Routing the Pipeline: The Structural Dilemmas of Urban Education

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Using a collaborative program evaluation of a bridge program at a state flagship university, the authors argue that contradictions in student perceptions of their literacy learning are endemic to the effects of the structure of urban schooling. Overcrowding and underfunding of particular schools, in contrast with successful academic magnet schools, result in an uneven playing field as college-bound students of color enter competitive programs. The authors argue that programs designed to enrich college-bound students' experiences cannot work in isolation: better university/public school partnerships need to be pursued in order to ensure that students from urban settings do not arrive at elite universities lacking skills in academic writing.

Introduction

This paper considers the effects of structural dilemmas specific to urban education. Drawing on an evaluation study of a recruit-and-retain diversity initiative, the authors detail the perennial and well-documented conflict inherent in widening the college pipeline for urban students. The tension between providing multicultural learning experiences geared toward enriching students' engagement in academic and critical literacy, on the one hand, and providing more technical skill-based exercises to supplement gaps in their high school education, on the other, seems a tension inherent to the structure of urban schooling. Routing the college pipeline, then, means addressing the effects of these structural dilemmas on students' college success. Here, we highlight the ways in which urban students of color speak to their schooling experiences; in doing so, we map how the students' comments illustrate the larger educational structures influencing their literacies.

Context & Background

In 1998 the University of Wisconsin-Madison entered into a partnership with Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), as well as local and state businesses to create a bridge program, attracting secondary students of color from Milwaukee Public Schools to the flagship UW campus. This program, called the PEOPLE[1] program, set forth the goals of retention and recruitment as a directed response to the UW-System 2008 Diversity Initiatives, which targeted, in part, the dearth of racial diversity at UW-Madison. Specifically, the student population of UW-Madison does not reflect the racial and geographic demographics of the state. The small percentage of students of color at the university hail primarily from Madison and other small cities in Wisconsin, leaving African American, Latino, Asian American students in Milwaukee grossly under-represented on the campus by the lake.

The under-representation of Milwaukee students at UW-Madison poses several problems. Hosting the majority of the racial diversity of the state, Milwaukee is the largest urban center in the state of Wisconsin. Beyond altruistic notions of fairness and balance, Milwaukee students who leave the state to attend top colleges are more likely to remain out of state and less likely to return to their home city and develop careers. This means the city's most precious human resource is drained by its own public education system. Although Milwaukee students do attend a number of other UW System schools, Madison offers the system's best academic programs, scholars, library resources, and state-of–the–art-facilities. It captures the lion's share of the state's budget and brings together regional, national, and international students. Thus, by not attending UW-Madison, Milwaukee students limit or deny their access to various types of resources, experiences, and future opportunities that are paid for by their parents' and communities' tax dollars. Additionally, students at UW Madison are denied the opportunity to interact with students from the state's most populated and important areas for generating state revenue and job opportunities, making Milwaukee continue to appear as an unknown and unwelcoming city that is seemingly severed from the rest of Wisconsin.

Understanding the structural dilemmas of the urban school-flagship college pipeline is meaningful to all educators who attempt to alleviate harsh injustices in higher education related to the under-representation of urban minority students at elite institutions. We provide

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[1] PEOPLE is an acronym: Precollege Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence.

a brief synopsis of our data analysis in hopes that other educators will find it helpful in informing their recruitment and retention efforts.

Framework and Study

We draw the framework for this paper from the research on strengths-based approaches to evaluation research (Kana'iaupuni, 2004). Specifically, we conducted a collaborative evaluation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003), which means that various stakeholders helped to design the study based on their interests in understanding the facets of the program which might contribute to its success or failure.

Collaborative Evaluation

This small, mixed-method study was conducted over a two-year period. Data collection included material documents from the program, informal interviews with students attending UW-Madison, background information on Milwaukee's high schools, and a student survey. Demographic data concerning the students who are currently attending UW-Madison was gathered. The researchers' professional knowledge of the students and the program is also included in the discussion and analysis of the data.

