

Fostering college access literacy for students and educators in school-university partnerships: a culturally responsive approach

School-University
Partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – This practitioner-based manuscript describes the development and implementation of Focus on College Understanding and Success (FOCUS), a school-university programmatic model to develop College Access Literacy (CAL) among both students and educators in a Professional Development School (PDS) network. With an emphasis on teacher training, supplemental learning opportunities for students, and faculty-student-parent mentor/partnerships, this model was designed to apply a culturally responsive approach to achieving equity in college readiness programming.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is conceptual in that it presents an innovative idea to stimulate discussion, generate new ideas, and advance thinking about a collective impact school-university partnership initiative focused on supporting underrepresented students in pursuing higher education goals through participation in the FOCUS program. A thematic analysis was completed on focus group data collected for both educators and students who participated in the project. Data focused on the identification of both strengths and challenges of program development and implementation.

Findings – The paper provides insights and ideas related to how to structure a college access and success program that focuses on the assets that underrepresented students bring to college readiness opportunities designed for them by centering their struggles while uplifting their personal, unique abilities. Our results validate a college readiness program design and implementation process that relies on asset-based theoretical frameworks including Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model and Moll *et al.*'s (1992) Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework.

Originality/value – This study shows how school-university partnerships are uniquely positioned to capitalize on the strengths of students and their families in designing college readiness programming. By considering the local context and culturally responsive approaches to program development and implementation, programs like FOCUS can build on community resources and the teacher-student relationship to increase College Access Literacy (CAL) in both students and their teachers.

Keywords Professional development schools, School-university partnerships, College access literacy, College readiness, Community cultural wealth, Funds of knowledge, Cultural responsiveness

Paper type Practitioner paper

Earning a college degree is associated with a range of benefits for individuals such as higher earnings and social mobility, greater access to healthcare and retirement plans, better working conditions, lower rates of unemployment and poverty, healthier lifestyles, and a longer life expectancy (Ma *et al.*, 2019). Society also experiences benefits from having citizens who attain postsecondary degrees which include increased economic productivity, less reliance on public assistance, increased civic involvement, higher rates of volunteerism, and higher voting rates (Ma *et al.*, 2019). However, while postsecondary education opens the door to many

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opportunities for individuals and society, the price of a college education continues to rise, and more students and families are asking if college is worth it (Blake, 2024). In extension, gaps in college enrollment, persistence, and completion rates differ considerably across demographic groups. For example, students from groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education including students of color, first-generation, multilingual, and students from low-income families often have different social and cultural capital from what is necessary for accessing and successfully navigating college, resulting in the derailment of aspirations for a college degree (Azpeitia *et al.*, 2023; Chorcora *et al.*, 2022; Dyce *et al.*, 2013; Manspile *et al.*, 2021; Najarro, 2023; Schuyler *et al.*, 2021; Weissman, 2022). Factors such as inadequate academic preparation, lack of resources, and program accessibility have widened the educational attainment gaps between underrepresented groups and other students (Dyce *et al.*, 2013; Perna, 2015). Additional factors such as insufficient student-staff relationships, cultural stereotyping and racism, and the essentializing of students – classifying multiple ethnic groups under one social category and assuming that all members of that social category have the same experiences – also act as barriers to equitable college access and success for underrepresented students (Perez *et al.*, 2021).

Given these challenges, inclusive college access programs that ensure equitable opportunities are critical for supporting students from underrepresented groups in pursuing higher education goals (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Systemic inequities around postsecondary access and success have motivated a focus on increasing *college readiness* in American school systems in recent years (Quartz *et al.*, 2019). According to Conley (2012), college readiness refers to the amount of preparation a student needs to enroll in credit-bearing college courses and persist in earning a college degree. Over the past decade, boosting postsecondary readiness has become a central issue in educational reform efforts in the United States. As a result, postsecondary preparation and completion initiatives in K-12 school systems have emerged with an increased focus on addressing systemic barriers and bridging the knowledge gap that often exists for underrepresented students on college and university campuses (Perez *et al.*, 2021).

Aligned with this focus, school-university partnerships are in a unique position to collaborate in creating college access programs that take into account students' and families' Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and their Funds of Knowledge (Moll *et al.*, 1992). College access programs such as the proposed Focus on College Understanding and Success (FOCUS) program aim to reduce systemic disparities by building on community resources and the teacher-student relationship to increase College Access Literacy (CAL), a term we coined to describe the promotion of interest in and knowledge about college access and success. This practitioner-based paper describes the development and implementation of FOCUS, a school-university programmatic model to develop CAL among both students *and* educators in a Professional Development School (PDS) network. With an emphasis on teacher training, supplemental learning opportunities for students, and faculty-student-parent mentor/partnerships, this model was designed to apply a culturally responsive approach to achieving equity in college readiness programming.

