

Capturing the College Potential of Students from Under-Served Populations: An Analysis of Efforts to Overcome Social and Financial Barriers to College

Executive Summary



PATHWAYS
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NETWORK

CommunicationWorks, LLC
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National associations, federal and state agencies, private scholarship programs, student loan agencies, and others have undertaken numerous efforts to motivate students to take advantage of college and financial aid opportunities. These initiatives typically focus on increasing awareness of the value of postsecondary education and the availability of aid to help pay for it. Promotional activities include brochures and posters distributed through schools and community organizations, college and financial aid fairs, and early awareness workshops. In order to gain insight into why, despite substantial investment, these initiatives appear to have had little impact on increasing the college-going rates of disadvantaged populations, the Pathways to College Network commissioned a study of the scope and effectiveness of existing efforts.

Problems with Existing Efforts

Looking at 86 campaigns and the awareness efforts of 57 outreach programs nationwide, the study found that a national, or broadly organized, effort to encourage under-served students and their families to set a course toward postsecondary education does not exist. Through a number of disparate efforts, a proportion of under-served students is being reached with this message and with programs to support this goal. But the effects of these efforts are limited because their message is not reinforced widely across other areas of our culture and society. While existing efforts have numerous strengths, significant gaps in these programs limit their impact, and far too many students and their families still remain to be reached. Most efforts are public relations or awareness campaigns designed to promote a program or to educate about college and/or financial aid; they are not designed to change college-going behavior. Gaps include the following:

There is insufficient deliberate identification of under-served students and families, and targeting of messages and activities to the appropriate audiences. The researchers saw little evidence of scientific segmenting of the populations and those who influence their decision-making (community organizations and leaders, parents, coaches, adults who serve as informal mentors, etc.). Many campaigns do not identify their target audience(s) specifically.

Campaigns lack clear, compelling and frequently repeated messages that cut across all activities and build a sense of unity behind a cause. For the most part, the messages are uninspiring; few are hard-hitting and motivational. There are no high-profile events or activities similar to AIDS bicycle rides or hunger walks to draw attention to the issue of college-going and to connect it to local communities at the grassroots level.

There is no message delivery in popular culture. Messages about college-going are not embedded in the media, advertising, or entertainment industries that dominate youth culture.

Most families say that they want their children to go to college, but many parents and students don't know what it takes to get there. Families don't help students make good choices and don't reinforce the right behaviors. Many students don't think about the required preparation until it's too late, or have unrealistic notions about life on a dropout's or high school graduate's income. They also have limited exposure to careers outside highly visible options such as medicine, law, sports or entertainment, and unrealistic notions about the preparation involved and the likelihood of achieving such aspirations.

There is a lack of good information about the 'product,' namely a college education.

Information about colleges and universities is not presented in a manner so that individuals can get a clear sense of the purpose, structure and operations of these institutions. As a result, many segments of our society, especially families without college experience, have misperceptions and inhibitions about higher education—in particular college and university education—and its multiple benefits.

Strategies and tactics that would expand outreach – and could carry a strong message to help more students overcome barriers to college – are underutilized. Few campaigns aim at changing attitudes and behaviors; fewer focus on moving beyond the desire to get to college to taking steps needed to make this possible. The strongest initiatives buttress academic support and individual counseling with messages delivered via advertising and the media.

Materials for parents and educators are not a high priority. Students are the primary target of materials, followed by multiple audiences, and then parents and educators. The study found few outreach efforts that included parents and educators as targets of strategies for encouraging young people to seek a college education, and even fewer with resources directed toward these audiences.

Programs are not well coordinated or well planned. Many organizations describe their objectives in vague terms, rather than in terms of actual numbers for success and timelines for attaining them. While some campaigns have a clear sense of where they are going and what they want to accomplish, others candidly noted that they have no coordinated outreach strategy, no plan to coordinate ad hoc efforts, and no unified message or well-conceived marketing agenda.

There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of outreach/awareness strategies and tactics. Much of the information available is on process outcomes such as how many brochures were distributed or public service announcement placed. Best-practice information typically is based not on analysis of data, but on anecdotes and gut feelings. This lack of real knowledge is reflected by the fact that virtually every state has a different sense of what works.

There is no coordinated national substantive role for the corporate community. Most major companies relayed that they have a role to play in developing an educated workforce. Yet, corporate leaders are far more involved in supporting the implementation of state standards and accountability systems than in opening college doors.

Funding to support outreach/awareness campaigns is precarious. Organizations noted that the aggressiveness of their awareness efforts depends on resources. Currently, most depend on a combination of state and federal funds, and public budgets are being cut.

Shifting from Public Awareness to Social Marketing

If we are to increase substantially the numbers of under-served students preparing for and succeeding in college, we must shift the focus of promoting college opportunities from increasing awareness of postsecondary education to changing behavior related to college-going. Campaign efforts must target not only students and families, but also teachers, counselors, policymakers, and others whose actions directly affect students' likelihood of attending college.

