At-Risk Students and College Success: 
A Framework for Effective College Preparation Programs in Urban Environments

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For the past generation, educators have struggled to develop ways to promote access to postsecondary education for low-income and historically underrepresented minority youth, and recent changes in higher education policy have made this task increasingly more difficult. While race-based admissions at the University of California system have been effectively eliminated, administrators at California State University wrestle with issues of a system-wide removal of remedial education. Such changes in higher education policy have made it significantly harder for historically underrepresented minorities to gain access to California’s public universities. Consequently, college preparation programs take on greater significance and importance.

While there are a multitude of ‘successful’ programs serving low-income urban youth, little is known about the how success is defined. It is important to have adequate data about what programs work, and if they work, how they can be replicated. In addition, knowledge of how culture can be integrated into the overall socialization process for urban youth is substantial. Neighborhoods in which urban youths grow up provide different signals and supports for their social and cultural identity. Moreover, the experiences of youths growing up in an urban environment determine the ways in which local youths develop and mold their senses of identity (McLaughlin, 1993). This requires educators to know how attention to the physical, social and familial needs is intertwined with academic success. The challenge then, is to develop ways where an individual’s identity is affirmed, honored, and incorporated into the organization.

Accordingly, we have developed a framework that identifies effective college preparation programs for low income and minority youth in urban areas. We will begin by establishing the context of college preparation programs that includes a brief historical overview and the parameters of who benefits most from services. We will then elaborate on areas in which administrators can best assist urban youth develop academic and
personal identities; a sense of self as scholar and individual can be instilled through the development of two notions: academic and cultural capital. In the former, we refine our definitions of academic capital by including the development of academic problem-solving as well as test- and note-taking skills. In the latter, our discussion encompasses the variety of extra-curricular activities associated with the theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977); we also assert the importance of family involvement in the overall socialization process. We will conclude with some general assumptions and recommendations for programmatic success.

I. Context of College Preparation Programs

American colleges and universities have employed a variety of strategies to increase access and opportunities for traditionally underrepresented ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged groups for nearly half a century, and college preparation programs have grown in comprehensiveness, complexity, and focus. In their attempt to increase student achievement, program administrators began to look at other avenues for change, emphasizing teacher and curriculum development as well as academic advisement and information services.

Chapter I programs began in the 1960’s to assist economically and educationally disadvantaged children. The program, which served about 5 million students at a cost of approximately $6 billion dollars per year, is increasingly criticized as a fragmented and uncoordinated program that adds to the disconnectedness of schools, especially those with large numbers of poor students (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1995). Scholars have argued that a proper remedy to the current problems will require a broad approach to curriculum rather than narrowly focused skills training, and a renegotiated and more integral relationship with general education (Commission on Chapter I, 1992).

Requirements under Title I, as reauthorized by the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, expanded upon its predecessor, Chapter I, and placed greater emphasis on parental involvement to develop strategies to enhance partnerships between
home and school (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1998). Moreover, greater emphasis was placed on the policy involvement by parents at the school and district level, shared school-family responsibility for high academic performance, and the development of productive mutual collaboration between schools, students and their parents. Private foundations as well as state and federal agencies have created specific programs that address the needs of students, but with limited and finite resources, do not want to waste money on ineffective or inefficient programs.

Given its history, we stress the importance that the panoply of programs designed to serve disadvantaged urban youth continue to do so. Often, programs geared toward serving urban youth end up providing service to those whom would ordinarily go to college. Programs should continue to be directed to only those students who would not have gone to college without these services. We provide a brief list of criteria to consider in delivering services.

Whom Do We Serve?

In earlier studies conducted on a national data set, many factors were identified as being associated with an increased probability of school failure and dropping out (Kaufman & Bradby, 1992). These factors were highly correlated with students’ demographic characteristics, especially in terms of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Students who match these conditions are generally at the greatest risk of failure or drop out, and as consequence, would benefit the most through early intervention programs. In addition, studies found the following concomitant risk factors that increase the likelihood of drop out:

- Students whose families in the lowest SES quartile
- Single-parent families
- Students with older siblings who dropped out of high school
- Students with average grades of C’s or lower from 6th to 8th grade
- Students who are recent immigrants to the United States
- Students reading at or below grade level
In the past, many studies have been conducted to categorize the variety of college preparation programs in existence throughout the United States (Coles, 1993; Fenske et al., 1997; Stoel, Togneri, & Brown, 1992). Through a review of previous studies, two methods of service can be identified: (1) working with students *academic needs* through the development of academic skills and competencies; and (2) addressing the *cultural needs* of students through a variety of extra-curricular activities. This approach to college preparation creates an impact at three levels: the students, their families, and their environment. In the following two sections, we explore how academic and cultural capital are addressed through programs and services respectively.

