

Building A
Better Bridge:
Helping Young Adults Enter and Succeed in College

Youth Development Institute
January 2008
New York City

Acknowledgements

Building A Better Bridge: Helping Young Adults Enter and Succeed in College

Researched and written by [Michael Chavez Reilly](#).

[Building A Better Bridge](#) was prepared by the Youth Development Institute (YDI) as part of its programs: Community Education Pathways to Success and the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success. This paper is the third in a series which includes: *College Access and Success for Young Adult Learners: a Research Summary for Schools and Programs* and *The Dream of College: Helping Struggling Students Succeed in College*.

The focus of this work is to increase understanding about how to enable young people who are over-age, under-credited, or have dropped out of high school to complete their secondary educations, enter, and complete college.

This paper has grown out the partnership of the Youth Development Institute with the New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York and Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation. We are deeply grateful to the students and staff of these organizations for their generous sharing of thought and feeling that has been central to the development of this paper.

The Promising Practices Partnership of the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success is a collaboration among the New York City organizations that supported and learned from this work. The members are:

[Charles Amundsen](#), Regional Superintendent for Region Four, New York City Department of Education Region 4 Learning Support Center; [Lisa Anzalone](#), Instructional Manager, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, New York City Department of Education; [Bonne August](#), Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, New York City College of Technology; [Jonathan Beauford](#), Former MTA College Counselor, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; [Eric Bent](#), Director of Youth and Family Services, St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation; [Tabari Bomani](#), Teacher & College Advisor, Bushwick Community High School; [Sabrina Evans-Ellis](#), Deputy Director of Youth and Family Services, St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation; [Lourdes Feurtado](#), Health and Hospitals Corporation Counselor Coordinator, New York City College of Technology; [John Garvey](#), Dean of The Teacher Academy and Collaborative Programs, Office of Academic Affairs, City University of New York; [Bonnie Genevich](#), Division Director, Good Shepherd Services; [Tyrone Glass](#), Director of College STEPS Program, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; [Meghan Gray](#), Former Director of College STEPS Program, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; [Derrick Griffith](#), Director/Principal, CUNY Prep Transitional High School; [Jane Heaphy](#), Director of OPTIONS Center for Educational Development, Goddard Riverside Community Center; [Tasha Henry](#), MTA Coordinator, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; [Lowell Herschberger](#), Director of Young Adult Programs, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; [Susan Matloff-Nieves](#), Assistant Executive Director, Queens Community House; [Rafael Medina](#), Director of College OPTIONS, Queens Community House; [LeAnn Mercer](#), College

Career Resource Coordinator, St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation; **Ryan Mooney**, College Resource Coordinator, St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation; **Michelle Neugebauer**, Executive Director, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; **Laksmi Nor**, Director of School/College Collaborations, Academic Affairs, LaGuardia Community College; **Amy Perlow**, Assistant to John Garvey, Office of Academic Affairs, City University of New York; **Tira Randall**, Principal, Bushwick Community High School; **Josué Rodríguez**, Associate Executive Director, East Side House Settlement; **Juyon Song**, Program Coordinator, College Access and Success Program, Queens Community House; **Emily Van Ingen**, Director of Programs, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; **Vanessa Villanueva**, Admissions Counselor, New York City College of Technology; **Michelle Yanche**, Director, Neighborhood Family Services Coalition

We wish to thank our funders without whom Community Education Pathways to Success and the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success could not have been possible:

Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Altman Foundation

The Clark Foundation

Lumina Foundation for Education

The Pinkerton Foundation

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The Cypress Hills program is supported by the Robin Hood Foundation.

Youth Development Institute Staff:

Peter Kleinbard – Executive Director

Vivian Vázquez – Director, Community Education Pathways to Success and the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success

Betty Marton – Editor

Annie Moyer – Program Officer, Community Education Pathways to Success

TJ Volonis – Executive Assistant

Justine Beaton – Program Assistant, Community Education Pathways to Success

The Youth Development Institute

1440 Broadway, Suite 1601

New York, NY 10018

pkleinbard@ydinstitute.org

(646) 943-8829

Copyright © January 2008, Youth Development Institute, a program of the Tides Center.

Building A Better Bridge

Executive Summary

OVERVIEW

The New York City Partnership for College Access and Success (NYCPCAS) seeks to increase opportunities for college access and success for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are over-age, under-credited, or have dropped out and returned for a GED or diploma.

Sponsored by the Youth Development Institute (YDI), the NYCPCAS is implementing a pilot to:

- * Increase access and retention in post-secondary education for formerly disconnected young adults who seek to go to college.
- * Identify, test, and disseminate effective practices to support these youth in gaining access and completing college.
- * Create a partnership called the Local Network to support youth by utilizing the strengths of each partner: a community-based organization, school or GED program, and a college.
- * Identify and address policy gaps for supporting college access and success for returning youth.

