

Getting There - and Beyond

Building a Culture of College-going in High Schools



About CHEPA

THE CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY Analysis (CHEPA) is an interdisciplinary research unit led by Director, William G. Tierney, and Associate Director, Adrianna Kezar. The Center was established to engage the postsecondary-education community actively, and to serve as an important intellectual center within the Rossier School of Education; it draws significant support and commitment from the administration. The Center's mission is to improve urban higher education, strengthen school-university relationships, and to focus on international higher education, emphasizing Latin America and the Pacific Rim. Working on fulfilling that mission are the Center's faculty, research assistants, and staff. We are currently involved in a three-year study of college access and financial aid for low-income students, a multi-year investigation of governance and decision-making in higher education, a study on ways to increase the diversity of faculty, and a project that will provide ways to increase the transfer rate of urban community college students to four-year institutions.

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Building a Culture of College-going in High Schools

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I: INTRODUCTION

FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS, RESEARCHERS AT the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) have spoken with students, teachers, counselors, administrators and family members about what is most helpful in preparing students for college. The majority of our research has been conducted at urban, low-income schools serving high proportions of students of color, many of whom will be the first in their families to attend college. In all of our work, we have been concerned with how to increase access to college and enable students to graduate from a postsecondary institution. We have analyzed the role of academics, guidance counselors, college preparation programs and financial aid dissemination. One overarching conclusion is that students are best served by schools that exhibit a strong *college culture*.

Culture is the intersection of beliefs and practices. All organizations have a culture, including schools. A school's culture is immediately evident when one sets foot on campus. It shows in hallway decorations, the way students interact with others on campus and attitudes about the 'coolness' of academic success.

Yet how does a particular school's culture promote college going? Do its students aspire to excel academically and to attend college? Are they aware of college preparation services available to them? Is the principal a champion of college preparation? Do the teachers discuss college with their students during class? Or do students, teachers and administrators participate in a culture of complacency?

We respond here to five key questions aimed at strategizing and promoting a college culture on high school campuses:

- ▶▶ What is a college culture?
- ▶▶ What are common challenges to building and sustaining a college culture?
- ▶▶ Who participates in a college culture?
- ▶▶ How can a school strengthen its college culture?
- ▶▶ What resources are available to improve college culture?

II: WHAT IS A COLLEGE CULTURE?

CONCEPTUALLY, *CULTURE* INVOLVES PATTERNS of activity and their symbolic values. All organizations have unique ways of doing things; some patterns of behavior are more formalized than others. The culture of a military unit, for example, differs from that of a college campus. Culture gives people clues about an organization's norms and values. These clues help individuals decide how to act and what to do.

College culture in a high school cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college. A strong college culture is tangible, pervasive and beneficial to students. It may be developed in a specialized section of a school, such as within a magnet program or small learning community. However, the ideal college culture should be inclusive and accessible to all students. Key studies about fostering college readiness underscore the following five elements in building a college culture and increasing college access (Alexander, K., Pallas, A. & Holupka, S., 1987; Hossler, D., Schmit, J & Vesper, N., 1999; Hugo, E., 2004; and McClafferty, K. & McDonough, P., 2002):

- 1) Academic momentum;
- 2) An understanding of how college plans develop;
- 3) A clear mission statement;
- 4) Comprehensive college services; and
- 5) Coordinated and systemic college support.

1. ACADEMIC MOMENTUM

A school culture that promotes going to college offers challenging academic courses taught by teachers qualified to lead AP or college preparatory classes. In addition to taking these courses, students complete college-level dual enrollment and Advanced Placement classes for university credit. Students are expected to read at or above grade level. When students struggle, summer classes are available to help them improve their reading level. Relationships are forged with local community colleges and four-year institutions.

2. AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW COLLEGE PLANS DEVELOP

To create effective college services, schools need first to understand how students develop college preparatory behaviors. Plans begin with aspirations. A high school with a college culture expects that their students will attend college and students share those goals. Once expectations are set, students engage in a lengthy process of completing the appropriate courses, taking all required exams and exploring various college options. After ensuring eligibility, students then apply to and enroll in the institution that best fits their interests and needs. Some evidence suggests that college plans do not necessarily follow college aspirations. Consequently, fostering expectations should be accompanied by support to ensure college preparedness and enrollment.

