

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF A SMALL URBAN HIGH SCHOOL'S ALUMNI

Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen¹
Lehman College CUNY

Abstract

Bridges Institute is a small public urban high school founded in 1994 as part of the restructuring of a failing comprehensive high school. Part of a network of “critical” small schools in New York City, Bridges aims to interrupt the educational neglect of their students through carefully designed student-centered instruction and authentic assessment, as well as through active engagement in relevant social issues. While the school has experienced success at helping students “beat the odds,” a previous study hinted that students faced considerable challenges in pursuing college degrees. The present study explores the issue more fully through an explicit examination of the college experiences of a group of Bridges alumni. Their perspectives on the challenges they faced, along with possible areas for action and further study, are discussed.

Keywords: small schools, college persistence, college drop-out, urban high school alumni

Bridges Institute ² is a small urban high school founded in 1994 as part of the restructuring of a failing New York City comprehensive high school. Located in one of the poorest Congressional districts in the country, Bridges is a zoned public high school, open to the predominantly Black and Latina/o students from the local community. Staffed primarily by a small group of veteran educators who had previously worked with Deborah Meier in the legendary Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan, the founders were dedicated to interrupting the educational neglect of their students through carefully designed student-centered instruction and authentic assessment, as well as through active engagement in relevant social issues. Committed to providing a high-quality education to historically marginalized youth,

¹ **Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen** is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Lehman College CUNY in Bronx, NY. Dr. Rivera-McCutchen can be reached at Lehman College CUNY, Carman Hall B20, 250 Bedford Park Blvd West, Bronx, NY 10468, or via email: rosa.riveramccutchen@lehman.cuny.edu. Dr. Rivera-McCutchen would like to thank all of the study participants, as well as acknowledge the contributions of William Waters, Mercy Agyepong, and the JULTR editors and anonymous reviewers for providing invaluable feedback. Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

² With the exception of Deborah Meier, a public figure, the names used throughout are pseudonyms.

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

Bridges continues to aim to prepare students for college. The staff capitalizes on the small size to create meaningful relationships with their students, and the word “family” is often used to describe the school community.

Still, Bridges is not immune to the realities facing many urban schools. Teacher turnover has been a persistent issue over the years as committed staff members move on to grow their families, pursue other opportunities, or simply to cope with burn out. Entering students continue to be woefully underprepared when they begin their freshman year, often reading multiple years below grade level, with their basic numeracy skills equally lacking. Challenging social issues, such as homelessness, high unemployment rates and violence in the community, impact their students’ ability to physically and emotionally attend to the work of school.

In spite of these challenges, Bridges continues to demonstrate success when compared to similar schools, and was recently honored for “beating the odds” with their students. In 2014-15, 65.7% graduated in four years, while 77% graduated in six, and post-secondary enrollment six-months after graduation rose from 41% to 47% between 2013 and 2014. Yet, previous research on the school hinted at challenges students faced in pursuing and completing college degrees (Rivera-McCutchen, 2012a, 2012b). The present study took up the issue through an explicit examination of the college experiences of a small group of Bridges Institute alumni and asked to what extent were the alumni successfully prepared for college? This article presents their perspectives on the successes and challenges they faced and suggests possible areas for action and further study.

“Critical” Small Schools

Reducing school size has been central to many reform efforts for over twenty years (Meier, 1999; Sizer, 2004). In New York City, a network of “critical” small schools, Bridges Institute among them, have worked for over ten years to form a strong coalition, the New York Performance Standards Consortium (Consortium), in order to resist policy mandates that are at odds with their collective vision, especially in the area of high stakes standardized assessments. After the implementation of the statewide high-stakes Regents exam mandate in the mid-1990s, Consortium schools successfully earned a waiver that allowed the schools to use performance-based assessment in lieu of all but one Regents exam, the English Language Arts exam.

Spurred on by the successes of these early small schools, in the early 2000s New York City served as the epicenter of small school reform. Mayoral control over the NYC Department of Education, bolstered by substantial funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, paved the way for creation of over 123 new small schools in an effort to go to scale with the successes of previous small school reform efforts (Bloom, Thompson & Unterman, 2010; Stiefel, Wiswall, Schwartz & Debraggio, 2012). However, proponents of earlier small school reform, led by visionaries like Deborah Meier, charged that the rapidly created themed small schools in historically underserved communities like Bronx, NY in the early 2000s, were fundamentally different from the earlier generation of small schools (Fine, 2005). Unlike the newer schools, the “critical” small schools that emerged in the 1990s were more than simply small (Fine, 2005; Hantzopoulos & Tyner-Mullings, 2012); what critical small schools held in common was a commitment to “democratic participation, complex forms of assessment, social justice and equity” (Hantzopoulos & Tyner-Mullings, 2012b, xx).

