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# Partnering for College and Career Readiness

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## Abstract

The call for educators to include college and career readiness learning standards across their curricula affords schools and universities the opportunity to create meaningful collaborations. This article presents research highlighting the importance of providing college and career opportunities in middle and high school and describes a college-school partnership that enables two examples of college and career readiness programs. Both programs emerge from collaborative efforts among university faculty, teachers and administration.

The call for including College and Career Readiness in the schools is urgent and timely. President Obama recently urged educators to create a “new vision” to help promote skills that build students’ capacity for college and career readiness (February 22, 2010). These skills have been infused across the Common Core State Standards Initiative and highlighted at professional education conferences. But what does college and career readiness actually look like when imagined, planned, and enacted inside of a school? The following article describes a small urban secondary school (6-12) in a Northeastern city that imagines college and career readiness as more than a set of learning objectives and discrete skills. Partnering with a college to envision an academic program for college readiness and career development even before the school enrolled its first student, the “Inquiry School” provides an example of collaboration between a school and a college that generates mutually beneficial opportunities for growth and learning, with a focus on preparing urban students for college and career. This article describes the collaboration and focuses on two pieces of the partnership: The Career Institute (CI) and the College Immersion Program (CIP)

The “Inquiry School” was conceived and planned with the help of a local school district, a local four year college and the Early College Initiative (ECI), a national movement launched with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support the development of college-school partnerships. The Inquiry School is an Early College High School that opened in 2005 with 83 sixth grade students and every year thereafter admits another 81-85 students to the sixth grade. The school is a regular, public school located in an urban area. Administrators recruit fifth grade students from the local area schools, especially students who continue to be underrepresented at institutions of higher learning, including struggling students, students with Individual Education Plans, and English Language Learners. Ethnically and academically, the Inquiry School reflects the diversity of its urban community: 50% of the students speak another language at home, over 25% of the student body receives special education services for learning disabilities, and 65% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Most of the current 11th grade students take classes at the partner college for both high school and college credit, attending their “regular” school for classes such as physical education, special electives, and Advisory. Next year, the school will be at full capacity,

serving approximately 500 students. As an early college school, students are expected to take their first college level class in the ninth grade, but this is not a requirement. When students are “ready,” they enroll in their first dual-credit college-level course. The dual credit helps students fulfill high school requirements, affording them the opportunity to graduate from high school in four years with 60 college credits.

The privilege and burden of early college readiness presents a challenge to the planning committee, a group of stakeholders that includes the school principal, administrators, college professors, teachers, parents and the college-school liaison. (The university-based college-school liaison’s role is to build the relationship between the college and the school). Even before the school opened, this committee asked, “How do we encourage students, most of whom are first-generation college-bound, to plan for college and careers? How can we help them to understand the connection between expanded career opportunities and academic success?” Two efforts emerged from these important questions. These are programs initiated through the college-school collaboration that support students’ career development and academic success and help motivate students to go to college. At the Inquiry School they are known as the Career Institute (CI) and the College Immersion Program (CIP). Following a brief discussion of the conceptual framework for both programs, each will be described.

### **Rationale for Program Development and Implementation**

The secondary school years (grades 6-12) are a critical time for ensuring future success in college and careers. According to a research report from ACT (American College Testing, 2008) students who do not meet crucial benchmarks in reading and math by the time they leave the eighth grade are likely to fall further behind. In fact, findings suggest that the best predictor of students’ college and career readiness is eighth-grade achievement. Based on these findings, ACT researchers strongly recommend that educators focus on programs that improve students’ college and career readiness skills in the middle school years in order to improve post-high school educational and career opportunities.

The issue of college readiness is particularly crucial for students of color who continue to be underrepresented at colleges and universities. Many, especially those located in urban areas, have little access to the kinds of rigorous courses needed for high school and college (Tierney, Colyar & Corwin, 2003; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003), and this lack is especially felt in the dearth of opportunities for higher-level math and science classes (Trusty, Spenser & Carney, 2005). The lack of access and availability creates unequal opportunities, and many students of color fall behind in middle school and continue to fall further behind in high school (Balfanz, 2009). Many secondary students of color also lack adequate resources and information about college and careers (Tierney et al., 2003), a gap that serves to widen the inequalities in college access at the most critical time for future planning.

