

Across the Divide: A Pre-College Program Helping High School Students Learn About “The Other”

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The School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee coordinated a pre-college program with rural, urban, and suburban high school students to explore issues of race, class, and geography to ameliorate the divide that often exists when high school students from monocultural communities move to more culturally diverse institutions of higher education. Through this program, participants engaged with each other via a common curriculum while participating in school projects and joint discussions. The goal of the program was to influence changes in the behavior of college-bound students, behaviors that often result in conflicts on campus when diverse cultures co-exist in new settings. Findings reveal that when institutions of higher education help connect and facilitate discussions among high school students, the potential benefits are high. Exposing high school students to diversity issues, while introducing them to a college experience, helps prepare them to ultimately take an active role in their communities.

Introduction

As colleges continue to grapple with the changing demographics of their student body, it is likely that there will be more debate over what their roles and responsibilities are to create a more welcoming environment for all incoming students, but especially for students from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Scholarship shows that “college interracial interactions are positively related to college satisfaction for all students, and students who come from racially diverse precollege backgrounds are particularly satisfied when they are able to connect interpersonally with diverse college peers” (Bowman & Denson, 2011, p. 420). Colleges are hard pressed to prepare high school students for the challenges they will face dealing with a diverse population when they come to college from homogenous communities. While many pre-college high school programs currently exist to aid in students’ transition from high school to college, these programs focus almost exclusively on the academic and financial nature of the college experience (Trombley & Sallo, 2012). The foci of these types of

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programs are vital aspects of the college experience, but for many high school students preparing to go to college, their out-of-classroom experience is an equally important factor in their successful transition to college. This paper describes a precollege high school program at a large public university that addresses these factors.

Administrators and faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) found that recent high school graduates often came to campus underprepared to deal with the diversity of its student body. A lack of understanding for social, cultural, racial, and economic diversity often occurs at the higher education level because many students go to colleges and universities that are not as monocultural and monolingual as the high schools they attended. At UWM, some of the students' lack of engagement with diverse cultures has resulted in a number of conflicts on the campus over the years. This situation has led to people from more diverse cultures and economic backgrounds feeling that UWM is not a welcoming place for them. Research has shown that perceived racial tension leads to a reduced sense of belonging on campus (Cabrera, 1999; Hurtado, 2007). Since developing a sense of belonging is crucial to retention, it is critical that colleges find ways to reduce this tension among its students. Given that UWM typifies many urban campuses in the US, the authors were asked to create a precollege program to help local high schools bridge the divide that exists between monocultural high schools and communities in the Milwaukee area. Sponsored by UWM, the program described here brought together students from three distinctly different communities in an attempt to engage students with issues of diversity prior to their high school graduation.

Literature Review

According to Miley (2003), administrators, academics, and national educational associations all offer compelling ways in which diversity provides benefits to individuals, institutions, and society. While Miley cites numerous studies showing how college students and the colleges they attend benefit from having a multicultural campus that offers opportunities for interaction, Whitt, Edison, Pasarella, Terenzini, and Nora (1998) found that openness to diversity precollege predicts an individual's openness to diversity and its challenges after the second and third years of college.

One way that this openness can occur is through experience with diversity in high school. Sax and Astin (1997) found that involvement in more racially diverse environments and activities leads to higher levels of cultural awareness and acceptance. Conversely, Globetti, Globetti, Brown, and Smith (1993) found that White students who had the least social interaction with someone of a different background were less likely to hold positive attitudes toward multiculturalism while at college.

While much attention and research has been given to ensuring that college students have interactions with diverse populations, researchers are beginning to conclude that these social experiences in college are influenced by the experiences

students have prior to college while they are in high school (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Research has found that student's interaction patterns will continue in college (Saenz, 2005; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurado, 2007), thus it is important that students in high school who are intending to attend college have interactions with diverse peers. Unfortunately, as researchers have shown, segregation at the high school level is increasing in many communities in the United States, which makes it increasingly difficult for students to have meaningful interactions that can lead to the positive outcomes that will benefit them, our institutions, and our society (Orfield, Bachmeier, James & Eitle, 1997; Orfield & Lee, 2006). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999) suggest that for many students graduating from these homogenous schools, college may be the first and only chance they have to interact with someone different from themselves; thus, it is not surprising that college students often handle these initial interactions awkwardly.

