



The Pathways to Success Project

Ray Legler¹

Keywords: university-community collaboration, college readiness, system-level change

Author Biography: *Ray Legler*, is an Assistant Professor of psychology in the School of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences at National Louis University in Chicago, IL. Dr. Legler earned his Ph.D. in Ecological/Community Psychology from Michigan State University and has been working on urban youth and education issues in the Chicago area for over 20 years. Prior to joining the faculty at National Louis, he served as Director of Research and Evaluation at After School Matters in Chicago. Dr. Legler's current research interests focus on community-based approaches to addressing and preventing urban poverty by building partnerships between high schools, post-secondary institutions, and businesses. He has published research and policy work on school-to-work transition, academic achievement gaps, and educator quality. In addition, Dr. Legler has led program evaluations of educational technology and after-school programs, as well as leading school-community partnership programs in the Roseland, Brighton Park and Bronzeville neighborhoods of Chicago.

Recommended Citation: Legler, R. (2023). The Pathways to Success Project. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 14(3), 1 - 12. Retrieved from Day/Month/Year, from (<https://www.gjcopp.org/>).

¹ College of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, National Louis University

Corresponding Author: Ray Legler. National Louis University. Email: rlegler@nl.edu.

The Pathways to Success Project

Abstract

This paper describes the Pathways to Success Project (PSP), which was designed to help students in a low-income community in Chicago more easily navigate the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Statistics from Chicago Public Schools show that only about two-thirds of high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education. This can leave many students ill equipped to succeed in our skills-based economy, and contribute to the ongoing problems of unemployment and poverty. Programs that provide support for students as they work to enroll in a college, university, or career/technical school can be effective at facilitating this transition and helping students gain the skills they need to compete in the 21st century workforce. In addition, collaboration that builds connections between the K-12 system, colleges and universities, and local businesses and organizations, can create a system of support for such programs and further ease for students the process of transition from school to employment. The pilot intervention described here built on existing college and career activities in 3 local high schools and engaged an existing community-based collaborative (the Bronzeville Community Action Council) to help address these issues. During the project, 202 students participated in 10 interactive visits to two local universities and two large, international corporations. Successes and challenges to implementing system-level change with high schools are discussed.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students face serious barriers in their efforts to obtain a K-12 education. With a student population that comes largely from low-income households, many families struggle with economic challenges that can limit parents' involvement in the education process. According to data from the Chicago Public Schools web site, 76.4% of students are from economically disadvantaged families (CPS, 2021). In addition, the violence that has become well-documented in Chicago can make the journey to school a challenge for students and lead to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) that further interfere with student learning (Mersky, Topitzes & Reynold, 2013).

A number of other factors affect student, family and community development negatively. In particular, these issues affect the rates at which Chicago Public School students graduate and attend college. A

report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago found that 74.8% of students graduate within four years (Allensworth, et al, 2016). However, only 44% of 2015 CPS graduates enrolled in college (Allensworth, et al, 2016). We know that some kind of post-secondary education – university, college, or trade/technical school – is essential for people to compete in a 21st century economy oriented around high-level skills and technology (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2015). One approach to addressing this issue would be to provide extensive support for high schools and their students as they navigate the process of applying to college or other post-secondary training.

This paper describes a community-based pilot program that was designed to address structural challenges that impair the ability of many students to navigate successfully the transition from high school to some type of

post-secondary education or training. The Pathways to Success project was implemented in collaboration with three high schools and a community-based organization in Chicago in an effort to test the premise that a system of community support for high schools could create opportunities for students to explore post-secondary options and transition successfully into post-secondary education or training. More broadly, such a strategy – if successful – could provide an approach to education and training that leads to increased employment and reduced problems often associated with poverty.

The transition from school to work, and the process of facilitating this transition, has been an issue of study for a number of years (Legler & Reischl, 2003). In particular, the transition from high school to post-secondary training or education can be a leverage point for addressing the perpetual cycle of unemployment and poverty in our low-income communities. This paper describes one approach to helping students in these communities think about and plan for college/vocational programs in ways that are realistic and sustainable.

