

Forming a College-Going Community in U.S. Public High Schools

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Huddled around the lunchroom table, Jessica asks Alison if her sister is happy at Indiana University or did she think her sister made a mistake not taking the SAT and applying to Northwestern given her interest in communication. Alison in a heart beat answers, “Oh she is having a great time, thinking of going sorority, but you know I don’t think it would have been my choice. She didn’t want to take calculus because she was so bad in math and you know the SAT is harder than the ACT when it comes to math. I plan on taking the SAT and applying only to eastern schools.” “Me too,” chimes in Rachel, “but I can understand her issues with math. Are you going to Ms. Rogers tonight for help on the mid-term geometry test? I need a ride.”¹

The lunchroom banter at most high schools where the college matriculation rate is nearly 100 percent is about college and social life, and for the most part in that order. Years of intensive study of high schools shows that in schools where almost every graduating senior will attend a postsecondary institution, even 9th grade students are keenly aware of what college preparatory tests they need to take and the scores they must achieve to be competitive applicants at specific colleges and universities (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Kim & Schneider, 2005). But the conversation and the activities the young women in this scenario are engaged in are not prevalent among all high schools, particularly in public high schools serving low-income students in urban and rural areas and in certain geographic locations, such as the Southeast.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Although the average college-going rate in U.S. public and private high schools has risen to nearly 70 percent, it is unevenly dispersed among high schools (NCES, 2006). There are “blue ribbon” high schools where nearly every senior will attend a postsecondary institution in the fall following their spring graduation.² Then there are other high schools where the proportion of seniors who matriculate to a postsecondary school is very small, sometimes as low as 20 percent. Within such high schools are students who should attend college but for several reasons do not make this transition after receiving their diploma. Two interrelated questions arise: (1) Why are high school college-going rates so different from high school to high school? (2) Why do some students who should be attending college fail to do so?

Research suggests that part of the explanation for both questions can be attributed to certain behavioral factors. For example, at the individual level, many students do not understand the importance of rigorous coursetaking for college entrance and even if they have the prerequisites and abilities they are not advised into such courses (Adelman, 2006). Without sufficient information, students — especially those who are first in their families to attend postsecondary school — tend not to prepare adequately for college entrance exams, select viable college options, complete and send their applications to colleges, or apply for financial assistance. At the school level, the problem is not a waning interest on the part of the students, but rather a lack of advanced-level course offerings, especially in urban and rural schools (Mathews, 1999; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Another set of explanations focuses on conditions embedded in the social relationships that students have with their peers, teachers, and parents. For example, some have suggested there is a social milieu, also termed school climate, that is strengthened by supportive social networks of peers and adults (both within and outside the school) who share goals and participate in activities that activate college attendance. This social milieu creates high educational expectations among the students, their parents, and teachers. The absence of such a milieu can be characterized as an environment where ambiguous messages about the viability of attending college are found among the student population and teaching staff. In such environments, college counseling is limited and high proportions of students drop out or feel unattached to high school, reflecting confused messages about the value of education.

Although these explanations seem compelling at one level, it does appear that several conditions have been overlooked which, if initiated, could improve the college attendance rates at many high schools to well over national averages. Validation for these conditions stems from two decades of recent research on elementary and secondary schools that have focused on adolescent development and the role of the high school in promoting promising pathways to adulthood by increasing formal education beyond grade 12. These conditions include:

1. **A whole school-based design that provides an integrated program of academic, social, and college preparation and planning activities.** All program activities should (a) carry the consistent message that matriculation to a postsecondary institution is an attainable goal, and (b) be developmentally appropriate for grades 9 through 12.
2. **Strong interpersonal connections among students, their parents, and school staff that reinforce high educational expectations and the requisite steps to attain them.** Not all high school communities are the same; some serve students that have considerable family economic and social resources while others serve students with limited ones. Some high schools have school staff that are committed to sending all their students to college and therefore engage in a set of activities that accomplish that goal. Then there are other high schools where these expectations and instructional activities do not occur. The differential effects that high schools have on students' college plans can be traced and linked in part to their families, peer groups, and school personnel.

This suggests that although there may be several common principles that promote a college-going community, there are some distinctive and unique solutions for different school communities. School student populations vary with respect to accessibility of information about college and role models, and the types of resources needed to address these differences will fluctuate from one site to another (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). One resource that should be a constant across all schools is relational trust — strong social ties among all members of the school community that support and place the academic and social well-being of the students as their highest priority (see Bryk & Schneider, 2002, for a definition of relational trust). To ensure that the entire school endorses and fully participates in building a college-going community requires a high level of relational trust among the students, their parents, teachers, and school personnel.

