

Promoting a College Going Culture in First Generation Students through Early Intervention

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Abstract

This article describes a college readiness program that was implemented for first-generation students in the 5th and 6th grades. It includes a description and rationale for the program, as well as, a discussion of the results obtained with the program over a two-year period. Results were measured by the number of students taking pre-advanced classes, interviews with student participants, and interviews with instructors and staff who worked with the program. The results indicate that the program has had an important impact on students' college preparedness behaviors (taking pre-advanced courses) and in their habits and dispositions about school. This case study has the potential to serve as a model for other communities in working with an early intervention model to help students prepare for a future where college is not only a possibility but also an intentional goal.

Keywords: First generation, college going culture, early intervention, mentoring, aspirational activities, college readiness, summer programs

1. Introduction

The case study description of a single college readiness program presented in this article looks at the program components of a community based effort to work with first generation students and their families from as early as the 5th grade to help them aspire to and prepare for college. The program is just in its third year in its current format. Preliminary results are measured by students that are taking pre-advanced courses in middle in preparation for college entry requirements in high school. The same group of students will continue to be studied and new cohort of students will be added at the 5th and 6th grade levels each year.

2. Literature Review

There are several strategies for helping students to develop college readiness. College readiness has been linked to parental in engagement in postsecondary planning for many years. Kiyama (2011) states, "The role of families, their values in terms of education, and their involvement in education processes contribute to whether students experience a college-going culture." (p. 23). When looking at first-generation college readiness reaching out to and involving parents is particularly important (Bosworth, Convertino, & Hurwitz, 2014). Not only is it necessary to engage parents of first generation students to assist their kids in preparing for college, it is also imperative to explain to them how to accomplish what is be asked of them (Martinez, Cortez, and Saenz, 2013).

Additionally, *relabeling*, or socializing students and their families "who have been viewed historically as not 'college material,' to see themselves as college-bound professionals" has been shown to have an important college readiness impact (Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2015, p. 313). Finally, mentoring as a strategy for developing college readiness has been studied. Radcliffe and Bos (2011) list five goals for college readiness that are addressed by mentoring: students understand the nature of college, students recognize that a college education may be important to their future success, students gain positive perceptions and aspirations about college, students prepare academically for college admission, and students set short and long term goals consistent with a college-going culture.

Waiting for high school to address college readiness may be too late for many students. According to Gaerner and McClarty (2015, p. 20), “Middle-school factors explain 69% of the variance in college readiness, and results suggest a variety of factors beyond academic achievement—most notably motivation and behavior—contribute substantially to preparedness for postsecondary study. For this reason, some programs have developed models that work with students for over a seven-year time period (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). The nature of the longitudinal work with students creates the necessity for college readiness initiatives that include close ties between schools, families, and community leaders and take place not only in the academic classroom (Ozuna, Saenz, Ballysingh, and Yamamura, 2016). They discuss these stakeholders seeing the necessity to address with students areas such as: time management, self-responsibility, and negotiating diverse environments. Finally, they express that their findings reveal, “that in order to improve college readiness, there is a compelling need to promote the development of co-curricular academic skills and to explore multiple stakeholder perspectives’ to make a collective impact” (p. 175).

Mudge and Higgins (2011) have developed a holistic framework for academic success and college/career readiness. Specific elements included in the framework include: climate/affective considerations, instructional/cognitive variables, and systemic/developmental variables. This framework can contribute to creating “horizon-expanding” networks within the family network that may assist in reaching positive educational outcomes.

3. Program Description

In an effort to promote a college going cultural in 5th and 6th graders, 40 students and their families were invited to participate in the Road to College program. Students were chosen from 2 elementary schools and 2 middle schools within the school district. Students were nominated by their school principals. The nominated students came from the middle 80 percent of students. The nominated students were then interviewed with their parents. Twenty students and their parents from each school participated in a six-week evening program which dealt with college readiness. Each group of twenty participated in the program that was held at their school. From the 80 completers, 40 students were chosen for the summer Road to College program.

Students who participated in the summer Road to College program attend 6-hour sessions three days a week for six weeks held at a local community college. The brain based instructional strategies included: including movement/physical activity, including outdoor activities, experiential learning, learning in groups and teams. The classes were held at a local community college. Classes included: math, reading, and writing with instruction given in gender divided groups. The summer portion of the program ends with an aspirational field trip for all of the students to the NASA center in Houston. Finally, students and parents attend a program graduation ceremony.

After completing the summer portion of the program, students were followed by a mentor. The mentors were college students who were all also first -generation college students. The mentors worked with the students during the summer program. During the school year the mentors, who each had about 10 students, called each of their students each week and went to the school to visit with the students each week. Additionally, students attended one tutoring session a month on a Saturday to help them with any academic issues they might be having.

The program was implemented in a district of 14,600 students in a city with a population of approximately 100,000 people. The district includes 16 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 3 high schools.

The program was funded by a local non-profit organization whose mission includes providing educational opportunities students in the community. The non-profit received grant funding from various foundations, as well as, funding from individual donations and community organizations. The non-profit contracted the work of the program to a local educational consultant.

4. Program Results

One of the goals of the program is to get students to choose to take advanced courses (ie. pre Advanced Placement, pre International Baccalaureate) to help prepare them for post secondary education. This program has been implemented two consecutive years. After the first year implementation, 83% of the students took advanced courses the following school year. This is compared to less than 50% for the rest of the district. The following year 33 of 41 students took advanced classes after participating in the program. Seven of the remaining 8 students were unable to choose advanced classes because they were 5 graders continuing the following year in 6th grade in an elementary school where advanced courses are unavailable. Forty students mentored 224 hours during the school year. They were also provided 24 hours of academic tutoring throughout the academic year.

An example of the impact of the program is captured in the testimonial of Daisy. Daisy is a 6th grader who describes being shy, undisciplined in school and not real concerned with eating healthy. She participated in the Road to College program in the 2015-16. Now Daisy likes to share with others how she has grown as a result of the program. She feels more outgoing and willing to interact with others. She also says that school seems easier now and she is doing better. She even talks about how she is more conscious of what she eats and feels healthier. She has had the opportunity to share her experiences with other students and parents and encourage them to make the most of the Road to College program as she has.

5. Conclusions

Other schools or educational organizations could benefit from examining the structure of this program and the brain based instructional practices in order to develop or refine their own college readiness efforts. The use of this type of program with students at a young age allows for continuous growth and preparation beginning at the 6th or 7th grade. Shareable lessons learned as delineated by program teachers, mentors, and staff: begin by involving the parents, social/familial aspect of learning is an essential starting point, social component of learning is important in developing belief and grit in students, experiential learning impactful for student engagement.

6. References

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