As the U.S. economy continues to transition from one primarily based on manufacturing to one based more on technology, the importance of advanced education and training for young people is becoming clearer. Multiple studies have documented the benefits of college education, including higher lifetime earnings and lower rates of unemployment (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Ma, Pender, and Welch (2016) found that a college degree is associated with lower rates of poverty and usage of public assistance, and higher earnings. These authors also noted that higher rates of income lead to higher amounts of taxes paid, suggesting additional, societal-level benefits of higher education.

For some groups of students, the path to college or other post-secondary education can be especially challenging. In particular, examination of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) shows that students of color and low-income continue to be under-represented in college compared to their white and more affluent peers. Research has also shown that students from low-income and single parent families face unique challenges in navigating from high school to college (Horn & Carroll, 1997). Students whose parents had not completed college were much less likely to attend college (47%) than students whose parents had college degrees (85%) (Engle, 2007).

Most research on the path from high school to college has focused at the individual, family, and program levels. For example, Nagaoka, et. al (2013) explored individual-level variables related to student academic mindset, perseverance, social skills, and learning strategies. Others have focused on the college selection process (Cabrera, 2000), the role of parents (Leonard, 2013), student support (Karp & Hughes, 2008), and programs such as Gear Up (Engle, 2007). However, less attention has been paid to a system-level analysis of the issue of helping students move from high school to college.

Improving the process of transition from high school post-secondary education and training

The need is becoming apparent for a new paradigm for the process of helping students, especially students of color and low-income, transition from high school to post-secondary education. Symonds, et. al (2011) suggested that the long-time approach of ‘college for all’ that ignores career-oriented programs is doomed to fail. In addition, Conley (2005) argued that high school and college are mostly disconnected and not aligned, and advocated for a restructured K-16 system

that reduces the distinction between high school and college.

An examination of the K-16 education system reveals several flaws, and suggests areas where better alignment and other improvement could be beneficial for students. Karp and Hughes (2008) stressed that collaboration and communication across the secondary and post-secondary would be helpful. Other experts have suggested that better links between career-focused paths, community colleges, and four-year institutions would lead to greater student success (Symonds, et. al, 2011), and that “higher education will need to expand its collaborative activities with K-12 education to better prepare students” (Hurtado, 1997, p. 66).

Part of a new approach to education may involve a reexamination of the popular conception that all students should go to college. In particular, a more effective approach may be to acknowledge that all students need some kind of post-secondary education or training that will allow them to acquire a marketable skill. For some students, this may be a traditional, four-year college degree. For others, it may be vocational training. Regardless, our approach to education requires system-level change that acknowledges both career and college tracks (Mulroy, 2011).

Better tailoring of educational strategies to student needs and talents could serve to address on-going, system-level challenges like high drop-out rates – particularly in urban school systems. By better matching post-secondary education and career plans to student needs and interests, students are likely to be more engaged in the educational process and less likely to drop out of high school before graduating (Symonds, et al., 2011).

On the other side of the educational equation, business and industry have recognized an “ever-worsening skills gap” between the skills of those in the labor pool and those required by business (Tyszko, Sheets, & Fuller, 2014, p. 4). In particular, the private sector has advocated for system-level change that will better allow our education and workforce development systems to meet the needs of the developing economy, and advocated for the involvement of the business community in helping to address the skills gap (Tyszko, Sheets, & Fuller, 2014).

There are several models of how to support students in their transitions from high school to post-secondary education. In the 1990s, a model called College Access was developed to help students of color and low income navigate the college entrance process (Bornstein, 2007). This model focused on supporting students in their efforts to complete college applications, personal statements, and applications for financial aid and scholarships. Another model, the Meyerhoff Scholars program (Legler, 2004), was designed to support students of color, once they entered college, through peer support and intensive academic support. Evaluations of both the College Access model (Ironbridge Systems, 2010) and the Myerhoff Scholars program (Maton, et al., 2008; Maton, et al., 2009) found that they were effective at helping students enter college, and succeed once there, respectively.

