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A Look at College Readiness Programs

The low numbers of students who pursue a college degree immediately following high school continues to be an issue for the nation. More specifically, research has focused on the fact that minority students and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than their counterparts to enroll in a postsecondary institution. In response to this data, many programs have been created to decrease the disparities in this area and to produce more college graduates. Presently, college readiness standards have been implemented nation-wide to address this issue. Historically, however, many plans have been put into place as an attempt to increase the diversity at the collegiate level through college preparation interventions. The purpose of this policy brief is to provide information concerning college preparation programs that are currently in place. Understanding the basis of these programs will offer an opportunity for further exploration as to the nature and outcomes of college preparation.

Vocabulary Terms

- AVID- Advancement via Individual Determination
- College-going Culture – Behaviors and practices that demonstrate the belief that all students can enroll in postsecondary education after high school and be successful.
- College Readiness- The level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed at a two-year or four-year institution, trade school or technical school. It is also expanded to include workplace readiness.
- GEAR UP – Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs
- TRIO- Federal outreach and student services programs

Descriptive Context

The issue of college preparation continues to evolve. The preparation of America's future is key to the success of the nation. Much of the push for college enrollment is based on the fact that U.S. economic security rests on the knowledge of its future citizens. According to Conley (2010), much of the college readiness movement has this concept as its guiding mission. America's future depends on a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. The college readiness movement centers on the idea that all students should be prepared for college. Unfortunately, discrepancies between the numbers of male and female college students as well as between members of various racial groups point to a failure to achieve this ideal.

Efforts such as the establishment of college readiness standards have been implemented to address these discrepancies. The work that ACT[®] (2011) has done mostly pinpoints the academic factors that should be addressed in order to increase the likelihood of college attendance by all students. The areas of English, Math, Science and Social Studies are presented as a means to provide stronger academic preparation for college entry.

The issue of college entry, however, is not the only aspect of college readiness. As ACT (2010) points out, a high school diploma does not guarantee that students are prepared for college. Likewise, college entrance does not guarantee college success. Students must be prepared for college-level academic work as well as the social aspect of postsecondary life.

In response to the need for programs that would increase the chances for college enrollment, course success, and college graduation, research has been conducted to study how high schools can promote a college-going culture. Conley (2010) describes the college-going culture as one in which high expectations are set for all students. There is an attitude of preparation beyond high school. The structure of schools with a college-going culture is one in which there is a clear plan for the transition from high school to college for all students.

The need for higher levels of postsecondary participation has led to the establishment of college readiness standards by each state. These standards focus on how public schools can ensure students are prepared for academic coursework at the college level. Moreover, there have been federal, state, and local programs created to address the various factors associated with postsecondary participation. Many of these programs, however, still only focus on the academic factors that are associated with college attendance. More attention should be paid to non-academic factors.

The Issue in Practice

Many programs have been crafted to address the need for higher levels of postsecondary participation by underrepresented groups. These programs have been instituted at various levels. While there are a great variety of programs across the country, there are three that are the most widely recognized: TRIO, GEAR UP, and AVID. A brief description of each program is contained below. Following this section, research associated with these programs will be provided.

Governmental Programs

- **TRIO**
 - The TRIO program was started in 1964 as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's attempt to address the poverty of the time (Swail & Perna, 2002). The program consists of 8 components; each component serves a different purpose. Each component was designed to serve low-income students, students with disabilities, and first-generation college students. The Upward Bound component addresses preparation for

college entrance in particular. The goal, according to the TRIO website, is to increase the completion of secondary and postsecondary education. The Upward Bound program works with students from middle school through college. The Upward Bound curriculum is based on math, science, composition, literature, and foreign language (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b).

- GEAR UP
 - The GEAR UP program was instituted in 1998. It was designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter postsecondary institutions and graduate from them as well. GEAR UP, according to Fields (2001) added to the work already being done by similar programs because it paid closer attention to the middle school level. Much has been said about the similarities between GEAR UP and TRIO. They seem to have found a way to co-exist.

Non-governmental Program

- AVID
 - AVID is a non-governmental program that was started in 1980 in San Diego, California. The AVID curriculum strives to accelerate learning through effective research-based instruction. The AVID program incorporates academic support and social support into one program. Students are taught skills and strategies that can be helpful academic tools at the same time they build strong relationships that will help them develop the social skills necessary for educational success. The AVID program targets the under-served middle of the road student. While AVID started out in California, its website boasts of its implementation in 46 states and 16 countries and territories. (AVID, 2011).

Snap Shots of Research

The problem at hand is the number of college graduates that the United States is producing. Connected to this problem is the fact that though growing numbers of African-American and Hispanic students are attending public schools, these numbers do not translate when it comes to which groups are attending colleges and universities. St. John and Musoba (2011) point to the fact that in the area of financial assistance there has been significant progress made in the U.S. when it comes to bridging the funding gap. There are, however, other issues associated with college attendance and completion.