Literature review

College readiness

According to Conley (2018), high school graduates today need to be ready, not just eligible, to meet with success in postsecondary school programs. While an emphasis on eligibility may have been effective in sorting students into groups considered “college material” and “non-college material” 30 years ago, the increased numbers of careers requiring college degrees today have exacerbated equity issues that require novel college preparation models (Conley, 2018). Moving from a college eligibility to a college readiness approach requires a more comprehensive understanding of the full range of variables that contribute to readiness. A broad range of competencies beyond just academic achievement are necessary for acquiring postsecondary educational success in and out of the classroom (Conley, 2018). As such,

Conley's (2012) model, The Four Keys to College and Career Readiness, suggests that students should acquire a combination of four distinct competencies: (1) content knowledge (i.e. big ideas related to core subject matter); (2) cognitive skills (i.e. analytic reasoning, problem solving); (3) pro-academic behaviors (i.e. goal setting, study skills); and (4) transition knowledge and skills (i.e. college application procedures, campus-based cultural expectations). In this paper, we emphasize the fourth key of Conley's model – transition knowledge and skills – as central to the development and implementation of the FOCUS program. We argue that transition knowledge is a form of cultural capital that is often explicitly taught to students from middle and upper classes but acts as a hidden curriculum for historically underrepresented groups. This hidden curriculum is crucial for meeting the expectations and demands of college transition and highlights the significance of understanding the backgrounds of the students who are served through college access and success programs. Explicitly drawing connections between students' backgrounds and relevant transitional knowledge can help to make the hidden curriculum visible.

While Conley's College Readiness Framework is widely used among educators and practitioners, it fails to consider the contextual needs of individual high schools and the cultural identities of the students and families they serve. Scholars have further critiqued the model for failing to account for differential readiness along race and class lines and for promoting a skills-based view of college readiness that perpetuates White-dominant, upper-class norms and values by expecting that minoritized students assimilate to the White dominant culture in order to succeed (Duncheon *et al.*, 2023; Perez *et al.*, 2021), rather than institutions capitalizing on the cultural wealth and funds of knowledge that underrepresented students already bring to educational settings. As such, we suggest that when school-university partners collaborate to develop CAL in students and educators, they consider local context and culturally responsive approaches to program development and implementation.

Community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge

Given the critique of Conley's framework and the call for a culturally responsive approach to school-university partnership efforts focused on college readiness programming, we draw upon Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model and Moll *et al.*'s (1992) Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework to consider how the college readiness experience, and the teaching of transitional knowledge specifically, can be conceptualized and enacted to support students from underrepresented groups. These two frameworks rely heavily on culturally responsive approaches to achieving equity in education-based experiences.

Community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) defines CCW as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). She identifies six types of capital that can capture the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring with them to the college experience: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital refers to the hopes and dreams that students have about their future. Linguistic capital refers to the language and social skills that students bring as strengths while communicating. Familial capital references the human resources that students possess in their extended family and community networks, while social capital encompasses the resources they can access via broader sets of peers and other contacts, such as those in institutions. Navigational capital refers to students' skills and abilities to maneuver within particular social settings or institutions. Resistance capital refers to the knowledge and skills students have learned as minoritized individuals when securing rights and protecting collective freedom (Yosso, 2005).

Many educational scholars have used CCW to shed light on the experiences of students of color in a variety of educational settings (Espino, 2014; Jayakumar *et al.*, 2013; Oropeza *et al.*, 2010; Liou *et al.*, 2009; Huber, 2009). Liou *et al.* (2009) studied the communication networks and college-going identities of Latina/o students at two urban, racially segregated high schools and highlighted the rich and dynamic support that communities provided to support students'

college-going aspirations while countering deficit perspectives often held about multilingual students of color. Likewise, [Oropeza et al. \(2010\)](#) studied four multilingual female students' persistence in college, illustrating how they used their community cultural wealth to access and navigate their college experiences. These counter-narratives promote a strengths-based approach and are in direct opposition to common deficit-based perspectives of low-income, minoritized, and first-generation students. In the context of developing and implementing college access and success programming, school-university partners can draw upon each of form of capital identified in the CCW model. This paper proposes a programming model that applies CCW to challenge deficit notions of underrepresented groups that persist in educational settings, center the experiences of underrepresented youth and their families, and recognize the assets and strengths that they bring with them to educational settings, including college access programs.