While outcomes of the newer wave of small schools have been mixed and somewhat controversial, at best (Bloom, Thompson, & Unterman, 2010; Kahne, Spote, de la Torre, &

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

Easton, 2008; Stiefel, Wiswall, Schwartz, & Debraggio, 2012), a recent Consortium study indicated that outcomes of the critical small schools belonging to the group is generally positive (New York Performance Standards Consortium, 2012). In comparison to city, state and national outcome measures on graduation rates of general and special education students, English Language Learners, as well as in the areas of college readiness and persistence, Consortium schools appear to have better outcomes:

Of those [Consortium graduates] in the sample who entered college within one year of high school graduation, 78% overall enrolled for a second year. Of those attending four-year colleges, 84% enrolled for a second year. Of those attending two-year institutions, 59% enrolled for a second year. In comparison, nationally only 73% of students who enter four-year colleges and 56% of those who enter two-year institutions return for their second year (Foote, 2007, p. 362).

The study emphasizes that the performance-based assessments employed by the schools in lieu of the high stakes Regents examinations, in particular, play a key role in the graduates' successful outcomes.

The Consortium's report offers an encouraging counter-narrative to the dominant discourse around the primacy of high stakes testing as the quintessential form of accountability. This trend in testing has had well-documented negative impact on curriculum, teacher morale and student persistence (Au, 2011; Hagopian, 2014; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008). While the Consortium's study shows promise in their alternative approach to schooling, one shortcoming of their report is that it fails to disaggregate the data in order to better understand the specific experiences of graduates from the different Consortium schools. Given their schools' unique hyper-local contexts, important distinctions in the experiences of students may have been obscured by this form of reporting. The present study begins to fill these gaps by exploring Bridges' alumni experiences with college more deeply, with an understanding that addressing the limitations in the Consortium's study is critical in order to achieve greater success.

Conceptual Framework

Historically, schools have been organized in ways that reproduce inequality (Anyon, 1980; Sizer, 2004; Willis, 1981). Rather than being the great equalizer, schools often solidify the narrow trajectories of students who have already been victimized by under-resourced schools and communities. In particular, depersonalized large high schools typically sort and condemn students to fulfill destinies too often predetermined by their race and/or class backgrounds (Sizer, 2004).

Many of the founding schools that make up what are now Consortium schools, emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in order to disrupt these negative reproductive forces and create new possibilities for urban schools (McDonald, 1996; Sizer, 2004). Founded expressly on the principles of providing quality education for all students, these "critical" small schools sought to provide academic experiences for students that would teach critical thinking through authentic and project-based learning, providing individualized and rigorous academic experiences for all their students. Beyond the academic elements, Fine (2012) notes that small schools are "designed and constructed with a rich sense of justice and democracy; a place where educators, parents, community and youth...come together to build knowledge, capacity and community power" (p. ix).

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

Critical small schools, then, are poised to counter the deterministic and subtractive nature of traditional schools (Valenzuela, 1998), by providing an alternative school setting in urban communities, often with the goal of preparing students for a college education. Yet research on college persistence among Black and Latino students (O’Keeffe, 2013; The JBHE Foundation, Inc., 2005) suggests that inequities persist beyond the high school years. Though prior academic preparation is generally accepted as a key factor for increasing retention of all students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003), other sociological and psychological factors have been highlighted as critical determinants (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

One dominant theory on student attrition (Tinto, 1993) has been a foundation for a great deal of empirical research on the topic, yet there has been some debate as to the model’s applicability to Black and Latino student experiences (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Carter, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Rodgers & Somers, 2008). Tinto’s framework posits that student departure is likely to occur when they are not successfully integrated into the academic and social climate of the college. Critics have argued that Tinto’s framework does not go far enough in acknowledging the impact of external factors, such as family and work responsibilities, on retention (O’Keeffe, 2013; Rodgers & Somers, 2008; Swail et al., 2003). As a result, other research has highlighted how improvements in campus environments might lead to greater retention of Black and Latino students (Carter, 2006; Lehmann, 2007; Museus & Ravello, 2010; O’Keeffe, 2013; Swail et al., 2003).

