

College Bridge Case Study for *First in the World*

The Students:

Communities face myriad issues with access to college, as the following statistics show:

95% of all high school students have college aspirations.

Average counselor to student ratio in New York City high schools: 1 to 250. Average percent of time guidance counselors spend on college guidance: 22 percent

55% of high school graduates from low-income families enroll in college in comparison to 84% from high-income families.

8% of 24 year olds from low-income backgrounds have attained a Bachelors Degree in comparison to 82% of 24 year olds from high-income backgrounds.

These statistics describe the situation faced by low-income first-generation to college students in NYC. In this case study, students are part of two different near-to-peer programs designed to confront these issues: The *College Bridge Program*, which trains college students to work back in their alumni high schools as College Coaches, acting as role models and guides for the students following them on the pathways to postsecondary education; and the *Strive for Success* program, which trains students who have successfully completed one year of community college to support incoming students to navigate frequent obstacles to persistence, ensuring that first-year college students integrate onto campus, use campus resources, and develop relationships critical to college success.

Currently, the College Bridge program trains 36 college students to serve approximately 2,800 graduating high school students; S4S trains 28 college students to serve 300 students.

These programs are rooted in a belief in the importance of mobilizing resources and training people *within* existing institutions serving first-generation to college students – including administrators, classroom teachers, and college students themselves – in order to help these students build “knowledge about college”, strengthen navigational skills, and develop multi-cultural college-going identities (Oakes, ___).

The programs not only function to serve their intended audience; as our work has developed, we have found important impacts on the college students themselves in these same areas. 73% of College Bridge coaches commented, at the end of their work, that the things they learned in order to be a coach “were helpful to me as well”; another 63% said they have used their knowledge to counsel or help friends around college access and persistence issues.

II. Institutional Supports and Issues:

The Urban Education and Social Personality Psychology Programs and the Center for Human Environments at the CUNY Graduate Center have been important incubators of engaged, social justice-focused scholars and scholarship, and this has played a crucial role in creating the programs profiled in this case study. From their encouragement of young scholars to focus their research on community issues, to their commitment to blending qualitative and quantitative methods and

utilizing participatory action research, to their willingness to host, nurture and promote social justice work growing out of this activist scholarship, the CUNY Graduate Center's engagement with the New York City communities most in need of voice and connection plays a critical role in the project described here.

At the same time, in its position as a public university, CUNY is often less able to lend a funding-hand to worthy projects created under its auspices; this means that a huge amount of time and energy has to be spent on fundraising, grantwriting, etc., rather than program and policy work that would further advance the program reach of this work.

III. The History/Evolution of the Program:

Established in 2011, College Access: Research Action (CARA) evolved out of its founders' deeply rooted experiences in New York City schools, youth development organizations, and the college access and success research community. CARA's programs confront the post-secondary "guidance gap" faced by first-generation to college students by transforming the cultures of institutions, training a wide range of people *within* communities to support students to and through college – including administrators, classroom teachers, and college students and high school students themselves - and directly providing tools that help young people build “knowledge about college”, strengthen navigational skills, and develop multicultural college-going identities.

CARA's work grows out of its co-directors' research into urban poverty, school reform, and pathways to higher education. CARA participates in a range of local and national level policy groups focused on college access and success, and CARA staff has published extensively in the field of college access and persistence.

We take what we learn from working alongside young people and adults in the field to improve practice, inform research, and advocate in the policy arena. CARA's programs work strategically to allow *young people themselves* to influence the programs and policies that are aimed at them.

The College Bridge Program was begun as a way to address the ‘summer melt’ that occurs between the end of high school and the beginning of college, when up to 30% of students who intend to begin college in September do not enroll .

Beginning in February, college coaches become valuable members of the school's college guidance teams, working with staff to support graduating seniors with the many other tasks that are required for successful matriculation. In addition to training and support from CARA, an adult supervisor at the school (college counselor, guidance counselor, teacher or another 12-month staff member) provides supervision for the college coach throughout the school year and over the summer.

