



# College Access Through Youth-Led Afterschool Programming

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With a public school student-to-counselor ratio that has surpassed 400 to 1 nationally for the past 30 years (American School Counselor Association, 2020), afterschool programs play a vital role in bridging disparities in college access.

Each year the federal government awards college access initiatives—collectively called TRIO programs—more than \$1 billion in funding; this figure does not include the private capital that college access and success programs receive from universities, nonprofit organizations, and foundations (Congressional Research Service, 2020; Gándara & Bial, 2001). College access and success programs, which typically take place during out-of-school time, range widely in their size, target demographics, and services offered. Traditionally, services include guidance through the college admission and financial

aid application process, college and career counseling, academic tutoring, and test preparation (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Koo et al., 2022).

Although concerted funding and energy have been dedicated to college access programs, the field suffers from a significant research and practice gap (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). Studies have demonstrated that TRIO programs increase college matriculation rates, but little is known about the mechanisms that drive their success; even less is known about the effectiveness of community-based college access

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programs, despite their prevalence (Harvill et al., 2012; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). This paper shows how a student-led college access program implemented by a community-based nonprofit served as an effective mechanism for preparing first-generation students for college success.

### College Access Among First-Generation Students

The National Center for Education Statistics attributes first-generation status to students whose parents did not receive any postsecondary education (Cataldi et al., 2018). Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are more likely to demonstrate risk factors that correlate positively with college dropout rates, such as enrolling in college part-time, attending two-year or for-profit institutions, and working during their studies (Choy, 2002; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021; Pratt et al., 2019). First-generation students are also more likely to be students of color and to come from low-income households, further compounding the barriers they face in obtaining a postsecondary degree (Harvill et al., 2012). Six years after matriculating at college, only 56 percent of first-generation students either have graduated or remain enrolled, whereas the same statistic is 75 percent for students who have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). Low-income first-generation students see an even slimmer rate of graduation, with a mere 11 percent obtaining a bachelor's degree within six years of matriculation (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### Traditional College Access Programs

Traditional college access programs, which are designed to address the needs of first-generation and other disadvantaged students, are typically community-based and localized. Even nationwide initiatives like Upward Bound and GEAR UP, two of the eight federally funded TRIO programs, are implemented by local or state organizations and do not use national standardized curricula. According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.b), Upward Bound

emphasizes academic preparation for college. Eligible organizations such as nonprofits or institutions of higher education can apply for grants to implement Upward Bound projects in their communities, with the condition that grantees “provide instruction in math, laboratory science, composition, literature, and foreign language” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b). In contrast, GEAR UP centers on increasing college attendance among low-income students at high-poverty middle and high schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). In both programs, exactly how these services are delivered is determined by grantees and partners.

Non-federal initiatives are similarly diverse in their program scope and focus (National Association for College Admission Counseling, n.d.). They include university initiatives like the University of Southern California (USC) Advising Corps, which pairs recent graduates with high school students to mentor them through the college application process (USC CERPP, 2022). AGUILA Youth Leadership Institute (n.d.) provides academic, leadership, and cultural enrichment for Latinx youth. 100 Black Men of America

(2020), with chapters across the U.S., mentors African-American students to reach their highest academic and professional potential. Organizations like Stanford Medical Youth Science Program (n.d.) deliver college guidance to underrepresented youth for specific pathways like health and STEM professions. Although college access programs and their local chapters tend to implement their own programming, most provide, at minimum, some guidance on completing college and financial aid application forms.