Funds of knowledge. [Moll et al. \(1992\)](#) define FoK as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). These funds include the skills, daily routines, cultural practices, and work experiences that individuals accumulate throughout a lifetime ([Moll, 2015](#)). [Moll et al. \(1992\)](#) assert that researching any student's FoK has great potential for facilitators in educational settings as they represent positive views of family households containing valuable cultural and cognitive resources when developing participatory pedagogy. This lies in direct contrast to deficit perspectives, which assume that families who do not have college experience have little to offer when participating in college access and success programming. For example, recognizing and utilizing students' FoK and their parents' labor histories can help create exploratory career opportunities when considering a college major or minor ([Rose et al., 2019](#)). Likewise, students could use the information they learn about the labor market in their local communities to make decisions about potential future career choices ([Rose et al., 2019](#)). We argue that any college readiness program can only be effective if it is grounded in students' FoK, a concept that focuses on families' lived experiences and strengths. Without accounting for these socially based funds of cultural knowledge, college readiness programs run the risk of blaming historically underrepresented students and their families for lacking the characteristics and capital necessary to succeed in college. “Most literature on students' transition to college focuses on individual-level explanations for why some students do worse than others” ([Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012](#), p. 4). According to [Dyce et al. \(2013](#), p. 156), “the extant research literature often views students from underrepresented families as capital-less because of their limited or lack of college experience, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic location, and social norms.” Without rejecting such views, school-university partnerships that collaborate to develop and implement college readiness programs also run the risk of perpetuating inequitable and harmful practices despite the best intentions to educate underrepresented students about the college experience. Leveraging the knowledge that students and their families bring to programming when researching, selecting, and applying to colleges is a culturally responsive practice that can assist them in navigating the complexities of the experience in the future.

Both CCW and FoK models challenge inequitable outcomes for underrepresented students in college access and success programming by centering student struggles as well as elevating their unique abilities. Due to their hyper-local focus on school improvement planning in relation to teacher professional development opportunities and student success strategies, school-university partnerships are in a unique position to design college readiness programming that considers the assets of families and local communities to meet the needs of the students they collaboratively serve.

Culturally responsive school-university partnership college access programs

Limited research exists to examine school-university partnership initiatives to address college access and success for underrepresented students, though a few studies offer some insight. In

their mixed-methods case study, [Alford et al. \(2014\)](#) analyzed key benefits and challenges of a P-16 initiative to strengthen math and science secondary school teaching in predominantly low-income, rural schools by working in collaboration with university professors and high school teachers to meet Texas College and Career Readiness Standards (TCCRS). Through workshops, on-site professional development opportunities, and Blackboard discussions between these stakeholders, [Alford et al. \(2014\)](#) found that high school teachers experienced an increase in their knowledge and understanding of the TCCRS in addition to ways to implement them in their teaching practices. Also positively impacted were the mindsets, practices, and processes of the teachers and administrators to achieve increased rigor in math and science classes for all students ([Alford et al., 2014](#)).

In their study to expand access to college for traditionally underrepresented students, [Quartz et al. \(2019\)](#), examined the processes and outcomes of a research-practice partnership focused on designing and implementing a college-going culture in a K-12 school-university partnership school. Through an exploration of the role of learning supports, status hierarchies, and resources, partners collaborated to offer a college preparatory curriculum to all students at the school and established, over a ten-year period, a strong college-going culture ([Quartz et al., 2019](#)). By addressing a practical problem – how to frame, support, and track a college-for-all reform effort, the partnership used multiple data sources including surveys, interviews, documents, and student outcome data to document their progress in building an infrastructure to increase access to public universities for all students. Both the graduation rate and college-going rate increased in this school-university partnership school as a result of this work ([Quartz et al., 2019](#)).

Classroom, school-based, and district-wide college readiness best practices

Researchers have examined several practices, factors, and interventions that can increase underrepresented high school students' college readiness, awareness, access, and knowledge that school-university partnerships can consider when collaborating to design and implement college readiness programming. Research-based classroom-level practices that promote college readiness for underrepresented students include fostering positive teacher-student relationships; promoting literacy instruction that leverages students' community knowledge and career aspirations; centering students' racial and cultural knowledge within instruction; and designing problem-posing projects that have students critique, discuss, and act in order to increase their critical and sociopolitical consciousness ([Perez et al., 2021](#)). Research-based school-level strategies that can be considered in college readiness programming include providing opportunities and encouragement for participation in extracurricular activities and service engagement; facilitating mentorship opportunities to include mentors who have been to college; creating opportunities to work on college applications within instructional programming; increasing student and family financial awareness that help students apply for financial aid; providing positive messages and support to attend college; and implementing culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy across content area instruction in schools ([Perez et al., 2021](#)).

While not focused exclusively on underrepresented student populations, the College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) presents eight components of college and career readiness that should be considered in college readiness programming at the district level when supporting schools: (1) providing a college-going environment by promoting awareness; (2) providing rigorous academic planning that addresses college readiness; (3) exposing students to extracurricular activities that can capitalize on their interests and talents; (4) initiating college exploration and selection processes; (5) analyzing college access and readiness data to identify student-specific supports; (6) offering college affordability planning; (7) providing information on college admissions processes; and (8) connecting students with community resources that can help them overcome barriers that could stand in their way of transitioning to college from high school ([College Board, 2010](#)).

Addressing these components within culturally responsive, student-focused frameworks such as CCW and FoK offers a way to acknowledge and utilize the individual abilities and resources that students have to help them succeed educationally and professionally. When school-university partnerships take a comprehensive approach toward viewing the individual students and families they serve, they can better comprehend the assets that their students possess and recommend resources to help construct the other needed factors.

