Mobilizing University Capital to Foster Pathways of College Access for Underserved Youth

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Abstract

The capital of Florida engulfs and neighbors some of the most impoverished zip codes in the state. Through a university and community partnership, college access programs have been instituted at local Title I middle and high schools to provide a continuity of academic provisions—creating early college access opportunities for low-income students through afterschool programs. Aiming to narrow the socioeconomic college enrollment disparities between underserved students and their wealthier counterparts, the program has provided students with academic support, mentorship, a three-week residential college-prep summer program, and college and cultural tours at no cost to participants. These efforts are fiscally and logistically made possible through the federal community service work-study program, grants, and university campus partnerships. The success of the program highlights the practicality of designing and improving college readiness and student success efforts through university and community collaboration. To date, the university program has served over 2,500 low-income middle and high students—rising to the call of civic engagement to strengthen the college pipeline for underserved communities.

Keywords: college access, low-income students, university-community partnership, educational attainment

Introduction

Leon County is nestled in the central northwest panhandle and home to Florida's capital city, Tallahassee. The city recently earned the distinguished title of All-America City Honors for its inclusiveness, innovation, and civic engagement. Home to three higher-education institutions, the Florida State Capitol, and touted as a family-friendly community, the city has much to be proud of.

Among the accolades and distinctions, the city engulfs and neighbors some of the most impoverished zip codes in the state of Florida. While this certainly is attributed to the high concentration of college students who reside in the area, one certainly cannot turn a blind eye to systems and policies that allow for low-income students to be subjected to funding practices that inequitably underfund schools in poor communities. Limited economic capital sets a precedence for students to have less access to quality educational opportunities and opportunities that lead to upward mobility. A school comparison analysis between Leon County's Title I and non-Title I high schools reveal performance gaps in English language arts achievement, math and science achievement, and college and career acceleration (Florida Department of Education, 2018). A controversial report cited Tallahassee to have had the "highest level of economic segregation" in the nation (Florida & Mellander, 2015, p. 9), with 47% of households experiencing financial hardship and without basic essentials for children and families (Hoopes, 2017). Then there is the ongoing issue of crime in this relatively small town. In 2017, Leon County was ranked as having the highest per capita crime rate in Florida, with the juvenile arrest percentage rate higher than the state's overall percentage (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2017). Lying adjacent to Leon County is Gadsden County, where the poverty rate was 24.6% in 2018—9.8% higher than the state's poverty rate at 14.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). While effort has been made to combat these problems, policy and reform efforts are needed to help eradicate and dismantle systems that continue to threaten economic equity.

Low-income families are remarkably resilient in being able to challenge adversity to meet day-to-day needs; however, a weak economic context presents greater infliction for exposure to community violence (Orthner & Randolph, 1999), high levels of stress, food and housing insecurity, discrimination, adolescent pregnancies, family violence, and homelessness (Orthner et al., 2004). Parents generally work low-wage jobs, which typically coincides with working nonstandard hours, thus increasing the likelihood of students to experience high rates of school absenteeism and retention (Johnson et al., 2012). Considering the systems that support low-income families through resiliency, schools are known to serve as a safety net and a source of consistency for students. Provisions such as breakfast and lunch, the availability of extracurricular enrichment and sports, and an additional network of adults beyond family members, who are invested in the growth and well-being of the students are some examples. The vital role that schools play for families is most evident during and immediately after crises (i.e., natural disasters and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic) where the pressure to keep schools open heavily mounts on school officials' shoulders.

Afterschool proponents advocate for legislation that would extend school days and fund more afterschool programs. This conversation sparked national attention in early 2020. A national parent survey reported that parents of 19.4 million students would elect to send their students to an afterschool program if the option were available, and an estimated five million children in grades K–8 go unsupervised after school (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). However, its execution is yet to be adopted because of a myriad of factors associated with its implementation to include the funding that would be required to staff personnel for this effort and insufficient evidence that an extended school day would improve educational outcomes. Nevertheless, there continues to be a need to create more safe spaces and extracurricular enrichment for students beyond 3:00 p.m.