Building A Better Bridge describes lessons learned from the first year of the partnership between Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) and The New York City College of Technology (NYCCT) of CUNY, to develop and implement the college access and success model. This paper discusses the successes and challenges of the partnership and how members engaged in a structured and collaborative process to learn how they could best meet the needs of formerly disconnected youth.

The focus of the first year's project and this paper is on youth who left the school system and obtained a GED at CHLDC. The effort has continued to grow. In the second year, NYCPCAS was joined by Queens Community House which partnered with a New York City Department of Education Young Adult Borough Center (YABC), and is placing students from the YABC's diploma and GED-granting programs at LaGuardia Community College. DoE's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, which supports the YABC and several of its schools, are active participants in the partnership.

SUMMARY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

As a result of this partnership between NYCCT and CHLDC, thirty-nine students have entered college. They have participated in:

- * Pre-college academic preparation programs;
- * Additional tutoring services;
- * Mentoring;
- * Social services;
- * Supplemental guidance on financial aid and advisement;
- * Student social activities;
- * A book credit program that allowed students to buy books; and,
- * Supplement financial assistance for transportation and book costs.

The experience of the first year highlights the potential that college-CBO partnerships have for supporting these young people. Participants significantly exceeded the retention rate of comparable CUNY students who were not part of this project. As a result, the CUNY college has recognized and is seeking to sustain the involvement of a CBO in supporting students. They see valuable lessons for their student population overall. Key findings from the project are:

- * Students experienced a myriad of academic challenges. These point to the need for better academic supports in high school and GED programs. Bridge programs for students in the period after completion of the GED but before entrance to college may be an effective means for helping students to build their skills without having to exhaust their grant funds by taking remedial courses after they enter college.
- * An advocacy counselor from the CBO—working with college staff—helped young people to overcome significant challenges to college entrance and retention.
- * The deep commitment to students of the CBO involved in this project is a critical factor in the success of its students. It is an important value that community-based staff brings to work with colleges.
- * Support from college leadership is a critical factor in obtaining student support.
- * CBOs are in a unique position to respond to the needs of young adults as they have experience with addressing a variety of challenges in the community and can operate in an entrepreneurial and rapid fashion in response to issues that emerge. The CBO was able to raise additional dollars to support emergency expenses, and accessed other community-based resources. Colleges are less flexible and have more limits in changing their systems to meet students' needs.
- * The young adults in the project faced challenges that went beyond attending college. Issues such as fears associated with going to school, affordable housing, work schedules, day care services, and transportation costs all impede students' ability to access and succeed in college. The case management approach that CBO counselors bring to youth work is vital in helping youth to address these challenges.
- * Most students must juggle multiple obligations including school, work, and family. This requires careful management of their time in order to complete assignments and prepare for exams. Counselors must take this into account and work with them on time management.

- * The college process must begin well before the last semester in which students are in high school or a GED program in order to give students and supporting staff adequate time to address academic deficits and prepare for the college entrance process. Students must understand the admissions, academic advisement, and financial aid processes. Young adults also need to understand financial literacy, especially if they take out loans.
- * Helping students understand the connection between academic success and their career interests helps to improve motivation and persistence.
- * College and CBO staff must work together closely to assure that students get the same message and to use their resources well, without duplication.
- * The partners shared and gained new knowledge across organizations and professional disciplines, and developed a team approach to supporting the young adults in the project. The partners need to be clear about the services each provides to avoid duplication of services and maximize each partner's resources.
- * CUNY needs to increase staff resources and the capacity to provide quality advisement for incoming freshmen.

POLICY

More resources are needed to create an interconnected web of services for these youth:

- * On-going data collection and sharing with partners is critical in evaluating retention in college.
- * Expansion of CBO/college partnerships (coordinated efforts of many organizations to address the challenges for these youth).
- * Policy changes supporting young people, particularly in the provision of bridge programs; greater financial, academic, and social support; and better academic alignment between the DoE and CUNY.
- * Restructuring colleges to resemble small school structures.
- * Better academic preparation for older youth.
- * Connect with individuals from colleges who are committed to this population.

Building a Better Bridge

In 2005, Diana Martinez found herself in a dilemma. At the age of 23, with a young daughter, a dead-end job, and a husband who worked long hours just to keep the family afloat, Diana was overwhelmed. After high school she enrolled briefly in college, but found herself unprepared to make the commitment. Now, she dreamed of finishing college, but felt hampered by limited time and income. She wanted to change the direction of her life, but was unsure of how to do it or where to start.

