

Partnering for Change: Lessons from College Access Efforts for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families

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Abstract

While the national high school graduation rates for culturally and linguistically diverse students have increased in the last five years, less than half of these students transition from high school to postsecondary settings. In this article we share the lessons learned from nearly a decade of college access and career readiness efforts by a program in the state of Texas focused on supporting students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We begin this report from the field by sharing the program's overarching goals as well as a description of each of its components, with a special emphasis on the partnerships that have been created. We then share how the program's evolution has led to five vital outcomes, all resulting from the ongoing study and improvement of partnerships.

Key Words: college access, minority students, partnerships, college outreach programs, culturally, linguistically diverse families, postsecondary readiness

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that Hispanic and African American students' high school graduation rates in 2017–18 were 81% and 79%, respectively, compared to 76% and 68% in 2010 (NCES,

2020). However, fewer than half of these students transition from high school to postsecondary. According to NCES (2018), only 39% of Hispanic students between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in higher education in 2016, and African American students accounted for only 36% of the college enrollment numbers in 2016. If the population projections of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)/minority students reaching 55% of the K–12 population by 2025 (NCES, 2019) are accurate and their graduation and college enrollment rates cannot be leveled with their counterparts, the potential negative impact on society is clear.

For decades, Texas has had many student success initiatives for students in K–20 settings. Texas' *Closing the Gaps* campaign made it a goal for all students in the state of Texas to understand the benefits of pursuing a higher education and to increase their access to postsecondary education opportunities across the state (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2015). The campaign also aimed to “(e)stablish coordinated P–16+ informational, motivational, and academic programs to prepare students for college” (THECB, 2015, p. 3). This effort has led to a strengthening of partnerships among school districts, community colleges, and universities to better support students in the K–20 pipeline. One of these partnerships has resulted in what is called the Work–Study Mentorship Program (THECB, 2018). Through this program, dedicated spaces in high schools—called GO Centers—were created to provide high school students with resources and information to ensure completion of high school and to arm students with a postgraduation plan, whether they chose the workforce, college or trade school, or the armed forces. With funding provided by the THECB, GO Centers are staffed by college students who are hired/trained by a partnering institution of higher education (IHE) to serve as near-peer mentors. In the 2018–19 year, for example, 22 four-year institutions, 30 community colleges, and 15 private institutions received funding to continue implementing these efforts across the state of Texas (THECB, 2018).

The Pathways to College Access and Career Readiness Program (referred to hereafter as Pathways) is one of the many programs at four-year institutions that received funding from the THECB. This article looks at data collected from the Pathways program at the University of Texas Arlington. We begin by sharing the program's overarching goals as well as a description of each component, with an emphasis on the partnerships established. We then share five outcomes that have resulted from partnering with school districts, students, parents, and local organizations, and how these have had an impact on the students and families served. In this article, we use the word outcomes in its more traditional meaning, as an end result to an activity or task, and not necessarily as a result stemming from a hypothesis.

Perspectives on College Access and Career Readiness Programs

Deficit-oriented perspectives have permeated our U.S. educational system for decades (Valenzuela, 1999). Misconceptions about minority students and their families have impacted every aspect of their education and the opportunities they are afforded (or otherwise), resulting in disparities in access to educational opportunities. In her seminal work, Valenzuela (1999) defines subtractive schooling as the more “traditional” method of schooling for minority students, one that either adds on a second culture and/or identity for students or taking away (subtracting) a student’s original culture and language. As a counter to the deficit models that create subtractive schooling, she argues for additive schooling or a pursuit of fully vested biculturalism and bilingualism. For secondary students, the impact of deficit perspectives on their schooling can be profound (Bridgeland et al., 2006). For instance, students not considered college-bound may be denied access to information and opportunity. Likewise, for students who are considered college-bound, depending on school staff and family background, they often have to navigate the path to post-secondary with little or no guidance (Amaro-Jiménez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013). CLD families show marked interest in their children’s education (Chlup et al., 2018), but many of these students will be the first in their families to go to college and have no familial experiences to help draw from when navigating the high school to college transition. These first generation college students have well-documented challenges in navigating this transition, and approximately 49% of first generation students are part of a minority group (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017).