In addition to the research on college readiness programs, this project drew on a primary paradigm of community psychology – that of action research. With its historical roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, “action research involves the idea of testing theories and methods by putting them into practice, evaluating their impact, and using the results to refine future theory, method, and practice” (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001, p. 313). A related concept, experimental social innovation (ESI), involves the dissemination

and evaluation of new social programs and policies in various contexts, and has been applied to a variety of social problems including substance abuse, youth violence, and others (Mayer & Davidson, 2000). In particular, Oxley (2000) has documented the substantial involvement of community psychologists' use of the ESI approach in the school reform movement. Finally, system-level approaches to social problem solving (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012) are designed to facilitate long-term, sustainable (second-order) change.

The current project

The pilot project described here focused on facilitating the transition from high school to post-secondary education or training and was designed to provide students (particularly students from disenfranchised neighborhoods and students of color) post-secondary experiences and knowledge. In addition, the initial model included components designed to: provide students with the knowledge and support they need to navigate issues such as choosing colleges or training programs to which to apply; how to complete applications for post-secondary education and financial aid and make wise decisions about student loans; and how to effectively complete the enrollment process (see Figure 1).

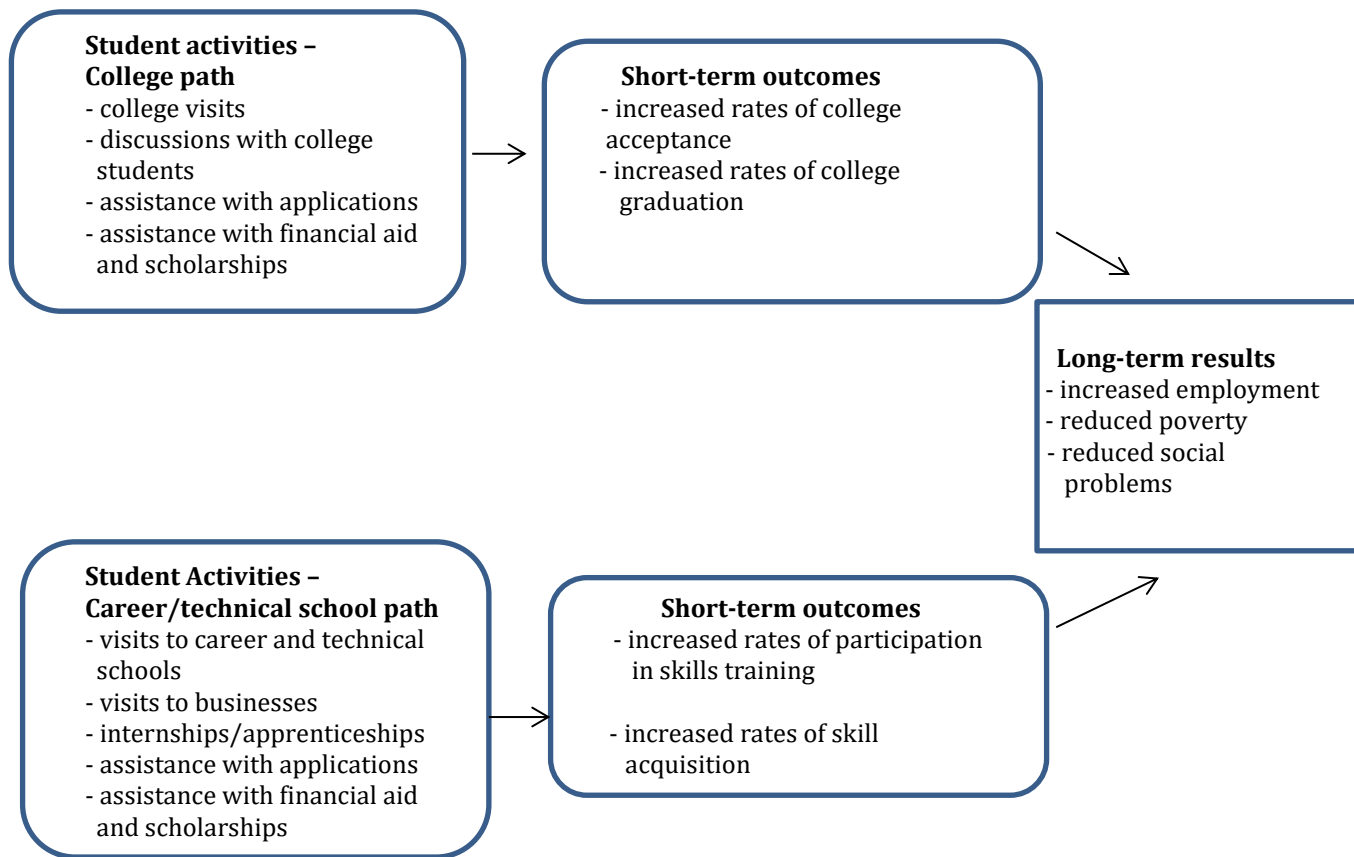


Figure 1. Logic Model for Pathways to Success

As detailed above, some of the proposed activities focused on students, while others focused on creating connections between high schools, post-secondary institutions, and businesses. These kinds of connections can be facilitated by community-based coalitions such as Community Action Councils (CACs). Chicago Public Schools supports Community Action Councils as a way to allow parents and community members to provide input to and participation in the school improvement process. Composed of parents, teachers, and