A Pipeline Program for Urban Community Teachers: Standing in the Gap of Achievement and Possibility

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Abstract

"Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow" is a project designed to attract high school students from Paterson, NJ to careers in teaching. This article is based on an exploration of high school students' sense of self, college awareness and preparedness, and academic achievement during a year-long pre-college program. Data indicate that students developed a strong self-concept as capable learners through the structure, activities and opportunities to see themselves accomplishing their academic goals. The program also succeeded in raising college awareness by allowing the students to be on campus and see what it takes to get there and stay there. Finally the program increased student's academic skills through a rigorous, comprehensive curriculum that challenged students at every turn to be their best.

INTRODUCTION

College access and college preparation are widely accepted educational goals. Much of the discussion centers on the ability of high schools to adequately academically and socially prepare students to go and succeed in college. Over the past few decades there has been a proliferation of programs that prepare students to go to college (Bailey and Karp, 2003). Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow (PT4T) is one of those pathways. Started in the spring of 2000, PT4T is a collaborative project between the city of Paterson, NJ, William Paterson University, and a private foundation committed to urban uplift. The program was created to attract talented high school students from Paterson to careers in teaching, prepare them to be effective teaching professionals, and return them to the Paterson Public Schools. The program includes a high school component and a university component. This article provides a discussion on data collected from the high school component[1] which brought four local high school students to the William Paterson University campus.

[1]For a description of the program including structure, components, and theoretical framework, please see Hill & Gillette (2005)

Pre-College Programs

There are many types of college readiness programs (Bailey and Karp, 2003; Thurston, 2009). Some comprehensive programs emphasize "academic rigor and enrichment" while others emphasize this as well as the "social-psychological preparation" for college (Bailey and Karp, 2003; Kleiman, 2001; Tinto, 1993). There are several models that suggest the importance of bringing secondary students onto college campuses prior to applying to college (Bailey and Karp, 2003). Two comparable universities have established similar programs: 1) Fairleigh Dickenson University - The Summer Scholars Program, and 2) Spelman College's college prep and early college summer programs.

Another body of literature examines systems of support for building a "college-going-culture" such as the importance of community, family, friends and university faculty (The College Board, 2006; Jarsky, McDonough & Nunez, 2009; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). The belief is that bringing urban high school students onto campus will provide them with access to resources otherwise inequitably distributed in the local community. In addition students will have the opportunity to engage in on-campus activities and become familiar with the "culture" of higher education—making it less intimidating. Similar to other pre-college programs, the PT4T high school program identified recruitment and participant involvement, college awareness and preparation for higher education, and an increase in students' academic skills through a rigorous comprehensive curriculum as the overarching goals.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in womanist theory (Hill, 2003), a standpoint that embodies a commitment to teaching and community uplift, and the notion that students in urban schools and students of color require life skills that are politically conscious and culturally relevant. A womanist framework believes that a college preparation program must prepare the whole student for the academic, personal, economic, cultural and social rigors of college. Acclimating students to college involves a well rounded experience, one in which the college process is demystified through an academically intensive, personally relevant, culturally significant way.

We also used womanist theory to help direct our methodology. As such, in collecting and analyzing data we were guided by characteristics like using the everyday experience as a criterion for meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the significance of an ethic of care, and the ethic of personal accountability.

This study explored the following research questions:

1. In what ways did participant involvement help students to develop a strong self-concept as capable learners and the feeling of being part of a special group?
2. In what ways did this program raise college awareness and preparation for higher education?

3. In what ways did this program increase students' academic skills through a rigorous and comprehensive curriculum?

METHODOLOGY

Multiple methods were used to create a more complete picture of experiences of the high school students, counselors and staff. Students attended urban state takeover public schools and had varied ethnic backgrounds including: Hispanic, African American, and Afro-Caribbean. There were four phases of data collection which occurred over the three week summer session:1) individual tape-recorded, semi-structured conversational interviews with four high school students, 2) observation of the math class, 3) a focus group with three of the summer/fall students, and 4) a student questionnaire. Pseudonyms were used throughout the paper to maintain participant anonymity. The data analysis consisted of an open coding, theme assessment, more coding and then a pattern analysis (Yin, 1994).

