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Benefits of Promoting College Awareness for Low Income Middle and High School Students

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Abstract

The disadvantages that low-income students face in today's society make it difficult for them to move on to a post-secondary education. Since higher education is no longer for the elite few and the number of students attending colleges and universities is rapidly increasing, all students need the necessary resources to prepare for a college ready future. In order to reach low-income students and close the learning gap between low, middle, and upper income peers, there will be a need for college awareness programs in the high poverty areas. This capstone examines the barriers low-income students face and how these college awareness programs develop and promote equal opportunity to benefit the students that they target.

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Introduction and Background

The idea of pursuing a higher education used to be reserved to the elite few, but today there is a “massification” of education and the number of students attending colleges and universities around the world is exploding (Karaim, 2011).

The promotion of early college awareness programs for middle and high school students is primarily to improve academic skills, increase high school retention, build self-esteem, provide mentors, increase parental involvement, promote college attendance, and increase financial and college/career awareness. It is crucial that we evaluate the impacts of these college preparatory programs because low income students are five times more unlikely to enroll in college and by the year of 2018, there will be a workforce shortage of 3 million college graduates (Knaggs & Schardt, 2015). Although the idea of college awareness programs might be clear to an individual, it is often unclear whether or not these programs are proven to be successful and beneficial.

Finding the importance of attending college and pursuing higher education will present the aspect of sustainability for one’s future. Promoting college for young students instills the idea that college will change and inspire them. They will develop into mature and responsible adults. In order for all students to have the opportunity to pursue college, they must be educated on the steps of how to get there, how to get in, and what to expect. Therefore, these college programs are helping students of low-income backgrounds build upon their knowledge, discover new passions, learn about themselves, prepare for a future they are well equipped for, and eventually give back to their community (“Attending College,” n.d.). Creating opportunities is creating a

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more sustainable future for our generations to come. High school graduates today are unable to obtain the jobs that once were available. The importance of college is compared to what a high school diploma was 40+ years ago. A college education means a gateway to a better option and more opportunities (McGuire, n.d.).

The primary research question I will be seeking the answer to; is how does promoting college awareness programs benefit the education of low income middle and high school students? A few secondary questions to be answered will be, what are college awareness programs? How have these college programs come about and who provides the funding? What does research say about the benefits of promoting college awareness for students at the middle and high school level? Do college awareness programs motivate the students? Are there any college awareness programs currently promoting the education for these students in the Monterey area and how do they promote? Why target low income middle and high school students? Do these college awareness programs improve graduation rates? And lastly, what indicates that these programs are successful? My purpose for this paper is to understand these benefits and look at how to close the learning gap amongst disadvantaged students and explore the benefits of promoting college awareness programs.

Literature Review

In order to research for my capstone and synthesize my work, I have developed a review of what supports and does not support my research topic. I will give a brief history of the development of college awareness programs for low income middle and high school students. I will also review what the research indicates about the future of college awareness programs.

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Knaggs & Schardt (2015) indicate that the reason the reason why we rely on these college awareness programs and who they are targeted towards is because our country has become more interconnected. The need for highly skilled and educated workers is pressing, “nearly two thirds of 46.8 million job openings in the next decade will require postsecondary education” (p. 1). It is unfortunate that the United States fails to prepare these disadvantaged students- economically, racial/ethnic minorities, and first generation college students, this leads to low college entrance rates among these students.

The history of college awareness programs begins for GEAR UP specifically with an initiative authorized by Title IV of the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965. On September 29, 1998, President Clinton signed this act into public law and stated, “what you earn depends on what you learn. This bill will make it easier for millions of Americans to get the higher education they need to succeed in the global economy. Colleges will reach down to middle school students in high-poverty areas to give them the support they need to be ready for a higher education” (“National Council,” n.d.). GEAR UP was created to provide communities with a comprehensive and research-driven initiative to prepare low-income and minority students for a higher education. California is perhaps the most notable of the states to invest heavily in early intervention programs, it spends about \$40 million each year in support of outreach to middle and high school’s students (Swail, 2000).

In agreement with college awareness programs, one might make the argument that the opportunity to go to college is the ultimate testament to the American dream. For education is one of the surest returns known to man. Education is the truest guarantee that can never be taken

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away from someone, you may lose the precise skills you have learned from time to time but the process will stay with you for your entire life. Regardless of how much the system may improve where we draw the line, students on the lower end of things will receive less than other, more fortunate students. Where the education system fails, the programs that provide the additional support to the disadvantaged students to help fill the gap. Youth with these background characteristics require the most attention and resources, yet receive the least (Swail, 2000).