The New York City College of Technology (City Tech) also has a dilemma. Provost Bonnie August explains: "Our six year graduation rate for first-time full-time freshmen in associate degree programs is about 18%. That does not mean that all of these students drop out permanently. Many students stop out and then return; others alternate between full-time and part-time status as their lives permit. It can take a long time. Our degree programs offer a real opportunity, though, and we want to do much better than 18% success in six years." City Tech and many other programs have tried to increase student retention and graduation rates, but as August acknowledges, "There are all these external factors the students confront. The faculty is aware that the students have very complicated lives and sometimes they feel really helpless to do anything about it."

The Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) is a community-based organization serving the needs of local youth in the Cypress Hills section of Brooklyn. It too has a dilemma. In recent years its staff has been serving a larger and larger population of young adults who want to go back to college, but are not prepared. As the director of College Steps Program at Cypress Hills, Megan Gray explains: "One of the things we've noticed over the years is that we were getting a higher percentage of students who are over-age and/or under-credited or who have dropped out. They come in pretty regularly and say, 'I'm sick of my dead-end job, I want to go to college.' They've either graduated high school but not gone on to college or dropped out of high school and want to go to college but don't have their GED."

In an effort to serve this population, Cypress Hills has developed an essential part of the educational system for out-of-school youth—a bridge between high school and college. "A few years ago, youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out were a very small percentage of our population, but within the past three years they have become 25 percent of our population," said Emily Van Ingen, director of programs at Cypress Hills. To serve this growing population, Cypress Hills has reached out to develop stronger relationships with the other educational institutions that serve these youth.

New York City has a dilemma. Career paths for high school graduates are disappearing, replaced by temporary jobs that do not pay a living wage. Globalization and technological change are restructuring the labor market so that entering a middle-class occupation now requires a college degree. Young people understand this and their demand for access to college reflects this

understanding. The city's failure to meet the growing demand for viable career paths not only threatens the futures of these individual students, but also the city's long-term economic edge. Economist Henry Levin estimates that the net benefit of public investment in programs to increase high school graduation are 2.5 times greater than the costs and would yield a \$127,000 per student return in government revenues.¹ Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics reports, "Students with a bachelor's degree, on average, earned about 23 percent more than students with no college. For students with an associate's degree, there was about a nine percent earnings differential compared with high school graduates."²

While everyone agrees there is a problem, to date there have been only isolated attempts to solve it. To fill this void, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) established the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success.

PLANNING THE PROGRAM

In July of 2004, YDI brought together representatives from six community-based organizations (CBOs) to meet with representatives from the City University of New York (CUNY) and the New York City Department of Education (DoE). They met because they had a common interest—to build a better bridge from high school to college. Together, this group designed the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success. They continue to support and guide the program by meeting monthly as a group known as the Promising Practices Partnership (PPP).

From the first meeting, all members were dedicated to pooling their experience and learning from each other. They examined the existing research on models that achieved results and began to define the target population and the specific roles and responsibilities that each member would take on. Through a process of dialogue and refinement of ideas, they developed a two-part model that consisted of a Local Network, a partnership between a CBO and a CUNY college that would select, enroll, and support a cohort of out-of-school youth through their first two years of college; and a Promising Practices Partnership (PPP) of key stakeholders that would support the Local Network by identifying best practices, sharing resources, assisting with data collection and analysis, and providing oversight and assistance wherever necessary. Members of the college and the CBO attended both sets of meetings, which created a system of feedback and communication between the two parts of the program.

Vivian Vázquez of the Youth Development Institute (YDI) became project director for the partnership. Vázquez's background as a founder of a New Visions school and an assistant executive

¹ Levin, H., et. al. (2007) *The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for all of America's Children*. Teacher's College, Columbia University.

² Zucker, B. and Dawson, R. (2003) Credits and Attainment: Returns to Postsecondary Education Ten Years After High School. *Education Statistics Quarterly*. Vol. 3, Issue 2, Topic: Postsecondary Education. National Center for Education Statistics.

director of a social services agency put her in a unique position to understand the student population and the two organizational worlds. She recalls the first meetings of the Promising Practices Partnership: "They determined collectively the selection criteria for the first Local Network—the first CUNY school and the first CBO. They talked early on about what data they wanted to collect and what research papers they wanted to gather. They read background articles together. They planned to use the PPP as a forum within which to disseminate best practices within the field, and, most importantly, impact policy. Here the researchers would be at the table with the high schools and with CUNY to join the discussion and have a cross-section of perspectives in the conversation."