3. A CLEAR MISSION STATEMENT

A college mission statement is based on a high school's expectations for its students. The mission statement includes college expectations, goals, benchmarks and an action plan. The college mission statement is a living document to which all stakeholders (see *Who Participates* on page 10) contribute input and revisit key points annually. The statement should be sufficiently clear so that everyone within the school community can communicate its meaning.

4. COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

College services loosely fit into three categories: 1) guidance, 2) preparation and 3) information and resources. Applying to college is a complex process and most students need individualized support. They require encouragement and guidance to understand how to apply to college and acquire financial aid. This assistance is especially critical for first-generation college students, who predominantly rely on school staff for college support. Academic preparation is the most vital component of becoming college ready. Without it, students may fail to apply to college or struggle to persist once there. Information and resources are best tailored to specific grades and should be consistently offered throughout high school. Information about financial aid and assistance with tests (testing fee waivers, subsidized test preparation and reminders about testing enrollment deadlines) are essential components in preparing students for college.

5. COORDINATED AND SYSTEMIC COLLEGE SUPPORT

An effective college culture necessitates a systemic approach to serving students. All stakeholders within a school community need to be actively engaged in developing and realizing college goals. Coordinated activities offered throughout the campus yield better results than those occurring in isolation. Partnerships with postsecondary institutions can be invaluable, offering resources and expertise to address the challenges facing a school, such as how best to help students transition from high school to college.

III: WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON CHALLENGES TO BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A COLLEGE CULTURE?

EVEN THE BEST SCHOOLS IN LOW-INCOME neighborhoods face significant obstacles in creating and maintaining a strong college culture. District policies may complicate a school's efforts to promote college going. For example, multi-track schedules prevent large groups of students from being on campus prior to key college and financial aid application deadlines. Low expectations also exacerbate challenges in schools with severely low college-going rates. If teachers, administrators, families or the community have low expectations of the school and/or its students, then its culture is probably not based on high performance. In addition to improving the mindsets of adults, such schools frequently need to change negative student attitudes about academic achievement into positive ones, reorienting students toward academic success.

Two major hurdles to enhancing college culture- a lack of systemic support for college going and isolated college services- are prevalent in many under-performing schools and can create a college culture based on mediocrity instead of one oriented toward high standards.

LACK OF SCHOOL-WIDE SUPPORT FOR COLLEGE

This challenge is connected to isolated college services, but is broader in scope. Low support for preparing students for college is manifested in several ways:

- ▶ **No clearly stated or widely publicized college-going mission**, coupled with a limited number of individuals who articulate the college mission, makes devising an action plan for increasing college-going difficult.
- ▶ **Lack of relationships with community colleges and four-year institutions** denies opportunities for college-level work to be done on campus.
- ▶ **Academic programs without a college emphasis** (i.e. schools with limited number of AP classes, advanced classes catering to various levels within one class and few teachers who incorporate college activities into their curricula) limit learning opportunities for students.
- ▶ **Weak college emphasis among counseling staff** increases the likelihood that students will not be appropriately counseled to take classes meeting college entry requirements.
- ▶ **Limited space and/or funds for college activities** (i.e. when a college center is housed in a room without an area for students to congregate, when the college counselor functions without clerical assistance or when parent nights occur in small classrooms) deprive students of opportunities to receive adequate college guidance and support. The school also sends a strong message about the value placed on attending college.

ISOLATED COLLEGE SERVICES

Schools with isolated college services may serve a portion of their students but leave large numbers without access to college guidance. This is due to the inability of the college counselor to devote time to all students. Isolated services may lead students to perceive that the college center is intended for a certain type of student. Another misconception may be that college plans should only begin in the 12th grade. A college center is only as effective as its surrounding services. If guidance counselors do not advise students to enroll in courses that meet college eligibility requirements or if students do not receive challenging academic preparation, then readying students for college becomes more difficult. Isolated college services are exhibited when:

- ▶▶ **The sole responsibility for college guidance falls on the college counselor** and not guidance counselors or teachers.
- ▶▶ **There is a lack of coordinated, synchronized and consistent reinforcement of college goals** between guidance and college counselors and/or teachers and college counselors.
- ▶▶ **Counselors are overburdened** with extremely high caseloads or non-guidance responsibilities, such as supervision and test proctoring and consequently cannot dedicate sufficient time to providing students with college support.