Learning gaps start to emerge early, predominantly with disadvantaged students. Usually students who do not start off well in their education, they tend not to thrive later on. This is not only due to stressful environments with little learning opportunities, but because early learning itself helps facilitate later learning. Students who generally know more about a topic often have an easier time adding information to that topic in the future, early exposure to knowledge can motivate students to learn more (Dougherty, 2014).

Educating low-income students on college early on in life will facilitate a more thriving learning environment. As a country that strives for high graduation rates and students that are ready for college, we have to confront the reality that we are nowhere near achieving this goal. Promoting college awareness for low income middle and high school students early on in their education will increase their likelihood to graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education, provide mentoring, and better prepare them for their future career.

The opposing viewpoints of the college awareness include some who might argue that the programs evaluations are done poorly and there are simply not enough studies to evaluate the programs. A few handfuls of program evaluations are empirically sound, but others are poorly

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done and internally biased. Some might argue that we are still very much in the dark about what works best in the programs. We do know that mentoring, tutoring, and academic support are all a very important aspect of being college ready, but what we also know that not all programs are doing these things the same. Some may be better and some may be worse, it is entirely plausible that poorly run programs may be doing an injustice to the students and have a reverse impact (Swail, 2000).

Methods and Procedures

Participants

The total number of participants in my study were 2 teachers total, 1 ninth grade high school teacher and 1 eighth grade middle school teacher. Both teachers were given the same questionnaire (See Appendix B). In my study I had also anonymously surveyed 44 middle school students aging from 13-14 years old, which were eighth grade students from Marina, CA. Then, 34 ninth grade high school students aging from 15-16 years old from Marina, CA. All students and teachers from this particular part of the study were from a Marina middle school and Marina high school, located in low-income areas (with high poverty). I then took those same surveys and had given them to a middle school in Pacific Grove, CA. There 53 eighth grade students had completed the anonymous surveys. The last participant in my research was an interview with the program coordinator of GEAR UP, Chris Mutschnick.

The way in which I had recruited these participants was particularly based off of convenience and the ease of choosing a college awareness program in Monterey County to focus on, GEAR UP. From there I chose two middle school teachers that I knew from previous

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encounters that were familiar with the college awareness program because of the extra help they receive in their English Language Arts classes. Jeanne Bartels and Jon Bayer both were so gracious to assist me in this research and allowed me to take time out of their instruction to conduct student surveys in their classrooms. Jon Bayer had the time to fill out a questionnaire for my research as well. For the selection of the high school students, they were a bit more random, I had known that GEAR UP had just entered this low-income Marina, California high school so I wanted to get my surveys and questionnaire there quickly. I was able to get them in the hands of a select group of ninth grade students who were being advised and mentored by GEAR UP staff and the college facilitator of GEAR UP. At the high school, I had chosen a specific ninth grade math teacher to answer the questionnaire because of a friend who happens to work with Gear Up was especially close to this teacher and put me in contact with her, Anjelica Amador. To assist me in filling out anonymous surveys, link crew teacher William Terri had conducted the surveys during his class time.

Materials

The first item of my research materials to collect data was the GEAR UP Monterey project director interview questions. In this interview format, I had created only four questions for Chris Mutschnick to answer. I intended to create these questions as a basis for conversation starters, my first question was for him to first describe what GEAR UP is and his position within the program (See Appendix A). I also found it valuable to ask Mutschnick about his opinion on the college awareness programs and how successful they might be.

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In order to measure the success within the classroom I had created the questionnaires as stated above for the two teachers I had the pleasure of working closely with and with their students. These questionnaires (see Appendix B) consisted of questions about the observations made by these teachers, like the following, in your opinion do the students enjoy the programs offered at school and do they seem motivated? This questionnaire only consisted of three long response questions.

The last material used in this research were the anonymous surveys used to assess the students' knowledge and feelings towards college awareness programs. In part of this I wanted to get a small background on the students and had asked about their household and if anyone had attended or graduated from college (See Appendix C). I also tested them on their college awareness by asking what universities or colleges are near or familiar and how do they feel motivated.

Procedures

My first step in this process was to review the literature and collect my research on a brief history of college awareness programs, what supports my claims, and what does the future look like.

I then moved onto my field work and started with an interview of the GEAR UP Monterey project director, Chris Mutschnick. I had first arranged to meet with him through my own personal contacts because of my relations to GEAR UP, first I had sent the interview questions directly to him so he had the chance to look at them in case he was unable to meet me in person. In this case, he had answered them via email but we were also able to talk over the

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phone and have a conversation about the questions as he had gone through them. His information and data were so precise; the email of information he had provided was the most valuable piece of the entire interview.

