

The Teagle Foundation College-Community Connections Program:
Report on a Convening

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In 2005, the Teagle Foundation launched College-Community Connections (CCC), a college access and preparation initiative that supports partnerships between community-based organizations (CBOs) in New York City and nearby colleges and universities. Central to each partnership is an academically ambitious program that seeks to provide talented but underserved high school students with an introduction to a liberal education, as well as to encourage these students to apply to colleges that they might not otherwise consider. Notably, each program is designed jointly by CBO staff and college faculty and staff in order to build on the collective expertise of the partners. The Foundation launched the third phase of CCC in 2012 with 11 grants that aim specifically to refine the programs and—perhaps more importantly—to institutionalize and sustain the partnerships beyond the grant period.

Believing that a funder's role should extend beyond the provision of financial support, the Foundation convened a meeting on November 4-5, 2013 in New York City with CCC grantees, higher education leaders, education researchers, funders, and others concerned with the college access and success of low-income students. During this convening, participants served as a community of practice in which they discussed the successes and challenges of the programs and partnerships; learned about related efforts to improve the college access and success of low-income students; and explored possible ways in which the partnerships can be sustained, as well as replicated, in other settings. The convening also featured several presentations that examined issues of importance to the CCC program in particular, and to college access and success efforts more broadly:

- *Democracy and Opportunity: How Liberal Education can Foster Both*, Carol Geary Schneider, President of the Association of American Colleges & Universities
- *Creating an Institutional Culture for Access and Success*, Estela Mara Bensimon, Professor of Higher Education and Co-Director of the Center for Urban Education at the Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California
- *College Match*, Crystal Byndloss, Senior Associate, and Christine Johnston, Operations Associate, MDRC
- *Voices from the Field: Sustainability and Replicability of the College-Community Connections Initiative*, Stephen Coleman and Tandra Turner, Policy Studies Associates
- *Expanding the View: A National Perspective*, Kim Ransom, Director of the University Chicago Collegiate Scholars Program; Robert Escobar, Director of the Scripps College Academy; and Kelly Hewitt, Former Director of the Scripps College Academy

The following report is not a chronicle of the meeting's proceedings; rather it describes themes and ideas that emerged from the presentations and discussions. They include: "slow ideas" that tackle big and seemingly intractable problems; institutional agents who create

educational opportunities and facilitate change; liberal education as a means of realizing the promise of opportunity and democracy; and the idea that the success of programs like CCC ultimately depend on “constant advocacy” and the creative use of human resources. The report concludes with final thoughts and questions.

“Slow Ideas” and the Pursuit of Change

Perhaps one of the most salient themes of the convening was the notion of education as an arena full of “slow ideas” that seek to improve the educational opportunity of low-income students in significant and lasting ways. According to Atul Gawande (2013), slow ideas can be characterized as “important but stalled ideas” that “attack problems that are big but, to most people, invisible” and do so in ways that “can be tedious, if not outright painful.” Although the adoption of slow ideas can be hastened by improved versions of those ideas (e.g. the introduction of better technology), Gawande importantly argues that their success turns ultimately on changing people’s norms and behaviors. Drawing on Gawande’s article, Crystal Byndloss and Christine Johnston of MDRC presented three principles that underpin the adoption of slow ideas: (1) personal engagement is an effective way to change behavior; (2) relationship-building facilitates knowledge transfer and change; and (3) those who seek to introduce innovations must meet people where they are in order to understand the barriers that might inhibit change, to overcome those barriers, and to build trust.

Byndloss and Johnston applied these principles to MDRC’s slow idea, a college advising intervention that aims to reduce the problem of “undermatching” among low-income, high-performing students. Undermatching generally occurs when students attend less selective colleges even through their academic qualifications suggest that they could have been accepted at more selective institutions (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2009). According to Smith, Pender, Howell, and Hurwitz (2012), 41% of students who graduated from college in 2004 were “undermatched.” MDRC’s College Match Program addresses this issue by providing students with a suite of individualized supports that help them navigate the college admissions process. While such a “heavy touch” intervention is needed to tackle the undermatching problem, that it is expensive and that it requires more time and personalized support than other college advising programs makes it a slow idea.

