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## The Power of Pursuing Lifelong Learning

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## **The Power of Pursuing Lifelong Learning**

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**Abstract**

This study examined student's access to advanced education and how parents, school personnel, and community members could prepare students for life beyond K-12 education. Due to the COVID Pandemic, this study was limited to a literature review of multiple scholarly and peer-reviewed articles. Analyzation of these articles revealed several trends in the opportunity gap, the importance of school-family-community partnerships, and the benefit of resources that assist future high school graduates with the necessary knowledge and tools needed to apply for undergraduate or vocational programs. Findings also indicate that academic preparation and support for young scholars throughout their K-12 education are essential for them to pursue and attain a college degree or career they are most passionate about once students graduate high school.

*Keywords:* students, community, support, college, access, education, preparation

### **Introduction/Background**

Our education is a tool that no one has the ability to take away from us. Higher education became a part of the culture here in the U.S. not long after European settlers arrived. It is harvested in people throughout the United States to value education because attaining knowledge will lead to great success. Advanced education is present in society however, access and knowledge of its values and attainability are limited to young underrepresented students. The purpose of studying access to advanced education was to determine how parents, community members, teachers, and other leaders in a student's life, can enhance their preparation in advancing beyond K-12 education.

According to the History of Education in the United States an article published by Cleary University, the first college in the United States is what is known today as Harvard University. Harvard University was developed to prepare students for a career in ministry, but after the American Revolution, higher education took a turn. A Brief History of Education in the United States by Claudia Goldin (1999), provided background information on how higher education has progressed since the mid-nineteenth century. "Many professional degrees (e.g. law and medicine) did not require a baccalaureate degree and thus the first professional degree often included a B.A...Junior (or community) colleges have been two-year institutions ever since the beginning of the twentieth century" (C. Goldin, 1999, p. 5). The most essential aspects of society such as education develop as time progresses. Educational courses from kindergarten through twelfth grade are limited and often discourage students from exposing themselves to the opportunities that are available after they graduate.

Interest in the topic developed from working as an academic intern through a federally funded program that prepares students in underserved communities to apply and enroll in a 2-

year or 4-year university to obtain a college degree. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) supports students for six to seven years providing resources that guide low-income students towards a path of success throughout middle and high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Playing the role of an academic intern requires one-on-one advising sessions, workshop support, and other various tasks used to enhance the preparation of students. Students and parents are exposed to University pathways/campuses, A-G requirements, in-class tutoring, and workshops that are designed to prepare them for graduation and beyond. Providing necessary support to students is an essential tool they can use for prosperity in education.

I am a phenomenon, I come from a low economic household and I am a first-generation college student. The schools I attended were not located in underserved communities and the teachers challenged every aspect of learning. There were few resources in high school such as a course students could enroll in, beginning in middle school throughout high school. Counselors and a small corner in the office designated as the College and Career Center were also available to students. This well-known program open to a limited number of students was called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a college preparatory course used to expose students to developing college-level questions in certain subjects, tutorial support with struggling courses, exposure to A-G requirements, and trips to individual universities. When the time came to apply for college during the fall semester of senior year, those enrolled in the AVID class around me began applying for college, it encouraged me to also apply. Reflecting on this period of time, made me concerned for students who do not have access to resources or support that is essential for their success. The majority of students who do not receive resources or support come from minority or low socioeconomic backgrounds. The concern is not only for

underrepresented students enrolled in the high school I attended but all public schools in the United States.

Information provided in this study will enhance the importance of academic and community support, exposure to college pathways, and trade programs in a timely manner, along with providing knowledge on the other forms of educational pathways students could pursue in order to attain a passionate career. Students often do not think about what their options are until it is time to graduate high school. Students are unrealistically expected to have a plan in place, and figure out what their passions are within the last year of K-12 education. Parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and most importantly students will benefit from the topic and understand the best ways to assist and expose students to the unlimited opportunities they have for success. Parents will learn ways to support and encourage their students starting at a young age, and community members will develop an understanding of how vital their role can be in student success. Teachers, counselors, and administrators will learn how/when to encourage students to manifest their dreams and goals throughout every grade level, and lastly, students will benefit from learning what support they need to transition into adulthood.

