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Facilitating College Readiness through Campus Life Experiences

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Facilitating College Readiness through Campus Life Experiences

It's the first day of College Immersion--seventh graders arrive early looking nervous. They rotate around the principal and then their English teacher. Some greet classmates with nervous squeals. In fifteen minutes they will enter the academic hall in front of them and take their very first college lecture course.

The tension builds. Then a football appears. Several students move away to start throwing the ball around. Small clusters of students wander from their teachers and sit on the grass, talking and laughing. And just when it's really starting to look almost completely like "real" college, Colin finds a big stick and starts jabbing the air. "Look at me," he yells. "I'm a Ninja warrior!" (Field notes, June 2008)

Imagine bringing middle level students to college. What comes to mind? Some teachers and university colleagues raise an eyebrow. Others educators wonder about the relevance--after all, college is so far in the future. Some just shudder at the notion. This article aims to address these concerns and illustrate the kinds of college readiness behaviors that middle level students can explore and understand when exposed to college life for a short period of time.

When middle level students have the chance to experience college life with activities that have been carefully planned and structured with their interests and needs in mind, they can begin to imagine a future that includes college and career opportunities. They participate in an educational setting that is challenging, responsive, empowering and equitable—all critical attributes of a meaningful education (National Middle School Association, [NMSA], 2010). This article describes findings related to two different collaborations involving a university, a college and several middle schools: Both collaborations involved bringing high-need urban students in the seventh and eighth grades to college for four to five days to experience a developmentally responsive and imaginative approach to college readiness called “College Immersion.”

Findings from two different College Immersion (CI) collaborations were synthesized, and the kinds of rich college knowledge, behaviors and understandings that middle level students described following their CI experiences are presented. The importance of this article lies in

exploring ways in which middle level students can embrace the idea of pursuing a post-secondary education and begin to imagine what they must do now, in middle school, in order to create and achieve their post-high school dreams. An examination of what college readiness means and *why* college readiness must be addressed in middle school, especially for students in poverty and other high need situations, is presented first, followed by a description of the CI programs and students' responses to their college experiences.

College Readiness in the Middle Grades

Before delving into the existing literature on college readiness and the critical role that the middle school years play in students' life chances, it is helpful to define, explain and operationalize what is meant by "college readiness." The idea of "readiness" has several facets that may be explored through themes conceptualized in David T. Conley's (2007) analysis of the knowledge, strategies, dispositions, and behaviors possessed by the college-ready student. Although much of Conley's research and work (2005; 2007) focuses on high school students, his definitions of college readiness may be reconceptualized to reflect the nascent college readiness dispositions and attributes being developed among middle grades students who participate in College Immersion programs.

Conley's Facets of College Readiness

Conley (2007) identifies four key areas, or "dimensions" of interactive knowledge and skills that offer a comprehensive way to identify and define college readiness. Conley depicts the dimensions in a nested model.

[Figure 1]

Moving from the core to the outer rings, he identifies "Key Cognitive Strategies," "Key Content Knowledge," "Academic Behaviors," and "Contextual Skills and Awareness." Conley

explains that these facets “interact with and affect one another extensively” (p. 8), an assertion that underlines the importance of envisioning the idea of “college readiness” as integrated and relational. It also points to the importance of conceptualizing the idea of readiness as a process.

Conley’s (2007) notion of Key Cognitive Strategies lies at the core of the nested circles. This concept refers to the higher level thinking and analysis that college ready students engage in as they access understanding and create new ideas. Conley identifies seven cognitive strategies: Intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning/argumentation/proof, interpretation, precision & accuracy, and problem solving. Moving outward from the core, the next concept presented is the idea of Key Content. This centers on what students need to know in different content areas in order to have a solid foundation for more advanced learning. Key content represents the “stuff” of learning—the learning blocks of knowledge that student may build upon by engaging with key cognitive strategies. The next area, called “Key Academic Behaviors” describes the activities that college ready students engage in, including self-monitoring and study skills. All three facets interact inside the outermost ring, “Contextual Skills and Awareness,” a facet that refers to students’ understanding of the systems and culture of college contexts; in this area Conley highlights the importance of knowing the processes involved in college life, including admissions, tuition costs and financial aid systems.

At what point in the P-12 experience should school educators begin to focus on these facets in order to prepare students for college? As the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) begin to impact student learning, it is expected that the higher order thinking strategies that anchor the standards will help students develop the kinds of key cognitive strategies discussed by Conley (2007). What, though, of the other facets? Can we wait for high school to begin introducing students, especially underrepresented students in our most vulnerable populations, to

the process of college readiness? To address this question, it is helpful to examine the literature on the importance of the middle grades in the academic development of students.

Significance of Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades

Students' academic achievement during the middle level years has a profound and lasting impact on their future high school and post-high school experiences. A research report from ACT (American College Testing, 2008) found that by the end of eighth grade, students lacking benchmark skills in reading and math were likely to continue to fall further behind; additionally, the kinds of accelerated, rigorous courses that might help prepare students for higher level work, especially in math and science, were not readily available in high poverty schools (Tierney, Colyar & Corwin, 2003; Trusty, Spenser & Carney, 2005; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003), leaving some of our most vulnerable students unprepared for high school and college.

