College Access and Success for Young Adult Learners:

A Research Summary for Schools and Programs

Acknowledgements

Overview

Despite the cost of higher education, the financial return gained by obtaining a college degree has never been greater than it is today. On average, college graduates earn almost a million dollars more over their lifetime than high school graduates, and are significantly less likely to be unemployed or adversely affected by economic downturns. As high-paying, low-skill jobs continue to disappear, and the demand for highly skilled workers increases, the earnings gap between those with a college degree and those with only a high school diploma or GED will continue to grow.

There are approximately 70,000 young adults in New York City who are out of school and out of work. Too many of these youngsters have dropped out of school and lack the educational credentials to obtain well-paying jobs. For many others who are still in school but are marginally succeeding, the prospects of getting into college and earning a decent wage also looks dim. These young people express a desire to go to college, yet too many do not know how to get there. Those others who have experienced failure in school and are returning to complete their education face especially difficult challenges making up for lost time and re-engaging in their educational development.

The realities of the 21st century job market for these youth places organizations serving them in a challenging position to expand beyond remedial education and employment and training activities, and to focus on helping youth to enter and succeed in college. To effectively help these young people, educators, guidance counselors, case managers, school administrators, and youth program staff need to have access to effective program models and strategies on what it takes for young-adult learners to access higher education. These strategies can help young-adult learners succeed in rigorous educational environments and remain in school long enough to graduate.

Fortunately, recent changes in New York City will provide opportunities for larger numbers of youth who have dropped out of school or have been at the margins to pursue their educations. The city is now investing in new partnerships between schools and community organizations that are designed to increase personal and academic supports for young people while they are in school, and to help them make the transition to the next stages of their lives, including college.

NEW YORK CITY PARTNERSHIP

In response to the needs of youth-serving organizations and the increasing attention paid to this population, the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute (YDI) is facilitating the NYC Partnership for College Access and Success. The Partnership provides a collaborative structure for the development and testing of promising practices in the successful transition of young adults into college. Community-based organizations and City University of New York (CUNY) partners pool their resources and expertise to support young adults to enter and succeed in college. At the same time, a city-wide advisory board comprised of community-based organizations, the New York City Department of Education, and CUNY supports the work of the collaboration through technical assistance, research, and the dissemination of promising practices and policy recommendations.

YDI has identified research that describes principles and practices that have been proven to be effective in, or that act as barriers to, helping young-adult learners enter and succeed in college. What follows is a brief summary of this research along with recommendations based on our implementation expertise for schools and programs on how to develop services and supports that reflect these findings. Lastly, this brief concludes with a series of questions that CBOs and schools face on the ground in supporting young-adult learners as they prepare for college.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: ENGAGEMENT, CAPACITY & CONTINUITY

Three broad conditions must exist together in students' lives for them to access and succeed in college.* It is important to stress that they must all exist together and that if one of them is missing, the likelihood of success for the student is greatly diminished. In using this information, those who work with young people can use this assessment as a framework for developing a comprehensive set of supports for them.

Engagement

Young adults must be engaged and personally motivated to enter and succeed in college. While this may seem obvious, many schools and programs would benefit from giving more attention to:

❋ Cultivating students' individual educational interests

❋ Identifying their individual assets and barriers to success

❋ Working with young adults to develop a personal plan and goals for their education

❋ Addressing students' hopes and fears about higher education

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* This framework is based on the 2004 report: *Engagement, Capacity and Continuity: a Trilogy for Student Success,* by Eric Jolly, Patricia Campbell, and Lesley Perlman. http://www.smm.org/ecc/ecc_paper.pdf.

Also, most young-adult learners need the encouragement of their family and friends; the commitment of financial aid, academic assistance and other forms of support; and to believe that college is a safe and welcoming place before they are ready to apply for, let alone succeed in, higher education.

Capacity

In order for young adult learners to enter or succeed in college they must be able to develop certain capacities necessary to navigate the complex world of higher education. These capacities include academic skills, knowledge and understanding. At the most basic level, students can't get into and succeed in college if they are not academically prepared.

Continuity

Young-adult learners who are engaged and have the appropriate capacities still require continuity in order to enter and succeed in college. Here, continuity refers to sustained institutional and programmatic opportunities, material resources and guidance. Schools and programs must offer quality services and information that help young adults enter and succeed in college. These services include sustained financial aid and consistent tutoring and advising.

