The Path to College

These nonprofits help schools leverage grants and technical assistance to make college attendance possible for all students

By Linda Lecht and Lisa Ciacci

Oscar Garcia grew up in Miami. He was raised by his Cuban grandparents after his mother died. He excelled in primary school but hit a wall in high school. He missed his mother and did not see where high school would lead him. His grades and motivation fell. Friends who finished high school were getting low-paying jobs; some of them got their jobs before graduating. His agenda for high school: to have fun.

Still, Oscar's ninth-grade English teacher at Westland Hialeah Senior High School saw promise in him. She believed if he could see that other paths were available, he would strive to do well. She encouraged him to join an afterschool activity called the College Club. The high school was finding ways to get more students to contemplate their future and put themselves on the path to college.

The College Club was exactly what Oscar needed. Now a senior, he recalls, "I entered high school not really caring. My English teacher told me to go to the College Club. I didn't think it would change me as much as it did. The College Club took a kid who was lost and really helped him out."

Simple but smart

The College Club is just one piece of a powerful and replicable model of how schools can help improve college readiness for all students.

In 2008, the Citi Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Citigroup, launched an initiative to help improve college enrollment and completion rates for high-need populations. Citi Foundation targeted three local education funds: Miami-Dade County, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. Each received challenge grants and technical assistance to develop demonstration projects that transform high schools into places where college is a possibility for every student.

"In today's economy, we see that the growth of opportunities for young people is in organizations and jobs that require much higher skill levels than in past decades," says Daria Sheehan, senior program officer at the Citi Foundation. "Since our foundation's mission is the economic empowerment and financial inclusion of low-income families in the communities where Citi operates, boosting college completion rates is a logical place to start." The foundation invested $5.1 million to start the initiative—the Citi Postsecondary Success Program (CPSP).

The Education Fund of Miami-Dade County worked with Miami-Dade Public Schools to pilot their jointly developed model at three high schools. Although the high schools had very different student populations, each had a free and reduced-price lunch rate of more than 60 percent and a college enrollment rate that was lower than the district average.

"By piloting this initiative in three very different communities, The Education Fund and the district could determine if our model would work in any school," says Hector Ponte, The Education Fund chairman.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools is the fourth-largest school district in the country. Each high school in the pilot program serves different communities. At Westland Hialeah Senior High School, the population is 97 percent Hispanic, with a large percentage of the families recently arrived from other countries. Miami Southridge Senior High school has a large African-American population in a community that is less urban. The economy surrounding Miami Beach Senior High School is based on the tourism industry with the low-wage jobs that sustain it.

The results after five years are promising. An evaluation of Miami-Dade's pilot high schools completed last year by the Philadelphia-based OMG Center for Collaborative Learning found:

- College-enrollment rates overall increased by 34 percent.
- College-enrollment rates for black students rose 69 percent versus a decrease of 6 percent in comparison schools.
- College-enrollment rates for Hispanic students rose 25 percent, significantly outpacing the 5 percent gain in comparison schools.
- College persistence rates (measured by high school graduates who go on to enroll as college sophomores) rose 30 percent versus an 8 percent decrease for students from comparison schools.

Getting started

At the heart of the program is a tool called Postsecondary Success Asset Mapping (PSAM). Built on research by David T. Conley, founder of the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon, PSAM calls for teachers to evaluate their school's delivery of strategies that research shows need to be in place for all students in order to have a college-going culture.

Initial analysis by teachers using asset mapping revealed schools had a list of activities to encourage graduation and college attendance, but less than half of the students, and in some cases only a handful, were benefitting.

"Asset mapping allows us to get buy-in from the faculty," says Bianca Calzadilla, principal of Miami Southridge Senior High School. "Who better than the teachers to examine what we need, how to accomplish it, and how to revise particular sections or components of the plan? These teachers create the foundation of our coursework to help get our students to the postsecondary level."

The PSAM helped reveal that our students eschewed college because they were not ready for college-level math. The Education Fund's CPSP advisory group convened high school math teachers and college professors from Miami Dade College and Florida International University to delve deeper.

They found that a substantial gap existed between what high school teachers were required to teach by the state and what students needed to test out of college remedial classes. The group then designed a curriculum to build college math-readiness skills in 12th grade. Today, more than a dozen high schools use the curriculum, Math for College Readiness.

