

Promoting a Pro-College Culture With At-Risk Students: School Counselors'

Perspectives

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### Abstract

There are several factors that encourage at-risk students to finish high school and continue to pursue post-secondary education. Some school counseling programs have combined these factors in an attempt to foster a pro-college culture within their schools. Using qualitative methods, a study was conducted to assess school counselors' perspectives regarding the factors that related to creating and maintaining a pro-college culture. Results and a discussion of the findings are presented.

## Promoting a Pro-College Culture With At-Risk Students: School Counselors' Perspectives

Students from minority or low socio-economic status backgrounds have been considered at-risk for not attempting or succeeding at post-secondary education (Kaufman & Bradby, 1992; McMillan & Reed, 1994). Recent statistics compiled by The Education Trust indicate that out of every 100 Latino kindergartners, 63 graduate from high school and only 11 obtain at least a Bachelor's degree; and out of every 100 African American kindergartners, 87 graduate from high school and only 18 obtain at least a Bachelor's degree. This is contrasted with 93 out of 100 White kindergartners graduating from high school and 33 obtaining at least a Bachelor's degree. From another perspective, 60 percent of students who graduate from college by the age of 26 are from high-income families whereas only 7% of those who graduate by age 26 are from low-income families (The Education Trust, 2003). Given that attainment of post-secondary education is a critical factor for success in today's society, it is imperative for educators to foster an environment that encourages minority and low SES youth to pursue education past high school.

The U. S. Department of Education's report on at-risk students identifies several factors that encourage at-risk students to stay in school and to go on to post-secondary education (Horn, Chen, & Adelman, 1998). These factors include: parental involvement in school-related discussions; high parental expectations for educational attainment; association with peers who plan to attend college; and participation in college preparation and outreach activities. Together these factors can be characterized as contributing to the formation of a *pro-college culture*. Administrators, educators, school

counselors, families, and communities all play vital roles in the development, growth, and outcomes of this culture.

For the past five years Montana State University has partnered with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in a national initiative titled *Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)*. The goals of the Montana GEAR UP initiative are two-fold: to increase the number of lower SES and minority Montanans who enroll in post-secondary education and to foster the success of those students who pursue post-secondary education. Thorngren, Nelson, and Baker (in press) researched Montana GEAR UP schools and found that schools with structured school counseling programs were more outcome based and clearly focused on student achievement and success than were schools where school counselors merely filled a position that lacked a programmatic function. Thus, Montana GEAR UP was designed to promote the development of a pro-college culture by working with school administrators and counselors to implement a comprehensive school counseling program that strengthens the skills and attitudes necessary for students to be successful. The school counseling program specifically addresses students' needs in the areas of academic, career, and personal/social development.

The purpose of the Montana GEAR UP initiative is to motivate and prepare low-income students to attend and succeed in some post-secondary educational pursuit. Motivation and preparation require that attention be given to the factors related to the process of seeking postsecondary education. The purpose of this study was to use qualitative methods to assess school counselor's perspectives of the factors related to creating and maintaining a pro-college culture in schools.

## Method

Middle and High schools in Montana that reflected GEAR UP priority populations (primarily rural, poor, and minority youth) were asked to be part of the grant initiative. While it was anticipated that all students in participating schools would benefit from the program, research and strategy development focused on promoting success for those youth most at risk for dropping out of high school or turning away from post-secondary educational pursuits. School counselors participated in training sessions and received materials to implement counseling programs that encourage students to pursue and succeed in postsecondary education.

In order to examine the efficacy of the GEAR UP training sessions and materials in promoting a pro-college culture, participating counselors were interviewed regarding the development of a pro-college culture in their schools. Specific areas of interest included: elucidating the creation and philosophy of a pro-college culture and identifying effective strategies for the promotion of post-secondary education. Nine counselors were randomly selected from a pool of 23 participating middle and high schools. Each counselor was interviewed via telephone by a trained research assistant. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Researchers trained in qualitative research methodology analyzed the data for the emerging themes.

