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College Preparation in the Middle Grades: It's More Than SATs

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College Preparation in the Middle Grades: It's More Than SATs

Abstract

Despite more than 30 years of effort by the federal government to increase college enrollment rates for African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students, these groups continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Although family income and financial resources continue to influence college enrollment decisions, educators now suggest that the traditional focus on reducing financial barriers for the underrepresented groups has been too narrow.

Disciplines

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Comments

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An Early Start Is Key to Success

College Preparation in the Middle Grades: It's More than SATs

The process of making college accessible to disadvantaged students must begin with a comprehensive outreach program no later than eighth grade.

by Laura W. Perna

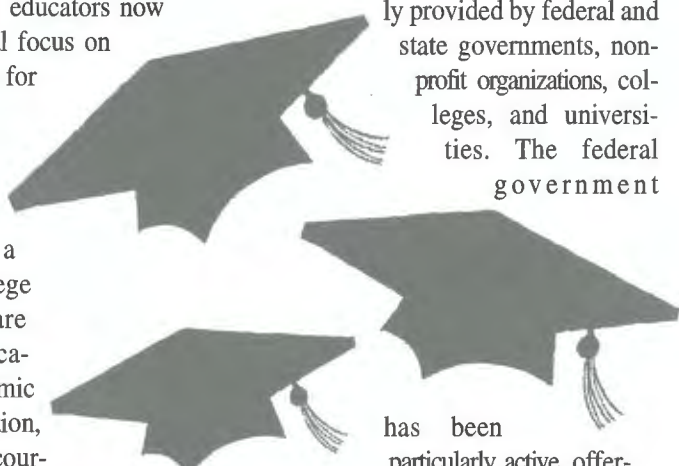
Despite more than 30 years of effort by the federal government to increase college enrollment rates for African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students, these groups continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Although family income and financial resources continue to influence college enrollment decisions, educators now suggest that the traditional focus on reducing financial barriers for the underrepresented groups has been too narrow.

Insufficient financial resources certainly are a major barrier, but college enrollment decisions are also influenced by educational expectations, academic achievement and preparation, parental support and encouragement, knowledge and information about college and financial aid, and a number of other variables (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Perna 2000). Increasing college access and the potential for success for underrepresented groups requires students to be academically, socially, and psychologically prepared (Gladioux and Swail 1999).

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Pre-College Outreach Programs

Pre-college outreach programs in the middle grades are designed to provide early help for disadvantaged students to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to prepare for college. A wide variety of these outreach programs are currently provided by federal and state governments, non-profit organizations, colleges, and universities. The federal government



has been particularly active, offering numerous programs to provide students and their families with information about college admission requirements, financial aid, scholarships, and grants (*see box on page 2*).

Many private organizations, like Eugene Lang's I Have a Dream (IHAD) Program, pledge financial support to graduating seniors in inner-city schools. And a 1994 survey by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that about one-third of all colleges and universities offer programs designed to increase access for educationally and/or economically disadvantaged students.

Involving Middle-Grades Schools

It is critical for middle-grades educators to devote greater attention to pre-college outreach activities for several reasons. First, college enrollment decisions begin to be made as early as the seventh grade while the process of becoming academically qualified for college must begin by the eighth grade. Many pre-college outreach programs may have only limited effectiveness because of their failure to start early enough in the educational pipeline. A 1999 survey by The College Board shows that only about a third of the outreach programs targeted at low-income, underrepresented minority, and immigrant students take effect before the eighth grade.

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A second reason for concern is that the many existing programs cannot satisfy the demand for their services. For example, the Council for Opportunity in Education reports that although 11 million students are eligible for outreach services through the federal TRIO programs, only five percent of those eligible are being served because of limited funding. And a 1994 U.S. Department of Education survey showed that the median number of students served by the largest program administered by an individual college or university was only 82.

Intervention by middle-grades educators is also warranted because many existing pre-college outreach programs are not able to provide all of the services needed to help prepare students for college. For example, only 25 percent of programs targeting low-income students have all five of the components that are considered the most important predictors of college enrollment: establishing college attendance as a goal; arranging for college

tours, visits, or fairs; promoting rigorous academic courses; involving parents; and beginning no later than the eighth grade (Chaney *et al.* 1995; The College Board 2001).

