snapshot
July 2013

OAKLAND KIDS FIRST'S PASS-2 PROGRAM: YOUTH & ADULTS JOINING FORCES TO PROMOTE COLLEGE READINESS

Kristin E. Geiser, Graciela N. Borsato, Brandy P. Quinn

In 2011, Oakland Kids First invited the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct a qualitative implementation study of Peers Advising Students to Succeed (PASS-2), a peer-advising program that aims to increase high school graduation and college-going rates as part of a larger effort to include youth leaders in the work of school reform. In this research snapshot, we situate PASS-2 in the context of the broader discourse regarding college readiness and highlight PASS-2's approach to engaging both youth and adults as key partners in improving college readiness in an under-resourced school district.

College Eligible vs. College Ready

Today more students than ever before, from all backgrounds, enroll in degree-granting postsecondary institutions after high school (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Kristapovich, Rathbun, Wang, & Zhang, 2013). However, higher college enrollment rates have not translated into substantial increases in the proportion of Latino and African American students who complete four-year degrees (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009). In fact, from 1980 to 2011, the gap in the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher between Whites and Latinos widened from 17 to 26 percentage points, and the gap between Whites and African Americans widened from 13 to 19 percentage points (Aud et al., 2013). These statistics signal a pressing need to ensure that *all* students finish high school not only *eligible* for college (i.e., meeting college admissions criteria), but *ready* to be successful in college.

What does it mean to be college-ready? Current thinking on college readiness extends its definition beyond academic preparedness to include the knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors needed to successfully access college and overcome obstacles on the road to college graduation (Conley, 2008; Kless, Soland, & Santiago, 2013). In particular, college readiness can be conceptualized as comprising three distinct but interrelated domains (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012):

- **Academic Preparedness** refers to key academic content knowledge and cognitive strategies needed to succeed in doing college-level work. Access to a rigorous curriculum and excellent teaching during the K-12 years are examples of factors that contribute to the development of academic preparedness by the time students finish high school.[1]

---

[1] The examples provided to illustrate each of the three domains are based on a review of the literature as specified in Gurantz & Borsato, 2012.

- **Academic Tenacity** refers to the underlying values, beliefs, and attitudes that drive students to embrace challenging work, to persist in the face of obstacles, and to pursue academic goals. Students who are exposed to caring and motivating classroom practices are more likely to put forth the effort to learn and do well in school.

- **College Knowledge** refers to the knowledge base and contextual skills that enable students to successfully access and navigate college. Understanding the college application process and the financial requirements for college, time management and organizational skills, ability to work well in groups, and awareness of when to ask for help, are examples of key knowledge and skills necessary to access and succeed in college.

The College Readiness Gap

There is increasing recognition of the importance of providing all students, particularly low-income and first-generation college students with the opportunity to develop their capacity in all three domains of college readiness (Conley, 2008; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Unfortunately, the students who need the most support often attend under-resourced schools where they have limited access to adults who can help them become college-ready. For example, during the 2012-2013 academic year, Oakland Unified School District employed 23 full-time academic counselors who served over 16,267 middle and high school students (personal communication, April 5, 2013). In settings with high student-to-counselor ratios such as this, the work of one non-profit organization, Oakland Kids First, suggests that it is not only adults, but *youth and adults in partnership together* who can make a difference in promoting higher levels of college readiness for all youth.

Engaging Youth as Partners in Promoting College Readiness

Through a 2004 youth organizing campaign supported by Oakland Kids First, a group of high school youth recognized the high student-to-counselor ratio as a significant condition hindering on-time high school graduation and college readiness. Youth identified the problem and identified themselves as a critical part of the solution. This vision led to the creation of Peers Advising Students to Succeed (PASS-2), a program that trains tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students to be youth mentors who provide freshmen students with access to the knowledge, skills, and habits associated with college knowledge—one of the three essential domains of college readiness.[2]

Through a series of workshops led by PASS-2's youth mentors, ninth graders learn what courses they need to pass in order to graduate from high school and be eligible for admission to the University of California or California's State University system. The workshops also describe skills and resources students need to successfully navigate the path to graduation, including how to develop a four-year academic plan, how to read one's transcript in order to monitor progress, and how to access support services if and when they are needed. Based on data collected by Oakland Kids First, there is evidence that freshmen who participate in PASS-2 workshops learn practical information that is associated with college knowledge (Oakland Kids First, 2012).

