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College and Career Awareness in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Greenfield Union School District provides the educational needs of students, K-6, who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, and special education. Data shows that students in the Greenfield Union School District have low academic performance in English, Mathematics, and other subjects. One reason for low academic performance is the lack of student engagement in school. The capstone project attempted to encourage student engagement, by increasing students' knowledge and awareness about college and careers. Three 5th grade classes participated in the college activities. The capstone project consisted of four college awareness sessions. The sessions included activities which expanded students' knowledge about career exploration, college terminology, researching skills, college culture, and college tips and skills. Data collected through a pre-survey and post-survey indicated that students gained knowledge and awareness of college and career topics. As a result of the project, students' knowledge about college terminology increased. Also, there was a noticeable increase in student engagement.

Keywords: college, careers, awareness, education, engagement

Agency & Communities Served

The Greenfield Union School District's mission is "to promote ALL students with high levels of academic and personal achievement through a collaborative system of support, guided by passionate, dedicated staff in a safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive environment that fully prepares students for future college and career success" (Greenfield Union School District, 2019). GUSD serves the student population, which encompasses students from four elementary schools and one middle school. The schools within the district are Arroyo Seco Academy, Cesar Chavez Elementary School, Mary Chapa Academy, Oak Avenue Elementary School, and Vista Verde Middle School.

Thus, the district serves preschool through 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. Additionally, GUSD serves a population that is "97% Hispanic, 94% socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED), 60% English Learners (EL's), and 10.5% Special Education" (GUSD, 2019). In order to meet the needs of this unique student population, services and programs such as counseling, after school programs, migrant programs, family and community engagement (FACE), academic mentoring, special education, and college preparedness programs are offered. These programs and services serve the purpose of meeting the needs of students that are crucial to their academic learning and development. Family and community engagement, for example, is a service that is offered for students' families in order to address their most pressing issues and teach them the necessary skills which will benefit the entire family.

In Arroyo Seco Academy, the counseling department's purpose is to address the social-emotional learning and behavioral aspect of students' lives. Individual counseling sessions are provided for students who need to speak with the school counselor about their emotions and difficulties in school or at home. The school counselor also offers group counseling sessions for students who are dealing with similar situations, where they can interact and work through the issues they are facing. Some lessons that students in group counseling learn are, how to make friends, how to behave, how to cope with anger, sadness, grief, and anxiety.

Problem Description

The issue being addressed by the district is education. The schools in the Greenfield Union School District need to improve academic performance. There are many contributing factors that directly and indirectly impact the quality of education that students receive. The schools within the district are expected to meet the needs of a population that has 60% English learners and 10.5% Special Education students. In the Greenfield district, SBAC results for the 2017-18 school year showed that only 27% of students met or exceeded the standard for English Language Arts. In Mathematics only 19% of students met or exceeded the standard (Greenfield Union School District, 2019). This is an indication of the need for improvement in education at this agency.

Contributing Factors

One factor that affects the quality of education that students receive in the Greenfield District is socioeconomic status. According to Chun and Dickinson (2011), "The relatively low

socioeconomic status of many Hispanic families is a well-known risk for low academic achievement. Students from low-income families have limited access to resources that promote academic achievement such as advanced technology, qualified teachers, and enriched educational programs” (p.1582). The majority of the student population in GUSD is comprised of Hispanic students (97%) who are also socioeconomically disadvantaged (94%). Thus, these findings are accurate and pertain to many of the students of GUSD. The economic status of the students poses a barrier to their education, even though it is outside of their control.

Other contributing factors that play an important role in the academic success of students are sociocultural variables. Taggart (2018) explains that “academic success among Latina/o students is related to home and family support, student peer groups, parental education levels, extracurricular participation, English proficiency, neighborhood variables and cultural variables” (p.454). This demonstrates the complexity of student academic success, for there are many variables that contribute to a good or bad quality of education. Taggart (2018), further emphasizes that peer group support is associated with better grades and overall better academic outcomes. However, if variables such as peer group support and parental support are nonexistent, it can affect student performance negatively.

Furthermore, student engagement is another contributing factor of low performance in academics. Rubin (2014) states that teachers must improve student engagement in their classrooms since research has shown that increasing student engagement decreases student distractions and negative behaviors. Additionally, these factors increase academic performance

and achievement. However, when students are not appropriately engaged, they become less involved and are more distracted which affects their learning. Thus, more emphasis should be placed on teachers' duties and contributions to their students' academic achievement, and not solely on the students' limitations.

