

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND HIGHER EDUCATION:

Promoting College Success for Minnesota's Young People

By: Maggie Whitman

INTRODUCTION

As the college graduation gap widens, it is increasingly difficult for first-generation college students and people from low-income backgrounds to attend college, graduate, and climb the socioeconomic ladder. This issue calls into question our nation's highly valued meritocracy and forces us to ask difficult questions about access and equity in education. Youths' autonomy is severely limited by the lack of access to college education and to the careers made available to post-secondary degree-holders. Multiple factors contribute to this lack of access and I believe it is the responsibility of schools, out-of-school-time organizations, post-secondary institutions, and students alike to address these issues. Youth work professionals who maintain positive youth-adult relationships based on mutual respect are well-positioned to prepare young people socially, emotionally, and culturally for success at higher education institutions. Youth development organizations and youth workers who engage young people of all ages should intentionally support the development of skills proven to contribute to youths' persistence and success in college.

OUR PROBLEM

In Minnesota and throughout the United States, a post-secondary degree is an increasingly necessary requirement for obtaining a job. A study released by the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce (2010) found that Minnesota will lead the nation in job growth in fields that require post-secondary degrees. The study estimates that by 2018, 70% of all jobs in Minnesota will require a college education (Carnevale, 2010, p. 57).

For all people, a quality education is the gateway to a wider range of higher-paying, safer, more fulfilling career options. For those living in poverty, the stakes are even higher. It is predicted that a college education will continue to be the main avenue into the middle and upper class. According to a New York Times article by Paul Tough (2014), author of the groundbreaking book, *How Children Succeed*, "the most powerful instrument of economic mobility for low-income Americans is a four-year college degree. If a child is born into a family in the lowest economic quintile...and she doesn't get a college degree, she has only a 14 percent chance of winding up in one of the top two quintiles, and she has a 45 percent chance of never making it out of that bottom bracket," (para. 62).

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Low-income and first-generation college students face complex, intersecting barriers to obtaining a college degree. According to a White House Report, "Low-income students often lack the guidance and support they need to prepare for college, apply to the best-fit schools, apply for financial aid, enroll and persist in their studies, and ultimately graduate" (The Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 2). University of St. Thomas Professor Buffy Smith, who researches racial and class disparities in higher education, writes that,

in addition to our nation's socioeconomic college gap, "There are also significant racial disparities in college graduation rates" (2013, p. xii). For example, in 2010 only 19.4% of black students and 13.5% of Hispanic students graduated with a bachelor's degree, compared to their white peers at 38.6%.

It is heartening to know that, despite the financial and logistical barriers to college admission, students from all income brackets are entering American colleges and universities in record numbers. In 2013, 21.8 million students attended college, about 6.5 million more than in the fall of 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In Minnesota, the efforts of out-of-school-time organizations such as College Possible, TRiO, and Breakthrough Twin Cities, along with increased college access support within schools have paid off for low-income students. College admission rates for Minnesota's low-income youth increased from 26% in 1972 to 54% in 2007 (Fergus et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, though college acceptance is certainly an accomplishment to be celebrated, college admission has little to do with student persistence and success in the college environment. According to a special report issued by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board (2010), about 60 percent of first-year college students have not been adequately prepared for the academic challenges of post-secondary education. Lack of academic preparation isn't the only reason students are not persisting in higher education; Smith (2013) writes, "Many scholars have tried to explain these educational inequities by examining students' family background characteristics, their lack of academic preparation, lack of parental support, lack of financial resources, and lack of institutional support at schools," (p. xii). My research and my personal experiences have shown me that these factors do indeed determine aspects of student success, but what I have been interested in throughout my fellowship research are the social, emotional, and cultural factors and the personal characteristics that determine success in higher education.

As a youth worker, I'm interested in how the field of youth development can contribute to young people's success in higher education. It is my goal to educate other youth workers about the factors that contribute to student success in higher education, and that in turn, youth work professionals incorporate this knowledge into their youth work practice with programming that develops these skills. To best support youth in their pursuit of a college diploma, it is also necessary for youth development organizations to continue to be sources of support for young people while they pursue post-secondary degrees, and for colleges to step in with targeted support programs rooted in youth development principles for low-income and first-generation students.