For my questionnaires for the teachers, I had decided to have just printed them out and let them know that they would be in their school mailboxes if they had the chance to look them over. I wanted their most honest answers without someone looking over them and taking notes as they spoke. I felt that by doing this, they would be more comfortable to answer specific questions about GEAR UP without feeling persuaded by my presence.

The last part of my research concluded with anonymous surveys for the students in middle and high school. I was lucky enough to go into the middle school class of eighth graders in Marina and let them know that their names were not to be put on the paper and their honest answers were a very important part of my research. I distributed the surveys and sat at the back of the room so that they too felt comfortable enough to answer questions privately. I then collected them at the back of each row and placed them into a folder to assure the student that the answers were to stay private. The procedure with the anonymous surveys for high school students went a bit differently. Since I did not have the chance to distribute the surveys to one particular set of ninth grade students myself, I had passed them along to William Terry, a ninth grade link crew teacher. These too are anonymous surveys and they were picked up when Mr. Terry had let me know the students completed them.

The final part of my procedures was something that I had hoped to do, but not yet planned. Since I am looking at low-income schools benefitting from college awareness

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programs, I wanted to have something to compare my data too. I then brought 60 surveys to be distributed to two separate eighth grade classes at a middle school in Pacific Grove on October 26, 2016. I collected them the following week from the assistant principal.

During my entire duration of conducting research and fieldwork, I spent about 8 hours a week in an eighth grade classroom because of my current job with GEAR UP. I work alongside with GEAR UP as one of their academic advisors and spend time in an English language arts class where I am used as an in class tutor. During fall break, GEAR UP had even offered extra help tutoring Monday through Friday and I got to be there for 3 of the 5 days. Also, during this time I had the privilege of being present for GEAR UP ran presentations for all eighth grade students on how to save and spend money, prompting their idea of how to save and prepare for a bright future in college and in their careers. I continued my observational research at the pursuit youth expo at Cal State Monterey Bay where 10 high schools from the Monterey area had come with programs such as Imagine College, Avid, and GEAR UP. And I will conclude my observational research with 50 eighth grade students from GEAR UP and AVID on their field trip to Stanford.

Results and Findings

After spending weeks preparing for my research, I was able to finally collect some of the information from my participants and fieldwork studies. By getting to know the teachers and students in the GEAR UP program, I was provided with not only evidence for my research but personal experiences that cannot be done through a computer.

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What are the college awareness programs? How have they come about and who provides the funding?

The most commonly known college preparatory programs are Upward Bound, University of California's Early Academic Outreach, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, and Advancement via Individual Determination. These programs all differ in their own diverse way, but commonly they will be providing academic support, test preparation, mentoring/counseling, college campus visits, and facilitate parental involvement. ("Characteristics of Early Awareness Initiatives" n.d.). The goals of these programs is to improve academic skills, increase high school retention, build students' self-esteem, build college and career awareness, promote college attendance, and increase financial aid awareness. This article from "Characteristics of Early Awareness Initiative" (n.d.) states that "more than half of all pre-college early awareness programs are run by a college or university, the remainder are community and school based" (p. 1). This poses the question, how are these programs funded? College for every student has a substantial impact on college-going attitudes of disadvantaged students. Seventy-five percent of its program participants in the study plan to attend four-year colleges, compared with 5% students in a control group. The organization's annual 3.5 million budget comes from private donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals, as well as federal title 1 funds (Adams, 2013).

Another familiar program to the Monterey County area is Upward Bound. According to Expanding Minds and Opportunities,

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Upward Bound Math-Science is a college access program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education TRIO program, that has an afterschool and summer component. The program was designed to provide disadvantaged high school students with skills and experiences that prepare them for success in a 4-year college and help them succeed in a math or science career field. Grants are given to 2- and 4-year colleges and universities to provide programs during the school year and summer. School-year programs include supplemental academic instruction and enrichment activities such as faculty-assisted experiments, seminars with outside speakers, and field trips. The 6-week summer program includes an intensive focus on math and science instruction and exposure to life in college, including residency in college dorms. All programs include activities such as preparation for college entrance exams, information on postsecondary opportunities, and assistance completing college applications and understanding financial aid opportunities (Brand & Valent, n.d., p.3-5).

What does the research say about the benefits of promoting college awareness for students at the middle and high school level?

Preliminary research done primarily through local, state, and national program evaluations suggest that “GEAR UP and other college preparatory programs are successful at increasing outcome measures related to academics, behavior, and attendance, but there is little knowledge about what aspects of these programs work to facilitate these successes” (Knaggs & Schardt, 2015, p.10).