An Additive College Access Program

The Pathways Program described in this article was created to meet stakeholders’ needs, with students and families at the center (Amaro-Jiménez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013). As was argued earlier, in this additive college access and readiness model, services are not given to students based on a label of being or not college-bound; all students and families are provided the information and resources to assist in career and postsecondary decision-making (Amaro-Jiménez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013). Additionally, having an open-door policy ensures all students and their families can seek support and be provided the resources and information they need to make informed decisions about their future. Moreover, students who are served are given opportunities to navigate their educational path based on their individual interests and needs (Amaro-Jiménez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013), rather than based on a particular plan set up for them. For us, an additive model put students and families

at the center, remained open-door at its core, and allowed students to determine need and guide their individual pathways.

Program Components

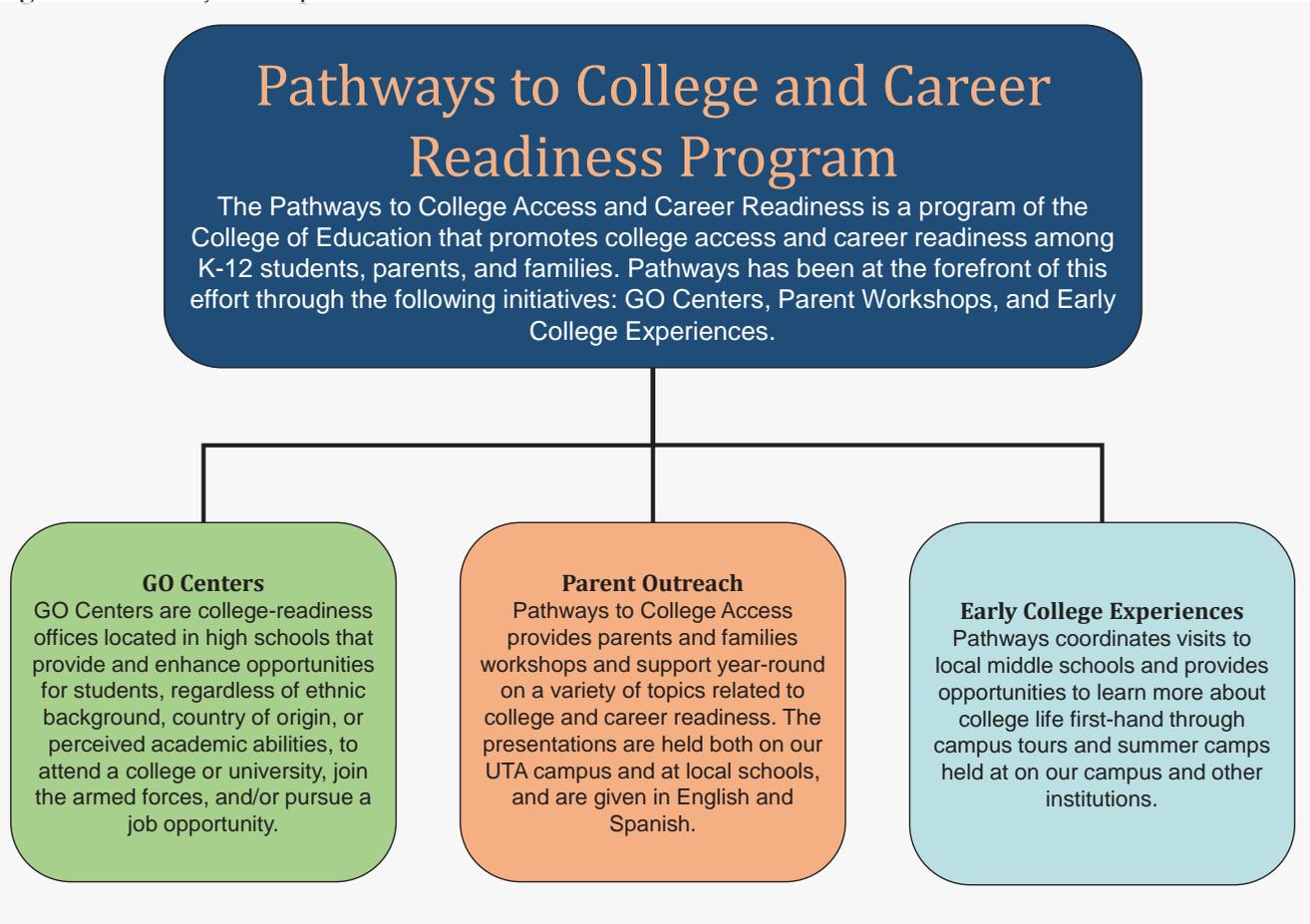
The College of Education housed the Pathways Program for 10 years. When state funding was received in 2010, the first Pathways-run GO Centers were officially created at one local school district. Thanks to continued state and federal financial support, as well as partnerships with nonprofits, corporations, and local school districts, the program has had up to 24 GO Centers across nine school districts, as shown in Figure 1. The components of the program are: Mentorship Initiative/GO Centers, parent outreach, and early college experiences, with each component being created as part of the ongoing partnerships spanning a decade. A brief description of each component and the goals for each component are shared next.