This lack of preparation, including a dearth of resources and current information about college and careers, begins to create a divide that launches some students towards success while others slide into what Balfanz (2009) describes as "achievement chasms" that place students "on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from ...high school" (p. 13). In fact, many students who eventually drop out of high school begin disengaging from their educational experiences in the middle grades, and many of these students are students of color, English Language Learners, and low-income students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010). This disengagement is especially troubling in light of research that shows students in the middle grades beginning to make decisions that impact high school (Trusty et al., 2005) and post-high school opportunities (Arrington, 2000; Osborn & Reardon, 2006; Trusty & Niles, 2003). Examples of these decisions include choosing a high school (i.e. in the area under study, there are over 700 different high school programs in

over 400 schools), taking advantage of higher level courses if available, participating in school and afterschool activities, and choosing to meet with the school counselor to gain advice about college and careers (Trusty et al., 2005). In the middle school years, students who are engaged in imagining their future post-secondary and career choices tend to make more informed choices and better decisions (Akos, Konold, & Niles, 2004; Arrington, 2000; Osborn & Reardon, 2006; Trusty et al., 2005).

The capacity to imagine and think about the future provides a cognitively based source of motivation (Bandura, 1977). This conceptual link between motivation and cognition scaffolds a self-interested future gaze. As Markus and Nurius (1986) explain, “Individuals’ self-knowledge of what is possible for them to achieve is motivation as it is particularized and individualized; it serves to frame behavior, and to guide its course” (p. 955). In experiencing college life in middle school, it is hoped that students begin to imagine a “possible self”—an identity as a confident student who can master challenging work (Finnan & Kombe, 2011) and find him or herself beginning to get ready for college.

It is also essential to consider the learning environments most engaging for students in the middle grades. Active learning, for example, is considered the most successful and engaging pedagogical approach to instruction for students in the middle level (NMSA, 2010) and research on engaged learning supports this (Willis, 2006; Willis, 2007; Wilson & Smetana, 2009). In active learning, students are placed at the center of learning and both produce and generate information (Shore, Ray & Goolkasian, 2013). Trends towards disengagement, however, (Venezia et al., 2003) along with evidence indicating that a responsive middle school curriculum is seldom seen in practice (Brazee, 2000) suggests that an active learning approach may be lacking in school settings. Arranging for students to engage in real college experiences at the

middle level literally places the child inside the center of college life and learning, affording them the opportunity to both produce and generate understandings about college life and use those understandings to imagine a future that includes college or other post-secondary institutions.

Research on the critical nature of the middle school years, combined with what we know middle level students need in their education, creates unique opportunities for universities and middle school partnerships. Indeed, one of the recommendations to emerge from research on the high school drop-out epidemic was the creation of partnerships between secondary schools and universities so that practitioners can both inform and take advantage of relevant research (Balfanz et al., 2010). The present study describes two institutions of higher education that welcomed middle level students onto their campus for a week of college life; both are located in a densely populated urban area in Northeastern United States. Although one is a private university and the other a public college, both have a history of strong commitment to community outreach and avidly support local community service programs. Considering that the most developmentally appropriate and effective approach to middle level learning occurs when students are actively engaged, it makes sense to actively engage them in college activities and classes. Providing college experiences at this level can promote contextual awareness (Conley, 2007) and career awareness (Schaefer & Rivera, 2011; Schaefer, Rivera & Ophals, 2010) as well as other facets of college readiness. In this paper, that college experience is a program for middle level students called “College Immersion.”

Description of the College Immersion Program

The College Immersion (CI) program began in 2007. At the time, a small public urban middle-secondary school was partnered with a local college. The students were mostly non-

traditional college-going and many struggled in school. In an effort to build students' understanding of the importance of post-secondary education while at the same time building and fostering the partnership, the idea of CI was conceived. For one week in June, all seventh grade students from the partnered school were invited to attend college. The preparation for this first endeavor was challenging: Professors from the college were invited to design high-level week-long courses in their field and write course blurbs. The professors then visited the school and described their course before a panel of 10 seventh grade students. The students voted on the most interesting and promising courses and these became the first set of classes for College Immersion. The 10-student panel selected a lecture course for all students in CI and five small courses, or "college majors" that students would choose from for their week-long experience. The professors whose courses were selected returned to the school one evening for a dinner with the school's seventh grade teachers. Here professors gained some understandings about strategies to use while teaching middle level students, including varying activities and assigning homework.

That first CI experience in 2007 proved both powerful and positive. The coordinator of the program and author of this article resolved to provide a yearly CI experience for every seventh grade child in the school, and when she left the school in 2010 to become a university professor at a different institution, she began a modified version of the CI program for a different set of local middle school students. The first CI program continues to thrive at the original school and college (Site 1) and another version of the CI program continues at the university of which the author is a full-time faculty member (Site 2).

Although located on two different campuses and occurring at different times of the year, both College Immersion programs shared basic similarities: They both involved bringing 50-80

middle level students to college for four to five days. Students were responsible for getting themselves to and from the college campus. Participation was not mandatory, but strongly recommended, especially for students who were struggling in school. Every student who expressed an interest in attending the CI program, even those regarded as “troublemakers” or seen as “disruptive,” were encouraged to attend. In over six years of program implementation at Site 1, only one student was asked to leave due to behavior issues. In the two years of the other program (Site 2), no student was asked to leave.

All of the middle level students’ college classes were taught by university professors, and students traveled to their different classes in peer cohorts, escorted by teachers or counselors. Students began each day with a 50 minute college lecture in order to give them a feel for taking notes and sitting in a large, stadium-style classroom. Past week-long lecture topics included Hurricanes and Natural Disasters, the Psychology of Music, and Toxicology. For their “major” courses, students chose smaller, seminar-style classes from a menu that included classes like Shakespeare, Medieval Myths & Life, Neuropsychology, Computers, Art & Design, Toxicology, and Human Relations. Each of these “major” courses lasted for two hours each day for the entire week. Following lunch, students’ afternoon activities included hour-long sessions such as physical education, art classes, visiting with Greek Life students, information on financial aid, campus tours, and conversations with college students. Each day was carefully scripted so that students remained together (with their regular classroom teacher or counselor in the background) and sampled a wide range of college life (See Appendix A and B for sample student schedules).