Glaser and Warick (2016) look directly at what research says about early awareness strategies for college success. The primary goal of their report was to provide information that will allow one to consider the policy discussions about these early awareness interventions and the second was to encourage the evaluations of these programs. Something to become familiar with in these programs is the idea of “awareness” because many students lack the knowledge of costs of college, availability of scholarships and financial aid, career paths, and economic value of higher education. When students are unaware of the benefits and availability of resources of

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college, they already start further behind than their higher-income peers. In this research, they also state that the importance of getting to the students in middle school is a critical time because the choices they might make in eighth grade could affect their college going goals. One of the primary goals for these programs is to create expectations in the minds of young people that they will go to college (Glaser & Warick, 2016). If some of these programs have the funds and connections to offer guarantee admissions or other types of promised scholarships, this will help set the expectations for young students.

“In addition of setting expectations and providing a financial pathway to college, the promise programs also aid in establishing a college-going culture within the community. Students hear the message that everyone is expected to plan for their futures beyond high school and to consider college as an option. Of these programs that offer full scholarships to all students, they have sent more than 15,000 students to college for almost free” (Glaser & Warick, 2016, p.7).

Something that brings familiarity to this, because not all programs are able to support college funds and offer scholarships, the research touches on the Gear Up program. This program in particular is one that provides academic support (especially to those at risk of dropping out), provides information to the students and families on the advantages of college, Gear Up is offered to an entire graduating class, starting at seventh grade and they are followed during their entire progress through school. However, research states that the government has not been regularly evaluating the program. More recently, a College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium was formed to evaluate the program (Glaser & Warick, 2016).

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After review of the college enrollment rates for high school seniors participating in one of the Gear Up programs in 6 different states, of those students 9,000 (56.9%) enrolled in college. Although this rate is lower than the national average which is 66.2% it was 6 points higher than the average for low-income students. In another study done at the middle school level, a comparison study of schools with college programs and those without. It states that schools without the Gear Up program, students had a better outlook and attitude on school and this might be for the reason of having higher educated parents who have more connectedness to the school. In contrast, the students in Gear Up had much more knowledge about college and the related services and reported to have had more conversations and discussions with parents and other adults about preparing for college. Although this area is more focused on Rhode Island, they had a recent study in 2015 to evaluate the impact of Gear Up and it was said that students in the program were 25% more likely to enroll in college and nearly 70% of their high school graduates from this school had enrolled in college. It was also stated that the number of Gear Up activities the student participated in or the more they participated, the better their GPA and increased attendance rates (Glaser & Warick, 2016).

A high school diploma used to be enough to get into the career that you always dreamed of, today this is no longer the case. The trend of needing post-secondary education will continue to increase because of the complex global labor market which is requiring higher levels of math, science, and language arts proficiency. Since it seems that high schools are increasingly focusing on student's performances on basic skills, but not about college and career options or to develop 21st century skills. It is important to push for college programs because those from economically

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disadvantaged backgrounds will have little access to these opportunities and services. If we are to look back upon the Upward Bound Math-Science the benefits proven was the improvement in math and science grades and the greater likelihood of majoring in math or science and completing a 4-year degree in math or science. Within those students with low educational expectations, they found increased advanced placement honors and a greater chance of enrolling in and completing a higher educational program.

Making higher education more attainable to disadvantaged students is an example of creating an equal opportunity at education for all. Equal opportunity at education is defined by Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, which is a federal law of the United States of America. It prohibits discrimination against faculty, staff, and students, including racial segregation of students, and requires school districts to take action to overcome barriers to students' equal participation (Bruner, n.d.). These college readiness programs are creating ways for low-income students to overcome these barriers. So what might these barriers be for the disadvantaged students? The most prominent barrier would be academics; low-income students struggle to graduate from high school because of their lack of academic resource. Sometimes the students are also at a disadvantage because their parents lack access to academic knowledge, such as; college entrance requirements, application processes, and financial aid opportunities. Another barrier that is common among low-socioeconomic status (SES) students is internally, they have low aspirations and set goal goals that do not reflect their academic achievement levels. Some external factors that come with SES students is the fact that they may not have access to transportation, have family barriers, and classism might be isolating the student.

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Do college awareness programs motivate the students?

In a study done by Knaggs & Schardt (2015), the qualitative results concluded that students/participants with GEAR UP had benefitted from the program personally. They felt the program supplied them with resources and had the support from their school and as a result of the program they had grown personally. This is described as a greater motivation to succeed academically and be involved in their communities and other activities. The last benefit from this study includes, “Realistic Expectations. By providing students with greater college access and better understanding of college opportunities, the GEAR UP program was able to help students communicate college-based future goals. Participants were not only able to both communicate clear and realistic goals for themselves and their future, they were also able to articulate their reasoning behind setting their personal goals and to describe ways in which they were currently preparing themselves to meet those specific goals” (Knaggs & Schardt, 2015, p. 3).