Mentorship Initiative

The first component of the Pathways program is the Mentorship Initiative. The goal for this component was to provide partner school districts with the resources and personnel they needed (college mentors) to support high school students' postsecondary readiness and decision-making. With state funding, Pathways hired, prepared, and placed college students from different disciplines (e.g., math, engineering, education) and classifications (freshman–senior) at college and career readiness offices in high schools' GO Centers. Many of the college students who work as mentors at the GO Centers are not only diverse, first generation college students (46.6% identify as Latino, 38.71% as first generation), but they also speak a language in addition to English, with Spanish being the most common. In the 2018–19 academic year, the program had 34 mentors. Because the partner school districts are located within a 49-mile radius from the university, the program serves families and students in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In the eight years prior to data-gathering for this report, the program served a total of 45,597 high school students at these GO Centers; the GO Centers were visited more than 160,000 times.

At the GO Centers, college mentors and high school students work through a variety of career- and college-related tasks until the high school students graduate, including career and college exploration, selection, application, and admission processes. Mentors support students and families in their decision-making, providing them with the tools to identify their career goals, short- and long-term plans, and paths to achieve those goals. Mentors also tutor students to get them ready for college entrance exams like the SAT. Over a span of eight years, 190,599 career- and college-related tasks were completed at the GO Centers (Amaro-Jiménez, 2017).

Figure 1. Pathways Components



The program’s success relies on not only having a skilled GO Center mentor group, but in having a designated GO Center sponsor who supports these mentors at their designated campus. The first part of the partnership is the identification of the GO Center sponsor who is a high school teacher, counselor, and/or an administrator. Usually, the sponsor is chosen by the administration, though occasionally the sponsor volunteers. The sponsors not only assist the college mentors with ensuring that they can work with students and families, but they also are key in making sure that these college mentors can be considered an integral part of the school’s operations. Some of the tasks performed by the college mentors and sponsors are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Tasks of College Mentors and GO Center Sponsors

Tasks GO Center Mentors Perform	Tasks GO Center Sponsors Perform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Help students register for the SAT and ACT ■ Inform and help students with college and scholarship applications ■ Help students with resumes and essays ■ Explore academic programs and schools ■ Assist students with financial aid forms such as FAFSA/TAFSA ■ Guide students with college application process ■ Answer questions pertaining to college life and organizations ■ Create a college-going culture within the GO Centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide supervision of GO Center and volunteers, mentors, and other staff ■ Ensure that mentor time sheets are signed in a timely manner ■ Communicate regularly with all stakeholders to provide feedback on the progress of GO Center Program ■ Meet regularly with all GO Center volunteers and associated others to coordinate GO Center activities ■ Scheduling of students for one-on-one mentoring and follow-up at the GO Center