An end-goal in designing college access programs for underrepresented students is to address the institutional barriers that exist in providing access to higher education pathways. What can be gleaned from the research is that college access programming needs to be comprehensive and culturally responsive with specific emphases on involving families. There also needs to be a recognition that although students and families from underrepresented groups may not represent what is deemed mainstream or dominant, this should not negate the fact that they bring strengths and assets that can be included in college access programming in making postsecondary education a reality.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify key benefits and challenges of a grant-funded, school-university partnership initiative to strengthen College Access Literacy (CAL) for underrepresented students and their teachers in three urban/urban-fringe schools by working in collaboration with university professors to develop and deliver a college access and success curriculum. Through the design and implementation of the Focus on College Understanding and Success (FOCUS) program, Seaside University (pseudonym) collaborated with three high schools in its PDS network to increase the number of underrepresented student groups who enter and complete college access programs, including but not limited to minoritized males, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners (MLs). FOCUS program goals were twofold: (1) the engagement and education of students to increase and encourage their understanding of and interest in the college experience; and (2) the professional development of high school educators to enhance their knowledge of college access and success topics and their ability to apply that knowledge to learning activities in their 9–11th grade classrooms. Outreach involved targeting 10 students in each of the three high schools to participate in six comprehensive seminars designed to enhance their CAL, as well as six teachers in those three high schools to increase their CAL for application in the classroom setting. The seminars – for dual enrollment credit – were co-taught by classroom teachers and university faculty, and they were organized around six essential college success topics including college selection and admissions, financial aid, campus student life, student support services, and academic advising.

Partners

Seaside university (pseudonym)

Seaside University is a small, urban, private university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Seaside's School of Education (SOE) offers both traditional and alternative educator preparation programs at the initial and advanced certification levels in addition to bachelor's, master's, post-baccalaureate, post-master's, and Ph.D. programs. The SOE formally partners with 13 PDSs across five public school systems that are within or border the metropolitan area in which the university is located. The PDS network includes seven elementary schools, one elementary/middle school, two middle schools, and three high schools.

Aligned with Seaside's mission to advance equity and social justice, school partners (PDSs) are selected based on the racial and economic diversity of the student populations they serve. It is the SOE's belief that initial certification candidates can best be prepared through their participation in internships that embody diverse populations of students. As such, the SOE's director of field placements ensures that candidates are placed in two highly diverse,

10-week internship placements during their student teaching semester. PDS sites in the network span four different districts with schools serving urban, suburban, and rural populations. The majority of the network's PDS sites serve majority minoritized populations; students who receive free and reduced priced lunches; MLs, and special education populations. Each of the three high school partners who agreed to participate in the FOCUS program primarily serve large numbers of underrepresented student groups – the targeted population for FOCUS.

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Riverview high school (pseudonym)

Riverview High School is a public, college preparatory high school serving young women in a large metropolitan city. The high school is located less than two miles from the university and enrolls 1,236 students in grades 9–12. The student-teacher ratio is 20:1 and the student-counselor ratio is 412:1. The percentage of teachers with three or more years of experience is 84%. Its student population is 100% female; 88% Black, 6% Hispanic, 5% White, and 1% Other. The four-year graduation rate is 95%. The percentage of students participating in dual enrollment or Advanced Placement (AP) courses is 4 and 29%, respectively. Around 77% of graduates pursue college or vocational programs. The school is below the state average in key measures of college and career readiness with a 4/10 score. Riverview High has served as a PDS partner with the university for 13 years.

Bayview high school B (pseudonym)

Bayview High School is located in an urban fringe school district, approximately 8 miles from the university. It has 1,680 students in grades 9–12. The student-teacher ratio is 13:1 and the student-counselor ratio is 239:1. The percentage of teachers with three or more years of experience is 87%. Its student population is 55% male, 45% female; 75% Black, 15% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% White, and 2% Other. The four-year graduation rate is 77%. About 21% of the students participate in AP courses and 1% in dual enrollment. After graduation, 49% enroll in college or postsecondary vocational programs. The school is below the state average in key measures of college and career readiness with a 4/10 score. Bayview has served as a PDS partner with the university for 12 years.

Lakeview high school (pseudonym)

Lakeview High School is located in a suburban school district, approximately 11 miles from the university. It serves 1,595 students in grades 9–12. The student-teacher ratio is 13:1 and the student-counselor ratio is 266:1. Nearly all teachers (97%) have three or more years of experience. Students are 53% male, 47% female; 34% Black, 24% Hispanic, 23% White, 13% Asian, 5% Two or More Races, and 1% Other. The four-year graduation rate is 87%. AP course participation is 28% and the share of students enrolled in dual enrollment classes is <1%. Around 64% of graduates pursue college or postsecondary vocational programs. The school is below the state average in key measures of college and career readiness with a 5/10 score. Lakeview High has served as a PDS partner with the university for 4 years.