### Deficit-Based Understandings of First-Generation Students

Tinto's student departure theory (1993) and Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) are among the top frameworks researchers use to understand the disparities between first-generation and continuing-generation students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Tinto's student departure theory asserts that a student's level of social integration—

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characterized by interactions with peers, faculty, and staff members—is important to persistence through college (Tinto, 1993). Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory posits that upper class members preserve their socioeconomic status from generation to generation through the reproduction of dominant social and cultural norms in major systems such as educational institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). When applied to understand the barriers faced by first-generation students, both Tinto’s and Bourdieu’s theories imply that first-generation students are at a disadvantage because their culturalization and socialization do not match the ethos of predominantly White academic institutions. Thus, first-generation status is treated as a deficit in such studies, opening the door to interventions focused on assimilating students to the majority culture (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; but see Tanaka, 2002).

### **Student-Led Programming as a Strengths-Based Intervention**

Today, researchers and practitioners alike are calling for a shift in the conceptualization of first-generation status from a deficit-based to an asset-based lens, recognizing that first-generation students have sociocultural capital that may differ from that of the majority culture but is nonetheless valuable to their educational pursuits (Hudson et al., 2020; Koo, 2011; Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Specifically, researchers have found that first-generation students tend to be prosocial, interdependent learners whose education and personal development are enriched when they can integrate their lived experiences into their academic contexts (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). The process of honoring the family cultural traditions of first-generation non-majority students has been aided when colleges and universities have transitioned from “multicultural education” to “intercultural education” (Tanaka, 2003), which values each student’s cultural meanings and avoids positioning students with different cultural meanings “in binary opposition to each other” (Tanaka, 2009). Scholars of intercultural education advise

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practitioners to facilitate spaces that validate students’ home cultures, equip them with competencies to navigate higher education, and connect their learning to practical applications that will benefit their lives and communities (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Tanaka, 2002; Tanaka et al., 1997; Yosso, 2005).

Student-led programming may hold great potential as an asset-based intervention for preparing first-generation students for college success. Although the body of literature on student-led college access programming is nascent, the few studies available show promising results. Preliminary data on the Student Success Centers in New York City—which are staffed by youth leaders who undergo extensive training to provide college counseling services to their peers—indicate the centers have been successful in increasing college access (Chajet, 2011). Even though student leaders cannot replace adult counselors, their position as peers gives them important social capital for relating to other students, communicating about the college-going process, and fostering positive student attitudes toward college (Chajet, 2011).

Research also shows that taking a leadership role, in and of itself, may amplify student voice, agency, and empowerment. College access programs that feature youth-led participatory action research—in which youth play a central role in generating knowledge—have inspired students to speak up about inequalities, advocate for educational reform, and sharpen their resolve to support low-income, first-generation students in obtaining higher education (Cook et al., 2019; Hudson et al., 2020). One systematic review of 63 studies found that students who led participatory action research projects reported increases in their agency, sense of belonging, and academic success (Anyon et al., 2018). Along a similar line, research on youth organizing found that low-income students who participated in advocacy for social and community change were more likely to attend a four-year college, engage in civic activities in young adulthood, and report a stronger sense of agency (Conner, 2012; Rogers & Terriquez, 2013).

## Program Rationale, Context, and Design

MAPS 4 College is a community-based nonprofit organization founded by Sarai Koo in 2009. The first author of this paper, Helen Chiu, is a program alumna who now leads the nonprofit as its executive director. The other authors had leadership or supportive roles in MAPS.

MAPS established the first afterschool college access and success program in a small, underserved community on the east side of Los Angeles County. The community’s college graduation rate was low at the time. Among residents ages 25 or older, 56.7 percent had graduated with a high school diploma or GED, and less than 12 percent held a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The community’s high schools ranked in the bottom 30th percentile on the Academic Performance Index in 2010 (California Department of Education, 2021). About 90 percent of students in the community’s high schools identified as Latinx, and over 70 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Upon establishing a partnership with the local government and receiving free office space and administrative support, MAPS implemented a range of college and career development initiatives in the community, from countywide teen summits to job

training for adults (Killen et al., 2021). The College Preparatory Leadership Mentoring Program (CPLMP) was MAPS’s capstone college access and success program.