3. **Student educational goals aligned with student career aspirations.** Students often have unrealistic impressions of how much education is required for desired jobs. Collectively, students need to develop an understanding of the relationships among college and occupational choices, and the steps necessary to achieve those goals.
4. **Whole school incentives that motivate students and their teachers to build a college-going community in their school.**³

Given this perspective, this paper discusses why these conditions are necessary for implementing a college-going school community; identifies strengths and weaknesses of existing solutions to current problems of low matriculation rates; describes key factors for enhancing a college-going community; and recommends steps for moving these ideas forward, including the importance of developing an intervention incentive model and testing it with rigorous scientific methods.⁴

SOME EVIDENCE ON THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

The evidence on the economic and social advantages of obtaining a college education is intensifying. Ensuring a successful transition to postsecondary education is becoming the number one goal of the K–12 education system (Consortium of Social Science Association, 2006). Despite the apparent advantages of obtaining a college degree, approximately 30 to 40 percent of high school seniors fail to enroll in a postsecondary institution for the fall after their spring graduation (NCES, 2002). Among those who enroll, less than 16 percent receive an associate’s degree within two years and only 53 percent receive an undergraduate degree in four years (NCES, 2006). With much more than 90 percent of high school students entering 9th grade expecting to attend college, there is an obvious mismatch between the desire to attend postsecondary school and making a successful transition after completing high school. One of the factors acknowledged as related to this mismatch is “unaligned ambitions”: having educational expectations inconsistent with one’s future occupational interests (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Kim & Schneider, 2005).

Evidence from the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (SSYSD), a longitudinal study of adolescent career development conducted from 1992 to 1997 at 13 high schools and 20 middle schools with more than 8,000 students, (including over 1,000 of whom were followed for five years), showed that many adolescents underestimated or overestimated the amount of education they needed to pursue particular careers. Adolescents with unaligned ambitions frequently misinterpreted what the work of specific jobs entailed, basing their perceptions of occupations on media images rather than specific role models. Their unrealistic images were often reinforced by their peer groups and lack of information discussed in school. The situation was further complicated by their parents’ employment, with the majority of unaligned students being unable to describe their mothers’ or fathers’ occupations and the actual work their parents engaged in at their jobs.

Low-income minority youth had particular difficulty identifying the type of adult work they would like to pursue and potential career opportunities.⁵ The most common career aspired to by low-income males was

in professional athletics, although by 12th grade fewer students had these aspirations. Females tended to aspire to careers in entertainment, including modeling. In both instances the students could not describe how to become a professional athlete, movie star, or model; the likelihood of being selected; or the average salaries for individuals who held these jobs. Students mentioned aspiring to be physicians more than any other professional job, with the exception of athletics; however, they were unfamiliar with the educational trajectory (from college through internship and residency) required to become a physician.

Intensive in-depth interviews with unaligned students revealed that many of their ideas about college life often also reflected fantasies constructed from movies and television. In contrast, adolescents with aligned ambitions had more realistic views of career paths and the types of work that characterized particular occupations. Some of this information came from family members and other adult role models. Students with aligned ambitions often had the advantage of being exposed to adults in different occupations and were able to learn first-hand about the challenges, responsibilities, and educational requirements of specific jobs.

The information links between the educational requirements for and characteristics of specific jobs were traced in part to adolescents' academic, social, and subjective experiences in high school. Academically, students with aligned ambitions could articulate what high school courses would best prepare them to pursue a certain college major, what colleges would be most likely to offer majors in their fields of interest, what the entrance requirements for those colleges were likely to be, and finally whether they had strong or slight chances of being admitted. These students were very strategic, and early in their high school careers initiated a hierarchical sequential plan for taking advanced-level courses. If they had difficulty obtaining permission to enroll in these courses or experienced academic problems in them, aligned students were more likely to enlist the assistance of teachers and parents for guidance on how to persist and do well in their classes.

To investigate more fully where, when, and how students subjectively experienced academic engagement, the SSYSD used the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) to identify a series of measures of challenge, concentration, and skill that together are associated with higher involvement with academic activities, including higher grades, more time spent on homework, and more aligned college plans (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).⁶ Students with high engagement in a subject reported feeling challenged and skilled, and were more likely to view that subject as important to their futures. Examining experiences in high school academic classes, SSYSD found that, compared to whites, low-income minority students were more likely to enjoy school. However, low-income minority students, especially in urban high schools, were (1) less likely to engage in academic activities significant to their class success, such as spending time on homework; (2) less likely to view homework and other class assignments as associated with receiving higher grades; and (3) less likely to be aware of the implications of poor performance and the effect it could have on their class rank. If one considers that academic preparation is key to college entrance, students who are unable to discern what information they need to learn in class and what level of effort is needed to master that information are at a serious disadvantage — not only with respect to their class performance but also their long-term educational futures.

