

From College Access to Success:
Importance of Psychosocial Competencies for Minority Students in College

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Abstract

Expanding college access program services beyond high school and fostering students' psychosocial competencies, particularly through positive peer and adult relationships, are critical factors for ensuring not only college access (e.g., matriculation) for students but also college success (e.g., persistence, graduation). Through a quasi-experimental design, it is shown that these practices (1) lead to better college outcomes than their matched comparison peers and (2) participants associate these outcomes to the positive relationships and experiences of the program. Furthermore, a second, ethnographic study identified the program's six *purposeful practices* and five *purposeful design* elements that lead to these successes. These programmatic elements are useful for similar programs seeking to improve the college outcomes of their students.

From College Access to Success: Importance of Psychosocial Competencies for Minority
Students in College

Students face many obstacles in transitioning to institutions of higher education, and success for all students, particularly low income and minority students, depends on gaining the skills necessary to meet these challenges (Gandara, 2002). The present paper sets forth findings from two evaluation studies of an effective college access program located in a large urban district, serving a low-income student population. This population generally does not receive college knowledge and psychosocial college preparation at school or at home. The schools have a 1:1000 average counselor-student ratio, and many of the students are first-generation college attempters whose families do not have college experiences to impart. This paper highlights principles of effective practice for college access and success and discusses implications for organizational design and culture which may be applied in similar programs and in educational institutions.

The findings set forth below derived from two evaluations of a college access and success program that serves a predominantly low-income and minority (Hispanic) high school population in an inner-city school district of nearly 30,000 students. Demographics of the district include 84% Hispanic students, 82% low SES (i.e., enrolled in free or reduced lunch program), and 35% ELL students. The mission of the program is to increase academic outcomes through the mediating effect of improved psychosocial competencies by developing culture, relationships, and activities that support student attainment. Study 1 focused on measuring and validating the academic outcomes and Study 2 explored and documented the culture, relationships, and activities that lead to the development of students' psychosocial competencies.¹

¹ Study 3, currently underway, is a 6-year longitudinal study of two program cohorts (freshmen and seniors) and matched comparison groups from the same school district, measuring the program effect on

Significance

Minority and low-income students may lack the resources necessary to attend college (Gandara, 2002). By providing knowledge, resources, and support, college access programs aim to diminish the gap and raise the educational attainment of students. Program outcomes traditionally measured have included high school graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and types of colleges attended. However, facilitating and measuring college access is not enough. Students who matriculate to college also need to persist in and graduate from college. They arrive to college with varying levels of academic preparation, social support, and academic motivation. To help students, particularly minority and low-income students, succeed in college, college access programs help foster students' psychosocial competencies (Farrington et al., 2012; Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015) and extend their support services into college.

Psychosocial competencies are perhaps best nurtured and developed through positive, supportive, and sustained peer and adult relationships (Johnston 2010; Davig & Spain 2004; Engberg & Mayhew 2007; Nagaoka et al., 2015). When college access programs strive to develop psychosocial competencies in students, facilitated through strong, developmental relationships, they foster student success in college and beyond. While academic skills and motivation may be most predictive of college GPA, psychosocial competencies (e.g., academic goals, academic self-efficacy, social support, social involvement) are better predictors of retention and incrementally predict retention over and beyond traditional predictors of SES, high school GPA, and ACT/SAT scores (Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Social supports help promote students' sense of mattering, or belonging, in college; without

psychosocial competencies and the mediating effects of these competencies on academic outcomes. This study will expand the work from Study 1 by collecting data from participants prior to joining the program to better account for self-selection factors.

feeling that one matters, even the most intentional efforts to support students may fall short in achieving its goals (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Study 1 - Quasi-Experiment

Utilizing a program theory-driven approach, the purpose of the first evaluation was to empirically evaluate program outcomes, hypothesized to exceed district outcomes. This evaluation study examined academic outcomes through a matched comparison quasi-experimental study utilizing 10 years of college data, as well as psychosocial outcomes through participant surveys and interviews. Furthermore, the evaluation team helped the program document its theory of change through a logic model (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Initial Logic Model for the College Access and Success Program