MY EXPERIENCE

I have worked as the College and Career Access Coordinator at the Science Museum of Minnesota's Kitty Andersen Youth Science Center (KAYSC) for the past two years. The KAYSC is a youth development organization that engages middle school, high school, and alumni/post-high school youth in informal science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education and leadership development programming. Our mission is to empower youth to change our world through science. The KAYSC works toward a future in which young women and people of color represent a percentage of the researchers, policy makers, educators, innovators and leaders in STEM fields commensurate with their numbers in the general population, concurrent with a shift toward innovations that support community development and social justice. All KAYSC programs target youth from communities historically underrepresented in STEM fields, including: women, people of color, and people from low-income backgrounds. The majority of KAYSC's youth participants will be the first in their family to earn a college degree.

During my time in the KAYSC, I've established a series of workshops and events with the goal of increasing our youth participants' interest in, and readiness for, post-secondary education. I have been honored to get to know many intelligent, competent, motivated young people who happen to come from low-income backgrounds and from racial and ethnic groups that are not well-represented at our nation's colleges. Before I knew these young people, the staggering statistics about the inequity in our education system were upsetting to me. I was affected by this information as I am affected by many other social justice problems our nation is facing. But deeply caring about individuals who are on the losing end of every educational statistic has intensely magnified my passion for making change. It is embarrassing to face a group of students and encourage them to attend college while knowing that the world of academia will not be fair to them.

Their college experiences will not be like mine. I was academically prepared, financially secure, actively supported by professors, and surrounded by a community of my peers with whom I effortlessly fit in. I was sought out for special research opportunities and encouraged to participate in campus clubs and campaigns. I never had to hold a job during the school year. My experience was darkened only by looming deadlines and a full schedule.

In the KAYSC, I have talked with our program alumni who are often ashamed and disheartened after they drop out of their college program. Since 2011, about 50% of our program alumni who attended college directly after high school have dropped out before they earned a degree. The majority of first-generation college students in the United States face unique logistical, financial, and psychological barriers when pursuing a college diploma. Too often, the burden of responsibility to gain access to, and graduate from post-secondary institutions lies solely with the student and the families involved. This is a systemic issue that is easily masked as a personal, private problem.

I propose a different scenario, where youth workers are part of a community of support for the college-bound. Youth workers can prepare young people of all ages socially, emotionally, and culturally for the college environment and continue to engage young people in youth development throughout their college years. If our society educates and supports all of our youth, we are setting ourselves up to access their potential contributions. In an age when there are many problems demanding our attention, youth workers are uniquely positioned to nurture this population's full potential to innovate, collaborate, and be civically engaged.

SOLUTIONS

As I've researched the experiences of first-generation and low-income college students, I've learned about several ways to support their social, emotional, and cultural well-being while in the college environment. From the methods discussed below, we can extract a set of "college-ready" skills that will ease the transition to higher education and make the college experience more positive for students from underrepresented populations. All of these solutions have ties to core youth development principles and could be intentionally worked into the programming of youth-serving organizations. Among the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets (2007), many of these skills fit under the internal assets and "Positive Identity," including belief in personal power and self-esteem.

EXPERIMENTATION WITH SUPPORT AND REFLECTION

Attending college is a great risk for young people. It's a huge investment of time and money into something that you hope, without guarantee, will pay off later. Often times, going to college means leaving some of your community of support behind—leaving home, parting from high school friends, moving out of your

neighborhood. As Gisela Konopka, youth development pioneer, wrote in her foundational *Requirements For Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth*, (1973) “Experimentation involves risks...adolescence should be a period in which youth can experiment without suffering disastrous consequences when they fail or make mistakes” (p. 10). If we think of attending college as an experiment with great risks, we should be conscious of the fact that youth do suffer disastrous consequences when they fail or make mistakes in college. What does it mean to get an “F” on a paper? What if you don’t pass a class? Many first-generation students think of these setbacks as evidence that they do not deserve to be in college (Tough, 2014). And what happens when youth drop out of college? The consequences are indeed disastrous—youth can become disheartened or begin to think of themselves as failures. This label, failure, is not conducive to trying again.