TRIO. TRIO's target population is low-income, first-generation college students. This program assists students from the middle-school through college if they qualify for services. Based on TRIO's 2007-2008 data, 77% of TRIO participants enrolled in a postsecondary institution. TRIO's 8 components consist of measures to help with

multiple aspects of college attendance. Upward Bound specifically focuses on providing support to help prepare students for the academic demands of college. In 2004, Upward Bound reported that 37% of its graduates had enrolled in a postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b).

GEAR UP. The GEAR UP program was implemented to impact the number of students who not only go to postsecondary institutions but also succeed in them. GEAR UP operates in the form of grants that are given to states and organizations to help them reach high poverty populations. Data connected with GEAR UP comes in the form of how much money was given to states and organizations. Individual states report on how effective they have been to increase the number of college graduates as a result of receiving GEAR UP funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

For the state of Texas for example, Austin ISD reported that in 2004 82% of their participants wanted to enroll in a postsecondary institution. The data collection and reporting practices for each state are varied which makes overall program evaluation problematic. Much of what is available is the dollar amounts attached to the program. Again in Texas for the 2005-2006 school year, 20 GEAR UP Grants were given out to a total of 203 schools which included 54, 036 students. More information is needed to determine how effective these grants are in recruiting and retaining underrepresented populations on postsecondary campuses.

AVID. The AVID program targets the underachieving middle student who is capable but perhaps is not motivated to do the academic work necessary to attend a postsecondary institution. While AVID is heavily focused on academic preparation, it does include topics such as goal-setting, leadership, and career planning (AVID, 2011). AVID does serve a large minority population. 49% of participants are Hispanic, 21% are white and 20% are African-American. In 2009, AVID reported that 74% of its graduates were accepted to four-year institutions.

Based on the data presented, it would seem that college preparation programs are effectively getting students to college. There remains to be seen a wealth of data on the subject of college resiliency and degree attainment. The data points to success in the area of preparation for entrance but there is a gap in the information known about preparation for completion.

Related Issues

There are additional issues related to this idea of college preparation. As aforementioned, resiliency is a factor when it comes to preparing students for postsecondary institutions. What tools are they being given that will make it more likely for them to stick with their goal of a attaining a college degree? Are there programs that address this issue?

Freeman, Leonard, and Lipari (2007) discuss resiliency in terms of policies that should be created to capitalize on strategies that make it possible for students to adjust to new surroundings rather than focusing on the deficits that students possess that are simply being identified. Resiliency comes by way of academic motivation, positive self-image,

physical well-being and a sense of belonging. In addition to strategies for resiliency, the literature also points to a need to recognize the historical connections to the gap in higher education participation.

Since the era of desegregation, much attention has been given to the racial divide that exists on college campuses. How prepared are students from underrepresented minority groups prepared for the environment that they will encounter once they step onto a predominantly white campus? Are multicultural issues being discussed as a part of the curriculum of these programs?

Williams (1988) points to the fact that the nation's de jure and de facto segregation policies cannot be ignored. Segregation is not the far removed from our present day dealings in education. With this in mind, it can seem plausible that there is still a gap between those who have always had open access to higher education and those who have gone from no access to limited access to full legal access within just the past 60 years.

Summary and Conclusions

As can be seen, much of the data that exists point to an increasing number of students enrolling in postsecondary institutions. St. John and Musoba (2011) show a pattern of increased college enrollment from 1970-2007. What is not shown in great detail is how this relates when it comes to the number of college graduates that are being produced. College preparation must go beyond preparation for entrance and extend to preparation for resiliency and completion.

Hagedorn and Fogel (2002) agree that much has been done to bring underrepresented populations to postsecondary campuses, but they also suggest that more be done to focus on the retention of these students. Issues such as family involvement, acknowledgement of cultural capital and factors related to the social well-being of these students should be taken into account. The authors also suggest that more focus be placed on making students "college familiar" so that they are accustomed to what they will experience throughout their college careers.

Perhaps the widest area for improvement is the high school to college pipeline. A great deal of what needs to be done to impact students' postsecondary experiences can happen on the high school campus. As Kirst and Bracco (2004) point out, much can be done to improve communication between high schools and postsecondary institutions. Moving beyond academic alignment, the two institutions can work together to build a bridge that will help in the transition process by setting up college visits, guest speakers, information fairs, etc. that are geared for the specific population of students who are attending. Rather than looking at the systems as K-12 and postsecondary, movements have been effective in creating K-16 initiatives. Policies that focus on building this bridge can be instrumental in making sure that students are successful in their academic pursuits.

Political History

- Higher Education Act of 1964

- Enacted by President Lyndon B. Johnson, Title VI of HEA prohibits the distribution of federal funds to institutions that discriminate based on race, color, or nationality. This legislation was enacted in an effort to increase the numbers of African-Americans who attended the nation's colleges and universities. Much of this legislation went without compliance and enforcement (Williams, 1988).
- Higher Education Act of 1998
 - This legislation, enacted by President Bill Clinton, extended the 1965 act by putting in place the grant system of GEAR UP to encourage institutions to create programs that addressed the postsecondary enrollment and completion gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

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