Social Support

An Essential Ingredient to Success

A College Readiness Issue Brief from the Pathways to College Network
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Why Is Social Support Necessary?

Research is unequivocal in showing that the quality and intensity of a student's high school curriculum has the greatest impact on college success. But even rigorous academic preparation alone is not sufficient to assure that a student graduates from high school ready to succeed in college.[1] Social support strategies that sustain the preparation and success of all students are critical to improving academic achievement, raising expectations, and increasing college-going rates of underserved students.

Even when high school students from underserved groups are as academically well-prepared as their more affluent counterparts, they are less likely to go on to postsecondary education. More than a fifth of college-qualified, low-income high school graduates do not enter college.[2] In fact, low-income, academically-prepared high school graduates scoring in the top quartile on achievement tests attend college at the same rate as high-income graduates scoring in the bottom quartile.[3] To increase their college-going rates, this well-prepared pool of potential college graduates requires greater access to structured social support, including peer support, mentoring and personalized support, parental involvement, and early college preparation and planning.

Peer Support

Positive peer support is an important strategy to raise expectations, increase academic persistence, and promote college-going for underserved students. Studies by the American Council on Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation confirm the importance of peer-related factors in increasing a student's likelihood of attending college:

- Students who had a majority of friends who were planning to attend college were four times more likely to enroll than students whose friends did not intend to pursue a college degree.[4]

- Students with a significant portion of friends who were interested in attending college and students who belonged to a cohort of peers with whom to share college planning activities were far more likely to attend college.[5]

A Framework for Action

The Pathways to College Network developed this comprehensive conceptual *Framework for Action* to inform and support states, districts, schools, and programs in their efforts to prepare all students for success in college and the workplace. This series of issue briefs illuminates and provides resources on each of the five interrelated areas of the Framework: High Expectations, Academic Rigor & Support, Social Support, Data Use, and P-16 Alignment.

Mentoring and Personalized Support

Most underserved students lack the social support structures that are taken for granted by middle- and upper- income students who enroll in college in large numbers. Research shows that positive relationships with helpful adults can make all the difference. The presence of a caring teacher, school staff member, or individual in the community who knows a student well and demonstrates concern for his or her advancement is a potent ingredient in nurturing personal and academic growth.[6]

Effective mentoring can take place in groups or one-on-one. Students can be paired with teachers or other school staff, college students, community members, and business professionals. Mentoring can occur as part of in-class activities, community programs, after-school or summer residential programs, and internships.

To promote a more personalized learning environment that includes mentoring, some schools have developed "advisories" to replace the traditional homeroom period. Advisories are designed as small, supportive groups where students are well-known by school staff personally and academically. Studies have shown that teachers and staff who work with such groups feel greater responsibility for individual students. In turn, students feel greater accountability and respect for teachers and staff, leading to higher aspirations, more engagement with school, and higher academic achievement.[7]

Schools that provide effective mentoring and personalization actively analyze disaggregated data to identify at-risk students early and make appropriate interventions. These schools also create a professional learning culture among teachers and school staff to foster a sense of shared responsibility for each student and for continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process.

Parental Involvement

It has long been known that a parent's education and income level have a direct bearing on children's college participation rates. Schools and parents need to become co-collaborators in helping underserved students aspire to and prepare for college. Underserved students and their families need to be encouraged by educators to prepare for college. Regardless of whether a student's future goals include college

or employment immediately after high school, preparation for postsecondary education and preparation for work require similar skills, competencies, and readiness.[8]

Parents of underserved students often face substantial barriers in helping their children plan for college, including lack of information, language differences, time constraints, and transportation and child care issues. To create a family-friendly school environment, schools should draw parents into the planning process and set goals for their involvement. Schools that establish trusting relationships between staff and parents regularly communicate the importance of education, instill high expectations for hard work and achievement, and provide ongoing support for students and parents.

