An Assessment of Urban Students’ Awareness of College Processes
Increasing college access for students living in urban areas has been a focus of practitioners and researchers for decades. School districts, nonprofit organizations, and universities have undertaken the task of designing programs that facilitate low-income, urban youths’ transition from high school to college. The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the success these programs have had in increasing diversity on college campuses; rather, we are concerned with the level of social and procedural preparedness youths possess when they arrive on college campuses. Although a rigorous high school curriculum is essential to postsecondary-level work, but also requires that students have a procedural knowledge of other university processes—what we define herein as “college knowledge.” This article presents the results of an evaluation of a college preparation program that focuses on college knowledge and provides a road map for designing an effective college knowledge curriculum.

The contemporary college or university campus is a complex and dynamic environment that requires students to navigate myriad institutional processes. College preparedness is not simply a matter of being academically ready for postsecondary-level work, but also requires that students have a procedural knowledge of other university processes—what we define herein as “college knowledge.” This article presents the results of an evaluation of a college preparation program that focuses on college knowledge and provides a road map for designing an effective college knowledge curriculum.

We define ‘college knowledge’ as a specific skill set—social, academic, and cultural—necessary for successful transition to postsecondary education and degree completion. Youths who live in middle-class communities with family members who have completed postsecondary degrees learn what it means to be in college through their social networks (Stanton-Salazar 1997). These youths benefit from conversations with family members and peers about how to prepare for college and what to expect. When they have a difficult time making a decision (e.g., which college to select), they have a social support system that offers guidance. Youths from low-income communities generally are less likely to have access to a social network that can provide this level of support and institutional knowledge (Lee and Bowen 2006); as a result, more often than not, they enter college unprepared. Students’
first-year college experiences are critical to their persistence through degree completion (Goldrick-Rab 2007). Students from families without a history of college-going may overcome application and acceptance hurdles, but this does not guarantee that they are fully prepared to successfully negotiate the transition to enrollment and degree completion. These students’ lack of knowledge of college processes becomes apparent upon their arrival on campus (Bloom 2007). Failure in classes the first semester or lack of social connectedness may lead to a perception by the student that completing college is not a realistic goal.

Gaining access to college is a multifaceted process that involves much more than completing applications and securing financial aid. In order for students to successfully negotiate the transition to college and achieve degree completion, they need to understand how to navigate institutional hierarchies, social obligations, and personal commitments (McDonough 1997). Our findings are based on an assessment of knowledge youths possessed who attended a summer bridge program at a large, urban, research university in the western United States. We worked with 90 youths who graduated from low-performing schools in a large urban area. Virtually all of the youths came from low-income families and were either Latino or African American. The youths had been accepted to a four-year college or university; one-third of the institutions were highly selective. The students’ relatively high grade point averages and their sacrifice of nearly a month of their summer break suggest that the students were motivated to be successful in college.

Students completed a college knowledge survey prior to participating in the program. Survey responses were compared with observations during college knowledge sessions during which students discussed aspects of the college transition. We used information gathered from the surveys to develop sessions that targeted aspects of college knowledge that appeared to be lacking. We discuss in the remainder of this article the four most prominent questions that arose. The final section provides an overview of the program we designed to address identified needs.
Access to information about financial aid is one aspect of college knowledge that has received a significant amount of attention (Burdman 2005; McDonough and Calde rone 2006; Perna 2007). The issue of financial access is of particular importance to youths from low-income families. Socioeconomic status is a significant indicator of students’ preparation for college (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Olivérez and Tierney 2005). For students from low-income families, the perceived cost of college is carefully considered; cost comparisons between institutions may be a deciding factor determining students’ school of choice (Paulsen and St. John 2002). Students’ awareness of the high cost of tuition does not guarantee that they also understand the additional costs of postsecondary education (Bloom 2007). First-generation students may not know that they also need to factor in social expenses, travel costs to visit home, and the cost of books and supplies.

Students who attended our program had basic knowledge of the financial opportunities and obligations associated with attending college. The majority of students understood that completion of the FAFSA was necessary to receive support from the federal government, including federal loans. Students had filled out these forms and had received documents from their universities and the federal government; however, they were unsure of how to interpret the financial aid documents they received in return—whether from their college of choice, grant agencies, or foundations managing scholarships. Students who did not have access to college preparation programs typically set aside these documents because they were unsure of the next steps. For example, one student received a statement informing her that she did not qualify for federal support because her mother had not filled out the FAFSA correctly: her form was missing a few pieces of information. Correcting the form required locating the information and resubmitting the form. Had the student had access to the required information, she could have responded to the financial aid office’s request within a few minutes. Unfortunately, the student did not understand the request and so put the document in her desk for nearly a month. Six weeks before school started, she received from the university a series of letters that she interpreted as denying her financial support.