Vázquez continues: "The CUNY and DoE representatives understood that part of their role was to listen and learn what the CBOs are doing. One theme that has emerged out of the PPP conversations is that for years, CBOs have done the "mop-up work" for a failing high school and workforce development system. As they are asked to play an increasingly important role in the education world, they find they are not adequately resourced to meet that role and need help. Some ask, can we realistically make up for ten years of educational neglect in one year? What are the limits to what they can and cannot do? How can the Department of Education, the CUNY system and the city support them? These are the kinds of issues that arose in the PPP."

To select the first Local Network, members of the PPP created selection criteria and a ranking process for assessing each of the six CBOs' capacity to partner with a college. The group defined five essential criteria: staff experienced with youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out, readiness to serve a new cohort, organizational experience with partnership, proximity to the college, and commitment to a cooperative learning process with a college. Through an open, candid, and democratic process, members of the group ranked each other's proposals and came to a consensus that the CHLDC was best positioned to be the first pilot CBO in the project. Vázquez observes that, "It was an interesting learning process for all the members to discuss exactly what it would take to support this kind of work. Some of our members realized that it was in their best interests to hold off starting a partnership until they had developed more experience." Vázquez notes that the spirit of cooperation at these meetings was refreshing for the field—the conversation had shifted from competition for funds to a process of cooperatively determining how best to use their limited resources.

For the first CUNY campus, the PPP selected the New York City College of Technology (City Tech, also known as NYCCT). "It was identified because of its willingness to collaborate in the program, its willingness to deal directly with recruitment and retention issues, and its understanding that this was to be a research study," says Vázquez. City Tech Provost Bonne August was approached by John Garvey, associate dean for Collaborative Programs at the CUNY Central Office, to sponsor this program in her college. Prior to her career as an administrator at City Tech, August directed an adult literacy program in Continuing Education. She then spent 22 years as a community college faculty member, primarily teaching writing and directing the writing program. As a result, she had

a lot of first-hand knowledge of the academic and personal struggles that non-traditional youth faced when re-entering college. Provost August explains why she chose to take on the project: "My interest was piqued for two reasons: one, the kinds of students that the program serves really represent the kinds of students that attend City Tech; they fit the same kind of profile. And two, it was a research project, and the goal was to find out what we could do that would really make a difference with the students." Finally, Cypress Hill's proximity to City Tech via the A train was the final factor that made this partnership the best match. Queens Community House (formerly Forest Hills Community House) and La Guardia Community College were slated for the second pilot partnership to start in the fall of 2006.

SETTING UP THE COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS PROGRAM

Diana Martinez was desperate to find her way back to college when she remembered that, as a teenager, she had received help at Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation. As a teenager, she had participated in a community service project in an intergenerational services program that first sparked her interest in human services. Now, ten years later, she heard through a friend that Cypress Hills had a program that could help her go to college AND find day care. When she walked back in the door of Cypress Hills, she met Megan Gray, who would help her through the process.

Counseling youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out was not new to Gray. She was a one-on-one case manager with such youth, first in foster care programs and, for the past five years, as director of Cypress Hill's College Steps program. She was also in her second year of a Master's degree program in social work. When Cypress Hills Director of Programs Emily Van Ingen approached Gray with the idea of expanding her job to take on the College Access project, she agreed. "We decided to take it on because we were already involved in the College Steps program and we decided that this was the direction in which we wanted to go," she said. "We submitted the RFP." Gray became the director for the College Access program (titled "Moving Towards Achievement") at Cypress Hills during its first year.

Recruitment & Screening

Gray's first task was to recruit and select the students. She explains, "Our category was youth aged 16 - 24 who had either graduated from an alternative high school, barely graduated high school, or who did not go straight into school and had a gap in their education. We got a lot of walk-ins. We recruited a lot from our College Steps and Youth Works program, our GED program at our Beacon, and from other local GED programs (Bushwick and Brownsville). We got a lot of interest. We then had to narrow it down to students for whom the program could really be a good fit." They also recruited through local churches and through their network of youth alumni. Conversations with students revealed that many participants heard about the program from other youth who were involved or had been involved in CHLDC programs.

Lesson Learned: Cypress Hills (and other CBOs such as Good Shepherd Services) were able to draw on formal and informal neighborhood networks to recruit students into the College Access program. This ability to harness trusted relationships in the community can speed the recruitment and screening of students interested in going to college.

Another lesson learned by the Local Network staff was that, for students who have been disconnected from the educational system, recruitment, selection, and preparation had to start even earlier than originally thought. Vázquez explains: "We learned that recruiting in June for a September entrance was very late. Although they recruited in the communities through fliers and through word-of-mouth, they found it hard to get the right kind of student. They had to screen out a lot who weren't ready to get to the 12-14 students they ended up with in September."

