

Bridging The Educational Gap

Bridging the Educational Gap through College Access Programs

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Abstract

College access and subsequently college attendance rates of students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those who would be first-generation college students are still significantly below second generation students and European-Americans. The gap exists because the dissemination of college information is inconsistent and informal. Short of students taking the initiative to walk into a professional school counselor's office there is no formalized and continuous way to get students the college materials they need. In response, one high school counseling department partnered with a privately-funded college access organization called Collegiate Candidates, Inc. to create such a formalized program. Results indicated that students who participated in the program produced higher college application rates than their non-participant peers.

Bridging the Educational Gap through College Access Programs

The U.S. educational system has made great strides since the struggle for civil rights of the 1960s to increase access to higher education for all Americans. Title I of the Higher Education Act of 1965, for example, is the largest pre-collegiate program geared toward improving access for underrepresented populations (Fallon, 1997). Researchers believe that certain populations of students, namely students of color, students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) and those who would be classified as first-

generation college students, have difficulty accessing education (Erford, 2003; Harvey, 2004; Howard & Levine, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The on-going need for college access programs is apparent. The literature suggests that disparities exist because educators expect less from students of color and those from lower SES, and underestimate the issues associated with being a first-generation college-bound student. In addition, a two-tiered educational system continues wherein European-Americans and/or middle class students receive high-quality, college-tracked curriculum while remedial or less rigorous curriculum is offered to others (Diamond, 2003; Erford, 2003; Goldsmith, 2003; Kahlenberg, 2001; Rodriguez, 2003; Tyson, 2003).

Recent statistics support that college access and subsequently college attendance rates of students of color, students from lower SES and those who would be first-generation college students are still significantly below second-generation students and European-Americans. Consider these facts: (a) the college-going rates for African Americans are 29.7% vs. 37.4% for Caucasians (Chronicle of Higher Education, as cited in Opp, 2001), (b) students from upper-income families are seven times more likely than students from lower-income backgrounds to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 (Hoffman, 2003), and (c) only 27% of first-generation students enroll in a 4-year institution, while 71% of students whose parents have bachelor's degrees do so (Harvey, 2004).

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School Counseling Partnerships with Privately-funded Organizations

The Current College Application Process

The problem identified is that some students are not attending college at as high a percentage rate as their peers because the dissemination of college information is inconsistent and informal. Short of students taking the initiative to walk in to a professional school counselor's (PSC'S) office to obtain information about college and the college application process, there is no formalized and continuous way to get students the material they need. However, it is largely the responsibility of the school counselor to ensure that all students have access to post-secondary options (Erford, 2003; Fallon, 1997; Shill, 1987). This is particularly the case since the college application process has become a source of anxiety and stress for both students and parents (Smith, 1997). PSCs are key to helping students make knowledgeable decisions as they pursue higher education.

Collegiate Candidates, Inc.

In response to the glaring disparities among some populations of students in accessing college, a counseling department at a high school within the greater Atlanta area partnered with a privately-funded college access organization called Collegiate Candidates, Inc. (CCINC) to create a formalized program. CCINC was formed in 2004 to assist underrepresented high school seniors in matriculating into post-secondary options (mainly higher education) by equipping them with the knowledge and resources necessary for making a smooth transition. The program supports on average 30 students, primarily students of color, first-generation and low-income, to participate each year. It is fully staffed by volunteers who work under the direction of CCINC personnel and PSC to give students individualized, college-related attention.

In order to explore the impact of the program in creating access for the high school in this study, a formal assessment was conducted to measure the effectiveness of the program based on two variables: (a) the rate at which students apply to college in comparison to non-participant peers who have similar demographics, and (b) student satisfaction with the workshops and information provided to them throughout the program. As the founder of Collegiate Candidates, Inc. and as a high school counselor, I designed the program assessment to compare the rate at which the student participants applied to

college relative to students from the same demographics who were not participating in the program. I also wanted to examine the extent to which the students made the program an integral exploration into post-secondary options, particularly higher education.