The purpose of this research was to gain a broad understanding of middle level students’ experiences of the CI program and examine if and how the CI program engaged middle level

students in active learning and facilitated understandings of college life related to facets of college readiness. The research questions posed were:

1. What understandings of college and college life do middle level students produce and generate after participating in a college immersion program?
2. In what ways do middle level students' understandings of college life and expectations reflect facets of college readiness?

Method

Participants and School Settings

A public college, a private university, and eight sets of middle level students figured in this study. Collaboration with the public college (Site 1) began in 2007--one year after college administration and faculty helped open a new small school with 81 sixth grade students. The school, launched in 2005 with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was an Early College High School that strived to recruit struggling students, students in poverty, English Language Learners and students with Individual Education Plans. College Immersion was created as a way to foster and deepen the bonds of the college-school partnership. The population of the school reflects its diverse, urban community: Over 50% of students attending the school speak another language at home. More than 25% of the student body qualifies for special educational services and resources, and 65% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

[Table 1]

In this site, all seventh grade students (approximately 81 students in total) were invited to College Immersion regardless of grades and behavior. Students attended the program during the regular school year for one full week. Permission to study students' surveys results was obtained through the district and affiliated university. In the first year of CI (2007), the students and

professors at Site 1 gave such positive feedback on surveys (see Appendix C) that the program has now been institutionalized, with every seventh grade class at Site 1 enjoying a full week of college life, usually in the second week of June.

The second CI collaboration (Site 2) was between a private university and two local public schools. It began in 2011 at the request of the Director of a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant who worked on the university campus and learned about Site 1's College Immersion program at a research forum. The director wished to use grant money to fund a similar project. Due to grant restrictions, the CI could only be offered outside of the regular school year, so the CI was instituted during Winter Break, a week in February where public school children in the area had five days off from school (because one of those days was Presidents' Day, also a university holiday, no classes could be scheduled on that Monday).

The two middle schools (Schools A and B) targeted for the CI program in Site 2 were in high poverty areas with diverse populations. School A served 1,376 students in grades 6-8; 91% qualified for free and/or reduced lunch. School B served 705 students in grades 6-8; 81% qualified for free and/or reduced lunch. To recruit a wide swath of students from these schools, during homeroom each student was given a flyer describing the CI program and announcing that an afterschool assembly would provide more information. Additionally, the program developer and researcher set up a table at the entrance to the schools for parent-teacher conference days and evenings. Here she gave parents and students information about the program and urged them to attend her information session. In an effort to identify students who were not in honors or accelerated classes, counselors and teachers working in afterschool programs used their knowledge of students to encourage struggling and disengaged students to attend the information assembly. The first twenty-five students from each school to complete an information packet

following the school assembly were recruited: The packet included signed letters of assent and consent, as well as eight open-ended survey questions; students answered the same questions before and after their CI experiences (see Appendix D).

Researcher Role in Study

It is important to note that as program developer, this author was deeply involved in every aspect of the CI programs in both schools and strived to ensure that every student had a positive experience. This meant talking to parents, helping students find their way to the university, meeting with teachers, principals, and professors, and being highly visible before and during the CI program. It should also be noted that the program developer's intimate knowledge of the students and their experience may have figured in her analysis of survey data, field notes, and interview results. To address issues of subjectivity, she included reflections on her own subjectivity as part of the field notes; she also understood that the point of the research was not to understand whether the CI program was good or bad, but to add knowledge to the field (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In the case of this program, that field was college readiness. Additionally, she strived to include all voices in this study and used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) in Site 2 to interview students who seemed successful in the CI program as well as students who appeared disengaged. She assumed the role of a participant-observer researcher in the program and remained with students for the entire week. The role of the researcher was intimately bound up in data collection; a description of this relationship follows.

Data Sources

At Site 1 each seventh grade student participating in CI took an exit survey on the last day of the program. For this study, 450 seventh grade surveys (Appendix C) were analyzed (2007-2011), along with daily field notes written by the program developer and researcher. From

this site, four sets of surveys were analyzed (n. 450) spanning 2007-2011 along with over 20 typed, single-spaced field notes taken by the researcher as a participant-observer during the program itself in the years 2007, 2008 and 2009.

At Site 2 two sets of pre and post survey data (n. 91) were analyzed (45 from 2011 and 46 from 2012) along with 24 open-ended interviews from 2012. Each interview lasted 15-35 minutes and each was completely transcribed. Again the researcher produced over 20 pages of field notes and assumed the role of participant-observer for both years studied: 2011 and 2012. Although survey data sets from Site 1 taken during years 2010 and 2011 were also analyzed, it must be noted that the researcher did not participate as an observer in CI during those years.

