Breaking Down Barriers for Low-Income College Bound Students: a Case-Study of Five College Access Programs

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Abstract
For this case study, a descriptive mixed methods research approach was used to evaluate the components and best practices college access advisers used to influence low-income and first generation college bound students’ matriculation into postsecondary school. Qualitative data consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with each of the five advisers followed by observations of the advisers using the College Access Tool of Evaluation (CATE). Quantitative data was collected using a Teacher Survey that asked teachers to reflect on the college going culture of the school. When given effective social supports and college going opportunities, low-income and first generation students can matriculate into universities.

Key words: College access, first generation college bound students, low-income students, social supports

Introduction
This paper focuses on the way college access programs in the United States can institutionally build the social and cultural capital necessary for college enrollment through the use of college access advisers. The research to be presented highlights the opportunities and best practices of these college access advisers and how they may affect the overall culture of the school.

As a college degree becomes the necessary avenue towards a middle class lifestyle, these findings and previous research on this topic become more relevant and significant to the field of education. Therefore, it becomes extremely important to understand the methods and strategies that are effective for increasing the college going rates and greater representation of low-income and first generation students in colleges and universities.

Background
In the United States, one’s academic success may be dictated at birth depending on his or her social class. The chance of attending a high quality school is much higher for wealthy students than for poorer students (ACT, 2013). Accordingly, success in school is linked to social class. Public school districts draw their students from the residential areas that surround them. Families with similar incomes chose to live in similar areas separating themselves from less wealthy
districts; therefore, schools in America are segregated by social class. In addition, because the percentage of minority students living in poverty is so high, schools are covertly segregated by race as well (Santow & Rothstein, 2012).

The belief that hard work will lead to the American Dream of obtaining a good job, owning your own home, and planning for your children to one day do the same, is quickly fading into the past, especially for those living in poverty. In a recent survey conducted by the ACT, most Americans believe that all students regardless of their race or current economic status should have the opportunity to obtain the American Dream (2013). However, they also demonstrate a belief in homogenous school settings. Often, there is a perception that a school of racial and socioeconomic diversity is less desirable than a school where students come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Once a school begins to diversify, higher income families often perceive the school to lose its quality and move their students to a more homogenous school. Consequently, schools are segregated by family income (Cashin, 2005). The gaps in resources between poor and wealthy schools place low-income students at a great academic disadvantage and drastically impair their chances of obtaining a college education (Barnes & Slate, 2010; Cashin, 2005; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Marina & Holmes, 2009; Sanbonmatsu, et al., 2006). Since a college education is linked to better health, higher employment rates, and longer life expectancy, many low-income students are pre-destined for a lower quality of life.

**The need for college access programs**

It is clear that equal educational opportunities for all students are much needed in the United States. According to Boehner and McKeon, “Education is the great equalizer in our nation. It can bridge economic and racial divides like no other force. It can mean the difference between an open door and a dead end and nowhere is this truer than in higher education” (2003). This statement is the foundational belief of college access programs. First generation and low-income college bounds students, who are new to the option of college, need the advice and guidance of specialists who are fluent in the college going process. The primary motivation for this case study was to uncover the best practices college access advisers use to affect student aspirations and matriculation into college and other postsecondary institutions.

The college access advisers in this study serviced students living under the circumstances mentioned above. The students attended a high school that was chosen to be the study site because of its unique history and diverse student body. The high school and district are the result of the last race based forced court ordered desegregation case in the United States. The case was won in 1981, but the five districts did not come together as one high school until the 1987-1988 school year. The district brought together African American and Caucasian students representing many different socioeconomic levels.
Therefore, a college going culture was present in some of the former high schools, but not all. Historically, the high school’s mission was to provide a quality and equitable education to all of its students regardless of race or socioeconomic status. The district was granted total unitary status in 2003, after proving to the courts that they were providing all of the students with an attainable quality education. Recently, however, the district was faced with the reality that all of its students were not receiving the same equitable education. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that there were a low number of African American students enrolled in higher level and Advanced Placement classes, along with a higher number of African American students referred for discipline issues (Polke, 2014). All these components make this district an extraordinary case study.