IV: WHO PARTICIPATES IN A COLLEGE CULTURE?

ADMINISTRATORS

Administrators perform a central role in fostering college culture. They set a college-oriented agenda for the school community. This process involves articulating college goals, forging relationships with community colleges and four-year institutions, facilitating a school-wide plan to increase college going, choosing key individuals to implement the plan and setting accountability benchmarks.

TEACHERS

Teachers are essential to a college culture. Students interact with teachers on a daily basis. Often students in under-resourced schools say that their teachers do not talk to them about college. Teachers have the potential to motivate students by sharing personal college experiences. They can discuss how they afforded college, ask students about their college plans and help students complete applications for admission and financial aid. Most importantly, teachers prepare students for eligibility requirements and the academic challenges they will face. By building college activities into curricula, such as writing a college personal statement or devising an expense budget for freshman year, teachers improve the likelihood that students will apply for college.

Teachers who oversee supplementary college preparation programs such as AVID, MESA or college clubs are particularly instrumental. These teachers train

others how to incorporate college activities into the curriculum and work closely with students who might otherwise be overlooked as potential college goers.

COUNSELORS

The college center serves as the hub of college guidance and activities. The college counselors' main responsibility is to provide guidance about college and financial aid, among other services. Counselors hold workshops to educate families about college and financial aid, coordinate visits from college representatives, plan student tours of college campuses and facilitate many other events that foster a college-going culture.

Guidance counselors are responsible for advising students with high school course selection, making them integral figures in ensuring college readiness. Besides teachers, counselors interact the most frequently with students and therefore can steer them toward considering college options.

SCHOOL STAFF

From administrative assistants to custodial staff to security guards, the extent to which the entire school staff supports college goals indicates how widely college culture is shared throughout the school community. When a student hears about the importance of college from one teacher and no one else, the student receives a mixed message at best. A college-going culture requires that the whole school community maintain a consistent and shared message.

STUDENTS

Developing a college culture requires active involvement from students. No matter how many college services are available, they are only as helpful as the students make them. Though students may ask their college counselor questions, they are often unaware of other college resources available on campus such as financial aid workshops or college recruiting sessions. Strong publicity for college activities is critical. Students are oftentimes overlooked as resources in cultivating a college culture. School staff can seek suggestions from students as to how to better meet their needs. Capitalizing on positive peer pressure, schools can encourage students to help each other excel academically (i.e. doing well is school is cool). Well-trained peer counselors can disseminate college information. Alumni can also serve as resources for motivating students and providing strategies for getting ready for and applying to college.

FAMILY MEMBERS

Parents, siblings, extended family and legal guardians play an important role. High school students benefit from having people - whether or not they have college experience - to talk with about their goals. Family members who have attended college are especially helpful. They can assist students by helping them to fill out applications, reading personal statements and answering questions about what college is like. Families can learn more about college options through informational nights at schools.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Community members act as college resources by serving as mentors and guest speakers, offering summer internships and raising funds for scholarships and other college services. Many community-based organizations provide programs and support to students interested in pursuing college and serve as useful partners when supplementing school services.

V: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: HOW CAN A SCHOOL STRENGTHEN ITS COLLEGE CULTURE?

GIVEN WHAT WE HAVE OBSERVED AND INPUT we have received from numerous sources, we suggest six ways a school might improve college services and student college outcomes. Underneath each point, we have included action items and strategies. The suggestions are by no means exhaustive. We encourage you to use them as starting points for discussion and brainstorming at your school and in your community.

1. INVOLVE THE WHOLE SCHOOL IN CREATING A CLEAR VISION FOR YOUR SCHOOL'S COLLEGE CULTURE

- ▶ Engage people in drafting a **clear and concise college mission statement and action plan.**

Strategy: Post the college mission statement in all classrooms and disseminate to families.

Example of a college mission statement:

At California High we believe that all students can be successful learners. By passing A-G classes and becoming competent in core academic subjects, students will be ready to continue learning in college.

► **Create benchmarks for evaluating college goals.**

Strategy: Verify that juniors are on track to complete college eligibility requirements during their senior year.

Strategy: Ensure that all students apply to college; keep clear records of where students apply and enroll.