College is not an environment with much tolerance for mistakes, but youth workers can offer a tool to act as a shield against disastrous consequences – that is, reflection. We can use setbacks as times for learning. Organizations could facilitate reflection circles for first-time students. Youth workers can encourage students to seek out on-campus resources to support their academic success. “Every attempt at experimentation...is new and very intense. If the outcome is negative it is exceedingly painful because youth do not have a ‘bank’ of positive experiences to draw from when defeats occur” (Konopka, 1973, p. 8). Youth workers must recognize that young people are taking big risks by attending college. We must allow youth to struggle and grow, while also being intentional about mitigating harmful experiences.

ANXIETIES, DOUBTS, BELONGING AND ABILITY

Tough (2014) discusses efforts at The University of Texas at Austin (U.T.) aimed at addressing the anxieties of low-income and first-generation college students. Researchers found that the presence of certain fears, anxieties and doubts about their ability often blocked students from living up to their potential.

These feelings were especially virulent at moments of educational transition—like the freshman year of high school or the freshman year of college. And they seemed to be particularly debilitating among members of groups that felt themselves to be under some special threat or scrutiny: women in engineering programs, first-generation college students, African-Americans in the Ivy League.

-Paul Tough, 2014, para. 33

Student confidence was found to be most affected by doubts about belonging and ability. To help students overcome these fears, researchers designed several interventions, each lasting only 30-60 minutes. Tough reported that at U.T., successful interventions included messages that appealed to social norms (“everyone feels this way at some point”), solutions that youth believed they discovered autonomously, and information was internalized when students were given opportunities to teach others what they had learned.

In one study, incoming college freshman read stories written by older students about their first few months on campus. These essays contained simple but effective messages, such as, “When I got here, I thought I was the only one who felt left out. But then I found out that everyone feels that way at first, and everyone gets over it. I got over it too” (Tough, 2014, para. 36). Participants in the intervention then wrote essays to future incoming freshman, giving them advice for their first months on campus. This particular intervention had an enormous impact on African-American students. “Compared with a control group, the experiment tripled the percentage of black students who earned grade-point averages in the top quarter of their class, and it cut in half the black-white achievement gap in GPA. It even had an impact on students’ health—the black students who received the belonging message had significantly fewer doctor visits three years after the intervention” (Tough, 2014, para. 36).

Another anxiety which affects the academic potential of first-year students is their belief in the “theory of intelligence,” that their intelligence is fixed and that no effort on their part will improve their ability to succeed in college (Tough, 2014). Stanford University researchers designed an intervention to address this belief among community college students placed in remedial courses. Students who participated in this intervention and read a scientific article that disproved the theory of intelligence were less than half as likely to drop out of college (Tough, 2014).

This research proves that one-time, 30-60 minute interventions that cost almost nothing can have great effects on the success of students at risk of dropping out. In other words, social and emotional factors matter. Many of the efforts at U.T. are similar to the practices of youth development organizations, such as: positive identity development, service to community, validating youth experience/perspective, team/cohort building, and leadership skill development. Youth workers could mimic the interventions occurring at universities like U.T. with their college-bound youth participants to build social and emotional readiness or use a higher education focus in programming that already exists.

ASK FOR HELP. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

During my research, I had the privilege of speaking with Melissa Hinderscheit, Assistant Director of the TRiO McNair Scholars Program at St. Olaf College. The McNair Scholars programs are designed to help low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented college students prepare for and navigate the path toward graduate school. Hinderscheit is a TRiO alum and familiar with the obstacles that students from these demographics face. She indicated that the educational, financial, and social obstacles are often systemic and cyclical. In addition, these obstacles greatly impact students’ confidence and create feelings of isolation in higher education. I asked Hinderscheit what the most useful skills for low-income and first-generation students to develop would be, and she said, “To learn how to access resources, find the people that will help you be successful, and know that you don’t have to do everything alone” (personal communication, June 5, 2014).