Methods

The quasi-experiment used one-to-one matching of demographically similar participant (n=280) and non-participant students (n=280) from the same district with similar baseline performance data (i.e., HS GPA, test scores, AVID participation, language spoken at home, demographics). This sample size was sufficient to have a power of .76 to see an effect size of $d = .20$ and a power of .97 to see an effect size of $d = .30$. After matching participants, there were no significant differences between the participants and the matched control group in terms of Freshman GPA, Freshman California State Test (CST) scores, AVID participation, gender, or ethnicity; however, while participants were more likely to be eligible to receive free/reduced lunch, this would bias the results in the opposite direction of the intended outcomes. Table 1

shows the demographic and academic performance data for both groups after matching.

Table 1. *Demographic and Academic Performance Data for Participants and the Matched Comparison Group*

Variable	Participant Group	Matched Comparison Group
Gender		
Female	183 (65.4%)	167 (59.6%)
Male	97 (34.6%)	113 (40.4%)
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	238 (85.0%)	225 (80.4%)
Black	8 (2.9%)	14 (5.0%)
Asian	28 (10.0%)	24 (8.6%)
White	3 (1.1%)	11 (3.9%)
Filipino/Pacific Islander	2 (0.7%)	4 (1.4%)
Native American	1 (0.4%)	2 (0.7%)
Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility	246 (87.9%)	224 (80.3%)
Freshman Year GPA	3.47 (.68)	3.51 (.63)
Freshman Year CST	741.65 (85.46)	738.78 (79.75)
Participation in AVID	58 (20.7%)	53 (19.2%)

Results

Their academic performance from the district and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) across 10 years of high school and college data was compared to determine the degree to which the program met its intended academic outcomes.² Results determined that 100% of program participants graduated high school (versus 75% in the district) and that participants were more likely than matched peers to matriculate to college (95% versus 84%), enroll in college the fall after high school graduation (92% versus 76%), attend a four-year institution (81% versus 59%), and attend a private institution (24% versus 9%). Program participants also persisted longer than their matched comparison peers (50.2 months versus 45.7 months). Lastly, thus far 57.2% of program participants have graduated college compared to 40.3% of matched comparison students.

² The original study was conducted in 2011-12 with 10 years of high school and college data from the school district and NSC. In 2016, the evaluation team conducted a follow-up study with an additional five years of NSC data to examine college persistence graduation rates for the later cohorts. This paper reflects these updated analyses.