Parent Outreach

The second component of the Pathways program is Parent Outreach. The ultimate goal of this component was to, in partnership with the school districts and local nonprofits, offer workshops and trainings on a variety of topics related to college and career readiness for parents and families. Some of these sessions included information on the college application process, the differences between federal- and state-level financial aid, and the various high school diploma options available, among others. Parents have also participated in hands-on workshops focusing on learning how to use technology to create presentations, searching for grants and scholarships, and simulating how to apply for financial aid. The presentations have been held both on our university

campus and at partner high schools. For four years, parents were also able to attend full-day conferences on our campus, and thanks to the partnership with one of our school districts, translation equipment was secured to ensure that all parents could engage in the workshops regardless of their native language. Since these parent outreach efforts were put in place in 2013, a total of 3,469 parents have received services through the program. More about the impact of the parent outreach component can be found in Amaro-Jiménez et al. (2020).

Early Exposure to College Experiences

The third component of the Pathways Program was to provide students with early exposure to college experiences. The literature has clearly shown that for many students, especially CLD students, conversations around college and careers need to start early (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). For first generation students, these conversations ensure support systems can be in place prior to students transitioning from middle school/junior high school into high school. As such, after listening to our partners and recognizing that parents, teachers, students, and administrators within the local school districts wanted early exposures to college to begin in middle school, the third arm of the program was created.

For the past five years, Pathways has supported middle/junior high school students in three ways. First, the program has helped coordinate visits to local elementary and middle schools and has provided opportunities for students to learn more about college and careers by having college students share their own experiences. Second, the program has provided firsthand experiences with colleges and careers for middle schoolers through campus tours of not only our university campus but also surrounding colleges, as well as residential summer camps that gave students the opportunity to live in a college campus, take classes, and be exposed to college life. Third, the program has also worked with our partner school districts to send mentors to their campuses to give presentations called “College 101” to students about a variety of topics centered on paths to college and ways to succeed once accepted. In the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years, these early college experiences reached a total of 3,689 middle school students.

Outcomes of a Successful Partnership

Creating partnerships that benefit our communities is an effort that requires time, networking, and access to stakeholders. Sustaining these partnerships takes dedication and an acceptance of partnerships as dynamic and ever-evolving. We spent the better part of the decade studying our partnerships, evaluating successes and failures, and making changes as a result. Next, we discuss some of the outcomes that came out of this continuous focus on

improvement. These include: (a) creating a resource hub, (b) providing access to information, (c) tailoring professional development, (d) charting new pathways, and (e) impacting *all* participants.

Creating a Resource Hub

Since 2010, the GO Center at many of the partner high schools has been the place students and families go for information on college and careers. When the program began, whenever mentors were not familiar with a specific topic or issue at hand, they directed students and their families to other offices and personnel at their campuses and/or referred students back to their counselor for additional information. This created programmatic challenges, one of them being that high school students had to find extra time to meet with someone else to complete key college tasks (e.g., receiving a test waiver), resulting in delays in getting their paperwork completed. Parents also had to schedule multiple appointments in order to get the information they needed to support their children. As a result, many opportunities to serve students were missed.

Today, with expanded outreach and partnership efforts, the GO Center has become the hub that houses many of the partner outreach programs available at each campus, including The Federal TRIO Program, Educational Talent Search, and College Advising Corps, among others. By utilizing the different strengths of each program, the GO Center became a “one-stop-shop” where students and families are able to obtain all the information needed without having to be referred to another office on their campus. Likewise, the partners housed at the GO Center are able to work with one another to identify who has yet to be served and the follow-up procedures necessary to ensure that the students are receiving the information they need. This centralized effort has also resulted in collaborations among institutions and programs, shared training opportunities for the personnel housed at the GO Centers, and goal-setting meetings for all programs involved. Were it not for these partnerships, the services offered by the GO Center mentors and others would just be “another” thing students are asked to do. By centralizing the efforts, students are able to receive the information in a timely manner and are able to see how the community is working together to support them as they make the transition from high school into adulthood.

Providing Access to Information

Increasing opportunities for students and their families to have access to information as well as resources at the high schools has been a goal shared by the community partners from the onset. There are particular challenges to overcome in ensuring this. Consider that the recommended counselor to student ratio is 250:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2017), and on

our partner campuses, these numbers are as high as 450:1. This makes ease and timeliness of access to college and career information problematic.