## Results and Discussion

School counselors interviewed in this study provided a clear description of the context and strategies which support GEAR UP goals. Responses identified three pivotal elements of the school environment that facilitate the outcomes of the GEAR UP program. School counselors described: formation of a pro-college culture, those people

or experiences that had a positive influence on students, and the barriers experienced in building and maintaining a pro-college culture in the schools.

### *Pro-College Culture*

When asked about their school's stance on students pursuing training or education past High School, all participants described their schools as positive and supportive. The school counselors described their schools as places where adolescents were encouraged to think about pursuing post-secondary education or training. Adults in the schools "try to encourage all the kids" and "promote" education past high school. One counselor stated that building a pro-college culture is "a major push of our school, our staff, our district; that you must have training past high school to be successful." Another indicated that "over half our kids go on to higher education. I think it's positive. I think they do it because they want to get off of the reservation. Some of them do it because they want to have a little bit better lives than their parents had."

The counselors indicated that one of the important emphases in their pro-college school culture was to help students identify options in addition to traditional four-year college degrees. For example, one counselor stated "I think most teachers try to encourage all the kids to look at some type of post-secondary schooling or training whether it's two-year, four-year, or vocational. And I know we really push our students if we know that they're not interested in going to college."

### *Positive Influences*

Participants were asked to identify the various people and/or experiences that they believed influenced their students' decisions to pursue further training or education. The key people appeared to be family members, school staff, community members, and

representatives from various post-secondary institutions. The important experiences for students included being in a pro-college environment, participating in specific GEAR UP activities, and having opportunities for campus visits.

Family influence appears to play an important role in helping students pursue education or training after high school. One counselor described it this way, “I would say families are one of the biggest influences and maybe tradition within the family... I do know that with most of the kids that I see who have gone on to some kind of training or college, their families have done the same.” Another talked about the importance of “seeing family members or peers that have gone on and succeeded” as being an important influence.

The school counselors were also very clear about the positive influence that educators have in encouraging students to pursue post-secondary education. Adults who play important roles include teachers, district staff, and the school counselors. Participants noted the following: “The entire school faculty influences them”, “The push from the staff and the district on post-secondary training has been really good”, “I push it a lot.”

Participants also identified important people outside the school who were influential in supporting students’ pursuit of education. Community members, older students, as well as peers were important influences. One counselor noted that it was important for students to see “peers that have gone on and succeeded and seeing other Indian people who have gone on.”

Finally, representatives from post-secondary institutions appear to be key players in creating a pro-college culture within the schools. For example, one counselor noted

that “Bringing in our representatives from the admissions offices, the military, or specialty schools and just getting the kids a better awareness of what is out there,” was very important. Another counselor stated,

The two people we’ve been working with from the financial aid office have come and done tremendous presentations to the kids and saying ‘You know if you want to, there is a way to do this financially.’ They have been very inspirational... during open house they sat in hallways and talked to parents. We just keep sending the message to the kids and their parents, ‘You know, if you want to go there is a way.’

Counselors also identified the experiences that supported students’ decisions to go on for education or training past high school. These included being surrounded by a pro-college environment which included participating in GEAR UP activities such as counseling and advisement. As one counselor pointed out, “I think with our advisement groups and counselors, you know the whole school is promoting it; it’s not just one person.”

A second critical experience was the opportunity to participate in campus visits. These visits were viewed as important because students and parents were exposed to and became aware of the variety of opportunities and possibilities associated with post-secondary education. One counselor stated, “I think that’s another reason why GEAR UP has done a good job. By encouraging college campus visits, they see the things that go on a college campus. If we can get them there, they will find out that college can be a positive thing.” Another counselor stated:



When we do field trips we try to select parents that don't have post-secondary education or have not had the opportunity, on purpose. And they go to the schools and they're just blown away. They're saying things like, 'My kid's going. We'll work out something to get them to school'... You know when you live in a real small rural town, you don't see a lot of those opportunities and this gives them a chance to really open some doors and say, you know, this might be kind of fun to do.