Strategy: Assist all students to successfully complete FAFSA forms and state-based aid forms if applicable; track students' financial aid awards.

Strategy: Administer a senior survey prior to graduation.

Strategy: State at graduation how many students are going to college and set a goal for a higher college-going rate for the following year.

Example of a sample Senior Survey:

What are your plans after graduation?

- college
- military
- work
- other

If you plan to attend college:

- Where were you accepted?
- Where will you enroll in the fall?
- Why did you decide on that school?
- What will you major in?
- What types of financial aid have you received?

- ▶▶ **Allocate adequate resources** to provide college services.

Strategy: Design a welcoming and well-organized college center. This should be a place where students feel comfortable “hanging out.”

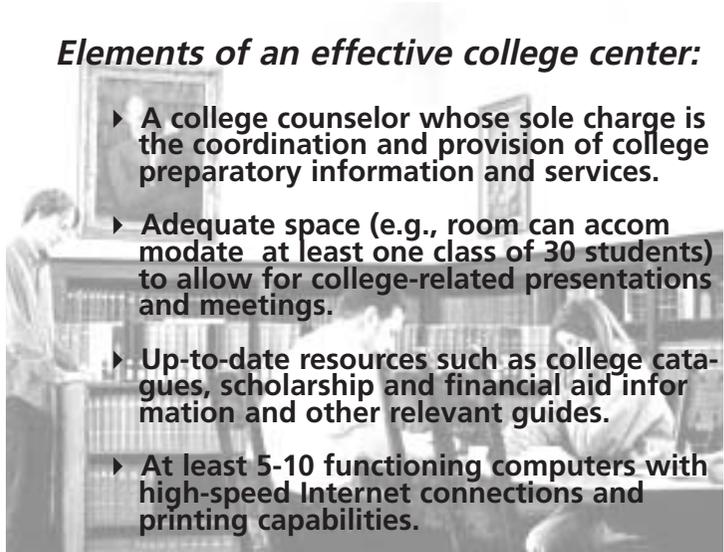
Strategy: Provide college-related professional development to counselors and teachers.

Strategy: Develop a volunteer cohort that will assist the college counselor.

Strategy: Build relationships with local colleges who will persist in college counseling.

Elements of an effective college center:

- ▶ **A college counselor whose sole charge is the coordination and provision of college preparatory information and services.**
- ▶ **Adequate space (e.g., room can accommodate at least one class of 30 students) to allow for college-related presentations and meetings.**
- ▶ **Up-to-date resources such as college catalogues, scholarship and financial aid information and other relevant guides.**
- ▶ **At least 5-10 functioning computers with high-speed Internet connections and printing capabilities.**



2. SUSTAIN AND CONSISTENTLY REINFORCE COLLEGE MESSAGES

- ▶ **Design a plan to serve student needs** at different points during their high school years.

Strategy: Incorporate college activities into the ninth grade curriculum and continue activities through the second semester of senior year; provide more individualized college information in the higher grades.

Strategy: Encourage all students to take the PSAT; at low-income schools, offer subsidized SAT preparation courses.

Strategy: Publicize the availability of financial aid early.

Strategy: Tailor messages and activities to particular grades.

Strategy: Individualize college information to meet the needs of particular groups of students such as students in foster care or undocumented students.

Helping Students Prepare for College:

The Basics by Grade

12th Grade:

Provide individualized guidance about college, assist students in completing college and financial aid applications and help students make informed decisions about where to enroll in college and how to interpret financial aid awards.

11th Grade:

Stress importance of doing well academically, discuss college and financial aid options with students, verify that students are prepared for and signed up to take SAT and ACT exams and encourage leadership roles in extracurricular activities. Begin drafting college personal statements.

10th Grade:

Encourage strong academic performance, verify student enrollment in courses that meet college eligibility requirements, discuss extracurricular opportunities and dispel myths about not being able to afford college.

9th Grade:

Foster college aspirations and instill the importance of good grades.

3. COORDINATE SERVICES AND WIDELY COMMUNICATE GOALS AND COLLEGE ACTIVITIES

- ▶▶ **Create opportunities for counselors and teachers** to discuss how their curricula and activities meet the school's college mission.
- ▶▶ **Encourage teachers and counselors to find ways to assist each other** in providing college support.
- ▶▶ **Publicize college activities and services.**

Strategy: Use hallways, bulletin boards and PA announcements to announce college acceptances and publicize important college and financial aid deadlines.