Over the summer, when school is not in session, the coaches provide one-on-one case management to help students complete final financial aid forms, figure out how to pay for textbooks, arrange transportation to college, and register for classes. Both literally and figuratively

¹ Arnold, K.D., Fleming, S., DeAnda, M., Castleman, B., & Wartman, K.L. (2009, Fall). The summer flood: The invisible gap among low-income students. *Thought & Action*, 25, 23-34

college coaches help usher students through the door as they begin the next step of their educational journey.

The majority of students that participate in College Bridge are young people of color from low-income families who reside in communities that sorely lack college information support and resources. As alumni of the schools that they are working in, the College Coaches reflect the population of students they serve. Most coaches attend a CUNY or another local college. The coaches are successful college student role-models for high school students that might not yet see themselves as college-bound.

Because the coaches recently went through their own college application and matriculation processes, they are especially tuned-into the needs of first-generation to college students and the potential obstacles that could stand in their way. As one college coach described, *“My senior year I had so many of the problems that they are having now, not getting my tests or the letters I needed. It is because of all of those bumps that I hit in the road that I can do this work.”*

Beginning in the fall, CARA hopes to extend this program to become a year-round one, with coaches beginning their work supporting seniors in September, and then continuing to extend through to the following August and college matriculation.

The Strive for Success Program (S4S) (named by the student leaders who we now call, ***Student Success Leaders (SSLs)***) -- incorporates campus-based college retention services along with community-based counseling and the support of trained peer leaders, in an effort to help students overcome the academic, financial, institutional *and* socio-emotional challenges to college success. The model builds upon best practices and successful retention models already in place at CUNY (e.g, ASAP and Guttman Community College), draws from the successful high-impact practice of intensive guidance/counseling, and is extension of CARA’s successful *Youth Leadership for College Access* and *College Bridge* programming, which use peer-to-peer and near-to-peer models to support first-generation-to-college students in the college access and matriculation processes. We believe that the collaboration will be a bridge between students, their communities and the college campus and serve as a pathway to graduation.

Strive for Success directly addresses the challenges first-generation-to college students face once they have matriculated onto a CUNY campus. The overarching goals of the collaboration are to:

- 1) Increase college persistence and retention rates for students in select CUNY community and comprehensive colleges;
- 2) Build and to diversify the colleges’ capacity to integrate, engage, support and retain students successfully through graduation; and
- 3) Identify and to document promising practices for college retention on commuter campuses.

Project staff report that the freshman are taking important steps to integrate into college life. With guidance from their Student Success Leaders, Campus Coordinators and CBO College Success Counselors, they are making connections to campus resources, building relationships with other students and faculty, and developing college knowledge, problem-solving and advocacy skills that we believe will help them overcome challenges to college persistence.

The benefits to the Student Success Leaders include part-time professional employment, and are developing knowledge and skills can apply to themselves and peers, developing a community that some may not have had including relationships with campus based personnel. And they are acquiring reported in post-training surveys, the development of college retention knowledge, resources and skills and non-cognitive, “tacit” knowledge and skills, which are critical to their own success at college and careers. Informally, as with CARA’s other programs, the SSLs have begun to share college retention resources with their families and peers outside of their caseload, both on their campuses and in their communities.

As a result of partnering with CARA, the Campus Coordinators and CBO College Success Counselors have greater knowledge of youth development approaches and peer-leadership strategies and have begun to integrate SSLs into their college retention teams.

IV. Anecdotes:

Brian Jordan, 18 and a student at New York City College of Technology, served as a Bridge to College coach this summer at The Bronx Guild High School. He worked with a student who was accepted to his top-choice school, had financial aid and was all set to go—until July, when the student got a bill for \$3,000 to cover costs not included in his aid. The college suggested a “Parent Plus” loan to fill the gap, but the student’s mother is undocumented and therefore ineligible. “In training, they taught us that if you’ve got a gap this size, you can usually explain to the college and they can help you find ways to fill in the gap. But he was very scared about calling the college because of his mother’s status,” Brian says.

