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**Promoting Career Development with Low-Income
Students of Color**

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Theories and practices relevant to career development for youth have taken a series of turns during recent decades. While in the past career counseling was used to prepare individuals to find a congruent job-match for a lifelong position, counselors now must consider that people will hold multiple jobs, at times within vastly different areas, throughout their adult lives, and that they must develop resiliency for these transitions (Patton & McMahon, 2006). More recently, researchers and practitioners have realized that traditional theories and practices in career development, which focus on individual choice-making and problem-solving, are insufficient and ineffective in working with multi-ethnic populations (Arthur & McMahon, 2005). The lack of culturally appropriate guidance, coupled with additional barriers that low-income students of color are forced to face, have created an unsettling picture for these youth and have placed them at an elevated risk for unsuccessful transitions into the workforce (Gushue & Whitson, 2006). The consequences of not successfully serving such students' needs have been elucidated by numerous scholars, who have found that both high- and low-achieving students of color are adversely affected by non-comprehensive efforts in the area of career development (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007; Ladany, Melincoff, Constantine, & Love,

1997). The study presented here explores the experiences of low-income students of color in four initiatives that provide comprehensive career preparation.

Literature Review: Unique Needs of Low-Income Students of Color

Interestingly, there is no identifiable gap that exists between students of color and white students in regard to career *interests* and *aspirations*; in fact, both groups are quite similar in reported goals (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998). However, the division emerges in the occupational *expectations* of students, with ethnic and racial minority students expressing much lower confidence in their future attainment of these goals, which supports the idea that factors other than *choice* are influencing their career development (Kenny et al., 2007). Students of color present a particular challenge for counselors in that their primary need is not to be assisted in making a career choice, but rather in being fully integrated and included in systems designed to explore a full gamut of opportunities (Killeen, Watts, & Kidd, 1999). Exposure and awareness of the opportunity structure for realistically achieving one's aspirations seems to be missing for many low-income students of color, relative to their white peers. As we have become more aware of the distinctive needs of students of color, recognizing how disenfranchised many of them have become from our traditional career-development models, scholars have modified their theories in hopes of providing a more contextual and culturally relevant career-development framework (Gushue & Whitson, 2006).

Barriers and Supports

As students enter late adolescence, they encounter the major developmental task of committing to career choices and processes (Ladany et al., 1997). However, contrary to their counterparts, ethnical and racial minority youth face individual, familial, and societal barriers that have contributed to high rates of academic

deficits, employment inactivity, and lower graduation rates (Daire et al., 2007). Lower school funding, family misfortunes, lower socioeconomic status and limited access to role models in the workforce are just some of the risks that hinder student pursuits (Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). Many low-income students of color have suffered past academic failures and lack confidence in their ability to obtain desired positions in the workforce, and if these factors are compounded by limited knowledge about potential career opportunities youth are likely to foreclose on future options (Killeen et al., 1999).

While low-achieving students may perceive their job prospects as minimal, gifted students are challenged with a different set of barriers. Students of color that excel in the classroom and exhibit high levels of motivation are often told “You can be anything you want to be,” which communicates that talent alone will carry them through (Maxwell, 2007). However, these students often feel lonely and isolated from their peers, and receive little to no support in understanding how to narrow down their options and obtain their goals.

Both high- and low-achieving students of color are aware of their races being underrepresented in certain fields, and often resolve that they don’t “fit in” or belong (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Given that social belonging in adolescents is such a basal motivator, race remains a sensitive and guiding factor for youth in considering their future vocations. If students fear an unfriendly racial climate or assume that they will be alienated or marginalized in certain settings, they will consciously avoid those prospects (Alfred, 2001; Gushue & Whitson, 2006). In efforts to circumvent workplace discrimination, students frequently lower their expectations and find jobs that are not commensurate with their abilities (Killeen et al., 1999).

If students begin to identify and access relevant support systems, and if adults begin to advocate in their favor, students of color can show a high degree of resiliency against these barriers (Rickwood, Roberts, Batten, Marshall, & Massie, 2004). Youth of color have expressed that both parent and teacher involvement positively influences their exploration of career options, which

additionally bolsters their outcome expectations (Gushue & Whitson, 2006). Further, when students are connected with peers who share common academic goals and will support their success, they can more effectively combat negative environmental influences (Kenny et al., 2007). One of the most profitable supports for adolescents is a same-race role model who has faced similar barriers and has experienced their unique career development process. It was found that students with at least one race- and gender-matched role model mastered more academic material and had more achievement-related goals (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004).

Challenges in Practice

Counselors desire to increase the amount of time they spend with students on career development and in accessing critical supports, but given the excessive number of students assigned to them, and factoring in other administrative pressures, the situation is not likely to change (Osborn & Baggerly, 2004). In fact, many counselors still report using traditional, non-contextualized models of career development (or neglect to incorporate any model), demonstrating that practice is lagging behind research (Patton & McMahon, 2006). It is unrealistic to believe that a single counseling position in the school can service and attend to all of the multi-faceted career development needs of the student body. Recognizing this limitation, our research team looked at programs that do not rely on a single “role,” but instead create a system and structure that promote and support the career aspirations and outcomes for students of color.

Methodology

In our study of four programs in New England funded in part by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s *Minority High-Achievement Initiative*, we asked: *How can the unique vocational needs of low-income multi-ethnic and racially diverse youth be met? Within this population, how can both low and high achievers be served? What types of strategies are effective in promoting career development for this group of students?*

A qualitative research design was adopted to gather data from students, staff, directors, and parents at all four program sites. The data were comprised of observations, interviews, and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with 54 students, 16 staff members, all four directors, and nine parents. A semi-structured interview protocol was used with questions that explored key components of each program and the experiences of the students.

