

# **Authentic Engagement for Promoting a College-Going Culture**

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## **Abstract**

The United States has lost ground internationally as a leader in educational attainment. Personal empowerment, national economic progress, and democratic ideals are enhanced through education, yet inequalities persist in the educational attainment of certain groups, such as low-income families or underrepresented minorities. Because the evolving economic landscape increasingly demands a diverse, highly trained, and well-educated labor force to fill the kinds of jobs required of the information age, the United States cannot afford to let large portions of its population languish educationally. Higher education outreach efforts to engage communities and promote the broad embrace of a college-going culture are seen as vital to achieving increased educational attainment.

## **Introduction**

**A**n important role of education is to prepare young people for the future, including preparation for productive work and for involved citizenship. The United States was the first major country to offer free public education for all (*Church & Sedlak, 1976*), and doing so served its purposes well, providing a workforce well-suited to meet the labor needs of the industrial revolution and of manufacturing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But as the country's economy continues to evolve, the kinds of skills and abilities needed for productive work and citizenship evolve as well. The United States has gone from an essentially agrarian economy, requiring little formal education, through an industrial/manufacturing economy that required some formal education, to an increasingly service-providing and information-based economy, requiring specialized knowledge and facility with automated systems, symbolic language, and interpretive skills, which are developed in postsecondary education. Moreover, throughout this economic evolution, the country has become an increasingly diverse society as evidenced by expanding ethnic, racial, and religious groups comprising the population of the United States. Today, education remains the primary source for upward mobility and acculturation, yet significant inequalities are evident, particularly as concerns access to college where higher order skills

are developed. One approach for addressing both future labor force needs and persistent inequalities of college access is for higher education to engage with communities to promote college interest and preparation. This essay describes the context for such engagement as well as the development of an educational outreach center at the University of Michigan that promotes the creation of a college-going culture in schools and communities.

### **College Participation: In the United States**

Attainment of a college degree is generally recognized as beneficial to its holder, including such advantages as higher income, greater job security, and better health (*Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010*). However, at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States confronts a decline in the educational attainment of its population. This is so with respect to high school completion rates, and particularly so at the postsecondary level, where the percentage of the U.S. population holding a postsecondary credential or degree has remained essentially unchanged for more than 40 years (*Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan, 2009*). In contrast, other countries have experienced a different trend. For example, college enrollment in China grew at an annual rate of nearly 20% between 1995 and 2003 (*Jones, 2002*). More generally, according to the *2010 Education at a Glance* report of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. now ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in the percentage of 25-34-year-olds holding a postsecondary degree among the 30 industrialized countries composing the OECD (*OECD, 2010*).

These are troubling trends. The United States was the first country to establish public schooling for all and among the first to extend the option of postsecondary education to anyone seeking it (*Longanecker, 2008*). However, this egalitarian orientation has suffered in recent years as the gap in college participation rates between low-income and all college-going students in the U.S. has widened, increasing by 50% between 1998 and 2008; low-income students now attend college at a much lower rate (18.2% lower) than the college

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attendance rate for all students (*Mortenson, 2010*). Moreover, according to the U.S. Congress Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid (*ACSEFA, 2010*), among students deemed “most qualified” for college, based on a measure of academic preparation, low-income students enroll in college at a rate of only 55%, compared to 86% for high-income students.

Similarly, high school persistence and graduation rates in the United States have actually trended downward for more than 40 years, having peaked in 1967 at about 77% (*Barton, 2005*); today about 74% of entering high school freshmen graduate from high school 4 years later (*Greene, 2002; Stillwell, 2010*). The U.S. national high school completion rate appears higher in some documentation because the Census Bureau includes those who earn a General Education Diploma (GED) among its count of high school graduates. Thus, regular high school graduation is augmented by students who earn the GED, bringing the overall high school completion rate in the United States to about 89%. In reality, the increasing number of students earning a GED masks a decline in diplomas awarded for completing high school in 4 years (*Barton, 2005; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003; Sum, 2003*). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), each year about 3.5% of high school students drop out; this means that more than 3 million students have dropped out of high school, representing more than 8% of the 37 million 16-24-year-olds in the United States (*NCES, 2010*). Ominously, the drop-out rate for students in low-income families is 10 times that of students in high-income families (*Chapman, et al, 2010*).