**II. Academic Capital**

Providing students with the means to prosper in a rigorous academic postsecondary environment requires adequate preparation and success in their core courses in high school (math, English, physical sciences). Educators who focus on curricular programs that equip their students with academic issues make efforts to provide specific educational opportunities, training, and experiences for children. The assumption is that by properly equipping children with knowledge and skills, their opportunities will increase. There are many examples of in-class activities and services that have been researched for the past decade. Two such approaches that impart adaptive skills and competencies for all children are exemplified: academic problem solving and test preparation.

*Academic Problem Solving*

One of the most frequent areas that are related to promoting competence is the acquisition of problem-solving skills. Literally hundreds of programs offer academic preparation to promote access to higher education for disadvantaged students. The largest of these is the federally funded Upward Bound program. Located on over 1000 college and university campuses around the country, Upward Bound programs serve
roughly 730,000 students with a $537 million dollar budget. These programs are generally designed to teach students the elements of successful academic skills.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is one example of a program that has shown success. Chosen by teachers or counselors to participate in the program, AVID students spend one extra class period a day in their high schools. Most often, a teacher in the school where the students attend teaches the class. The class has at least two explicit objectives: one is to teach students basic skills such as how to take notes, how to study, and how to complete various homework assignments. A second objective pertains to understanding how to navigate the college application process, from preparing for entrance examinations to submitting application materials, visiting college campuses, and ensuring that the courses taken in high school are geared toward college attendance and not vocational preparation.

Test Preparation

Based on the assumption that many African American and Hispanic youth do not test as well as their white and Asian counterparts on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), other programs have focused not on the academic curriculum but on successful preparation for college entrance examinations to ensure greater opportunities for underrepresented students to the University of California. Indeed, some institutions have developed partnerships with test-taking companies (e.g. Stanley Kaplan). These programs offer courses that focus exclusively on students’ preparation for an exam. This type of program is geared to students who are likely to attend college, but need to improve their SAT scores. The outcome is that those students who take the exam will be more likely to go to a more prestigious institution than if they had not taken the program.

Issues of academic skills are certainly worthy to address, and this approach might be successful at conveying how to master specific academic tasks, but in order to ensure academic success at the postsecondary level, a college preparation program cannot merely seek to teach facts and figures to a group of disenfranchised urban youth.
Educators need to address the cultural processes that advantage some and disadvantage others.

III. Cultural Capital

The teaching of skills is insufficient for students who have been previously labeled “at-risk” and are at the educational margins of society for one reason or another. When education is seen as a tool that can be used for or against children, then of necessity, one must bring into question the roles different groups have in the process (Tierney, forthcoming).

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) cultural capital framework has been important in studies that focus on how class status plays a role in educational achievement. He claims that the cultural capital of middle and upper class students privilege them in terms of economic security, organizational contexts, and personal support systems. His notions are based on the assumption that cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities are possessed and often inherited by certain groups in society, and that these are distributed socially. Distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted by the families of each social class; as a consequence, children of upper class families inherit substantially different skills, abilities, manners, style of interaction, and facility with language (Bourdieu, 1977).

One way that working-class and minority youth can enjoy the same advantages as their more affluent and privileged peers is for educators to act in a manner such that it generates a socialization process that produces the same sorts of strategies and resources employed in privileged homes and institutions. This necessitates that services be designed to transmit non-academic skills that help negotiate the pathway to college through a variety of out-of-class activities as well as through the involvement of the family.
Out-of-Class Activities & Services

The cultural capital approach identifies the loci of risks at two primary points of intervention for underrepresented students: the family, and the community. The recommended action is to re-engineer the school environment and to work in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and parents to promote desired outcomes, increase and identify available resources, and address potential risks to school failure. The following are some examples of typical extra-curricular activities that programs have implemented:

- College visits
- Career days
- Field trips to museums, plays, and concerts
- Motivational seminars
- Admissions and financial aid workshops
- Mentor programs
- Summer bridge programs

The assumption for providing these services is based on the belief that it is the acquisition of a framework and strategies that for solving problems that contributes to long-term adjustment. Providing students with the skills and abilities to successfully transition from one academic environment to another. By teaching students to think through alternative solutions and their consequences, they will obtain the necessary tools to confront and overcome new situations and unfamiliar environments. NAI and AVID are examples of programs that have understood this educational imperative and have been moderately successful in implementing a design that addresses these issues.