Consequences

Quality education is imperative to keeping students engaged in the classroom setting and ultimately decreasing their chances of becoming a part of the school-to-prison pipeline. Rubin (2014) asserts that a major concern for the Latino/a student population is the theory of the school-to-prison pipeline, which states that students of color are more liable to become a part of the U.S. juvenile justice system through suspensions and expulsions. Rubin (2014) also states that youth from minority groups account for 60% of the children in the juvenile justice system, and compared to their White peers they are more than 8 times as likely to be placed in juvenile detention facilities. Thus, the significance of engaging students, mainly students of color, in academics is further emphasized by the possibility of detrimental outcomes such as the school-to-prison pipeline. This alarming theory is not far from reality, especially when taking into consideration that the student population in GUSD is mostly composed of students of color.

The importance of education is also emphasized by opportunities for employment and social mobility. In fact, Haley-Lock (2013) observes that "Postsecondary education has become the threshold requirement for a middle-class family income...Dropouts, high school graduates, and people with some college but no degree are on the down escalator of social mobility (p.283).

Furthermore, Haley-Lock compares the advantages for college degree holders versus individuals who do not have a college degree, she states that “college graduates work more weekly hours and have access to greater non-wage compensation, including employer-paid health insurance and supplemental retirements” (2013, p. 283). Addressing education issues and focusing on college preparedness for students is essential to their future outcomes, such as employability and social mobility.

The consequences of educational attainment are many and may lead to negative outcomes in life. Educational attainment is linked with health outcomes in that it is a “fundamental cause of social inequalities in health because it influences the distribution of resources including money, knowledge, power, prestige, and beneficial social connections, that can be used in situ to influence health” (Clouston, 2015, p. 323). Taking into consideration that educational attainment can lead to either poor or good health outcomes, poor educational attainment can likely have negative outcomes. Clouston (2015) further emphasizes that individuals who are equipped with higher education are likely to surround themselves with friends and acquaintances who engage in healthier behaviors which can have an influence on them being just as healthy. Also, education may impact the interactions of individuals with health care professionals by improving them. Thus, the quality of education that students receive throughout their school years is crucial to future outcomes, including health.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Socioeconomic status	Academic performance in Greenfield Union School District is low.	School-to-prison pipeline
Sociocultural variables		Less employable
Student engagement		Negative health outcomes

Capstone Project Description and Justification**Capstone Project**

The capstone project focused on creating a group with a few students, where college preparedness was the main focus. Workshops were developed where students were provided with information about colleges such as community colleges, CSU's and UC's, financial aid, housing, classes, majors, and more. The purpose of this project was to increase students' knowledge about college and to encourage them to begin thinking about their futures. This project addressed the issue of low academic performance by providing students with a purpose to work harder and to improve their academic performance.

Project Purpose

The proposed project served the purpose of increasing student engagement in the academic setting. Student engagement is a contributing factor to academic success, so when students are not involved or show no interest in academics, they are likely to be more distracted which impacts their learning. According to Quin (2016) "disruptive behaviors, student absences, academic failure, and dropout have historically been viewed as a problem of student low

engagement or alienation” (p.247). Furthermore, Quin (2016) stated that there are short-term negative consequences of minimal student engagement (missed educational training and learning opportunities) as well as long-term consequences (a decline in both physical and mental well-being, less vocational opportunities, and increased mortality). For this reason, increasing student engagement is a crucial step to improving academic success. Thus, the project benefited students by motivating and providing them with a goal in mind and a greater sense of purpose.

Additionally, this project equipped underserved students with information and knowledge about the college pathway that they may lack at home and in their community. The aim of the project was to address sociocultural variables that affect academic success such as home and family support and student peer groups. Many students from low-income communities may lack adequate social capital, which is often obtained from family and peers, to help them succeed in school or to pursue post-secondary education. In fact, Goddard (2003) stated that “...as members of schools, families, and communities, students may have access to various forms of social support that can facilitate their success in school” (p.59). Thus, it is the aim of the project to provide students with information that they may otherwise be lacking.

