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What culturally responsive educators can do to prepare high school students, parents for college

Whenever we talk about preparing kids for college, we often hear, “College is not for everyone.” This comment is disturbing because, in most cases, educators are referring to culturally and linguistically diverse students and white students from working-class backgrounds. But more troubling, because personal beliefs greatly influence practice, this belief may indicate that culturally unaware educators with little knowledge of students’ abilities, aspirations, and

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interests are depriving students and their families of their right to decide whether to pursue higher education.

HOW DOES YOUR SCHOOL DO?

To determine if this is the case in your high school(s), consider the following questions:

- Which students are placed in honors and advanced placement classes offering a rigorous and challenging curriculum, and which are steered into remedial courses?
- Which students are advised to take higher-level science and math courses, and which are tracked into vocational education?
- Which students are advised to take at least two years of a foreign language, and which are assumed to not need these courses?
- Which students are advised to join band, cheerleading, student council, and other extracurricular activities to demonstrate well-roundedness, and which are not?
- Which parents are invited to attend college night and made to feel welcome, and which do not receive the information or feel marginalized at the event?
- Which students are urged to make college visits, and which are not?
- Which students take college admissions exams such as the ACT or SAT, and which do not?
- Which students are advised to apply to a four-year university, and

which to the local community college?

- Which students are encouraged to apply at prestigious institutions, and which are discouraged from doing so?
- Which students are given applications for academic scholarships, and which are informed only of student loans?
- Which students are supported in their pursuit of college admission with encouragement, advice, and information? Which are told, “You’re not college material,” “You don’t have what it takes to make it at _____ University, so consider the community college,” or “With your family’s lack of financial resources, perhaps you should go to work and think about college later”?

If the answer to the first question in each set is predominantly white middle- and upper-class students and the answer to the second is culturally and linguistically diverse students and white working-class students, it’s highly likely the decision about higher education is being made *for* students and their families rather than *by* them. While it’s true that college may not be for everyone, a college degree can have a significant impact on a person’s quality of life.

All students and their parents, not just some, should have the right to make this decision.



DEVELOP STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Culturally responsive educators question inequities and work to transform them into culturally responsive practices. They purposefully reach out to diverse families who may have different expectations of schooling, less knowledge of the educational system, fewer economic resources, and limited English skills.

Because many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents have not attended college, they may lack the knowledge, advice, contacts, and strategies for facilitating college admissions that middle-class parents have. Culturally responsive educators first work to develop strong relationships with students and parents. Then, in high school, they work

methodically to build families' knowledge and skills, establish support networks, identify

contacts in the community, create opportunities, and develop parent confidence. Specific practices include support for parents and students.

SUPPORTING PARENTS

- As soon as students enter high school, educators make personal contacts with parents to learn about families' expectations and aspirations for their children and enter into ongoing conversations about how the school and families can work together to develop college readiness. When parents and educators speak different languages, the educators obtain translators and provide written materials in the parents' native language – not just for this meeting, but for all future contacts. Initially, these meetings may be held in the community until parents feel comfortable in the school.

- Educators capitalize on parents' funds of knowledge, such as inter-

dependence and collective work, to build relationships with and among parents to help parents realize they have common concerns and to share support, assistance, and resources.

- In regular meetings with parents, educators share implicit knowledge, including which courses students should take; parents' right to question and advocate; the implications of a student's placement in a college-readiness track versus regular, remedial, or vocational education; the importance of extracurricular activities for college admission; the pros and cons of attending of a university, a community college, or a trade school; tips for completing college applications and financial aid paperwork; how to make college visits; important dates to remember; and options for financial support, such as scholarships, grants, and on-campus jobs. Planning for these sessions should consider parents' native language and their racial or ethnic identification with educators (and speakers). In addition, consideration should be given to the meeting's location and scheduling, the availability of child care, providing refreshments, and helping parents feel welcome.

- Once trust is established with parents, educators address reservations parents may have, such as fearing strong familial bonds will weaken due to students' acculturation, believing children will not return to live and work in the community, and worrying about the lack of income children would ordinarily contribute to the family while attending high school and college. Educators recruit college graduates working in the community to share their stories with parents and students and discuss how concerns can be resolved.

- In a continuing dialogue, educators help parents understand that a college degree will economically benefit the family, not just the child. Additionally, they explain funding sources and that children may be able

to send a little money home monthly to contribute to the family's support.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

- Like their parents, students are convened regularly to develop relationships and build a network of support. Topics covered in these sessions include courses to take, the importance of a challenging curriculum, students' rights, college information web sites and tools and how to use them, writing a personal essay for college admission, developing contacts who can facilitate college admission, college interviewing skills, and asking for strong recommendations, not just recommendations.

- Educators recruit community members with a college degree who are willing to serve as student mentors throughout high school and who may have important contacts inside and outside of the community.

- Educators help students identify funding sources other than loans (i.e. scholarships, grants, on-campus jobs) and guide students through the application process.

- Educators talk with students about the ramifications of decisions such as not pursuing higher education, going to a community college rather than a university, or attending a prestigious institution, and they encourage students to aim high and try the unknown.

- Educators encourage students accepted to the same college or university to attend as a group and room together to reduce their loneliness and increase their likelihood of academic success.

By purposefully reaching out to culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and their parents in these ways, culturally responsive educators provide the same access to college readiness and, consequently, to college admission that middle-class families enjoy. ■

The discouraging comments to students are real. But these students ignored them.