Based on personal experience, education, and research, I framed a primary question and multiple secondary questions. The goal of this paper was to answer the primary question: *How can communities promote and teach their students and parents about the opportunities they have beyond their high school education?* Related questions used to navigate research include: *What should schools be doing to promote advanced education? Why should community leaders sponsor/support advanced education for their young citizens? When should young students be introduced to the concepts of advanced education? And how is information being presented to young students about advanced education?*

### **Literature Review**

Support from parents, teachers, administrators, and the community is essential to student success. “Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1993, pp. 117-118). It is important to inspire students to be lifelong learners and to know exactly what that means to themselves. Access to higher/advanced education is one way for students to learn and appreciate their own definition of who they are as lifelong learners. Support programs and counselor productivity are factors that dramatically alter the education of all students but the majority of students who are affected are considered underrepresented and face income inequality issues. “We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities” (National Commissions on Excellence in Education, 1993, p. 118). The literature review will examine the similar traits and themes identified throughout the review of scholarly sources and articles, as well as the similarities and differences of findings and methods used throughout the research.

A scholarly article written by Isabel Sawhill (2013), focuses on the opportunity gap in education that young students in America are beginning to face. She argues that the only way to begin closing this opportunity gap is if low-income students were not only given the opportunity to attend college but prepared to attain a college degree. To support students’ transition to college and readiness for college-level coursework, the education system should provide quality academic preparation for scholars. “Probably the most important factor explaining lack of completion is inadequate preparation for college in the K-12 years” (Sawhill, 2013, para. 4). Throughout the article Sawhill presents the question, why are students applying and pursuing a

college degree, but not completing it? There is a bountiful amount of resources that are federally funded and courses students can enroll in to prepare themselves for higher education. However, it is not fully up to the student or these resources to prepare them for what lies ahead. “Efforts to make more information available and to help high school graduates and their parents navigate the complexity of the financial aid system - as well as the multitude of institutional choices available to them - should be increased” (Sawhill, 2013, para. 9). Sawhill (2013) argues that the issue is not getting students to apply to college, it is getting them to stay and complete their degree or certificate within six years or even at all. “Almost half of all college students and much higher proportions of poor and minority students drop out before they complete a degree” (Sawhill, 2013, para. 3). Sawhill (2013), argues that it is clear select populations of a school community should be exposed to more post-secondary opportunities. Some students have the ability to pursue an education, while others should be provided with information regarding alternate career and educational options available to them. A study done by the U.S. Department of Education found that while one might assume low poverty schools would receive and have access to resources, this is not true. “45% of high poverty schools receive less state and local funding than was typical for other schools” (U.S. Department of Education, para. 3). Students who come from minority and low-income backgrounds attend college and complete degrees at lower rates compared to their peers, and factors such as suspension or expulsion create an increase in drop out rates and expand the opportunity gap.

Lara Perez-Felkner (2015), does not focus on the opportunity gap. The author presents an article that is written using mixed methods of research to answer her primary question, “how can the social context of schools keep underrepresented minority students on track to transition to college”? (Perez-Felkner, 2015, p.1) She argues that schools, where the majority of students



enrolled are white, received significantly more resources compared to schools that are attended by underrepresented students. “The social context refers to the quality and nature of relationships among actors within schools, including teachers, students, and other school personnel” (Ball 2002, as cited in Perez-Felkner 2015, p. 6). These functioning relationships are crucial in shaping the educational outcomes of adolescents. Perez-Felkner (2015), focuses on underrepresented and minority students and understanding the challenges they face throughout their educational journey. A common misconception teachers have is that they should only assist students who are focused in the classroom or asking for help. “For example, teachers may fail to recognize minority students’ academic abilities and reward their preschool behavior as highly as their white students...unfortunately, many schools still tend to better prepare majority youth for the transition to college” (Perez-Felkner, 2015, p. 5). Teachers should make themselves available as a resource to all of their students and not just to those who they feel would benefit most from their guidance. If students were provided with tangible resources, they would be less likely to use hazardous strategies when searching for jobs or potential educational opportunities according to Perez-Felkner (2015).