About a quarter of the students in the United States who start high school do not graduate with a standard diploma. The situation is worse for students in low-income families, creating an additional burden on economic progress as the potential of low-income students to contribute to economic activity is limited (*Darling-Hammond, 2010*). In fact, as noted by the OECD (2009):

A well-educated and well-trained population is essential for the social and economic well-being of countries. Education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to participate effectively in society and in the economy. It also contributes to the expansion of scientific and cultural knowledge. (p. 28)

Stagnation in educational attainment, lagging postsecondary attendance in comparison to that in other countries, and

inequitable college participation rates do not augur well for the United States labor force of the future. Indeed, a report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (*Carnavale, Smith, & Stroh, 2010*) shows that fully 60% of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education by 2018. Thus, there is a clear imperative to improve educational attainment rates, not just for the personal empowerment that education provides, but also for the common good through the contributions a well-trained labor force makes to economic progress and democratic ideals. Such sobering data has led to calls from the College Board (*2008*), the Lumina Foundation (*2010*), and even the President of the U.S. to increase college attainment in the United States from the current 38% to 55-60% by the year 2025.

Researchers have identified several targets of opportunity for addressing barriers to educational attainment. Tierney, et al. (*2009*) recommend building peer and adult support for college-going aspirations, assisting students in completing critical steps for college entry, and helping students to become aware of their level of preparation for college. Similarly, members of the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) suggests providing information to students and parents on college costs, available financial aid resources (e.g., Pell Grants), and early efforts to encourage college-going aspirations (*IHEP, 2010*). Others recommend providing information on steps involved in college enrollment, such as course selection in high school, the college application process, and financial aid awareness, including the importance of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (*FAFSA; Hahn & Price, 2008*). The Lumina Foundation emphasizes “significant changes in the nation’s post-secondary system,” foremost being a need to recognize that it is necessary to increase the rate at which students enroll in and complete college by developing programs and services that expand and strengthen college access and completion (*Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010*). Similarly, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) has emphasized the development of outreach programs, especially to pre-eighth graders (*Education Commission of the States, 2001*).

These recommendations amount to a call for greater outreach and engagement with students, parents, schools, and communities to inform them about college opportunities and resources, to encourage sound academic preparation for college, and to improve knowledge about the college application and college-going process. An important element in fulfilling these targets of opportunity is the involvement of colleges and universities as authentic partners with those who support, prepare, and encourage

students to seek college access (e.g., teachers, counselors, or community organizations) rather than for the higher education community to serve merely as the passive recipients of the students who happen to show up at the college doorstep. Too often those who actually enroll in college are from an elite segment of society: those who are from high-income families, who reside in affluent communities, and whose parents are themselves college graduates. As the Lumina Foundation (2010) has emphasized, addressing the nation's decline in educational attainment will require not only increasing completion rates, but also improving college participation from a broader range of students, including students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. Indeed, students from low-income families represent only about 8.7% of bachelor's degrees among the 18-24-year-old cohort, compared to 54.2% for students from high-income families (Mortensen, 2009).

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Recognizing these needs and issues, colleges can advance the educational attainment agenda by implementing programs of outreach to promote college-going and academic excellence among target students, especially low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students, for whom the evidence indicates are less likely to pursue higher education.

This essay details efforts by one university to reach out to students, parents, and communities with programs designed to employ recommended strategies to promote college-going. At the University of Michigan, a university-wide initiative was implemented to reach out to students and communities across the state for the purpose of promoting a college-going culture.