Interestingly, the counselors emphasized that campus visits were most beneficial when students enjoyed themselves over the course of their visit. As one counselor commented about campus visits:

It doesn't make any difference what they go for as long as they have a good time. For example, basketball camp is not academic but it gets them on a college campus. They stay in the dorms, do different things, they find out that you can get around and not get lost on a college campus. I mean they find out that there are lots of things they can do.

### *Barriers*

Participants were asked to describe the obstacles that students encountered along their path toward education or training past High School. The responses suggested five key barriers: financial struggles, family influences, personal perceptions, environmental distractions, and lack of personal skills.

Counselors indicated that many of the students in their communities are facing poverty and/or financial difficulties. This appears to be a significant hurdle. One

counselor stated, "I think a lot them don't see themselves as able to go on because of the economics in their families." Another made the point that,

They see getting to college as more of barrier than maybe it actually is because they don't necessarily know. We could do probably a better job of explaining that college is affordable for everyone. Although the things that GEAR UP has done in that way are very good, for example, making presentations to 7<sup>th</sup> graders that about higher education... to let kids know that it is affordable and doable.

A second barrier that some students encounter comes from personal connections and responsibilities within their family contexts. For example, one counselor related, "They aren't ready to leave yet ... I try to encourage them to go to a tribal school the first year because it's so hard to get away from their family. Their families are the most important thing as they should be in this culture, and they really are, but they do not want to think about leaving."

Another counselor stated, "A lot of them are caretakers for elders and a lot of them have early pregnancies or are early fathers and I would say that is the biggest barrier." Furthermore, when parents do not have any post-secondary training or education, they may not know how to foster their children's interest in further schooling. One counselor described it this way: "Maybe the parent hesitation is a barrier, not that they don't want their kids to go, but they don't know how to go about encouraging them. They're intimidated about visiting a college campus and so they don't take kids to visit."

Students' personal perceptions and choices form a third barrier to post-secondary participation. Counselors responses indicated that the adolescents in their schools may place a higher value on activities other than further education : "They feel

like they need to be free to do what they want to do, I guess... it's mostly an issue of freedom and choice of how to spend their free time." Some students have a low sense of academic self-efficacy: "Some of the students don't think they can do it." Some students may perceive the financial difficulties as impossible to overcome: "It's just a cycle where they don't know what it's like to be out of poverty so they just keep..., you know, it's just a cycle kind of thing."

Counselors identified various distractions in students' local environments that posed a fourth barrier to post-secondary training and education. One counselor noted:

I suppose drugs are probably an issue, weekend partying' another issue ... and they're kind of preoccupied with sexual behavior too, ... I think they have the right priorities but ... they still get carried away by something that's more fun to do ... I think it's stress that prevents them from setting their priorities and reaching their goals.

Finally, lack of personal skills was seen as a barrier for some students.

Counselors suggested that students' progress was possibly constrained by a lack of skills in the areas of time management, self motivation, and academic goal setting. For example, outcomes can be influenced by their "own personal values and time management skills and desire to succeed; although some have the desire, they don't have the stick-to-it-ness or the dependability to rely on themselves." Self-management was also viewed as a critical component for success in post-secondary pursuits. One counselor suggested that when schools provide too much structure, the students may not learn the necessary skills to be successful:

We take too much care of our kids in high school in a way ... if they have detention; we make them do their homework. We make them get their grades in and if they don't have their grades in on time, we make them hand it in anyway ... but when they get to college, they don't; that's all gone and that's a big thing. They're not ready for the amount of responsibility and self-direction and self-motivation.

### *Effective Strategies*

Participants were asked to identify all of the activities that they believed were effective in promoting the pursuit of post-secondary education. Responses were grouped into four categories: experiential or "hands on" activities, education-based information and activities, involvement of others, and cultural awareness.