The racial distribution of the students is commensurate with the racial distribution of students of color in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Milwaukee Public Schools are 60% African American, 18% Latino, 17.3% white, 4% Asian American, and 1% Native American(Instruction, 2003-2004). Although PEOPLE does not host African American students exclusively, they are the primary stakeholders in the success of the program because of their high representation in the city of Milwaukee and the PEOPLE Program, as well as their low representation at UW-Madison.

The literacy curriculum was created with the various racial groups of students in mind, meaning that other components of the program reflected the cultures of the students. The programmers sought to make connections between faculty and Madison students from corresponding racial groups, to give students the opportunity to learn fine arts that originated in various geographic locations and cultures, as well as to encourage dialogues about race, gender, understanding, and equity across groups.

Program Curriculum

Sensitivity to issues of race, class, and gender was consciously embedded throughout the program and was reflected in the literacy curriculum. The curriculum for the two three-week workshops was built on the theoretical framework of critical multiculturalism, also labeled the

"action approach" for Banks (1995) and "social reconstructionist" for Grant & Sleeter (Grant & Sleeter, 1998).

In this approach to multicultural education, students are asked to move forward in their academic careers with critical thinking- and problem solving-skills that help them understand and question the multiple communities in which they live. The students are able to make relevant connections between their academic knowledge and their future goals. Teachers encourage students to become conscious agents of change in their everyday lives and future endeavors. Multicultural scholars (Banks, 1995; Gay, 2004; Grant & Sleeter, 1998; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 2000) would agree that the final levels of the various multicultural typologies for education are the ideal goals for pedagogical practice; they also would admit that few teachers and fewer schools have invested the resources and time necessary to meet the standards for teachers to work towards these difficult goals. Therefore, it was important to the curriculum planners to provide the students with a brief exposure to critical multiculturalism that they had likely not encountered in their urban classrooms.

In part, this exposure was provided through extensive multicultural literature that the students could read and use as writing models or foci for analysis. Grant affirms the importance of multicultural literature when he states, "Literature is one of the foundational subject areas of multicultural education. For more than twenty years, key questions, sources of evidence and support for challenges to multicultural education have been located in discussions of literature-..."(in Harris, 1997, xii). Through fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry, students encounter people and cultures they initially perceive as similar or dissimilar to themselves. The critical analysis of characters and situations leads to broader understandings of historical and societal contexts. The focus is not on the ethnic identity of the author, but on the text itself and the issues that are addressed in the body of the work. So long as the text can be used as an entry point for discussions of plurality and difference in society, the author may be from any ethnic and racial background. Through dialogues and interactions with multicultural literature, new realms of understanding occur, highlighting unfamiliar practices and beliefs, as well as examining how personal practices and beliefs are constructed and lived, resisted and accommodated. Multicultural literature was used to further acknowledge the values and experiences of diverse groups as well as provide ample fodder for discussions and writing activities.

In keeping with critical multiculturalism's focus on the individual and her or his place as an agent of change in society, the writing assignments asked students to reflect on issues of identity and society. The students were encouraged to investigate issues of family and

community relationship within the scope of broader issues of race, class, and gender in the U. S. and the world. Because of the limited time frame for the workshops, these were not focused on grammar and sentence structure. Although these areas of writing were handled through revision and rewriting and individualized teacher conferences, they were not specifically addressed as foci for the workshops.

Teachers were provided with readers and anthologies, which included such authors as Maxine Hong Kingston, Octavio Paz, Mark Mathabane, Chester Himes and Zora Neale Hurston. The program sequence provided a progression: moving from a critical reflection about one's self and community to a pro-social engagement with equity concerns beyond those that may narrowly affect only the self. While teachers were provided with a broad range of materials, the teaching teams were free to design the specific scope and sequence of their three-week courses based on these broader touchstones. The rationale of this approach, in part, was to honor teacher professionalism and personal style.