The limitations of this study are that the researchers collected the data over a short period of time and only collected data from some of the participants (notably we were missing many of the male voices from the program). However, it would have been an additional advantage to have followed up the questionnaire with individual interviews to get more in-depth information and to have followed a few cases over time to get in-depth portraits of who succeeds and why.

RESULTS

Being capable learners and part of a special group

"It turned out that it wasn't that hard after all. I just lived the challenge…"

Several of the participants and the instructors noted that the structure of the program and the group cohesiveness helped them to step up and be capable and confident learners. Maria's efforts to "live the challenge" reflect the realities of the students in this program. Maria recalled "I just thought I wasn't able to do it … turned out that it wasn't that hard after all. I just lived the challenge." One of the professors shared a similar insight when she described how "some of them found that they were either nervous or scared about college and [they] also found out that it was more attainable." Part of being a confident, capable learner entailed self-reflection. As Dr. Walker, noted "We had seniors coming in saying… 'I failed a test today in math, I'm gonna need extra help." The program made students reflect and take action around their own learning needs. This is consistent with research that maintains that students who are aware of themselves as learners and set personal goals, do better (Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Schunk, 2003).

Students felt confident and capable within the context of a scaffolded learning environment. Several of the students commented on the program's support system. Keisha, noted that in the program she learned "different ways to solve problems, different ways from what I learned in

school." Elisa commented on learning "Power Point and Publisher and scanning and other things that I didn't know when I was in high school, when I should have learned it."

Part of becoming a confident and capable learner is getting the knowledge one needs. The math professor, Dr. Lorde, noted how she tries to "to cater to their [individual] needs and it's amazing that you can ask 15 students and I can literally see 15 different levels." A literacy professor commented how "there tends to be a rhythm where we know who needs modification, what we need to do if kids haven't been there." One of the elements that make this program work is the self-reflective nature of the design--students, teachers, counselors, tutors are all thinking about the learning that is occurring.

Comments across participants illustrate the role of a nurturing, risk-taking, caring environment in building confident, capable learners. Elisa expressed a common sentiment among the students stating that in the beginning she questioned herself. "Am I going to be alright?" She said that "at first we had to get to know each other…we became a whole family…Then it was easy." Dr. Walker reiterated this sentiment, "I don't think that happens right away. I think students have to go through a trust process first. When students trust each other, they discuss their misunderstandings, ask for help, and make meaning through shared conversations." As they do this they become confident and capable through collective effort.

Raising college awareness and preparedness

"The program helped me learn what I'm supposed to expect from college, and what college expects from me."

All of the students and staff felt that the program raised students' college awareness. Elisa noted that, "The program kinda helped me in college prep, learning what I'm supposed to do, interviews…so many things I should be aware of…I probably wouldn't of been successful in knowing anything about college. I'm the first from my family to graduate from high school…period. Sooo…they were kinda like my parents…you know they helped me a lot." While this kind of parenting – "other mothering" (Hill & Gillette, 2005)--comprises the program's foundation, the high school program also reached out to parents for sustained parental involvement. Brian noted that parents "were invited to campus events and parent dinners" and had opportunities to expose their students to opportunities "they never had."

Both students and staff felt that the program prepared students for succeeding in higher education by watching the experiences of others. One professor noted that "the students got to see the difficulties for navigating entrance to college." Keisha noted that, "It helped me …by teaching me what goes on in a [college] classroom." Dr. Henry commented that the students are exposed to "a wide variety of text that they wouldn't normally interact with in their regular high school classroom …they become more responsible and they are able to talk in small group discussions and do presentations."