Professional development design

Participants

Education professionals. Developing the grant-funded FOCUS program and a CAL-supportive environment at three local schools required a blend of collaboration, innovation, and a deep understanding of the local schools' and students' needs. Educational professionals at various levels provided this collaborative support. First, the classroom teachers provided firsthand knowledge of their students' needs and abilities. Six classroom teachers were selected by their principals for their leadership potential in CAL-supported topics and/or their relationships with the students targeted. These six teachers represented a range of subject

specialties: math, Spanish, English/language arts, special education, AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination), and a vocational program that prepares future teachers. Second, the university provided five university mentors, full-time education professors who co-taught classroom lessons and after-school seminars with the aforementioned teachers. These professor mentors also offered evening Zoom mentoring sessions, one per seminar topic, to further clarify seminar topics, help students through the Student Action Plan (SAP, discussed in greater detail below), or reteach content if the student missed a seminar. Finally, the last set of professionals were Seaside University staff who were experts in the six CAL topics: College Selection, College Admissions, Financial Aid, Student Life, Student Support Services, and Academic Advising. We believe this three-pronged approach (classroom teachers, university professor mentors, and university staff) provided the infrastructure needed to support the FOCUS initiative.

Students. The FOCUS initiative targeted 30 students for CAL enrichment. Each of the three high schools was allotted 10 slots, and the selection process began with principals speaking with guidance counselors and student support personnel to identify juniors who met specific criteria. These criteria included students who were underrepresented in higher education and specifically targeted by the grant (African American, MLL, and/or special education designation), and who demonstrated academic promise and expressed interest in attending college. After the initial identification, students were invited to submit a brief online application with short-answer questions about their college aspirations. The purpose of this step was not to create a competitive selection process but to ensure that students had a strong interest in the program and would benefit from the dual-enrollment opportunity. This approach fostered a cohort that was motivated, academically curious, and reflective of the populations the program aimed to serve. The above method yielded the following groups of participants: Riverview High School: 10 participants, all girls, with three identified as African American and seven identified as Hispanic; Bayview High School: seven participants, all identified as African American, with five females and two males; Lakeview High School: 10 participants, all MLLs, with four males and six females.

Process

Planning. The goal in developing the program was not only to bring awareness and greater fluency in the six CAL topics, but also to mitigate barriers students face when navigating the complex college admissions process and to uncover systems of support both before and during college. By incorporating college-level coursework into high school, the program aimed to build confidence and advocacy skills while also fostering a greater understanding of what CAL entails. As mentioned, six university staff served as CAL experts in their respective fields, and they drove the professional development (PD) of the teachers and university mentors. Once those six experts were identified, the two PIs on the grant (also serving as university professor mentors) met with each staff member for a brief overview of the grant expectations and the PD sought. Here, the university mentors stipulated the content students most needed (honed through initial student application forms, discussions with their site-level classroom teachers, observations as the program advanced regarding student gaps in college readiness and the particular challenges they faced). This approach ensured that the program would be tailored to the specific contexts of the schools involved and the specific needs of the targeted students, to ensure buy-in from key stakeholders.

After the initial expectations overview, the university staff experts assembled a one-hour presentation on their respective CAL topic. Upon completion, they once more met with the two PIs and delivered the content to them as a “dry run” of the topic. This step, though lengthy, ensured that the content met expectations and also helped foreclose any misperceptions of the topic before final presentation to the PD team. From this second meeting, the PIs developed the Student Action Plans (SAPs). The SAPs were actionable and customizable accountability

mechanisms to ensure the students interacted with the CAL topic in salient ways (more on School-University SAPs below). Partnerships

Six dates were selected over the spring of 2024 to deliver the six CAL topics to the PD team (six classroom teachers and five university professor mentors). These PD sessions lasted three hours (from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.) and were held over Zoom to accommodate differing locales and busy teacher schedules, and the teachers received coverage for their classrooms during this time. The first few minutes of each session consisted of a PD overview, a time for questions, and the transmission of information on time-sensitive topics, such as completing paperwork for the students to receive college credit. From there, the invited university staff member delivered their CAL topic to the PD team with time for questions, answers, clarifications, and debate. After a short break, the PD team met for one hour of classroom lesson planning and one hour of after-school seminar planning with their partners. During this planning period, the partner teams worked to customize their instruction and SAP template.

The SAP template, as mentioned above, sought to provide an actionable plan for the students to work with and through their various CAL topics. For example, the “College Selection” SAP asked students to brainstorm what they were looking for in a college and what they wanted to do with their lives, and then to juxtapose those values against possible colleges, including a target school, a reach school, and a safety school. Meanwhile, the “Financial Aid” SAP asked students to spend considerable time on the FAFSA website to familiarize themselves with requirements, deadlines, and the support resources available. The SAPs were customizable so that the teaching teams could modify to fit their time constraints and student populations. For example, at Lakeview High School, one of the on-site teachers lamented that students repeatedly displayed difficulty in writing a college entrance essay. Hence, the team at Lakeview High School customized the “College Admissions” SAP into one in which planning infrastructure for a successful college essay was stressed. Finally, each SAP ended with a brief reflection, in which students were asked three questions: if they had any questions or lingering concerns, if they anticipated any “roadblocks” to attending the colleges they explored, and if they planned to attend the evening Zoom mentoring sessions to either work through those roadblocks with their mentor, resolve questions that may have arisen, and/or simply receive support in a one-on-one mentoring platform.