The fieldwork I had conducted helped support that, with my questionnaires (See Appendix B) and student surveys (See Appendix C). The teachers and students confirmed that they found college awareness programs beneficial. I have collected two responses from middle and high school teachers in Marina, CA. The first being, Mr. Bayer an eighth grade English teacher. When asked for his opinion on the success of college programs in schools today he had said, “I believe the combination of AVID, GEAR UP, teachers, parents, and the school environment altogether will impact student motivation. I can tell because attitudes towards school has improved with these factors in place” (J. Bayer, Personal Communication, 1 October 2016). He had also agreed that the students seem to really enjoy it, although not all kids are

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taking advantage of it, but they are especially impacting our community when combined with

AVID. The second teacher, Ms. Amador a ninth grade teacher from a high school in Marina

answered very similarly. “I believe college awareness programs seem to be a good idea to have

in the middle and high schools because students have the

opportunity to think about what career they want to pursue

after high school” (A. Amador, Personal Communication, 7

October 2016). She explained that her personal connections to

it were satisfied because of the help she receives from GEAR

UP staff in which they provide an in class tutor to help

students that are struggling with math and need the extra

attention.



Why target low income students?

A study done in South Texas that indicated low-income high school graduates are less likely to get to a postsecondary institution than their middle and upper-income peers. The study done among the students were to compare two different college readiness programs; Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and Early College High School Initiative (ECHS). Two separate high schools in South Texas implemented separate programs and used a knowledge and skills assessment to analyze the academic and college performance, they also used test scores from English Language Art and Mathematics to compare. The results indicated that students who were involved in ECHS college readiness programs were outperforming the GEAR UP students, ethnicity and socioeconomic status did not have a

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significant effect on college readiness achievement. Gender was the only characteristic that had a statistically difference in their performance. The results also indicated that environment implementations contributed to student performances (Smithwick-Rodriguez, 2011). The need for a skilled and educated workforce is growing. It's unfortunate that the underrepresented college bound groups are present in our current higher education system, they include: racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students. They face barriers that are both academic and non-academic risk factors; they lack the academic resources- technology, tutors, materials, and college preparatory curriculum. They lack access to knowledge about college entrance requirements, the application process, and financial aid opportunities

The financial barriers can lead to social isolation and create low education aspirations. Also, transportation may become an issue and result in the lack of connections for opening up the future opportunities (employment).

After obtaining all questionnaires, the interview, and anonymous surveys while also conducting my own observations the data begins to surface. My data analyses are broken down quite simply. In order to answer the question of “are these college awareness programs useful and motivational for students?” and how much do the students really know about college, do they want to go, and did the adults in their households graduate from college? I conducted surveys (See Appendix C) for middle and high school students in Marina and Pacific Grove. In order to answer why students are targeted and compare the two, I've created tables to compare the eighth and ninth grade students from Marina and Pacific Grove.

Eighth (8th) Grade Students from Marina, CA.

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Did the adults in your household graduate from college?	45% of students answered yes
Do you want to attend college?	84% of students answered yes
Who motivates you to reach this goal?	31% of students said their families 38% of students said to prepare for a better future
Are you familiar with any colleges?	79% of students answered yes & gave examples
Where does your knowledge of college come from?	54% of students said their families 25% of students said their school informs them
Do you believe college awareness programs are useful? (ex. GEAR UP)	90% of students answered yes

These results answer the question of how much students really value their college awareness programs and tells me that the students are gaining knowledge about college through their schools. These surveys required short answer responses and in this I found a few interesting answers written down. For example, when asked about college awareness being useful, a student had said, “I think GEAR UP is useful and motivational because the idea of college will get into kids heads and persuade them to go to college.”

Ninth (9th) Grade Students from Marina, CA

Did the adults in your household graduate from college?	47% of students answered yes
Do you want to attend college?	94% of students answered yes
Who motivates you to reach this goal?	39% of students said their families 23% of students said their interests

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Are you familiar with any colleges?	87% of students answered yes with examples
Where does your knowledge of college come from?	44% of students said their families 38% of students said their school
Do you believe college awareness programs are useful? (ex. GEAR UP)	90% of students answered yes

My reason for going to the high school level to get these surveys done by 34 students in the ninth grade was to examine the preparedness and readiness for college within the year of leaving eighth grade. There was a 10% increase in the amount of students who wanted to attend college and it was clear that these students were starting to learn more about college in school than they were in middle school.