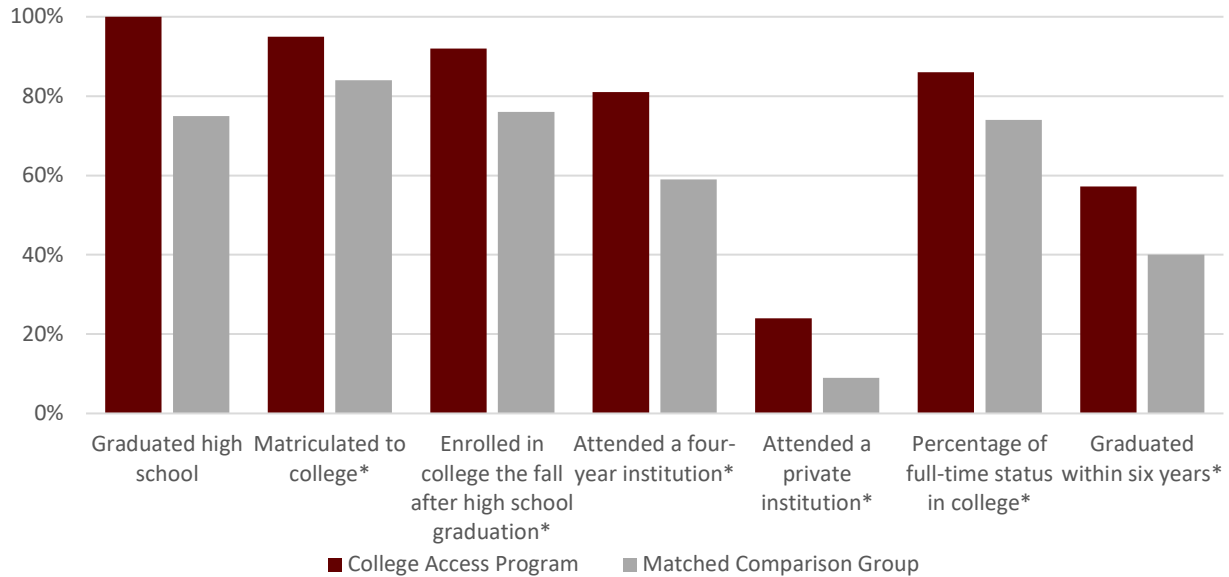


Figure 2. Participants in the college access program had significantly better college outcomes than the matched comparison group.

* = The percentages are of the participants who matriculated college and not the entire sample.

Additionally, surveys (n=701 students, over 80% response rate) and five focus groups with high school participants and program alumni enrolled in college were used to identify and measure psychosocial (i.e., non-cognitive) program effects. Results indicated high self-expectations for college and career success and community involvement, strong peer relationships and prosocial behaviors, and highly trusting relationships with program adults. Students also reported high motivation and self-efficacy, agency and self-regulation, self-esteem and confidence, resilience and resourcefulness in the face of obstacles, and psychological well-being. For example, 88% of high school students and 90% of college students believed that they have transformed for the better intellectually, academically, psychologically, and socially as a result of the program. Furthermore, 93% of high school students and 91% of college students were committed to giving back to their community. Students also reported extremely positive relationships with staff, indicating that staff members go out of their way to help them with anything at any time. Also, 85% of students reported that staff members were like family to

them. Program participants attributed these high levels of psychosocial outcomes to their participation and success in the program.

The evaluation concluded that the psychosocial competencies the program helped participants develop were highly influential in achieving academic success in high school and college. However, it was unclear how the culture of the program was driving the academic and psychosocial success of participants. It was hypothesized that psychosocial outcomes partially mediated the effects that the program and its culture have on academic outcomes. An ethnographic study (Study 2) was designed and conducted to examine the principles of practice underlying the program's culture and to determine how these practices assist in the development of psychosocial outcomes critical for student success in college.

Study 2 - Ethnographic Study

Methods

The ethnographic study utilized a naturalistic inquiry design using an exploratory and descriptive qualitative research approach. The naturalistic inquiry design allowed the evaluation team to learn about human phenomena that comprise the program processes and practices by exploring them in their natural settings (Merriam, 1988). The study was conducted over the course of a full year, thereby allowing for observation and documentation of a full, annual cycle of program activities and processes, utilizing the following methods: 1) in-depth, unstructured observations of program activities, 2) homogeneous participant focus group interviews with all key program stakeholder groups, 3) document review and analysis of program materials, and 4) audiovisual analyses of program artifacts. The table below displays the research methods used for data collection from key stakeholder groups (data sources).

All data were captured in and/or transformed into narrative form; i.e., focus group interview recordings were transcribed, and observation and audiovisual notes were documented.

Thematic content analysis was conducted, utilizing grounded theory approach to develop coding schemes for analysis. Results were triangulated across data sources and methods to produce robust findings.