Findings: The Structural Dilemmas Emerge

Overall, the students stated that they enjoyed the program and the writer's workshop. The students felt that the program helped them to adjust to the UW-Madison climate that contrasted so starkly from their urban communities. Comments of students speaking about their general impressions of the PEOPLE program were generally laudatory[2]:

> AD: [PEOPLE] has allowed me to meet new people, explore the campus, and experience classes.
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> AJ: I was given the chance to work and experience the college life before my college days had even started. I took courses that prepared me for things like the ACT or just classes that I may have encountered going into the next year of high school. I was able to form connections with people... I also had the chance to learn the campus. I had a good time being in the PEOPLE Program.
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> DC: It helped me to learn things that I otherwise would not know. My summer experience in Madison has also been very beneficial in becoming familiar with the campus and resources available.

They also felt that the program had created a support network of adults and peers to sustain the their progress. Other researchers have documented the strength of these connections as successful practices to retain students of color (D. Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000{fix; D. Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Villalpando, 2003). The findings in this project parallel previously documented outcomes from other research. Specifically, a clear attention paid to the affective environments of students generally results in higher levels of student engagement and, consequently, retention. As we reviewed these responses, we felt ready to make certain claims about the program's success; however, we began to uncover contradictions among groups of students regarding their preparedness for college-level reading and writing. We attribute these

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[2] Students are identified by initials of their pseudonyms here.

contradictions neither to confusion among the students, nor do we attribute them to a lack of quality programming in PEOPLE. Rather, we came to understand students' concerns as endemic effects of the structure of urban schooling.

The students' comments presented an array of perceptions about the PEOPLE literacy program. Themes beyond the overall positive effect and strong personal relationships with teachers emerged: there was confusion about the source of academic skill development (more basic skills versus more literary analysis). In terms of general effect, the following comments represent the mixed bag of reactions to the writer's workshop. Many of the students felt that they gained a better sense of themselves as writers or were able to work on some writing skill:

> AJ: I had the chance to take courses that enabled me to enhance my writing, especially college writing.
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> CP: I learned new techniques and ways to memorize and how to write 3 page essays. The writing workshops helped me think critically and allowed me to question the authors' motives and movies' themes. Also, I learned about morals of short stories.
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> DJ: As I remember my experiences with the PEOPLE Program writing curriculum, I remember a lot of free writing. This was of some help as it helped me organize my ideas and thoughts into clear, cohesive paragraphs. I also got exposure to journal research, which was of great help. I think that the program should emphasize the importance of it. Remembering my past summers, I remember doing writing samples without really knowing the objective of them. As I compare this to the IB English curriculum that I had in high school, I find that the workshops need more structure. Also, I think that not enough literature analysis was made. This is a skill that is very necessary as I had to master it in higher levels of English classes in high school and even now in college.

Others commented on the teachers in the program and the level of confidence or types of activities they conducted during the workshop. The strong personal relationships students and teachers built in the short time proved memorable, and likely led to better retention in the PEOPLE program:

> MX: I don't remember much about the Writing Workshops but that my teachers were awesome! I think I did two literary criticisms on two stories. Also, I was trained to "read the words" more than to "read the book." I thought that was something different and interesting. It is a very useful skill now.
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> SG: There is not much that I can remember but I can say that I truly enjoyed [teacher's name]. She made the writing class that much easier to handle and made it a fun learning experience all together. I think if it wasn't for her I probably wouldn't have gotten a lot out of the workshop.
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> WS: The teachers were always friendly, and they really seemed to actually care about the students' work. I also always loved the fact that the writing classes always had teachers from our own schools in Milwaukee.

Managing the academic potential of such a diverse group remains problematic for bridge programs that wish to provide academic stimulation without overwhelming some students or boring others. These concerns reflect the challenges documented by other predominantly white universities' attempts to recruit and retain students of color and low-achieving students (Kezar, 2000). The limited focus on issues of structure and grammar became a primary theme in our analysis. What we found in the qualitative component of the survey is in part a reflection on the program and the university, but more so a reflection on the urban schools these students have attended. Many of the comments gave us insight into what the students sought from their high school education.