Eighth (8th) Grade Students from Pacific Grove, CA

Did the adults in your household graduate from college?	89% of students answered yes
Do you want to attend college?	98% answered yes
Who motivates you to reach this goal?	44% of students said to prepare for the future 19% of students said their families
Are you familiar with any colleges?	93% of students answered yes & gave many examples
Where does your knowledge of college come from?	68% of students said their families 15% of students said their school informs them

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Do you believe college awareness programs are useful? (ex. GEAR UP)	91% of students answered yes
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These responses gathered from the 53 middle school students in Pacific Grove, CA were particularly interesting to me because you can see that a significant amount of them have family that attended college and graduated. And it is not a large gap, but in this high income area of Monterey they seemed to be much more familiar with college campuses. For example, when an eighth grade student answered the question about where their knowledge of college comes from, the student has said, “my parents always tell me about college and we always tour colleges for my brother.” This response was not rare amongst these Pacific Grove students, many of them had said they had the experience of being on a college campus with family and that their parents are the majority educators of college. Something else that was not uncommon amongst these answers was the “do you believe college awareness programs are useful?” Most students answered yes, but some went on to even question what college programs, “I think so, but I don’t know about any of them.” And one Pacific Grove eighth grade student had said, “No because I don’t even think we have them.” It is not at all that these students are not being educated on college in school, but that they are receiving majority of their knowledge through family and they do not have college awareness programs on site. They do have AVID, which is also at most middle schools in this area. AVID is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to closing the achievement gap by preparing all students for college and other postsecondary opportunities (*What is AVID?*). This program teaches skills and behaviors for academic success and provides

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intensive support for student/teacher relationships while also creating a sense of hope for personal achievement through hard work. Although, I do agree with what this class provides, it unlike any normal college awareness program because they do not provide this to all students. It is a select few that are succeeding in class and are carefully chosen by the teacher of the AVID class.

Do these college awareness programs improve graduation rates? What indicates that these programs are successful?

My interview with Christopher Mutschnick (See Appendix A), Program Coordinator of GEAR UP went extraordinary well. He was able to answer the questions of what kinds of things he does in his position with GEAR UP. In contrast with what some of the research said about how there is no evaluations set in place of these college programs, Mutschnick explained that his duties are to develop, implement, and evaluate GEAR UP services. These programs are designed to raise awareness of postsecondary options and increase knowledge of financial aid opportunities that promote academic preparation. The most influential response that Mutschnick had given was to the question of “In your opinion, do these college awareness programs seem to be successful?” (C. Mutschnick, Personal Communication, 14 September, 2016). He was able to go into the details of the data he had on file by responding that these programs are so impactful because 29% of California school districts have no counseling programs at all and if they do, the ratio of students per counselor on average is 945 to 1. In Chris Mutschnick’s opinion, these college awareness programs are sometimes all that these low income schools have to offer for counseling and mentorship which is critical to the development of student’s education. And in

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his response to how he could tell that these programs are successful, he said “These funds are strictly aligned with goals objectives that are designed to increase the number of low income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education, GEAR UP is subject to an annual evaluation in the Annual Performance Report” (C. Mutschnick, Personal Communication, 14 September 2016). In this project, GEAR UP was awarded a seven year grant and they must continuously demonstrate growth and progress towards meeting the stated outcomes and in return they risk the possibility of not being refunded. And given the strict standards imposed, GEAR UP continues to have a strong track record and since 2000, they been awarded seven GEAR UP grants resulting in \$43 million in funding (2 of the 7 grants are serving the Monterey Peninsula Region).

A breakdown of progress based on measureable program outcomes (provided by the Annual Performance Report):

PM 1: Starting in year 2, cohort students' avg. daily attendance (ADA) at each school will be at least 90%.

- As of the end of Semester 1 of Year 2, ADA is 96%, indicating strong likelihood of meeting this target for Year 2.
- Target has been met and exceeded by 5.8%.
- Results 2015-16 year-to-date

PM 2: Each year, at least 95% of middle school students and 90% of high school students will be promoted to the next grade level on time.

- Target has been met and exceeded by 5%.

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- Results 2014-15 to 2015-16:
- Program-wide 100% (858/858)

PM 2: 80% of parents graduating from the GEAR UP Parent Academy will demonstrate advanced knowledge about costs and benefits of postsecondary and understand postsecondary options, preparation, and financing.

- Target has been met and exceeded by 3.3%.

PM 3: 50% of parents will actively engage in activities designed to assist their student in their academic preparation for postsecondary education, as measured every two years.

- Parent service implementation began late during May 2015, and so has been underway for less than one year to date. As of the end of 2015, 20% of Cohort 1 students and 27% of Cohort 2 students had a parent actively engage in such activities, indicating progress toward meeting this target (C. Mutschnick, Personal Communication, 14 September, 2016).