"Our students were stuck on math," says Maria Sahwell, who coordinates The Education Fund's CPSP at Miami Beach Senior High School. "They were coming to high school with low-level math skills, and we needed to bridge that gap before they went on to postsecondary education."

Asset mapping also led schools to revise schedules, for example, by adding back homeroom times once a month in order to help students review course credit needs. Others revised courses. At Westland Hialeah Senior High School, the entire ninth-grade orientation course was rewritten to incorporate strategies identified in their asset map sessions.

College trips

In addition to school-identified strategies, the Miami-Dade model required schools to take at least 250 students a year to visit colleges. At first, the schools questioned the need to take so many students and couldn't understand why a ninth-grader should visit a college. However, since students' grades starting in ninth grade affect college entrance, students need to develop their goals early.

With much encouragement, schools took students to visit campuses within Miami-Dade County. Building on this success, The Education Fund created a trip to colleges throughout the state for more than 100 students from all three schools. The next year, two of the three schools' College Clubs organized similar visits, and the following year visits included out-of-state schools such as Alabama, Duke, Georgia Tech, Georgia State University, Louisiana State, Loyola, North Carolina, Tulane, and others.

"We have students from a very low socioeconomic status, so these kids would never have the opportunity to travel," says Katrina Cordova, Westland Hialeah Senior High School College Club sponsor. "With the CPSP model and subsidy, we make these trips super affordable, and allow them to pay in installments if they need to. You see the gratitude in the parents' eyes."

The college trips might be the highlight of CPSP, but through their College Clubs, students also receive instruction in academic skills and research techniques, essay writing, entrance exams, and researching careers and colleges. All students are welcome, though the clubs target students who are the first in their families to attend college and whose GPAs range from 2.0 to 3.0 – students least likely to receive such support.

Money for college

One of the biggest barriers college attendance is cost. The Education Fund's CPSP Advisory Committee decided to tackle that issue by giving students and families expert help, beginning with help filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. The application is a gateway to consideration for nine federal programs as well as hundreds of state-based aid programs with most of the aid available from individual educational institutions.

With CPSP partners, Miami-Dade County Public Schools Student Services, Miami Dade College, Florida International University, and uAspire, each school holds "FAFSA Marathons." Sitting at a computer with a local college admissions or financial aid expert, parents and children walk step-by-step through the application process.

After five years, a remarkable 50 percent of seniors' parents across the three schools attended a FAFSA Marathon, placing rates of online submissions from the schools among the state's highest.

Miami Dade College even allows seniors to register during FAFSA nights. Rolando Montoya, Miami Dade College provost, says, "When we bring parents and students together with our admissions officers, it is an ideal opportunity to admit some students on the spot."

It takes a county

Even with the roadmap provided by asset mapping, schools cannot act alone. The only way to build pathways and provide resources for greater postsecondary access and success is through collaboration and partnership. "It may take a village to raise a child, but instilling a college-going culture in thousands of high school students takes an entire county," says Deborah Montilla, district director of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' division of student services.

At schools, partnership committees focus on college readiness and success, resulting in televised "town hall" meetings held at schools, in-school college fairs, buses for college field trips and, most importantly, coordination of services.

At the county level, The Education Fund and the district's division of student services activated a Community Partnership, a gathering of nonprofit organizations that work together on projects to increase student readiness for and access to postsecondary education.

An advisory committee of provosts from local universities, the district's chief academic officer, principals from the pilot schools, and the president and manager from The Education Fund guide the program.

Results and expansion

Due to the results and feedback from schools, the district encouraged expansion of CPSP to five additional schools this year.

School leaders like Calzadilla and Guillermo Muñoz have experienced the achievements firsthand. "With CPSP, we're embedding in students the idea that anything is possible," Calzadilla says. "Recently, one of our students told me proudly that she had been accepted to Florida International University, which is my alma mater. To me, that is such an affirmation of what can be achieved."

Muñoz, former principal of Westland Hialeah Senior High School, says, "Before CPSP, most people felt if we graduated the students that was enough in itself. With the outreach to parents, the town halls, and other campus events, we're raising expectations not just within the school but throughout the community." UA

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