Findings

Based on our coding, the research team grouped the common strengths of the programs studied into five categories: breaking down barriers, providing the “right fit,” coupling high expectations with high support, staffing adults who function as working role models and can offer guidance, and creating kin-like support systems among students.

Breaking Down Barriers

All four programs recruit low-income students of color and are acutely aware that the financial burden of post-secondary education is one of the greatest barriers to accessing higher education. Therefore, these programs incorporate some type of funding or scholarship opportunity for students to alleviate some of the economic stress. The programs themselves do not provide the financial support, but instead create partnerships with neighboring institutions that provide opportunities to earn college credits at no cost and, ultimately, college scholarships. During one interview, a student vented her frustrations with trying to figure out what type of financial assistance she might be afforded, as she struggled with her college financial aid form. She then stepped back and acknowledged the financial relief her program offered, “But next year, everything will be fine, and I will need this scholarship” – the one she anticipated in response to completing the forms provided by her program, and which the program staff helped her complete. Even the provision of extensive support is not a complete buffer against the financial anxieties associated with college costs, but without such support

many students would be too overwhelmed to even apply for financial assistance, and, in turn, college admission.

Providing the “Right Fit”

One of the most significant findings of the research team was that all programs are not – and should not be – created equal. Each program we observed found strength in its ability to select a specific and narrow population and cater its program to that population. While one of the programs served students who ranked highest in their classes and required a demonstrated ability to succeed academically to enter the program, another catered to students whose performance was academically average, yet showed potential to grow; instead of the honor roll student this program sought the “C student with a spark,” and offered a chance for these students to succeed in high school and to move on to college.

Finding the right fit goes beyond selecting a population. Program staff describe creating the right fit for students by constantly learning about their students’ needs and adjusting the program accordingly. According to the program directors, multicultural competence, within the program as a whole and for each individual employed, is a significant component of finding the “right fit.”

Program structure also contributes to finding the right fit. Once a program has decided whom it can serve and has learned about the specific populations involved, the next step is to tailor the structure to the population at hand. How high will the expectations be? How much support will be offered and how?

High Expectations, High Support

Integrated into the various programs studied were clear standards of conduct and performance. Students in each program were aware of the high expectations placed upon them by staff, and felt they could meet these high standards by utilizing the services offered by the programs. Support differed markedly across programs in some respects. In one program, students are supported and

challenged through demanding academic activities, such as being asked to solve civil engineering equations on the chalk board in front of classmates; in another, they are guided in exploring the specific admissions criteria and academic offerings within a wide range of colleges and universities, and are expected to report back to their peers; and in another case students are challenged simply by keeping a homework journal for the first time in their lives, and then processing key aspects of their work with peers and counselors. Through all of these processes, adults provide guidance and role modeling, while peers provide their own quality of support and help establish normative expectations for pursue careers that require a college degree.

Role Modeling and Adult Guidance

Each of the programs placed an emphasis on providing same-race role models for their participants. By diversifying the staff, students are not only exposed to a positive, working adult, but also to someone who can relate to their culturally specific career pathway. One student in a rigorous engineering program raved about the experienced staff and how they all actually “do” what they teach. Not only do these programs seek out a diverse staff, but they are committed to retaining them so that students can form lasting relationships with such adult figures. These relationships can demystify aspects of career development, including the myth that some careers are unobtainable for particular groups of people.

Offering career guidance to students of color can get lost in today’s schools, given the press to close the academic “achievement gap.” In the four programs in our study, career guidance was seen as a primary motivator to help close that gap. Spending time with adults in the program with whom they have built a close, trusting relationship was presented by the students as paramount to their experiences. One student explained, “Sometimes I have come here for some college stuff, and I ended up just talking about how I just couldn’t deal with it. And [my advisor] just talked, spiritually...and he used himself as an example. He’s [my advisor] very nice. He has

helped me a lot with my problems.” Students in all four programs were clear that adults motivated them to pursue their goals not just by pointing out the options, but by blending their knowledge of career development with their fuller support of the students’ lives.

Kin-like Peer Group

Programs serving as a type of *family* to students emerged as one of the most repeated themes in student and staff interviews. According to the students, each of the programs creates an atmosphere of unconditional support and caring. This sense of belonging keeps students coming back year after year, and serves as a critical support during the trying years of adolescence. One interviewee captured the nurturing support by saying, “[They] show us-like, what can happen if you pursue things that you love. Like if you just assume that everybody in your family does one thing, so you’re going to go into that field. But they push you to be yourself and be like, *Alright, what do you love? If you love children, if you love teaching, go ahead and be a teacher. If you love the mind and how it works and everything, go into psychology.* It’s whatever you feel, they’ll support it.” Interviewees involved in these high-achievement programs often described the peer environment at their home schools as antagonistic and sometimes violent, while there were often references to peers in the same program as siblings or other degrees of kin.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to enhancing the educational and career-development opportunities for low-income minority students, but common key elements have proven to be effective in several researched programs. We found the programs in this study to be multi-dimensional, culturally sensitive, and tailored to a specific population, with an explicit goal or outcome in mind. Each program provides students with a vision of being college bound

and explicitly nurtures the academic, psychological, and social skills needed to realize previously undeveloped potential. Surrounding the students with like-minded peers and faculty members who maintain high expectations while providing substantial care and support not only establishes a family-like atmosphere but also appears to be instrumental to the prosperity of the programs. The findings suggest that counselors would be well served by working toward a team approach with their students. This includes proactively engaging the larger community to establish partnerships that can provide mentoring, career modeling, and information on financial assistance. Further, counselors might research local programs that connect students with opportunities that are a “right fit” for them.

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