Engaging students in planning for their future is critical as decisions students make in middle school and high school impact their future college and career opportunities (Akos, Konold, & Niles, 2004; Arrington, 2000; Osborn & Reardon, 2006; Trusty et al., 2005). The secondary school years also tend to be the point at which students begin to disengage from school and school-related activities (Trusty et al., 2005). Career planning is a way to engage students in school, both academically and socially, and



keep them on track by beginning to help them plan for career and college. Accordingly, part of a school's academic program should include multiple and on-going opportunities for students to become aware of and consider career interests and possible future goals throughout their 6-12 experience (Rivera & Schaefer, 2009).

Efforts to engage students in academic and social activities is often highlighted in the literature on student engagement but seldom seen in practice (Brazee, 2000). Students need "active learning," characterized as the most successful pedagogical approach to instruction for students, particularly in the middle level (NMSA, 2010), but the trends towards disengagement and apathy (Venezia et al, 2003) suggest that these methods may be lacking in actual practice. The Career Institute and the College Immersion Program provide an example of actual school practice with a focus on engagement. Both programs highlight the connection between career aspirations and academic learning, and both emerged as a result of the college-school collaboration.

### **The Career Institute**

The idea for the Career Institute (CI) evolved out of efforts to identify ways in which the Inquiry School could best prepare students to attend college as early as the ninth grade. The program was specifically designed to help students become more self-aware and reflective about their interests and abilities and expand their knowledge about the world of work. Additionally, the CI activities were designed to help students deepen their understandings of the connections among school work, careers, and post-high school educational goals so that they developed a goal-oriented plan for future.

During the first couple of years, the CI activities were delivered by college faculty and school counselors with the assistance of the teachers. The interventions took place during Advisory, a time built into each school day where one teacher and a small group of students create a safe, comfortable space for sharing and exploring social, emotional and academic experiences of school life (NMSA, 2010). As the Inquiry School continued to grow, teachers took over the delivery of the lessons plans with assistance from the school counselors.

Today, the CI activities are carried out in teacher-led Advisory sessions. Teachers receive a set of lesson plans and activities that are constructed by university faculty with input from teachers and school counselors. The lessons are designed to be developmentally appropriate and interesting for each Advisory grade level. With support from the school counselors, teachers engage students in completing the activities for each grade. While teachers meet with their advisory group throughout the school year, during the four to six weeks of the CI, the Advisory teachers focus specifically on students' career development. In keeping with the school's early college mission, the CI activities are geared at providing students with opportunities to explore their interests and abilities, explore information about the world of work, and begin to think about their future college and career goals.

The CI is one example of how school teachers, administrators and counselors can collaborate with college faculty and administration to infuse a focus on career development throughout students' academic experiences. Helping students understand themselves and relate this understanding to their future academic and career goals is an important aspect of college readiness and one that is integrated throughout the CI. In

order to give students an idea about what college is like before they take their first college courses, it is important to provide them with some “hands-on” learning. For the Inquiry School, experience with college readiness takes center stage in June as seventh and eighth grade students go to the partner college for one to two weeks. This is called the College Immersion Program (CIP).

### **The College Immersion Program**

In June, middle level students become “immersed” in college life during their regular school year: They do research in the library, exercise in the gymnasium and eat in the college cafeteria. The program literally brings the college and school together. Students report to their partner college to take classes taught by college professors. All professors engaged in the College Immersion Program (CIP) are recommended by colleagues on the school planning committee and have met with middle grades teachers and some students to learn active learning strategies for teaching at the middle grade level.