Some college preparation programs—specifically, those affiliated with a high school course—do not extend through summer, leaving students without a resource to consult when questions arise. Students could have contacted the directors of their high schools’ college prep programs but typically were afraid they would be considered bothersome. Students were unsure of whom to consult when an unexpected situation arose. Throughout the program, we observed that the majority of students did not ask questions until they were given a clear opportunity to do so. Students with concerns they perceived as private or potentially embarrassing were not forthcoming about financial issues until they were asked during individual sessions.

**QUESTION 1:**
“I KNOW WHAT FINANCIAL AID IS, BUT WHAT ABOUT MY SPECIFIC SITUATION?”

**QUESTION 2:**
“SHOULD I GET INVOLVED IN ACTIVITIES ON CAMPUS?”

Involvement while attending college is one of the strongest predictors of persistence and graduation (Astin 1984; Tinto 1998). Tinto (1998) posits that involvement—in the classroom as well as in the greater university community—and a feeling of integration into the campus community strongly contribute to the likelihood that a student will choose to stay in college. Nearly 50 percent of all students who drop out do so prior to the start of their second year of college (Tinto 1998). Getting involved during the first year increases the likelihood that students will be socially connected with others who have an academic focus. Thus, it becomes vital for students to know prior to their arrival on campus (or early in their undergraduate experience) what opportunities for involvement are available. However, involvement alone is not sufficient. The student must perceive her involvement as beneficial in order for it to positively influence persistence (Rendon 1994).

Students with whom we worked had knowledge of involvement that was dependent upon their participation in related activities in high school. For example, a student involved in student government in high school assumed that student government was an option in college. Many students wanted to continue their involvement in activities similar to those in which they had participated in high school. For example, 93 percent of students involved in sports planned to be on an athletic team in college (ranging from intramural to varsity). More than 60 percent of students involved in speech and debate, student government, cheerleading, performing arts, and community ser-
vice organizations planned to continue participating in these activities. Students connected the reasons they were involved in high school to their intended participation in college: If they participated in activities that were fun or that allowed them to stay physically fit, then they would do so for the same reasons in college. However, few students connected their participation in activities to their success in college (or beyond). Further, students were unaware that postsecondary institutions typically offer myriad co-curricular opportunities.

The majority (67 percent) of students in our program were involved in multiple activities in high school and planned to continue that level of involvement in college. A small group (4 percent) of students were not involved in high school programs; that percentage doubled when students predicted their involvement in activities at college. We were particularly interested in why this group—though representing only a small proportion—did not plan to participate in student activities. Students gave three explanations: employment; need to focus on academics; and lack of interest. One young woman who planned to live with her parents while she attended school explained her need to prioritize employment over involvement. She stated that she would consider joining a student activity if there was time, but she was not optimistic. Another student did not understand why anyone would want to participate in extracurricular activities; her priority was to pass her classes. She felt that involvement in other activities would distract her. A couple of students did not believe they would be interested in any of the activities offered on campus. They connected their lack of interest in high school activities to their perception of postsecondary involvement options. These students did not identify any negative consequences that might result from their lack of involvement in student activities.

**QUESTION 3:**
“**HOW DO I DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN FRIENDSHIPS?”**

Students discussed and defined relationships in regard to their family, peers, and professors. One of two responses was typical with regard to maintaining family relationships: never visit, or visit every weekend. Responses frequently were dependent on geographic proximity: Students who chose to attend a college or university in the city where their parents lived typically planned either to live with their parents or to visit every weekend. Visits were discussed in terms of maintaining friendships and fulfilling family obligations. Students living at home planned to contribute by assisting with childcare for younger siblings, assisting their families financially, and devoting considerable time to family activities. Students who chose to attend colleges or universities that were more than a five-hour drive from home assumed that visits home would be limited to winter break and summer vacation. These students planned to maintain their familial relationships primarily via e-mail and phone.

