



# EARLY EXPOSURE TO & PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Many educators around the country are deeply committed to serving their Black and Latino male students and helping provide the support they need to pursue postsecondary education. But relatively few resources offer practical guidance about how to approach this work.

*Early Exposure to and Preparation for College: A Guide for Educators* is one of several guides produced by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools as part of our [evaluation of the City's Expanded Success Initiative \(ESI\)](#). ESI created opportunities for participating high schools to try new strategies (or expand existing programs) aimed at increasing college and career readiness for Black and Latino male students.

The guides cover approaches that principals and teachers across ESI high schools have identified

as important to helping young men of color reach—and be well prepared for—college. (Other topics include Culturally Relevant Education).

Drawing on interviews and observations in five ESI high schools, each guide begins by briefly describing one of these approaches to boosting college readiness and why schools are using it. The guides then explain *how* individual schools have implemented that strategy, including concrete examples, tips, and tools. Each guide also provides a list of discussion questions and resources for educators.

Together, these materials are designed to inform educators in NYC and beyond as they work to develop innovative programs and services for Black and Latino male high school students.

## What Is Early College Exposure and Prep?

Time and funding designated for college preparation are a scarce resource for many high schools. Therefore, it is not surprising that schools often use these resources to support 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, who are approaching and beginning the college application process.

However, there may be significant benefits to beginning college preparation earlier in high school, particularly for students who would be the first in their family to attend college. High schools can immerse younger students in a college-oriented culture and build an academic program focused on college success. They can provide students with information about postsecondary options and details about the college application process. In these ways, school staff can help students identify postsecondary goals earlier on and encourage students to take concrete steps toward those goals.

## Why Provide Early College Exposure and Prep?

Evidence shows that most high school students in the United States aspire to attend and graduate from college. Unfortunately, to date, college enrollment and degree attainment rates have not lived up to these high hopes.<sup>i</sup> College completion rates are particularly low among Black and Latino males. In 2011, 26 percent of Black males and 18 percent of Latino males earned an associate degree or higher, compared to 41 percent of students overall.<sup>ii</sup>

This gap is due, at least in part, to the fact that Black and Latino young men leave high school less prepared for college than their White and Asian peers. In New York City, for example, only about one in ten Black and Latino males who entered high school in 2006 graduated “college ready” four years later, based on New York State’s Aspirational Performance Measure.<sup>iii</sup>

Increasingly, high schools are taking action in an attempt to change these statistics. An early focus on college readiness (i.e., the skills, knowledge, and mindset needed to successfully participate in college-level courses), as well as preparation for the college enrollment process may put students on track to apply to and succeed in postsecondary education. The schools featured in this guide illustrate a range of strategies for building a college-going culture for Black and Latino male students, starting from the beginning of their high school careers.

This guide was authored by Tony Laing and Adriana Villavicencio.

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to the schools featured in the guides: **ACORN Community High School, East Bronx Academy for the Future, High School for Law and Public Service, Manhattan Bridges High School, and Queens Vocational and Technical High School.** We are especially grateful to the staff members who shared their time and insights with us: Corey Alexander, Alexandra Brown, Melissa Burg, Naoime Gonzalez, George Lock, Hegal Martinez, Mirza Sanchez Martinez, Andrea Piper, Nicholas Politis, Miriam Rosa, Sarah Scrogin, and Claude Stuart.

We would also like to thank Paul Forbes, Lillian Dunn, Elise Corwin, and Richard Haynes, the members of the NYC Department of Education’s ESI team, for their thoughtful input. Finally, we are grateful for the contributions of our Research Alliance colleagues, James Kemple, Chelsea Farley, Shifra Goldenberg, Linda Tigani, Stefano Biguzzi-Velcich, and Rory Santaloci.

# HELPING STUDENTS ENVISION THEMSELVES IN COLLEGE

## ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

ACORN staff work to help students visualize themselves on college campuses. They hope that increasing college awareness will help students approach academics with a greater sense of purpose. ACORN's experience suggests several strategies:

### **Challenge students' false impression that "college isn't for them."**

According to one teacher, "A lot of our [Black and Latino] male students have bought into the narrative and stereotype that education isn't for them, that they don't need go to college." To counteract this belief, ACORN offers college visits (described below) and in-school activities such as college preparation workshops, alumni panels on student experiences in college, and "College Fridays" (when teachers wear apparel from the college they attended). Consistent reminders of the real possibility of college are aimed at helping Black and Latino students see themselves succeeding both academically and in their careers.

