

College knowledge is a critical component in ensuring that young people, especially first-generation and low-income youth, are able to progress to college and into careers.

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College knowledge: A critical component of college and career readiness

Sarah Hooker, Betsy Brand

WHILE POLICYMAKERS AT THE national, state, and local levels have endorsed the movement to raise academic rigor and demand college and career readiness for all students, the stark reality is that the educational pipeline loses far too many young people before they can even enter postsecondary education. Approximately 7,200 students drop out of U.S. schools each day, adding up to 1.3 million students annually who fail to graduate from high school in four years.¹ The context of an economic recession makes the urgency of addressing the dropout crisis and improving college access all the more striking, as higher levels of education translate to higher earnings for all racial and ethnic groups. College graduates earn approximately \$1 million more over their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma,² and they also experience better health and are more likely to vote.

Achieving the goal of college and career readiness for all youth requires innovative programs and policies that address the multiple

factors influencing young people's educational pathways. High school dropouts report that their primary reasons for leaving school were that classes were uninteresting or irrelevant to the world beyond high school or that they felt alienated and unsupported.³ The traditional vision of college readiness, which has typically meant an exclusive focus on improved academic performance for in-school youth, may fail to fully capture the developmental process required for all young people to complete high school and enter, succeed in, and graduate from postsecondary education and training. Increasingly, researchers and policy analysts recognize that the necessary qualities for persistence in and completion of postsecondary education encompass more than just academic components. Disconnected youth, in particular, need access to a comprehensive set of resources and supportive adults who can help them make informed choices regarding postsecondary education and careers, and interventions must focus on both in-school and out-of-school youth.

In a recent publication, *Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond*, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) examined the research findings on programs that help students prepare for college and careers.⁴ From the review of programs, it became clear that college and career readiness involves the development of a wide variety of skills, abilities, and dispositions well beyond the academic domain. In response to the complexity of this developmental process, AYPF developed a broad definition of college and career readiness:

Students are prepared to successfully complete credit-bearing college coursework or industry certification without remediation, have the academic skills and self-motivation necessary to persist and progress in postsecondary education, and have identified career goals and the necessary steps to achieve them. Readiness also requires the developmental maturity to thrive in the increasingly independent worlds of postsecondary education and careers, the cultural knowledge to understand the expectations of the college environment and labor market, and the employer-desired skills to succeed in an innovation-based economy.

Implicit in this definition is the need for young people to possess what we term college knowledge, meaning that students have an understanding of the complex college admission and selection processes, the options available to help pay for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education.

College knowledge, and the development of a college-going identity, can enhance the relevance of the high school experience, help youth stay engaged in school, and ensure they take the necessary steps to prepare for and enroll in postsecondary education. Research has shown that many low-income, first-generation college-going students often face particular challenges in applying to, enrolling in, and persisting in college, and these challenges are compounded for youth who are off track academically or have dropped out of school. Students from underrepresented groups often lack the social capital to understand the world of postsecondary education, as they are less likely to have role models who have attended institutions of higher education (IHEs), and they may have less collective college knowledge in their communities.

Another challenge is that many young people and their families know it is important to go to college, but they know little about the options of postsecondary studies. As a result, many students aspire to attend a four-year college, but in reality they have very little understanding of the academic and social preparation needed to enter and succeed. Far too many students do not receive counseling on the range of postsecondary options or on finding a course of study that matches their interests and career aspirations. Without such guidance, they cannot make informed choices based on the opportunities and labor market prospects available in their communities. The fit of the IHE with the student's interests and abilities also plays a critical role in college retention and completion. The Consortium on Chicago School Research found that attending a high school with a strong college-going culture was the most consistent predictor of whether students took the steps required for college enrollment, underscoring the importance of

receiving timely information and assistance with the college application process. This impact was particularly strong for Latino students, many of whom may be first-generation college students.⁵

The attainment of college knowledge involves both acquiring practical information about how to plan for and enroll in college, as well as developing a college-going identity through exposure to the world of postsecondary education. Youth need early opportunities to complete college-level work, navigate college campuses, and understand how the structures, opportunities, and demands of higher education differ from those of high school. Academic success behaviors, which include study skills, self-monitoring, and other effective learning habits, as well as social and emotional maturity, also are critical components of college knowledge.

Programs that build college knowledge

The twenty-three programs profiled in *Success at Every Step* represent a wide range of programs and educational models that support students' progress along the pathway to college. Several programs have a focus on developing college knowledge, and we briefly discuss some of the elements of those programs and then provide short profiles of three programs, Early College High Schools, Washington State Achievers, and Citizen Schools, that intentionally target students' college knowledge through diverse strategies. Although the three programs described here work with in-school youth, many of the approaches and strategies can benefit out-of-school youth as well and can serve as a guidepost for programs targeting dropout prevention and recovery.

