What a Principal Can Do to Create a College-Going Culture

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Usually, the more educated its people are, the more advanced a nation can be financially, culturally and scientifically. When compared to ranked global nations, the level of education in the United States is not competitive, revealing a need to systemically change how we educate an increasingly diverse student population and shift to a more inclusive paradigm that helps us move forward.

Consequently, as a nation, we should act to ensure that our educational system emphasizes equity and excellence to increase the overall academic achievement of all students as well as to eliminate achievement gaps and prepare students for both the workplace and a rigorous university curriculum.

We need every school to operate with a college-going culture where the expectation is that all students will be prepared to enroll in and successfully complete college courses while in high school, to enter a post-secondary institution and to fulfill the requirements of their chosen career.

Where do we begin? First, we must convey to the community and to students a genuine and shared belief among all school staff that every student can achieve and will be provided a college preparatory curriculum. In other words, a school operating in a college-going culture mode provides opportunities and hope for all students regardless of students’ socioeconomic or ethnic background, the language they speak, or the community in which they reside.

A college-going culture cultivates valuing attitudes about students and provides an environment where students and their families are encouraged to seek college information, access resources, cultivate high aspirations and ultimately obtain a college degree. Through this process, discovery of the tools needed to enhance access and success can be achieved.

School personnel and community leaders must actively engage in the process to ensure this preparation becomes a reality for all students (Robledo Montecel, 2010). The main goal is for students to believe in themselves by building the confidence that is necessary as they plan for a great future. Students must prepare academically, socially and emotionally for the options that can lead to a creative and better life after high school.

Lyndon B. Johnson stated: “We must open the doors of opportunity. But we must also equip our people to walk through those doors.” Early college plans are most vital in determining whether students will be trained and prepared to learn the in’s and out’s of college and be successful in navigating its systems.

A college-going culture transforms the school climate and transcends negative stereotypes to provide all students the option and realization that they can and will succeed in college if they are prepared. The school leadership team must be committed to
building and fostering this culture to develop a stronger community that will excel and improve economically.

There are certain key elements and non-negotiable steps that must be in place to build a college-going culture in a school, particularly at the secondary level, to assist students and parents (Avilés & Garza, 2010). As a former school principal and as a recent director of the Early College High School initiative at a university, I saw that these key elements were in place at the schools where I have worked. One of the productive outcomes was that 93 percent to 97 percent of students pursued enrollment in a two- or four-year institution (Avilés, 2007). Here are some essential elements.

- Foster an environment that reinforces to students the importance of achieving a post-secondary career and how this will be accomplished. The school, the community and the home should share with students the same message of support in meeting the high expectations placed before them for a brighter future.
- Build capacity among students, parents and community members with pro-active empowerment and a genuine guidance program that increases students’ understanding and competencies needed to succeed in college.
- Teach students early that they are capable of succeeding in college as they start building their confidence and developing college aspirations.
- Help students trust their educators by eliminating preconceived notions of which students will succeed or not succeed. Students trust educators who have high academic expectations and standards for all and who provide individualized support services as well as boost opportunities and access through optimum guidance on how to successfully navigate the unfamiliar world of college.
- Build caring and positive relationships with all students and demand that they meet the high expectations and rigor of a curriculum that will prepare them for college. Provide a genuine support system focused on success through persistence, willpower and commitment. This is one of the most important aspects that can make a profound difference in students’ lives. These positive relationships must be extended to students’ families as they will provide additional support to them and to the school.
- Support everyone in the school to invest in becoming knowledgeable and making time to share information on a wide variety of college-related topics. From the custodian and cafeteria worker to the superintendent, everyone should be collectively committed to increasing and enhancing students’ college goals.
- Ensure that everyone in the school reinforces the following formula: Determination + Self-Discipline + Academic Focus = Success. In addition, place all kinds of posters and slogans on the walls of classrooms and hallways, and use college lingo as part of the everyday vocabulary connected to the curriculum content being taught.
- Have discussions with students and parents to help them understand that life brings many obstacles and challenges, and that how we face them is what leads to successful outcomes. Seeking help when needed is critical to getting the right support to overcome obstacles. Students and parents should be counseled: “For every barrier there is a solution. Do not allow anything to derail your dream of attending and graduating from college.” (Avilés, Rodríguez & Villarreal, in press)
- Set up a comprehensive school counseling program that emulates the
understanding of students’ funds of knowledge and that of their families as they convey assets and interconnect with the conditions that influence classroom instruction and administrative practices.

- Establish partnerships with nearby colleges that can provide a shared wealth of information, resources and facilities to support secondary students and their families to become familiar with and begin to navigate the college system. A positive partnership should include a comprehensive plan in preparation for college assessments and a well-aligned high school and college curriculum. This will ensure students have the necessary reading, writing and math skills as they learn to work collaboratively, apply critical thinking and problem solving skills to the relevant courses of studies.

Building a college-going culture in schools is especially important where students are traditionally underserved and underrepresented in higher learning. College prep high schools have common characteristics: (1) a belief in the potential of every student to succeed in college; (2) a determination to succeed as a school with a college-going culture; (3) much self-discipline to address numerous barriers that may appear during the planning and implementation phase; and (4) academic focus, hard work and commitment that are shared by all school personnel to ensure that all students are treated with respect and are provided the support necessary to become successful.

Resources


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