CPLMP was designed to become a youth-led college access program in which, with the support of subject matter experts and facilitators, students would become the drivers of their own learning. Like traditional college access programs, CPLMP provided resources to help students succeed through the college application and matriculation process (Killen et al., 2021). Students had the opportunity to tour colleges, interact with admissions officers, receive college counseling, and participate in a summer college readiness bootcamp (Koo et al., 2022). All participants were students of color who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch; 96 percent identified as first-generation students (Koo, 2014). Participant data for this study were gathered during the years 2010–2014; see Table 1.

CPLMP differed from traditional college access programs in its holistic approach. Based on the belief that youth require a broad array of skills to successfully transition to college, CPLMP worked to strengthen participants’ sense of agency, voice, grit, and purpose. It also equipped students with leadership skills using the SPICES framework (Koo, 2014):

- Spiritual: self-realization and self-awareness surroundings

**Table 1. CPLMP Student Demographics, 2010–2014**

Variable	N	Percentage
Total students who completed CPLMP	33	100%
First-generation college students	32	96%
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	33	100%
Gender		
Female	28	85%
Male	5	15%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian American/Pacific Islander descent	6	18%
Latino/Hispanic American descent	27	82%
Grade level when first joined		
Junior	22	67%
Senior	11	33%

Note: Due to a grant stipulation, the program was open only to 11th or 12th grade female students during 2010–2012.



- Physical: physical and physiological poise
- Interpersonal: intrapersonal and interpersonal interaction
- Cognitive: cognitive and creative consciousness
- Emotional: economical and emotional equilibrium
- Social: sociable and service-oriented society

SPICES is a novel human development paradigm that addresses the multiple dimensions of self in an approach Koo terms *dynamic interplay* (Koo, 2011, 2014). The SPICES framework aims to help people to become balanced and centered in all areas of their lives by transforming them from the inside out. In CPLMP, the SPICES framework was implemented through the three programmatic features outlined in this section: leadership training, peer-to-peer teaching, and community action projects. This section also highlights how the program evolved, in response to student feedback, to incorporate more opportunities for youth leadership.

### Leadership Training

All CPLMP students underwent training that gave them a framework for leading their peers. Cohort 1 read writings on servant leadership and case studies of youth-led education reform; held discussions evaluating diverse leadership models; and explored concepts such as social stratification, equality versus equity, and agency.

After Cohort 1, the leadership training became more robust, adding workshops on social, emotional, and communication competencies. Modeled after Socratic seminars and youth-led participatory action research (Koo & Lester, 2014), roundtable discussions became more frequent as participants began to open up about their personal struggles and perspectives on social injustices. The discussions became a place for students to express their questions and explore nuanced ideas together.

After three cohorts, Koo drew on SPICES (Koo, 2014) to develop a comprehensive leadership and character development training program. The three-month training taught students holistic life and leadership skills ranging from grit and self-awareness to intra- and interpersonal

communication, socioemotional intelligence, mental wellness, and more. The program focused on the dynamic interplay of components that would prepare students to transition to college and adulthood.

Embedded in the leadership training and the MAPS program structure was the belief that any student can be a leader. This belief was reinforced through the deliberate choice of words. Participants were referred to not as *kids* but as *youth*, *students*, or *leaders*. Participants were not given hierarchical leadership roles, such as president and secretary, as is typical in school clubs. Instead, all participants—no matter their GPA, age, or cohort—were invited to take an active role in leading CPLMP. As facilitator, Koo held regular discussions to give students space to voice how MAPS could be improved, what college preparation resources they needed, and what topics they wanted to cover. Whenever possible, she implemented student feedback and supported the execution of their ideas. The purpose was for students to develop as cofacilitators of the project (Koo & Tanaka, 2015).

### Peer-to-Peer Teaching

In tandem with leadership training, students carried out peer-to-peer teaching related to the ACT college entrance exam, one of two exams that fulfilled the standardized test requirement of most colleges until 2020. Peer-to-peer teaching served two purposes. First, being a teacher required participants to deeply internalize the subjects they taught. To sharpen their comprehension, students taught both their highest- and lowest-scoring subjects.