A study of services provided by college access advisers is vindicated in the context described above. Low-income students and students who are first in their family to attend college, require special support and attention to gain access and acceptance into an institution of higher education. The highest achieving students at low-income high schools are enrolling into college and universities at the same rates as the lowest achieving students in high income schools (Haycock, 2006). In 2005, 81 percent of students from the top income quintile enrolled into college the semester immediately following high school graduation compared to a mere 54 percent of students entering college residing in the bottom income quintile (NCES, 2011). Enrollment rates directly affect degree completion rates. In the last several decades, the college completion rate of students from high-income families has grown drastically while the completion rate of students from low-income families has remained stagnant (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Baum, Ma, & Papyea, 2013).

**Theoretical Framework**

Perna & Titus (2005) link the lack of access to higher education to low-income students’ lack of cultural and social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as “institutionalized or widely shared high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, possessions, and credentials) used for cultural and social exclusion from jobs and resources and the latter to exclusion from high status groups” (p. 158). The transmission of educational aspirations from family and friends, involvement in cultural activities not related to school, and frequent discussions with parents and family about the possibility of college all contribute to one’s cultural capital (Massey, et al. 2003; Perna & Titus, 2005; Petty, 2013).

Bourdieu (1973) proposed that individuals acquire cultural capital throughout childhood within the family. Families demonstrate specific linguistic and cultural competencies and familiarity with culture. Such cultural capital translates into conventions of school success, and therefore, children from
middle and upper class families often perform better and do take advantage of educational opportunities more often than their less fortunate low-income peers. As an example, studies show that there is a 150 point gap on the SAT between those children whose parents have a professional degree and those whose parents are high school dropouts (Lareau, 2011). Socially elite parents transmit cultural capital, not taught in schools to their children, which in turn greatly contributes to the perpetuation of social class inequality (Bourdieu, 1973; Gillen, Seliongo, & Zatynski, 2013; McDonough, 1997). Middle and upper class students, because of their cultural capital, place a greater value on earning a high school diploma and a college degree. College advisers tried to compensate for the students lack of cultural capital through best practices. For example, college tours where students could see a college campus and interact with college representatives was one of the best practices used. Essentially, college access advisers played the role of surgate parents by providing the students with experiences they may have not experienced otherwise, thus building their cultural capital.

Bourdieu explains social capital as the people and community resources that can enhance one’s life through coordination and cooperation benefitting both parties (1986). One’s social capital also affects his or her desire to attend college. Researchers argue students with limited access to strong social networks have minimal postsecondary options compared to peers who, through strong college going social networks, are exposed to a variety of college going options (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; McDonough, 2005).

**Methodology**

Since this study sought to establish not only the effects of college access programs, but also understand what processes created these effects, a mixed methods research approach was most appropriate. Nora (2002) argues that when a study only focuses on outcomes, it fails to uncover the more difficult yet imperative processes such as student attitude and staff behaviors. The interactions between the two are essentially, what leads to specific outcomes. Such processes cannot be highlighted or examined in large numeric databases that pay attention to outputs only and ignore the human process that took place.

This descriptive mixed methods approach case study examined five college access program advisers’ experiences interacting with their students in a high school setting. Stake (2005) states that case study research is used to examine a specific system that is bound by time and location. The five college access program advisers and their interactions with students within one high school over the course of one semester, therefore, is the case. Merriam (2002) argues that case study design is especially relevant for studies that explore participants’ experiences in their natural setting. In this type of research, the researcher has minimal control over the events he or she will observe.
Data was gathered using quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews and observations. Collection began with the quantitative component of the study. Questionnaires were administered to educational professionals. The educator questions probed the effect of the college access programs on the “college going culture” of the school and the programs’ integration or auxiliary status within the school. The surveys where then scored on a scale of 0-4 with 4 being the most positive sign of a college going culture. Higher scores would indicate the college access advisers best practices had a positive affect on the school’s overall college going culture. The survey was a way to analyze the best practices’ effect on the overall college going culture of the highschool.