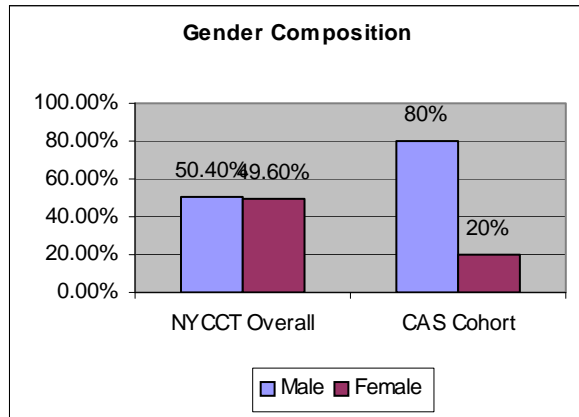
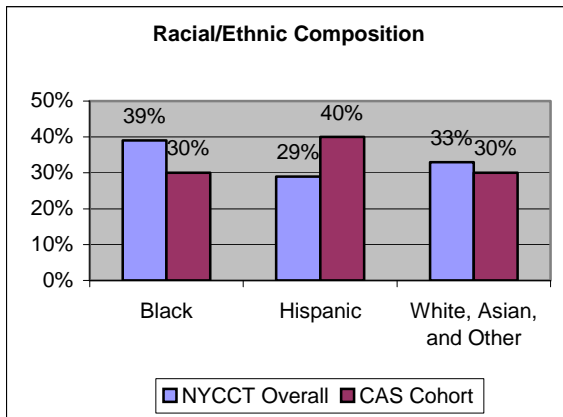
Screening is a complex process. Students need to be assessed not just in terms of their academic preparedness, but also their willingness to make the necessary sacrifices of time and money. They need to be able to rearrange their work schedules to make room for school and homework. They need to be prepared to commit their own finances to the endeavor. And they need the personal motivation and ability to persist in the face of obstacles and setbacks. Some students were not ready to make the transition to college. As a multi-service agency, Cypress Hills was able to steer these students toward its job-training program (located in the same office) or to other agencies (such as the YABCs) that help provide internships for students. This ability to keep young people at all levels of preparedness connected to the broader education and workforce development system can be a vital part of connecting students to college.

Looking back on the first year, Megan Gray comments, "In an ideal world, anyone developing this program would have a pre-program that would help these students three months before. It's just so hard for this particular population. If you think about it, high school students ideally have from September to September to deal with the process of college admissions and the transition of getting into the college mode. Our kids have maybe a month at best. And who knows when was the last time they were involved in an educational program? So it would be great if we could engage them three months in advance to do a great program that is about academics, and that also helps them develop study skills, life skills, and really helps them develop a peer network that can support them."

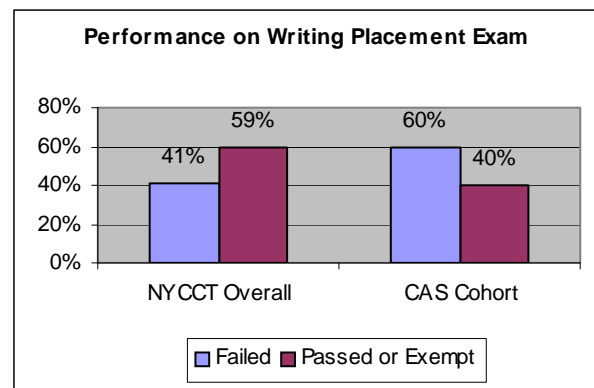
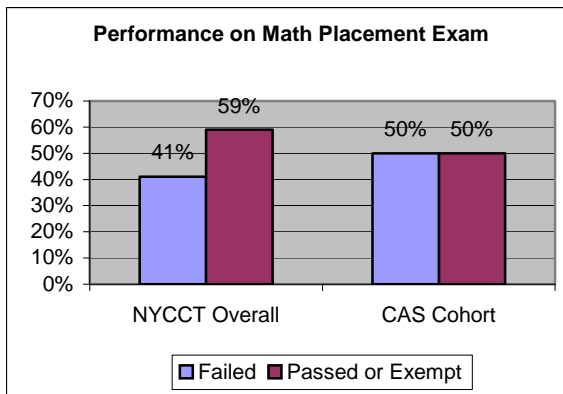
Lesson Learned: To be ready for college, students need to prepare on many levels. This preparation must start months in advance and takes time and dedication on the part of students and those who serve them.