Most of the programs that focus on developing college knowledge provide a rigorous curriculum and ensure that instructional staff members are prepared to support students who participate in more demanding classes. Effective programs also provide early college exposure by conducting campus visits, hosting programs on college campuses, and providing opportunities for high school students to earn college credits. Successful initiatives also facilitate

young people's relationships with adults who can answer their questions about college, guide them through the admission process, and help them find ways to finance their education.

The brief profiles that follow provide short descriptions of three diverse programs and how each one contributes to students' college knowledge, along with information on the evidence base demonstrating positive outcomes for participants.

Early college high schools

The Early College High School (ECHS) model maximizes the potential to expose students from traditionally underrepresented groups to every aspect of a college environment and culture. As schools that integrate the learning opportunities of a partner IHE with extra academic and social supports of a small high school community, they offer all students the chance to earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree, or comparable college credit. The national Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), established in 2002, provides funding to intermediary organizations to convene various partners, such as school districts, IHEs, and community-based organizations, to launch ECHSs. At least twelve schools in the ECHSI network specifically serve students who have previously dropped out or were unsuccessful in traditional high schools.

The majority of ECHSs are located on college campuses, and, as a result, students learn what it is like to be in college by attending classes, using college facilities, and forming relationships with college students. Youth begin to see themselves as college-goers who are capable of handling the rigor of higher education and navigating the new environment. Most schools incorporate academic support classes and tutoring into the school day, and students receive college application assistance through a specific college planning class. Two-year public colleges are the most common type of partner institution, and they often provide connections to multiple career pathways.

Two ongoing evaluations of the ECHS model have demonstrated positive early outcomes for students with regard to high school academic rigor and performance, as well as increased college aspirations. A rigorous, experimental study of North Carolina's ECHS Initiative, conducted by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, is tracking the results of students who are randomly assigned to attend ECHSs, along with a control group of students who are not admitted. Early results from two sites show that ninth-grade students progressed in a college preparatory curriculum at higher rates than the control group.⁶ The ECHSI National Evaluation, conducted by the American Institutes for Research and SRI International, has found that the network's schools outperform district averages on assessment tests and expected on-time graduation rates, and the first ECHS graduating classes planned to enroll in college at a higher rate than the national average. Interestingly, the most positive outcomes with regard to academic achievement, attendance, and on-time promotion rates are found at ECHSs located on college campuses.⁷ These results speak to the power of the place to raise student aspirations and build college knowledge.

Washington State Achievers

Washington State Achievers (WSA) provides a strong example of a program that combines comprehensive school reform with early college awareness, increased college counseling, mentoring, and the opportunity to earn a substantial college scholarship. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the program provided five-year school redesign grants to sixteen high schools in Washington State from 2001 to 2006 and created an ongoing, comprehensive college scholarship and preparation program for eligible graduates from these schools. In collaboration with the College Success Foundation, College Preparatory Advisors in the WSA schools guide students through the college planning and application processes, offering college advising, assistance with the

application and financial aid processes, and family outreach. As the program's hallmark component, WSA awards five hundred college scholarships to eligible juniors from participating high schools each year. The selected students, known as Achievers, are provided with mentors during the last two years of high school and the first two years of college who help the Achievers acclimate to the culture of postsecondary education and provide advice on managing the responsibilities of college. Unlike a traditional merit scholarship, the program uses a unique selection process that includes an assessment of noncognitive traits, such as goal setting, the ability to navigate social systems, resilience in the face of challenges, and demonstrated leadership, which have been associated with success in postsecondary education for students of color.

The Achievers have family incomes in the bottom third of the state's income distribution, and over three-quarters of the cohort selected in 2009 were students of color, which is substantially higher than the statewide enrollment of nonwhite students in higher education. The grade point averages of recipients range widely, and the program provides intensive academic support for students who do not achieve college-ready scores on college placement tests.