[Table 2]

In the years that the program developer and researcher participated as an observer (Years 2007, 2008, 2009 at Site 1 and 2011 and 2012 at Site 2) she remained with students from start to finish. As a way of gaining multiple perspectives on students' and professors' experiences in the program, she attended the lectures and each of the "major" 2-hour classes at least once. She gave the welcome address to students before the first lecture of the week, ate lunch with students and accompanied them to their various afternoon activities. She gave closing remarks at students' final CI activity. As a participant-observer, she wrote detailed field notes about the students and deep descriptions of her own experiences. In 2012, she gained permission from students, parents and educational institutions to interview students from Site 2 to triangulate the growing categories that were emerging from a cross-case analysis of both sites. Twenty-five students were asked or volunteered to be interviewed. Of those, 24 allowed their interviews to be transcribed and analyzed (see Appendix E). One student had difficulty articulating her feelings

and thoughts about the CI program and after the interview requested that the tape not be utilized in the study.

Data Analysis

This research study used naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and qualitative research methods to gain insights into the understandings of college and college life that students produced and generated after participating in a College Immersion program and ways that these understanding did or did not figure in facets of college readiness. This study examined two sites, treating each site as a case study (Yin, 2008). Fieldwork and data collection were accomplished one site at a time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data were analyzed using a two-stage approach: The within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009). For within-case analysis, the data were coded for identification and development of categories using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The coding process began with open coding. Here field notes and students' articulations of their CI experiences were read carefully, with lists of names and ideas about what students said about their experiences, how they said it, and the researcher's observations of students' experiences. In open coding, preliminary categories were developed. In axial coding, the codes were re-examined to merge redundant categories and conceptualize larger categories that captured students' experiences. At this stage, the researcher looked carefully for any expressions that did not fit with the developed categories. Finally, the researcher examined the data again to integrate categories and select representative pieces of the data.

After the data from each site were analyzed, cross-case analysis of both sites began using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method to determine the patterns of experiences that cut across both cases. In order to develop categories and ultimately concepts

(Charmaz, 2000), the researcher engaged in “thematic analysis,” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) looking across codes to locate common categories, and identify particular themes (Charmaz, 2000; Ely, 2002). This activity helped the researcher understand the salient categories about college life and college work that emerged from students’ experiences. Three major categories were created: Following a week-long experience of immersion in college life, students (1) Imagined a future that included post-secondary possibilities (2) Developed college knowledge, and (3) Cultivated deeply positive feelings about college.

Findings

Students Imagine a Future that Includes Post-Secondary Possibilities

Now I’m thinking about which college I should go to, should I go here or should I go there. The only reason why I wouldn’t come here is because I really like football. In college you’re going to meet a whole bunch of new people. You can’t just be quiet and you have to start doing things... This program teaches you about college and before I came here I didn’t know that much about college and now I want to go to college” (Site 2, interview 2012).

Middle level students experiencing college for the first time do not usually enjoy their first days on campus. As depicted in the field notes that introduced this article, on the first day of CI students typically cling to their friends or teachers. Even by the second day, however, a shift has begun: “In the second day of college I feel more comfortable because I know where to go in the college. In the first day it’s totally different. I don’t feel comfortable with everything. I feel struggle even with my friends [there]” (Site 1, 2007), and by Friday, the scene is very different:

“...as we stand waiting for students to arrive, they nod to us and keep walking ... or just ignore their teachers completely. Most of them walk by reviewing notecards or reading papers. Sam stops to ask a question but Ricky pulls him back: “Come on, we’re going to be late for our Health final!” [Others] mill about, waiting for their final college lecture on hurricanes...sad it’s their last day with their small, two-hour class. (Field notes Site 1, 2008)

This comfort with college was evident in how students spoke about how they might set goals and work hard now in middle school and then high school in order to achieve their future dreams of college. “Bob,” [all students’ names are self-selected pseudonyms] attended a financial aid session and asked specific, pointed questions such as, “How many classes can you take in one semester?” and “How many credits you need to graduate?” and then, “How fast can you do it”? In this session, he also found out about AP classes in high school and expressed interest in taking as many AP classes as possible in order to save time and money. During an interview with Bob (Site 2, 2012), it became clear that the impetus for his line of questioning came from his concern for taking care of his family. He said, “I have the experience [of college] but now I can have more experience and experience more college classes. Going to high school and taking a college course, I can go to a better college.” When asked to explain, he said he wanted to go to college and get a great job “because I want to be there to take care of my family so my family doesn’t have to worry about anything. I want to make sure I know what I’m doing [so] when I get to the real college I can just go through.” Bob confided that he was fairly certain that if he took AP classes in high school, he could finish in three years.

Bob’s attitude differed from other students’ in its single-minded focus, but his post-secondary planning stance was echoed by other middle level students attending Immersion. “College was a fun learning experience that will help me in the future...we got to work on the computer and also learn something new that may be useful in the future” (Site 1, 2007). The two-hour course, which students selected from a menu of choices, gave them their first taste of “choosing” a college major or focusing in on their interests: “They let us pick what we wanted to do. Also the courses we were able to take kind of helped us to see what direction we might want to go in life and the careers we want to choose” (Site 1, 2010).

Additionally, students often cited the content they learned in their small, two hour classes as helpful for the future: “It help me learned [sic] interesting new things that probably new college students learning now. So if I remember these notes I will of course use them for college if we’re learning about it” (Site 1, 2008). The process of going to classes in different areas of the campus also helped students envision themselves as college students in the future: “Now when it is really time for me to go to college I won’t be afraid...It was a lot of fun. I liked hearing the lectures every morning and going back to our small classes... I saw what it would be like when I’m older and I have the chance to go to college” (Site 1, 2008).

