

College Week: Preparing First-Generation Students for the Transition to Postsecondary Education

Marco A. Murillo, *Assistant Professor, Santa Clara University*

Frank C. Worrell, *Professor, University of California Berkeley*

Although more students are enrolling in and completing college, students from some groups (e.g., African American, Latinx, and low-income learners) continue to enroll in college at lower rates than their European American and higher income peers. In recent years, more attention has been given to preparing traditionally underserved students for college. In this Campus Note, we describe College Week, a program designed as a college-prep experience for high school seniors. Using 155 responses from 12th-grade students about their College Week experience, we sought to understand how first-generation college students interpret their college readiness at the end of high school and what they need to do to prepare for the transition to college. Two themes emerged from the analysis: (a) becoming independent and (b) developing navigational and network support. We conclude with broader implications for supporting first-generation students' college transition.

A challenge for educators working on college access has been defining and operationalizing college readiness. In general, being college ready is understood as possessing the academic skills, academic content, and knowledge to enroll and succeed in college (McAlister & Mevs, 2012). However, contextual factors, such as organizational and policy contexts, may impede college readiness (Welton & Martinez, 2014). At present, many schools center college preparation and enrollment as part of their school design (Quartz et al., 2019). Yet despite these efforts, African American, Latinx, and low-income students' college enrollment and completion rates continue to lag behind their European American and higher income peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). To address these outcomes, some high schools have instituted strategic programs and services to guide students through the college choice process and prepare them for the college

transition (Quartz et al., 2019). In what follows, we describe a college preparation program created in partnership between a college preparatory high school and a local university. After describing the program, we highlight two themes that emerge in students' learning about their college readiness. We conclude with recommendations for supporting college readiness.

Program Description

Near the end of the academic year, 12th-grade students at a charter school in northern California participate in a 5-day College Week at a local four-year university. The program is a partnership between a research university and a local high school. The school serves mostly low-income, Latinx (82%) and African American (17%) students. The school has instituted a number of academic (e.g., early interventions) and social (e.g., individual counseling) supports to improve academic achievement and provide students with the knowledge and tools they need to continue on to higher education.

The purpose of College Week is to introduce students—most of whom are first-generation students of color—to college-level course work, as well as provide key information about the college transition and experience. Prior to College Week, students enroll in a course focusing on cultural identities, immigration, historical argument, and health equity that is taught by university faculty, staff, and doctoral students. Class activities include completing a personal cultural identity profile or discussing the politics of immigration. In addition, students participate in information sessions at the beginning of the day led by university staff, such as librarians and outreach coordinators. As part of the program, students are expected to commute on their own to the university.

At the conclusion of College Week, students complete a questionnaire that asks them to reflect on the week, what they learned, their challenges, and their plans to become college-ready. The data from this paper were collected from three questions:

1. What was challenging about attending College Week?
2. What did you learn about your readiness for college through this experience?
3. What will you do between now and starting school this fall to maximize your readiness for college?

In what follows, we report on two central themes emerging from the responses of 155 students who participated in the week-long program between 2015 and 2017.

Student Learning

Responses reflected a need to focus on the personal development and learning behaviors students felt they needed to develop before starting college. Two major themes emerged: (a) becoming independent and (b) developing navigational and network support.

Becoming Independent

Many participants were surprised by the amount of independence they were given. For example, students were expected to arrange their own transportation and attend class without being prompted by school teachers or staff. Some students felt it was a drastic change from their typical school routine: “the most challenging part was having too much freedom.” In addition, responses reflected how students adjusted to being on their own and away from their peer group. One student wrote, “I got a glimpse of how it’s going to be in college because at times I have to be alone.” Without teachers telling participants what to do, students felt responsible for being on time and prepared for class in order to be engaged and meet professors’ expectations.