## **The Context for Educational Outreach in Michigan**

In many ways, the state of Michigan exemplifies the declining fortunes that accompany relatively low college completion rates. Michigan has a long history as a manufacturing state, which had offered high-paying jobs that did not require postsecondary training. Today, Michigan has one of the nation's

highest unemployment rates, hovering at about 13% during the 2007-2009 recession, while the nationwide unemployment rate has been about 9%. Michigan also ranks about 33<sup>rd</sup> of the 50 states in terms of the current population of adults who hold at least a college degree (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010*). Moreover, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, more than 60% of Michigan's jobs over the next decade will require postsecondary education (*Carnavale, Smith, & Strolh, 2010*). Among Michigan's current workforce population (those between 24 and 64 years of age), only about 35% hold at least an associate's degree. Even among those 18-24 years old, college participation is not keeping pace with projected need. For 2008, the college participation rate for all 19-year-olds in Michigan was 42.3%; for low-income students it was 35% (*Mortenson, 2010*). For African Americans, college participation was 23%; for Hispanics and Native Americans, it was 21% and 22%, respectively (*Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010*).

The matter is made even more urgent by voter-initiated legislation prohibiting affirmative action in college admissions. In Michigan, a voter referendum prohibiting affirmative action in public university admissions or public employment was passed in 2006. Despite the 2003 landmark Supreme Court decision allowing race or gender as one of many factors that may be considered to achieve the compelling state interest of a diverse student body, the passage of such acts prohibits doing so in practice as a matter of state law. The predictable effect is to reduce college enrollment by underrepresented youth at flagship state universities, as has been seen in states where similar laws have been enacted, such as California, Washington state, and now Michigan. Although underrepresented populations constitute more than a third of the college-age population in the United States, they represent only about 26% of all undergraduates (*National Academy of Sciences, 2010*). Consequently, ratcheting up college participation rates requires reaching out to diverse communities to inform, encourage, and engage. At the University of Michigan, compliance with the anti-affirmative action legislation likewise resulted in a decline in underrepresented student enrollment, but much less than was the case in California or Washington state. Among the reasons for the University of Michigan's relative continued progress in achieving a diverse student body was not only the addition of more admissions officers to conduct holistic reviews of applications, but also more efforts to reach out to students across the state, including the establishment of an outreach center to advance the idea of increasing college participation rates through both a centralized university

office, and the coordination of numerous independently operated existing university programs.

### **Authentic Engagement with Communities**

Zuiches (2010) has identified five themes that undergird authentic engagement and provide a framework for understanding the outreach efforts developed at the University of Michigan. According to Zuiches, authentic engagement

- reflects collaborative, reciprocal, and scholarly work, and builds the capacities of all partners;
- requires active involvement in communities as well as shared mission and vision;
- values and engages diversity of people, expertise, and culture;
- uses authentic processes for learning, teaching, integrating, and investigating in and with communities; and
- is built upon institutional philosophies and core values embedded in democracy, collaborative leadership, and mutual respect (*p. ii*).

Such principles for engagement with communities, as outlined by Zuiches, form a compelling rationale for the steps taken by the University of Michigan to establish an educational outreach center, and are representative of the kinds of efforts that were employed in reaching out to schools and community organizations.

### **The University of Michigan: Steps Taken to Establish a Center for Educational Outreach**

The University of Michigan is a publicly-chartered, state-assisted institution with its main campus located in Ann Arbor. The Ann Arbor campus enrolls about 41,000 students, and includes professional schools in dentistry, law, medicine, and pharmacy. Two branch campuses conduct research and provide undergraduate education. The University of Michigan-Dearborn has about 8,725 students in four schools and colleges. The University of Michigan-Flint has four schools and 6,500 students. The university's instructional staff numbers about 5,000, with a non-instructional staff of 26,000, for a total employment of 31,000. The university awards about 11,500 degrees each year.

The university is committed to a diverse and vital university community as an essential part of the culture and fabric of its campus. It is a leader in the defense of diversity in higher education and in its research programs on the value of diversity in education. The University of Michigan's leadership in the fight for the right to create a diverse campus community is reflected in its pursuit of the matter all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The landmark 2003 Supreme Court decision endorsing diversity in higher education as a compelling state interest served as the model for the nation with respect to enrolling a diverse student body. Despite the university's victory at the Supreme Court, or perhaps because of it, a state constitutional amendment was proposed and passed (Proposal 2) in 2006, which prohibited affirmative action in college admissions and, as a result, reduced student body diversity at the University of Michigan. In response, the university established a Center for Educational Outreach in 2007 for the purpose of promoting academic excellence and the development of a college-going culture in communities across the state. The author of this article is the founding director of that center.