representatives of community-based organizations and businesses, Community Action Councils represent a powerful vehicle for school and community improvement. This pilot project began through work with the Bronzeville Community Action Council (BCAC) and built on the successes of the BCAC by leveraging the connections it had developed. The Bronzeville CAC included most of the main community-based organizations in the neighborhood as well as several businesses. The PSP built on these relationships to increase the number of connections between 3 high schools in the Bronzeville area and organizations and businesses in the city. It also worked to provide opportunities for students to visit college campuses in the area, meet and talk with college students, and learn about the important step to enrolling in post-secondary education such as completing applications for colleges, financial aid, and scholarships. These initial efforts relied primarily on staff at the high schools and colleges, college

student and community volunteers, and youth peer leaders.

When the PSP began, the project worked in collaboration with the executive committee of the BCAC to select two Chicago public high schools for involvement in the project. After the first year, one of the schools withdrew from the project and was replaced by another local public high school. The PSP employed a community psychology model of community-based collaboration that applies knowledge about building system-level connections to address a social problem – in this case, the problem that too many students do not make the transition successfully from high school to employment. This multidisciplinary approach synthesized information across the fields of education, economics, and community psychology.

The PSP is innovative in that it builds on previous approaches to the issue of access to post-secondary education by adding a career and technical component to previous models of college readiness. By including career and technical education, in addition to college readiness, the project was more inclusive of high school graduates and addresses the needs of many students who are either unwilling or unable to attend a college or university. In addition, the project included system-level intervention that worked to build relationships between multiple stakeholders – with the goals of permanent change and long-term sustainability (see Figure 2).