Table X.
Crosswalk of Sources and Methods

Source	Document Review	Focus Groups	Observations	Audiovisuals
Students	X	X	X	X
Parents		X	X	X
Interns/Volunteers	X	X	X	X
Program Staff	X	X	X	X
Leadership/Board		X		

Results

The study resulted in a more detailed logic model, building on the Phase 1 logic model, describing in greater depth the Inputs, Throughputs, and Outcomes of the program (see Figure 1). The use of “throughputs” in lieu of the more traditional “activities” category in a logic model was the result of a deliberate decision to highlight the difference between *activities* (*what* the program delivers) and *purposeful practices* (*how* the program delivers its activities). While most college access programs deliver similar types of activities, they differ vastly in the practices they utilize to create a *culture* of support for students. The study identified six purposeful practices as the driving force of the unique culture which animates the program’s activities. Additionally, the evaluation identified five purposeful design elements that drive the operations of the organization at the level of the leadership and staff. These design elements and purposeful practices together create a unique and coherent program culture that leads to the positive program outcomes, as demonstrated in the resulting program logic model below.

Purposeful Design Elements. The five purposeful design elements describe principles that underly the program’s organizational design: (a) research-based design, (b) continuous

improvement framework, (c) structure of loose-tight coupling, (d) unique culture of success, and (e) purposeful use of human resources. Focus groups with the leadership team (directors and Board members) and interviews with the program founder demonstrated a rigorous commitment to the use of research, evidence, and validated experiential knowledge in decisions about program design.

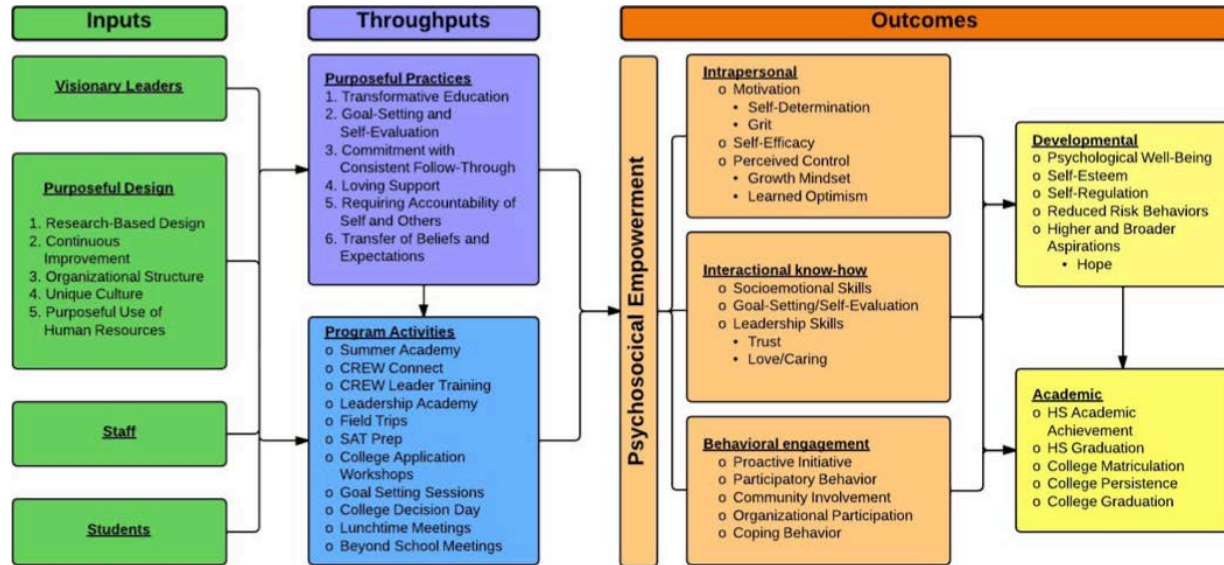


Figure 1. Final Logic Model for the College Access and Success Program

Leadership and staff consistently use research, credible evidentiary data, and findings and recommendations from program evaluations to modify and refine program design and activities (a). At all levels of the organization – Board and leadership, staff, volunteers/interns, and students – cycles of planning, implementation, and reflection are built into the system to ensure continuous improvement (b).

The organizational design is both highly defined (tight), especially in its specifications for how students proceed through the program, and flexible (loose) to allow for ample adaptability, creativity, and autonomy among both students and staff in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities (c). Thus, stakeholders remain engaged and committed in a setting of rigorous standards.

