



Increasing postsecondary education access and success:

Raising achievement through outreach programs

Higher education benefits both individuals and society as a whole. About 80 percent of the fastest growing occupations in the United States require at least some postsecondary education. Individuals with more education are better able to compete for high quality jobs and more likely to obtain jobs with better working conditions, essential benefits, opportunities for advancement, and job security. As a society, we must have an educated workforce to compete in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Higher education contributes to lower crime rates, fewer unplanned pregnancies, lower unemployment rates, decreased burden on social services, and increased civic engagement.

The achievement gap

Persisting achievement gaps based on race/ethnicity, family income, and other demographics are evident throughout the school system from early childhood to higher education both locally and nationally. Although Minnesota is often praised for high test scores and its increasing postsecondary enrollment rates, closer analysis reveals deep disparities.

Achievement gaps related to income and race/ethnicity are found in elementary and secondary school grades and test scores, enrollment in Advanced Placement math and science courses, average ACT scores, and high school graduation rates. For example, the 2007 Minnesota four-year on-time high school graduation rate is 73 percent overall, but the rate for low-income students is 55 percent, and only 41 percent for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students, according to the Minnesota Department of Education. The achievement gap is becoming an increasingly important issue as these groups make up the fastest growing populations in the K-12 school system.

The gap remains large for college enrollment, credit completion, and graduation from a postsecondary institution. In Minnesota, smaller proportions of Blacks (57%), Hispanics (47%), American Indians (46%), and

low-income students (40%) than Whites (66%) and Asians (74%) enroll in college directly after graduating from high school (Perna, 2007). Furthermore, the percentage of students who earn a bachelor's degree within six years is 57 percent overall, but only 43 percent for Blacks, 46 percent for Hispanics, and 36 percent for American Indians (Minnesota Department of Education, 2007). Similarly, of Minnesotans age 25-40 years, greater proportions of Whites (38%) and Asians (47%) have attained a bachelor's degree or higher compared to Blacks (17%), Hispanics (15%), and American Indians (9%) (American Community Survey, 2007).

In addition to academic preparation, financial resources are necessary for postsecondary access and success. However, recent trends in financial aid policy coupled with rising tuition have exacerbated financial barriers. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008) gave Minnesota an "F" on affordability, indicating that low-income families must devote 36 percent of their income, even after aid, to pay for tuition and living costs at a two-year college. Financial aid alone, however, is not enough to level the playing field.

To do that, systematic inequalities in K-12 schools must be addressed. Nationally, low-income and minority students are overrepresented in schools that lack resources. As a result, these schools tend to have lower quality teachers and are less likely to offer a challenging curriculum. In Minnesota, a substantially smaller proportion of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students (13-19%) than White and Asian students (41-44%) complete advanced math in high school, which has been shown to be one of the most important predictors of college enrollment and success (Perna, 2007).

In addition to academic preparation and financial resources, lack of information is a barrier to higher education for many underrepresented youth. Impediments include lack of access to resource networks, fewer neighborhood resources, lack

of peer support for academic achievement, segregation, and low expectations and aspirations. In Minnesota, help from high school counselors is limited by one of the worst student-to-counselor ratios in the country at nearly 800:1 (Perna, 2007).

Raising achievement through outreach programs

Closing the achievement gap depends on highly effective public schools, strong community support, and family involvement. Raising the overall rates of achievement in Minnesota is a vital part of this goal. Research has shown that pre-college outreach programs improve college access for underrepresented groups, including low-income, first-generation, and minority students. The most effective programs do this by promoting college awareness and attendance, improving academic skills, building student self-esteem, and providing role models. One study found that such programs can nearly double the odds of college enrollment for moderate- to high-risk students. Further discussion of key features of effective pre-college outreach programs is provided below.

Key features of effective outreach programs

Prepare students academically – A college preparatory curriculum, especially rigorous math courses, is the most critical variable for helping students gain access to and complete a postsecondary education. Additional strategies include academic counseling, enrichment and remediation, personalized learning environments, and teaching study skills.

Balance academic support with social support – Social support is a predictor of college attendance and completion. Students are more likely to plan to attend college if their friends also plan to enroll, and strong social networks help support students' academic and emotional development. In addition to peer support, mentors play a key supportive role.

Intervene early – It is critical to intervene early, preferably before high school, in order to facilitate curriculum planning.

Encourage parent/family involvement – Students with parents who are knowledgeable about college are more likely to attend college.

Help students navigate the college admissions process – Helping students complete college applications and helping students prepare for entrance exams are important predictors of enrollment.

Provide comprehensive, long-term support – The programs that have the greatest impact tend to be those that offer comprehensive services, are intensive, and require long-term commitment.

Provide financial assistance – Students need adequate financial resources in order to attend and complete college.

Encourage systemic reform – Most outreach programs are peripheral and supplemental to the classroom, which may explain why outreach programs tend to have little effect on students' academic achievement. The most effective programs offer long-term systemic services that are incorporated as part of the regular school offerings, rather than short-term supplemental programmatic services. Research has also shown that linking the secondary and postsecondary educational systems – for example, by aligning high school curricular requirements with college entry requirements – helps low-income and minority students succeed.

Resources

Learn more about this issue: This briefing paper presents highlights of the report *Increasing postsecondary enrollment: A literature review of the effectiveness of outreach programs*, found at www.wilderresearch.org, with additional information from Perna's *Improving the transition from high school to college in Minnesota*, found at www.growthandjustice.org.

Additional data was obtained from: American Community Survey, Minnesota Department of Education, and National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.



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