Working in small groups, meeting participants offered and discussed some reasons why CCC is a slow idea. One participant noted the complexity of institutional fit between the CBO and college partners. Another participant suggested that CCC confronts the notion that liberal education—and college more generally—is not for all students. Yet another participant stated that the CCC projects are small and boutique-like, thus making scalability a challenge. Factors such as these challenge the quick adoption of programs like CCC. Following the slow ideas framework, one can argue that it is only through the deep engagement of people who work day-to-day in these programs that such factors do not become barriers to change.

Institutional Agents: Creating Educational Opportunities, Transforming Organizational Cultures

Another theme that emerged in the convening is the critical role that individuals play in creating opportunities for students. In her presentation, Estela Bensimon introduced Ricardo

Stanton-Salazar's (2001) concept of "institutional agents," that is, "high-status individuals who use their position, status, and authority to act on behalf of low-status students." Institutional agents can be faculty, staff, administrators, or counselors who utilize their human, social, and cultural capital to positively impact the social mobility of their students by connecting them to institutional resources, services, and opportunities. Furthermore, institutional agents help students cultivate the feeling that they are capable of succeeding in school, as well as motivate them to reach their educational goals. Finally, institutional agents exhibit a deep level of personal care for their students such that they become "protagonists" in students' stories.

Bensimon argued that in addition to their one-on-one work with students institutional agents are essential to creating cultures of access and success at colleges and universities precisely because they help realize institutionally espoused goals of democracy, diversity, and equity. In a study on Latino students in STEM, Bensimon and colleagues interviewed 22 STEM faculty and found only four that could be considered "institutional agents" (see http://cue.usc.edu/our_tools/latino_students_in_stem.html). Common to these four faculty were the following characteristics: (1) a deep commitment to increasing the access and success of minority students by changing the ways in which educational institutions serve these students; (2) an awareness that structural racism can limit the educational opportunities of minority students; and (3) a willingness to use his or her position, influence, and power to change institutional policies and practices. It was these characteristics that allowed the four faculty to more fully understand the particular challenges that Latino students faced and to provide these students with the necessary support and resources that could further their academic success.

Thus, while institutions have faculty, staff, and administrators who care deeply about their students, they often lack a critical mass of institutional agents to create an institutional culture of access and success for all students. Bensimon proposed that cultivating institutional agents among existing faculty is central to creating such a culture at colleges and universities. Doing so requires the "remediation" of existing norms and practices that are typically informed by the assumption that students' characteristics, behaviors, aspirations, and goals are the key determinants of their success. Changing these norms and practices so that they focus on what faculty can do to foster student success is the first important step to establishing a critical mass of institutional agents, and thus, an institutional culture of access and success.

Liberal Education as a Pathway to Democracy and Opportunity

In recent years, "student success" has become an issue that is no longer the sole province of individual students or the institutions that they attend. According to Carol Geary Schneider, two national dialogues on student success have emerged. The first defines success as completion and is characterized by statistics on persistence, retention, graduation, and degrees earned. The second defines success as the achievement of key capacities, and as such, points to questions about the meaning of degrees and the quality of education. Schneider argued that higher education's challenge is to merge these dialogues. She offered two strategies—(1) connect completion with essential learning outcomes, and (2) foster a shared commitment to a new conception of inclusive excellence—and proposed liberal education as a basis on which to realize these approaches. To Schneider, liberal education has endured changes in knowledge and

practice over time precisely because it is composed of goals that are adaptable and relevant in a wide variety of contexts. In its most contemporary version, these goals focus on fostering “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; intellectual and practical skills; personal and social responsibility; and integrative and applied learning” (see http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/EssentialOutcomes_Chart.pdf).

Importantly, Schneider argued that liberal education is necessary to addressing a fundamental challenge to the fullest realization of democracy: diversity. Defined as the variety of people on the one hand, and as patterned inequities and systemic inclusions and stratifications on the other hand, diversity forces higher education to consider what it means for all students to have access to the kind of education that will better their individual lives, as well as the collective life of the country’s democracy. Put another way, realizing an inclusive form of democracy is contingent on all students—regardless of their background—having access to a liberal education that will not only prepare them for the inevitable changes in their socio-economic environment, but also for their participation as citizens in a robust democratic society. That is, liberal education is designed to prepare students for a lifetime of changes, not simply the next job, and for a “life lived with others,” not simply those who are most like themselves.