Project Justification

The importance of introducing college awareness to students early on in life is because it fosters an interest in children and it can effectively encourage families to plan for college adequately. Myers and Myers (2012) stated that “families who engage in earlier and informed college planning have higher college aspirations and attendance, especially as many families rely

on financial aid” (p.281). Thus, through the various informational sessions of the college pathway, students will be encouraged to have discussions with their peers and parents about their college aspirations. Elliot, Johnson, and Guo (2010) explained that “children begin to form ideas about occupation and education at a much younger age...children have a basic idea about employment and may begin to develop occupational aspirations in elementary school” (p.1578). Therefore, it is imperative that children are exposed to the concept of college at an early age, so as to encourage them to consider college as an option for them in the future.

Project Implementation

In Greenfield Union School District, relatively little focus has been put upon college awareness and planning. In Arroyo Seco Academy, one of the schools in GUSD, teachers and staff have previously planned career days to expose all students to various career opportunities and to motivate them to start thinking about their future aspirations. Also, individual classes (6th grade) have had the opportunity to create presentations pertaining to college and careers. The school staff has focused on such activities because they see the value in getting students familiarized with college, so they can start seeing it as something achievable for them.

The capstone project was implemented in four 5th grade classes at Arroyo Seco Academy, for approximately 30 minutes on Mondays and Thursdays. Each 5th grade class participated in about 4 sessions of class activities and presentations about college and careers. The content which the students learned about and participated in is compiled from the “Elementary School Curriculum” from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). The

students took part in grade-appropriate activities such as “career exploration” in which they were required to think about careers that they may be interested in. Another class activity was to determine the student’s knowledge of basic college terminology. Students also had the opportunity to do activities that will help them identify the characteristics they may like, to find the right college for them. Finally, students were informed about different colleges and universities, the admissions process, financial aid, and more.

Key individuals for the implementation of the capstone project were: the school counselor, 5th grade teachers, 5th grade students, the community liaison, and the principal. The school counselor assisted in the entire process of the capstone project as a supervisor. The 5th grade teachers assisted by rearranging schedules if necessary to allow time for the sessions to take place. Additionally, the 5th grade students were the key participants in this project as their cooperation is imperative. In order to begin the preparations for the class presentations and activities, the assistance of the community liaison was required for tasks such as printing of flyers and activity worksheets. Discussions about the capstone project had to be approved by the school principal, thus, their role is instrumental.

In order to get this project started, resources such as college guidebooks and viewbooks needed to be purchased. Many of the activity worksheets used during each session required printing. For some of the activities, access to computers was needed. Incentives for the students such as college sweatshirts were also considered. A capstone grant was written in order to fund this project.

A considerable amount of time, to get the project underway was invested in the months of May and June. Additional research on the content of college awareness and planning started midways of May. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Expected Outcomes

By prompting students to begin thinking about college and future careers it was expected that students' knowledge about college will improve and student engagement will increase. Students also have a clearer idea of what their potential career interests might be.

Assessment Plan

To assess the expected outcomes, pre and post surveys were distributed at the first and last session of presentations and activities. Questions helped gather data about students' knowledge of postsecondary education before and after the sessions. Once the data was collected and analyzed, results demonstrated whether the project was successful in meeting the expected outcomes.

Project Activities

In preparation for the implementation of the capstone project, various tasks were accomplished. First, a curriculum was developed for each of the four sessions. The curriculum was obtained from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). On the NACAC website, there were numerous resources for college awareness activities designed for elementary students. There were slight modifications made to the activities, so they were

more suitable for the students. A meeting with the 5th grade teachers also took place in order to discuss the capstone project and to schedule the sessions. Once the curriculums were reviewed, the pre-survey and post-survey were created.

For the first college awareness session, the pre-survey copies were prepared for the three participating classes. The first session began with an introduction to inform the students about the capstone project and its purpose. Afterward, students were instructed to take the pre-survey to measure their knowledge and awareness of college. Following that, students were introduced to Career Zone, a website designed to help students explore careers based on their interests. After a demonstration on how to complete the task and navigate the website, students were directed to take the career assessment on their own. Students were given an opportunity to explore their career results and to share their results with their partners as well. Lastly, the class convened so that each student was able to share their results. Students shared their thoughts about the careers they were assigned. They also shared the salaries, requirements, and qualities needed for their particular careers.