Often overlooked and underestimated is the powerhouse of institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities are touted as social enterprises, possessing a plethora of resources and human capital that could be leveraged to fulfill a social responsibility to help in mending the fabric of society. Special attention will be focused on the efforts of the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) of Florida State University, one of the many forces in the capital city of Tallahassee that has risen to the call of civic engagement to empower local youth. CARE's primary mission is to serve as a transition and retention program for unrepresented undergraduate students who are the first in their family to attend college. CARE prides itself as the primary contributor in raising the University's six-year graduation rate for Black students to 72% (Mathews, 2008). However, on the national scale, college graduation rate disparities continue to exist for Black and Hispanic students, with enrollment rates at 37 and 36%, respectively, compared to White and Asian students at 42 and 59%, respectively (Hussar et al., 2020).

In 1989, CARE expanded to include a pre-collegiate division, designed to eradicate college enrollment gaps at the local level by employing a college access program into the community. The division strategically fulfills two needs—improving college readiness for underrepresented populations and fulfilling a community need to provide a continuity of academic and social enrichment after school. In general, college access programs have an important place in the world of educational equity—serving as a pipeline for underserved students to gain access to the world of higher education. Programs proactively minimize challenges that low-income and potential first-generation college students experience when navigating the world of college accessibility. For instance, money management lessons are integrated into programming to combat the financial issues that overwhelmingly plague first-generation students. Quarterly college tours are organized for students, free of charge, to bring awareness to the array of postsecondary options. One-on-one advising and tutoring are offered weekly to increase academic readiness and academic support. Research shows that exposing students to relevant and customized college admissions information, particularly to low-income high achievers, increases the likelihood that students will apply to a public

institution by 48% (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). In short, these efforts are employed with the intent to set precedence for college accessibility and foster social mobility.

This paper intends to synthesize the outcomes of the effectiveness of a college access program that is supported and backed by an institution of higher education. Program data will highlight students' post-secondary commitment plans and their outlook on the program after receiving robust services during their high school career. The hope is to encourage cross-sector collaboration between K–12 school leaders and universities to execute college readiness reform and improve college enrollment for underrepresented populations.

Method

Participants

During the 2019–2020 school year, 110 students were served through the FSU-CARE college access program. Participants included 73 females, 36 males, and one person whose gender was undisclosed. Of the group, there were 100 Black students, four Hispanics, four of multiple races, one White, and one Native American. Of this group, 34 were high school seniors.

Students were generally recruited through word-of-mouth, at in-school tabling events, at open house events, or recommended by school staff. Funding is allocated based on an agreement with stakeholders to improve college enrollment rates for disadvantaged students; therefore, eligible students are required to demonstrate an academic and economic need. The academic criteria require students to either be a potential first-generation college student and/or have a grade point average below 2.5. The economic criteria require students to be eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, receive public assistance, or be a ward of the state.

Materials

The college access program relies on non-economic and economic forms of capital to include: (a) partnerships with university departments in student affairs to provide workshops and host activities for middle and high school participants, (b) the utilization of the Federal Work-Study Program (FWS), and (c) agency and government-funded grants.

Program administrators and staff forge partnerships with university campus departments that offer outreach services. This helps enhance the social and personal development of participants at no cost to the program. Some of the campus collaborations for the 2019–2020 school year included partnering with the Career Center that provided a series of career development workshops; Campus Recreation that provided exposure to outdoor activities (i.e., paddle boarding, canoeing, and sailing); and the Center for Leadership and Social Change that taught participants literacy and leadership development through Peace Jam (an international education program). The program also welcomed student volunteers as mentors who provided supplemental instruction in the sciences.