Design of professional development curriculum. The next section describes the six College Access Literacy (CAL) topics that the FOCUS program developed in its students.

College selection. This topic guided students through the college selection process by helping them align their academic goals, personal values, and career aspirations with the offerings of various institutions. Further, it asked students to reflect on important considerations such as institution size, geographic location, and type. The focus on this module was reflection, inspiration, and allowing students to expand their perceptions of what they previously considered possible. On the SAP, students brainstormed possible careers, college majors, and other considerations of college life that might be important to them, e.g. campus life, housing options, makeup of the student body, religious affiliation, extracurricular activities, etc. After brainstorming a list of 5–10 institutions, students took a deeper dive into researching three of these institutions, which comprised their target, reach, and safety school framework for the rest of the seminar. This deeper dive included researching aspects such as transit distance from home, average scholarship/financial aid package, potential majors, programs, visitation options, and information sessions they may wish to later attend.

College admissions. The college admissions topic afforded PD participants the opportunity to speak with a college admissions counselor to gain advice on applying but also the highly-prized knowledge on what admissions counselors look for in granting acceptances and scholarships. Advice on applying via the Common Application (“Common App”) and essay writing was provided. Participants learned of various stipulations afforded to ease entry for students for whom the college admissions process may be particularly challenging; these stipulations included application fee waivers, rolling admissions, optional SAT/ACT testing, and expected grade point average (GPA) ranges. Participants learned about typical application

deadlines (for early and regular decisions) and received a timeline for when each piece of the application process was due and to whom. Finally, participants were encouraged to leverage their counseling resources, first at the high school level but also at the college level where admissions counselors, who were touted repeatedly as a valuable resource, could be contacted by students or school staff. For the SAP, students researched their three colleges' admissions requirements, perused the Common App website, used scholarship search engines to locate potential sources of aid, planned for leveraging counselor support (both at their high school and targeted college admissions team), examined what typical admissions essay questions asked, and brainstormed an outline for that essay.

Financial aid. This session explored the foundational elements of the various types of financial aid available, including federal grants, scholarships, work-study opportunities, and student loans. Participants learned about the importance of early financial planning, and how completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was a fundamental step. Furthermore, participants learned how financial aid packages were constructed and the distinction between need-based and merit-based aid, while also stressing the significance of institutional aid specific to colleges. The PD stressed that financial aid must be applied for yearly, usually by a March 1 deadline, and that any mistakes in completion could delay package notification. Finally, the difference between grants and loans was heavily discussed and included advising on the responsible use of student loans, offering strategies for minimizing debt. The SAP asked students to research different colleges' cost and average financial aid packages, investigate the FAFSA website, plan for "out-of-pocket" expenses not covered by grants, loans, and scholarships, and finally, brainstorm work-study options on campus. Students were asked to do this as a means of leveraging work-study to find jobs that were not only fulfilling, but also in alignment with their future career interests and desired work-related skills.

Student life. This topic emphasized the importance of holistic growth and development during the college experience. Participants learned of three different avenues of student engagement on campus, namely, organizations related to academics, social life, and student identity. These organizations exist to promote both academic success and emotional well-being. Furthermore, participation in Student Life contributes not only to students' social engagement but also to their personal growth, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and sense of belonging within the college community. Related, participants were introduced to the concept of leadership development through involvement in student governance, service learning, or peer mentoring programs. They were taught the importance of diversifying their experiences and utilizing these experiences to "fail safely," that is, to try new things, take on new responsibility, and flex their leadership muscles, all within a supportive environment meant to mentor them toward success. The SAP asked students to explore their values, passions, and identities, to identify ways in which they were already involved in Student Life activities within their high school and greater community, to research what Student Life looked like at their three target colleges, and to explore residence life (on-campus living) options.

Student support services. This topic emphasized the importance of utilizing student support services as a critical component of student success while in college. Participants learned that these services, such as tutoring centers, accessibility supports, career services, and mental health counseling, are essential, much like the above Student Life topics, in promoting both academic achievement and personal well-being. Transitions, in general, were stressed, and the wide array of services were presented as not only helpful but vital in helping students navigate the major transition from high school to college. Understanding the value of seeking assistance early and often, rather than waiting until challenges become overwhelming, was a core aspect of the training. First-generation specialized programs were discussed, as were examples of an on-campus thrift shop and a suit closet where students could secure professional clothes for a job interview. For the SAP, students spent time reflecting on when and how they had successfully coped with major life transitions in the past. This primed them to see the grit and resilience already part of their personality. They also brainstormed various social challenges

that might appear in college, e.g. roommate issues, and planned for how they could tackle them. After drawing upon their internal problem-solving reserves, students then researched the various social supports available at their three colleges. Similarly, they did the same thing for academic challenges and career challenges: First they brainstormed problems, listed personal solutions, researched outside support, and planned for how to utilize these outside resources while on campus. We encouraged students to view these services as integral to their college experience, reinforcing that proactive engagement with support systems to foster resilience and facilitate long-term goal achievement.