Furthermore, a year-long implementation study conducted by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University found that it is not only the freshmen, but also the youth mentors, who develop college knowledge through PASS-2. According to the

---

[2] For a longer discussion of PASS-2's theory of change, see Geiser & Quinn, 2012.

research findings, many youth mentors credit PASS-2 with providing them with the college knowledge that helped them get and stay on track for graduation—an important step toward college readiness. Of those youth mentors interviewed as part of the study, about one-third reported learning about high school and college eligibility requirements for the first time in the context of the PASS-2 leadership training, and almost all of the youth mentors reported a heightened sense of motivation to graduate as a result of their experiences as PASS-2 mentors (Geiser & Quinn, 2012). As one youth mentor said, "It just made me more aware and really pay attention to what I'm doing in the class and what kind of classes I have so that I am eligible for a four-year [college]."

While PASS-2 focuses on promoting college knowledge, it does so within a broader commitment to cultivating youth and adult partnerships in the service of school improvement. The findings of the implementation study suggest that youth mentors' growth in the area of college knowledge is enhanced by the way PASS-2's design reflects a positive youth development approach to youth leadership.[3] PASS-2 entrusts youth mentors with the authentic and complex task of teaching younger students, and supports them in developing the mindsets and skills necessary to accomplish that task. When youth mentors describe their experience of PASS-2, they speak of how they develop college knowledge, but they also articulate how they are engaged as leaders with meaningful responsibilities. As one youth noted: "It wasn't like we were just going around just doing nonsense. We were actually trying to do something that could help change the school around."

PASS-2 provides an example of how efforts to promote college readiness and positive youth development might converge to provide more youth with equitable access to the skills, knowledge, and habits associated with college readiness. Youth-adult partnerships may hold particular promise in under-resourced settings where young people themselves are resources poised to be developed and engaged as partners in school-wide efforts to improve college readiness.

References

Aud, S., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Kristapovich, P., Rathbun, A., Wang, X., & Zhang, J. (2013). *The Condition of Education 2013* (NCES 2013-037). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Conley, D. T. (2008). Rethinking College Readiness. *New Directions for Higher Education,* 3-13. doi: 10.1002/he

Geiser, K. E. & Quinn, B. P. (2012). *Oakland Kids First: Peers advising students to succeed implementation study.* Retrieved March 10, 2013 from http://jgc.stanford.edu/resources/reports/OKF_Report_12.12.pdf.

Gurantz, O. & Borsato, G. N. (2012). Building and implementing a college readiness indicator system: Lessons from the first two years of the CRIS initiative. *Voices in Urban Education, 35(*Fall*)* 5-15. Brown University: Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Retrieved June 10, 2013 from http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/our_work/cris/VUE35.pdf.

Kless, L., Soland, J. & Santiago, M. (2013). Analyzing Evidence of College Readiness. Manuscript in Preparation.

Oakland Kids First (2012). *The PASS-2 All Schools 2011-2012 Evaluation Report.* Available from www.kidsfirstoakland.org.

---

[3] For a longer discussion of how PASS-2 supports youth development, see Quinn & Geiser, 2013.

Quinn, B. P. & Geiser, K. (2013). *Urban youth as urban leaders: Reframing school improvement as youth-led collaborative culture change.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco.

Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., & Coca, V. (2009). College Readiness for All: The Challenge for Urban High Schools. *The future of children, 19*(1),185-210. Available from: http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/19_01_09.pdf

FOR MORE INFORMATION *regarding the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, please visit our website at gardnercenter.stanford.edu.*