Quasi-experimental evaluations of the WSA program have found that students at WSA schools are more likely to complete the courses required for college admission than similar peers at other schools, and the impact of attending a WSA school is particularly strong for Native American and African American students.⁸ Recipients of the Achievers scholarship are more likely to enroll in college than similar peers, and those who applied for but did not receive the scholarship also have greater odds of college enrollment than similar peers who did not apply.⁹

Citizen Schools

Citizen Schools (CS) demonstrates the importance of starting early to build a college-going identity and provide youth with

applied learning opportunities and exposure to college and careers. CS prepares middle school students for high school and postsecondary education through a structured after-school program in approximately forty public schools in seven states. According to a study of CS in Boston, over 90 percent of participants are students of color, 85 percent are low income, and over 20 percent are in special education.¹⁰ The program includes apprenticeships, which are experiential learning projects led by adult volunteers and supported by a staff of professional educators, as well as regular field trips to sites such as universities, museums, and nature centers. By promoting active participation in the community, providing more time for learning, and fostering connections to supportive adult mentors in a variety of roles, CS aims to enhance the relevance of the school experience and increase student engagement and success.

The capstone of the CS experience is the Eighth Grade Academy, which emphasizes the transition to high school and provides early college information. Participants visit several colleges throughout the eighth-grade year, and they typically have the opportunity to spend a weekend on a college campus with other CS students from throughout the state. Youth learn the vocabulary of the college admission process, as well as key factors that go into choosing a college, at a particularly young age. In school districts with high school choice, such as Boston, the program also focuses on helping students to assess the quality of high school options and preparing them to select a college-preparatory curriculum. The CS model recognizes the critical role of decisions made before students enter high school and aims to provide students and their families with the necessary information to facilitate college enrollment.

A quasi-experimental, longitudinal evaluation of CS in Boston by the Policy Studies Associates found that participation in CS is associated with improved school engagement and academic performance that persists even after students graduate from the program and enter high school. Former CS participants are more likely than matched nonparticipants to enroll and persist in a high-quality

high school that will prepare them for success in postsecondary education. In addition, former CS participants have higher high school attendance rates and are more likely to pass their math classes at every grade level. Early results indicate that students who participated in CS during middle school have higher on-time graduation rates than the district average.¹¹

Recommendations

Based on our analysis of the evaluated programs in *Success at Every Step*, AYPF developed a number of policy recommendations. The following is a summary of the recommendations that relate to enhancing college knowledge, and they have relevance to both in-school and out-of-school youth.

Because becoming college and career ready is a multifaceted and complex undertaking, it is important for policy to support a comprehensive approach to working with the various providers that help young people throughout the educational process. Legislators can ensure that various policies share common objectives leading to college and career readiness for all youth. Specifically, governors (as some are doing) can create statewide initiatives to raise awareness of the need to better prepare all youth for postsecondary education, and federal and state administrators of publicly funded programs (such as education, workforce, economic development, and social services) can agree to ensure that all youth are college and career ready. Policymakers can allow increased flexibility to make it easier for programs to collaborate in providing various supports to youth.

Policymakers need to support programs and initiatives that help youth and their families build knowledge of the admission and financial aid processes and provide exposure to college environments. In particular, many first-generation, low-income, and disconnected youth need assistance in navigating the college search, application, and financial aid processes, which often act as barriers to postsecondary enrollment. Allowing youth to participate in

programs that provide access to college campuses and classes, through dual or concurrent enrollment, early college models, or expanded learning opportunities, is an effective way to help students gain college knowledge and see themselves as college students. Programs that work with students in the middle school and their families to build college knowledge are also critical, as many families and students decide before high school that college is unattainable.

The K-12 education system and institutions of higher education play a vital role in providing youth from underrepresented groups with the academic preparation and social supports needed to succeed in postsecondary education. Policymakers should encourage the secondary and postsecondary systems to collaborate more extensively in helping young people develop college knowledge. For example, funding formulas can encourage dual enrollment by ensuring that both high schools and colleges receive resources linked to participating students. Policies should also ensure that high school graduation requirements are aligned with the expectations of colleges and universities and that students receive clear, early signals about their level of academic readiness for postsecondary education. Policies of this type should include students who have dropped out but returned to complete high school because they need extra assistance in navigating the path to postsecondary education.

Similarly, policymakers should recognize that many providers throughout the community can help students learn about the college-going process and develop college knowledge. After-school providers, employers, and community-based organizations can contribute to building students' expectations and knowledge and need to be supported and integrated into ongoing efforts.

Success at Every Step demonstrates that college knowledge is a critical component in ensuring that young people, especially first-generation, at-risk, and low-income youth, are able to progress to college and into careers. The three programs profiled here are excellent examples of those that are deliberate in their goal to ensure that more youth are college and career ready.

Notes

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SARAH HOOKER is a program associate with the American Youth Policy Forum in Washington, D.C.

BETSY BRAND is the executive director of the American Youth Policy Forum in Washington, D.C.