Strategy: Publish a college newsletter and disseminate to the school community.

Strategy: Create a "Wall of Honor" - when students are admitted to college, put their photos and names on the wall.

Possible contents for a college newsletter:

- Brag section:*** College acceptances, scholarships awarded and news/advice from alumni
- Calendar:*** Important deadlines for the month/year, visits from college representatives, announcements about college fairs, campus tours and related events
- Information:*** Definitions of financial aid and college terms
- Resources:*** Useful websites, contact information for people on and off campus who can offer guidance
- Checklists:*** For the month or semester, by grade

Ex: March (seniors)

- ▶▶ Submit your FAFSA and other state-based financial aid applications
- ▶▶ Receive and interpret your SAR (student aid report)
- ▶▶ Check on scholarship applications
- ▶▶ Research housing options at your school
- ▶▶ Keep your grades up
- ▶▶ Plan to take a summer course

4. CREATE AND SUPPORT A STRONG ACADEMIC PROGRAM

- ▶ **Ensure that all students have the option to enroll in college classes.**

Strategy: Publicize college requirements in the beginning of each year. Require guidance counselors to discuss them alongside senior graduation requirements.

- ▶ Stress that **maintaining high grades and taking challenging courses are the best guarantees** for students to be prepared for college and eligible for scholarships.
- ▶ Offer a comprehensive array of **Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses** that parallels an elite private high school's offerings.
- ▶ If students are not reading at grade level, **have a summer 'boot camp'** that brings them up to grade level.
- ▶ Offer SAT preparation courses.

5. PROVIDE QUALITY GUIDANCE

- ▶ Appropriately **train all college and guidance counselors** to serve students' college needs.
- ▶ Offer college-related professional development to teachers and other school staff.
- ▶ **Recognize the unique needs of your student population** and plan accordingly.

Example:

Schools with high numbers of undocumented students and/or youth in foster care can better meet their populations' needs by holding workshops tailored to their specific situations. Sharing detailed information about financial aid options is of high importance.

6. FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- ▶ **Encourage college representatives** to supplement school-wide guidance efforts.
- ▶ **Offer college-level courses at school** taught by college-level instructors.
- ▶ **Facilitate students taking college-level courses** on a college campus.
- ▶ **Cultivate relationships with colleges** who offer special summer programs.
- ▶ **Enable students to visit college campuses.**
- ▶ **Form partnerships with university schools of education** who might be able to evaluate your college outreach program and services.

VI: WHAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR IMPROVING COLLEGE CULTURE?

THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES OFFER STRATEGIES and tools for strengthening college culture:

- ▶ The **ALLIANCE FOR COLLEGE-READY PUBLIC SCHOOLS** includes a section on effective practices for increasing college preparation in small schools. <http://www.laalliance.org/>
- ▶ For schools in California, the **CALIFORNIA STUDENT AID COMMISSION** provides information about financial aid and links to useful resources. Of particular use is their *Fund Your Future Workbook*. <http://www.csac.ca.gov/>
- ▶ The **CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS** site offers several tools designed for practitioners. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/chepa/>

Breaking through the Barriers: A 25-page monograph that analyzes the financial aid processes for low-income students and their families

CHEC-List. An 18-page monograph that outlines ways to expand college counseling beyond the college center to the larger school community.

Preparing for College. A 20-page monograph describing nine elements that comprise an effective college preparation program.

Show Us the Money. A 44-page booklet that outlines the different forms of financial aid available to students, suggests effective financial aid practices and lists resources.

AB 540 Guide. A 46-page monograph detailing AB 540, history of relevant legislation, immigration definitions and resources, important information about applying to college, tips on succeeding in college including how to fund it, and examples of undocumented students who have succeeded.

- ▶▶ **HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT** has publications, a venue for dialogue and strategies for involving families in schools.
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/>
- ▶▶ **NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY & COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS WITH SCHOOLS** recently published a strategy brief on how to reach out to diverse populations to foster family-school connections.
<http://www.sedl.org/connections/>
- ▶▶ **PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE NETWORK** lists a collection of publications and links aimed about increasing college access. Various toolkits designed to assist practitioners in developing and evaluating college access programs are of particular relevance. <http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/>

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