College Access Research Summary:
Helping Students Enter College

OPPORTUNITIES	BARRIERS
ENGAGEMENT Young-adult learners from low-income communities are at least twice as likely as other students to suggest a purely economic reason for wanting to go to college. Young-adult learners who are clear about their own identities, interests, and goals are likely to apply to college (Oakes 2005). Active involvement by a parent or other caring adult is a key determinant for young people in applying to college.	Young adult learners from low-income communities and with a history of struggling in school give less credence to the potential long-term payoff of college and to their ability to get into and succeed in such an environment. Latino youth, in particular, are less likely than their peers to aspire to a college degree. Latino and African-American young-adult learners are less likely to believe college is "for them" (Tornatsky, 2003). Young-adult learners from low-income families are often expected to stay at home, provide child care services, and contribute to the well being of their families, and thus are not encouraged to seek out higher education.
CAPACITY Young-adult learners who develop the skills in mathematics, reading and writing to enable them to perform well in a college setting. Young-adult learners who understand the educational requirements of different career paths and can appropriately connect their career choices with their educational decisions (such as whether to go to college) are more likely to access higher education.	Young adult learners with a past history of struggling in school often don't initially have, and/or don't think they posses the test scores, grades, and academic skills needed to get into college, and therefore, don't bother to apply (McDonough 1997, McDonaough 2004, Vargas 2004).
CONTINUITY Young-adult learners who attend schools/programs that challenge them with high expectations and provide access to college-level courses are more likely to apply to college. Young-adult learners who attend schools/programs that provide them with the resources needed to apply to college—such as access to the Internet to explore different colleges and their requirements, and discretionary funds to take SAT preparatory classes, pay for college applications and travel for interviews—are more likely to apply to college. Young-adult learners who have access to adults and peers from their schools, programs and communities that can educate them about college, guide them through the application and financial aid process, and serve as the "social proof" they need to believe that college is possible for them, are more likely to apply to college.	Due to the rising costs of college and the shift from grants to loans for even low-income students, many young adults don't apply to college because it's not affordable for them. Studies suggest that low-income students that get help with financial aid are 35% more likely to go to college than those who receive no financial assistance. Students applying to Associate degree programs struggle to find the means to cover necessary expenses such as travel, clothes, and food. Financial need substantially discourages enrollment. Young-adult learners from low-income communities are more likely than their peers to lack knowledge of what the college experience entails, the range of different types of higher educational institutions, the requirements for getting into college, and the intricacies of the application process. Young-adult learners from low-income communities often have pressing financial needs and obligations, and don't believe they can risk forgoing their current earnings to take advantage of the future benefits that higher education offers.

What Can Schools and Programs Do to Facilitate *College ACCESS?*

Engagement

Work to build students' interest in academic learning and make them aware of the benefits of such learning and of advancement through college.

❋ Engage young-adult learners and their parents so that they understand the educational requirements of different career choices and to learn about the economic and other life benefits that result from obtaining a college degree.

❋ Remove obstacles faced by young-adult learners such as housing or health problems.

❋ Provide young-adult learners with access to a network of program alum and other peers from their own community who have applied and been accepted to college. These peers can offer advice, encouragement, and serve as the "social proof" that young adults need in order to believe that college is for them.

Capacity

Stress academic mastery at the level required for college. Provide supports in reading, writing and mathematics, to enable students to perform at the levels required to succeed.

❋ Guide students to develop an educational/career plan for themselves that provides an assessment of their strengths, as well as their skills and capacities that require improvement if they are to get into college; outline the economic and personal reasons that they should apply to college; provide a step-by-step roadmap of what they personally need to do to access higher education.

❋ Educate parents about the college application and financial aid process, and offer advice to parents on what roles they can play in supporting their child through this process.

❋ Implement early interventions such as introducing the college financial aid and admissions process for parents and requiring students to take challenging high school courses and college examinations.

Continuity

Make sure that there are sustained supports available, such as a counselor who will take the student through each step of the process, and someone at the college level who will continue that support.

❋ Arrange regular meetings with students' parents, from as early on as middle school, to ensure that they encourage and buy in to their child's decision to go to college (Vargas 2004).

� Facilitate college visits for young-adult learners that expose them not only to classroom activities but also to the full range of recreational, enrichment, and social opportunities that college offers (Vargas 2004).

� Develop partnerships with community organizations and community colleges to create college access programs that provide young adult learners with the support and guidance they need to apply to college, including access to programs with multiple points of entry and programs that allow students to stop and re-enter their education with minimal administrative obstacles (Vargas 2004).