### **Bring students to visit Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).**

Eighty-three percent of ACORN's students are Black, and 45 percent are Black males. Given these demographics, school leadership decided that it would be meaningful for students to visit Historically Black College and Universities. Even if students ultimately do not enroll in an HBCU, the visits enable students to see themselves as part of a larger community of young people of color in college. ACORN staff have led trips of approximately 20 students each (including 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders) to Morgan State, Delaware State, and Howard Universities.



“I think the biggest success were the college tours... A lot of students, especially when they go as freshmen and sophomores, come back to school ready to start working because **they get the larger picture**. They see themselves able to reach other places, and want to go to other places.”  
 – ACORN Teacher

**Prepare students to get the most out of college visits.**

For example, staff show students movies related to the Black student experience in college, such as *School Daze* or *Drumline*, or that provide a historical look at HBCUs, such as *The Great Debaters*. ACORN staff use the movies to launch a free-ranging discussion about the significance of HBCUs. Additional discussion about the movies’ importance takes place on the bus returning to ACORN.

**Enlist the help of recent college alumni or current students.**

It is useful for high school students to discuss college with near peers. ACORN alumni who attend HBCUs have served as tour guides on college visits, engaging in frank discussions with visiting students on such topics as campus life, balancing classes with other responsibilities, and academic requirements.

**Explore funding options.**

College trips can be costly (e.g., transportation, lodging for overnight trips, and food), so it’s important to consider costs carefully and explore funding opportunities far in advance. Schools might consider looking for funding from individual donors, local foundations, government grants, or corporate sponsors to help underwrite costs.

**Sample HBCU Tour Schedule**

<b>6am</b>	Students arrive at school and board bus.
<b>6:30am</b>	Chaperones serve breakfast; bus departs. Students watch and discuss a movie about the experiences of Black college students.
<b>10:30am-1pm</b>	Arrive at HBCU. Participate in admissions presentation and campus tour. If possible, ACORN alumni join the tour, along with representatives from Black Greek Letter Organizations. HBCU students lead a Q&A for ACORN students.
<b>1:30pm</b>	Board bus and depart HBCU. Chaperones lead a discussion about what was learned on the visit, including comparisons to other HBCUs, campus life, academic requirements, etc.
<b>3:30pm</b>	Stop for lunch. Staff found that most ACORN students were uncomfortable dining on campuses with college students, and opted to eat elsewhere.
<b>4:30pm</b>	Bus departs for ACORN.

# SUPPORTING THE COLLEGE SEARCH AND APPLICATION PROCESS

ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

ACORN staff help students learn about their college options and navigate the application process, beginning early in high school:

## Encourage students to learn about different colleges.

ACORN designs in-school activities that aim to foster a college-going culture and support students' learning about higher education options. The school holds student assemblies to gauge interest in different kinds of institutions (e.g., local or out-of-state), possible areas of study, and extracurricular interests (e.g., athletics, fraternities/sororities, etc.). According to one staff member: "The assemblies serve two purposes: to introduce and reinforce the 'going to college' mindset, and to gauge students' [specific] interests for postsecondary plans and subsequent life." To promote early college awareness among first-year students, ACORN has all 9<sup>th</sup> graders develop and present a college information poster. For this assignment, students select a college or university they would be interested in attending and prepare a college information poster, which they present in class. Students tell their classmates about the school they have selected, including admission requirements, academic programs, and extra-curricular opportunities.

## Involve a wide range of staff members in early college planning.

ACORN students meet with guidance counselors at each grade level. In the meetings, counselors and students review transcripts and discuss grade-relevant information about the college planning process. Students and counselors work together to identify short-term objectives (e.g., GPA targets, Regents exam target scores, a plan for gaining at least 11 credits each academic year) and long-term goals (e.g., potential career and personal aspirations) and to map out concrete activities that can help students meet these goals. Teachers help students through the college application process, including reviewing application timelines, discussing responses to essay questions, setting deadlines for requesting letters of recommendation from teachers, and helping students complete financial aid forms. Specific supports are tailored to individual students' needs.