While these very high student to counselor ratios pose a logistical challenge, it is also an equity issue. The mentors who work at the GO Centers are able to help stand in this information gap as they help counselors to provide access to information and resources to all students, not just those already labeled “college bound.” A former GO Center sponsor (counselor) reflected on the importance of having GO Center mentors at their campus:

I don't even know how to put in to words what the GO Center does for our campus. Losing the GO Center would be like losing a limb! As counselors we are pulled in so many different directions that it is very difficult to be consistently available on a day-to-day basis for our students that have questions about college, financial aid, ACT, SAT, etcetera. I really can't say enough about our GO Center mentors (quoted by University of Texas Arlington, n.d., para. 2).

As the comment indicates, the support that the GO Center mentors provide at the campuses is vital. However, ensuring that all are aware of these opportunities and services is key, and sponsors/counselors are integral to this information dissemination, especially when making the needed connections between families and services available.

For example, at one of the largest schools the program has served (student population: 3,393), the mentors and their sponsor meet weekly to discuss what was accomplished as well as concrete ways for the mentors to work with students and families. Some of these discussions center around the tasks that students need to complete, including making sure students have signed up for tests and/or have received the necessary waivers to take them. Additionally, schools have created special passes for students to visit the GO Center to finish time-sensitive tasks and have these delivered to students by mentors, which assists in rapport building. Partners have also created morning announcements to make sure all students know where to go for more information. Additionally, the services offered at the GO Centers are not limited to school hours; many of the GO Centers have before and after school hours, and some even offer these services during the summer. Services have also been advertised when parents are invited to visit their school campuses, whether it be for open house events and/or college-related nights held (e.g., Financial Aid Nights).

Tailoring Professional Development

From the program's inception, professional development for the mentors has been necessary and ongoing, because college-related timelines and processes constantly change. However, by working with sponsors/counselors and each of the

campus's administration, the ongoing partnerships have also permitted identifying other professional development needs as these have emerged. For instance, the state of Texas instituted House Bill 5 in 2013 (Texas Education Agency, 2013), which required eighth grade students to select a career endorsement before they transitioned to high school. Some of these common endorsements include STEM, public service, and art and humanities, among others. Prior to this becoming law, Independent School District (ISD) personnel requested that the mentors be trained on how this would impact students and their families. In fact, one of the school districts provided the training on that house bill for the mentors; the training they received was the same as the one provided to the school counselors for the district. The training allowed for the mentors to not only be knowledgeable about the law and direct impacts of the changes, but they were able to also help guide parents whenever questions arose.

Tailoring the mentors' professional development has allowed the program to better equip these college students with content expertise. As part of their training, mentors learn pedagogically sound teaching and learning strategies they can use to meet the needs of the students they serve at these GO Centers. Mentors have also participated in student success-related trainings offered on campus. Though these professional development opportunities have always been beneficial, partnering with various departments and units at the university (e.g., Financial Aid Office, Admissions), community colleges, local school districts, and representatives from the Navy, Army, and ROTC have given the mentors the kind of information they know they will need and use when working with all students. Most recently, Texas OnCourse (n.d.) was created to help educators stay current on college and career planning. The mentors use their online modules for additional training to better answer student questions relating to life after high school. One of the highlights of the program has been when mentors who have graduated return to help train the new mentors, offering advice and assistance.

Charting New Pathways

As mentioned previously, partnerships are prone to evolve. Two examples of how these partnerships have led to new initiatives have involved serving middle school students and creating a "grow-your-own" initiative. Via parent outreach efforts (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020), many parents voiced concerns that for some of their children, the college- and career-related information they were learning was coming too late. Many of their children had not been exposed to this information while they were in high school, and they felt their children would struggle to catch up early in high school.