Not only did students begin to envision themselves as college students, but they spoke about how they might set goals and work hard now in middle school and then high school in order to achieve their future dreams of college. As Sonya said in an interview, “The most important thing that I saw was scholarships to go to school...I’m more prepared now because before I really didn’t care, and now it got proved to me that you should really care about college because there’s a lot of stuff ahead of you” (Site 2, 2012). Melanie echoed this idea of working in school now in order to achieve later. In an interview she said, “To be prepared for it [college], to be an intern as well, [I need] to work hard in school right now. It’ll help me to get a scholarship” (Site 2, 2012). The forward-looking stance held by students was a salient aspect of the interviews conducted with them.

In these last four days I’ve watched students who were not from the “gifted” classes learn drive, learn ambition, learn why and how they need to study and work hard. The growth in just 4 days has been exponential, and amazing. In the interviews – and wow am I glad I did them—they are talking about their goals and ambitions, the fact that now they need to work harder to achieve their dreams. It’s a conceptualization, a concrete look at the nuts and bolts of college life that gives them a specific vision to focus on and a realistic dream to achieve. (Field notes, Site 2, 2012)

Often, when students considered a future that included college, they also talked about what they learned in their college classes and *how* they learned in their college classes. This understanding of what and how students learn in college was subsumed under the theme, College Knowledge.

Students Develop College Knowledge

[College Immersion] was able to let me know what a college campus is like, what it looks like and what it feels like. It did kind of change my perspective...it got to let me explore, and entirely see inside, what school was like...I was able to see what type of professors they were and how they think and how they teach the students and connect to everyone, and how friends can become brothers and sisters on the campus and things like that (Interview with "Ivan," Site 2, 2012).

As expressed by Ivan, there were two aspects of college that students especially appreciated: Knowledge of the campus, and knowledge of how courses and professors worked.

Knowledge of Campus

A major theme to emerge from students' talk and writing about Immersion was their deep satisfaction in being able to navigate the college campus. The act of walking to and through the campus with purpose and knowledge afforded students a different perspective of the campus itself. Middle level students connected this confidence of knowing the campus with feeling like a "real" college student: As Drose explained in an interview, "...now I have experience with college I'm more ready...I'm exposed to a different background, instead of just going to school, I'm going to class, and you're moving to different building after building" (Site 2, 2012).

Another student wrote, "I got to experience going around a college campus with a college schedule and at the second day we knew our way around the place without help...it helped us see the college building[s] and what we will feel like in college so we know what to expect when we actually get there" (Site 1, 2008). Students connected confidence in their physical knowledge of the campus with imagining how that campus might feel to them in the future. As with Conley's

interactive facets of college readiness, this category connects to the first theme, where students imagine a future that includes college. The college classes themselves, especially the morning lecture and the longer daily two-hour classes, gave students a sense of how college classes work. “Double A” in particular articulated how college conversations differed from middle school conversations:

Double A: [in my 2-hour class] we learned about different stuff like sticking together and the worst case scenario, like in the beginning we learned what if there was a tsunami and we had to kill five of the people we didn’t need, like we learned how to settle that. Human Relations has been my kind of subject, I even tell my dad what we talk about

MB: Do you think you could have those conversations in middle school?

Double A: Yes but we really don’t get as deep into it

A conversation with “David” gives another perspective on how students in CI valued the college discussions:

David: Yes. I like that we were treated like real college kids and we could talk about sexual relationships but we can’t do that in junior high school because everyone will start laughing.

MB: Do you think that experience helps prepare you for college?

David: Yes. Now I know when I go to college, I’m going to [university in Site 2], I’ll know some of the teachers.

MB: That would be great if you had the same professor. Do you think the College Immersion program helped prepare you for college?

David: Yes. Now I know that in college, well in junior high school, the classes are right next to each other, but in college you have to go from building to building. I thought college was like junior high school, but the classes are all around.

David connects knowledge of the physical campus to his comfort with and knowledge of college and of professors. This knowledge of professors emerged as an important aspect of students’ knowledge of college.

Professors

The most surprising part of CI for many students was the professors. One student wrote, “It surprised me that professors aren’t boring. Before the college experience, I thought all professors are either mean or boring. I was expecting [Dr. G] to be an old, strict historian. He was really engaging and fun” (Site 1, 2007).

Students seemed pleased to know that college professors could and would go out of their way to help them understand complicated or dense topics. Prior to CI, students expressed fears such as, “[professors] make you write fast and theirs [sic] no slow people in the...class... They speak faster and don’t show lesson on board, they are harder and expect more. They care less about your problems” (Site 2, 2011). Before attending CI, another student wrote, “College professors are more serious and demanding. In middle school if you slip up you get a second chance. In college theres [sic] no time to mess up. Collge [sic] porfessors [sic] proably [sic] have a no nonsense rule” (Site 2, 2012).

One of the most powerful understandings to emerge from the College Immersion experience was students’ changed perceptions of professors. Instead of the “serious and demanding” person imagined by students, after CI students were expressing the idea that

The professors were very caring...They ...were nice and they are different from middle school teachers because they go fast [sic] but they make sure you are with. [sic] ...we did not understand it at first but the professors explain it to me and we understood it when she was done understanding [sic] it.” (Site 2, 2011)

The importance of this understanding was reflected in students’ belief that even if she or he had not acquired all of the content knowledge needed for the class, their professors might be willing to help them: “They [professors] weren’t as mean as I thought. They cared for the well being of our academics [sic] was pleasant to know I would not be left out in college” (Site 2, 2011). Professors also demonstrated willingness to respond to students’ interests and needs,

particularly the need of middle level students for active learning; the following observation was taken from a course called “Green Energy, Green Power:”

In Professor M’s class on energy, the students were freezing in the air conditioning. So Professor M. gave them a quick lesson on creating energy by taking them for an energetic jog up and down the stairs. Prof. M’s class always seems to be somewhere interesting! Yesterday they walked around the Science Building measuring the temperature of various objects. When they got back to the classroom there were formulas to study and equations to work on. Physically tired, the all-boy class quickly went to work on the complicated problems. I was impressed, and when one student had an issue converting volts into watts, Prof. M. took such time and care explaining the problem that they were all late for lunch. And not one student complained! (Site 1, Field notes, 2008)

The shifting perspective on professors filled up most of the data on how students began to feel more comfortable and “like a college student” during the College Immersion program.