Second, peer teaching was a vehicle for leadership development because it encouraged young instructors to take ownership, make decisions in consideration of others, and communicate multilayered concepts. After 10 weeks of lessons by an expert instructor, Cohort 1 was guided by adult facilitators to recruit the next cohort, select the subjects they would teach, and deliver lessons. Once new students came on board, they received lessons

from peer teachers and worked in small groups for one semester before graduating to become instructors themselves. At the end of each semester, students held planning meetings during which they shared teaching

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methods, set attendance policies, determined the next semester's meeting schedule, and gave feedback on how facilitators could support them.

### **Community Action Projects**

CPLMP students were encouraged to execute community action projects as part of their leadership training. They read and discussed case studies of youth who were addressing social inequalities across the nation. In Socratic seminars, they identified personal and sociopolitical issues that affected them and expressed their desire to transform their community (Koo & Lester, 2014). The MAPS facilitator therefore invited them to plan, direct, and execute college access events in the city. As in the peer-to-peer ACT teaching, this component enabled participants both to exercise leadership and to create college-going resources that would benefit them and their peers. Participants had the chance to participate in meetings with city council members and representatives of the community's recreation department, to speak at school board meetings about their initiatives, and more. MAPS also supported the execution of independent projects that students proposed.

### **Program Evolution from Facilitator-Led to Youth-Led**

The preceding sections have highlighted some ways in which MAPS evolved over the four years to respond to participants' feedback and to facilitate youth leadership, such as the shift from instructor-led to peer-to-peer ACT training, the incorporation of participant feedback, and the development of the SPICES framework. Here are other examples of how the program changed:

- In response to participant feedback, ACT lessons moved from all day on Saturdays to two hours per evening on Mondays and Wednesdays.
- The ACT instructor position was replaced by a youth leadership specialist.
- Participants took over from staff the responsibility for recruiting the next cohort of students and designed the recruitment strategy.
- Staff continued to teach leadership development workshops, facilitate college visits and other events,

and host guest speakers, but they shifted from leading roundtable discussions to guiding students to lead.

### **Program Results**

MAPS participants' outcome data, interviews, and reflections on their program experience illustrate the difference CPLMP made in students' college access and preparation, leadership and community action, and college matriculation and success.

### **College Access and Preparation**

On average across the four cohorts, students saw a five-point increase in their ACT scores. The highest jump was 12 points. Students' initial ACT scores ranged from 9 to 31 out of 36 points. Their mean baseline score was 19—which matched the average ACT score of students in the community's two high schools—and their mean final score was 24, three points higher than the national average.

For context, the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are 18 for English, 22 for math and reading, and 23 for science (Allen & Radunzel, 2017). The composite score based on these benchmarks is 21.

Students who taught the most gained six points on average, whereas students who taught rarely or not at all had an average increase of three points. In line with the literature on peer teaching (Stigmar, 2016), students developed skills such as collaboration and awareness of their learning styles through peer lessons. For example, a student in Cohort 4 shared:

Having someone stand up in the room and teach me the ACT curriculum didn't really work for me, but it did help me understand what I had to do to improve my ACT score. Sitting in small groups did help me work with others around me. I learned how to explain things to others, which I totally was not good at before MAPS.

The student-run nature of the program gave participants space to integrate their specific and unique needs into their college preparatory process, but they required time to become accustomed to voicing their thoughts. Initially, students in the first cohort were quiet when asked for their feedback, even when it came to decisions like what snacks they wanted. As one student observed:

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We'd sit there awkwardly shy and silent when Dr. Koo asked us what we wanted to eat, sometimes for an abnormally long span of time. We simply didn't want the power.... That was the feeling I got from the initial stages of Cohort 1. I think the mindset was, "What do I know? You're the adult and teacher, you should know."