Two Examples of Successful Transition

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), a program located at the University of Southern California, is an example of a culturally responsive approach to education that encompasses both family involvement and the affirmation of the community. It focuses on targeting students at an early age, as well as on normative school transitions, such as moving from middle school to high school, and from high
school to college. The environment and teacher are modified and designed to be responsive to the local community, thereby benefiting all students in the classroom setting.

NAI begins the socialization process in the 7th grade, enabling teachers, counselors and other staff members to help students develop the skills for successful transitions from middle school to high school, and ultimately through college. A university-based program, NAI was strives to provide children with (a) a safe, supportive environment that affirms local identity and demands academic excellence; and (b) provides transitional and coping skills training to enhance students’ capacity to deal effectively with stresses and changes in an educational environment.

As mentioned previously, the AVID program works to teach students basic academic survival skills such as note-taking and critical thinking, but also teaches students how to navigate the college application process. Again instilling in students the cultural capital needed to understand “how the world works” is necessary to prepare them for academic survival and overall success beyond their days in high school and college.

In many respects, a teacher in the AVID program assumes the role that has been dramatically reduced in inner city schools due to fiscal shortfalls - that of the guidance counselor. The demise of guidance counseling in American high schools has led to a reduction of much needed services for potential college bound youth. As a result, decreasing numbers of counselors are often required to do an increasing amount of work (McDonough, 1994). Indeed, scholars have found that 90% of the counselor’s time is spent doing work that should encompass half their time (Gutkin & Conoley, 1990), and that some college preparation programs have been successful at identifying and addressing the deficiencies of college counselors through a variety of measures (Tierney & Jun, in preparation).
AVID instructors constantly focus on the importance of college and how one can get there. The classroom is replete with college-going materials and motivational signs and slogans about college. In short, the instructor takes an individual interest in each student in his or her care, and tries to create the conditions so that the students will go to college. Such work might involve instilling in students the cultural capital needed to survive in what many urban youth perceive as an alien environment (the college campus) or it might focus on psychological and emotional support structures for adolescents who do not have an adult in their lives who has gone to college or understands how to go about getting into college. The consolidation of efforts of those adults who do hold significant positions in students’ lives then, becomes essential. In the next section, we examine the need for increased efforts of collaboration between families and educators to effect change in students’ lives.

IV. Family Involvement

Family involvement has become an important issue in American education today. Statements about the need for parents to be involved in their children’s education appear regularly in popular magazines and periodicals. These popular sentiments are echoed by academic literature, and as mentioned earlier, increased family involvement has become mandated through federal programs. Few researchers dispute the notion that children are shaped by their families. Though invariably, there are differing opinions on exactly how the family affects children. While some researchers focus on the affects of family status (Clark, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lam, 1997; Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1998), others emphasize the importance of family processes (Lam, 1997; Delpit, 1988).

Previous studies have found that students’ academic achievement in elementary and high school improved when their parents attended parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings, and helped their children in select courses (Peterson, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Clark’s (1983) study on African American families in the inner city found that sponsored independence, high support, high expectations, close supervision, and
respect for the child’s intellectual achievement characterized poor black parents of high scholastic achievers. This finding is consistent with White (1982), who found that when socio-economic status was defined by measures of home atmosphere, such as parents helping children with homework, higher family SES correlated much higher with academic achievement.

In a qualitative study on family and school relationships, Annette Lareau (1987) found that social class provided parents with unequal resources to comply with teachers’ requests for parental participation. As a result, middle-class parents were more likely to participate in school activities. She further found that middle-class and working class parents had more differences in the ways they promoted educational success than in their educational values. Working class parents typically surrendered the responsibility for education to teachers, while middle-class parents did not.