Students Cultivate Deeply Positive Feelings about College

Students’ positive experiences of college during CI emerged as a major theme in middle level students’ experiences. This included a sense of wonderment, exploration and forward-looking gaze. Enthusiasm for college was a salient feature of students’ talk and writing:

I thought this was an awesome week and I loved it. I thought having a taste of college life was really cool. I wish it was longer and I didn’t have to go back to school. I’m going to miss being able to have lunch outdoors and doing all this cool stuff... I liked being able to be more on my own and being treated more like an adult, lunch, and just chilling [Site 1, 2009]

Students frequently used the words “love” and “fun” to describe their experiences in the program. Many contextualized this idea of love and fun with the freedom they were given. The college cafeteria, for example, provided a chance for students to choose their lunch. They exercised choice in selecting their two-hour “major” subject. Students appeared to value the opportunity to be treated as older and more mature. Students wrote comments like, “[Immersion] showed me how to behave as a college student and what to expect. It was an enjoyable experience which helped every student individually. I learned a lot here” (Site 1, 2011), and “I

liked feeling older and how as a 7th grader they treat me like a college kid...I loved feeling like an adult” (Site 1, 2010). Students evinced a positive attitude towards college in general: “This program has made me become less shy, nervous, and scared about college. I can’t wait to go to college. I just need to set my mind for it” (Site 2, 2012).

In analyzing seven sets of survey data, two students indicated that they weren’t sure they would like to do the CI program again. Overwhelmingly, however, students indicated that the college experience helped them look towards the future with hope and enthusiasm, and many spoke about doing better now in middle school in order improve their college options.

Discussion

Situating the findings of this study within Conley’s (2007) framework for College Readiness allows us to see how the idea of college readiness might be re-imagined for middle level students. Conley’s four dimensions of readiness may be seen in this study’s analysis of middle level students’ experiences following CI. Unlike Conley’s representation, the dimensions of college readiness as exhibited by students did not appear neatly nested. Instead, their experiences moved in and out of the dimensions, reflecting a sampling of sorts. Conley’s conceptual model, however, is useful as a guide or map to understanding how students’ middle level college experiences may provide a kind of context and foundation—a scaffold of sorts, for future college readiness development.

[Figure 2]

Contextual Skills and Awareness:

The idea of contextual skills and awareness was most prevalent in this study’s finding that students “Developed College Knowledge.” Navigating the college campus with growing confidence was important to students and gave them a kind of “experiential” learning that was

especially important for the middle grades child (NMSA, 2010; Shore et al., 2013; Willis, 2006). Physical knowledge of the campus supported students' evolving understandings of what it meant to be a college student. Students also talked about how their exposure to "real" college students, Greek Life activities, financial aid, scholarships, and opportunities for academic and sports scholarships helped create a more complex and realistic view of college. As Melanie explained in her interview, the most important thing she learned from the CI experience was "what we learned about internships and college life. It helped me learn, in the future, what they have and it makes me want to learn more about it" (Site 2, 2012). Visiting with university students who received financial aid support elicited a plethora of questions during a class session with a financial aid counselor and college students.

Students were also surprised at the camaraderie and friendships they witnessed among college students. This more complex understanding of college life and culture was a powerful motivator for many. What had formerly been strange was now familiar, enabling many to imagine themselves on a college campus, learning, walking from class to class, and making friends and enjoying campus life. Perhaps even more important was the related finding that students "Cultivated deeply positive feelings about college" after their CI experience.

Academic Behaviors

During CI, students cultivated college knowledge and also observed and cultivated some of the academic behaviors they felt college students must possess. Prior to CI, students presented a somewhat idealized vision of how the typical college student behaved: "They do good in all their classes do good in all exams, get their notes and listen to their professor. They pay attention in class and organize their workplace" (Site 2, 2011). Following CI, many students appeared to

have a more nuanced understanding of the demands placed on college students. As one student (Site 2, 2011) wrote in her post-CI survey,

I think college students do their work, participate, and come on time to their classes. They volunteer and give back to their community. Successful college students try to put their best effort and actually enjoy their courses.

The experience of “acting college,” as one student phrased it, helped them understand some of the pressures of the college student. In an interview, Omar explained what he learned about self-monitoring in his 2-hour class:

One thing in Shakespeare class, we had to remember a little passage, and we didn't entirely have to memorize all of it. That day, I went home, I studied a little bit, but then the next day I didn't remember everything about it, so when I got home, I probably should have studied a little bit more, even though I thought I was sure of myself (Site 2, 2012).