The next data collection tool used was the College Access Tool of Evaluation (CATE). With the evaluation tool, components of programs and the behaviors staff were observed through the use of 6 domains: Domain 1: College Going Activities & Admissions; Domain 2: Trust, Self-Efficacy, & Relationships; Domain 3: Professional Activities & Responsibilities; Domain 4: Academics & Testing; Domain 5: Building a College Going Culture; Financial Aid The tool focused its data collection on observations that highlighted processes that lead to students matriculating into college Prior to the CATE, only output data was deemed important. Data was collected over the course of 24 forty-minute sessions. Finally, individual interviews were conducted with college access advisers from each of the five programs.

Findings and Discussion

Maslansky and others argue that establishing trusting relationships is a precursor to accepting assistance (2010). Therefore, the Trust, Self-Efficacy, and Relationships domain may be the most necessary or important component of college access programs. For low-income or first-generation college bound students, attending college may put them in high social and personal risk situations (Bloom, 2007). Students may need to have formed trusting relationships with adults who encourage their college going abilities before they will participate in college going activities. Advisers in this study were able to earn the students’ trust, which allowed the advisers to encourage and convince their students that attending college was a worthwhile investment. The belief that the students were capable of being successful at the postsecondary level was also promoted. Convincing students that college could be their next step was not always easy due to the social and cultural capital barriers they faced. Using specific components and best practices, advisers were often able to overcome these barriers by creating college going opportunities for their students. The opportunities are explained below.
One-On-One College Counseling

College advisers saw one of the most important opportunities they could provide their students with was one-on-one college counseling. These interactions allowed for the student and adviser to format a plan that was realistic and attainable. Students felt comfortable enough with their adviser to articulate their true dreams of attending college. For example Adviser E said:

There are a lot of students in this school who know they want to do something else. They know that they want to go to school, and they know they are going to need some help with it. They don’t really have any help at home so they sign up for the program. I see myself as an added voice for an option they thought wasn’t available to them. They think attending college is an unreachable goal and most of the time it is not out of reach. They just didn’t realize they had the ability to get to college.

From the interview data, advisers were a little startled to realize that college was not the next logical step for many high school students. Adviser E said, “College may seem like the next logical step after graduation for us as professionals, but for low-income and first-generation students, attending college may seem like a lofty goal.” The opportunity to have a conversation with a college access adviser gave students the personal confidence needed to begin thinking about and applying to college. Without the opportunity of one-on-one counseling, the student may have never considered the possibility of attending college.

A Space for College Knowledge

The advisers believed that having a space in the high school designated for college going activities was important for two main reasons. First, it gave the students an opportunity to think about their futures outside of the traditional classroom. Second, it gave them a space to work on their goals with the resources needed when they had questions. For example Adviser B said:

It’s a friendly space, and it’s a comfortable atmosphere. It doesn’t look like a classroom at all, and it’s a place where they can come with friends. It’s not really terribly structured, and students can come in and do some work and have a little bit of fun working on something that is going to help them in the future. If they have questions, we are here to help.

The Center stayed open after school until five. If students could not stop in during the school day during a class or during lunch, they could stay after school to work on their college or scholarship applications or homework. The college going culture of the school was fostered in the college space. The message was college and postsecondary education are important to this school. There must be a place designated for college going activities. The belief that attending college was both important and popular amongst the students, visiting the College Access Center became a new trend.
Social Support

Although social support is not tangible and cannot truthfully be measured, it often times is a service ignored or not analyzed. An adviser cannot count or measure how many times he or she has provided social support to a student. However, this may be the most important service that an adviser can offer a low-income or first generation college bound student. Adviser A said:

You don’t realize sometimes, what a simple conversation will do for someone. A student said to me ‘you spent time with me today and you got to know me as a person; and you talked me through some of the things I was really nervous about. My mom does not do that for me and my family doesn’t really talk to me about this stuff; and so I just want to do this. I want to be successful because I don’t want to be like my mom who has two minimum wage jobs and I never see her.