Taking into account the existing research on the challenges of college persistence, particularly for Black and Latino students, the present study locates Bridges within a tradition of critical schooling (Hantzopoulos & Tyner-Mullings, 2012a) with the potential to interrupt hegemonic reproductive forces in education. As such, the study explores both the long-term promises and limitations of critical schooling through the experiences of Bridges Institute’s alumni. Specifically, the research examines their perceptions about the extent to which Bridges prepared them for the multiple challenges they faced in college, and what factors supported and/or hindered their progress.

Methods

Bridges Institute alumni who graduated between the years 1997-2013 were recruited to participate in interviews using social media (i.e. Facebook) and snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, a link to an electronic survey was posted on the Bridges’ Facebook alumni group page. Citing concerns about possible coercion, the New York City Department of Education’s IRB board rejected a proposal for recruitment within the school, and the school’s faculty members were not allowed to assist with recruitment (i.e. they could not reach out to alumni they remained in contact with to inform them of the study). As a result, recruitment efforts were limited to first posting and then frequently re-posting information about the study and the survey on the alumni group’s Facebook page.

Although recruitment efforts were inhibited by the IRB’s decision, nine alumni, all of whom attended or completed college at some point, volunteered and participated in the semi-structured interviews, which ranged from thirty minutes to two hours in length. Follow up questions were asked to explore and clarify ideas as they arose during the interviews (See Appendices A and B). Survey participation rates were very low (n=25), and five of the survey respondents were also interview participants. As a result, those five sets of survey responses

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

were used in conjunction with the participants' interview data, rather than being treated as separate survey data.

The online survey consisted of forty closed and open-ended items. In addition to demographic questions, other items asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "Bridges Institute felt like a community" and "I did not get a good education at Bridges Institute." Alumni who indicated that they had attended college, were then asked to respond to items related to specific skills associated with college success, such as "defend a point of view with evidence" and "ask for help." On these items, alumni were asked to indicate whether they had learned the skill before or while attending Bridges, while at Bridges, during college or if they had never learned the skill. Open-ended questions for those indicating that they attended college included, "What did you like best about your college?" and "What did you like least about your college?" Alumni who indicated that they did not either apply or attend college were asked to indicate a reason in an open-ended question, however, only a few did so.

The transcribed interview data and, where applicable, participants' corresponding survey data were coded over multiple cycles (Foss & Waters, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). During the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2012), transcripts from the earlier interviews were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to begin to make meaning of the data. Coupled with analytic memos, the first cycle coding informed subsequent interview data collections. Additional cycles of coding led to the distillation of the major themes that came up in each in each interview. They included: barriers to college persistence; extraordinary support, and unlikely successes.

Given the limitations of the survey, the data for the twenty respondents who did not participate in interviews were hand-coded individually and organized thematically alongside the interview data. Throughout the coding process, themes and emerging analyses were shared with an external reader to ensure trustworthiness.

Results

Barriers to College Persistence

At first glance, an analysis of the data collected for this research tells a simplistic and perhaps, unfavorable story about Bridges' ability to prepare students for college: only three of the nine alumni who were interviewed were successful in their attempts to persist in college. While the numbers are disconcerting, the alumni interviews, augmented by the survey responses, reveal a complex and layered backstory that illuminates the "whys."

Not surprisingly, alumni often experienced the hardships highlighted frequently in the research literature as barriers to student success (Roderick, Nogoaka, & Coca, 2009). The financial burden of college was cited as a challenge frequently among the alumni that were interviewed, particularly those who attended private residential colleges. It was not limited to them, however. Several of the students who attended college within City University of New York (CUNY) system noted the hardships incurred by the costs of tuition, materials and commuting, as well. The alumni were wary of the loans they had to take out in order to cover their expenses, and were especially concerned about the long-term implications of college debt.