A number of students noted the importance of selecting their own classes and making the right decision. For example, some students realized they could not take classes in the early morning. One student wrote, “No 8 am classes for me!” In addition, some students felt they needed to hold themselves accountable “in terms of being responsible for everything I need on a daily basis.” This included choosing to attend class rather than hang out with friends and to be an active participant by being engaged and ready to learn. Some students also felt they needed to learn how to self-advocate and talk with professors and counselors. In addition, some acknowledged difficulties managing time, planning their commute to campus, and avoiding distractions in between classes. Students realized it was important to arrive to class on time because, as one student said, “being late is really awkward, and you miss info from the class.” In addition, learning how to manage their time properly was frequently cited. For many students, time management involved developing their organizational skills. Specifically, students mentioned the need to designate a time to study and to be responsible for attending class and completing assignments.

Developing Navigational and Network Support

After participating in the sessions and the college classes, many students felt they needed to familiarize themselves with their college campus. Many students planned to research academic services and summer programs to prepare themselves for

the transition to college. One takeaway many students had from the morning information sessions was the need to find people and programs that would help them navigate college. As such, many students planned to research whether their college campus offered a summer bridge program. In addition to gaining familiarity with the campus, students hoped to build a supportive community where they could ask for help and receive guidance. Students also planned to identify individuals who could assist them throughout their college experience. A reoccurring concern was whether they would be able to articulate responses during class discussions at a level that was expected from college students: “One thing that was challenging to me was that when questions were being asked in class, I felt nervous to answer because I didn’t feel like it was the way that college students answer questions.” Because some participants felt they did not have the language or resources to provide responses that were more refined, they wanted to work with counselors, peers, and other school staff to build their readiness.

Finally, some students planned to research potential classes or programs that could help them transition to college and identify student organizations they could join. One student wrote, “I would also like to research about the clubs and student spaces where I would be able to relate to others. It has opened my eyes on what I need to do.” A key aspect of students’ college preparation was to make connections to gain new insights. As one student put it: “Hopefully, look up study groups. And hopefully engage with people that have already experienced college and get tips.” For many students, it was important to get information from a diverse set of people to prepare academically and socially.

Recommendations

Participating in a university-led college program afforded students the opportunity to consider areas of improvement (i.e., learning behaviors and skill sets) before starting college. Although students commented on their academic preparation and understanding of course content, the majority of their responses focused on the behavioral and navigational skills they needed. As such, the findings from this study indicate the importance of nurturing a set of learning and pragmatic skills in high school so students can become “college-ready” (Conley, 2012). These skills include developing appropriate study habits, learning to manage time, learning to be independent, navigating the transition to college, and helping students connect with potential supportive networks. The high school–university partnership helped create a program in which first-generation students of color had the opportunity to participate in a mock college experience and anticipate how college might be for them. However, it is important to note that although high schools may partner with a

local college or university to provide a similar opportunity to students (McClafferty et al., 2002), high schools can address these needs (i.e., learning behaviors and navigational supports) as part of their everyday college-prep curriculum. In addition to fostering strong study habits, time management, and independence in academic courses, schools may use the college choice process to encourage students to develop a set of non-academic practices, such as the ability to self-assess and make changes accordingly. It is difficult to replicate a “real” college setting for students while still in high school. By being intentional in scaffolding learning and navigational skills for first-generation students of color as they apply to college, schools may better equip them with the range of tools they will need to manage the transition to college. In addition, opportunities for students to reflect on their college preparation may help them identify the areas where additional support may help them to be better equipped to find the resources that will allow them to persist.

References

- Conley, D. (2012). *A complete definition of college and career readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center.
- McAlister, S., & Mevs, P. (2012). *College readiness: A guide to the field*. Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
- McClafferty, K. A., McDonough, P. M., & Nuñez, A-M. (2002, April). *What is a college culture? Facilitating college preparation through organizational change* [Paper presentation]. Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, United States.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *The condition of education 2016*. Institute of Education Sciences.
- Quartz, K. H., Murillo, M. A., Trincherro, B., Neri, R. C., & Jacobo, S. (2019). Framing, supporting, and tracking college-for-all reform. *The High School Journal, 102*(2),

159-182. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2019.0004>

Welton, A. D., & Martinez, M. A. (2014). Coloring the college pathway: A more culturally responsive approach to college readiness and access for students of color in secondary schools. *The Urban Review*, 46, 197–223. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0252-7>