A first step in developing the Center for Educational Outreach (the Center) was to identify existing outreach and partnership efforts on the campus. Fortunately, prior work by the University of Michigan's School of Education had identified a list of more than 200 educational outreach programs offered on the campus. Using that base, the Center's staff canvassed other programs and ultimately identified over 300 outreach efforts offered by university departments and offices. In addition, more than 70 educational outreach efforts conducted by student organizations were identified. Both sets of programs were compiled into a searchable database and made available via the Center's website (<http://ceo.umich.edu/>) so that students, parents, teachers, and others could easily locate information about the variety of programs available. This step also allowed communities to be engaged with information about the kinds of programs and resources the university could offer, while providing a basis for community stakeholders to help identify services or programming areas they felt still needed to be addressed. A university outreach council was established to provide regular opportunities for outreach staff members to share information, network, and collaborate.

A second step in the development of the Center was engaged scholarship with a wide range of stakeholders, both within and outside the university, in order to identify problems, priorities, and potential solutions. On the campus, this took the form of a series of interviews with deans and program directors to review existing



efforts as well as to explore opportunities for collaboration or for launching new initiatives. A similar effort took place with constituencies outside the university, and involved a series of consultations with school officials (e.g., principals or superintendents), community agency directors, as well as University of Michigan alumni who resided in communities where Center activities would be offered. In doing so, the authors gained an understanding of the kinds of programs or services that would be most useful to schools or agencies that had an interest in promoting a college-going culture in communities.

In turn, as the Center's staff was put together, a concerted effort was made to select those who could contribute to the development of programs that addressed the problems and priorities which had emerged from consultations with target communities. The newly hired staff members were charged with developing programs that would respond to the expressed interests of those communities. The result has been the development of a series of innovative and engaging programs and services that reach out to young people and to their teachers/supporters, and that emphasize a shared commitment to academic excellence, to the goal of college attendance, and to cultivating knowledge about the college-going process.

Through active involvement with communities, the Center's staff learned that educators, students, and parents were interested in programs and partnerships that would

- help raise awareness among students about academic readiness for college;
- help students understand that their college aspirations were realistic and that resources (i.e., financial aid) were available to help finance college attendance;
- provide students with opportunities to visit college campuses and learn firsthand what the experience is like;
- inform students about the college admissions process, including the roles of grades, standardized tests, and personal essays in college admissions;
- provide direct classroom management assistance to teachers;
- help parents understand the role they play in encouraging academic excellence (particularly parents of first-generation students);

- provide educational enrichment activities for students beyond the classroom; and
- provide opportunities for interaction with “near peer” college students (i.e., role models who demonstrate “I can do it, so can you!”).

Queries of community members and school personnel confirmed that developing and offering such programs would represent precisely the kinds of targets of opportunity identified by researchers for expanding college access (*Swail, 2000; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005*). At the same time, the Center’s staff sought to establish programs that were consistent with their own institutional goals, and thus emphasized the creation of programs that had a focus on service, leadership, diversity, and knowledge creation/sharing.

Among the problems and priorities that emerged from engagement with schools and communities, only one seemed to be outside the Center’s purview, and that was the desire for university personnel to provide direct assistance in the classroom. Such a role was considered not only impractical (due to such constraints as competing commitments, distance, or distinct academic calendars), but also inconsistent with certain tenets of academic freedom or teacher union contracts. Moreover, such classroom-based involvement is already provided by existing teacher education programs. However, the Center’s staff members were confident that they could develop a set of programs that would address the other concerns and interests that had been expressed. Some programs were developed and offered expressly by the Outreach Center, while others were offered in partnership with other university programs and with schools or community organizations.

Engaged scholarship with stakeholders as well as a review of best practices and institutional goals led Outreach Center staff to develop outreach programs that fell into four broad categories: (a) information and exposure, (b) talent development, (c) educational enrichment, and (d) leadership development.