Early Preparation and Planning

Early preparation and planning for underserved students is the collective responsibility of middle schools and high schools, two- and four-year colleges, youth-serving organizations, and community and business groups. While the great majority of underserved students aspire to attend college, most do not have a clear understanding of the necessary steps involved in planning and preparing, and therefore fail to take timely action.

Students who make the connection between the need for completing a college credential in order to pursue their chosen career are far more likely to attain a degree than are those who lack career aspirations. Nonetheless, more than one-fifth of eighth, ninth, and tenth graders surveyed had neither thought about nor explored the type of education, training, and work they might pursue beyond graduation.[9] Schools with large percentages of underserved students need to provide students with timely information that links educational pathways with career aspirations. Effective preparation and planning that benefit underserved students should cover at least three key areas:

- *Postsecondary Information:* Involve parents as early as middle school to develop and continually re-visit an educational plan that will guide their children through high school completion. Provide parents with the necessary information, skills, and resources their children will need to carry out the plan. Inform students and parents about the full range and types of colleges, admission requirements, and encourage campus visits.

- *Financial Aid Information:* Help parents understand the difference between the "sticker price" and the actual net cost of college after financial aid is received. Provide assistance with applying for financial aid early and reinforce the benefits of completing a strong college preparatory curriculum in order to increase scholarship awards.

- *Career Information:* Provide students with career information early, and follow up with ongoing opportunities to explore multiple career paths through extra-curricular activities, internships, and community service. Make sure they understand that good entry-level jobs require the same academic preparation as college.

What Actions Can We Take *Now?*

Social support is an essential ingredient in the college access and success of underserved students. Here are some steps key stakeholders can take:

State Policymakers/District Superintendents

- As early as the middle grades, ensure that students and parents have accurate information about the academic and financial prerequisites for success in college.

- Address postsecondary affordability issues to support college access and success, especially for underserved students.

Middle and High School Principals

- Instill in teachers and other staff the expectation that postsecondary preparation is a goal for all students; provide students with a range of high-quality college-prep tools.

- Address cultural beliefs of school staff that may negatively impact teaching expectations and interactions with underserved students.

- Incorporate students' cultural, linguistic, and historical knowledge into the social and learning activities of the school.

- Develop personalized learning environments that expect teachers to know their students well.

- Strengthen school-community-business partnerships to shape an external environment supportive of learning and relevant to student interests.

- Partner with higher education institutions to develop programs that bridge students' high school-to-college transition.

Teachers and Counselors

- Expect that all students are capable of being prepared for college success.

- Communicate regularly with parents so they are co-collaborators in reinforcing high expectations for their children's education.

- Discuss with parents strategies to support their children's test performance, and how test results are used in postsecondary planning.

- Involve parents in reviewing children's course schedules; provide information about how middle school courses connect to high school courses; hold open houses and meetings with high school counselors by eighth grade.

- Emphasize continuously with students and parents the importance of completing a challenging curriculum; provide parents with strategies for supporting and monitoring their children's academic progress.

- Make sure parents understand that costs need not be a barrier to postsecondary education; provide information about financial aid and no-cost college financial planning resources.

Learn More:

To find these and other resources, search the online PCN Publications Library at
http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ListTopics.aspx

- College Readiness Begins in Middle School
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=46)

- First in the Family: Advice about College from First-Generation Students - Your High School Years
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=559)

- Involving Families in High School and College Expectations
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1137)

- It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=881)

- Realizing the College Dream: Curriculum Guide
  (http://www.ecmcfoundation.org/download_registration.html)

- Reclaiming the American Dream
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1371)

- Pathways to Improving Practice: How Can Schools Develop Relationships with Pre-College Outreach Programs
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1289)

- Pathways to Improving Practice: Improving College Access through Mentoring
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1290)

- Reaching Parents: The Role of Latino Parents in Their Children's Education
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1276)

- Taking a Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement
  (http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=759)

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[8] ACT, Inc. (2006). Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different? Iowa City, IA: Author.

[9] Wimberly, G.L. & Noeth, R.J. (2005). College Readiness Begins in Middle School. Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc.

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