Indeed, the ability to seek help and feel supported can make all the difference for first-time college students. Thinking back on my own experiences with the registrar and the financial aid office, I know that the ability to make allies in large, bureaucratic institutions can make or break your college experience. Hinderscheit also mentioned that for many first-generation students it is taboo to share their experiences with others or to ask for help. This contributes to a feeling of isolation and loneliness. She said her program encourages first-generation students to own their experiences and talk about them with others. In this way, youth learn to be proud of their background, value their resiliency, and see their motivation and perseverance as an asset, rather than be ashamed (personal communication, June 5, 2014).

Youth workers should encourage young people to develop the college-ready skills of accessing resources, finding the people that will help them be successful, and finding support in community during their middle and high school years, so they have experience with these skills by the time they enter college. For example, we should empower youth to seek out free tutoring centers, build relationships with teachers or with adult mentors, and build strong networks of peers and supportive adults.

Youth workers can be more intentional about calling out the college-ready skills they see in youth, such as the ability to network, navigate systems, solve problems, and self-advocate. We can help youth see these skills as transferable. For example, a young person who has helped his or her family navigate social services has had practice navigating bureaucracies, which is useful in higher education.

CODE SWITCHING

Every social group has a set of norms and values that govern social interaction within that group. These rules are often unspoken, but knowing them is crucial for positive interactions within that social group. Sociologists refer to this as social capital. For example, in Wisconsin where I'm from, if someone offers you something, you are initially supposed to deny the offer. Then a little skit plays out where the person continues to offer and you continue to say "no thank you" a few more times until you finally accept and everyone is happy. Any other interaction is considered rude. Nobody ever sat me down and told me this was how I was supposed to behave; it was just something I learned through my socialization into white, European-American, Midwestern culture.

I am privileged in that I have been raised to have powerful social capital in white European-American culture, and most of our society's institutions operate under these same rules. My social capital made my transition to higher education fairly seamless. For many low-income and first-generation youth, the social capital that affords them success in their communities does not align with the social capital that governs higher education. These young people do not have the vocabulary or experiences of the dominant college-going culture and this can make the college environment overwhelmingly foreign. It is my hope that higher education institutions will shift to be more inclusive of students from all backgrounds, but until then it will continue to be necessary for students to learn how to adapt to the social capital of the college environment.

Code switching is a term that describes the ability to have social capital in more than one social group and change one's behavior to fit in. For example, young people do not write texts in the same way they would write a paper for school. There are consequences for not understanding when to use each style of writing. In order to code switch, individuals must have a solid understanding of the social capital of another group. People that code switch well are able to straddle more than one culture and transition between social groups more easily. I know from my personal relationships that youth and people from marginalized groups are code switching all the time, and it's exhausting to be constantly conscious of which self you need to present.

Youth workers can help young people develop their ability to code switch, or recognize that they already have this skill and learn how to apply it to the college environment. Buffy Smith writes, "It is unrealistic to expect underserved students to begin college with all the essential skills needed to navigate the cultural learning environment of predominantly white middle class institutions" (2013, p. 3). But who is responsible for teaching youth these skills?

In a discussion I had with Smith, we talked about code switching and whether this skill should be taught to youth. This could be a potentially harmful topic, and youth could easily interpret the teachings as, "You need to change who you are to be successful in college. You need to act white." However, I believe that youth workers who value mutual sharing of information, and who respect young people are well-positioned to promote code switching and teaching tools for adaptation without devaluing youths' cultural backgrounds. In this way, youth workers can teach young people the tips and tricks for engaging with professors or participating in class discussions while simultaneously validating the knowledge and the social capital of youth. Youth workers who have experienced higher education can act as cultural liaisons, relaying potentially useful information. Youth workers should identify code switching as a "college ready" skill and point out when young people are utilizing it. We can help youth learn how to apply code switching to the college environment, as well as to other large institutions they will encounter.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Code switching and the hidden curriculum are two sides of the same issue. "Code switching is the individual's responsibility, but it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure everyone who enters the

institution knows the rules” (B. Smith, personal communication, April 1, 2014). By “knowing the rules,” Smith was referring to making the hidden curriculum explicit to everyone in the classroom.