In the second session for college awareness, the aim was to introduce students to college terminology. Students were divided into groups and each student was assigned the role of “researcher” “writer” or “illustrator.” The activity prompted students to create a poster with the definition of words such as “college,” “financial aid,” “major,” “dorms,” and more. In addition, the illustrators were instructed to create an illustration to represent the word, so that it would be a more enjoyable activity for them. The researchers searched for the correct definition of the

words, while the writers wrote down the definition. Once this part was completed, each group presented their posters and shared the definition of their word with the entire class. This activity allowed students to practice their research, teamwork, and presentation skills. It also aimed to enhance their knowledge of college terminology.

The third college awareness session consisted of an activity to help students identify key figures in their community who support them. The first portion of the session was spent defining the words “community” and “support.” The 5th grade students brainstormed different examples of communities and the types of support the communities offered. Furthermore, the class worked on creating a figure which explained how a school could be a community. Next, students worked on identifying four communities they were a part of, four people who supported them, and how the people supported them. Lastly, students shared their communities with the class in order to learn about all the different communities that exist. The importance of community support throughout their educational journey was also emphasized to the students.

The final college awareness session consisted of a PowerPoint presentation that covered different topics. The first topic was about habits and skills students could develop early on to help them in future endeavors. The second topic covered the different methods students could utilize to find information about colleges and universities. Lastly, the students were given a demonstration of a short virtual tour of different universities. The 5th-grade students had the opportunity to virtually “visit” a college campus and learn interesting facts about it. Students

were encouraged to explore college websites in order to inspire their curiosity about the college pathway.

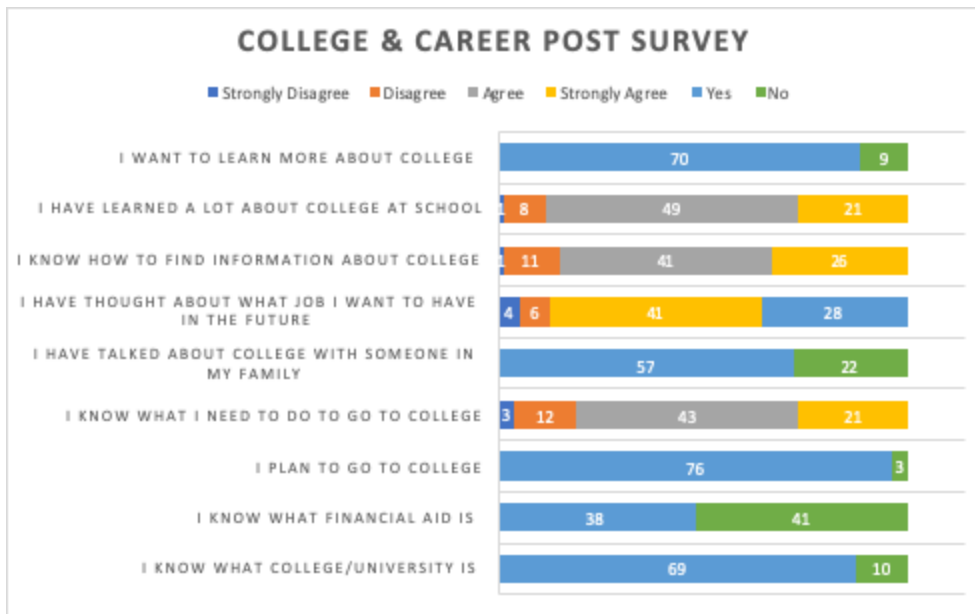
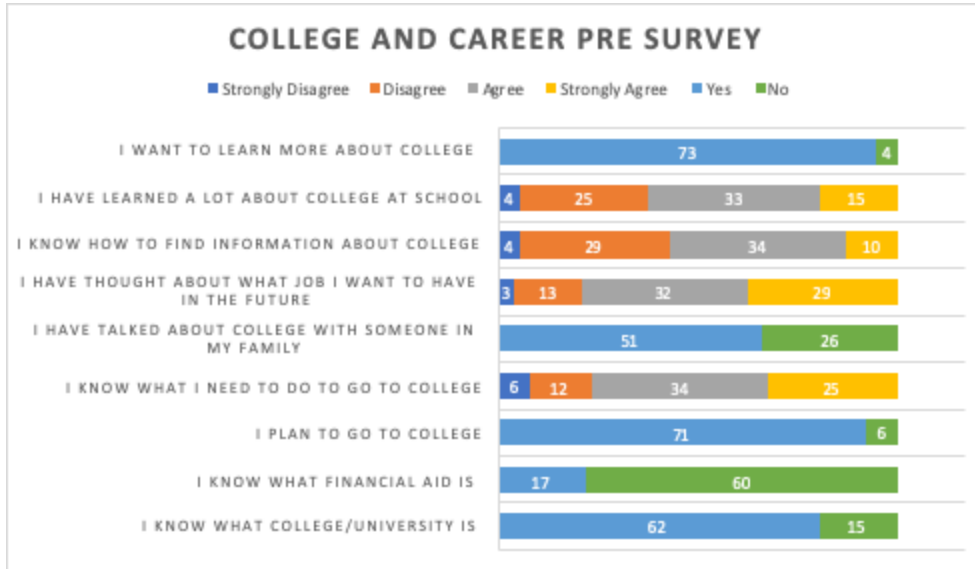
Project Outcomes

