Executive Summary

In 2009, the Teagle Foundation awarded grants to 12 partnerships of community-based organizations (CBOs) that offer college preparatory programs and private colleges and universities in the New York metropolitan area under the Foundation’s College–Community Connections (CCC) program. The three-year grants support the development of academically challenging programs that prepare underserved high school students for college. The CCC program was introduced in 2006 as a pilot initiative—these grants are the Foundation’s second funding cycle for the program.

The CCC program offers a valuable model for college readiness—it provides authentic college experiences for highly talented youth to expose them to the rigors, realities, and possibilities of a liberal education. Different from programs that are designed to increase access to postsecondary education on a broad scale, the CCC program prepares college-bound students to make informed choices about college and develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a selective institution. The Foundation’s goals for the program are to:

- Enhance the college readiness of highly talented but disadvantaged high school students served by community-based organizations in New York City.
- Encourage these students to aim high in setting their academic goals, and to succeed in reaching them.
- Provide opportunities for faculty and students at colleges and universities in the New York City area to work with these students.
- Encourage academic departments at colleges/universities to commit to the partnership over the life of the grant.
- Encourage CBOs and colleges to explore ways in which such partnerships can be more fully integrated, and eventually institutionalized, at their institutions.
- Support college preparatory programs at community-based organizations.

To better understand if the program achieved these goals, the Foundation contracted with Metis Associates, a nationally recognized research and evaluation firm, to conduct a one-year evaluation of CCC during the second year of the program’s funding cycle. The evaluation was designed to examine the extent to which the partnerships are helping prepare young people for college and whether the programs are challenging and stimulating and support liberal education. The evaluation also explored what elements of the programs are most impactful and replicable, and if the grantees can sustain them. The main research questions focused on the characteristics of the program participants, elements of the program that were most influential to the students, the potential for sustaining the program, and the extent to which the program can be replicated and if the benefits are worth the investment. The methodology included focus groups with CBO
staff and college faculty, surveys of participating secondary students, analysis of participant data, and reviews of program documents. This report presents the findings of the evaluation.

Evaluation Findings

Profile of the CCC Participants

Twelve partnerships between CBOs and colleges or universities made it possible for 325 secondary students to participate in CCC programs. The program participants were predominantly minority and low-income students, and were from families with little or no college experience. Most of the students were juniors or seniors in high school (79%), African-American (62%), and female (62%). A majority of the participants (79%) were eligible to receive free- or reduced-price meals in school—an indicator of low income.

Most of the participants (86%) intend to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher; 26 percent of them would be the first in their immediate family to attend college. The participants most frequently identified resources at their high school, such as teachers (77%) and guidance counselors (76%), as their sources of information about college.

Program Impact

- **The CBO/college partnership is a highly effective model for introducing high school students to valuable information about college.** Overwhelmingly, the focus group participants agreed that the CBO-college partnerships were an essential component of the CCC programs. The partnerships gave the CBO students access to a network of college resources, including faculty and college students. In return, the colleges relied on the CBOs to facilitate administrative aspects of the programs and to recruit a racially and ethnically diverse group of secondary students. Most agreed that, while other models could produce similar results, the CBO-college partnership helped build a cohesive and impactful program.

- **The CCC program helped secondary students learn about the academic rigors of college coursework and the social responsibilities of being a college student.** The data from the focus groups and student surveys indicate that the CCC programs helped the participating students increase their understanding of academic and social aspects of college—including the college application process, the content and degree of difficulty in college courses, the amount of work that is required, how college students need to manage their time, and the types of student support services available on a college campus and how to access them.
The CCC program influenced students to be more thoughtful in their college search and to apply to selective universities and liberal arts colleges. The CCC participants, according to the CBO staff in the focus groups, were making more informed decisions about what colleges to apply to as a result of their participation in the program. The staff noted that the participating students had a better understanding of the difference between selective and nonselective institutions. In addition, they learned the importance of considering factors such as school size, location, and availability of college majors when applying. They added that more students were applying to private universities and liberal arts colleges as a result of the program.