Several additional studies have pinpointed the issue of unrealistic educational and occupational aspirations as major stumbling blocks for developing college plans and the strategies necessary for achieving one's goals (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). A series of solutions has been designed to provide students with more concrete advice for taking more rigorous courses, such as recommending what mathematics courses to enroll in throughout middle and high school.⁷ There is, however, little evidence that students are receiving adequate help from their high schools regarding course selections, specifically in schools with large student-to-counselor ratios (Horn, Nuñez, & Bobbitt, 2000).

Based on the research cited above and other studies, initiatives designed to increase the proportion of students who attend college are more likely to be successful if they provide assistance to high school students in the following domains.⁸ This list applies not only to those students whose families have never been to college, but to adolescents in all types of high schools. Students need to:

1. Visualize the educational requirements for different career paths.
2. Acquire information on how to achieve one's educational goals.
3. Differentiate between productive and unproductive time use.
4. Form realistic plans for college choice and occupational goals.
5. Be exposed to adult work and qualifications associated with specific jobs.
6. Identify and act upon strategies for achieving goals.
7. Mobilize resources based on assessments of personal strengths.
8. Garner social support emerging from a trusting environment where teachers and principals consider the welfare of the students and their college plans a priority (see Schneider & Stevenson, 1999, for further explanation of each of these points).

EXISTING SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

With more and more students entering postsecondary schools, many available programs can increase the college attendance rates of students who are currently underrepresented in colleges. Some of these programs include ACHIEVE: <http://achieve.org> (Learning Point Associates, 2005); AVID: www.avidonline.org; GEAR-UP: www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html (see Student Advisory Council on Student Financial Assistance, 2000); PROJECT GRAD: www.projectgrad.org (Ham, *et. al.*, 2000); and Upward Bound: www.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html (Cahalan & Curtain, 2004). These programs are designed to serve low-income and minority students who often lack adequate academic and social supports by committing to help students improve their academic performance through tutoring, preparing for college entrance exams, and providing academic mentoring.

Access to Postsecondary Education, a report by the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Working Group, has raised concerns that while the elements of many of these programs appear to be successful in promoting college access and success, few of these programs have been systematically evaluated (NCES, 2001). Without a systematic evaluation, the actual effectiveness of these programs cannot be determined. The need for such evaluations has been raised as a national concern and federal policy (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) requires that intervention studies being funded by the federal government be evaluated with rigorous methods such as randomized controlled experiments.⁹

There are other problems with these programs that may be undermining their effectiveness:

1. Typically these programs are not based on a whole school design that customizes the intervention to include specific college preparation activities for the entire school population. Instead, most programs tend to target specific grade levels or groups of students and pull them out for special activities. The practice of pulling students out of their regular classes or identifying them as needing special assistance can sometimes create a divisive school community (even if the assistance is targeted only for those who are academically talented).¹⁰
2. Some of the programs specifically target a select group of teachers or college counselors. By focusing on one group of school professionals and not others, it is difficult to coordinate messages and activities throughout the school. In forming a college community, the idea of creating a whole-school message of high educational expectations, academic performance, and college attendance needs to be reinforced by all school personnel. It is imperative for all school personnel to be actively engaged in the college-going process because without “talking the talk and walking the walk,” the message can easily be interpreted by students as disingenuous.
3. Many of the programs are not based on a research model, and even those that are tend to be limited in their knowledge of adolescent development. Adolescents are at a particularly vulnerable stage where they seek independence from adult authority yet need adults to help them navigate through an educational system that has become and remains exceedingly complex.¹¹ At the individual level, some adolescents may physically mature more quickly than others but their social skills and emotional well-being may not match their physical appearance. At any grade level, these different stages of physical and social development are obvious, but grade-specific college activities should accommodate the range of adolescents’ developmental stages and personal challenges. One high school senior may be splitting time between caring for one’s own child and going to school in the mornings, whereas another might have to work overtime because of family financial needs, while another may have hours to devote to her studies or musical talents. Some of these programs fail to apply a differentiated approach to the grade level and life experiences of the students.
4. Although many of the programs involve helping with financial assistance, few engage in realistic financial planning that gives students an understanding early on of how to pay for college and the steps involved. For many of the students targeted by these types of programs, it may be

more efficient if they have agency for securing their own financial aid, as their parents may be reluctant to assume debt responsibility because of the implications for their immigration status, garnishing of wages, or foreclosing of their home mortgages if college bills fall into arrears.

CREATING A COLLEGE COMMUNITY WITHIN THE HIGH SCHOOL

Some high schools have strong college-going communities that are reinforced by families in which the parents and older siblings attended college themselves, and student peer groups in which siblings, relatives, and family friends have attended or are planning to attend college. Some high schools are located near higher education institutions where college activities, such as athletic events, art exhibits, music performances, and homecoming weekends, are visible occurrences in adolescents' daily lives. The challenge for many high schools, especially those in urban and rural areas, is to create a college-going community within the school where the values, norms, and social roles associated with college going are present and consistently reinforced. Given this situation, what kind of assistance is needed to address these problems (and those defined above)?