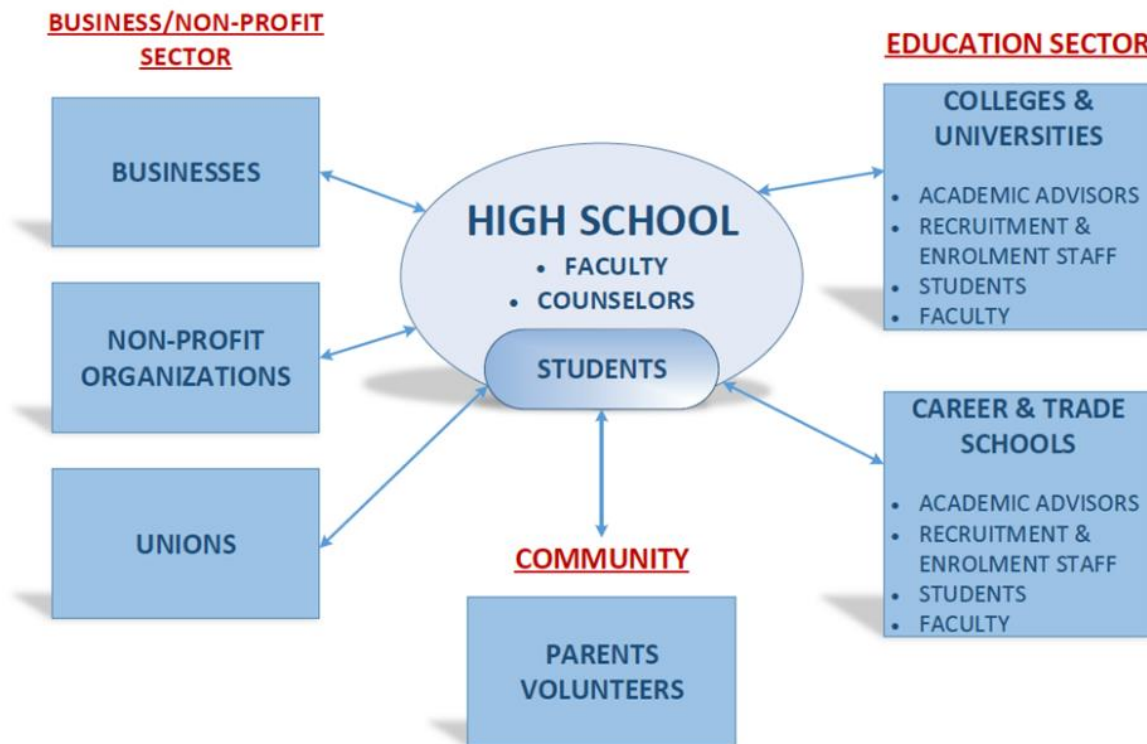


Figure 2. Pathways to Success System-Level Connections

The PSP took a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to building on and strengthening an existing community partnership (the Bronzeville CAC). This, in turn, was intended to facilitate a comprehensive response to the critical policy issues of unemployment and poverty.

In summary, the Pathways to Success Project involved intervention at two different levels – the program level and the community/system level. At the program level, the project involved high school staff, college staff, college students, and community volunteers in assisting high school students with the process of applying to post-secondary educational opportunities. This assistance involved support for students with completing applications to schools, personal

statements, applications for financial aid, and other requirements related to post-secondary

education. The program also involved exposing students to various post-secondary educational opportunities by facilitating visits to college campuses, career and technical training schools, and businesses. At the community level, the author worked with CPS staff and members of the Bronzeville Community Action Council to build relationships between the business and nonprofit sector, colleges and technical schools, community members, and three high schools in Bronzeville. The goals of building and strengthening connections between employers, post-secondary educational institutions, and the local high schools were to increase opportunities for students and create a sustainable system of support for

their transition from high school to post-secondary education and/or career training.

As this was a pilot project, no systematic data collection was conducted for the purposes of evaluation. Informal feedback was collected from student participants and school staff about their experiences in the project, and their suggestions for improvement.

Ultimately, the project's primary goal was to improve long-term outcomes such as high school graduation rates, college application and acceptance rates, and employment rates.

A total of 10 trips involving 202 Bronzeville students took place, including visits to two local universities and two large corporations in Chicago. The feedback from students about these visits was consistently positive. The quotes below are examples of typical student comments regarding their visit to a local corporation:

"I liked the trip because I learned different things I never knew about. I got an understanding about different things that each coworker does. Also I would enjoy coming back and doing something similar."

"I felt that the trip was helpful for me because all the information that they gave me, I took to mind. I really believe that I would come back again because this would be somewhere to do an internship."

Students who visited a local university had similar positive comments:

"This experience has been great, they informed me on a lot about college life and being flexible with school, home and work. And the different ways to pay. Also the culture of the school in students."