Academic advising. This topic revolved around the importance of relationships and advocating for oneself during the four years of undergraduate education. Participants learned that effective use of Academic Advising was not limited to course selection each semester, but rather encompassed long-term planning for degree completion, exploring potential minors or interdisciplinary interests, ideating on internships, and aligning academic pursuits with career aspirations. Academic Advising was framed as a partnership between the student and advisor with proactive communication highly prized. Additionally, participants learned how to monitor their academic progress, address any potential obstacles, and adjust their plans as needed when something unforeseen occurs, like a failed exam. The university staff expert stressed that students were considered adults now and expected to communicate and advocate for themselves. The SAP asked students to reflect on when they have successfully advocated for themselves regarding academics and made a proactive plan for successfully advocating for themselves at college. Finally, they returned to their three colleges to research academic support in the context of potential majors, minors, and degree completion plans. By mentoring students in how to leverage Academic Advising to their advantage, we equipped them to take ownership of their college educational path, make strategic decisions, and ultimately, achieve a fulfilling, efficient, and successful college experience.

The above comprised the Professional Development that went into the six CAL topics. Below, we will discuss the design of the after-school seminars, classroom lessons, and evening mentor sessions.

Design of after-school seminars, classroom lessons, and mentor sessions. After-school seminars. As mentioned, teachers and university professors met during the second hour of their three-hour Zoom professional training to plan after-school seminars for the three schools. Each school had four personnel on this task: two teachers and two university professors, except for Lakeview High School which had two teachers and one professor. First, six dates throughout the semester were established. Two schools (Riverview and Bayview High Schools) held seminars after school. One school (Lakeview High School) held seminars during the day during a specialized, longer period unique to their school for these types of extracurricular activities. Each group utilized a generic seminar planning template which included the goal of the seminar session, assessing prior knowledge, presentation/discussion/interactive activities, SAP, and closure. All three groups modified and then used the Power Point Presentations delivered to them by the university staff experts. All three groups modified and used the SAP templates. The teaching teams decided the best mode of content delivery for their seminar students, and the team of two professors and two teachers facilitated it. At each after-school seminar, refreshments were provided. Finally, each student was asked to complete a brief evaluation at the end of the seminar.

Classroom lessons. The last hour of the three-hour Zoom PD was dedicated to individual classroom lesson planning. The groups now winnowed to two: one classroom teacher paired with one university professor. Once more, the teachers chose one of their courses in which they could devote six CAL topics over the course of the spring semester, whether that subject was Spanish or advanced math. Each team utilized a generic lesson plan template, which included an objective, anticipatory set, direct instruction, guided practice, assessment, closure, and homework. Once more, individual teachers used their knowledge of their students to plan the best method for content delivery and assessment. On the days of each classroom lesson, both

the teacher and the university professor delivered the lesson, and students completed an evaluation at the end of the classroom lesson.

Evening mentor sessions. The five university professors became mentors for 5 of the 30 FOCUS students, while one professor had 10. Each of the six CAL seminar topics included an evening session to clarify questions, work through roadblocks, provide individualized support, reteach content, and/or make-up teaching if a student missed the seminar. These mentorship sessions were held over Zoom and were completely optional to students. Furthermore, students were encouraged to bring their parents if they had any questions or wished for individualized mentoring themselves and to utilize this resource to its fullest.

Findings

Educators and seminar students were asked to participate in informal focus groups at the close of the program. The educator focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes. Seminar student focus groups averaged approximately 20 minutes in length. Participants in each focus group were asked to evaluate the overall strengths of the program in addition to suggestions for future replications of the program.

A thematic analysis was completed on the focus group data. The researchers transcribed participant contributions in real time. Then each researcher read and re-read the focus group data in addition to the written responses for each question on the end-of-program survey to code the transcripts. The researchers met several times to compare their findings and categories were developed across participants. Researchers identified themes related to both program strengths and challenges that emerged from each focus group.

In a thematic analysis of the responses provided in educator focus groups on the professional development they received through FOCUS, four themes related to program strengths were identified: (1) the development of programming that relied on a variety of stakeholders in delivering the college readiness content to students to ensure that it was meaningful; (2) the structuring of professional development sessions to include adequate time to learn the information and plan for their student seminars and classroom lessons at one time; (3) the emphasis on a team-based approach for planning; (4) the quality of the resources provided to include presentations, materials, and action plan templates that could be differentiated based on student backgrounds and needs. Three themes related to program suggestions were also identified through educator focus groups. First, teachers would have found it helpful to collaborate more closely with those responsible for college and career readiness in their schools and districts as part of programming. Second, teachers had concerns about program sustainability in the absence of future grant funding. It was their collective desire to continue with a partnership program targeting interested college-bound juniors indefinitely because they saw so much value in the experience for their students. Third, teachers thought it would be helpful to treat the seminars as an “actual college course” to include a syllabus that outlined objectives, outcomes, important dates, and expectations. In their opinion, this would have made the experience more similar to the communication of expectations associated with college course work.