Rationale for Structured College Access Programs

The rationale for writing this article was simple. All students have the right to receive the same information about college in a fair and structured manner. Without a process, the decision of obtaining an education is left to the individual motivation of a student to visit a counselor's office. Or, the decision is left to the time that PSCs have to dedicate to this issue and a plethora of other items simultaneously. One way to ensure that the above does not happen is to create intervention programs, such as the one developed by Collegiate Candidates, Inc, for groups of students that directly impact a need and to share the success with other practitioners

Methods

Participants

The PSCs and Collegiate Candidates, Inc. personnel involved in this study selected 26 high school senior males to participate in the college access program. The majority of students were members of ethnicities of color, derived from a lower socioeconomic background (as determined by their eligibility for free and reduced lunch) and self-identified as first-generation and college-bound. The program developed by CCINC was set up in two phases and took place every 2 weeks for 90 minutes during school hours. Phase I of the program focused on assisting students with the college identification and application process through workshops covering topics such as general admission requirements, financial aid, and writing college admissions essays. The most important and a unique feature of the CCINC program was that the participants had the opportunity to acquire college applications and were given time and assistance during the program hours to complete them. Phase II of the program focused on college access issues such as exploring college majors, getting involved in student organizations and identifying services to support students on campuses. The intervention meeting times rotated on "block" hours so that students did not miss the same class twice in a row. All meetings were supervised by a PSC and during each

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phase of the program, parents and school administrators were kept abreast of program happenings.

Procedures for Evaluation

Two methods were used to measure program outcomes. The first method, used to determine the rate at which students applied to college were students' official transcripts mailed from the high school counseling office to the respective colleges or universities. Transcripts mailed to colleges or universities throughout the year as well as "final" transcripts sent were considered in this study. Final transcripts are those that are mailed after a senior finishes all high school courses required for graduation. The number of students from the Collegiate Candidates, Inc. program who sent off transcripts (throughout the year and "final" transcripts) was compared to the number of students who sent off transcripts (throughout the year and "final" transcripts) from the original pool.

The second method of measuring program outcomes was the use of evaluations given at the conclusion of each workshop. The evaluation captured student satisfaction with workshops and information received during the program. Questions on the workshop evaluation form elicited information regarding how well the students were exposed to various aspects of higher education as a result of participating in the program. The evaluation forms used a 5-point rating scale and were assessed using Microsoft Excel. Excel was chosen as the means of collecting data based on its ease of use. All workshops were evaluated separately in different worksheets of Excel. The data was then merged and averaged in order to rank the workshops from most satisfied to least satisfied.

Results

College Application Rate

Students who participated in the Collegiate Candidates, Inc. program demonstrated higher college application rates than their non-participant peers. It must be noted that the final number of participants was reduced from 26 to 24 for the following reasons: Two of the students' transcript requests could not be considered in the evaluation process because one student entered the armed forces, therefore making a transcript request irrelevant, and the other student did not graduate from high school. Of the 24 remaining participants, 17 students requested to have "final" transcripts mailed to colleges or universities. This represents a 71% application rate versus

the non-participant rate of 20%. The 7 students who did not request transcripts each received three follow-up telephone calls by the researcher. Three of the 7 students could not be located using the information on file with the high school; one student had not received acceptance or rejection letters from the colleges to which he applied and the other three students reported that they were still planning to request transcripts before mid-June.

Workshop Evaluations

Students' satisfaction with the workshops was measured in three areas: Relevancy of the Workshop, Knowledge Gained and Usefulness. The outcomes indicate that as a result of participating in the Collegiate Candidates, Inc. program, students found the workshops to be relevant and valuable to their college application process and significant in helping them gain more knowledge about the college application process and college as a whole. This conclusion is based on the students' 92% overall Satisfaction rate with the workshops, their 94% overall Usefulness rating and their 93% overall Relevancy rating. The highest rated workshop was the College Visit, which received a 97% rating. Other highly-rated workshops included Admissions, Essay Writing, SAT/ACT Prep and Healthy Living. They all received ratings in the mid-to-high 90% range. The Dining Etiquette workshop was received least favorably with an overall average score of 87%. Students did not feel that this workshop was relevant to their admission process, nor did they find it useful.