The first fundamental principle of creating a college-going community is designing an intervention that should be targeted to all students in the high school, rather than focusing only on selective students in specific grade levels. To undertake such an intervention requires a high level of coordinated activities that promote college readiness and foster an environment in which all students see themselves as competitive college applicants.

One of the key ingredients to creating a college-going community is recognizing the multiple steps involved in planning, applying, and attending college. In schools that traditionally have low college-going rates, each of these steps needs to be deconstructed, with special assistance provided to students at each stage of the process. Therefore, it is important that specific whole-school activities are required, that they take place on a routine schedule, and that they are well advertised throughout all grades. These informational sessions can occur in student assemblies, group meetings, and before and after school.

Three basic messages communicate and reinforce the value of academic work, and underscore good study and planning skills that need to be recognized by teachers, students, and parents, regardless of the type of intervention considered. The first is taking the right courses. Course counseling and advising is crucial. When students take the right courses, especially during their early high school experience, they are better prepared for knowing what to take next and, more important, when to take certain courses that will help with college entrance exams and persistence and success throughout college (Horn, Nuñez, & Bobbitt, 2000; Adelman, 2006; ACT, 2006).

The second message is doing well in class. Students need to understand the importance of attending class and seeking help when needed. In suburban schools, parents often purchase out-of-school tutoring for advanced-level courses from professional tutors who have taught the courses and often teach SAT and ACT

preparation classes. The high school should provide “shadow education activities,” such as after-school tutoring, on a routine basis.¹²

The third message is managing time. One of the major differences between students who plan to attend college and those who do not is how they identify their time and then allocate it for activities such as homework, paid work, sports, and spending time with friends. Time management is particularly important during this developmental period and again in college when students have to manage their own time. One way to help is to encourage them to think about how they should allocate time for schoolwork, out-of-school activities, and college admissions preparation. Research shows that students who learn to manage their time early on are more likely to complete their high school and subsequent college coursework on schedule and at high-achievement levels.

The three messages form the core of a set of norms that are communicated and reinforced through social relationships. Any intervention implemented in a school needs to focus on nurturing and strengthening social ties among all members of the school community. These social ties can shape lives in powerful ways.

■ Importance of Building Social Capital and Relational Trust

Strong social relations form what has been termed social capital, a high degree of interconnectedness among individuals that create dense communication networks of mutual expectations, norms, and obligations of responsibility (Coleman, 1988; 1990; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). These social exchanges provide opportunities for self-identification and affiliation. For the student, self-identification could mean perceiving one’s self as a competitive college applicant; for the teacher, assisting students in the college preparation process. Affiliation with the school’s goals reinforces the message that all students are expected to attend postsecondary school. When students, teachers, and parents perceive that each is advancing the academic and social welfare of the students, there is a high degree of relational trust in the school. If a high degree of relational trust can be built and sustained, reform initiatives are more likely to be endorsed and enacted by the entire school community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The most fundamental element of relational trust is advancing the best interests of the students, including their academic and social development. In the high school, this translates into shared goals among the staff that all students can go to college, and it is their personal responsibility to try and make that happen. One of the most important predictors of college going is how many years of schooling a student (and his or her parents) expects to attain. Today most parents of adolescents, even if they have limited resources or have never been to college, expect their teenagers will attend college. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of teenagers expect to attend college (NCES, 2006). This expectation, however, is inconsistent among high school teachers. To help promote a consistent message, all teachers in a high school should explicitly articulate the expectation that all students will attend postsecondary school and provide resources and opportunities to make that happen (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

Research indicates that, especially for minority students, the foundation of a college-going community is initiated, formed, and reinforced in the context of the high school classroom. To create a school with a college-going community, teachers must first adopt a more positive approach regarding college attendance for their students. Then teachers need to engage students in rigorous academic work by using

primary sources and college textbooks, assigning challenging homework that is graded, and underscoring college information in the context of their lessons. For example, observations of English high school classes revealed that some teachers specifically identify words and passages as likely to be covered in college preparation exams.

Teachers also need to work with counselors to build relational trust with their students' parents. Parents who have limited experience with college planning should feel comfortable trusting the school to advise their adolescents appropriately. This concept of relational trust is not a one-way process. It involves a high level of reciprocity and mutual exchange among the entire school community. Parents cannot be expected to trust teachers who do not exemplify practices that encourage college attendance. Similarly, teachers are unlikely to trust parents who do not reinforce school policies and expectations regarding postsecondary attendance. Thus, at some level, parents and teachers feel vulnerable to each other — a vulnerability that can be capitalized to keep all network members on somewhat equal playing fields so that trust can be established, nurtured, and sustained.

