Building A College Culture:

Needs, Goals, Principles, and a Case Study

Patricia M. McDonough

University of California, Los Angeles
Graduate School of Education and Information Studies
A technical report.
For information please contact:
mcdonough@gseis.ucla.edu
OVERVIEW

Research on college access tells us that having college plans by the tenth grade increases the likelihood of attending by 21%, compared to plans formulated during the senior year. Early plans allow students to prepare—academically, financially, and even mentally—but college aspirations do not simply happen. Students' ideas about what is reasonable to expect must be fostered and encouraged in a variety of ways, including through their schools' cultures, which can have a strong impact on both aspirations and achievement.

In families without college knowledge and resources, schools—through teachers and especially counselors—are often the only available source for advising on appropriate classes, providing basic information on why college is important, and being a sounding board for college choices. Given counselors' heavy caseloads and myriad responsibilities, however, it is clear that one solitary professional cannot carry a school's college resource infrastructure. Changes must occur throughout schools so that the college mission is heard loud and clear by all students. Moreover, these expectations must be present from the earliest stages of their academic careers.

This document offers a template for creating an environment where this can take place. Specifically, it outlines the changes that are required in order to create what we have called a "college culture." In a school with a college culture, energy, time, and resources are devoted to the broad goal of college preparation. More specifically, where such a culture exists:

All students are prepared for a full range of postsecondary options through structural, motivational, and experiential college preparatory opportunities.

Within this broad goal are several more specific objectives. In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative that:

- School leadership is committed to building a college culture
- All school personnel provide a consistent message to students that supports their quest for a college preparatory K-12 experience
- All counselors are college counselors
- Counselors, teachers, and families are partners in preparing students for college
In order to meet these more specific objectives, some specific school characteristics must be developed. These characteristics are derived from decades of research on college access and educational attainment and are designed to allow schools to determine the extent to which they are currently fostering a college culture and the steps they might take in the future to strengthen that culture.

The following section describes these principles. The final section of this document provides examples of each of the principles and illustrates the progress made so far in one school cluster in building a college culture.
PRINCIPLES OF A COLLEGE CULTURE

College Talk
Clear Expectations
Information & Resources
Comprehensive Counseling Model
Testing & Curriculum
Faculty Involvement
Family Involvement
College Partnerships
Articulation

College Talk
Developing a college culture requires clear communication about what it takes to get to college. These conversations must take place in an ongoing manner with students, so that they understand what is required and expected of them if they want to stay on a college path. By the same token, faculty and administrators must have opportunities to share their own experiences and discover their own assumptions about their roles in preparing students for college. Through this College Talk, the purpose of building a college culture becomes clearer and the process becomes more effective.

Clear Expectations
If all students are to be prepared for a full range of postsecondary options when they graduate from high school, then the explicit goals of this preparation must be clearly defined. These goals must be communicated in ways that make them part of the culture of the school, such that students, family members such as parents, teachers, administrators and staff recognize the role that each plays in preparing students for college.

Information and Resources
Students must have access to information and resources related to college. This information must be comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible. Although counselors are likely to have primary responsibility for collecting and maintaining resources, school faculty should be aware of what’s available and incorporate it into daily classroom practices on a regular basis.

Comprehensive Counseling Model
In a school with a successful college culture, all counselors are college counselors. As such, all student interactions with counseling staff become opportunities for college
counseling, because all counselors are informed about college issues. In this manner, decisions about students' coursework and career options are made with all postsecondary options in mind.

Testing and Curriculum
Standardized tests like the PSAT and SAT are critical steps on the path to college. Students must be knowledgeable about these tests and be aware of testing dates. Moreover, the school must make a commitment to providing the resources necessary to ensure both that students are prepared for the tests, and that testing fees are not a barrier to any student's ability to take the tests. This includes ensuring access to preparatory coursework like algebra and geometry. Moreover, the school must ensure that students have access to coursework that ensures their eligibility to apply to college upon graduation.

Faculty Involvement
School faculty must be active partners in the creation and maintenance of a college culture. They should be kept up-to-date on important information related to college knowledge (e.g., admissions requirements, types of institutions, etc.) and be provided with ongoing professional development to allow them to play an active role in preparing students to aspire to, apply to, and attend college. This should include integrating college information and the very idea of college into regular classroom activities. Faculty must make themselves available to family members to answer any questions and make decisions about students' academic futures.

Family Involvement
Parents and/or other family members must become informed partners in the process of building a college culture. They must be provided with opportunities to gain knowledge about the college planning process as well as be made aware that their children are "college material." The counseling staff must make themselves available to family members to answer any questions and help make decisions about students' academic futures.

College Partnerships
Forming active links between the school and local colleges and universities is vital to the creation of a college culture. This facilitates the organization of college-related activities such as field trips to college campuses or college fairs, and the provision of academic enrichment programs, all of which raise awareness of and aspirations toward college.

