

From the Field:

College - We Want In!

By Carolyn Probst, and Dennis P. O'Hara, Ed.D.

Most people reading this article had the privilege of attending college and understand its value. However, for too many of our students, this is not the case. According to the Economic Policy Institute, "Americans with four-year college degrees made 98 percent more an hour on average in 2013 than people without a degree. That's up from 89 percent five years earlier, 85 percent a decade earlier and 64 percent in the early 1980s" (Leonhardt, 2014, par. 4). And yet, in 2013 the research indicated that low-income students pursue college at a considerably lower rate than their higher income peers (Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

The Value of Early Engagement

How do school leaders help students and parents, especially those from low-income families, understand the value of a college education? Engaging students and families early and often and using a continuum of strategies enables school leaders to close aspiration gaps, thus creating and sustaining a college-going culture for all students.

Typically, college counseling initiatives begin in the middle of eleventh grade. Waiting until this late stage in a student's academic career guarantees missed opportunities. For students who do not see themselves in college, or who are unaware of the significance of their early academic work, the eve of senior year is simply too late. According to ACT (2008), "...the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate from high school than anything that happens academically in high school" (p. 2). In response to these conditions, school leaders in Oyster Bay and Westhampton Beach High Schools, (Long Island, New York), have created programs for students that jump-start college awareness beginning in eighth grade.

Igniting Excitement

New York Times bestselling author Daniel Coyle (2009) refers to the term "ignition" in his book *The Talent Code*. Coyle explains that ignition is a process that creates and sustains motivation and supplies energy over time (p. 97). In his book, Coyle refers to Gary McPherson, an Australian music psychologist. In reference to successful musicians and music students, McPherson said, "It's all about

the perception of self. At some point early on they had a crystallizing experience that brings the idea to the fore, that says, I am a musician" (p. 104). For students from low-income families, the idea of college can seem unattainable. It is difficult to want something that seems off limits - something no one in families has ever seen. We needed to provide our students with a crystallizing experience that made them say, "I am going to college!"

We came....We saw....We'll be back!

In Oyster Bay High School, the first step in igniting a passion for college among all students is the eighth-grade college awareness trip. Eighth-grade students, along with their teachers and administrators, spend a three-day-weekend traveling to four colleges in and around Philadelphia. Schools such as the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Lehigh University, Muhlenberg College, Villanova University, Ursinus College, and Cabrini College provide students with admissions information sessions and guided campus tours.

This trip begins early on a Friday morning. Students travel via coach bus three hours to Philadelphia. In addition to the college tours and information sessions, the days are filled with fun and exciting activities such as the Franklin Institute, IMAX movie theaters, collegiate athletic events, bowling, roller blading, pizza parties, and of course, enjoying famous Philadelphia cheese steaks. Teachers, administrators and students participate in fundraising activities as a way of generating excitement and ensuring all students participate in the weekend trip regardless of family income or socioeconomic status.

What happens on the trip is certainly informative, but more importantly it is transformative. Former Oyster Bay High School Assistant Principal, Taryn Johnson, said of the trips, "Students get a piece of the college process to motivate them for the future. The child you put on the bus the morning that you are leaving is different than the child who gets off the bus when you return."

Many of our students will be the first in their families to attend college and they return home with knowledge about the college admissions process that rivals that of most college-educated adults. While visiting with admissions repre-

sentatives, students learn the components of the holistic application review process. They learn about minimum grade requirements, recommended courses, the importance of community involvement, the various admissions policies, the importance of SAT and ACT scores, and the need to challenge themselves with the most rigorous courses available. Most importantly, students learn they belong and they suddenly envision their future selves on these campuses.

Sustaining the Excitement and Creating the Culture

Bringing students to visit college campuses transforms students and creates excitement, yet, creating and sustaining a college-going culture requires much more. A continuum approach is necessary to create equity and promote access. The chart below contains a list of the many programs, activities, and supports provided to students and families in each grade level.

Not all initiatives fit neatly into a specific grade level, yet are equally important. Among them is the creation of a college omnipresence. This is accomplished in a variety of ways including the display of college pennants in and around the school building, a display announcing the colleges that faculty members attended, and calendar days on which faculty members proudly wear their own college

apparel. In addition, as twelfth-grade students announce their college choice, the Honor Society decorates each student's locker in the motif of his or her future college. May 1st of each year is known as "I Declare" Day. Seniors wear the apparel of their chosen college, receive an éclair from the Counseling Department and have a pennant that bears their name and the name of their college displayed above the entrance of the Counseling Center for the remainder of the year.