"I like it. It was a great visit at ___ today. I really love the presentation which was not

about coming to ___ but what would we do after high school. Also the most interesting part is the class size, and the opportunity of scholarships. I am (interested) to come to their school and be happy."

Successes

As mentioned, 10 total student visits involving 202 students took place. These trips involved more than simply providing tours and information. During visits to universities, students not only participated in a tour but also had the opportunity to engage with some college students. These conversations over lunch allowed an informal time for the high school students to ask the college students questions about their college selection and enrollment process, and also about other important issues such as obtaining financial aid, housing, and related issues. In addition, the college students typically reflected the diversity and socioeconomic backgrounds of the visiting high school students. This helped create a situation where the high school students could feel comfortable and envision themselves as college students.

Also, the project facilitated partnerships between high schools and businesses. In the short term, these relationships lead to the arrangement of visits by groups of high school students to the businesses. Similar to their experience during the college visits, the visits to the businesses allowed opportunities for the young people to engage with company staff about the work of the company, the education required to work in various positions, and the range of compensation that was available.

Challenges

The main challenge in the implementation of this project was building a foundation of trust and collaboration that would allow for attempts at creating community connections and fostering system-level change. The

author spent about a year attending Bronzeville Community Action Council monthly meetings and executive committee meetings in order to build relationships. The process of selecting the schools was a collaborative one that involved BCAC executive committee members. Once the schools were selected, executive committee members and the author met together with the school principals. Unfortunately, changes in leadership at the schools and the BCAC undermined much of the progress that had been made during the first year.

Another challenge for the schools was organizational capacity and resources. Most Chicago public high schools have one or two postsecondary counselors. These dedicated staff members already have their hands full in trying to make sure that all graduating seniors have completed a financial aid application and applied to at least one college. The effort that is required to build and maintain relationships with local colleges and businesses is frequently more than school staff is able to handle. Future efforts to replicate this project will need to address this issue. One idea that arose during this pilot was that parent volunteers or community members, possibly supported with small stipends, could provide support for these kinds of efforts.

The implementation of the Pathways to Success Project was guided by many of the practice competencies advocated for by The Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA). The fundamental model of the project, illustrated in Figure 2, reflects the ecological model put forth by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The primary goal of the project was to empower students to navigate successfully the transition from high school to post-secondary education, and secondarily to empower school staff to build and maintain systems of support for these transitions. The partnership with the Bronzeville Community Action Council allowed for collaboration on

project development and management, with the hope that better access to education and employment for students would help prevent poverty and related social problems. Lastly, capacity building was exemplified by creating connections between schools, universities, and businesses, and the emphasis on collaboration and coalition development was intended to facilitate community and social change.

The description of the pilot project presented here provides initial evidence for its fundamental premise – that efforts to build connections with local colleges and businesses can contribute to a system of support for students as they transition out of high school. In addition to efforts that focus on individual students, such as support for completing financial aid and college applications, students need to have opportunities to engage with college students and business staff in order to have a better understanding of the opportunities that await them after high school. These system-level connections, if supported and nurtured, can create powerful opportunities for students to explore their career interests, and make clearer the connections between what they are studying in high school and their future success.