To begin closing the opportunity gap and providing resourceful information regarding advanced education for all students requires the participation of the essential adults present in a student's life. To support this argument, a piece of extant literature written by Julian Bryan and Lynette Henry (2012) is presented and offers recommendations to school counselors on how to build meaningful connections between school personnel, family, and community members. School Counselors play a key role in developing school-family-community partnerships. “School-family-community partnerships are collaborative initiatives and relationships among school personnel, family members, and community members and representatives of community-

based organizations, such as universities, businesses, religious organizations, libraries, and mental health and social service agencies” (Bryan & Henry, 2012, pp. 408-409 ). According to Bryan and Henry (2012), these partnerships were considered essential to the forty percent of school counselors who were surveyed. However, these partnerships were not possible without the proper support and initiative of administration within the school. “School counselors report that their involvement in partnerships is affected by a number of school and school counselor factors...a collaborative school climate, school principal expectations, school counselor self-efficiency about partnerships, role perceptions, time constraints, and partnership-related training” (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, as cited in Bryan & Henry 2012, p. 408). School counselors were endorsed as the people responsible for creating workshops and implementing programs used to aid students in their educational endeavors. “School counselors’ roles as advocate, facilitator, leader, liaison, and initiator in these partnerships” (Bryan & Henry, 2012, p. 408).

Community members and leaders help mold young citizens. A second scholarly article also written by Byran and Henry (2008), “describes a case study example of a strengths-based approach to school-family-community partnerships that school a counselor in a Title 1 school is implementing to empower low-income children and families of color” (p.149). Most parents of low-income or single-parent households, feel as if they have strong connections with their children. However, due to a lack of community resources, parents do not feel capable of being active in their students’ education. “School personnel should affirm families’ efforts and collaborate with family and community members to provide the extra family support that families need to overcome numerous challenges they face to their children’s success” (Bryan & Henry, 2008, p. 149). When the community becomes involved parents, school leaders, teachers,

and counselors begin working together in the best interest of their students. Support from every member listed above will determine the outcome of students' K-12 education. Students in school throughout the United States lack the proper knowledge they need to be confidently successful in their lives. Students require structured support in order to maintain a degree or to take an alternate path towards success once they leave high school. Access for students is a collaborative effort by essential members and they are important. Bryan & Henry, 2012 says:

“Rich and effective partnerships are built on a foundation of shared principles or values that enable a healthy collaboration process among partners and lead to improved success and access for students and their families, especially those who are less advantaged in schools” (p. 409).

The term Underrepresented student is a word used to describe a situation students face based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or economic backgrounds. Berliner, 2013; Blank, 2011, as cited in Bernadette Tiernan, 2015 stated that:

“Without adequate support from family, community, and school advisors, many of these students will lose hope or interest in acquiring a college education, as they succumb to pressure from their families to try to find a job quickly and contribute to support of their home” (p. 4).

Tiernan (2015), uses a quantitative research method to examine the relationship between high school students' participation in the New Jersey College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) Aim High Academy, with the enrollment, and student achievement in college. Research articles suggest that if underrepresented students were given preparation before they embark on higher education, they were more likely to continue and be successful. The U.S. Department of Education says that the purpose of CACG programs is to “foster partnerships among federal,

state, and local governments and philanthropic organizations through matching challenge grants that are aimed at increasing the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education” (para. 1). Resources such as GEAR UP, Aim High Academy, EAOP, Summer bridge, and other summer intervention programs can play a vital role in student success. Tiernan’s analysis provided evidence that if underrepresented youth were provided with summer interventions before their senior year of high school, their chances of success in college would increase. Dr. Terence Hicks (2005) uses a similar research method as Tiernan (2015) and found:

“Students who participate...are well-prepared and tend to experience greater academic, personal, and social success, and have higher retention and graduation rates than other first-time freshmen...Pre-college summer programs allow the students to know and understand their cognitive abilities, academic skills, and fullest potential, and what it takes to exceed on a college-level” (Hicks, 2005, p.24).

Students that face income inequality issues are greatly impacted because without the proper academic preparation and support from teachers, parents, and counselors, there is little to no benefit of K-12 education. “High school students from low-income households where neither parent has attended college are often challenged by their level of academic and social, preparation, major financial constraints, and insufficient parental support” (Berliner, 2013 as cited in Tiernan, 2015, p. 2). These programs can increase student and parental support and potentially increase parental involvement.

The U.S. Department of Education reported:

“Far too many students, especially in underserved groups and communities, lack robust access to core elements of quality education. That includes free, quality pre-school, high, challenging standards and engaging teaching and leadership in a safe, supportive, well-resourced school; and an affordable high-quality college degree” (para. 2).

Tiernan (2013), and Hicks (2005), both argue that preparation in the summer before senior year of students’ schooling can improve not only their preparedness but their confidence as the decision approaches. Pre-college preparation programs can influence whether or not the student will continue pursuing their degree. Knowledge about various opportunities is crucial in supporting students and is one of the biggest ways the community can become involved. It is argued by many authors that programs should not only offer financial information but other information concerning students and their families. It is also imperative that students are academically prepared before moving into the next level of education. Academic preparation of students before they apply to college and pursue any type of college degree or certification is key to their success.