A unique culture of success is developed (d), consisting of high expectations and accountability in a warm, welcoming, and supportive environment of trust. Loving support and high trust were a hallmark of the program, reflected in the data repeatedly by multiple stakeholder groups as critical elements of the program's culture associated with its success.

Lastly, the program's process for recruitment, training, and utilization of human resources builds on program strengths to magnify program impact (e). Most program volunteers and staff are former students, carrying the organizational culture forward. At the student level, the program utilizes a Crews® system of peer group supports that places students in groups of 6 peers and trains them to support one another and hold one another accountable for follow through on goals and aspirations.

Purposeful Practices. Six purposeful practices emerged from the ethnographic study, describing the principles of practice underlying program activities and relationships. Together, these purposeful practices describe *how* the program achieves the culture that drives its outcomes: (a) transformative education, (b) goal-setting and self-evaluation, (c) commitment with consistent follow-through, (d) loving support, (e) requiring accountability of self and others, and (f) transfer of beliefs and expectations. These practices are embodied in all program activities and together form the culture of the organization, which is instilled in participating students beginning day one of the program.

The program uses research-based, carefully structured, and mindfully delivered activities with both students and parents to transform existing limiting beliefs about low-income, minority students' capacity for college attainment and the role of families in support of that attainment (a). Parents are given a guarantee that their students can and will get into college if they stay engaged in the program, and they are shown financial aid information that demonstrates that every family

can afford college. As one parent noted, “We didn’t know how we were going to do it and they opened our eyes as to how.”

Goal-setting and self-evaluation are integrated into every aspect of the program’s activities (b). Staff members train students to set, evaluate, and achieve academic and personal goals, using SMART goals worksheets and monthly self-reflection meetings to monitor progress. This activity teaches students to practice self-regulation, improves their academic motivation, and increases their self-reliance and resilience. Students, in turn, support one another in achieving their academic and personal goals through participation in Crews®. The Crews® environment creates a culture in which academic attainment is revered and rewarded by peers, in contrast to popular culture. Staff members model goal-driven behavior for students by setting goals for themselves and for the program and devoting time for individual and collective reflection and self-evaluation. After every key program activity, staff members meet to reflect on what went well and what may be improved. This practice is also aligned with the continuous improvement framework embedded in the organizational design.

The program’s high expectations and beliefs about student capacity are reflected in their commitment and consistent follow-through with respect to each participant (c). Staff members go above and beyond for students and become trusted advisors. In the student survey, students (over 80%) reflected that they trust program staff equal to or more than their own families. In an environment that lacks consistency, these relationships become anchors for the development of commitment, trust, self-reliance, teamwork, and other important psychosocial competencies in students.

When staff and students describe relationships in the program, they speak of strong, caring bonds and often refer to these exchanges as “love.” Staff and students understand that loving support is an essential capacity and capability needed for success in life (d). In their

graduation speeches, many students express grateful to have had the opportunity, through the program, to develop the capacity to love themselves and others. The program views loving support as a necessary corollary for accountability. Staff members and Crews® hold themselves and one another accountable for the success of every student (e) as a reflection of high expectations and loving support. The program requires minimum thresholds for participation for each student and expects a personal sense of accountability and responsibility from students for completion of program activities. Thus, participation in the activities both imparts knowledge of the tasks necessary for college attainment and builds in students the capacities needed to persist and succeed in college.

The program's emphasis on the power of the beliefs and expectations (d) is reflected in all its purposeful practices. The program holds high expectations for students and transfers this belief to students through transformative education, goal setting and consistent follow-through, and accountability with loving support. These purposeful practices create a culture and a set of experiences that, over time, result in a belief on the part of students in their own capacity and a set of corollary competencies to set high goals and carry out their goals. Most participants (95%) go on to college and outperform their peers in a successful college career.