Background Characteristics

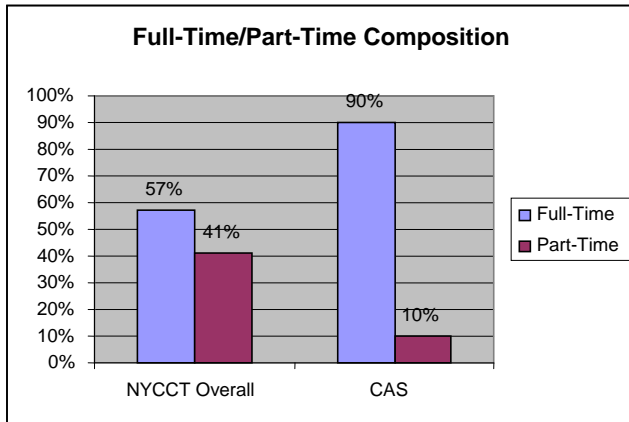
Although initial data for the first College Access and Success (CAS) cohort is limited to ten of the initial twelve students, a quick comparison of the cohort's background to the general composition of the City Tech student body (12,443 students) is in order. As the graph illustrates, the CAS cohort is slightly more Hispanic and slightly less African American than the overall student body. In addition, eight of the ten students in the first cohort were male, which is very different from the overall City Tech student body, which is evenly divided.



The CAS cohort enters somewhat less prepared academically, compared to the overall student body.



The CAS cohort is also entering with a much higher percentage of students enrolling as full-time students. While full-time enrollment is advantageous to students in their application for financial aid, it can also pose a challenge when students are working longer hours. In the case of the initial cohort, eight of the ten students were working the first semester, and six of the ten worked 20 hours or more. These high hourly commitments to both school and work became an increasingly demanding challenge for students throughout the first year.



Access: Preparing Students for the First Semester

What does it take to prepare youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out of college? First, Local Network staff found that students entering the program were not academically prepared. Vázquez recalls, "Even after screening, the 12-14 students we recruited had very low GED scores. Although the vast majority of students graduated high school and/or received their GEDs, the truth is that this does not mean that students are "college-ready." Many students who have been out of school for years have forgotten fundamental math and literacy skills. In fact, nationally, "60 percent of students who enroll in two-year colleges and one out of four who first enroll in a four-year college takes at least one remedial course at the postsecondary level."³

In order to place out of remedial classes at CUNY, students must score a 75 on the Language Arts and Math Regents or have high enough SAT scores. Otherwise, they must pass three placement exams. Most of the College Access students were required to take the placement exams, and preparing students for these exams became a key challenge for the College Access program. After the first cohort was selected, Cypress Hills held a series of four classes over the summer to prepare the students for entrance exams. CHLDC Director Van Ingen describes the challenge for CBOs providing exam preparation classes for out-of-school youth: "Students who enrolled in the preparation classes at Cypress Hills have a wide range of academic proficiency. We need support from educators to design math and English programs for students who have very different scores."

Local Network partners at City Tech were able to assist in exam preparation by connecting some students to the college's University Summer Immersion Program (USIP). Four students from the

³ SOURCE: Adelman, C. (2004). *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972–2000*, tables 7.1 and 7.2. Available at: <http://preview.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/prinindicat/index.html>. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000), "Fourth Follow-up, 2000."

cohort were able to enroll in USIP and the rest were able to prepare at Cypress Hills. As a result of both of these efforts, some students in the cohort were able to place out of remedial classes and others were able to enter at a higher level.

Lesson Learned: Rather than developing college preparation programs in isolation, the partnership structure can increase availability while avoiding duplication of services. In this case, students who were eligible attended the CUNY course, and students who were not prepared at CHLDC. Sharing specific information about existing services and eligibility requirements is critical to ensuring an efficient use of organizational resources.

From Test Preparation to College Preparation

During meetings of the Local Network over the summer, Bonne August, provost of City Tech, explained that true college readiness must go beyond test preparation. Many students equate education with passing such tests as the GED and are unaware that success in college also depends on sharpening higher thinking skills in mathematics and literacy. Provost August explains the shift toward meta-cognitive thinking that must take place: "People who work with students need to help them surface their own processes so that they are reflecting on their own learning and the relationship between their efforts and what they have learned." To prepare students for the challenges to come, she suggested that students needed to "become immersed in literacy." Megan Gray initiated this process with a weekly reading club over the summer for the entering students. She met with four to five students every Friday to discuss Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. It gave students the opportunity to get to know each other and practice textual analysis.