In a thematic analysis of the responses provided in student focus groups, three themes related to program strengths were identified. First, students were grateful to have received dual-enrollment college credit for participating in the seminars. It made them feel as if they had the first class in their college transition journey “under their belts.” Second, they saw great value in hearing personal stories about the college experiences of their teachers and professors. This made the content associated with each CAL topic “come alive.” Thirdly, students were empowered by all they learned through the program. Most students admitted that they had “never even had a conversation” with another person about the CAL topics that were covered in the program. While most assumed they would ultimately go to college, they expressed knowing very little about what preparation or the experience would be like. Two themes related to program suggestions were also identified through student focus groups. A majority

of students expressed a desire to include their parents/families more fully in the programming. While the mentor sessions were designed to invite parents to join and ask questions of the mentor professors, very few actually participated in these sessions. Another desire for students was that the program continue into their senior year to allow for “real” application of the content. While they admittedly learned a great deal about the CAL topics, many students were afraid of “forgetting” some of the content before applying to colleges in the year ahead. Having the continued mentorships and seminars would have ensured a direct connection between knowledge and application. Finally, all students agreed that the incorporation of a college visit would have made the experience more tangible. Two of three seminar classes visited Seaside University as an added (but not required) part of the program and reported huge benefits from being on campus “for real.” Eating in the dining hall and attending a class helped them envision themselves as college students in the near future.

Discussion and lessons learned

The findings included positive reflections among students and educators who participated in the FOCUS program. However, the data also revealed several challenges. Consideration of both the benefits and challenges contributed to lessons learned.

Our results validate college readiness program design and implementation that relies on asset-based theoretical frameworks such as [Yosso’s \(2005\)](#) CCW model and [Moll *et al.*’s \(1992\)](#) FoK framework. Highlighted as strengths of the program were intentional emphases on the various forms of cultural capital that [Yosso \(2005\)](#) outlines, most specifically aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital. Drawing on the aspirational capital of the students and their families, there was an emphasis in each seminar and classroom lesson that focused on students’ hopes and dreams for themselves. For example, students were provided choices about what types of colleges to research when embarking on the process as it related to their future goals. In addition, activities associated with action planning were collaborative and allowed students to share with one another their aspirations for the future.

Familial capital was considered when designing the evening mentor sessions for students. Related to the program’s design, this was an opportunity for professors (as mentors), family members, and students to engage in conversations about questions that families had about each of the CAL topics. Family involvement and the college choice process are major elements of successful college access or preparation programs ([Rose *et al.*, 2019](#)). More specifically, parental involvement is a vital component of students’ occupational and educational aspirations ([Jeynes, 2007](#)). While well-intentioned, these evening mentor sessions were not well-attended by students or their parents, which led to the underutilization of familial capital in the process. An emphasis on the strategic use of linguistic capital should also be considered in future CAL programming. Asking families about the most effective sources of communication in addition to the time of day that would garner the most participation may have resulted in higher participation rates. Doing more intentional work to build family relationships may have increased communication and attendance.

Drawing on social capital, the local emphasis on the development of the program utilized social contacts such as local university personnel to deliver the professional development content, local university professors to share authentic learning experiences and expectations from their college classrooms, and high school teachers to identify specific examples of students’ funds of knowledge that could be leveraged when teaching the CAL topics in their seminars and classroom lessons. Differentiated practices promoted the development of resources that embrace students’ cultures and are inclusive of their family members.

While the action plan template provided some common structure across seminars and classrooms, teachers and university professors were encouraged to modify the activities included in them in culturally responsive ways that emphasized their funds of knowledge and cultural capital. For example, many teachers identified timely resources from TikTok to make the content motivating and relevant. In addition, they chose examples of students who looked

like them and shared common experiences with them as teenagers navigating the college transition process. The differentiated lessons emphasized using social capital to initiate conversations that helped to build navigational capital. Because initial theories and frameworks on college access and readiness did not consider the role that racism plays in education (Perez *et al.*, 2021), students navigating White-dominant school cultures are at a higher risk of developing negative student identities that can ultimately impact their decision to pursue a college education. Including examples of students who navigate similar challenges can help underrepresented students “see” themselves as college students and feel better suited for postsecondary education.

Conclusion

Inclusive college access programs that ensure equitable opportunities are critical for supporting students from underrepresented groups in pursuing higher education goals and school-university partnerships are in a unique position to collaborate in creating such programs. Much too often, the cultural and social capital of families and students of underrepresented groups are framed in deficit ways when considering education-based pathways (Bertrand & Marsh, 2021). The CCW and FoK frameworks can help provide asset-based lenses through which to challenge inequitable outcomes for underrepresented student groups by centering their struggles while uplifting their personal, unique abilities. By considering the local context and culturally responsive approaches to program development and implementation, programs like FOCUS can build on community resources and the teacher-student relationship to increase College Access Literacy (CAL) in both students and their teachers.

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