Articulation
Students should have a seamless experience where a college message is communicated from kindergarten through 12th grade. As such, there must be ongoing communication between counselors and teaching staff among all schools in a feeder group. Work being done at each school site should be coordinated with activities at other levels.
"Creating a College Culture" is a collaborative project that involves UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, The Achievement Council, and 27 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (schools that formerly comprised the Venice Westchester Cluster). What follows is an overview of some of the accomplishments of the two high schools and four middle schools that are part of this initiative. Each item listed is an important piece in the difficult and important task of changing school cultures so that all students are prepared for a range of educational options when they finish high school.

College Talk
- Through newsletters and dedicated space in school newspapers, students and faculty are informed about important deadlines, events, and activities. These outlets are also used to debunk the common myths about "who can go to college."
- One principal conducted his own "consciousness raising" with his entire faculty to emphasize the importance of strong and consistent resources on the path to college.
- One middle school now has an afternoon "College Club" where students do research on different colleges and gather information about the schools that interest them.
- An essay contest allowed students to reflect on the question, "What would you bring to college?" Hundreds of submissions provided insight into students' excitement about and aspirations toward college.

Clear Expectations
- In 2000, vertical teams from all schools in the Cluster participated in a day-long seminar on the creation of a college culture. Topics ranged from what the research tells us to the articulation of clear and integrated goals toward achieving project objectives.
- Monthly meetings with key counseling staff from all participating schools have allowed for the articulation and clarification of project goals.

Information and Resources
- College Centers were created at all four of the middle schools. Counselors report having students waiting outside their doors every day, eager to talk about college. College Centers at the high school level were enhanced through the identification of all counselors as college counselors.
- At the middle school level, the counseling staff is available during homeroom periods, during lunch and nutrition, as well as before and after school. At the high
school level, college centers are open throughout the day and all counselors are prepared to talk about college with the students.

- High school students attended presentations on obtaining financial assistance for college.
Comprehensive Counseling Model

• Additional funds were provided to create a new counseling position at each of the middle schools. This individual is responsible for fostering a college culture at his or her school.
• At the high school level, counseling caseloads have been lightened and all counselors are identified as college counselors.
• Counselors are more knowledgeable about college preparation and are able to share this information with students with greater frequency.
• The middle school counselors have developed an on-going collaboration that allows them to share resources and coordinate their efforts.

Testing and Curriculum

• Across the cluster, the PSAT will now be offered on Tuesday, rather than Saturday, allowing greater numbers of students to take part in this important step toward college.
• One high school has created “Test Fest 2000” – a single day in October when all students will be involved in testing, including the PSAT. Moreover, funding from the school and the Venice Westchester/UCLA Collaborative will cover the PSAT registration fee, ensuring that all 10th graders in the school will take part.
• At the middle school level, students had the opportunity to take part in PSAT preparation classes and to take a practice exam.
• Conversations with principals from across the Cluster have addressed the need to change the master schedule to accommodate greater numbers of students in key courses such as algebra and foreign languages. These discussions are on-going.
• Since good study habits are critical to academic success at any level, the middle school counselors have focused energy on working with students on organizational skills and other strategies.
• One middle school counselor regularly meets with students before school to ensure that their homework is completed and that their work is neat and organized. She tells all of these students that they are college bound.

Faculty Involvement

• Counselors have adapted existing materials and created some of their own to offer to teachers, so that they also have the opportunity to communicate a college message to their students.
• At one high school, following the administration of the PSAT to tenth graders, mathematics teachers were responsible for interpreting test results and for incorporating explanations and other PSAT materials into their daily lessons.

Parental Involvement
A year-end "College Fair" involved students, their parents, and teachers from all grade levels in a Saturday gathering at West LA College. Colleges from across the country sent representatives to share information. Workshops addressed topics ranging from on-line college searching to study habits to financial preparation for college. Families were entertained by student performances and saw essay contest winners from all grade levels receive certificates and other prizes.

• Counselors at both the middle school and high school levels hold parent meetings throughout the year to offer information on academic and financial preparation for college.

• Thanks to funding from the University of California Office of the President, a series of college preparation workshops targeted to parents of middle school students was offered in the 2000-2001 academic year.

**College Partnerships**

• Counselors involved with the project have organized numerous trips to college campuses around the Los Angeles area. Through these trips, students gain a greater understanding of what college life is like. When they talk about college in the classroom, they now have a vivid picture of it.

• All of the schools held events such as College Week, College Night, or Career Week to emphasize the importance of higher education. These events included guest speakers, college dress days, door decoration contests, and other activities designed to expose students to a range of college options.

• Several schools have established and expanded tutoring programs that bring together college students with high school and middle school students. These programs not only help students academically, but also expose them to college students who share backgrounds similar to their own.

• Middle school students participate in a pen pal program that allows them to communicate with college students with similar backgrounds and experiences.

**Articulation**

• Middle school counselors directly reach students as early as fifth grade. Through their work with feeder elementary schools, students as young as kindergarten-age are aware of and aspiring to college.

• The counseling process has begun to be more fluid, with greater integration of counseling work across levels. High school and middle school counseling staffs are relying on each other to a greater degree and pooling resources to increase the impact of their work.