Smith (2013) defines the formal curriculum as “a set of written requirements, rules, policies, and practices that serve as the official guidelines for how to engage with individuals and evaluate their quality of work” (p. 48). In other words, the formal curriculum is what is intentionally taught in the classroom. Contrastingly, “the hidden curriculum represents the unwritten norms, values, and expectations that unofficially govern the interactions among students, faculty, professional staff, and administrators” (p. xiv). An example of the hidden curriculum in higher education is the expectation that students contact their professors or teaching assistants to find out how they can catch up if they miss class due to illness. This is not a requirement on most syllabi, but in my experience professors appreciate this type communication, and it is better than simply skipping class.

But how do people learn the rules of the hidden curriculum? According to Smith (2013), “The hidden curriculum is revealed to students who possess the institutional cultural capital and social capital that is rewarded in higher education. Institutional cultural capital refers to the information and knowledge that individuals use to decode, interpret, understand, and navigate the culture of school” (p. xiv). That is to say, people that have been socialized to be successful in predominantly white, middle class institutions already understand the hidden curriculum and its rules. Because these rules are unspoken and understood as common sense by many, the hidden curriculum is not often discussed or taught. This has negative consequences for students who do not have social capital in middle class, white institutions such as higher education.

It should be the responsibility of all educators to examine how the hidden curriculum functions in their classrooms, and to make the rules clear for all students. But before this happens, youth workers can again act as cultural liaisons, shedding light on the hidden curriculum. Buffy Smith’s book, *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education* details ways in which caring adults can mentor students with the intentional purpose of making the hidden curriculum known. As youth build relationships with people who have been successful in higher education and have conversations about the hidden curriculum and code switching, they will increase their social capital in higher education institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Initially, I thought the best way to better prepare youth socially, emotionally, and culturally for the post-secondary environment was to drastically change college preparation methods and college access curricula. One idea was to expand college access programming to include teachings during high school that would build self-confidence, self-efficacy, leadership skills, and networking skills, these college-ready skills I’ve discussed. I thought there must be a way for college access organizations to continue doing important work around college admission and academic preparedness while also having conversations about cultural code shifting, seeking out resources, etc. I recognize that many college access organizations are responsible for reporting numbers to their funders, such as ACT test scores and GPA. It would be difficult to remain loyal to the goal of improving test scores while also adding new programming that may not immediately impact academic performance.

I also struggled with ways to fit this all into junior and senior year programming, just in time for youth to graduate. At this time, I imagined youth would leave their youth development programs and be stamped “college ready”—fully developed individuals by the age of 18. How could youth workers and college access

professionals possibly arm youth with all the tools and knowledge they need to be successful in college in such a short period of time?

As a result of the engaging and enlightening conversations I've had with other youth work professionals during my fellowship research, I came to realize that my thinking was too small, too "inside the box." Of course all the skills I was learning about could not be internalized in the last two years of high school. What this amounts to is a need for the focus on college-ready skills to begin earlier than high school, and for youth development to continue during the post-secondary years.

Many youth development organizations focus on the teen years as being the most critical to growth. Youth often "graduate" from youth development programs at the age of 18, losing the support of youth workers at the same time they lose the support of high school staff, their high school peer group, and their family and community if they move away to college. But we know from neuroscientists that young people's brains are not fully developed until the age of 25. Youth should not be deemed too old for youth development at the age of 18. Self-efficacy, personal identity development, and reflection should all continue during the college years with the support of caring adults.

I know most youth workers will say that they're doing the best they can with the resources they have. I completely understand this point. Out-of-school-time hours are limited, funds are limited, and we use all the time we have to create college buy-in, increase academic readiness, and navigate financial aid and the application process. In my own program at the Science Museum, I have experimented with different activities and workshops to determine which combination of preparation will be the most helpful for young people. I am keenly aware that a day spent talking about time management means less time spent applying for scholarships or meeting with parents. But as the research out of the University of Texas shows, supporting social, emotional, and cultural readiness might not take as much time or as many resources as we think.

This paper and the culmination of my research is a call for the field of youth development to act quickly to figure out how we can continue to offer youth development programming to students in higher education. Whether it is the responsibility of youth development organizations to extend their upper age limits or for colleges and universities to step in where youth workers leave off will have to be decided. But it is clear that youth development should not end at the age of 18 and that young people, specifically those from low-income and first-generation backgrounds need our continued support as they navigate higher education institutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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