Best Practices

The interview protocol and the CATE provided insight into the participant’s thoughts on the best practices that they used that lead to matriculation into college or post secondary school for their students. There were six categories of best practices that emerged from the data. These best practices began with simply getting students to think about the possibility of college and concluded with the very important practice of strong social support and trusting relationships that gave the students the confidence to actually matriculate into a college or university. The first practice to be explored was the difficult practice of convincing students that a college education, even though perhaps a new concept to his or her family, was the student’s next step upon high school graduation. Advisers chose to do this by talking to the students about money and making money, a concept everyone understands.

A Conversation about Lifestyle

The advisers began the conversation with students about their vision of the future lifestyle they desired. All five of the participants spoke at length about the strategies they used to convince students that college was both a necessary and realistic next step. What the students often found was that individuals who skipped college and did on the job training only, made the least amount of money. College graduates made significantly more money. Both Adviser C and Adviser D found that using money as a motivator helped spark the initial interest in a college education.

Academic Programming

Once students realized that it was their aspiration to attend college, they then understood the importance of academic success. Academic programming was offered by all five college access program. A best practice was the summer college experience offered by Adviser A’s program which included a research component which Adviser A described as having the biggest impact on the
students. The goal of the summer program was to provide enrichment courses to the participating students. In addition to taking these courses, students also had the opportunity to work with State College faculty on original lab research. “It’s an experience where the students collect the data, analyze it, and prepare for a presentation at the end of the summer,” explained Adviser A.

Another academic best practice was an after-school peer-tutoring component run by Adviser B. She used students who had successfully completed course work during their freshman, sophomore, and junior years, and these students tutored their younger peers who were struggling in certain subjects. “The kids responded well to their peer tutors, sometimes better than they responded to a teacher,” Adviser B said.

College tours

The practice of taking students on college tours was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews, and all five advisers mentioned the importance of these visits. The tours always drew a high number of participants. They were something the students really looked forward to, and the students were constantly asking when and where the next trip was going to be.

Sometimes a tour convinced a student that he or she should attend college.

The advisers felt that it was important to take the students out of the high school and their environment and place them on a college campus so they could visualize the possibilities of college. This best practice was particularly effective with low-income students who had few opportunities to travel outside of their neighborhood.

One-On-One College Counseling

The advisers spent the majority of their time engaged in the best practice of counseling their students one-on-one. It was during these sessions that students could verbalize their plan. Advisor C spoke about meeting with her students individually:

I like meeting one on one with the students because I think you can accomplish a lot more than you do in groups. With the one-on-one interaction, the students tend to respond in a way that is different from how they act when they are in a group. I feel like these conversations give students the opportunity to learn about themselves.

All five of the college access programs assisted students very closely throughout the entire college matriculation process beginning with the college search starting as early as freshman year. “It’s a big decision,” commented Adviser D. “You can’t pick a school because you like their school colors or they have a good football team,” she joked. Exploring colleges and deciding where to apply is paramount to the college going process. What may seem like a simple act by the college adviser was a crucial step in the college enrollment process and that was having the student actually complete the application with the adviser.
Many students were extremely intimidated by the college application process and often procrastinated not wanting to begin something they had never done before. Burge believed that one of the most important things she did was to sit down with a student at the computer and have them fill out a college application for the first time. The best practice of one-on-one counseling was the foundation for building accepted social support and relationships with the students.

College access advisers in this study spent considerable one-on-one time with students coaching them through the college selection and application process. The advisers attempted to steer the students to an institution that was academically and financially appropriate for them. The advisers also helped students select which college to attend when the student had been accepted to multiple schools.

**Financial aid assistance**

The cost of college can sometimes be paralyzing for low-income college bound students and their families. Each of the advisers spoke about educating first generation and low-income students and families about the financial aid that would be available to them in order to lessen the cost of college. Adviser E found one of the most important practices of his program was reaching out to parents and exposing them to Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), state grants, and scholarships.