In the qualitative component of the study, students critiqued the program for the lack of time spent practicing more basic skills for writing. Several students commented that they wanted more structure to their workshops and would rather work as a group with a lead teacher conducting the course. Others commented that they would have liked more work with literary analysis. Since the surveys are confidential and not anonymous, we were able to match student comments with the high schools that they had once attended. Not surprisingly, students arriving on campus from elite public high schools engaged more fully with the seminar style of the workshops. Students from schools in which rigid student-teacher relationships were the norm often indicated that more structure was necessary. To urban educators, these results come as no surprise: large, frequently underfunded schools which emphasize quiet behavior over the development of student autonomy create particular environments for learning. These environments, marked by an emphasis on managing large numbers of bodies, are not conducive to developing the independent curiosity of their learners. What this means is that urban students must make more significant adjustments in their learning dispositions than their suburban counterparts if they are to be marked as outstanding by flagship universities that follow a tradition of liberal scholarship.

More Basic Skills

In any given district, the quality of schools may vary greatly. In combination with magnet schools and choice programs in urban areas, where some schools have virtually been left to die a slow death, these variances in schools become even more pronounced. In Milwaukee, two college preparatory schools have maintained records of high achievement, graduation rates, and college graduates. Overall, the students from these two programs did not comment on the need for basic skill work. However, when asked, "In thinking about the PEOPLE Writing Workshops (the first two summer sessions), what areas (types of

skills and practices) did you need to concentrate on more?" many students responded:

> CP: Grammar and thinking more about the morals of stories.
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> EG: Well for me I think that it was important to focus on all the skills and practices so that I could improve my writing.
>
> KR: GRAMMAR and critiquing literature.
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> RM: Concepts, organization, and clarity.
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> ShR: The correct forms of grammar and punctuation. Analyzing different works to find the hidden meaning.

Some of these comments were likely resultant from the due given by many PEOPLE teachers to students' home languages: when students employed home languages such as AAVE (African American Vernacular English) in their personal writings, instructors viewed this as a point of strength. It is unfortunately not entirely clear whether this is what students are indicating in their comments on "correctness." The teams of writing teachers certainly did emphasize correctness of grammar and punctuation in final drafts, even if they did not explicitly teach particular rules.

By contrast, other students wanted more literary analysis and conceptual thinking:

> AJ: I needed to focus more on how to analyze and interpret complex pieces of writing such as prose poetry.
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> DJ: Free writing. I think that serves us well to get thoughts written out, but literary analysis is important too.
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> KK: I think I would need to practice more on my creative writing as well as my style of writing. What the writing workshop did was allow me fully appreciate writing and, more importantly, make me work on my writing.
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> The students were thoughtful about their individual needs during their high school careers. Clearly, they wrestled with different aspects of the writing process, all of which demand sustained practice and instruction in writing. Students who struggled with grammar and cohesion also wrote that they would have liked more directed instruction and more individual time with the teacher, for example:
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> AD: More organization, one on one action with the students, ask the students if they need help in certain areas, and focus on that area with them and if change is needed, adjust.
>
> AJ: Add more writing instructors so that they can work with smaller groups of students and focus on individual needs instead of working with a big group of students with many different needs and concerns.

While a significant group of students were comfortable with individualized writing time and informal class discussions on literature and society, others had had limited exposure to these class activities. These students also wrote that they did not benefit from working on their own projects and found it difficult to complete their two assignments with this format. Students who were not familiar with a workshop format often found it difficult to manage their time and work independently. Still

others felt that they did not have enough time with the teacher, regardless of their ability level, to interact and share ideas and comments.