Parents are an important asset in the college process, primarily by reinforcing the message to their children about the value of attending college. While educational expectations are imperative, matching student abilities and interests with a college program is becoming increasingly complex and requires a sophisticated knowledge base. This is a knowledge base that many parents, especially those who never attended college, do not have. For example, sometimes parents unknowingly send confusing messages about college because they are not knowledgeable about the higher education system in the United States. They may believe that all colleges are similar and that it does not matter where one attends, even if the student has special talents or skills. This message is passed on to their children, who then articulate similar beliefs. In these instances, the school becomes a critical player in the college-going process. One way to augment the role of the parent is through mentors who are familiar with the process. Research shows that mentoring relationships are associated with increased academic expectations and knowledge of the college application and selection process (Arora, *et. al*, 2006).

■ **Fostering a College Community in the High School Using a Multi-tiered Mentoring Program**

College mentors can promote outreach beyond the high school environment by visualizing the goal of college through a combination of discussion and experience (including shadowing college students at their home institutions). In high schools where students have few opportunities to access role models and college experiences, it is important to provide a multi-tiered mentorship program that follows 9th graders through their high school careers and into postsecondary education. Such a multi-tiered program should have three components: (1) proximal peer mentorship, (2) distal college mentorship, and (3) career mentorship.

Proximal peer mentoring involves establishing relationships whereby 11th and 12th graders are assigned to mentor 9th and 10th graders. The purpose of this is to create big-brother, big-sister models in schools where upper-grade students interact with each other, talking informally about their courses, college-preparatory activities, employment activities, and their relationship to future jobs. The ultimate goal is

learning what jobs are unlikely to lead to long-term stable employment, especially after high school. The key feature of proximal peer mentoring is beginning the college discussion early on and providing students with an immediate view of their future in high school. This is especially important in schools where families have not completed high school or attended college. Proximal peer mentoring also helps to build a college-going community and has been associated with the development of teamwork skills, a critical component of learning activities and adult work.

Distal peer mentoring is designed to establish relationships between college students and high school students. High school students are linked with college students based on a combination of factors, including high school students' interests and abilities. Mentors recruited from local colleges provide yet another model for college going by distributing critical information on the experience of getting into college, what courses they are taking, and the time and effort it takes to be in school. These interactions are intended to clearly demonstrate to high school students the academic load of college, why their high school courses matter, and the value in learning how to study. Bringing college students into the high school provides realistic role models for students who may have limited exposure to college life.

Career mentoring helps high school students crystallize their career aspirations. Young adult mentors could be recruited to engage with students in their places of employment and in various recreational activities. The value of such opportunities is that students learn about educational requirements for particular jobs, the types of institutions that are the best match for meeting career goals, financial opportunities, and alumni networks. Many programs exist today with this type of mentoring. (For a review of these programs, see DuBois, *et. al*, 2002.) A unique feature in this type of career mentoring is that the mentors are systematically selected to represent different occupations and are matched with students and their schools. These young adults need not be at the peak of their careers, but rather closer to the high school students in chronological age and at the early stages of their careers. High school students with limited adult social networks often can only rely on teachers for college letters of recommendation. Strong personal relationships with career mentors can be especially useful in the college application process.

■ Institutionalize a Set of Activities Shown to Promote College Attendance.

The following resources and activities are found in many high schools with high rates of college attendance:

Advisory Periods

A daily advisory period staffed by a teacher is one common feature of high schools where the majority of students attend a postsecondary school after graduation. The advisory period takes the place of one class for the teacher. Advisory periods tend to be at the beginning of the day and teachers are assigned to each student, as advisers tend to stay with the same group of students throughout their high school experience. In high schools where students rarely have the same teacher for more than one class, the adviser can become a stabilizing adult figure in the adolescents' lives.¹³ One potential challenge is if the students and advisers do not click. In such instances, it is better to have the student switch advisers.

The role of the adviser is to distribute key information concerning college activities, such as when and where college entrance examinations will be given and available instructional tools, including online programs, for exam preparation. Many students who intend to apply to college often are unfamiliar with how colleges vary in their competitiveness rankings. This is the type of information that could be reviewed and discussed in advisory periods.

Advisers also monitor student academic progress, arrange for tutorial help, and distribute information on financial aid options and sources for waiving examination and application fees. When advisers are with students from the beginning, they become familiar with the students' academic strengths and are well-qualified to write detailed college recommendation letters.¹⁴

Preparing for College Entrance Exams

Almost all colleges require some form of entrance exam for admission. Two-year community colleges often require a mathematical proficiency exam that must be passed before a student can take other courses and receive an associate's degree. In schools with high college-going rates, students take practice college examinations beginning in 9th grade. It is not uncommon to find students who plan early in their schooling careers to attend competitive colleges and who have been taking online versions of the SAT and ACT since 8th grade.