As they underwent the leadership training and were consistently given a space to speak, students became more vocal. During Cohorts 2 and 3, students decided to change the meeting times for ACT lessons from Saturdays to weekday afternoons, implemented 15-minute breaks between hourlong lessons, and crafted a policy in which tardy students would write a short essay on how to avoid being late. Students also demonstrated a high capacity for developing creative teaching strategies. They experimented with teaming up to deliver lessons, found helpful online resources to share with each other, and used examples from their advanced math classes for lessons. By Cohort 3, students ran lessons and planning meetings mostly autonomously.

The student-led program model allowed participants flexibility to structure their meetings according to the needs of each cohort. For example, although students in Cohort 3 kept to their ACT teaching schedule most of the time, sometimes conversations from their leadership trainings carried over into teaching time. In that case, they used their ACT time to continue discussions on subjects such as the needs of undocumented residents in their community, national immigration policies, familial relationships, and career aspirations. In one session during Cohort 3, when most students were seniors, they changed the meeting focus from an English prep session to a roundtable discussion on their feelings about school, the pressures of college applications, and their feelings of anxiety about the future. In Cohort 4, students began coming to the program early and tutored each other for their Spanish and math classes before ACT lessons started.

This fluid program style, however, did not appeal to every participant. A student from Cohort 1 noted, "There were many times where I was put off by the

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disorganized way that we functioned as a group." Because the program prioritized student empowerment, all MAPS activities were voluntary. Regular attendance was highly encouraged but not strictly enforced. Of the 48 students who signed a contract of participation to join CPLMP, 33 completed the program by finishing one full year of program activities. Students who dropped out typically did so within the first month, usually due to personal reasons or schedule conflicts with other afterschool activities. Those who stayed, however, tended to commit for the long haul. Even after matriculating at college, about 15 percent of MAPS students returned during summers to mentor younger participants.

### **Leadership and Community Action**

Although students may have joined MAPS for ACT prep and college application guidance, many gravitated toward the program's leadership development and community action projects. A student from Cohort 4 captured this sentiment in his reflection on MAPS:

MAPS initially appealed to me because of the free ACT prep it offered. As I stayed in the program, I found that it offered more than it advertised.... Politics, religion, society, and even the qualities of a lasting existence were brought up in civilized, roundtable discussions. I'd often heard from relatives that such conversations existed on higher education campuses, but never did I think I'd find them so close to home.... We saw the inequities society shackled us with due to our geographic location and upbringing, and decided to organize several college fairs and information sessions in the area to generate interest in higher education.

Indeed, after participants became aware of their capacity to be change agents, they were energized to lead projects that could leave a positive mark in their community. In response to being tasked with executing college access events, MAPS students launched five countywide youth-based events, including a teen summit and three college fairs. Students organized themselves into teams to recruit volunteers, managed the event schedule, created marketing materials, contacted guest speakers, and gave thoughtful

responses during meetings with elected city leaders. During one teen summit, MAPS and its students received an award from a state senator in recognition of their community leadership.

Outside these projects, students launched personal initiatives and stepped into leadership roles at their schools. For example, students started a fundraising project to help undocumented students pay for college applications, petitioned to redress misogynistic undertones in their school's dress code, and founded a MAPS 4 College club at their school to spread knowledge on college access. One student, seeing many problems with his school's student government, discussed the issues with his CPLMP peers and then successfully ran for student body president. Another student pursued his passion for film by becoming president of the school drama club. He directed six plays in two years and won a full-tuition scholarship from the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. Furthermore, the integration of college prep and leadership helped some participants tether their educational pursuits to a greater purpose. One student from Cohort 4 wrote, "After being involved with my community and seeing how happy I made others, I realized that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to help others and work for my community."