"Nearly all of our classes at some point, whether it be freshman, sophomore, junior or senior year, whether it be science, math, or English, all of our teachers understand that we are on the journey to go to college... [and] the goal is somewhere out of high school. They all share that knowledge with us so that we can go further to the best of our ability."  
– ACORN Student



# EARLY COLLEGE CLASSES

## EAST BRONX ACADEMY

East Bronx Academy (EBA) participates in College Now, a collaboration between the City University of New York (CUNY) and the NYC Department of Education (DOE). Through College Now, EBA students have the opportunity<sup>iv</sup> to register for 12 college credits at CUNY's Lehman College, at no cost to EBA or qualifying students. Students receive both high school and college credit, and have access to resources on Lehman's campus. Courses are offered after school<sup>v</sup> during the fall, spring, and summer semesters on subjects including English, math, and art.<sup>vi</sup> An EBA guidance counselor supports participating students by arranging academic tutoring if needed.

One East Bronx Academy staff member described College Now as a gateway for students who may not have seriously considered higher education. Other staff members reported that students feel that the rigor and high expectations of College Now help prepare them for college in the following ways:

### **Position college as a realistic option.**

EBA staff reported that many of their students—especially males—don't imagine themselves in college. Even students who identify college as a goal may express doubts about fitting in or have trouble visualizing their own college experience. Attending a college class on a real campus encourages students to think about college as a viable option for their future.

### **Offer a head start on college coursework.**

Students in the College Now program have the opportunity to earn credits that can transfer to most colleges and universities, allowing students to save time and reduce college tuition costs. Taking college classes can also provide high school students with an opportunity to develop strategies for succeeding in higher education. College Now provides a supportive environment where students can learn study skills or how to write a college-level paper.

### **Improve math and literacy skills.**

Roughly half of NYC high school graduates attending CUNY institutions are designated as in need of remedial math coursework in their first year.<sup>vii</sup> College Now classes are aimed at sharpening high school students' reading, writing and math skills, so they don't have to spend time and money on remedial courses.

### **Supplement high school learning.**

By exposing students to college-level reading and assignments, College Now classes offer students learning opportunities not necessarily available in high school. One teacher stated, the program "pushes [up] the bar for what students are learning."

"It's about making those [real life] connections for some of them [to college]. The option [to take college classes] opens up so many more [opportunities] as **they are starting to think about their futures.**"

– *East Bronx Teacher*

# COLLEGE COURSEWORK AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

## QUEENS VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

Students may require academic support beyond traditional high school course offerings to be well prepared for college and careers. Queens Vocational and Technical High School (Queens Voc) provides career training classes and academic supplements to help students get ready for whatever path they choose after high school.

### Develop college and career exploration classes.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Queens Voc students rotate through a series of classes designed to introduce them to potential college majors and careers (e.g., business, cosmetology, graphic arts, plumbing design, and more). In February of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, students select a small learning community based on one of those career interests. They receive initial career training and/or college preparation in their chosen field through graduation.<sup>viii</sup>

### Partner with local colleges.

A small group of Queens Voc 9<sup>th</sup> grade students participated in a course at nearby LaGuardia Community College. The course was designed to teach critical thinking skills through readings, writing assignments, student presentations, and other projects focused on climate change. According to one staff member, the primary goal of the class “was to make students advocate for solutions” about a topic that affects them now and will in the future. Conceived by the chair of LaGuardia’s psychology department and Queens Voc’s principal, the course was also designed to show students that they can fit in at community college, which may, in turn, serve as a stepping stone to a four-year college or university. Queens Voc purposely selected students for the class who demonstrated mid-level academic achievement, because they believed the highest-achieving students would succeed without the program, and that struggling students weren’t ready for the rigors of the course.

### Inform students about postsecondary choices other than college.

Queens Voc partners with the NYC DOE to offer job training for students interested in transitioning directly to a career after high school. In addition to providing career training through the small learning communities described above, the school brings in speakers from two community-based organizations (Goodwill and Sunnyside Community Services) who provide information to students about potential trade professions.