Conducting a College Search

In schools with high college-going rates, there is often a wide range of professional college advisers outside of the high school who work for a fee and advise students and their parents on what colleges the students are likely to be admitted to based on their college examination scores and grade point averages. These college advisers also provide help in completing college essays and other materials requested by the colleges. In urban schools there are few counselors, and this customized matching of colleges' and students' interests and talents rarely occurs. It is important that the schools identify multiple individuals who could play the role of professional college adviser, advising and assisting students in developing strategies for selecting colleges and completing admission materials and financial aid packets. This type of service needs to be institutionalized within the high school using college and career mentors in addition to school staff.

Funding Considerations

When much of the burden of paying for college falls on the student, and his or her family has limited resources, the need for financial assistance is vital. Financial aid forms often are considered more complicated than tax forms and families can be overwhelmed by the requested information. In some instances where families have never attended college, they are concerned about the financial liabilities they are incurring. One solution is to create forms by which the student has agency and autonomy for his or her aid. Advisory periods are an excellent time for students to learn about financial aid, but the learning process needs to include actual forms and procedures. Advisers should help students develop their own

financial portfolio by (a) creating alternative financial plans and portfolios with the students; (b) reviewing with students fee waivers for admission applications and entrance exams; (c) directing and guiding students through interactive online financial planning Web sites; and (d) locating opportunities for scholarships and fellowships.¹⁵

Learning about Employment Opportunities

Adolescents often have trouble identifying how much education is required for certain jobs. So that students do not have to wait until college to get more information, it is especially useful for high schools to have job fairs where students learn more about certain types of work and the education degrees needed for those jobs, including promotion criteria. For example, in some cities recruits must have a college education to become a police officer. Similarly, certain types of technical jobs, such as automotive technician, require an associate's degree and a certificate qualifying the individual to work on certain types of automobiles.

It is important to underscore that the purpose of a job fair is to serve as an introduction to employment possibilities and the requirements for certain careers. Critical to this process are carefully designed internships or job shadowing programs where students learn firsthand the responsibilities of specific jobs and the steps that individuals took to acquire their positions. The emphasis here is on *carefully designed*; students need to learn what the career trajectory is for particular jobs, including the prognosis for job stability, career advancement, and possibilities of relocation. Labor economists have projected the increasing demand for jobs in the service sector. High school students need to learn how to differentiate among jobs that are easy to find with relatively high initial salaries from those that are likely to result in stable employment with promotion opportunities and the relationship between these jobs and the value of acquiring additional education beyond high school.

Arranging for Mock College Interviews

Some colleges require interviews to determine scholarship recipients, and some students arrange for college interviews to increase their chances for admission. One helpful activity for students is participating in mock college interviews with alumni college volunteers who have experience conducting admissions interviews for selective institutions. These volunteers could meet with the students individually and assist them in preparing for these sessions.

Provide a Physical Presence in the School

In schools with a high rate of college going, there are places outside the classroom or the counselor's office where students can obtain information on college programs and financial aid, and can receive help in completing applications and tutoring. In schools with limited resources, having a college drop-in office staffed by upper-grade students and young adult college and career mentor volunteers provides a concrete place to go for assistance. College drop-in offices can provide students with sample test practice questions and vocabulary enrichment materials. Not only should these materials be available to the students, the materials need to be made visible and their value underscored.

College Fairs

Research shows that the mere presence of college representatives in the high school promotes college attendance. High schools should solicit college representatives to visit their school. Such activities, much like the college mentors, provide students with an opportunity to visualize themselves in a college environment. College representatives can be particularly helpful in discussing special college programs, work-study opportunities, and financial assistance.

College Visits

Some high schools provide bus trips where students are actually driven to colleges for visits and interviews. This is an especially important activity for students whose families have limited resources to support such trips. By having the high school arrange the visits, the pressure on families who are unfamiliar with the purpose of the college is lessened. Viewed as a high school trip, parents also are more likely to allow their adolescents to participate.

Provide Resources for Teachers, Principals, and Guidance Counselors

Messages regarding the steps all staff in the building can take to develop a community of college-going success among their students need to be reinforced. Program resources to teachers, principals, and counselors in support of these messages could include: (1) Opportunities for teachers to receive individualized feedback regarding elements of their instructional strategies associated with student academic engagement. (2) Teacher professional development meetings in which student engagement and the implications for college preparation are discussed, including specific information on the concepts and types of questions used in college admissions tests. These sessions should also include information on the value of using instructional materials strongly associated with success in postsecondary education, such as using introductory college texts and primary sources. (3) Access and training for an online suite of resources providing quick links to Web sites for local and national colleges and universities (including URLs for the main organization, the admissions office, and copies of applications in PDF format).