This idea of expanding skill sets (to not only mean academic skills but also social and communication skills) was a common thread in the interviews. Elisa commented that "talking to people… that was just something I felt uncomfortable with, it kinda got me out of my shell, cause I get to talk a lot. I think that helped me a lot." Dr. Lorde also spoke about teaching transferable skills, "…preparing them for college courses in general but one of the things I do in math is… is I try to make it around problem solving because that's universal …that should stay with you throughout all of your life." Teaching content and life skills is an example of a kind of other-mothering pedagogy that is rooted in a womanist ethic of care. Teacher educators of color, in particular, practice this type of womanist pedagogy (Hill, 2003).

Another critical component of raising college awareness was being at the university. One of the counselors noted that the students "get the college life experience…just to give them the experience before hand… so that they feel more comfortable being here, before they get here." Keisha described it as "an experience…it was fun, exciting, it was different from going to a regular school." Brian noted, "I just think overall it's a better atmosphere because they are out of their environment…they're getting something, a taste of something. So I think nothing but good can come out of that." In describing the value of coming to study at the university campus, Dr. Walker commented on the magic of possibility:

> Its eye opening…seeing the possibility of themselves is eye opening. I spoke to one parent and she said that her daughter's conversation at home has changed; she said all she talks about now is going to college; and she wasn't talking about that before. So I think that having them on campus, they got the experience that it's doable. College is doable; it's not something that is so farfetched.

By physically being on a college campus, high school students got an opportunity to see themselves as college students, thereby increasing college awareness.

Increasing students' academic skills through a rigorous curriculum

"It was all that-- it was exciting and challenging."

When asked about rigor, the data indicate that students and staff felt that the pre-college program was rigorous, given the time frame, context and possibilities. Keisha noted that "Some of the things you do are a little challenging, but they help you, most of the time so you know what you're doing." Tina, another student described how in the program, "They challenge you to think outside the box."

A common theme that pervaded the conversations about rigor had to do with differentiated instruction. One of the literacy professors noted, "I think we modify based on the students and we make it as rigorous as possible for each." Another professor mentioned, "The fall was very rigorous. It was very intense…We did a lot of pre- and post- assessment. We really tried to differentiate instruction. We had a lot of small groups and provided tutoring and things were

individualized as well as we could." From these comments we see that there was an individualized rigor that permeated the program. Each student was individually held accountable to being the very best they could be.

Another common theme that arose in the discussions about rigor had to do with how attendance interferes with rigor. In commenting on how they had to create a more flexible attendance policy, one professor noted that, "Yes the attendance prevents it being as rigorous as it should be… I mean, for a lot of the kids, work is an issue. Sports is an issue. And a lot of our students attend performing arts school, and they can't miss performances."

Increasing students' academic skills through a comprehensive curriculum

> *"Did we cover everything in 3 hours to make up for inequitable access to a good Paterson education?" No, but was it comprehensive for 3 hours a week? Absolutely*!"

Everyone felt that the program tried to encompass the various needs of the students. Dr. Lorde described an interdisciplinary geometry flag assignment that covered not only math but several other skills, noting that,

> It is global and multicultural and inclusive of other content areas, because they also have to write. I told them, they have to check the grammar, the punctuation and point out to those who brought it to me their errors.

Dr. Walker noted that they "focused on literacy, technology and math and I think what would have made it more comprehensive was science. We touched on geography through math." Brian discussed how "…the program definitely increased literacy skills, study skills, finance skills, interview techniques and things like that. It was comprehensive." Another professor echoed these same sentiments, stating, "It's very comprehensive. …We've really focused on the NY times articles; we had SAT prep; and we had a very successful book club on Saturdays…So many pieces were fit into the three hours."