College Success Research Summary: Helping Students Succeed In College

OPPORTUNITIES	BARRIERS
ENGAGEMENT	
Young-adult learners who feel like they are prepared for the academic rigors of college, and that they were qualified for admittance, are more likely to retain their confidence and motivation to succeed in higher education. Young-adult learners who have the opportunity to achieve small, continuous successes and make noticeable progress towards their academic goals are more likely to graduate. Young-adult learners who are connected in a formal, consistent way to a counselor, mentor, and network of peers are more likely to feel engaged and invested in their college education. Young-adult learners with one risk factor (substance abuse problem, mental or physical health problem, family crisis, etc.) are twice as likely to succeed in college as students with two such risk factors.	Young-adult learners who experience a difficult start at college—such as course failure, absenteeism, lateness, and personal problems outside of college—are less likely stay in school over the long term. Young-adult learners who perceive or experience racial tension, prejudice, and stereotyping from their peers, faculty, and school administrators are less likely to succeed in college (Rendon 1992, Steele 1992, Weis 1992, Rendon 1996, Steele 1999). Students who work more than twenty-five hours a week, have significant family and financial obligations, and experience frequent pauses in their educational journey have more difficulty focusing on their studies and succeeding in college.
CAPACITY	
Young-adult learners who have a proven ability to master college-level content (particularly English literacy and mathematics courses) and workloads are more likely to complete their higher education. Intensity of academic preparation matters more than most other indicators of success (Adelman, 1999). Young-adult learners who possess a thorough understanding of the expectations of college, are comfortable with the academic and social culture of college, and know how to identify resources and supports for themselves on campus are more likely to succeed in college	Students who struggle socially, academically, and economically are less likely to succeed in college (Richardson 1992, Adelman 1999, Hagedorn 2002).

College Success Research Summary:
Helping Students Succeed In College *(continued)*

OPPORTUNITIES	BARRIERS

<div style="vertical">CONTINUITY</div>

OPPORTUNITIES

Young-adult learners of color that attended high schools that set high expectations and offer challenging curricula that include advanced placement and other college-level courses are more likely to graduate from college, regardless of their high school grades, test scores, or class rank.

Young-adult learners who have a substantial proportion of their college financing needs met through grants as opposed to loans are more likely to remain in schools. Similarly, students that don't experience tuition increases or significant changes to their financial aid status while in college are more likely to finish their higher education and obtain their degree.

Young-adult learners are more likely to succeed in college when university faculty and administrators treat them with the same high expectations and rigorous standards as other students.

Young-adult learners are more likely to thrive in college when professors employ more personalized, active, and student-centered instructional methodologies and assignments as opposed to traditional, didactic teaching methods.

Young-adult learners who are provided with academic, social, and, if necessary, psychological counseling from the inception of their college experience are more likely to remain and succeed in college.

Students that attend colleges that have a representative group of African-American and Latino faculty and students, and that are formally connected with these individuals in a supportive fashion, are more likely to feel safe, welcomed, and that college is a place "for them."

BARRIERS

Students are less likely to complete an Associates degree when loans become the primary and on-going means of paying for college (as opposed to grants), or when students need to work part-time or full-time and/or when students are delayed or must interrupt their attendance for financial reasons (Pascarella 1991, Terenzini 2001, Fry 2004).

Young-adult learners from low-income communities who attend college often feel socially alienated from their peers and from the faculty, don't engage in extra-curricular activities, and feel isolated on campus. Students who are disconnected from college life in this way are more likely to drop out of school.

What can schools and programs do to facilitate *College SUCCESS?*

Engagement

❋ Connect young-adult learners with peer study and support groups that can help them to feel less socially isolated on campus (Harris 1996).

❋ Connect young-adult learners with faculty mentors of similar backgrounds/interests who are best able to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for students' cultures.

❋ Establish classes, forums and dialogues, and extra-curricular activities that address issues of race, class, gender, culture, and sexuality (Richardson 1992, Harris 1996, Brown 2000, Hurtado 2002).

Capacity

❋ Incorporate college-level academics into educational curriculums for all young-adult learners to ensure that these students have the skills and confidence needed to handle the rigors of a college workload.

❋ Research tells us that when academic skills are present, the suggestions as presented in this paper can bolster a student's academic success. However, without academic skills, success is not likely.

Continuity

❋ Provide low-income, young-adult learners with a combination of grants and work-study (less than 15 hours a week) that gives students a significant degree of financial security while encouraging them to believe that college is for them (Choy 1998, Fitzgerald 2002).

❋ Provide personalized and consistent tutoring, counseling, and support services (health care, child care, etc.) for young-adult learners in college. It is critical to provide students with focused and intensive services of this kind at the inception of their college experience to ensure that they experience early successes and develop positive feelings towards and an attachment to college life.

❋ Help young-adult learners to transition to college by teaching them the academic and behavioral norms and expectations of college life *before* they officially begin their college experience. This can be done by facilitating bridge programs and supports such as intensive, month-long, college-prep programs after graduation from high school or the attainment of their GED; summer academic/creative arts programs on college campuses; and the ability to take community college courses while still in secondary education.

❊ Develop partnerships with other community organizations and community colleges to create college success programs that provide young-adult learners with the individualized attention, academic supports, and guidance they need to flourish.