In his study of the effects of social class on parental values, Kohn (1977), found that the higher a parent’s social-class position, the more likely he or she was to value characteristics indicative of self-direction and the less likely to value characteristics indicative of conformity to external authority. Kohn suggested that this pattern was related to the different conditions of life faced by parents in different socio-economic positions. Parents with high SES were more typically independent, freer from close supervision, and more likely worked at non-routine tasks. Hence, they were more likely to value characteristics such as independence and self-direction in their children.

Challenges to Working with Parents

Given the conceptual framework and review of literature, we would like reiterate to counselors and program administrators, the importance of working with parents and addressing any unique needs of low-income families. For example, by asking low-income parents to attend school events (PTA meetings, open house night), to help in the classroom, or to participate in Saturday programs, teachers make demands on the time and disposable income of parents. Attending afternoon parent-teacher conferences might
require transportation, childcare arrangements, and job flexibility. Middle- and upper-income parents may have more time and disposable income than working class parents may.

Time and income afforded by higher-class jobs may effect parental attitudes and definitions of teacher and parent roles, while the absence of these resources will alter and challenge traditional notions of parental involvement in schooling. Defining education as a cooperative responsibility between parent and teacher may lead to increased participation by middle class parents. However, alternative understandings of some urban parents and their strategy of entrusting the teacher to educate their children, may lead to deflated participation by parents that does not promote success.

Although working- and middle-class parents want their children to succeed in school, their positions in society may lead them to employ different strategies to achieve that goal. Thus, social class positions and class cultures become a form of cultural capital. Mehan and colleagues (1996) assert that while parents of low-income and minority children have high aspirations for their children, they frequently have insufficient knowledge and resources to assist their children with higher education goals. “Although AVID parents support their children’s college goals, they don’t know the details about required courses, and tests, application forms and deadlines, scholarship possibilities and procedures. Although they understand that their children need to go to college to be successful, they express some ambivalence about them leaving home” (1996, p.158).

While the strategy employed by middle-income parents—actively participating in supervising, monitoring, and overseeing of their children’s schooling—promotes success, differences in definition and strategy has crated a significant impact on low-income families and their children. It behooves counselors, policy makers, and administrators to recognize differences in the definitions and expectations of families from a wide variety of backgrounds, and to address these issues in order to better serve and incorporate
family involvement into the curriculum. In our final section, we offer some challenges to administrators and also propose some general assumptions and recommendations for future programs.

V. Challenges, Recommendations, & Assumptions

Challenges

Is a six-week immersion program on a college campus prior to a student’s senior year really effective in preparing an individual for what he or she will discover during the freshman year? At a time when fiscal resources are tight, policymakers, foundations, governments, and schools can not afford to fund programs if they are ineffective. More often than not, funding agencies are concerned with the actual numbers of students served to justify refunding, and this leaves staff members spending a majority of their time and energy to ensure the accurate reporting of the numbers of students served are equal to their proposed objective.

It is not enough to think that by simply bringing students on to a college campus for one summer, they will be better prepared for the transitions that await them. Most organizations that run programs are often limited to offering services in the summers, either between the junior and senior years of high school, or during the summer between high school and college. Many summer bridge programs organized by admissions and orientation staff are often concerned with two issues: (a) the recruitment of underrepresented minorities; or (b) increasing their annual yield and ameliorating the losses caused by the “summer melt” (i.e., the number of certified students who fail to enroll in the fall).

There is disengagement in the delivery of services between K-12 and the college that confounds what researchers have been imploring for some time—continuity across the continuum of services. If administrators of college preparation programs know that the measurement of success is graduation from high school, and they thus choose students who are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college, then one
would certainly question the effectiveness of the program. Moreover, if funding agencies and preparation programs overemphasize numbers for reporting purposes, then they will lose sight the overarching goal of ensuring ultimate student success as defined by graduation from college.

Recommendations & Assumptions

Effective strategies for programs differ from community to community, and the most appropriate strategies for a particular community will depend on local interests, needs, and resources. However, several successful approaches to working with underrepresented minority and urban youths have emphasized innovation and flexibility. Through the review of successful programs included in this study, we submit seven recommendations that have significant implications for educators and policy makers:

· **Remember that change takes time.** Educators should recognize that developing a successful program requires continued effort over time, and that solving one problem usually creates two new ones. Educators must remember that the method of implementation matters more than the immediate outcome measures.