Steps for Success

Middle-grades teachers and principals can play a direct role in at least two aspects of the college preparation process: encouraging students to consider college attendance; and ensuring that they will be academically qualified. Here are some ways in which educators can supplement the work of existing outreach programs, or compensate for their absence:

Enlist parents. Administrators of outreach programs believe that parents play a critical role in the success of their programs (The College Board 2001), reflecting research which shows that parental encouragement and support are important

predictors of college enrollment (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper 1999). Principals need to develop ways to build parental support for their children's higher education. They should make an effort to convince all parents—particularly those who have not attended college—that college is a realistic option for their children, and encourage them to participate in college-related activities with their children.

Provide information. Most studies show that parents and students tend to overestimate college costs and lack accurate information about financial aid (McCulloch 1990; Litten 1991; Ikenberry and Hartle 1998). Research also shows that students are less likely to enroll in college when their parents lack accurate knowledge of financial aid (Ekstrom 1981; Higgins 1984; Flint 1993). Educators can reduce this knowledge

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Federal Outreach Programs

The federal government has played a critical role in developing a number of pre-college outreach programs:

TRIO Programs. Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services make up the TRIO programs, established as part of Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" during the 1960s. These programs are designed to help disadvantaged students prepare for college, and two-thirds of the students served by the programs must come from families with incomes below \$24,000.

Upward Bound provides students with academic instruction on college campuses after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer.

Talent Search provides participants and their families with information regarding college admissions requirements, scholarships, and available financial aid.

Student Support Services provide counseling and training for students attending college.

National Early Intervention Scholarship Program (NEISP). The NEISP offers matching grants to states for programs providing financial incentives, academic support services and counseling, and college-related information to disadvantaged students and their parents. State programs are currently funded under the NEISP in California, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Gain Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP). Congress established GEAR-UP to augment the NEISP in 1998. Unlike NEISP grants, GEAR-UP grants are available not only to states but to partnerships comprised of (a) one or more local educational agencies representing at least one elementary and one secondary school; (b) one institution of higher education; and (c) at least two community organizations.

- o Ensure that their children are enrolled in college preparatory courses;
- o Provide a strong academic environment in the home by monitoring their children's progress, attending school events, and encouraging participation in extracurricular activities;
- o Understand the benefits of preparing for challenging high school courses in the middle grades, and the level of commit-

ment required; and

- o Research the wide range of college financial aid opportunities.

A college education holds the key to economic and social success for most Americans today. Elementary and middle school principals have a great opportunity—and, some would argue, an obligation—to help all their students navigate

the path to college from an early age. When principals affirm the capabilities of each student by balancing high standards, high expectations, and high levels of support, they effectively notify the entire school community that college is a viable option for everyone.

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College Prep

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gap by providing such services to students and their parents as financial aid counseling, campus visits and tours, and meetings with college students and faculty.

Promote academic preparation. Academic achievement is an important predictor of college enrollment, yet many students find themselves disadvantaged in the enrollment process by low levels of academic achievement and/or inadequate academic preparation. Principals should not only ensure that all students have adequate information about academic requirements for college enrollment, but that they have access to high-quality academic courses.

Among the academic services that can help promote academic preparation and achievement are study skills training; critical thinking skills development; supplemental instruction in the core subject areas of mathematics, science, reading, and writing; grade and attendance monitoring; SAT or ACT preparation; computer skills training; academic enrichment courses; remedial instruction; and accelerated courses.

Build on community resources. Finally, middle-grades principals should identify relevant existing programs in their communities and develop ways to build on their strengths. A useful source of this information is *The College Board's Outreach Program Handbook: 2001*. If no such programs are available, principals should consider identifying potential partners in the community, developing a pro-

gram, and applying for government funding.

Middle-grades educators owe it to their students to learn about the availability of pre-college outreach programs and to identify ways to supplement such programs, particularly for students who are economically and/or academically disadvantaged. Intervention during the middle grades is critical if we are to raise college enrollment rates for students who continue to be underrepresented in higher education.

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