“We created [a course] to show them that they can indeed go to college and that there were kids in college that looked like them and were about them. Then, okay, now that you sold LaGuardia Community College, what about other colleges, four-year? Again, let’s look at a CUNY. Let’s look at a SUNY. Let’s look at private.”  
– Queen Voc Staff

# MATH SUPPORTS

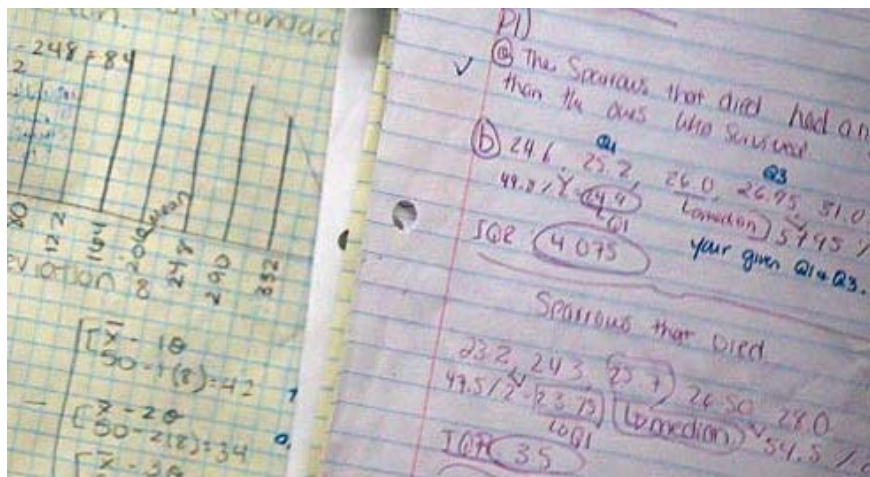
## QUEENS VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

### Increase advanced math course offerings.

In New York City, Black and Latino male students enroll in higher level math courses at a lower rate than their White and Asian counterparts.<sup>ix</sup> In fact, among New York City public schools serving the largest populations of Black and Latino students, only 10 percent offered Algebra II in the 2009-2010 school year.<sup>x</sup> However, advanced math, and particularly Algebra II, is a strong predictor of college enrollment and success—as well as a requirement for admission to schools in the State University of New York system.<sup>xi</sup> The lack of Algebra II automatically disqualifies a large pool of Black and Latino students from applying to most four-year institutions.<sup>xii</sup> To help prepare students for admission to competitive higher education institutions, students at Queens Voc take four years of math, including Algebra II. It should be noted that there are tradeoffs to offering four years of math: One staff member pointed out that some Queens Voc students who would have taken four years of science in the past are no longer able to do so.

### Offer a supplemental College Ready Math (CRM) course.

To ensure that all students pass required state exams and are ready for credit-bearing college courses, any Queens Voc student who does not obtain at least an 80 on their first attempt at the Algebra I Regents exam is placed in a supplemental math course. The goal of the class is to ensure that, by the time students graduate, they all have the minimum Regents score needed to become exempt from remedial math in CUNY. The semester-long CRM course meets daily, in addition to the students' core math course. If students' schedules are full, their day may be extended to make sure they have time for the CRM course.





## Questions for Educators

1. Before reading this guide, how did your school think about providing exposure to—and preparation for—college to your younger high school students? How did the strategies you read about here reinforce and/or challenge your thoughts on this topic?
2. Describe some of the ways your school helps students prepare for the college application process. What are your school's strengths and weaknesses in this realm? In what ways could this process start earlier in high school?
3. How does your school approach college trips? Who is able to attend? Where do these students go? Think about what message your school is sending young men of color when they attend these visits. Do they see students who look like them on campus? Are they getting a chance to see themselves as college bound?
4. How does your school convey the importance of attending college to Black and Latino students? How could your school expand these activities?
5. The schools profiled in this guide have made it a priority to start conversations about college early in high school. Complete the table below by filling in the college supports that your school offers for each grade. In what areas and for which grades are you offering robust support? Where might you place more emphasis? What immediate steps could you take to complete an additional box in this table?