The programs exposed students to liberal education and helped them develop the knowledge and skills to succeed in college. The secondary students in the programs participated in academic coursework that required them to think critically about broad issues and understand the social context of their ideas. They were challenged to learn new things and ways of thinking, understand new and different perspectives, and integrate ideas from multiple sources. And as a result of their participation, the students, according to focus group data as well as survey responses, increased their skills in areas such as developing and communicating their own ideas, deciding what ideas and information are important, connecting classroom learning to the real world, and communicating clearly through writing and speaking.

The most influential aspects of the CCC program were the on-campus activities and experiences, particularly the interactions participants’ had with college faculty and students. All of the evaluation respondents agreed that on-campus coursework and residencies were impactful because they gave the CCC participants an opportunity to experience a college student’s life. The experiences showed them what it is like to take college courses, live in dorms, and be involved in a college community. Interactions with college professors and students were also extremely influential. The college faculty members are passionate about their subjects and worked to engage the students in academic discourse. In addition, college students, who served as real-life role models for college success, mentored the CCC participants.

Sustainability of the Program

The CCC programs effectively enhanced the CBO college preparatory programs, but have not yet been fully integrated into programming or curricula at the CBOs. The focus group participants agreed that the CCC programs augment college familiarization for the secondary students and offer authentic college experiences that the agencies are not able to provide. Staff at some CBOs reported that they had fully integrated the CCC program into their college preparatory programs, by aligning the curricula of the two programs, offering CCC activities throughout the school year, and offering the CCC program to all students. Staff from other agencies, however, suggested that the CCC program is less integrated because only some of the students participate and the content is different from the topics or skills addressed in the college preparatory curriculum.
The programs serve as tangible examples of the colleges' and universities' commitment to service learning and community engagement, but have not yet received a high level of institutional support from the college administrations. All of the participants in the college faculty focus groups believed that the CCC programs were completely aligned with their institutions’ mission to increase service learning and community outreach programs. Yet in the CBO focus groups, the respondents did not believe that the CCC programs had achieved much institutional support from the colleges and universities.

Program Replicability

The CCC programs were successful in meeting most of the Foundation’s intended goals for the program. In order to replicate the program model, an organization should be prepared to commit the level of resources provided by the Teagle Foundation. In the focus groups, CBO staff and college faculty agreed that it would be very hard to replicate the program without strong partnerships and an adequate level of funding. They added that any organization wanting to replicate the program would need to ensure equality in the partnership between CBOs and colleges with clear communication and real collaboration about the characteristics and needs of the target population, the content and format of the coursework, and the qualifications and skills of the program staff. In addition, the partners need to understand how each functions administratively and professionally in order to work together effectively. The CBOs should also develop a broad network at the college so the program can take full advantage of the resources of the campus. Finally, an adequate level of resources, both financial and in-kind contributions, is required to design and implement an effective program.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to guide the Foundation in its thinking about the future of the CCC program.

1. Continue to fund the CCC partnerships at a robust level to support the development of lasting and meaningful programs.

2. Consider targeting the program to colleges and universities that demonstrate a real understanding of the goals of the CCC program and the capacity to provide the resources needed to sustain the programs beyond the grant cycle.

3. Recruit CBOs for the CCC partnerships that serve the types of students who will benefit most from the program model—namely, highly motivated, college-bound students who are intellectually and socially prepared for an authentic college experience.
4. Work to ensure that all of the CCC partners understand the mission of the Teagle Foundation so that the CCC programs are fully aligned with the Foundation’s goals.

5. Consider building a pilot year into the grant so the partnerships can achieve effective collaboration before the three-year grant is awarded.

6. Provide regular opportunities for CBOs and colleges/universities to convene (both before and after the grants are awarded) to share best practices and have collegial discussions about college readiness and the CCC programs.