senior years of high school or during the summer between high school and college. And many summer bridge programs organized by admissions and orientation staff are concerned with two issues: (a) the recruitment of underrepresented minorities; or (b) increasing their annual yield and ameliorating the losses caused by the "summer melt" (i.e., the number of certified students who fail to enroll in the fall).

There is a disparity in the delivery of services between K-12 and the college that confounds what researchers have been seeking for some time—continuity across the continuum of services. If administrators of college preparation programs know that the measurement of success is graduation from high school and thus choose students who are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college, then one would certainly question the effectiveness of the program. Moreover, if funding agencies and preparation programs overemphasize numbers for reporting purposes, then they lose sight of the overarching goal of ensuring ultimate student success as defined by graduation from college.

Recommendations and Assumptions

Effective strategies for programs differ from community to community, and the most appropriate strategies for a particular community will depend on local interests, needs, and resources. However, several successful approaches to working with underrepresented minority and urban youths have emphasized innovation and flexibil-

ity. Through the review of successful programs included in this study, we submit seven recommendations that have significant implications for educators and policy makers:

Remember that change takes time. Educators should recognize that developing a successful program requires continued effort over time, that solving one problem usually creates two new ones, and that the method of implementation matters more than immediate outcome measures.

Develop local definitions of identity. Where an individual comes from is of utmost importance. Individual and community identity must be recognized, and excellence and success must be stated in culturally relevant contexts. Low-income urban youth need teachers, tasks, and pedagogies affirming who the students are.

Connect the individual, the school, and the family. Although it is impossible to attribute student academic achievement or success solely to parental involvement, it appears that many programs that make parents' involvement a priority also see student outcomes improve. In addition, college preparation programs must be seen as an essential, integrated component of a school and district, and as part of the continuum of support for ensuring student success.

Demand high standards. Educators must be aware of the potential danger of lowering one's expectations of students labeled "at risk." Providing students with challenging work conveys respect for their potential to learn and succeed. Teachers' expectations on assignments must be high but realistic. Also, supportive and positive discussions about attending four-year colleges and universities should occur frequently.

Consider cost effectiveness. Successful yet expensive programs may not be as effective as programs that can obtain similar goals while maintaining cost efficiency. To be sure, a program that spends a million dollars and gets 90% of its students to graduate from college may not be deemed as effective as a program that spends $100,000 and gets a 75% graduation rate. Should one consider a program successful if at the end of the year a majority of the participants attended a college, but the activities were so time-consuming and exhausting for the teachers that the program fell apart?

Invest in program evaluation. Programs must assess the effects of services and pedagogies using multiple indicators. As important as it is to invest time, effort, and financial and human capital in services, it is equally important to develop evaluation measures (both formative and summative) that define and gauge successful delivery of services. Upon thorough review and assessment of the effects of the program, results should be shared with other scholars and educators in the community at large.

Do not rely on a "one size fits all" approach. Educational reformers have increasingly tried to move away from a cookie-cutter approach to pedagogical and organizational issues that assumes that all schools and all school children need to develop in precisely the same manner, shape, and form. Programs must build upon what already exists and works well in the community. This requires identifying the strengths, interests, and needs of students, their families, and staff, and design strategies that respond to these. Different students have different needs, and different programs will need to be created for different clienteles.

In addition, the following key assumptions serve as important reminders for individuals working in college preparation programs: (a) if properly educated and sup-

ported, minority students and those from urban environments can be as successful in school and college as anyone else; (b) despite evidence that it is best to start early in preventing problems, it is never too late to reach young people; and (c) when colleges get involved with young people and the schools they attend, pronounced benefits accrue not only to students but to their institutions.

Conclusion

To reiterate, early intervention programs came about as educators recognized the need to eradicate poverty and ensure equal opportunities for historically disadvantaged students. The clamor to move toward the establishment of more prevention programs led to the development of the federal Chapter I program to serve economically disadvantaged or historically underrepresented youth in the 1960s, and, more recently, efforts have been made to involve families and to reach students at an increasingly younger age. Some programs focus intensively on strengthening students' academic problem-solving skills, seen as critical to gaining access to future postsecondary education, while also addressing the nonacademic needs of the individual, family, and community.

To be sure, college preparation programs should possess the following: (a) be based on the knowledge that they hold potential for improving both academic and non-academic skills; (b) be able to create greater opportunities for historically underrepresented minority youth not only to enroll in but graduate from college; (c) be typically directed only to those students who would not have gone to college without these services; and (d) be adaptable enough that they are applicable across diverse racial, ethnic, and regional communities. In addition, they should be implemented in collaboration with other school programs and professional activities as part of a continuum of the services available, and parental involvement and accountability must also be incorporated whenever possible.

Year-end evaluations and reports to funding sources often lack the critical information necessary to determine the factors that made the program successful, and funding agencies have also invested significant financial resources in the programs with high expectations for their success, but the funding for proper evaluative studies has been scarce. Existing fiscal allocation, administrative structures, training, staff, and support for research has been insufficient. Accordingly, the goal of this study was to determine what types of college preparation programs are most effective for encouraging and empowering low-income urban youth to enroll in and graduate from college.

We have highlighted components that have been demonstrably effective and successful in serving urban minority youth, implementing programs that can be characterized by a desire to foster creativity and innovation at a local level. The implications of the study are important for educators, policy makers, and administrators of programs who seek to serve economically and educationally disadvantaged students.

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