After Brian assured him that the college can’t legally inform the government about her status, the student called the school. They crafted an alternative aid package for him.

Josetta Adams, a 21-year-old junior at City College in Harlem, was a coach at the High School for Global Citizenship this summer. One of her students was stuck on the FAFSA aid application. “Her parents didn’t file taxes in 2012 so she wasn’t sure what to do—so she didn’t apply for financial aid.” When she got her orientation information from the college, it came with a hefty bill. She was considering loans, but Josetta intervened. From personal experience and her Bridge to College training, Josetta knew what to do: “I told her, ‘You need to note your mom’s salary, find out what she made. Give them her W-2 and then I’ll help you call the financial aid office.’” The student’s FAFSA application was accepted.

Some students just need a little guidance. “They seem to have a sense of what they need to do, but it’s, ‘I haven’t done this or I’m not sure how to do this’ or ‘I haven’t gotten to this yet,’” says Jordan.

For others, the issues are more complex. Paola Vargas, 18, is a sophomore at SUNY New Paltz. This past summer, she served as a college coach at the PanAmerican International high school in Queens, New York. “I met a lot of parents who expect kids to work right after high school because they can’t afford to help them and don’t want them taking out loans. They want them to work so they can help out the family.”

Paola says her own experience as an immigrant from Latin America gives her credibility in her coaching. She understands where families are coming from, and at the same time, she herself is “demonstrating the value of going away to college as a step to take to have a better life and get out of poverty.”

She used this first-hand understanding about the cultural barriers to help convince the worried father of a bright young student that it was safe for her to leave home and attend college upstate.

V. What is sustainable, what makes the program vulnerable? Dilemmas of practice.

Peer-to-peer and near-to-peer work around college access has garnered intense interest from policy-makers, funders, and community-based groups. As the program grows, the youth leaders themselves – at both levels – continue to lead the way towards new strategies for engaging young people in the college search and application process.

However, the more we talk with young people and follow their journeys, the more we uncover about the challenges that they face in the transition to and journey through higher education. Though we have identified the important role in this work of what Oakes, Mendoza and Silver (2005) call building a “multi-cultural college going identity” - “ Students see college going as integral to their identities; they have the confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing their own identity and connections with their home communities. They recognize that college is a pathway to careers that are valued in their families, peer groups, and local communities” – we want to further explore *how* to combat the sense that many low-income students of color who are the first in their family to access higher education have – that college is “not for them”, that they are unqualified, or do not belong. We have yet to fully explore this with the young people we work with, or find programmatic and research avenues for naming what this means, confronting the barriers that these young people face in building that identity, and finding ways to build this work into the access and success work done by peer-to-peer and near-to-peer work. This is less a dilemma of practice than an underexplored area that we would hope to begin to excavate through this project.

VI. Edges: where hopes to go, dangerous or exciting

Our hope is to, over the next several years, build both research and program work around exploring, naming, and owning multi-cultural college-going identity for first-generation to college communities. We envision the majority of this work to be generated by young people themselves, through in-person conversations, visual, video and and social media explorations, circling out through documenting experiences that dis/empower young people in pursuit of this goal - on college campuses, in admissions and financial aid offices; in their homes and in spaces in their community; places that hands are extended or doors closed; tools offered or denied. Together, College Coaches and Student Success Leaders will build a toolkit for their peers and those who come after them to assist in navigating this fraught and so often left-silent terrain that far too many currently traverse alone.

VII. Evidence that will be gathered, products hope to generate

Qualitative Research: Navigational guide. Community navigation, CUNY 4-year navigation, predominantly white institutions. Bridging moments, moments of alienation.

Quantitative Research: Following graduates from CARA's programs to look at impact on access and success: completing steps to enrollment, FAFSA completion, match schools, college matriculation, enrollment in opportunity programs, college persistence.