INCENTIVE-BASED PROGRAMS

One mechanism for creating a college-going community is to use incentives such as scholarship or fellowship programs for students who graduate and attend college. High-performing students often are recruited and offered scholarships to attend postsecondary institutions. In most instances, these scholarship programs are given to selective students and rarely to an entire school. The effect of these scholarship programs on college going has largely been a positive one — increasing college-going rates within high schools about 10 to 15 percent (Kane, 2004). This increase, especially in high schools with very low rates of college going, suggests that this may not be the most effective mechanism for encouraging students who should be attending college but are not. Most likely, incentives of this kind are sensitive to students who plan on attending college but do not have the financial means to do so. An intervention directed at all students in the high school may have more significant effects. By focusing on the whole school, the norms and values of the entire school community are redirected to college, and students who might not have considered college an option receive new information that can change their perspectives and subsequently their behaviors.

Incentives could be of varying types, such as waivers of college application fees and/or college entrance exams; or blanket tuition supplements, providing students graduate, are enrolled, and successfully complete a semester. Regardless of the incentive put into practice, there must be extensive support mechanisms such as the activities described above. Corporate entities have given scholarship assistance only to be disappointed at the low rates of college attendance among the recipients.¹⁶ Incentives work when all school community members have buy-in, including the students, teachers, and administrators. For instance, in the state of Michigan, the Kalamazoo Promise[®] was initiated in 2005 by several local corporate companies and anonymous donors to provide each Kalamazoo Public School graduate with the opportunity to attend postsecondary education with up to a 100 percent tuition scholarship. Even programs such as The Kalamazoo Promise, kept exclusively at the Kalamazoo Public Schools, are likely to run into difficulty if there is not a clear understanding of how the school community should support the means and the ends of the incentive (Kalamazoo Promise, 2005).

TESTING THE INTERVENTION

Research designs are defined by the question being asked. In the instance of programs designed to improve college-going rates, the question rarely has been: What is the effect of a specific program or intervention? To ask that question requires a design that measures the likelihood that a program created the effect — in this case, increased college-going rates. To test whether a whole-school model, including the elements described above, increased college-going rates, the most powerful design for determining if the program was effective would be to implement a randomized controlled experiment. This experiment would involve a set of high schools that would initiate and sustain the practices specified above while another set of similar schools would continue with their ongoing programs and activities (also see page 6 for more information).

The reference to the randomized controlled trial is included in this document because too often we have pursued educational interventions that have not been tested using the most rigorous methods, only to be disappointed in the effects of what appeared to be promising practices at the onset. If a model such as the one described were to be implemented, it would be incumbent on those responsible for its initiation to undertake the most rigorous design possible. In this instance, it would be the randomized control trial. A key aspect would be to begin the design with a series of measures that would allow one to isolate the effects of specific program components and observe their greatest benefits.

INITIATING A COLLEGE-GOING COMMUNITY

The challenge in creating a college-going community is to work internally in a school where these values, norms, and social role models are not present.

Such an initiative should:

1. Target schools with high proportions of students who do not matriculate to postsecondary education institutions despite having the academic qualifications to do so.
2. Recognize the differences in schools and the reality that some schools will require many more resources than others. Testing the model may be more efficient in places where the academic and social norms are more receptive to a college community than others, even if the college-going rates are low.
3. Customize college-preparatory activities by grade levels.
4. Employ a multi-tiered mentoring system that assists students in crystallizing their education and career plans.
5. Allocate resources to counselors, teachers, and principals regarding student performance, engagement, and college preparation.
6. Build relational trust within the school community.
7. Use technology to provide access to a wide range of Web-based information for college preparation and financial aid assistance, including providing sufficient technical assistance to ensure that all students can use the equipment.
8. Continue to experiment with various incentive programs to increase college-going rates.
9. Develop an evaluation plan that employs a rigorous design and a set of instruments that assesses the high schools' effectiveness in increasing students' college attendance. Such an evaluation should also assess the effectiveness of each of the high schools' college-going activities for increasing students' college attendance and persistence.¹⁷

If such a program were in place, the potential results would be full-school participation in college-preparatory activities, such as taking rigorous courses and college preparatory exams; identifying college programs that are consistent with student interests and talents; acquiring career-specific knowledge, including the education required for those careers, among all students; and creating financial plans to pay for college while in high school and beyond. The expected measure of this program's success would be 90 percent of the high school graduating class enrolling in postsecondary school, persisting in those institutions, and obtaining higher education degrees.