References

- Allensworth, E.M., Healey, K., Gwynne, J.A., & Crespin, R. (2016). *High school graduation rates through two decades of district change: The influence of policies, data records, and demographic shifts*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Bornstein, D. (2004). *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas. Chapter 13 (pp. 159-176)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cabrera, A. and La Nasa, S. (2000). Understanding the College-Choice Process. In A. Cabrera & S. LaNasa (Eds.), *Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carnevale, A. P., Stroh, J., & Gulish, A. (2015). *College is just the beginning: Employer's role in the \$1.1 trillion post-secondary education and training system*. From Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, McCourt School of Public Policy website: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Trillion-Dollar-Training-System-.pdf>.
- Chicago Public Schools (2021). Chicago Public Schools Stats and Facts web page. Retrieved January 26, 2021. <https://www.cps.edu/about/stats-facts/>
- Conley, D. (2005, September). *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*. Condensed from Principal Leadership and Published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASSP), Reston VA.
- Dalton, J., Elias, M., & Wandersman, A. (2001). *Community psychology: linking individuals and communities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Engle, J. (2007). Postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students. *American academic*, 3(1), 25-48.
- Foster-Fishman, P. G., & Watson, E. R. (2012). The ABLe change framework: a conceptual and methodological tool for promoting systems change. *American journal of community psychology*, 49(3-4), 503-516.
- Horn, L. & Carroll, C. (1997). *Confronting the odds: Students at risk and the pipeline to higher education*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Hurtado, S., Kurotsuchi Inkelas, K., Briggs, C., & Rhee, B. S. (1997). Differences in college access and choice among racial/ethnic groups: Identifying continuing barriers. *Research in Higher Education*, 38, 43-75.
- Ironbridge Systems (2010). *An Evaluation of College Summit Outcomes*. Author.
- Karp, M. & Hughes, K. (2008). Supporting College Transitions Through Collaborative Programming: A Conceptual Model for Guiding Policy. *Teachers College Record*, 110(4), 838-866.
- Legler, R. (Ed.) (2004). *Perspectives on the Gaps: Fostering the Academic Success of Minority and Low-Income Students*. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.
- Legler, R. & Reischl, T. (2003). The relationship of key factors in the process of collaboration: A study of school-to-work coalitions. *Journal of*

- Applied Behavioral Science*, 39(1), 53-72.
- Leonard, J. (2013). Maximizing College Readiness for All Through Parental Support. *School Community Journal*, 23(1), 183-202.
- Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. Trends in Higher Education Series. *College Board*.
- Maton, K.I., Hrabowski, F.A., Özdemir, M. & Wimms, H. (2008). Enhancing representation, retention and achievement of minority students in higher education: A social transformation theory of change. In M. Shinn, & H. Yoshikawa, H. (Eds.), *Toward positive youth development: Transforming schools and community programs* (pp. 115-132). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maton, K. I., Sto. Domingo, M. R., Stolle-McAllister, K. Zimmerman, J.L., & Hrabowski, F.A. III (2009). Enhancing the number of African Americans who pursue STEM Ph.D.s: Meyerhoff Scholarship Program outcomes, processes, and individual predictors. *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering*, 15, 15-37.
- Mayer, J. & Davidson, W. (2000). Dissemination of innovation as social change. In Rapoport, J. & Seidman, E., *Handbook of Community Psychology*. New York, NY: Kluwer.
- Mersky, J, Topitzes, J., & Reynolds, A. (2013). *Impacts of adverse childhood experiences on health, mental health, and substance use in early adulthood: A cohort study of an urban, minority sample in the U.S.* Child Abuse & Neglect, 37(11), 917-925.
- Mulroy, J. (2011). College or bust: replacing “college prep for all” with a three-tiered educational model based on student abilities. *Family Court Review*, 49(3), 657- 670.
- Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allenworth, E., Keys, S. T., Johnson, W. D., & Beechum, O. N. (2013). Readiness for College: The Role of Non Cognitive Factors and Context. *Voices in Urban Education*, 38, 45-52.
- National Center for Educational Statistics (2018). *Digest of education statistics*. Retrieved from nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_302.60.asp
- Oreopoulos, P. & Petronijevic, U. (2013). *Making College Worth it: A review of research on the returns to higher education*. *Future of Children*, 23(1), 41-65.
- Oxley, D. (2000). The school reform movement: opportunities for community psychology. In Rapoport, J. & Seidman, E., *Handbook of Community Psychology*. New York, NY: Kluwer.
- Symonds, C. W., Schwartz, B. R., & Ferguson R. (2011, February). *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*. Report Issued by the Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Tyszko, J., Sheets, R., & Fuller, J. (2014). *Managing the Talent Pipeline: A New Approach to Closing the Skills Gap*. Washington, DC: U.S. Chamber of Commerce.