Social marketing campaigns focus on changing behavior of a target audience in order to benefit society. Social marketing is characterized by the use of extensive research from the campaign's beginning through its conclusion, in order to understand the audience and to structure the best means of reaching it and influencing new behaviors, and to determine the effort's success in actually changing behaviors. Once the goal is defined, in this case increasing college access and success for under-served students, social marketing research begins with collecting knowledge about the target audiences' values, ideas and attitudes in relation to the goal. Additional research on the audiences' habits is undertaken to determine the best places to reach them and the type (e.g. advertising, grassroots outreach, media advocacy, entertainment) and content ('messages') of promotional materials. Ongoing research is used to measure the effects of various campaign elements on behavior change, to revise these elements over time, and to determine the campaign's overall effectiveness.

Specific recommendations for transforming and strengthening existing college awareness efforts into social marketing campaigns include the following:

- Conduct market research to determine interests and values of target audiences, develop key messages, and evaluate impact.
- Use crisp, hard-hitting, factually oriented and motivational messages that cut across all activities, are frequently repeated, and build a sense of unity around going to college.
- Take advantage of social networks and audience members who are promoters and multipliers, e.g. high school girls who exert strong influence over boys.
- Test marketing materials using focus group research with target audiences and modify materials based on feedback.
- Produce different materials for different audiences, based on market research on interests, attitudes and values.
- Make extensive use of multiple paid media outlets, including radio, television, and advertising, in order to get the message about college coming from every direction.

- Create signature events with the involvement and support of high-profile figures such as governors and media personalities.
- Provide clear information about the "product," designed to allow students and families better understand the differences among types of colleges and degree programs, the campus environment, and college instructional methods and requirements.
- Bolster messages developed via the media with specific actions students and families can take to make college a reality, such as individual college counseling, academic support with college preparatory courses, and participation in a program that makes an early commitment of financial aid to students who meet specified requirements (e.g. Rhode Island Children's Crusade).
- Make a long-term commitment – at least three years – to carrying out the campaign.
- Conduct and disseminate long-term studies across locations and using high-quality data to determine what really works to change behavior.

The Pathways to College Network partners have identified four areas in which students and their families need to take action in order to be prepared for college. These areas are:

1. Aspiration—developing the desire to obtain a college education;
2. Planning—taking the appropriate college preparation courses and learning and doing what else is necessary to enter college;
3. Financial Aid/Affordability—preparing for and obtaining the resources to pay the costs associated with a college education; and
4. Persistence—developing the skills and understanding of the college environment and requirements to be successful in college.

In the judgment of Communication *Works*, developing aspirations is the area in which social marketing campaigns can yield their greatest effect to increase college-going among under-served groups. A number of current campaigns focus on increasing college aspirations, yet large numbers of students remain untouched by these efforts, in part at least because these programs do not carry strong messages for motivating students. Campaigns focusing on increasing aspirations need to develop awareness and expectations both among students and within other audiences that can help make the case and provide resources for under-served students to attend and succeed in college.

With regard to planning and financial aid/affordability, Communication *Works* found that useful information and tools already exist although not on a pervasive scale. Existing tools need to be adapted to reach across languages and cultures and be made more widely accessible by students and their families. More thorough distribution strategies and networks need to be put into place to ensure that tools actually get into the hands of students and parents in the form that is most likely to encourage their use. Information for parents, especially minority parents, also is an area where content, availability and distribution of materials need to be improved substantially.

Information and tools to help students and families with college persistence are generally not as strong these need to be, especially in helping families understand and be comfortable with how to support a student's college experiences effectively. Strategies to help students succeed once in college are covered least in current efforts and are not widely available. There are a small number of examples of effective models for introducing students and their families to the college experience, including the TRIO Upward Bound program and other programs that make a college immersion experience central to the college preparation process. Upward Bound and other programs, such as the Daniels Fund College Prep and Scholarship Program and the Posse Foundation, follow up with students during their college years, often using ongoing contacts with mentors and other volunteers within and outside college. Many of these programs have developed written materials, workshops, videos, and other means to inform students and their families about ways to succeed in college. Still, while there are increasing resources to help students persist in college, there remains a tremendous need for expansion and improvement in the effectiveness, availability, and use of existing materials.

Exemplary Models and Practices

The study found a small number of exemplary campaigns or awareness activities, modeling practices that could strengthen the efforts of others. Models incorporating exemplary practices include the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering's (NACME) *Math is Power* campaign, the American Council on Education's College is Possible campaign, state initiatives in Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia, and the Cleveland Scholarship Program. The best overall campaign identified is a statewide communications effort launched by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, aimed at the full range of target audiences whose involvement is needed to achieve the goal of more under-served students attending and completing college, including students, parents, teachers, counselors, and state policymakers. Funded with federal (GEAR UP) dollars, the campaign involves sophisticated market research, produces different materials for different audiences, and uses paid media extensively. Since the campaign began, enrollment at Oklahoma state institutions has increased by five percent, and participation in a scholarship program for low-income students has increased by 170%.

The full text of this study, including additional information about these models and other exemplary practices, is available on the Pathways to College Network Web site (www.pathwaystocollege.net).