	College-Focused Academics	College-Oriented School Culture	Support for College Application Process
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade			
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade			
11 <sup>th</sup> Grade			
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade			

## Organizations that Support College Preparation

*The following organizations offer services and information related to early college exposure and preparation:*

Blue Engine

<http://blueengine.org>

College Access Consortium of New York:

<http://cacnyinc.org/>

College Access: Research & Action (CARA):

<http://caranyc.org/>

College Now:

<http://collegenow.cuny.edu/>

College Spring:

<http://collegespring.org/>

College Summit

<http://collegesummit.org>

Collegiate Zone Enterprise

<http://collegiatezone.net/>

The DOME Project

<http://www.domeproject.org>

Good Shepherd Services:

<http://goodshepherds.org/programs/for-youth/college-and-career/>

Graduate NYC:

<http://gradnyc.com/>

Hip Hop 4 Life

<http://hiphop4lifeinc.org>

SureScore

<http://surescore.com>

Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers

<http://tstt.org>

## Related Sources

*Schools interested in providing their staff with books related to early exposure to and preparation for college may refer to this abbreviated list:*

Hale, F. W. (2006). *How Black Colleges Empower Black Students: Lessons for Higher Education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Harper, S. R., & Wood, J. L. (2016). *Advancing Black Male Student Success from Preschool through Ph.D.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Palmer, R.T., Wood, J.L., Dancy, T.E., & Strayhorn, T.L. (2014). *Black Male Collegians: Increasing Access, Retention, and Persistence in Higher Education*, ASHE Higher Education Report, 40:3.

U.S. Department of Education. White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. <http://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/>

Williams, R. A. (2014). *Men of Color in Higher Education: New Foundations for Developing Models for Success*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Wood, J. L., & Palmer, R. T. (2015). *Black Men in Higher Education: A Guide to Ensuring Student Success*. New York, NY: Routledge.



## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Executive Office of the President (2014). *Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students: Promising Models and a Call to Action*. Retrieved from [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white\\_house\\_report\\_on\\_increasing\\_college\\_opportunity\\_for\\_low-income\\_students\\_1-16-2014\\_final.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white_house_report_on_increasing_college_opportunity_for_low-income_students_1-16-2014_final.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Lee Jr., J. M., & Ransom, T. (2011). *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress*. New York, NY: College Board. Retrieved from <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/advocacy/nosca/nosca-educational-experience-young-men-color-research.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> Villavicencio, A., Bhattacharya, D. & Guidry, B. (2013). *Moving the Needle: Exploring Key Levers to Boost College Readiness Among Black and Latino Males in NYC*. New York, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools. [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/publications/moving\\_the\\_needle](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/moving_the_needle)
- <sup>iv</sup> In order to qualify for program participation, students must have an overall grade point average of 75 or higher and (1) a score of 75 or higher on the English Language Arts Regents exam, or (2) a score of at least 480 on the SAT Verbal/Critical Reading section. EBA's guidance counselor selects 4-5 students with high GPAs from all eligible students to participate. There is no application process for students.
- <sup>v</sup> Classes are also available earlier in the day for students whose schedule allows for this.
- <sup>vi</sup> For complete list of classes see <http://www.lehman.edu/college-now/college-courses.php>
- <sup>vii</sup> Coca, V. (2014). *New York City Goes to College: A First Look at Patterns of College Enrollment, Persistence and Degree Attainment for NYC High School Students*. New York, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools. [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/publications/nyc\\_goes\\_to\\_college\\_first\\_look](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/nyc_goes_to_college_first_look)
- <sup>viii</sup> Students have a short window in which to switch learning communities, if space is available. However, due to state certification requirements for some learning community topics, they cannot switch after a deadline in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.
- <sup>ix</sup> Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, & Guidry (2013).
- <sup>x</sup> Retrieved from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, & Guidry (2013); Toldson, I.A. (2011). *Breaking Barriers 2: Plotting the Path Away from Juvenile Detention and toward Academic Success for School-Age African-American Males*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.
- <sup>xii</sup> Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, & Guidry (2013), p. 36.

To learn more about our evaluation of the Expanded Success Initiative, please visit our website:  
[http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/research/projects/esi\\_evaluation](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation)

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City's public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students' development and academic success.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools  
285 Mercer Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
New York, New York 10003-9502  
212-992-7697  
[research.alliance@nyu.edu](mailto:research.alliance@nyu.edu)  
[www.ranycs.org](http://www.ranycs.org)

### Author Contact Information

Tony Laing: [tal208@nyu.edu](mailto:tal208@nyu.edu)  
Adriana Villavicencio: [arv228@nyu.edu](mailto:arv228@nyu.edu)

© 2016 Research Alliance for New York City Schools. All rights reserved. You may make copies of and distribute this work for non-commercial educational and scholarly purposes. For any other uses, including the making of derivative works, permission must be obtained from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, unless fair use exceptions to copyright law apply.