Discussion

The most pressing reason I wanted to research college awareness programs was because of my affiliation with GEAR UP. At some point in a person's career path, they might find themselves wondering why they do what they do and how do you stay passionate about it? To me, the essential to a happy life is living with a sense of purpose. And my future is not necessarily in college awareness programs but it does involve the success and progression of students in their academics and future. After conducting my research on college awareness

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programs I feel more confident in what I am doing and the outcomes of my work is proving to be worth it.

Throughout my research, I came across different resources that seemingly compared one college awareness program to another. The most useful piece of what the research was saying came from the fact that public needs to be provided with more information about the success of these college awareness programs. Many students lack knowledge of the costs of college, availability of scholarships/financial aid, career paths, and the economic value of pursuing a higher education. Those that lack the resources of college are already starting behind their higher income peers. In order to dig deeper into what I was finding, I wanted to compare the low income area student's knowledge and availability of resources to those of a higher income status. My data and findings confirmed this statement and exposed that students from higher income areas were receiving 68% of their information of college from their families, opposed to 44% in Marina, CA (the lower income area). We must be targeting these students now, since they are in a low income middle and high school, they will not as likely be open to postsecondary options. Exposing students to college awareness early on will help facilitate a more thriving environment because those students who start off disadvantaged are not likely to have an easy time gathering this information later on in life. If we can educate the students early, it will lead to closing the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students.

A response from a middle school student that came with a no answer to college awareness programs being useful, "No because some people don't want to go to GEAR UP

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because they are during our time.” This student makes a valid point and leads me to believe that maybe learning about college shouldn’t be something “extra” students need to be doing, it should be a part of their curriculum.

The interview with Chris Mutschnick has strongly confirmed my beliefs that the college awareness programs are impacting the communities and benefiting students. They work to create a sustainable change in schools and districts, and college access programs are 100% committed to the success of students and eradication the systems of social injustices. These programs are hopeful and passionate about breaking the cycle of poverty and educate/empower students that they reach out to. Since the people involved in these programs are in a profession that is based upon passion and commitment to student’s success, I firmly believe that they are making a difference.

All in all, with the questionnaires with middle and high school students seemed to have a general consensus that they enjoyed having the programs at their school. They could see the behaviors towards school changing in their classrooms and noticed that students enjoyed the extra help they could receive in and outside of class. Ms. Amador had also pointed out that students are able to catch up with their math and English skills while collaborating with their peers, they enjoy the field trips to college campuses, and getting that mentoring from GEAR UP staff (college students themselves) is inspiring to students.

During my own personal observations, I felt I gained the most answers in my research. I had the pleasure of joining eighth and ninth grade students for many college awareness programs

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events and presentations, the first being the Bay Federal Credit Union presentations. Students had one period dedicated to learning about how to save money safely and sufficiently in order to take advantage of the college opportunities that are in their near future. The students were fully engaged and were interested in learning about how much they will need for college and why college is important (financially why). In general, I was able to spend a lot of time on campus with these students and I got to experience that college atmosphere that is cultivated by GEAR UP and AVID. In the picture provided, it includes me with four colleagues of GEAR UP in front of the painted college murals done by students depicting their favorite colleges in the country. The next event I attended, Pursuit Youth Expo included 10 high schools from the Monterey area (all coming with college awareness programs provided by their schools). This workshop was created to guide students toward higher education through projects, volunteerism, and mentoring. This entire experience was really inspiring, the idea was to help students define their values, discover their skills, and stay true to themselves by pursuing something they are passionate about.

For my last observation, I attended the final field trip for the semester with 25 eighth grade students to visit and tour the college campus of Stanford. This event was led by GEAR UP and AVID. It was a great experience for me personally. I got to see the effects it was having on the students and their interests in college and experience the first time a student was stepping onto a college campus. Also, observing the collaboration between two college awareness

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programs was beneficial in my research because it provides the students with the best possible resources to a brighter future.

Through my observations, I was able to witness a lot of really wonderful things on campus in Marina, CA. The school itself creates a college bound atmosphere, such as including college themed street signs all over campus. Doing so, this explicitly puts the idea of college in a student's head without making it too noticeable. This time at this school with these students was my most influential since I was able to spend the most time with them, I spent hours observing and helping in their classrooms. It is not enough to just say that these college programs are working because I see it, but the atmosphere at this middle school is different. It breathes college environment and has a sense of hope for a great future in college.