· **Develop local definitions of identity.** From this perspective, where an individual comes from is of utmost importance. Individual and community identity must be recognized, and excellence and success must be stated in cultural relevant context. Low-income urban youth need to have teachers, tasks, and pedagogies that affirm who they are.

· **Connect the individual, the school, and the family.** Although it is impossible to attribute student academic achievement or success solely to parent involvement, it appears that many programs that make parent involvement a priority also see student outcomes improve (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1998). In addition, college preparation programs must be seen as an essential, integrated component of a school and district, and as part of the continuum of support for ensuring student success.

· **Demand high standards.** Educators must be aware of the potential danger of lowering one’s expectations of students labeled “at-risk”. Providing students with challenging
work conveys respect for their potential to learn and succeed. Teachers’ expectations on assignments must be high yet realistic. Also, supportive and positive discussions about attending four-year colleges and universities should occur frequently.

- **Consider Cost Effectiveness.** Successful yet expensive programs may not be as effective as programs that can obtain similar goals while maintaining cost efficiency. To be sure, a program that spends a million dollars and gets 90% of its students to graduate from college may not be deemed as effective as a program that spends $100,000 and gets a 75% graduation rate. Should one consider a program successful if at the end of the year a majority of the participants attended a college, but the activities were so time consuming and exhausting for the teachers that the program fell apart?

- **Invest in program evaluation.** Programs must assess the effects of services and pedagogies using multiple indicators. As important as it is to invest time, effort, and financial and human capital into services, it is equally important to develop evaluative measures (both formative and summative) that define and gauge successful delivery of services. Upon thorough review and assessment of the effects of the program, results should be shared with other scholars and educators in the community at large.

- **Do not rely on a “one size fits all” approach.** Educational reformers increasingly have tried to move away from a cookie cutter approach to pedagogical and organizational issues as if all schools and all school children need to develop in precisely the same manner, shape, and form. Programs must build upon what already exists and works well in the community. This requires identifying the strengths, interests, and needs of students, their families, and staff, and design strategies that respond to these identified strengths, interests, and needs. Different students have different needs, so different programs will need to be created for different clienteles.

In addition, the following key assumptions serve as important reminders for individuals working in college preparation programs: (a) if properly educated and supported, minority students and students from urban environments can be as successful
in school and college as anyone else; (b) despite evidence that it is best to start early in preventing problems, it is never too late to reach young people; and (c) when colleges get involved with young people and the schools they attend, pronounced benefits accrue not only to students but to both institutions.

**Conclusion**

To reiterate, early intervention programs came about as educators recognized the need to eradicate poverty and ensure equal opportunities for historically disadvantaged students. The clamor to move toward the establishment of more prevention programs led to the development of the federal Chapter One program to serve economically disadvantaged or historically underrepresented youth in the 1960’s, and more recently, efforts were made to involve families and to reach students at an increasingly younger age. Some programs focused intensively on strengthening students’ academic problem solving skills, seen as critical to gaining access to future postsecondary education, while also addressing the non-academic needs of the individual, family, and community.

To be sure, college preparation programs should possess the following components: (a) be based on the knowledge that they hold potential for improving both academic and non-academic skills; (b) be able to create greater opportunities for historically underrepresented minority youth to not only enroll in but graduate from college; (c) be typically directed to only those students who would not have gone to college without these services; and (d) be adaptable enough so that they can be applicable across diverse racial, ethnic, and regional communities. In addition, they should be implemented in collaboration with other school programs and professional activities as part of a continuum of services available, and parental involvement and accountability must also be incorporated whenever possible.

Year-end evaluations and reports to funding sources often lack the critical information necessary to determine the factors that made the program successful, and various funding agencies have also invested significant financial resources in these
programs, with high expectations for success, but the funding for proper evaluative studies has been scarce. Existing fiscal allocation, administrative structures, training, staff, and support for research were insufficient. Accordingly, the goal of this study was to determine what types of college preparation programs are most effective for encouraging and empowering low-income urban youth to enroll in and graduate from college.

We have highlighted components that have been demonstrably effective and successful in serving urban minority youth, implementing programs that can be characterized by a desire to foster creativity and innovation at a localized level. The implications of this study are important for educators, policy makers and administrators of programs who seek to serve economically and educationally disadvantaged students. However, further studies are needed to incorporate the efforts of practitioners at both the secondary and postsecondary levels in order to ensure more effective delivery.
References