Across the Divide at UWM

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Across the Divide (ATD) Pre-College Program focused on increasing learners' exposure to diversity, leading to a greater understanding of different economic, racial, and ethnic cultures. The high school students engaged in activities and lessons centered on social justice issues, both through technology and face-to-face experiences. Through the ATD program, students learned the skills needed to work effectively with peers who came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The three high schools were selected through previous associations with the UWM faculty: all three of the teachers involved were former students of the English Education program, a program focused on social justice issues. ATD had two purposes: 1) educate high school students about inclusion and diversity by exposing them to different environments which, in turn, would give them the skills to interact with others in an evolving society and 2) share the knowledge gained from this project with other educators.

Planning Year

UWM collaborated with the three high schools situated in southeastern Wisconsin to complete this program: Riverside University High School (urban), Nicolet High School (suburban), and Big Foot High School (rural). ATD worked with approximately 200 students between the three schools.

The student participants were upper level and advanced placement students in their high schools. ATD facilitators worked with the English teachers in each of these schools to develop the shared social justice curriculum, which was taught to the students during the last spring marking period. A shared curriculum was developed by the teachers during the monthly planning meetings. In addition to meeting Wisconsin's requirements for instruction in English, the program included

TABLE 1

School Comparison Data

Name of School	Nicolet	Big Foot	Riverside
<i>Description</i> (NCES Classification)	(Large, Suburban)	(Local School, Rural)	(Large, Urban)
<i>Number of Students</i>	1100	520	1600
<i>Ethnic Breakdown:</i>			
American Indian	8	1	9
Asian and Pacific Islander	52	2	125
Black	228	6	1097
Hispanic	69	75	218
White	708	429	152
Multi-Ethnic	42	7	0
Number of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch	179	153	991

field trips to the partner schools, reading and discussion of common literary texts, creation of social media (e.g., blogs) for students to share their experiences and exchange ideas, and a one-day diversity workshop at UWM that allowed the students to discuss and analyze their learning experiences.

The program supported the students in taking the first steps toward “crossing the divide” caused by racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, among other issues, by interacting with each other over educational materials that asked them to think critically about literature and their lives. It became apparent that there was also a divide that was a result of geography. Students came to terms with stereotypes developed over years that were based on school locations. Through the field trips and the culminating one-day diversity workshop held at UWM, the students had the opportunity to explore social justice topics and develop critical thinking skills that helped them analyze situations from multiple perspectives.

Program Design

Using a combination of cinéma vérité and interview footage of the students, their schools, and their teachers, the organizers of ATD recorded all activities and meetings with the intention of having a video that would document the need for

programs such as this and the process by which student attitudes changed. The teachers organized their lessons and reading selections to run concurrently in each of the schools in preparation for each field trip, during which the students learned about the other participants' communities in alignment to a literature curriculum that adhered to state content standards for literary analysis. The teachers assigned readings from *In Short*, a collection of brief, powerful stories that allowed the teachers to model critical conversations about literature with complex themes on race, class, and privilege. They then assigned the novel *Aftermath*, once the students were comfortable with these kinds of conversations, even holding a question and answer forum with the author. During the shared reading, the teachers created active, hands-on lessons that engaged the students in literary analysis that considered multiple perspectives. Additionally, the teachers created a book discussion site on *Goodreads* for students to post comments about the program across the school sites. The field trips were interspersed throughout the semester. The dates were selected after reviewing the calendars of the participating schools.

At the very end of the program, students and their chaperons participated in a one-day culminating workshop on the campus of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. The chaperons included parents, teachers, and school counselors from each of the schools, along with selected faculty and staff from the university. The workshop was conducted by an outside organization called Challenge Day that had experience with structuring youths to confront their biases. The purpose was to bring all the student participants together one last time to discuss preconceptions and new perceptions of each other and each other's communities.

Assessment and Evaluation

Student participants completed a questionnaire prior to each field trip to express their expectations of the trip and its objectives. The teachers then held discussions about the students' perceptions. After each trip, the teachers had them retake the questionnaire to gauge if any perceptions had changed. These post trip conversations allowed the teachers to assess the students' understanding of stereotypes and preconceptions they may have had prior to the trip.