Gray and Vanessa Villanueva, admissions counselor and Gray's counterpart at City Tech, also used these weekly meetings to uncover students' fears about college. Indeed, preparing students for the emotional demands of college turned out to be a task as complex as preparing students for the intellectual demands. College represents a major life change—it requires a new set of social and emotional skills as well as academic skills. "A lot of students were very afraid because they were afraid to fail," Gray explains. "The truth is, they feel like they have failed before, and that can do a lot to their self-esteem. So sometimes it can feel easier for them to give up or blame someone else, rather than try again.... There are so many barriers and so many little hurdles that if not handled properly will throw them off track. There were a lot of 10pm calls on the cell phone because the TAP aid hadn't come through and what are we going to do? That kind of stuff." Acknowledging this dynamic, student Raul Molino observes that sometimes he could be his own worst enemy. "Sometimes I put me down. When I had to do an essay, I said to myself it was too hard and I couldn't do it. But I could, I just had to try. "

Lesson Learned: College readiness courses for out-of-school youth must be prepared to deal with the psychological as well as academic challenges students bring to the process of enrolling in college. Counselors with a background in case management should be involved in the design of these programs.

As September enrollment approached, students were more in contact with Villanueva, who would be the primary counselor for students in the College Access program. Villanueva was an admissions counselor in the SEEK program at City Tech and was recommended for the program by City Tech's vice president of Enrollment Management. She was considered the ideal choice because she was able to identify with the students on a number of levels. In addition to her background as a SEEK counselor, she was a Latina, a mother, and a City Tech graduate. Indeed, many students would come to know her not just as an advisor and counselor, but also as a mentor. For the students in the first CAS cohort, Villanueva was the "human face" of City Tech. Provost August has referred to her as "an exception to the bureaucratic mentality. She cares about the youth and became a coach and mentor to them."

Carlos Besora describes Villanueva's approach: "I met Vanessa that first day. She sought me out. She spoke to me as if she had known me for years. So I went back the next day to talk to her." Student Rebecca Rodriguez also credits her with making a difference in her life. Before enrolling in the College Access program, Rebecca had dropped out of a local community college in upstate New York. She chose City Tech on the recommendation of her sister who told her about the extra support they give. "I needed the extra support to get me back on my feet," she says. "I never had a support system like Vanessa to help me. I had to do everything else by myself —scholarships, financial aid, classes, etc. Vanessa was there for guidance and I didn't have that at [the other] college." Fellow student Raul Molino agrees, saying that Villanueva and Gray are there "to make sure things go right."

Clearing the Hurdle of Financial Aid

In addition to intellectual and emotional preparation, financial aid paperwork had to be set in motion immediately. Once students filled out financial aid forms, they began their relationships with state and federal financial aid bureaucracies and student loan corporations. For students whose parents do not have the experience to guide them through the bewildering maze of paperwork, the process can be intimidating. Villanueva became responsible for guiding students through the process. In some cases, parents were reluctant to disclose family financial information, which resulted in delays in filing. "Some students applied late for financial aid, so I pressed them to get their documentation in," Villanueva explains. "If they didn't get it in on time, they often didn't get full financial aid (TAP, Pell, etc.). If their forms came in early enough, they were covered. But if they sent them in late, sometimes they got the TAP but not the Pell, or vice versa, and that threw off their budget. They were not prepared for that." The failure of financial aid packages to come through on time was a major challenge the students and staff of the College Access program had to confront during the first semester.

Lesson Learned: The complex and time sensitive nature of the financial aid process is crucial for staff of both colleges and CBOs to understand. Many students get overwhelmed and stuck when facing complicated financial aid forms. Counselors must have the knowledge to guide them through

the process. They should know what information students and parents need to produce for Pell and TAP applications and, if necessary, help students develop strategies to gather that information. They should know how to help students estimate living expenses. This information should be more widely diffused to CBO counselors.

SUCCESS: SURVIVING THE FIRST SEMESTER

Financial Challenges

Despite the preparation students had received, they were nonetheless described as being in shock as they tried to negotiate the new financial, bureaucratic, and academic challenges before them. Textbooks cost much more than the students had anticipated. Many did not buy books because they did not have the money and/or their financial aid had not come through. As a result, many students fell behind in their courses during the first and second weeks of the semester. Megan Gray recalls: "At the beginning it was very interesting. None of our kids had books—none of them. And because the financial aid hadn't gone through, they had a stop on their accounts so they couldn't even get a picture ID to go to the school library to check out their books. The kids were so unaware of the repercussions. It wasn't until the second week that they were telling us what was going on. There was a lot of bureaucracy surrounding this—that was a huge hurdle. Also, I think they didn't know how to ask for help. I think about what it was like to be 19, and to have to be completely self-reliant, and it's very difficult." This example illustrates the change in mindset that must accompany becoming a college student. Students did not realize that it was more important to acquire books in a timely manner than to accrue a temporary debt.