### **College Matriculation and Success**

Of the 33 students who completed the program in Cohorts 1–4, 100 percent matriculated to college, and 88 percent enrolled directly in a four-year university. On average, students were admitted to universities with acceptance rates that ranged from 20 percent to 40 percent. Most enrolled in public state institutions, but four students ventured out of state for their studies, and four attended highly competitive private colleges on full or near-full financial aid packages. At least three of the four students who enrolled in community colleges successfully transferred to a four-year university. In 2022, of the 24 students we located through follow-up, 100 percent had graduated from college. Four had gone on to earn graduate degrees;

all four worked at the time we contacted them as educators with a commitment to giving back to their communities.

### **Lessons Learned**

Preparing low-income first-generation students to succeed through college may not be as simple as providing guidance on completing college and financial aid applications. We found that young people were wrestling with significant questions regarding their identity, community, career, and purpose. They worried about national politics, dealt with pressure to provide for their families, and experienced significant feelings of self-doubt and anxiety.

Research has found that first-generation students often experience a sociocultural gap between their upbringing and their experiences at predominantly White institutions (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). This gap may exist even before students matriculate at college. MAPS students understood that college was important, but their concept of preparing for college revolved around test prep and college application forms.

Students held low expectations that their lived experiences might be integrated into their higher education. However, when they were given the space to share, collaborate, and lead, they engaged in deep discussions on personal purpose and community justice. Students structured the program to fit their needs and organized projects around issues that were most pressing to them. What's more, when youth were given access to knowledge about the college-going process, they succeeded in sharing this knowledge with their broader community.

A college access program predicated on student leadership can be a powerful avenue to teach students how to lead, self-advocate, and take an active role in shaping their education. Of course, building such a program requires time and patience on the part of program staff. Students might be initially uncomfortable with changes in traditional power structures between youth and adults. They may make mistakes in the process of exercising peer leadership. They most definitely need an equitable and inclusive space where

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they feel safe to speak their minds and implement ideas without fear of failure. Best practices implemented in CPLMP to facilitate such a space included:

- Providing tangible opportunities for students to lead and make decisions on questions ranging from what snacks to buy and when to meet to what values the group should espouse
- Inviting students to engage in event planning meetings alongside adults
- Hosting weekly roundtable discussions to solicit young people's input and facilitate sharing
- Using open-ended questions that encouraged students to think critically and arrive at their own conclusions
- Speaking with neutral and positive language so that information was never conveyed negatively
- Consistently reiterating the importance of youth voice to the success of CPLMP and acknowledging that adults did not have all the answers
- Treating all students as leaders and rejecting hierarchical structures and titles
- Facilitating discussions on power sharing, voice, agency, group values, and leadership

In addition, MAPS showed that peer-to-peer teaching can be an accessible method of incorporating academic enrichment into college access programming. Colleges have increasingly shifted away from using standardized tests like the ACT to evaluate applicants, so test prep may not be included in all college access programs. Still, peer-to-peer teaching can help students collaborate to study for their school courses, exercise leadership, and discover their learning styles. Small-group teaching sessions in which each member is responsible for delivering a lesson may be more productive than a lecture-style model; we found that the act of teaching often precipitated the greatest learning gains.

### Facilitating College Success for First-Generation Students

First-generation students are much more capable than some researchers and practitioners recognize. Unfortunately, when first-generation status is treated as a deficit, students may internalize this judgment and doubt their own potential to succeed in higher education. Afterschool college access programs can play a critical role in shifting this narrative. In supporting students through the transition from high school to college and to adulthood, these programs can provide

students with leadership experiences that empower their voice and agency. They can help first-generation students integrate their lived experiences with their academic pursuits and position them as conveyors of knowledge through peer-to-peer teaching and student-led programming. First-generation students typically do not have the same access to college-going knowledge from their parents as continuing-generation students. However, with support from adult experts, they can not only power their own success but also work with community leaders to build a strong foundation of college-going capital for other young people in their neighborhoods.

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