The process of engaging with stakeholders can take different forms, including the kinds of consultations with stakeholders mentioned above, and deserves some comment. Thus, two examples of the engagement processes used are described in more detail here. Although these two examples do not exhaust the variety of ways the Center has employed engaged scholarship, they are nonetheless representative of the process, which actually entails multiple forms of interaction, mutual consultation and feedback, and coordinated program development.

**Table 1. Center for Education Outreach Program Types, Descriptions, and Examples**

Program Type	Description
Information and exposure	Programs that provide information and expose the K-12 population to the experiences and possibilities provided by a higher education
Talent development	Programs that focus on developing interests and abilities among students for specific fields or disciplines
Educational enrichment	Programs that supplement existing educational pursuits
Leadership development	Programs that assist students in developing and honing leadership skills

In the first example, the Center was approached by school representatives seeking assistance in addressing a persistent achievement gap for certain groups of students in the district. The school district assembled statistics on the extent of the problem, and together the Center's staff and school representatives explored intervention strategies. A general intervention model was crafted, and discussions concerning it were held with the district superintendent, school principals, and counseling staff. This was followed by drafting a partnership agreement detailing the roles to be played by the school district and by the Center in implementing the intervention program. Once commitments were secured and a program developed, meetings were held with parents and with students, describing what was planned and seeking their commitment to participate. The result was a cohort-based intervention strategy that involved a leadership course offered in the school, as well as after-school tutoring and mentoring by university students, educational enrichment field trips to campus, and a summer camp experience. Preliminary results indicated that participating students are performing well in school (mean grade point average of 3.2 in freshman year of high school), that their college aspirations are strong, and that students, parents, and school staff members are pleased with progress to date.

The second example involves a different approach, and is rooted in the university's partnership with a national organization to provide college advising staff for work assignment in under-resourced schools. In this example, the process began with the Center reaching out to school superintendents describing the program and services that could be offered and inviting the school district to consider participation. If the school district responded with interest in partnering, the Center's

staff members met with the superintendent and any designated school staff members to describe in detail the project and the commitments required. If both parties agreed to proceed, then a memorandum of understanding was drafted and adopted. School representatives were invited to campus to meet candidates for assignment to their particular school and to provide their input on the suitability of candidates for such assignment. For this program the university, with philanthropic support, provides salary and supervision for the assigned staff, while the school district provides office space and support. Preliminary results from this project are very promising. Students in the school report having a more positive attitude toward college-going, gaining more information about their college options, and dramatically increasing the number of college applications submitted. Similarly, reports from district superintendents, principals, and school counselors independently confirm that the program is having its intended effect in terms of a broadly changed attitude in the schools concerning the prospect of attending college. Such preliminary results are encouraging, but more formal evaluations will be forthcoming as programs mature and sufficient data is collected across the different programs and for multiple years.

### **Outreach Initiative**

The national imperative to improve college-going and completion rates has spurred a wide range of initiatives and argues forcefully for increased involvement by colleges and universities to address the issue. Doing so is widely recognized to require outreach to students, educators, and communities to encourage the development or expansion of a college-going culture among communities other than the higher income families that already send a high percentage of their children to college. The initiative at the University of Michigan represents one response to the challenge

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and has resulted in the creation of new programs as well as collaborative efforts with existing programs that currently reach

thousands of students. Specific examples are represented by Table 2, which lists some of the programs offered either directly by the outreach center or in partnerships with schools, as well as student-initiated efforts supported by the Center.

**Table 2. Representative Educational Outreach Programs Developed Through Engaged Scholarship**

Program Name	Partner Organization	Purpose	Number of Students Served	Engaged Stakeholders
College Corps	2 regional high schools	Build student awareness of college options and the level of preparation needed for admission	97	Principal, counselors, parents
Michigan College Advising Corps	8 high schools across the state	Place full-time college advisors in underserved high schools to promote college access and success	9,444	District superintendent, principals, counselors
Rising Scholars	3 local high schools	Address the achievement gap by providing academic enrichment and talent development programs for underserved students	97	District superintendent and staff, principals, counselors, parents, and students
Future U	4 underserved middle schools	Develop interests and abilities in academic fields among middle school students through workshops and field trips	125	Parents, principals
Camp KinoMaage	12 Native American tribes	Develop interests and abilities in STEM fields among Native American middle school students through a residential field experience in biology	20	Tribal education directors, university faculty, community organization directors
Real On College	Schools, community organizations, churches	Strengthen personal leadership skills, community involvement, and thoughtful consideration of college aspirations	5,107	Parents, ministers, community organization directors, school personnel
Students for Educational Equality	University students	Promote academic achievement through afterschool activities, including near-peer mentoring, tutoring, and standardized test preparation workshops	183	Principals, parents, counselors, college students

