

COMMENTARY

College Access and Success: A Joint Production

by Barbara Cervone, Ed.D. | December 2010

In the first semester of college at the University of Tennessee, Edward Wood can say exactly how a low-income student like him is supposed to beat the odds and get to college.

“It starts with an adult, it starts with a parent, it starts with a teacher, it starts with a mentor, and then you excel off of that,” he said. “They’re the launching pad, you’re the rocket.”

But this was far from Wood’s own high school experience. Many of the adults he turned to for help with college, he admitted, were “missing in action.”

So last spring, along with two dozen other high school student researchers, Wood set out to unearth the startling truth beneath the drumbeat of the current aspirational rhetoric that urges all students to earn the college degree.

Wood is one of 25 diverse students from Hamilton County, Tennessee and Seattle, Washington whose report, “Hear Us Out,” was released this week by the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice at What Kids Can Do, Inc.

Their findings offer a stark reminder of the gap between President Obama’s call to raise the nation’s college graduation rate to 60 percent in just ten years and the everyday reality in so many of our public high schools.

Students, these youth researchers found, simply do not get the college-going help they need from schools until far too late in the game. Three-quarters of the respondents named their families as the chief source of college motivation and support, even when their parents and guardians had not attended college themselves.

Asking 5,000 peers about the path to college

With support from Lumina Foundation for Education, the young researchers collected surveys from almost 5,000 classmates in nine high schools. Another 225 students participated in their focus groups and interviews, making theirs a sizeable contribution to both the quantitative and qualitative research on college access.

“I turned to as many adults as I could for help,” Wood said. “But it was my older sister, who had gone to college herself, that proved my launching pad. The adults, well, many of them were simply missing in action.”

Their presence would have made a big difference, he said. “Once you know someone is looking at you, expecting the most of you, that’s when you start working and doing your absolute best.”

Almost a third of students surveyed, however, said they had never spoken with a school counselor about college. Although that percentage dropped to 12 percent by twelfth grade, 28 percent of seniors said they had completed their college application mostly on their own.

The “Hear Us Out” study underscores the many ways, big and small, in which high school students are failing to get the college help they need. A quarter of the students in the study would be the first in their family to go to college.

Strong motivation, not enough help

Conversations about setting their sights on college began early for 86 percent of the students surveyed and came to a peak in sixth through ninth grades. Over three-quarters reported they had been aiming for college “a long time.” But they lacked concrete advice from school sources in the critical early high school years, they said.

“It starts with the GPA,” one student noted. “I didn’t know until my junior year how all the grades add up starting from ninth grade.”

If they encountered a problem with their college plans, 86 percent of students said they would turn to a parent or guardian, compared to 38 percent who said they would consult a school counselor, and 33 percent a teacher.

The cost of college was the biggest hurdle, according to more than two-thirds of students. However, forty percent said they knew little or nothing about financial aid. Of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, only 64 percent expected to attend college directly after high school, compared with 78 percent of higher-income students.

For many students, community-based afterschool and summer programs offer enrichment, motivation, and confidence building. But less than a quarter of the student respondents had participated in such programs, and more than half said they knew little or nothing about these out-of-school opportunities.

Under-resourced schools

A good education is the most important asset high schools can give students. They need not only to win college entry but also to succeed once there. Recent reports suggest how far we have to go. Only about 57 percent of students who enroll in a bachelor’s degree program graduate within six years, and fewer than 25 percent of students who begin at a community college earn the associate’s degree within three years. For African-American and Latino students, completion rates are bleaker still.

The consequences of under-resourced high schools show up just as starkly in the college advising students receive. Of nine high schools in the “Hear Us Out” study, the average

student-to-counselor ratio was 375 to one—actually lower than the national average of 457 students per counselor, yet outrageously inadequate.

Student participants in the study’s focus groups often spoke with deep appreciation of a teacher or counselor who had reached out to them about college. “I usually don’t like asking for help,” said one respondent. “But when someone says, ‘Hey, check this out, I don’t know if you’ll like it, but you should look at it anyway,’ that goes pretty far.”

Yet they repeatedly commented that counselors and teachers were chronically strapped for time. “The counselors, they do their best,” said one Chattanooga eleventh grader. “Many of them stay after school to help you with questions you have. Still, they are swamped. They are covered. It’s almost impossible to get their attention.”

The counselors in the study concurred. Most estimate spending, at best, an average of 15 percent of their time on college advising—although at the most affluent school, some counselors reportedly spent up to 50 percent of their day guiding students towards college. At the least affluent school, where the student body was almost entirely African-American and low-income, the guidance office door (like almost all others in the school) was locked between classes. Students needed an appointment to enter.

Taking the college-going process online seems a logical strategy to fill this advice gap in schools. In the urban comprehensive high schools in this study, however, the ratio of students per computer ranged from 90 to 150. Most computers were available to students only before or after school.

Going online at home was not an option for many students. “At school, at home, we’re on the wrong side of the digital divide,” said one Seattle student.

What to do

After almost ten years talking to high school students nationwide about their college hopes and dreams, I found this student-led research at once surprising and confirming. Like others who believe in the transformative potential of higher education, I stay up nights creating lists of what to do—from top to bottom, from policy to practice—to change the storyline.

In the end, I always come to the same conclusion: Making college a reality for our nation’s youth requires *all of us*. It is a joint production. Of course student motivation is critical. Students must push themselves academically, set goals, ask questions, seize opportunities, and take positive risks. But at so many points, the critical difference comes from teachers, counselors, mentors, and other adults—including the family members to whom most students turn for inspiration.

Schools must provide students the academic capital they need and deserve, an especially tall order in under-resourced schools, urban and rural, where simply reducing dropout rates proves daunting. Structural alignments between K-12 and higher education are crucial.

But when it comes to the social and emotional capital students need for college, each of us plays a role. In the face of constraints caused by overloaded counselors and shrinking school budgets, community partners must step in with support and coaching for families and youth. Higher education is uniquely positioned to provide the mentoring that students crave from their “near peers”—college students from similar backgrounds who can share practical advice about access and success.

Afterschool and summer programs also merit our steadfast support. They are the places where so many students—whatever their family income—find a passion, develop leadership, and try out and build new skills. They are a central part of the college equation.

Reducing costs at public colleges and universities, at a time when higher education is more important and expensive than ever, also demands fierce political will as public coffers are shrinking.

“My family motivated me, inspired me, for college, because they told me their stories of how they struggled with not going to school,” one Seattle high school senior said. “My aunt, my uncles, my parents, seeing them has convinced me going to college is the way to go.”

Our country’s youth have looked us square in the face and asked, “Hear us out.” Will we hear them and reach out with the help they need for college? Or will we shut our ears and put the blame on them?

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., directs the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice at the nonprofit What Kids Can Do, Inc (WKCD), which she co-founded with education writer Kathleen Cushman in 2001. Prior to launching WKCD, Dr. Cervone coordinated Walter H. Annenberg’s \$500 million “Challenge” to improve the nation’s schools, directing research, communications, and sharing and learning among the Challenge’s 18 projects. Dr. Cervone is a 2008 Purpose Prize winner.