### **Methods and Procedures**

When conducting research to find ways parents, teachers, administrators, and community members can influence students to pursue advanced education, it was important to pick a starting point. I decided that referring to the secondary questions, key-words presented in the abstract and key phrases such as “underrepresented students access to higher education in the United States” was ideal. This study was limited to a literature review of various scholarly and peer-reviewed articles. These articles were found using multiple secure search engines such as google scholar, the U.S. Department of Education, and Onesearch through the CSUMB online library. When

resources from initial searches were limited, I examined sources from the current articles I was reading, to help guide me and find new valuable information.

### **Results, Findings, and Discussion**

This section will review the secondary questions presented at the beginning of the paper, and attempt to answer the questions based on information found throughout the literature review. Readers will develop an understanding of the Role of school personnel, the value of community in education, when information is being presented to students, and the presentation of information students receive regarding advanced education.

*1. What should schools be doing to promote advanced education?*

The literature review discussed various ways school personnel can prepare their students to assure they are successful beyond K-12 education. Schools should be focusing on preparing their students for future academic endeavors that will thrive on their knowledge. They should also provide resources, workshops, training, etc. to their school counselors to teach them the value of school-family-community partnerships and exploring what that looks like.

*2. Why should community leaders sponsor/support advanced education?*

Community members are role models to young citizens, who are going to school, learning, and trying to figure out who they are and want to be. Our brains do not stop developing until around the age of twenty-five years old, until then, we are constantly being defined by the influences around us. Community members will help ensure the future of young students, by preparing and inspiring them to continue learning. No research indicated exactly what community members should be doing, and it is the role of school counselors to build those connections.

Once counselors build community partnerships, citizens become involved and it becomes easier for them to influence young community members.

3. *When should young students be introduced to the concepts of advanced education?*

After reviewing the articles, it is clear that there is a great benefit to having knowledge and access to advance education. When young students are presented with hands-on workshops and information sessions regarding college, they are more confident in going and are likely to attend. This information would benefit students most during the adolescent developmental period within their last two years of high school. It is important to note that in order for students to have access to these opportunities, there are steps that principals, counselors, and teachers should be taking to assist students and prepare them for life after high school.

4. *How is information being presented to young students about advanced education?*

Information is being presented to students in the form of their academic work, through workshops, and community/adult interactions that occur on a daily basis. There was no clear research that indicated how students are being prepared from one classroom to another, but the education system should be working to benefit the future of students. Pre-college preparatory programs and courses are offered to high school students, but it is limited to certain populations. The Literature review revealed that more should be done to expand resources to all students because everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed at every level.

### **Problems and Limitations**

The limitations of this study were due mostly to the CO-VID pandemic. Due to school closures in the area, surveys were not conducted amongst students and I was unable to conduct interviews with local administrators and other school personnel. The study was limited to a literature review of scholarly websites and articles to find useful information that would enhance students' educational journey. I also had to rephrase supporting questions multiple times in order to support research on students' access to advanced education.

### **Recommendations**

The overall goal of this study was to find ways that community members, parents, and school personnel can work together to increase student enrollment in advanced education. To meet this goal, students should be presented with support starting at a young age. School teachers should be open and supporting each of their pupils at all times. School counselors are responsible for fulfilling their duties in creating community partnerships, so parents and students become more inclined to be involved in their educational experiences. Reinforcement of expectations for counselors from school districts and administrators would benefit the overall school environment. There are many components of a school environment that require attention and time in order to provide students with quality education, and job opportunities. However it is important to remember, it is not impossible and it is the only way to ensure a bright future for young citizens in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

As community leaders, we set the example and pave the pathway for the young students who are following in our footsteps. A personal interpretation of a life-long learner means always finding curiosity in learning, whether in education, or other aspects of the world and life. This is a value that is not taught to young students, but if we as educators hold value in learning from all



of life's experiences, we can inspire students to do the same. Students enjoy being curious about life and the options they have to be successful in education or pathways beyond. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1993), says to create a learning society it would entail, "Commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes" (p. 118). Exercising our brain through education allows us to form concise, reasonable ideas that change as the world progresses. Maintaining an open mind, and exposing ourselves to learning opportunities allows us to be curious and insightful community members.

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