❊ Connect young-adult learners with faculty mentors of similar backgrounds/ interests who are best able to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for students' cultures, communities, and the pressures that they face. These mentors can provide students with the specialized and consistent support they need, as well as help students to discuss and cope with any existing racism on campus (Weise 1985).

❊ Offer regular opportunities (e.g. surveys, focus groups, support sessions, etc.) for young-adult learners to provide feedback on their educational and campus experiences, to discuss their concerns and feelings with other students, and to offer suggestions to administrators on how to strengthen existing campus support structures.

The Engagement, Capacity and Continuity (ECC) Trilogy

As detailed in this brief, in order for young-adult learners to enter and succeed in college, they need to be engaged, have the appropriate capacities, and be supported by institutional, familial, and community resources and structures. Each of these factors— engagement, capacity, and continuity—is important, and none are individually sufficient to ensure positive student outcomes. While this brief has used the ECC trilogy as a way of offering schools and programs a set of research findings and recommended organizational practices, schools and programs can also use the ECC trilogy as an assessment framework for evaluating each young adult that comes through their doors to determine in what areas of the trilogy their students are strongest and what areas they need the most assistance and guidance.

Key Questions for Programs, Funders and Policymakers

This literature review suggests a set of principles and practices for schools and programs interested in helping young-adult learners from low-income communities access and succeed in college. Additionally, YDI's ongoing experience facilitating the NYC Partnership for College Access and Success suggests a series of key questions that require further research and deliberation if practitioners are going to be able to take full advantage of these research findings:

1   Academic preparation is perhaps the most critical element for young-adult learners to enter and succeed in college. Yet, many of these students come to CBOs with less than a ninth-grade reading level, and have little patience for or can't afford to spend more time in school to catch up.

What proven instructional strategies and curriculums exist to rapidly improve the literacy and mathematics skills of young adult learners who have struggled in traditional educational environments?

How can schools and programs balance the desire to have high expectations for all students with the need to be realistic with students, and with themselves, about the time, services, and supports available to ensure that struggling young-adult learners are not put in a position to fail?

2 The research suggests that young adults require an array of services and supports to access and succeed in college both before and during their time in higher education, including counseling, social services, stipends for travel and application, cost of books, faculty and peer mentoring, and intensive academic assistance.

What is a reasonable cost-per-student model for a college access and success initiative that incorporates these necessary program components, and does the current landscape of foundation support, state and local policies, and available funding streams accurately reflect this cost?

3 At the same time, research on promising practices and additional resources alone will not lead to better outcomes unless schools and programs receive practical guidance on how to actually shape and strengthen their service and educational practices for young-adult learners.

How can funders, policymakers, and intermediaries articulate to schools and programs the findings contained within this research and in other relevant documents in a way that directors, front-line practitioners, and educators can understand and utilize to improve their work with young-adult learners on the ground level?

4 Finally, regardless of the resources and supports available to schools and programs that work with young adult learners, CBOs face an uphill battle in that they are expected to make up for ten to fifteen years of students' lack of achievement in an incredibly short time period.

How can CBOs involved in college access and success programs work with public school systems to share their lessons learned, create educational environments that encourage students to go to college and support this expectation with the necessary academic and youth development experiences?

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Fund for the City of New York

Youth Development Institute

The Fund for the City of New York was established by the Ford Foundation in 1968 with the mandate to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. For over three decades, in partnership with government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and foundations, the Fund has developed and helped to implement innovations in policy, programs, practices and technology in order to advance the functioning of government and nonprofit organizations in New York City and beyond.

The Fund seeks out, adapts, applies and assesses ways to enable government and nonprofit agencies to achieve excellence through its core programs—bridge loans, grants, incubation, management and technology assistance—and through four strategic initiatives: the Center on Municipal Government Performance, the Youth Development Institute, the Center for Internet Innovation/E Community Connect and the Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Solutions.

The Youth Development Institute seeks to build the capacity of communities to support the development of young people and help them to transition to adulthood successfully. YDI provides technical assistance, disseminates information, develops policy and conducts research to strengthen the quality and increase the availability of positive developmental opportunities for young people. It works with communities, government, funders and the institutions that serve youth—schools, community organizations and collaborations among institutions. YDI also enhances the craft of youth work by developing programs and systems to support the professional growth of those who work with youth.

It is our vision that all young people will experience close relationships with caring adults, high expectations, engaging activities, opportunities to make a difference in their world, and continuity of support in every setting where they live, work and study. The adults who are in their lives will understand and seek to provide these experiences. The research-based Youth Development approach demonstrates that these are the types of experiences that promote the successful development of young people. This vision for young people constitutes the foundation of the Youth Development Institute and its programs and has shaped the work of YDI since it was established in 1991.

For more information about the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute, visit **www.fcny.org**.