Realizing the promise of liberal education for democracy and opportunity demands: (1) “a broad and compelling vision for liberal education in the service of society”; (2) an explicit articulation of how liberal education can help solve the world’s most pressing challenges (e.g. education and equity, poverty, energy, terrorism); (3) a curriculum that develops students’ capacity to think critically about these challenges and to develop innovative solutions that take into consideration the needs of the people they are designed to help; and (4) an expectation that all students should have the opportunity and support to pursue questions that are of great importance to them.

Yet, this holistic vision of liberal education for democracy and opportunity is confronted by realities that stall its adoption by all institutions of higher education. For example, competing public narratives that do not push for quality *and* educational opportunity exist. Indeed, such narratives have a limited focus on education as workforce development. Further, higher education as a whole is prone to inertia such that changes in how “things are done” are difficult to facilitate. Finally, the students who stand to gain the most from a liberal education are probably also the first in their families to attend college. “Educating” students and their families about the benefits of liberal education, particularly in the face of the workforce narrative, requires nothing short of constant advocacy.

“Constant Advocacy” and Leveraging Human Resources

The CCC projects, along with the Collegiate Scholars Program at the University of Chicago and Scripps Academy at Scripps College, are examples of programs that aim to change the narrative about college and liberal education for low-income, first-generation, and minority students and their families. By providing students with (1) immersion experiences in a college setting, (2) rigorous course work that highlight the benefits of disciplinary inquiry, (3) appropriate college preparation supports, and (4) opportunities to build relationships with

faculty, staff, and current college students, these programs demonstrate in authentic ways what college, grounded in a liberal education, can be like.

While several years of testing and piloting ideas have ensured the successful implementation of these programs, sustainability and replication remain open questions. An evaluation of the CCC program by Steve Coleman and Tandra Turner of Policy Studies Associates suggests that sustainability requires the development of financial resources, internal and external champions, and other supports geared toward maintaining program visibility and impact. Replication, in turn, demands a balance between fidelity to key elements of each program and flexibility to allow for adaptation to different local contexts. The way in which CCC programs are sustained and / or replicated, therefore, will differ depending on the particular situation the partners are in.

Interestingly, Coleman and Turner, as well as Kim Ransom of the Collegiate Scholars Program, and Robert Escobar and Kelly Hewitt of Scripps Academy, all point to the faculty's critical role in the sustainability and replicability of the CCC programs and other similar initiatives. For example, Coleman and Turner suggested that faculty should be involved in fundraising and creating institutional buy-in to sustain programs. Additionally, they proposed that engaging and supporting faculty's participation is key to replication. Ransom stated that at the University of Chicago, the Collegiate Scholars Program has a "symbiotic" relationship with the faculty: faculty who teach in the program have looked to it as a source of talented students who they can tap for research opportunities. Escobar and Hewitt echoed this notion of symbiosis, saying that the Scripps Academy provides faculty with an opportunity to learn how to better teach students who do not necessarily fall into the category of "high achieving." They noted too that the Scripps Academy has influenced the retention of faculty of color at Scripps.

Meeting participants added that the involvement of other individuals, such as alumni of CCC programs, can help with sustainability. Alumni, for instance, are a particularly valuable resource who can speak of the program's benefits to other audiences. They can also help create a college-going culture among students in the program by providing advice on the college admissions process.

The CCC convening facilitated a wide-ranging discussion of a number of slow ideas that are tackling the big problem of making more available high-quality educational opportunities for low-income, first-generation, and racial minority students. As the progression of these slow ideas continues, we should at the same time turn towards the equally important concern of defining what "success" looks like. Indeed, one measure of success in education is the increased number of students who gain access to and graduate from college. But such an assessment is limited since it does not consider the kind of education students receive and the outcomes they can achieve as a result. Shared across the CCC projects, the college match initiative, the development institutional agents, and the rigor of a liberal education is the promise of an undergraduate experience that not only cultivates students' critical thinking, communication, and analytical skills, but—perhaps even more importantly—helps them develop the qualities necessary to be engaged, democratic citizens in a complex, ever-changing society. Ensuring that

all students have equitable access to this kind of education is a great challenge, but—if accomplished—presents the best measure of success we can hope to realize.

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