A common impression from the suburban students was that they expected the urban school to be run down and overcrowded, while they felt the rural school would be small with limited facilities. Neither impression was the reality. The students were surprised by the architectural beauty of the urban school and its welcoming artwork and equally surprised by the extensive new facilities and size of the rural school.

In addition to pre and post testing student attitudes, a DVD of the experience was created to gauge the success of the program. At the onset, the planning group felt that the UWM documentary film department could follow the PIs, the teachers, and two students from each of the schools. ATD focused on these students throughout the program, including conducting individual on-camera interviews with each of the students during the program.

Discussion

There were a number of successes in ATD. High school students were engaged in conversations regarding complex topics involving race, gender, and social class. These topics were similar to the ones that first-year students would encounter upon entering college. For the students who chose to attend college, participating in this program meant that they would not be shocked when topics such as these occurred on their campuses. Students who chose not to attend college also benefitted from these conversations. Due to the increasingly diverse world, there is no doubt these students will need to live and work with others who are different than themselves.

Designing a curriculum that met state standards for English through this program was another success. Students did not see these lessons as an “add on” to their literary studies, but central to the texts they read and analyzed. The activities that the students engaged in deepened their understanding of the complex texts they read together across all three schools. The curriculum that was developed through this program can easily be adapted elsewhere.

The third, and perhaps most significant, success occurred when the students established friendships with people from different geographic locales, students they most likely would never have met and learned about other than on a college campus—a place many of them did not envision in their future. Feedback forms confirmed that ATD helped the students self-evaluate, reflect, and reassess their understanding of their communities. One visitor to the urban school noted that “the hallways [would] be chaotic and the teachers wouldn’t have much control over the classroom/class, like in stories I’d heard about [urban] schools.” After her visit, she noted with surprise that the school, “was filled with pride and spirit. There wasn’t any chaos.” Similarly, another student “imagined [the urban school] to be darker, prison-like and super plain, as well as intimidating and creepy in a ‘no one will know if you die here’ sort of way.” In contrast, when she left for the day, she remarked, “It was friendly and welcoming and really beautiful in its own way.” Since so much of the conflict with race, class, and gender that arises on campuses appears to occur from a lack of understanding of “the other” (Globetti, Globetti, Brown, & Smith, 1993), these successes were major accomplishments for the program.

Along with the successes of a program such as this, there are also challenges the organizers faced along the way. For example, there were no formalized assessments included in the design so the successes noted are anecdotal. Replication did not occur the following year because grant funding was not secured. Additionally, the expense of the program increased because filming and editing required much time and expense. Coordination between the three high schools was often an issue as well, especially since the program needed to make accommodations for AP testing at the various campuses. The counselors who chaperoned the final day, who were not privy to the extent to which the students received academic and emotional support throughout this entire process, expressed concern for the students’ well-being when discussing race, social class and gender, despite the fact that these conversations occurred in a safe space by trained facilitators. These challenges

would have been resolved the second year if funding had been secured.

Conclusion

The economic prosperity of many communities requires its schools to prepare students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to effectively come together in the workplace after gaining the education they need to succeed. Across the Divide provides high school students with the tools to think critically about and understand social differences. The goal of educating high school students about inclusivity, diversity, and awareness of differences encourages learners to interact with each other in the workplaces of an evolving society.

Students today live, see, read, and understand the world around them in very different ways than was the case just a few short years ago. Across the Divide recognizes this and helps to provide high school students with the tools to recognize, manage, and lead others as they enter college and the working world. Participating in a program that exposes them to diversity in a way that is safe, educational, and meaningful will benefit the students and the communities they serve.

Connecting students from urban, rural, and suburban areas can lead to life-changing experiences. As a pre-college initiative, ATD has potential for replication for school districts that struggle with diversity. Although the program described in this paper focused on three different high schools from three different school districts, it could take place between different schools within the same district, especially if they are neighborhood schools, a trend that is reemerging.

When universities help connect and facilitate discussions among high school students, the potential benefits are high. Exposing students to diversity issues while introducing them to a college experience helps prepare them to ultimately take an active role in their communities.

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