One of the expected outcomes of the capstone project was that student's knowledge and awareness about college would increase as a result of the activities. The capstone project also aimed to increase student engagement (attention, curiosity, interest) in college and career topics.

Results

The expected outcomes of the capstone project were moderately achieved. Student's knowledge and awareness of college and careers were measured through a pre-survey and post-survey. The pre-survey was given to the students on the first college awareness session, while the post-survey was given in the last session. Through the data, it was concluded that there was a slight improvement in student's knowledge and awareness of college and careers. For example, before the project was implemented, 62 students stated that they knew what college was. The number increased to 69 by the last college awareness session. Similarly, on the pre-survey 60 students said they did not know what financial aid was, and on the post-survey the number decreased to 41. The data collected shows that there was somewhat of an improvement in student's knowledge and awareness of college-related topics. The increase in knowledge can be attributed to the interactive activities that students participated in. The activities were mostly hands on, so students could have an easier time learning. Although student engagement was not measured, students showed enthusiasm about the college presentations throughout the process.

Students also commented that they really enjoyed the activities and they expressed their gratitude for them.



Conclusion/Recommendations

Based on the results of the capstone project, which showed an increase in knowledge and awareness of college, the capstone project was successful. Students gained knowledge about

college terminology and explored careers. Through research and the capstone project, the need for more college and career awareness was clearly emphasized. Studies showed the importance of educating students about college starting from Kindergarten and upwards. Students can make connections about college and careers at an early age, thus incorporating more college awareness in schools and classrooms is strongly encouraged. Furthermore, the fifth-grade classes showed good engagement and positive attitudes towards the capstone presentations.

One main recommendation for Arroyo Seco Academy is to invest more in college and career awareness and improve upon it. Many of the students enjoyed the college presentations and expressed a desire to learn more. It is important to incorporate college and career awareness in schools and classrooms. A curriculum should be developed for each grade level to ensure that students receive age-appropriate information and knowledge about college. Also, students should be able to do activities around college for at least one class session to maximize learning opportunities. Establishing a college culture in school is vital to engaging and motivating students in the learning process.

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Appendix A**Scope of Work**

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Research	Curriculum	May 15th / May 25th	Intern
Prepare and build presentations	College awareness Powerpoints	May 25th / June 1st	Intern
Find incentives	Prizes for students	May 15th / May 20th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Write memorandum to 5th grade teachers	Flyers of session schedules	August 1st / August 3rd	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Plan session dates and times	Official schedule	August 8th / August 10th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
First presentation session	Outreach/awareness	August 12th / August 15th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Pre-Survey	Data collection	August 12th / August 15th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Second presentation session	Outreach/awareness	August 19th / August 22nd	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Third presentation session	Outreach/awareness	August 26th / August 29th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Fourth presentation session	Outreach/awareness	September 9th / September 12th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Post-Survey	Data collection	September 9th / September 12th	Intern/Mrs. Laurel
Evaluate data	Evaluation report	September 15th / September 20th	Intern

Pre and Post Surveys

College and Career Pre-Survey

I know what College/University is

Yes No

I know what financial aid is

Yes No

I plan to go to college

Yes No

I know what I need to do to go to college

Agree Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I have talked about college with someone in my family

Yes No

I have thought about what job I want to have in the future

Agree Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I know how to find information about College

Agree Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I have learned a lot about college at school

Agree Strongly Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I want to learn more about College

Yes No