ENDNOTES

1. Indiana University requires scores from either the SAT or the ACT. Students must submit the results from the SAT or ACT writing component along with the other standard sections of either test.
2. “Blue ribbon” refers to exceptional high schools with high college-going rates, not the testing criteria that are used to identify such schools in No Child Left Behind.
3. In this paper, the concept *college-going community* is used rather than college culture or climate. This decision was made to avoid confusion with those who have specific disciplinary perspectives on the concept of culture. The choice of community underscores the importance of social ties among all relevant actors, including students, their parents, teachers, and other school staff. The term *neighborhood* also is avoided due to the increasing number of charter schools and schools of choice where students now are more often than not, especially in urban areas, attending high schools outside of their neighborhood school attendance area (Lauen, 2007).
4. For the past 15 years, I have studied adolescents in high school: why some students attend college and why others do not. The argument for this report is based on years of evidence that I have obtained through analysis of the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development and several national longitudinal databases. I wrote this report for a more general audience and in a format that I hope will motivate others to rethink current high school reform efforts designed to increase student college attendance and persistence. For those desiring statistics and case materials, they are available upon request.
5. The Sloan Study over sampled minority and low-income high school students, as these populations were underrepresented in the research on career development.
6. The ESM was developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues at the University of Chicago. The ESM collects information from participants who are asked to wear wristwatches that emit seven to eight beeps each day. When beeped, individuals record in a booklet where they are, what they are doing, who they are with, and how they are feeling, producing information on mood and psychological state at the moment (see Hektner, J. M., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Schmidt, J. A., 2006).
7. In *Ambitious Generation: America’s Teenagers Motivated but Directionless*, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) describe how middle and high schools work together to guide students into the right courses for college entrance. But taking the right courses is only one component of forming a college community. A more complete prescription for initiating a college-going community is detailed at the end of this document.
8. This is not a review of studies that identify factors influencing individual college going (see Trent, *et. al.*, 2007 and SSRC, 2005, for a comprehensive review of the literature on this and related topics pertaining to college transition).
9. In a randomized controlled experiment, individuals are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The random assignment of participants to treatment and control conditions assures that the

treatment group assignment is independent of the pretreatment characteristics of group members; thus differences between groups can be attributed to treatment effects rather than pretreatment characteristics (Schneider, *et. al* 2007).

10. The selective nature of specific programs can divide the school community into groups: those going to college and those unlikely to go. In schools where few students attend college, it can create resentment among those not selected. It has been suggested that for those selected into elite programs, there may be pressure from those not selected to drop out or participate in the program at a minimum level of involvement (Carter, 2006). In either case, those who are selected remain isolated from the general population; therefore, little of what they are learning about college extends into the general school population.
11. Adolescence has been characterized as a period of growing independence (Arnett, 2006). One of the problems in working with adolescents is deciding when to exercise control, when to encourage responsibility, and how to communicate without being too intrusive and reproaching.
12. Stevenson and Baker (1992) describe shadow education as the academic activities that occur outside of school. These activities, such as academic tutoring, are often purchased by parents to ensure that their children perform better in school and on college entrance exams.
13. Given the diversification of U.S. high school course offerings, having a special teacher that a student can depend on for advice during all four years fills an important developmental social and emotional void that many adolescents experience.
14. Extensive in-depth interviews with college counselors found that many of these individuals are expected to write numerous letters for their students and often resort to form letters or having the students write their own letters. These letters are then edited by adults who may not be familiar with the students' academic careers (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).
15. Currently there are a number of experiments with financial planning programs, such as the Harvard University-based College Opportunity and Career Help (COACH), which was spearheaded by Thomas Kane and Chris Avery (Kane, 1999). See www.ksg.harvard.edu/service/ksg_initiatives.htm for current information on COACH.
16. The author was involved in evaluating the Pepsi Challenge Program started in the 1980s to increase college going by offering tuition supplements to students who graduated from high school. The major difficulty with the program was that the focus was on the scholarship but few college-going activities changed within the high schools.
17. The effectiveness of the high school program should not be limited to college attendance. If students attend only for a semester or a year, the program is less effective than if students continue in their college programs through graduation. While college graduation cannot be based solely on high school preparation, the effectiveness of the high school in enhancing student persistence is critical. High schools, especially those with missions to increase college going among their student population, need to follow their high school graduates beyond initial college acceptances.

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The No. 1 public high school in the country is Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology in Alexandria, Virginia. Last year's Niche ranking gave the No. 1 spot to Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, in Aurora, Illinois, which has now fallen to No. 2. Here are the 15 best public high schools in America.

15. Staten Island Technical High School — Staten Island, New York. Staten Island Technical High School/Facebook. According to a student: "Union County Magnet High School is an excellent school! The student community feels like family and the teachers are available to their students often. It's a very safe environment both physically and emotionally." Source: Niche.
11. Northside College Preparatory High School — Chicago, Illinois. kgander/Flickr/CC 2.0 Attribution.

Many public school systems and community colleges offer adult high school classes — or can direct potential students to a program in their area — so dropouts can earn those last few credits. Some schools, such as Penn Foster High School, offer online adult education programs. Take the GED exam. Instead, these schools look at other academic markers, such as high school coursework or projects, teacher recommendations, current reading lists, standardized test scores, extracurricular activities and sometimes even work experience.