A more revealing pattern among most of the study participants who did not complete college, however, was a persistent belief that they were incapable of succeeding. This is

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

noteworthy, since research suggests that self-confidence and self-efficacy are non-academic factors predicting college persistence (ACT, 2007; Lehmann, 2007). When reflecting about his first experience at the community college, Orlando, a Latino who now has a successful career in the culinary arts, recalled, “I walked into college...feeling like I was dumb, like I didn’t belong.” This sentiment was echoed by four of the interview participants, regardless of the type of institution they attended, and was further reinforced by the fact that the alumni were often required to enroll in remedial courses, a theme that was also evident in the survey data. All of the students interviewed who attended public colleges and one who attended a private college had to take remedial math courses, sometimes more than once. Hector, a Latino who was also in the first graduating class recalled his experiences at a private college in Massachusetts,

I had to take a few remedial courses. I remember taking math and ... I think I actually didn't pass the first time and I had to take it again. I remember that being like a downer. I think I was also in the, I don't know, I think there was another sort of remedial class that I had to take. I guess I wasn't as, I don't know if - I felt like I didn't quite measure up to everyone else.

Here, Hector’s feelings of inadequacy when compared to his peers at his private institution were compounded after he failed the remedial course. This was a common theme among the other interview participants as well, and seemed to be echoed in the survey data. In addition, several survey and interview participants indicated that they were required to enroll in costly non-credit bearing remedial courses that failed to move them closer to their goal of completing their degree. This further underscores the aforementioned concerns over money.

For the two participants who had attend private residential colleges, “culture shock” greatly shaped their experiences in school. Julissa, a Latina, recalled her experiences at the school she attended in Massachusetts,

I had A’s in my psychology class and that was a graduate class. I was standing out with everybody. Leaving [Bridges] I walked into [the college] confident that I could stand up. It was just mentally I wasn’t ready for the culture shock that I think that when I walked into [college]. I was looking for people who were like me because I always ... I felt confused. I don’t know ... When I would come home I felt at home.

Though she was thriving academically and did not echo other participants’ feelings of being underprepared for college, the culture shock was disorienting and very challenging for Julissa. This is a common barrier cited in the literature, especially for students of color attending predominantly White institutions, as these two students did (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Rodgers & Somers, 2008). Not surprisingly, the culture shock Julissa experienced, coupled with her fears about taking out school loans led her to decide not to return to the college after her first year. Though she affirmed that she felt very well prepared for the academic challenges in the private college, after returning home and transferring to a CUNY institution, Julissa dropped out. She recalled feeling lost in the large CUNY classes after having attended a small liberal arts college. In a sense, Julissa experienced a second kind of culture shock: a kind of depersonalization that was vastly different from her experiences both at the private college as well as at Bridges Institute.

Extraordinary Support and Unlikely Successes

While the experiences of participants who ultimately left college underscore key challenges they faced, the “success” stories in this research are equally as illuminating. Interviews with the three students who persisted in college and completed their degrees suggest that they had an extraordinary degree of post-graduate support in varying forms. While not explored in the survey, this was a noteworthy common thread that weaves across the three interview participants who successfully completed their college programs.

Chiqui, a Latino who was in a relationship and had fathered two children by the time he graduated from high school, was interested in attending college but was conflicted because he had a responsibility to support his family. Accepted into a residential community college two hours away from New York City, Chiqui had decided at the last minute that he would not attend. However, on the eve of the start of the semester, a former high school teacher who had learned of Chiqui’s decision not to go to college called and informed Chiqui that he would be picking him up to take him to school the next morning:

He came and picked me up like 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. I packed my clothes, TV in garbage bags. And we drove up to [the college], went into the financial aid office, filled out whatever paperwork, whatever needed to be handled, my room and board, my high school teacher-basketball coach paid for it. And that's how I got to [college].

Chiqui’s former teacher went to extraordinary lengths to play the role of surrogate parent, supporting him financially, academically and emotionally throughout his time in college. As a result, Chiqui persisted and successfully completed his associate’s degree. Now, sixteen years later, he has returned to college and is pursuing his bachelor’s degree at a four-year CUNY institution.

Rayna, a Latina who graduated with Chiqui, describes herself as self-directed, but noted that having a baby near the end of her senior year of high school presented a significant challenge. Though she recalled that support from her teachers at Bridges played a critical role in helping her graduate from high school, she credited her husband and mother-in-law’s support as being instrumental in completing high school and college. Their unwavering support propelled her through the public four-year college where she completed her undergraduate degree, and later went on to complete an advanced graduate degree in nursing.