Students Ask for More

Following a successful and passion-igniting eighth-grade college weekend, students were eager to visit more college campuses. This led to the creation of a five-day, eleven-college trip for tenth-grade students at Oyster Bay High School. Much like their experience in eighth grade, students are provided the rare opportunity to travel with their classmates to visit colleges in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Students see a combination of large and small, public and private, rural, suburban, and urban campuses as well as schools that represent a range of selectivity. These trips have become highly anticipated annual events for students and their families. As a staple in our school culture, the trips have demystified the college search and application processes.

8 th Grade	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8th Grade College Trip College Awareness Night College Day Trips Family and Consumer Science College Awareness Project Hispanic College Night Regents Algebra for all students (high school credit course) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College Day Trips ReadiStep for all students ACT Aspire for all students Individual College Counselor conferences Hispanic College Night AP Biology College Introduction Night Financial Aid Night 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5-Day College Tour PSAT for all students PSAT Night (results and explanation) Individual College Counselor conferences Hispanic College Night College Panel Night Financial Aid Night 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College Day and Overnight Trips PSAT for all students PSAT Night (results and explanation) In-school ACT (weekday, during school hours) Hispanic College Night Junior Family Night Individual College Counselor Conferences Junior Seminar Mini College Fairs College representative visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Essay Writing for College Course College Application Night Financial Aid Night On-site Applications Senior Assembly: Transitioning to College Hispanic College Night In-school ACT (weekday, during school hours) "I Declare" Day

Scalability

Although the programs at Oyster Bay High School and Westhampton Beach High School have components in common, they are not identical. Leaders in any school, regardless of population size, demographics, and geographic location can incorporate many of these strategies en route to creating and sustaining a college-going culture that closes aspiration gaps and makes college accessible to all students.

Community Support

Parental and community support for these programs is widespread and is a significant proponent of the program's success. Parents often report that traveling to visit colleges is cost prohibitive due to travel expenses and missed time at work, but the college visit program makes it possible. Additionally, parents share that when they are able to take their sons and daughters to visit colleges, the process is much more efficient since they do not waste time and resources traveling to campuses that do not fit their children's preferences. The benefits of these programs are evident in the comments we receive from parents.

- "Stephen came home from the trip with a completely new perspective on the importance of getting a good education. He has already started to take more initiative with his school work now that he has been exposed to collegiate life. Honestly, I wish I had the opportunity when I was in high school."
- "I wanted to thank you for giving my children, Kyle and Kelly a wonderful eighth grade trip. I agree with Oyster Bay's philosophy that exposing children to colleges at an early age is both inspiring and motivating. You provided my children with an educational experience in an entertaining and exciting fashion. When my children arrived home from the trip they were filled with enthusiasm and joy about their experience. When reviewing the itinerary I commented that the staff must have been exhausted because they were so busy. Kyle and Kelly both responded that the staff was just as "pumped" as the kids. They explained that the adults were smiling and laughing the whole time, which made the trip extra fun."
- "I was skeptical at first when I heard about a college trip for 9th graders. I thought, what's next, SAT prep for pre-schoolers? Well, I'm definitely a believer now. This trip was the perfect motivation for our daughter. Dinner conversation for the past three nights has been a healthy discussion of colleges and careers. We're excited! Thank you!!"
- "No one in our family has ever gone to college. This trip was truly the opportunity of a lifetime for Joshua. We are so grateful."
- Jack came home so "college positive" from his trip. Things I've never heard from Jack before like, "I have to step

it up with my studies" was one. Everyone has a life changing experience, this may be it for Jack! Thanking you and your staff for your time devoted to my son.

Student Growth

Changes in students are observable both empirically and anecdotally. For example, college-attendance rates at both schools have increased. Both schools have also experienced increased enrollment in honors and Advanced Placement courses, with a corresponding increase in AP exams. First generation students of both schools are not only approaching the application process with confidence, they are enrolling in college. Students are receiving better financial aid packages from more selective colleges. More students are applying to and enrolling in geographically diverse colleges. Student involvement in extracurricular clubs and activities has increased. Students and their parents have become savvy consumers of higher education. Rather than being passive participants, students and parents are now active and engaged in preparation for the post-secondary lives. On a college visit, it is not uncommon to witness a student inquire about the benefits of applying early decision, the college's four year graduation rate, sophomore retention rate, merit and athletic scholarship opportunities, faculty to student ratio, percentage of students who receive financial aid, or study abroad opportunities. In addition, college apparel abounds in both high schools, thus further propagating a college omnipresence and sustaining a college-going culture for all students.

Using a continuum approach, our schools have closed aspiration gaps, and in the process, closed achievement gaps, thus creating a college-going culture for all students.

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