Discussion

The purposeful design elements and purposeful practices identified in the study were shown to create a culture that drives the critical process of developmental transformation and academic success in participants. The program achieves this transformation by setting high expectations for desired outcomes, removing barriers to those outcomes, and creating a vision of reality in which those outcomes are in fact possible and are not only within reach but are within students' and parents' locus of control. Further analysis of each of the six purposeful practices reveals how the program supports its intended outcomes:

1. Through its purposeful practice of Transformational Education, the program removes images, perceptions, and beliefs that pose mental barriers to college and career success and replaces these limiting beliefs with positive and achievable messages and beliefs, for parents and students alike.
2. Through Goal Setting and Evaluation, it develops the skills of self-regulation and self-reflection in students. The staff encourages students to set high goals and supports them in meeting those goals. Positive results reinforce positive beliefs and high expectations.
3. Through Commitment and Consistent Follow-Through, the program models responsibility and accountability and demonstrates to students their worth and value. Staff commitment to students and their goals also models for students a commitment to themselves and their own goals.
4. Through Loving Support, students learn to love themselves and others. “They taught me how to love,” a student noted in her graduation speech, and others echoed the sentiment repeatedly. Loving Support, as demonstrated by staff and mirrored in crews, models for students how to build constructive, supportive, and positive interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.
5. Requiring Accountability of Self and Others further reinforces self-regulation, responsibility, accountability, and resilience. When staff members hold students accountable to high standards, they provide evidence to students of their high expectations for them. In staff-student relationships, holding students to high standards is constructive when it is in combination with Loving Support and Commitment and Consistent Follow-Through, which provide students with the certitude that if they fail a task, they can pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and try again. Thus, students build resilience and grit, qualities required for academic and life success. The training and

support of Crews®, in turn, provide a framework for implementation of accountability in student-student relationships.

6. Through Transfer of Beliefs and Expectations, students then learn to set and maintain high expectations of themselves and to broaden their horizons for academic and career success and for contributions to their communities and to society at large.

All of the purposeful practices, working collectively and in coherence, create a foundational culture of psychological empowerment that leads to progressive development of youth and their continued and persistent advancement into college, through college, and beyond. This is critical as it presents a model and framework for similar programs. Implications suggest that these principles of design and practice are critical for supporting and advancing a culture that drives positive youth development and secondary and post-secondary success.

The study also highlights the importance of focusing on principles of practice, rather than identifying activities alone, in defining a program logic model and theory-driven approaches to program design and implementation.

Limitations

The main limitation of both studies is that the purposeful design and practices were not empirically linked to the academic and psychosocial outcomes of the program. While leadership, staff, and students corroborate this linkage and observations and other qualitative data support it, the association remains to be tested empirically. The third evaluation study—a six-year, longitudinal quasi-experimental study of two participant cohorts and matched comparison groups—in currently underway to test specifically these linkages.

A limitation of Study 1, the quasi-experimental study, is that the matched comparison group could not be reached to test psychosocial outcomes. Thus, psychosocial outcomes were

only studied in the treatment group. For the comparison group, only academic outcomes from high school (through the district database) and college (through the National Student Clearinghouse database) could be examined. The third evaluation study currently in progress will remedy this issue.

As with most qualitative studies of a program, a limitation of this study is the necessarily limited sample. However, triangulation of findings across various data sources and research methods (observations, focus groups, document reviews, etc.) allowed for mitigation of this limitation. Another limitation common to qualitative research is the element of the human mind serving as a research tool. As researchers, we are intent in maintaining objectivity or bracketing ourselves out of the data collection process. This concern was addressed with regular and systematic team meetings for debriefing and triangulation of data sources throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, multiple researchers attended the bulk of activities to strengthen inter-rater reliability.

Conclusions

As a result of evaluation recommendations, the program expanded its services to continue serving its graduated high school participants who matriculated to college and now provides services to its students throughout their college years. The program has also developed a training institute to assist other similar college access programs achieve the same levels of effectiveness; this training program builds on the findings of the two evaluation studies – five organizational design elements and six purposeful practices – to develop capacity in organizations to create a culture of success.

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