Problems and Limitations

Since conducting my research, I have come to find that some issues with collecting the data from anonymous surveys with young students is sometimes unreliable. I created these surveys and introduced them to students as how important it was that they give me truthful answers and really took their time on answering them because of the importance of my research. Unfortunately, I could not hover over them and make sure they were complying with what I had said, so this led to some students rushing through it and giving me ingenuine answers.

In regards to my teacher questionnaires, I do believe that the teachers had given me their honest feedback, but I am led to believe that maybe since I am affiliated with GEAR UP, they had felt the need to hold back some of what they might say if I had not. This is also why I

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reached out to a high school teacher I had not known. The questionnaire was passed along from a colleague. I had originally intended to question 3 teachers total, but the communication was lost and I could not get the third questionnaire back in the time frame I had hoped for.

I believe that my data was sufficient enough to answer my primary research question, “How does promoting college awareness programs benefit the education of middle school and high school students?” The information collected from my interview with GEAR UP Monterey project director, Chris Mutschnick gave me statistics and data that had given me the numbers for what students were targeted and how many of those students in the cohort met their expectations. His responses also provided answers for secondary questions like, “What are the college awareness programs? How have these college awareness programs come about? Who provides funding for these programs?” Not only did Chris Mutschnick give me his personal opinion on GEAR UP impacting the community and benefiting students, the student’s answers on their anonymous surveys, the teacher’s questionnaire answers, and my own personal observations helped answer my primary research question.

Recommendation

After conducting my research, spending time with a familiar college awareness program, and getting to know the students targeted, my recommendation is to continue to push for funding of the college awareness programs. In order to close the gap for learning with young students, we must start college awareness as early as middle school. Early learning is key for low-income students, if they get the idea of going to college sooner in their education the more likely they

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will be to pursue it when entering high school. Because of my research before, I stand behind the idea of promoting college awareness programs for low-income middle and high school students. Since learning gaps start to emerge early, most evidently with disadvantaged students. Those students who do not start off well in their education, tend not to thrive later on. This is not only due to stressful environments they might face with their learning opportunities, but because early learning facilitates later learning. If we can educate the target students for these programs learning on they will have an easier time in the future adding information to the topic of college (Dougherty, 2014). My overall recommendation is to expose students early to college awareness and help motivate them to learn more later on.

Conclusion

This capstone examines the question “how does promoting college awareness programs benefit the education of middle and high school students?” College awareness programs are designed to improve academic skills, increase high school retention, build self-esteem, provide mentors, increase parental involvement, increase financial aid and career awareness, and promote college attendance. These programs include, but are not limited to; GEAR UP, Imagine College, Upward Bound, AVID, ECHS, etc. For some programs, like College for Every Student, they are privately funded by private donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals. Some receive their funding from grants (like GEAR UP), either at the state or federal level.

Now that my fieldwork has come to an end, it is my understanding that teachers of low income schools truly value and appreciate college awareness programs. Of the 78 students that

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participated in my anonymous surveys in Marina, CA almost all answered “yes” they found college awareness programs useful and motivational. And 90% indicated that they want to pursue a future in college.

In conclusion, these college awareness programs are successful. The results are there in the data and the outcomes/goals are being met above their expectations. The information and support being provided to these students in the Monterey area benefits these students in a way that cultivates a healthy learning environment and motivates students to reach higher. Not only is this because they are given the tools on how to succeed, but because they are capable and feel empowered to do so. Every day our economy is changing and this generation is the change. If we get kids interested now, they will change the world.

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Appendix A

GEAR UP Monterey Project Director Interview Questions

Please describe what GEAR UP is and the kinds of things you do in your position with the program.

In your opinion, do these college awareness programs seem to be successful? How can you tell?

Where does the funding for GEAR UP come from? And how did the program come about?

Do you believe that GEAR UP is impacting the community and benefiting the students?

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Appendix B

Middle & High School Teacher Questionnaire

When you were in middle school/high school did you have college awareness programs? If so, were they helpful? If not, where did the majority of your college readiness and awareness come from?

In your opinion, do these college awareness programs seem to be successful in the middle schools/high schools today? How can you tell?

Do you believe that GEAR UP is impacting the community and benefiting the students?

From your observations, do the students enjoy the programs offered at school and seem motivated by them?

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Appendix C

College Awareness Survey

Grade _____

1. Has anyone in your household attended college and graduated?

2. Do you want to attend college or have goals for after high school?

3. What motivates you to achieve these goals?

4. Are you familiar with any colleges? Please name them below.

5. Where does your knowledge and awareness of college come from? (in other words, who taught you about college) if there is no knowledge, are there resources you can easily access to attain the knowledge?

6. Do you think that college programs in school are useful and motivational? (For example; GEAR UP)