Literary Analysis

Almost all the students who made comments mentioned the need for more literary analysis in the workshops. The students quantitatively ranked this experience as valuable and wanted more chances for practice. This comment was made particularly by the college freshmen that were taking Composition 101 (which requires several analytic papers), indicating a kind of presentism in perceived needs. That is, the needs students perceived in the moment of the survey may not reflect accurately the needs they had as sophomores in high school:

> DJ: Reforming the curriculum to perhaps analyzing 1 novel during the 3 week (or segments of it) and writing papers that analyses the literary terms, authors purpose, and the effects of literary devices, focus on ethos, logos, pathos
> MX: Focus more on the actuality of writing the literary criticism and not so much if it's right or not. Write an argumentative essay.
> RC: writing an analysis for a paper and organizing ideas.
> SS: Analyzing the structure of academic writing.
> SG: Preparation for college writing styles.

These students felt under-prepared for the rigors of the freshman composition course and expressed a desire to practice this form of writing much more before they entered UW-Madison. Students frequently referred to their desire to have more analysis as college preparation for the course work.

Points of Discussion

The students' rankings and thoughtful comments lead us to consider several points of discussion. While we noted that the quantitative data placed the program in a favorable light, we recognize that the program will continue to struggle with some fundamental conflicts between the goals of the program, the students' expectations of the program, and the challenges of urban schools to meet the needs of all students. These issues are specific to PEOPLE, but also endemic to all bridge programs that seek to connect large populations of students of color living in urban centers with flagship universities that are committed to serving the educational needs of the state.

First, the breadth of the students' comments spoke to the challenge of creating a meaningful workshop that was not ability-tracked for all students from the eighteen different high schools. Even in a class of fifteen students, skill ability ranged dramatically, as did familiarity with academic English. The teams of teachers struggled to insure that all students completed the workshop with a valued final draft and a new understanding of their writing, literature, and even

society. Clearly, these are lofty goals for two three-week workshops. Yet, the choice to limit the curriculum means forsaking aspects of the curriculum that they may find useful at some other time in their academic or professional lives.

Second, the students' comments about grammar and sentence structure and analysis pointed to missing pieces of their high school curricula as well as issues to address in the PEOPLE program. Since the program was designed to facilitate the transition between high school and college by introducing youth to college-level thinking and assignments, and not as an academic skill building program, it cannot easily compensate for what the students do not receive in their high schools.

Last, the PEOPLE program is set in place for both recruitment and retention. The emphasis on multicultural literature and the discussions around societal issues concerning race, class, and gender served as a recruitment tools as well as pedagogical practices to engage the students. These classes were modeled from upper-level seminars that students would not take until their junior or senior years at UW-Madison. By not making explicit the model for the class, the program contributed to the culture shock experienced by the students when they entered a typical lecture hall of two hundred students.

Concluding Remarks

Our research indicates a few pointed suggestions for improving the writing program. First, there needs to be more explicit discussion about the goals of the PEOPLE program and how they may relate to the students' future experiences at UW-Madison. Students and parents should be given a conceptual map of the program that they can use to frame their experiences. The second suggestion, that the students start the program in middle school (Waller et al., 2002), is already coming to fruition. The early connection with the university allows students more opportunities to become comfortable in unfamiliar settings. Extended contact may also take the forms of after-school tutorials and other academic resources to boost the skill levels of students from less-rigorous schools. The final point is that the writing program may need to scale back its learning outcomes, focusing more on writing and reading, producing only one final draft rather than two. This may alleviate the burden of shifting from one type of writing to another, thus giving the advanced students the opportunity to take on something more challenging while the struggling students can concentrate on various elements of the writing process. These suggestions are provided for the PEOPLE program and other programs that want to enrich and expose students' academic opportunities without further marginalizing their chances for success.

Another, more complex concern points back to preparing students for success: better university-public school relationships need to be pursued in order to ensure that students do not arrive at elite universities lacking basic skills in academic writing. This dilemma cannot be solved by bridge programs alone: sustained partnerships which support public school teachers in increasing academic rigor and performance expectations for all urban students must be built. As perennial as this dilemma continues to be for urban educators, it is one that we cannot fail to address.

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