## Engaged Scholarship: Challenges

Engaged scholarship does not just happen, even when well-meaning university faculty members and researchers present themselves offering resources; rather, engagement interactions need to be well-planned and carried out with due consideration given to the needs and sensibilities of the communities to be served. Outreach Center staff have learned from their experience that certain realities must be kept in mind and that outreach efforts and partnerships with schools need to reflect these realities. For instance:

- School calendars and university calendars often do not match; thus, university students serving as mentors or tutors, for example, may not be available at times when schools may wish most to have them present. Therefore, the duration and nature of commitment to be provided by university personnel should be spelled out in advance.
- Similarly, even when university personnel (students, faculty, or staff) are available to offer programs or services, the timeliness of the activity is important. Will the program be offered in school, after school, or on weekends? A simple matter like when or where a program is offered can dramatically affect participation.
- Teachers and counselors have their own sets of duties and responsibilities to carry out, so even well-intentioned university-sponsored intervention or outreach programs can be seen as intrusive, burdensome, or even threatening. Thus, an engaged scholarship approach involving consultation with school staff members and seeking their input and advice prior to any program implementation should be an important element.
- School districts are run by superintendents, but schools are run by principals. Thus, leadership and culture in the individual school must be an important consideration for outreach and engagement. An emphasis on postsecondary education (i.e., college attendance) as inherent to the school's culture should be a persistent and routine matter for school leaders.
- Parental support can be critical to the success of intervention or engagement programs aimed at students. Thus, the importance of communicating with parents to enlist their support and encouragement cannot be overemphasized.

## Conclusion

This essay has described the context and development of a university-based educational outreach and engagement center, and represents progress made in the 3 years since the program's inception as well as its continued commitment to authentic engagement with constituent communities. Although much work remains to be done, and challenges continue to evolve, Outreach Center staff are quite encouraged by the sense of engagement that has been demonstrated by their partners, both those within the university and those outside it. The Center has created more than a dozen ongoing outreach programs, and has now placed full-time advisors in 15 high schools with plans to expand to 24 advisors; it has hosted thousands of middle and high school students in programs and on campus visits, as well as hosted statewide conferences on promoting college access; and it has formed partnerships with several middle and high schools. In addition, the Center has worked with teachers and principals to bring educational enrichment activities to students and has conducted numerous workshops on college participation and access.

Although it is too early in its development to provide a formal evaluation, initial reports on program impact are quite promising. For example, survey questionnaires administered to participants in Center programs yield overwhelmingly positive reactions, with more than 80% of respondents indicating their satisfaction with information and activities that were provided. In unsolicited reports, both spoken and written, school principals and counselors not only indicated that they were pleased and appreciative of the Center's efforts in their schools, but also shared their conclusion that the programs were having positive impacts in terms of student interest and motivations. Moreover, students themselves have expressed their gratitude for the opportunities provided

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by their participation in the Center activities, as well as their impression that their attitudes about school and about college have undergone positive changes. In addition to such impressionistic responses, the authors have hard evidence of impact, such as dramatic increases in the number of applications submitted for

college admission, the number of FAFSA forms completed, and the number of scholarships awarded to program participants in partner schools. Formal evaluations are in the design stage and will be conducted as the Center matures, but early evidence is quite encouraging.

All of the Center's efforts have as their goal an emphasis on the creation of a college-going culture in communities, particularly but not exclusively those communities with significant numbers of underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation college students. By encouraging academic excellence while in school and representing college attendance as a realistic and attainable aspiration, the authors expect authentic outreach and engagement to have a long-term impact on college enrollment, success, and graduation for diverse students.

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