Engaging in a college class that required students to self-monitor and study helped some of them begin to reframe their academic identity and think about themselves as college students. This idea also related to the study's finding that following CI, students “Imagined a future that included post-secondary possibilities.” This vision included strategies that are interesting in their specificity: “To have the best chances of success I would take very good notes, pay attention in class, ask the teacher for help and actually good [sic] to class all the time” (Site 1, 2010). Students also wrote that the CI experience “Showed me how a college student would act, taught me how a college student's life is and showed me how I have to be responsible for myself” (Site 2, 2011). Students described “feeling” like a college student, and although this experience manifested differently for each student, overall there was a deeply positive and satisfying sense of accomplishment. As one wrote, “It wasn't that serious, but you saw the identity of a college student...it built you another identity of a college student” (Site 2, 2012). Seeing, feeling and

experiencing the sensation of “acting college” encouraged some to try on this new academic identity and cultivate positive feelings about college.

Key Content Knowledge

While it is certainly not possible in one week for middle level students to acquire the necessary understandings in math, science, social sciences, languages and arts that Conley (2007) defines, they evinced pride and pleasure in the content knowledge they did gain. In particular, the lecture class helped students feel like a college student, and the facts that they wrote in painstaking detail in their lecture notes and studied again at home were deeply satisfying. In fact, most students were eager for more and challenging work. This may help explain why some expressed disappointment in the level and amount of work encountered in their two-hour classes. In fact, their enthusiasm for learning was interesting to observe and remarked on, somewhat wryly, by students’ regular subject area teachers who openly wondered why their students were so excited for more homework.

Key Cognitive Strategies

Some students in CI demonstrated a kind of hunger for learning that illustrated the key cognitive strategies of Inquisitiveness and Intellectual Openness. This hunger was especially evident in their two-hour class. Most students said it was here that they learned the most and developed a rapport with their professor. Others expressed a desire for more work:

I thought the work would be more, I thought I was going to be challenging [sic] in a way but it turns out that I went on and beyond giving myself more work that [sic] I’m supposed to. I think we should’ve done more work (Site 1, 2009).

Some of this enthusiasm for learning may be due to the fact that most students received their first choice of “major,” which was the two-hour course. Other enthusiasm for learning may be attributed to the many professors who allowed students to follow their interests—sometimes

to such an extreme that when students were curious about how fire extinguishers worked, as we have seen, their physics professor encouraged them to take it apart. This invitation to explore interests generated a great deal of excitement among students and provided opportunities for students to begin cultivating and using key cognitive strategies in order to develop College Knowledge.

Conclusion

In reconceptualizing Conley's (2007) framework, we can begin to imagine ways to provide real and relatable scaffolds to college readiness while students are still in middle school. It is interesting to consider how Conley's framework might inform other middle school programs. For example, Finnan and Kombe (2011) present a school-university initiated intervention program for high risk and over age middle school students that accelerates learning in order to help students graduate on time. The "Accelerated Program" succeeds for the most part; students discuss their changed identity from poor students to capable students with abilities. The program contains many elements found in CI, including active learning, small learning environments and support from the university. Reconceptualizing this wonderful program through Conley's facets of college readiness can add a dimension of college awareness that may enhance students' experiences in the Accelerated Program. For example, exposure to college classes and life may help them cultivate an identity as a capable, college-bound student. Additionally, students might cultivate a love for college and ideas for future career paths. Perhaps they would make post-secondary learning a part of what they expect and hope for as they begin high school.

Collaborations between middle schools and universities can create opportunities for students to experience college life and develop positive memories of college activities. A strong

recommendation to emerge from a review of the literature on college and career readiness was for educators to 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. CI helps students envision what college looks and feels like without the real stress of grades and trying to navigate the college campus alone. Partnerships between local colleges and middle schools can provide opportunities for professors to understand the joys and challenges of middle level teaching and gives students a glimpse of a possible future that includes some postsecondary education. Even if middle school students go to a local college for just a day of college experiences, they can begin to develop a framework for thinking about college and college life. Universities and colleges with schools of education might be especially receptive to this kind of collaboration.

Students in the middle grades cultivated important perceptions about college after participating in College Immersion: Students realized that professors were people with whom they could form a relationship. Also, because students' interest in the classes drove their selection of courses, choice and interest seemed to play a role in students' understanding of the course material and their enthusiasm for acquiring new subject area knowledge. Some students suggested that they were now more motivated to do well in middle and high school in order to increase their opportunities for college access and success. By actively engaging in college activities, students developed the beginnings of a framework for thinking about college or other post-secondary experiences in their future. The kind of active learning through a kind of immersive participation provided deeply positive experiences for students.

Students' participation in the CI program addresses President Obama's call to create a "new vision" to promote activities that build students' capacity for college and career readiness (February 22, 2010). Students' comments and experiences indicate that post CI they are beginning to "set their mind" for college, and this idea is one of the most important outcomes of this program. As we see evidence that students from our most vulnerable populations, such as the populations that participated in this study, begin disengaging from school in their middle school years (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2010), programs such as these that engage students in thinking about and imagining their future become even more important. As students of color continue to be underrepresented at colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions, it is imperative that we create more programs for middle level students that promote active learning and offer students choices that challenge their minds and imaginations.

Active learning for middle level students is especially pertinent for this study. Here students are placed directly in the heart of the action. We can see how the idea of "immersing" students in activities so that they engage with learning in ways that ask them to generate and produce information can be a deeply positive and rewarding learning experience. Providing students with similar experiences of active learning with higher level work within classrooms (i.e. group work, authentic projects, field trips) may help students to engage with key cognitive strategies in ways that are memorable and help prepare them for college level work. By "doing" college, students produce and generate understandings about college and college life in ways that are deeply positive. They are active participants in their own learning about college. College is no longer an amorphous anchor for a Common Core Standard. College is now a memory.