Another partnership worth highlighting is the utilization of the FWS Program. FWS allows the college access program to employ over 20 college students who serve as mentors to participants. The only expense of this partnership is the cost of a Level II background check, which ensures that employees are cleared by law enforcement to work with minors. Tapping into the FWS program allows the university to push full steam in fulfilling its civic goals while employing college students who are eager to make meaningful contributions to the community and earn income. Mentoring, which is the task assigned to the student employees, is one of the most vital components of the program. Large- and small-scale studies attest mentoring to be a powerful contributor in the burgeoning of low-income students' aspiration to attend college (Hooker & Brand, 2009; Tierney et al., 2009). General day-to-day responsibilities for mentors also include providing one-on-one advising on topics that enhance college preparation (e.g., study skills, choosing and applying to college, goal

setting, etc.), chaperoning college tours, helping with the coordination of workshops that strengthen students' motivation to attend college, and tutoring in all subject areas. FWS mentors also share similar backgrounds and life experiences as the students they serve, which helps build rapport and strengthen connections to the program.

Government-funded and local grants aid with program sustainability and the acquisition of resources to fund cultural enrichment field trips, college tours, consulting services with test prep agencies, on-campus living expenses for students during the residential summer program and many other expenditures. The grants provide funding for two program assistants (who help design the curriculum for the academic and summer components and who supervise the work-study staff). Grant funding makes all services free of charge to all enrolled high school students.

Procedure

The purpose of the FSU-CARE Pre-Collegiate Programs is to "prepare potential first-generation college students for admission and enrollment into higher education" (Pre-College Programs Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement, 2020). During the school year, work-study mentors travel to two local schools, three days a week, and meet with middle and high school participants. Activities include tutoring, homework support, assistance with school assignments and projects, mentoring activities, academic advising, workshops on college and career topics, and cultural engagement field trips. Once a month, students attend Saturday Academy where they are invited to participate in a range of enrichment activities on the Florida State University campus. Frequenting the campus helps with increasing comfortability and familiarity with the college environment. Programming continues in the summer with a three-week residential program where students reside in a co-op styled home and acquire life skills by sharing in the upkeep and maintenance of communal space (i.e., learning how to prep and cook meals and share a room in the same fashion they would do once in college). Students also attend core classes in the morning to include English, test prep, laboratory science, and mathematics. The afternoons are reserved for electives, workshops, and mentor/mentee group sessions, which builds community and comradery among the participants. The summer program concludes with a college and city tour.

Program effectiveness is measured by the collection and review of quarterly report cards, activity attendance records, and student satisfaction surveys.

Results

Of the 2019–2020 cohort, 100% of 12th grade participants graduated from high school with a standard diploma. Table 1 shows that 60% of the high school seniors would matriculate to a 4-year college; 25.7% would attend a two-year community college; 5.7% would attend a vocational/trade school; 5.7% would enroll in the military, and 2.9% would enter the workforce. Table 2 shows that 61.8% of students self-reported to have graduated with honors and 38.2% self-reported to have graduated without distinctions. An additional question queried students about their career aspirations. The responses were diverse to include, but not limited to, dreams of becoming a real estate agent, physical therapist, orthodontist, nurse, psychologist, physician, diabetic educator, and a clinical pharmacist. When asked if the program influenced their post-secondary plans, 100% of the participants responded yes. Of the responses, 23 of the 34 respondents shared sentiments about their summer experience residing on the college campus.

Program participant Shanada (pseudonyms are used to mask students' identity) shared, "One of my favorite memories was getting to experience a summer on a college campus." Raheem shared, "My favorite memory was the summer program where I had the chance to actually see how my life could be when I go to college and what it is like to live in a dorm." Betty's favorite memory was attending the college tour to Chicago, IL, and bonding with her summer mentor.