*Experiential activities.* Examples of experiential activities that had a positive influence on students included field trips to colleges and universities, visits to job sites, career fairs, playing simulated career games, and job shadowing. Experiential learning theory defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Participants' responses indicated that engaging students in experiences directly related to career choice and future planning allowed students to more readily grasp what post-secondary education actually implied for them.

*Education-based information and activities.* Participants listed a variety of education-based information and activities such as guest speakers, interest inventories, study skills, practice exams, research projects, and the development of portfolios.

Furthermore, counselors also indicated value in activities such as writing resumes, taking courses that applied current learning to future goals, watching videos, reading books, and participating in programs such as Upward Bound.

Previous research in the area of cognitive styles has sought to identify students' "stable, individual variations in perceiving, organizing, processing, and remembering information" (Schunk, 2004, p. 266). Findings suggest that there is a wide variety in students' "modes of perceiving, remembering, thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, reflective of information-processing regularities" (Messick, 1994, p.122). Results from this study suggest that the divergence of adolescents' learning styles as inclusive of experiential learning and education-based information appear to promote post-secondary educational pursuits.

*Involvement of others.* A third component of successful activities was the inclusion of others outside the school network. Participants made two primary suggestions: convey information to parents and involve community members. Research by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) supports this finding. Researchers indicated that children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more when schools, families, and communities work together to support learning. In addition, researchers found that students who were involved with parents, regardless of income or background were more likely to attend school regularly, earn higher grades, pass classes, and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

*Cultural awareness.* A final component related to the success of activities designed to promote postsecondary educational pursuits was a strong connection

between the activity and the students' culture. Specific to this study were references to the Native American culture. For example, counselors related that having Native American college students sharing their experience with middle and high school students was a highly effective activity.

Fuchs and Havighurst (1973) noted that a significant drop in achievement motivation occurred in Indian students beginning around seventh grade. This was attributed to an increasing awareness of one's "Indianness," a related perception that school and post-secondary education did not fit into their life plans, and a perception that chances for mobility in the world of work were less for Indians (Coladarci, 1983). Wood and Clay (1996) concluded that cultural discontinuity and perceived structural barriers between Indian and Anglo cultures serve as deterrents to academic performance.

Wenzlaff and Biewer (1996) conducted interviews with Native American students who were experiencing post-secondary educational success at a state university. Among the reasons for perceived success were: the ability to balance cultural values with the rules of white society; support from families; mentoring relationships; tribal college experiences; peer group support; and support of professors.

Counselors and teachers can encourage the development of these factors in Native American adolescents through a variety of activities that promote the "balance" between honoring cultural values and learning to succeed in the predominantly white world of post-secondary education. Native American and White adolescents can learn from the experiences of each other. As differences are shared and similarities

cultivated, fertile ground is provided for both attaining an individual identity and building strong interpersonal relationships.

### *Success Factors*

Counselors indicated that two specific elements made particular activities successful: Increasing connections and increasing awareness were identified as key components to success.

*Increasing connections.* Three categories involving connections emerged from the data. They included increasing connections between thoughts and actions, between emotions and real life experiences, and between the present and future. For example, a description was given of “the necessity [sic] of getting out of the paper and pencil mode and into thinking about real life.” Another interviewee discussed the importance of “younger kids understanding the necessity of reading, math, and science....just to start thinking about different areas they are interested in and work toward them” [sic]. In other words, if youth are challenged to examine the link between what they are learning in school and the actions that are necessary to succeed at a particular goal, they will be more successful in applying and retaining this information.

Regarding the connection between emotions and real life experiences, several participants indicated that participation in campus based programs, such as Upward Bound, helped students gain a “feel” for campus life. It was noted that this typically led to an increase in self esteem and a belief that success on a college campus was viable.