Financial aid procedures could be very intimidating. Since most of the students at the school were low-income, they qualified for a great deal of federal and state aid. However, the processes necessary to obtain the funding could be extremely confusing particularly for first-generation college bound students and their families. All five of the college access advisers made themselves available for students and their parents to have the opportunity to receive assistance completing the first step of the financial aid process, the FAFSA.

**Social Supports and Relationship Building**

Of the six best practices, social supports and relationship building were the only non-tangible best practice but were fundamental for the social capital they provided. Adviser B said:

> Convincing a student to do something that his or her family members have never done before takes a tremendous amount of trust between the adviser and the student. The student must believe that you have his or her best interest in mind, and many times these same students have been cheated by the system in the past making it difficult for them to form trusting relationships.

Once a student realized that a college adviser was invested in his or her future and the adviser was going to help him/her as much as possible, a trusting relationship seemed to begin to develop. The college advisers were also devoted to building the students’ sense of self-efficacy. Through conversations, they often were able to bolster the students’ self-esteem. Adviser C said that she felt
that her program gave students hope and helped them to feel like they could accomplish a college degree. The students knew the advisers were committed to them. This care and special attention may have lead students to complete college going tasks when they otherwise may not have.

The relationships formed between student and adviser sometimes morphed into a familial relationship for the students. Burges explained:

Sometimes I do feel like their parents. Everything I am doing for them is what my own parents did for me when I was applying to schools. The students even tease you sometime and call you “mom.” The best thing about these close relationships is when a student comes running into the Center waiving his or her acceptance letter and yelling I got in! I got in! Sometimes they tell us before they tell their parents. That’s when we put them on the phone and have them call their parents at work to share the good news.

The Findings suggest that College access programs need to be extremely selective when hiring college access advisers. Essentially, the college access adviser is what makes a program successful. The ability of the adviser to form trusting relationships with students is the foundation and strength of any program.

**College Going Culture**

A survey containing 17 items was administered to the participating school’s faculty. Items 8-17 received a score between 1 and 4 with four demonstrating the strongest evidence of a college going culture. Using descriptive statistical analysis the faculty’s responses to the questions scored out of 40 a minimum score of 19.00, a maximum score of 37.00 and a mean score of 24.04. These scores affirm that the faculty at the participating school perceived the school to have a positive college going culture. The data also suggested that although college access advisers have done a great deal to change the college going culture in the school, teachers still believed that more can be done for their students. Survey questions pertaining to student participation in college going activities scored highest in the rarely or sometimes categories indicating that positive college going behaviors were not present amongst the entire student body. As a group, teachers believed, however, more college related activities and opportunities could be provided to the student body.

**Conclusive Summary**

The primary motivation for this descriptive mixed methods case study was to uncover the practices college access programs and their advisers use to positively affect low-income and First-generation college bound students’ aspirations and matriculation into postsecondary education. College access advisers advocated college beginning with freshman. They engaged the students in discussions about the lifestyles the students desired after graduating high school. Next, college access advisers
provided academic support to underclassman by implementing in-class and after school tutoring. Taking students on college campus tours increased students’ cultural and social capital and introduced them to post-secondary opportunities. This study found that when college access advisers provided one-on-one college counseling throughout the planning, applying, and financial aid processes, these activities contributed to students’ beliefs that college was the appropriate next step after high school graduation. The most important finding was the necessity to foster a trusting relationship between students and their college access advisers. Advisers believed that this was just as important as providing any other type of college going opportunity. The focus of building trusting relationships between college adviser and student provides insight into what is beneficial for current college access programs and schools wishing to implement a college access program. These findings both support and contribute to existing research in areas supporting the college readiness of low-income and first-generation college bound students. As a college degree becomes the necessary avenue toward a middle class lifestyle, these findings and previous research on this topic become more relevant and important to the field of education.

References


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