Because of initial funding requirements, Pathways' work originally focused on supporting students in Grades 9–12 only. However, it became evident that

extending this support to students in earlier grades was necessary. This became even more necessary when House Bill 5 came into effect, and school district partners were eager to get this information to students through various outlets. Thus, to support the partner school districts as well as respond to the families' concerns, additional funding was sought to hire a select group of mentors who would present about college and postsecondary options to students at middle schools and junior high schools in partner ISDs. These mentors were traditional college students, but who, for the most part, had just completed high school. Being closer in age to the students allowed them to develop presentations that were not only informative but relevant as well. Moreover, the relationships built with these students in middle schools appear to be facilitating a smoother middle to high school transition, as students and families already know what services will be offered at their soon-to-be high schools.

Also, given the program's longevity, many of the mentors who now work for the program visited a GO Center as a high school student. This did not happen by chance. As sponsors and school personnel have seen the impact that the program has had on their students firsthand, many requested that their former students, now students at our university, be considered for positions at the GO Centers. As one of our recent hires, who used the GO Center at his high school, stated, "My mentor helped me so much that I always said that when I became a [university] student, that would be the job I want throughout my college career to make a difference like my mentor" (personal communication).

We call this the "Grow-Your-Own Model," and it has proven beneficial to all involved, as students are able to see familiar faces and work with students who understand the culture of their campus. Moreover, having the GO Center sponsor work directly with their former students in the GO Center has resulted in many innovative collaborations, including making Career Day events at the campuses with their own alumni and creating scholarship opportunities for students. As one GO Center visitor said:

I am a part of the most recent addition to the long line of [name of school] Alumni. I will say this truthfully, the GO Center changed my life. It was the epitome of my senior year. I met three mentors who encouraged me in areas I never knew were possible. I struggled with some of my classes, but the GO Center mentors tutored me in those subjects that I struggled with. In addition to that, the mentors helped me with scholarships essays. I thought I would not receive a scholarship, but I was wrong. I was awarded two scholarships, one of which was the "GO Center Scholarship." The 2013–14 school year was the first year the GO Center had started their own scholarship. The GO Center guides you. They help you with everything from registering for your SAT/ACT to

applying for colleges/universities/scholarships, and they also tutor you! I would highly recommend using the GO Center to your full advantage. They are there to help you and make things easier for you! (University of Texas Arlington, n.d., para. 1)

Impacting All Participants

The mentors themselves have been impacted by this program in two important ways. First, reflection journals submitted by the mentors demonstrate a noticeable shift in attitude towards the communities being served and the impact that they believe they have on the students and families (Amaro-Jiménez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013). The reflection journals showed an increase in empathy, and a desire to ensure that their mentees could succeed. While additional research is currently being conducted, anecdotal evidence demonstrates a clear increase in cultural awareness evident at the grassroots level in the day-to-day interactions among mentors, sponsors, students, and parents. At this level, relationships between each stakeholder is built, trust is gained, and student success becomes triangulated from home, to the GO Center, back through school administration.

Second, because the program has always emphasized the importance of making sure the mentors are on track towards completion, the program has focused on “school first,” meaning every component of the program—from hours of operation of GO Centers, to middle school visits, to parent outreach events—is based on the mentors’ availability. The hours of operation for the GO Centers, for example, depend on the hours that the college mentors are available for work, which are the times when classes and other extracurricular activities they are involved with do not overlap. The program’s office also served as a hub for the mentors to study on their days off and in between class times. From 2010 until 2016, the program hired a total of 236 college students to serve at these GO Centers. Of these students, in 2016, 156 had graduated, 46 were expected to complete their degrees in the next two years, 12 transferred to another university and five of those had already graduated, and only 22 discontinued their studies. Based on our data, the GO Center mentors were not only graduating (93.2% graduate or were on track to graduate), but the average time it took them to graduate was 3.56 years.

Conclusion

For almost a decade, Pathways has striven to empower high school students and families via information, allowing them to use this knowledge to make informed decisions about their futures. Through the partnerships created, the

program has been able to accomplish its initial goals and much more. Without the partnerships, the program could have ended when the first round of funding concluded. Because of the program's longevity, many of the processes and procedures are clearly outlined and defined, and the majority have been mutually decided with the program's partners. However, it is expected that the program will continue to adapt and evolve as new needs emerge. While the literature and statistics can give us a glimpse of what the current needs are, partnerships that attempt positive change in our communities must ensure that needs are identified and studied locally (Hands, 2004, 2014). Gathering, analyzing, and utilizing data to inform program decisions is necessary. Likewise, data as part of these processes need to be transparent and shared with stakeholders. We believe that having partners at the table in the entire decision-making process should not be an afterthought, but rather an integral part of the process.