A frequently cited source of connection was the relationship between what students are currently doing in the classroom and their future endeavors or goals. Responses indicated that some of the most difficult goals for students to achieve were

the ones related to academics, as opposed to goals oriented toward personal or social development. If academic goals were related to future career goals, they appeared to become more desirable and attainable. One interviewee indicated this was especially important for youth with special education needs as they need to “know they can do something after high school with the other students.....you need to give them the awareness to think outside the box.”

Consequently, it appears that those activities which are most successful in promoting post-secondary educational pursuits help students make connections between thoughts and actions, emotions and real life experiences, and between their current academic endeavors and future career goals. Establishing relationships between these variables appears to be useful in orienting students to post-secondary experiences and to helping them develop the skills necessary to succeed.

*Increasing awareness.* The second theme to emerge in regard to successful activities was that of increased awareness. This included expanding the students’ understanding of what career options were available to them as well as helping them discover what talents and skills they possessed that would help them succeed in a chosen field. Respondents indicated that many students were not aware of all the possibilities that existed in terms of career pursuit, which may have been a result of the rural nature of the schools and a lack of exposure to career possibilities other than those careers that were evident in their community (i.e., farming, ranching, retail work, etc.).

Additionally, it appeared that helping students gain awareness of skills and abilities they already possessed was important in the encouragement of post-secondary



educational pursuits. If students are made aware how the skills they have acquired in their rural communities can help them succeed in academia, they may experience a greater sense of self efficacy and success. This may include helping students understand the natural applications of geometry used in carpentry and construction or the interpersonal skills used to navigate problems in their small communities.

### *Insights Regarding Effectiveness*

When queried about reasons that activities were not favorably received by students, participants discussed two primary themes. If activities were viewed as punitive by students or lacked a connection to a larger purpose, the activities were not considered successful.

*View of activities as punitive.* Examples of activities that were sometimes viewed as punitive were courses or programs that were held over summer vacation. While some students enjoyed these activities, others viewed them as punishment and did not appear to benefit from the summer academic experience. This example demonstrates that it is possible for the same activity to bring about positive or negative results depending on the perception of the participant. Punitive perception is related to themes in question number two regarding the importance of making connections between thoughts, feelings, and actions. Additional research regarding the development of positive perceptions may be warranted. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, which emphasize the ways in which thoughts affect both emotions and actions, may be useful in working with youth who are exploring post-secondary educational options.

*Lack of connection.* A lack of connection to a larger purpose (such as future goals or life direction) was the second theme described in regard to unsuccessful

activities. An example that was described asked students to interview teachers in the school regarding whether or not they had held other jobs/careers prior to becoming teachers. While this activity appears to have some usefulness, students were unable to perceive the relevance of it to their own career pursuits. This may have been due to lack of follow up discussion and failure on the part of the counselor to help students make meaningful connections regarding this assignment and the goals of the students. Again, the importance of making linkages between present and future goals as well as between thoughts and actions is illustrated.

### Implications

Promotion of post-secondary education for adolescents seems vital in today's society and economy, especially for the disadvantaged. Initial research indicates that a variety of strategies can be successfully employed to support this goal at both the middle and high school levels. The implications of this research would suggest that school administrators and counselors can work together to plan and implement various strategies that will foster a pro-college culture within their schools. While it should be noted that the current study involved schools participating in a grant project; the strategies and activities can be implemented by any school staff interested in promoting a pro-college attitude among students. By combining experiential and education based activities, administrators, educators, and counselors will meet the needs of a greater number of students. Diverse learners can all benefit from strategies that involve presentations, interviews, and guest speakers. Inclusion of important people in the students' lives is also pivotal in advancing post-secondary educational pursuits. Parents and community members, as well as those who represent the youths' cultures, are key

figures who can advance the work that is being done by educators and counselors in the schools.

Lastly, to be successful, strategies and activities must help adolescents make connections and increase their levels of awareness. Connections between present and future endeavors were particularly significant. Increased awareness of skills and abilities as well as potential opportunities also contributed to helping youth prepare and plan for post-secondary education.

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