Limitations to the Study

Although program outcomes indicate benefits to the student participants, a few caveats must be stated. First, since contact could not be made with several students in the Collegiate Candidates, Inc. program and others had not turned in transcript requests before the conclusion of this evaluation, the overall effectiveness of the program in relation to non-participants can only be suggested. The same transcript issues may also apply to students in the control group. Another item for consideration is that although students applied to college and appear to be enrolling due to their actions in sending off final transcripts, there is no way to ensure enrollment short of getting information directly from college admission offices. A limitation of the study was the fact that the 26 high school seniors were chosen from a select group meeting the criteria: students of color, low SES, and self-

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identification as first-generation to be college-bound.

Implications for School Counselors

Implications exist for school counseling departments which desire to partner with privately-funded organizations. First, do these collaborations hurt the integrity of the profession in that it may appear that professional school counselors are not capable of handling the responsibility of preparing students for college? The researcher thinks otherwise. Educating students takes many resources and individuals. Reaching out to stakeholders only strengthens our ability to nurture brighter, more prepared students. Furthermore, partnering with organizations may lead to internships and scholarship opportunities for students that otherwise may not have been available.

Another inference to consider is whether or not relationships between PSCs and the private sector puts public school positions in jeopardy. Will PSCs become obsolete in lieu of consultants who have ready-made programs? The researcher believes otherwise in that PSCs are professionally trained to work with the individual and group needs of all students. PSCs work to develop the whole student. The profession is more than a business—school counselors help build lives.

Finally, PSCs should contemplate the best time in a student's educational career to implement a college access program. Is it too repetitive or do we lose student interest if programs start in elementary or middle school? Are students' minds already made up in high school about their ability to access college therefore making access programs in short "preaching to the choir"? Support exists for such beginnings to happen at the middle school level, yet research shows that college access programs implemented on the high school level can still be effective (Trusty & House, 2004). Often it is the type and intensity of the curriculum and partnerships at this level that can make the difference between the program's success or failure. High school programs should include a component on a college campus or college visits at the minimum, incorporate a mentor program using current college students or college graduates as mentors, assist students with acquiring college applications and financial aid and inform parents every step of the way (Dervarics, 2005; Jacobson, 2004).

Recommendations

The program evaluation did provide data which points

to the benefits of a college access program. However, a few clarifications are in order. First, this assessment did not evaluate all of the organization's goals, which included assessing the students' ability to perform and recall the steps needed to apply to a college or university. In order to more rigorously evaluate the program's worth, additional assessments need to be put into place to measure stated goals and objectives. Other assessments may include qualitative data in the form of focus groups, interviews and essays, and will include other program stakeholders such as professional school counselors, parents and volunteers. Second, it is unclear, given the consistent high scores, whether or not the students took the evaluations seriously. In the future, it should be communicated to students the importance of the evaluation forms and how they are designed to assist the school counseling department in planning future programs. Additional time at the conclusion of each workshop may also be needed to help students process the information contained in each session.

Furthermore, it is going to take a collaborative effort on the part of the stakeholders to ensure that access programs such as Collegiate Candidates, Inc. are adequately meeting the needs of the students and increasing the pools of students ready for the collegiate environment. One example is for the PSCs to obtain periodic grade reports from teachers to make certain that the participants are on track to graduate and are meeting minimal academic requirements for the college. In addition, students would benefit from more face time with their counselors, who are aware of policies and procedures related to the college application and access process. Mentors are also needed to work with the students on a one-on-one basis between formal meeting times to ensure that participants have consistent support outside of school. A supplemental training session should be added to the mentoring program to inform mentors about the college application process as well as the barriers that students of color and first-generation students encounter while going through the application process.

A formalized, on-going college access program has been shown to be beneficial in helping students reach higher education. Partnerships between outside firms and school counseling departments represent a unique response to the challenge of meeting the needs of students glaringly underrepresented in U.S. college enrollment figures. However, in order to provide students with the most effective support, more research needs to be done on the types and outcomes of college transition programs and the effectiveness of such programs in helping students

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apply to higher education. The researcher presenting this article hopes to fill some of that gap.

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