Steve, a more recent graduate of Bridges, completed his associate’s degree at a public community college in Manhattan. Steve’s experiences in college were not unlike many of the other alumni that noted struggling with the financial costs of college, and he highlighted the significant expenses he incurred while commuting. Similar to the others, Steve, who is Black, was enrolled in remedial courses and struggled to successfully complete them. During the interview, he noted that he was in his third year at the two-year college, explaining, “I messed up my first semester. I tried to do a bunch of everything at once and I ended up crashing.” Though Steve’s experiences mirror others’ in the study who ultimately left college, he persisted because had the support of his advisor at the college. While students typically have access to an advisor in their respective colleges, Steve’s experience is noteworthy because he was in the inaugural class of a new community college. As a result, Steve received an exceptional degree of support from an advisor who had fewer students assigned to him than he might typically in another

public two-year college. Furthermore, he had the fortune of attending college at a new institution that had a vested interest in demonstrating early success.

Unlike Steve, Chiqui and Rayna's experiences highlight that relationships outside of the school (i.e. friends and family) proved to be instrumental to their ability to persist despite research suggesting that external social relationships can be distracting for students of color and may therefore pose a barrier to college success (Baker & Robnett, 2012). On the contrary, Steve identified his college advisor as the person who played a key role in supporting him through challenging times, rather than someone external to the school. This is more consistent with the literature on research that highlights the critical role college advisors (and by extension, the institution) play in supporting the success of students of color (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Swail et al., 2003).

Discussion and Conclusion

While all of the alumni interviewed for the research shared comparable backgrounds and faced similar challenges, critical support from one or two people seemed to be essential to the success of those who completed their degrees. Though faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers, including teen parenthood and repeated failure in remedial courses, these three students were able to persist in their respective colleges.

Notably, the other alumni interviewed did not identify any such support person. While all of those interviewed noted key Bridges' mentors who supported and, at times, cajoled them to successfully complete high school, not all appeared to have had the benefit of sustained support after graduation. Several, in fact, lamented their failure to reach out to their advisors and mentors at Bridges when they struggled in college. One alumna wondered aloud if the outcome might have been different had she reached out to her Bridges' advisor when she was first contemplating leaving her private college.

Though the study is limited in size, these findings suggest that in schools like Bridges where students "beat the odds" and finish high school, much more must be done to ensure their continued success beyond 12th grade and into college. It is highly unlikely that Bridges completely filled the academic gaps left by years of previous systemic educational neglect; of course, it is critical to close the opportunity and resource gaps for students like the ones featured here well before they reach high school. In the meantime, however, this study indicates that students like the ones described in this study can be successful even when they face sustained academic, financial and social challenges prior to and during their college years, if they are provided with appropriate, and perhaps extraordinary, supports.

Schools like Bridges continue to be sites of promise, through their disruption of the reproductive cycles of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) that limit opportunities for historically marginalized low-income students of color in urban schools. However, to make good on that promise, a careful and honest exploration of the limitations must be undertaken to avoid the pitfalls that many of the alumni in this study faced. To that end, additional and more expansive studies examining the themes illuminated in the present research should be undertaken. Further, studies examining realistic and sustainable models of support mechanisms that have been most meaningful for graduates is critical and timely. Finally, understanding how these supports might vary across different types of institutional contexts within higher education is also an important area for further exploration. Consortium schools are sites of great promise;

THE (IM)POSSIBLE PURSUIT OF THE COLLEGE DEGREE

fulfilling their potential, however, is contingent upon better understanding and addressing their limitations.

Appendix A

Study Participants

Name	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Graduation Year	College Type/Degree	Completed College
Julissa	F	Latina	1998	Private Residential/BA	No
Arelis	F	Latina	1998	Public Commuter/BA	No
Orlando	M	Latino	1998	Public Commuter/AA	No
Chiqui	M	Latino	1998	Public Residential/AA	Yes
Hector	M	Latino	1998	Private Residential/BA	No
Rayna	F	Latina	1998	Public Commuter/BS	Yes
Nathan	M	Latino	2012	Private Commuter/BS	No
Steve	M	Black	2012	Public Commuter/AA	Yes
Greg	M	Black	2012	Public Commuter/BA	No

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. After finishing at Bridges Institute, did you attend college? or What college are you attending? or Did you attend after graduating from Bridges Institute?
2. What academic skills did you learn while attending Bridges Institute?
3. In what ways did the portfolios help (or not help) you academically?
4. If you attended college: What kinds of assignments were easy for you and what challenged you?
5. If you did not attend college: What factors contributed to your decision not to attend college?
6. In what ways would you say that Bridges Institute prepared you for college and/or work?
7. In what ways would you say that Bridges Institute did not prepare you for college and/or work?

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