Students did not clearly define social relationships. Those who were moving to another city expressed anticipation and anxiety. They cited the residence hall and student involvement opportunities as avenues they planned to use to build a social network. They were unsure whether time would be available to maintain high school friendships. Students planning to attend schools in close proximity to their high schools had significantly more interest in maintaining friendships. In particular, students planning to live with their families prioritized relationships formed in high school and downplayed the importance of creating new social connections.

Students perceived that their relationships with professors would be formal and distant. More than 40 percent of students did not plan to meet with a professor unless they were struggling academically. One student mentioned that he planned to meet with a professor only if he was failing a class; another student commented that she might go to office hours if she was dealing with a crisis adversely affecting her grades. Nearly half of the students misunderstood the purpose of office hours. Viewing student-faculty relationships as adversarial or negative contributes to students’ inability to become integrated into the campus community and reduces the chance that students will seek academic support; each of these in turn may lead to decreased persistence and/or academic performance.

**QUESTION 4:**
“**HOW AM I GOING TO GET EVERYTHING DONE?”**

McCarthy and Kuh (2006) used HSSE and NSSE survey findings to compare the amounts of time students spent weekly preparing for classes in high school and college. On average, college students spent twice as much time preparing for classes as high school students. Students new to the
Given public schools’ limited resources and capacity, college environment and unaware of the increased workload are at a disadvantage their first year—the very year most crucial to their continued success in college (Tinto 1998). College preparatory programs that include an instructional component intended to mirror college-level classes can help students anticipate and prepare to meet academic expectations their freshman year.

Students expected that time management strategies that had worked in the past would continue to serve them well during college. Strategies included attending class regularly to get announcements about due dates and setting aside time to study with peers. Students who had not participated in college preparation programs assumed that their class schedule would be similar to that in high school (i.e., six hours a day, five days a week). More than 80 percent of students overestimated the amount of time they would spend in class, and nearly 65 percent underestimated the amount of time they would need to study.

Few students used daily planners to organize their studying in high school. Nearly two-thirds of students used planners to keep track of important events (e.g., birthdays and tests), but they did not use them to plan completion of schoolwork. Many students had few independent strategies to keep themselves organized and relied instead on the structures of high school to remind them to complete assignments. Most students were familiar with the adage that ‘professors do not remind you to turn in your work.’ However, they needed additional strategies for negotiating the independent nature of college-level academic assignments. With fewer assignments and less structure than high school, college inevitably will present students with challenges they have not yet faced. Fewer assignments is one factor that makes college less forgiving than high school. Students who enter college with unrealistic expectations may quickly become overwhelmed by the workload and may struggle continually to catch up and overcome the deficit. Such students are at risk of failing or dropping out of school, particularly if they already feel less prepared academically and have weaker social support networks.

**DESIGNING A COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE PROGRAM**

College preparation programs (those outside the public school system) are designed to increase individuals’ base of knowledge about college and access to higher education. Given public schools’ limited resources and capacity, these academic enrichment programs are the best places for students from families that do not have a history of college-going to obtain knowledge of postsecondary processes (Swail 2000). Most college preparation programs share the same ultimate goal: for students to attend and graduate from college. Programs have an array of structural designs and short-term goals to achieve this end; however, most focus on college access for low-income, minority youths who are first-generation college students (College Board 2000). These programs have a positive impact on the youths they serve; however, most of them are not in session during the most critical months—those immediately preceding entry and transition to college. Increasing numbers of questions occur to students as the transition to college becomes a reality. Students often need assistance dealing with administrative details and individual emergencies that arise. In this final section, we discuss four aspects of the program we developed to increase students’ college knowledge. The four program components were financial access; involvement and campus life; relationships; and time management.

**Financial Access**

Successful negotiation of the financial aid process requires more than a single, large-group session during the last year of high school (Venegas and Hallett forthcoming). Securing financial aid is a process. During the summer “college knowledge” program, students had the opportunity to participate in three different types of sessions: large group, individual consultation, and a guided phone conference. The large-group presentation covered general information about loans, scholarships, and award letters. Students asked general questions about financial aid opportunities and the overall process. A professional staff member from the university’s financial aid office facilitated the workshop. Although our program staff possessed a great deal of knowledge regarding financial aid processes, we felt it was important to invite a campus-based expert for this session to allow students to obtain the most direct and accurate information possible. This also gave students experience speaking with someone similar to the financial aid staff at their campuses. Students were encouraged to voice concerns and were given information that would support self-advocacy.