Table 1. *High School Graduates' Post-Graduation Plans*

Post-Graduation Plans	%
4-year college	60.0
2-year college	25.7
Vocational School	5.7
Military	5.7
Employment	2.9

Table 2. *Percentage of 12th Graders Who Graduated With Honors*

Distinctions	%
With Honors	61.8
Without Honors	38.2

During the mid-quarter report, data were collected to assess the performance of students in grades 9–12. The average GPA was 3.08 for students in 12th grade, 3.30 for students in 11th grade, and 3.15 for students in 10th grade; there were no GPAs on record for the five students in 9th grade as they were not enrolled in the program until the summer. One hundred percent of all participants were promoted to the next grade level for the following academic school year.

Discussion

Through the FWS program, campus partnerships, and government-funded grants, the CARE Pre-Collegiate Division has been able to deliver high-quality pre-college services for low-income students who experience some of the highest levels of poverty in the state of Florida. The program provides a niche of services for communities that benefit from extracurricular engagement for students, while also supporting students' postsecondary plans.

Major findings revealed that with accessibility to college advising, support services, and individualized support, underserved students can successfully overcome educational barriers and increase their likelihood of being accepted into college. When solicited to identify the most impactful experience in the program, the greater majority (65%) spoke fondly of having the opportunity to reside on the college campus, marking this as a valuable component of the program. Overall, these findings strengthen a need for pre-college experiences that allow students to gain exposure to college culture. Hicks (2005) conducted a study that supports the notion that early college/pre-college programs are "ideal mechanisms" (p. 6) for college entry for first-generation students as the experience is found to be impactful for personal, social, and academic success. Furthermore, the results strengthen a case for high schools, (particularly those who serve underserved students) to create targeted methods that provide all students with post-secondary planning advising. The outcomes could improve college enrollment rates and help to bridge the educational gap that perpetually exists in a stratified school system.

As with every program, limitations warrant reflection. While the staff used report cards as the primary source to determine outcome data and college admission letters were collected throughout the year as verification of future college enrollment, the data presented in this paper were self-reported. A programmatic limitation was staff turnover, which impacted student recruitment. All program mentors were part-time college students employed through FWS; thus, the program experiences yearly staff turnover. When a partnership with a local middle school was formed, all efforts were

poured into the school, leaving little opportunity to recruit additional students in high school. The program would benefit from hiring a full-time program coordinator to create consistency for students and increase recruitment efforts to assist more local students.

Future inquiries on the program include conducting a longitudinal study that assesses the college graduation rates of students who graduated from this cohort; assessing if the residential summer program improves this student population's belief and expectations about college culture and expectations; and comparing student outcomes based on their history and time in the college access program.

Is College for Everyone?

As low-income and first-generation college students continue to graduate at significantly lower numbers than their wealthier peers and have low retention rates upon the completion of their first year in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008), there is a growing movement for this population to pursue alternative educational pathways (e.g., trade schools and certificate programs). While certain short-term career programs promise a profitable payoff in the labor market, suggesting that college is only suitable for a certain sector society presents an equity concern when in the same vein, low-income students are successful with intentional and targeted college readiness efforts in place. A recent groundbreaking study revealed that low-income students who attend the same four-year institution as their middle- and upper-class peers earn roughly the same amount (Burd, 2017). A policy brief on the Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative revealed a gross misalignment in the K–12 school system standards and college entry standards and a need for college readiness reforms to better support the needs of all students (Mokher et. al, 2019). If systematic disparities knowingly exist and there is evidence that suggests research-based strategies could potentially narrow socioeconomic disparities in college enrollment and success, then perhaps more attention should be focused on prioritizing equal accessibility and outcomes for all.

In conclusion, college access programs are powerful in that they serve as an engine of opportunity for underserved students to gain motivation and skills to pursue a college degree. Students from economically marginalized families are predisposed to educational setbacks and require holistic supports to disrupt generational poverty. Policymakers and school leaders must restructure college readiness initiatives to support upward mobility (particularly for underserved students) especially with strong evidence that these students are academically capable with the right supports in place. With authentic and robust support from community partners and local universities and colleges, these efforts can be affordable and sustainable. Whole community engagement is an essential piece to the puzzle of laboring to achieve equitable outcomes for our most underserved students.

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