While students' positive feelings towards college are encouraging, they are also worrying. Is it unrealistic to regard college as "fun?" Will students be ready to engage in the hard

work needed to succeed in college? Or is it enough, in seventh and eighth grade, to feel confident and positive about college success in the future? It is hoped that by giving students the opportunity to experience life on a college campus, they will consider college as a serious part of their future plans and begin to see the relevance of their current work in middle school.

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Appendix A: Sample Schedule from Site 1

SEVENTH GRADE COLLEGE IMMERSION SCHEDULE: JUNE 8-12

	CLASS A	CLASS B	CLASS C
MONDAY	(Ms. F)	(Mr. C.)	(Ms. S)
8:50-9:50	Lecture: K. 270*	Lecture: K. 270*	Lecture: K. 270*
10:00-12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00-12:55	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00-2:10	Physical Education	Art: **	Library
2:15-3:30	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433**
TUESDAY			
8:50-9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00-12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00-1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00-2:10	Art: 433**	Library	Physical Education
2:15-3:30	Physical Education	Art: 433	Library
WEDNESDAY			
8:50-9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00-12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00-1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00-2:10	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433
2:15-3:30	Art: 433	Library	Physical Education
THURSDAY			
8:50-9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00-12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00-1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00-2:10	Physical Education	Art: 433	Library
2:15-3:30	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433
FRIDAY			
8:50-9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00-12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00-1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00-2:10	Art: 433	Library	Physical Education
2:15-3:30	Physical Education	Classroom	Library

* **Morning lecture course: How Many People can the Earth Support?** A series of lectures by Dr. B

****Sketching History: A Printmaking Workshop**

Dr. R

Students will create drawings based on a series of prints featured in xxx museum. Students will analyze works featured in the exhibition and use them as inspiration for their own drawings and printing plates. Students will create cardboard relief prints and pull prints from the plate. No prior artistic experience is required.

Appendix B: Sample Schedule from Site 2

COLLEGE IMMERSION SCHEDULE: FEBRUARY 19-22

	CLASS: Human Relations Professor W.	CLASS: Criminal Justice Professor C.	CLASS: ART Professor D.	CLASS: Sports Management Professor H.
TUESDAY				
8:45-8:55	Sign in: S. Cafe			
9:00-9:55	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)			
10:00-11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00-1:00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:10-1:30	Public Safety : Bldg. S			
1:35-2:55	Campus Tour	Campus Tour	Campus Tour	Campus Tour
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
WEDNESDAY				
8:45-8:55	Sign in: S. Cafe			
9:00-9:55	Lecture: Toxicology (room)	Lecture: Toxicology)	Lecture: Toxicology	Lecture: Toxicology
10:00-11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00-1:10	Lunch with Greek Life Members (S. Cafe)			
1:00-1:30	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.
1:20-2:00	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity
2:00-2:55	CAREER PLANNING: S. Cafe			
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
THURSDAY				
8:45-8:55	Sign in: S. Cafe			
9:00-9:55	Living on Campus S. Café			
10:10-11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00-1:10	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall
1:00-3:00	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy
1:00-2:00	Career Lecture: D 301			
2:15-2:55	Community Building Room TBD			
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
FRIDAY				
8:45-8:55	Sign in: S. Cafe			
9:00-9:55	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)			
10:00-11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00-1:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:30-2:55	Closing Ceremony (Presidents Room, C. Arena)			
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal

Appendix C (Survey for Site 1)

What part of the College Immersion program did you like the most?

What part of the College Immersion program could have been better?

In which part of the College Immersion program did you *learn* the most?
Please describe what you learned (generally)

What part of the college experience surprised you the most?

In your opinion, was this College Immersion week a valuable experience? Why or why not?

Please describe your overall opinion and view of the Immersion Program.

Do you think the College Immersion program helped prepare you for college? Why or why not?

Would you like to do this again? (circle one) Yes No Maybe

Appendix D (Survey for Site 2)
Pre-College Immersion Student Survey

1. How would you describe your academic preparation for college classes?
2. How do you think college classes compare to your middle school classes?
3. What do you think successful college students do in order to earn high grades?
4. If you were to enroll in a college course now, what would you do so you have the best chances for success? (i.e. time management, organization, note-taking, concentrating, etc.)
5. How do you think college professors are similar to and different from your middle school teachers? Please describe
6. Describe how you think college assignments differ from your middle school assignments
7. What do you think it takes to succeed in college? Please describe.
8. Do you expect to go to college after high school? Why? Why not?

Post-College Immersion Student Survey

1. How would you now describe your academic preparation for college classes?
2. How did the college classes compare to your middle school classes? Please explain
3. What do you think successful college students do in order to earn high grades?
4. If you were to enroll in a college course now, what would you do so you have the best chances for success?
5. How were your college professors similar to and different from your middle school teachers? Please describe.
6. Describe how you did on your college homework assignments. How did they differ from your middle school assignments?
7. What do you think it takes to succeed in college? Please describe.
8. Do you expect to go to college after high school? Why? Why not?

Appendix E (Site 2)

College Immersion Interview Protocol

Say to Students before Interviewing: I'm here to find out about your experiences at College Immersion so far. This interview will be recorded. You may decide to stop answering the questions at any time and ask for the tape not to be used. This is an interview, but it is also a conversation about how your experiences here at xxx University. Do I have your permission to ask you a few questions?

1. Tell me about your experience at College Immersion so far. Do you think this experience prepares you for college? How?
2. Do you expect to go to college? Why?
3. What have you learned so far this week? Will that prepare you for college? How?
4. How prepared do you feel about going to college now?