The CIP addresses middle grades students’ need for active learning and a responsive curriculum (NMSA, 2010). “Active learning” is characterized as the most successful pedagogical approach to instruction for students at the middle level; offering students the chance to develop their college readiness skills through hands-on, active learning is addressed by bringing them to college to experience the rigor and expectations of university life. It also gives them a chance to enjoy a week “away” from middle school.

The partner college is located about a mile away from the Inquiry School and all students report directly there. The seventh grade has one week at the college and begins each day by attending a college lecture. This lecture hall is filled exclusively with Inquiry School students, as are the rest of the classes they take during the CIP. Each day is carefully scripted so that students move throughout the day with their school peers (with their regular classroom teacher in the background) and sample a wide range of college life.

The daily morning lecture class, usually a geology or biology class scheduled from 9-10 am, requires students to take careful notes that they will use later for studying. Most students use the note-taking skills they had learned in Career Institute activities to conscientiously fill and organize their notebooks. They are encouraged to ask questions during the lecture, and a short Friday quiz gives students a chance to see how well they took notes and understood the material. If they choose, students’ scores may be included in their regular science classes. Grading for all classes is optional. This alleviates the stress of achievement and leaves only the pleasure of discovery and acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

At 10:00 a.m. students begin their self-selected, small (10-15 students) two-hour class with a college professor. Students interested in science choose the Green Energy class. Other classes include geology, book-making, art, sociology, psychology and a history class focused on immigration. Each professor who elects to teach in the CIP writes a course blurb, and students indicate their first, second and third choices from a menu of about seven. Most students get their first or second choice. Following their two-hour course, students gather in the college cafeteria for lunch and recreation. The afternoons contain a combination of art, physical education, science labs and library time. The



college librarian helps students learn how to use digital library resources so that they may complete homework for their two-hour class. Support for these first attempts at college level work is given by their Inquiry School teachers.

After a full week on campus, students begin emulating college students. They bring coffee to their lecture class and call their Inquiry Teachers “professor.” At this point, they also navigate the campus with ease and assurance.

The eighth grade students spend two weeks on campus, but their experience as “seasoned” college students differs from the seventh grade. They take two classes each morning taught by college professors: One is a small writing class focused on college level writing and the other is a health class. Each class lasts 90 minutes. For many students in the Inquiry School, writing extensively in subject areas is not new, but the idea of writing for a college professor may be intimidating. Teachers offer important support and encouragement to students and scaffold these first attempts at writing for college. As with the seventh grade, all classes are taken with peers, but eighth graders receive high school credit for passing their college health class. In the afternoons, Inquiry School teachers conduct regular middle school classes, but at the college.

### **Final Thoughts: Looking Both Ways**

The Career Institute and the College Immersion Program help infuse the partnership with mutual learning throughout the year. Five years of open-ended surveys gathered from professors and students after their experiences in the CIP help us understand how students’ conceptions of university professors change after the college experience. Most find hope and joy in the fact that university professors are “nice” people with whom “you can actually form relationships.” Students are also quite relieved that not all professors are “boring.” The CIP helps students experience college life first-hand. On the college campus, they get to know professors and imagine how college life may be a part of their future.

University professors who help write lessons plans for the Career Institute and teach college courses to middle grades students during the CIP talk about the privilege of helping secondary school students achieve in school and prepare for college. Many speak of increasing respect for middle and high school teachers, citing a “better understanding” of secondary teachers’ struggles and rewards. Others talk about “digging deep” for interesting answers to the many questions students in the middle grades ask.

Five years of short-answer surveys given to students and teachers each year before and after CI activities reveal that students begin to make connections among their interests, abilities, and plans for the future. They become more self-reflective and develop an awareness of and openness to possibilities available to them. Teachers notice the positive changes in students’ attitude.

Both programs foster a partnership that establishes mutually beneficial and enlightening experiences. By working together, the college and the school develop deeper understandings of and appreciation for each other. Mutual trust is cultivated and facilitated through these programs, and most students at the Inquiry School look

forward to completing their college experience at their partner's institution—on time, if not sooner. And with a career goal.

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