Students who needed extra support navigating the financial aid process were encouraged to sign up for an
individual consultation. These students met with a staff member who was knowledgeable about the financial aid process. Together, the student and the staff member reviewed the award letter and resolved any outstanding issues. Finally, each student was given the opportunity to receive guided support in contacting the financial aid office at the institution he or she planned to attend. The staff member first rehearsed the conversation with the student and then prompted the student with questions throughout the actual phone call. The goal was to empower students by giving them skills that would serve them throughout their academic careers—and beyond.

**Involvement and Campus Life**

Notice of opportunities for student involvement and information about campus life were disseminated through two primary sources: a series of student involvement seminars and a panel of current college students. The first seminar discussed the importance of being involved in the campus community and the diversity of options available; the second involved the use of online resources. Students browsed the student involvement Web pages at their respective institutions’ Web sites. The purpose of this session was to expose students to the diversity of options and to have them make initial contact with organizations of interest to them. Each student either called or e-mailed three organizations to request additional information. The purpose of this activity was not to force students to commit to an organization but to help them take the first step toward involvement by initiating a dialogue with student leaders at their future campuses.

A student panel was the second component of this session. The panel comprised college students who had graduated from the high schools the program participants had attended. Program participants were given the opportunity to ask the college students about their experiences and to seek their advice about campus life.

**Relationships**

We were intentional about including professors, teaching assistants, graduate students, and current college students as presenters. The vast majority of students in the summer program had not previously met a professor and did not have a close personal friend or family member who attended a postsecondary institution. The structure of the program enabled the students to participate in classes with professors and teaching assistants, as well as to speak to them in more casual situations. The intent was to expose students to as many of the different groups of people they would encounter during their first year of college as possible.

The relationship portion of the program used problemsolving sessions and seminars on building relationships with professors and discussed the importance of grades. The problem-solving sessions presented students with typical situations that arise in college (e.g., a student does not understand an assignment or does not know what to do if a conflict occurs with a roommate). Students brainstormed solutions and resources that might be available to assist them. Situations that encouraged students to consider professors, teaching assistants, residence hall staff, and campus officers as essential parts of their social network also were discussed.

**Time Management**

The responses students gave at the beginning of the program exposed the limited information they had about the daily demands and “flexibility” of college life. Consequently, sessions were designed to help students develop the time management skills needed to meet the real demands of college. Students learned how to use daily planners to keep track of course assignments; how to plan to complete assignments; and how to allot time to study for exams. Because most students anticipated being involved in extracurricular activities, they were shown how to use a planner to keep track not only of course assignments but also of meetings, social obligations, and family events.

We deemed the management of time within each class period as important as using a daily planner to keep track of commitments each week and semester. Students were shown how to utilize time management strategies to complete timed exams and to take notes during lectures. The majority of students associated note-taking with writing down every word a professor said. They were frustrated when a teacher spoke too fast for them to record her words verbatim. To ease their anxieties about note-taking, students were encouraged to pay particular attention to main ideas and concepts. We demonstrated how to identify key concepts and organize the ideas presented.

The majority of students had not taken essay exams in their high school classes. Thus, sessions were designed to
teach students how to identify what a question was asking and how to manage the limited time available to write a complete and thorough answer. The first session was a lecture that outlined writing and organizational strategies. After the session, students practiced taking an essay test and were given feedback by writing instructors.

CONCLUSION

A rigorous college preparation program must ensure that students are exposed to and retain accurate and relevant college knowledge. The moment students set foot on a college campus, they must begin to adjust to an entirely new way of life. Students from low-income, urban backgrounds are at a greater disadvantage than their more advantaged peers, and they drop out in greater numbers. Developing skills such as interpreting a financial aid offer, understanding a tuition bill, knowing how to take an essay exam, being aware of opportunities for campus involvement, and managing personal finances eases the potentially jarring transition to college and prepare students for success inside and outside the classroom.

The results of our study confirm the clear gaps that exist between what low-income urban youths know about college prior to their arrival on campuses and what they need to know to make the transition successfully. College knowledge beyond academic preparation is vital, so we must find a way to identify the barriers low-income urban youths face and assist them in overcoming them. Urban youths face many challenges in gaining access to college. Lack of functional college knowledge is a deficiency that can be remedied through carefully planned interventions in pre-college preparation programs.

REFERENCES


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