Exposure to multiple experiences across time raised confidence and academic achievement levels. One student said, "I have improved, because I'm a much better reader….I'm faster." Dr. Lorde had students reflect at the beginning and end of her math courses. At the beginning she asked, "How many of you have been afraid of math? How many of you believe that you don't like math?'" She found "the majority, and sometimes all of them are either afraid of math or don't like math or don't believe that they have the ability to do math" but by the end of the project, students' math anxiety were "significantly reduced" and their progress was reflected in their grades and SAT scores. Program post test results indicated significant increases in math and reading. This was a huge accomplishment and an important area of focus especially in light of the recent National Math Report (April 2008) that notes how much of a gatekeeper math is in our educational system.

All of the participants of the program felt that technological skills increased. The literacy professor compared the change in technology skills between this summer and last summer. In comparing power points from entry to exit she saw,

> …a spectacular difference, you know just being able to use a USB, being able to import pictures, change fonts, being able to express themselves visually, being able to attach files, being able to use different software…Technology has just taken of. It is wonderful.

This program is equipping students with repertoire of 21st century skills (Wagner, 2008) including "technological literacy, oral and written communication, critical thinking, collaboration and ethics" necessary for their future (Symonds & Gonzales, 2009).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The overall program reached its anticipated outcomes by being flexible and responsive to the high school students' needs. Set against the backdrop of the national achievement gap, this program seriously addressed the needs of traditionally underachieving students of color. The implications of this study lead to the following conclusions.

First is the reality that it takes a plethora of human, material and physical resources to successfully implement a college prep program. The deep commitment of the professors, counselors, tutors, program assistant and students was the life-breath of the program. The abundance of material resources –educational materials, equipment, travel and food also contributed to the effective implementation of the program. All of these micro-issues such as transportation to the program, meals and the required resources to do the work, met students in their areas of need and allowed them to focus on learning. The physical resource of the campus setting provided a context for learning, specifically in the context which they were learning about and towards. Given all these resources, students eagerly participated in the program and coming up to the campus for the program poignantly provided them with a wider lens about college life. They gained an insider's perspective- a view from within. They went to college, were taught by college professors, and worked with college students, essentially they had "full access."

Second, scaffolded learning with meaningful activities translated into students feeling like their involvement in this program mattered. The purposeful activities not only encouraged participation but also helped students to achieve the stated goals. The structure of the program held students accountable not only to learning their immediate studies, but also to gaining the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to go to college and succeed. Moreover, students learned that learning is multifaceted and can be approached in many ways, and that as confident and capable learners, they can find a way to do what they set their mind to doing.

The third implication is that academic activities can provide skills, knowledge sets and attitudes that students will need to be successful, not only in high school but also in college. The academic activities built habits of mind such as perseverance, effort and confidence. The

activities were designed in such a way that the subject matter, the educational methods and the various events, all engaged the students. The staff had a way of making it plain and accessible.

Moreover, students not only gained many valuable academic skills, but also many social ones such as learning how to get along with others, communicating in front of others and problem solving. Integrating these skills across the curriculum provided purposeful practice. Students had to read, write and use technology across the curriculum as an integral part of their learning. While student's academic skills increased, so did the possibility of themselves as college students and as teachers able to change the lives of families and communities like their own. Students were empowered, and as such, they began to bridge a gap of achievement and possibility.

CONCLUSION

There were several significant findings from this study. The first was that this program stood in the gap in several ways. It stood in the achievement gap, raising academic levels of traditionally underachieving students and preparing them to go on and succeed in college. It stood in the home-school gap, by being the liaison between potential first generation college students and their high schools and universities. It taught them, as one student poignantly noted, "what they should have learned" in high school. Moreover, it taught students the skills they needed to succeed when they got college. The program stood in the possibility gap by empowering students to see the possibility of themselves in college through success and achievement.

We have found that the tenets of a womanist framework - involving a well rounded, comprehensive, soul/mind/body deep approach to college preparation is a "promising practice" in terms of helping ethnic minority students go to and thrive at college. Policymakers and educators should consider the following areas for further research: 1) the importance of first generation parents as partners on the pathway to college, 2) the importance of metacognitive practices on student confidence and achievement, and 3) the intentional integration of 21st century skills across preparation coursework.

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