However, one of the program's current and most pressing priorities is to better support high school counselors. Without their partnership, most of the work that is conducted at the GO Centers (and other college access and career readiness centers) in high schools would not be possible. Just like counselors believe that the mentors who work for the GO Centers are integral to their work, so are they for college access and readiness programs everywhere. Counselors are the lifeline for outreach programs. With the increased focus on college readiness across the nation (Conley, 2010), we expect that counselors will need more time and resources, but opportunities for more resources and supports are difficult to find. Our hope is that, along with the calls for more work to be done regarding college and career preparation within and outside high schools (Chlup et al., 2018), more resources and personnel can be allocated to schools so they can use their most valuable capital assets, their counselors, and support them as they, too, strive for more opportunities for their students and their families. We call for more funding opportunities so that this important work can be done.

Just as funding is a necessity, we also believe that fruitful partnerships have to rely on shared outcomes and achievable objectives. The following are four suggested strategies for creating and sustaining helpful partnerships:

1. Needs assessment: Though one can identify a host of needs in our communities, it is important to identify a pressing, short-term need that can be met with a defined, actionable goal. These needs may include having access to tangible/concrete resources and services, for example, while others may simply entail a need to identify the key people in the community who could help "connect the dots." Partners benefit from a discussion based on needs first, with goals and timelines as a result. This should be an ongoing process,

with ongoing needs assessment. As needs are considered met by all partners, new needs (and new goals should those follow) should be articulated.

2. **Goal-setting:** It is important to identify an actionable, common goal. Identifying a common goal should be fairly easy to do when partners come to the table as a result of a need identified in the community. One of the ways Pathways did this was by having a yearly partner breakfast where current and potential partners could share the ways in which their work was impacting the community. These conversations were beneficial for the program because they created goal-setting opportunities. As an added bonus, it gave others unfamiliar with the program an opportunity to understand its community impact and make connections to other potential partners who shared common goals.
3. **Needs-mapping:** Creating a Needs Map can help project partners to visualize pressing needs as well as necessary supports. These are some of the suggested components for it: (a) an identified need, (b) a goal to meet, (c) potential resources/partners in the community along with contact information, (d) a “reach out” plan (how contact will be made, with whom, message to share, etc.), and (e) a timeline with actionable steps along with who will take those actions. A map like this needs to be revisited regularly, not only to keep it up to date, but to identify if there is a need to revise the plans made and/or add additional supports as plans are enacted. In sum, a Needs Map should articulate: prioritized needs, resources necessary, potential partners, and steps to take to result in meeting these needs.
4. **Ongoing transparency:** True partnerships tend to evolve with time and as needs change. We have found, however, that the key in sustaining partnerships, even when there is no work being done together at that time, was to be transparent. Although Pathways’ goal was always to share the positives and the great work that was being done, it was also necessary for program partners to be fully aware of the challenges being faced as they happened. Waiting or not sharing with our partners would have caused us to lose valuable time and valuable opinions on solutions. Having ongoing conversations with key personnel allowed us to keep them updated in real time and get their input on ways we could overcome challenges. Sometimes this resulted in new needs assessments and goal setting, and other times it simply required troubleshooting issues while we pursued current plans.

As stated above, unless everyone shares a mutual goal, and that goal is clearly communicated amongst all constituents, no resource or funds will produce the results desired. For Pathways and its local partners, this goal has been to ensure that all students the program comes in contact with have an opportunity to

access information and resources in relevant, meaningful, as well as culturally and linguistically responsive ways. Though Pathways is only one program implemented across the country, we believe that the lessons shared here from these longstanding partnerships can inform others' efforts to increase the participation, success, and excellence in education of all students and their families.

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