A similar obstacle arose around transportation. Some students were surprised that, unlike public high schools, neither the college nor the program provided unlimited *MetroCards*. Many had not factored in the extra money and time necessary for all these things. Acknowledging students' frustration at one PPP meeting, Provost August asked, "Is there a way to lobby the MTA to give transit checks to college students on financial aid or extend transportation passes to them?"

Focus groups revealed that many students consistently underestimate the living expenses that come with college and many are unfamiliar with the skills of budgeting and long-term planning. Some students in the program reported dropping out of City Tech because they ran out of money and were afraid to incur more debt. Student Victor Acosta observes, "Most of the students need advice on financial management. Some have really bad credit, or need help understanding credit cards."

Lesson Learned: Financial literacy skills must be integrated into both college preparation courses and introduction to college courses. For example, students need to understand how interest rates and repayment plans on student loans differ from those on credit cards.

To respond to students' immediate financial obstacles, members of the Local Network and the PPP mobilized to find solutions. To help students struggling with new expenses, the CHLDC staff

successfully approached their local City Council member, Eric Dilan, to establish a fund of \$10,000 to support students' needs for books, transportation, and childcare. With this fund, Cypress Hills established a book account fund with the City Tech bookstore, allowing College Access students to buy their textbooks on credit.

It took three weeks into the semester before students could access funds for books. The lack of money for books put some students behind academically early on, and some struggled all semester to catch up. This is an example of how a simple bureaucratic obstacle can become an unintended catalyst of student attrition.

Lesson Learned: If financial aid does not become available by the beginning of the semester, students need to have a back-up financial support strategy.

It was also notable that while CHLDC has a much smaller resource base than CUNY, it was able to respond to students' needs in a rapid and flexible manner. CHLDC was able to bring targeted community resources to an emergency problem by appealing to a local politician to establish an emergency credit program to help some students facing temporary financial crises.

Lesson Learned: Smaller community-based organizations can sometimes respond to individual student crises (such as immediate fiscal or housing needs) faster than colleges, which are organized to meet different needs. Colleges who wish to retain at-risk youth need to closely coordinate services with CBOs. In particular, such partnerships should consider establishing emergency expense funds to help students who face unavoidable, temporary crisis situations (as CHLDC did by going to Councilman Dilan). Otherwise, some students will drop out or resort to credit card use, which can become financially unsustainable.

The struggles of students in the first year to finance college confirms what is generally known—current financial aid packages do not cover the whole cost of college. Tuition is just one part of the expenses incurred. "They are not able to afford additional expenses associated with attending college including expensive books, college application fees, transportation, and childcare," observes Villanueva. Indeed, despite the support provided by the Dilan grant, at least three students would drop out in the first year for explicit financial reasons. Moreover, the high cost of college can drive students to work more hours, further reducing the time available to study.

Lesson Learned: On a policy level, these situations drive home the need to challenge the state and federal aid policies that are moving away from need-based aid. Financial aid does not cover all tuition and often leaves living expenses unaddressed. In addition, particular restrictions on financial aid should be reformed. For example, TAP funds cannot currently be used pay for non-credit remedial or "life skills" courses, which are often crucial to orienting youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out to college.

ACADEMIC PROGRESS & THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESSING HELP

Filling the Advisement Gap

Throughout the first semester, a key challenge was to keep overwhelmed students from dropping out. Most students failed at least one of the three required placement tests, which meant they had to take non-credit, remedial classes. As students became aware of how far they had to go to achieve their dreams, many of them grew frustrated. Local Network staff found themselves placed in the position of being informal academic advisors. As Megan Gray explains, "It is very frustrating for our young people who say they want to be radiology technicians and they are taking all these remedial classes and they don't feel that they are doing anything towards their major, and they're not. They have to take these remedial classes and pass them in order to get to the next level."

Lesson Learned: City Tech and other colleges should make a clear link between remedial work and later academic and career success. Showing students why remedial work in reading, writing, and math is essential to later academic and career success remains a gap in City Tech's advisement and information system.

Because of Villanueva's prior experience as a counselor at City Tech, she was able to make recommendations to students about which professors might be the right match for them and which majors might give them the best opportunity to reach their long-term goals. Provost August acknowledged the need for improved advisement for City Tech freshman and used her insider knowledge to help the CAS cohort steer clear of common registration pitfalls. For example, Bonne explained to Local Network staff that students who come in with "undeclared" majors have more flexibility and opportunity to participate in learning communities than students who declare a major. However, this information is not made clear on any applications. Similarly, she explained that waivers for the \$65 application fee were available through the community fee waiver program but were not available if you were directly admitted to City Tech. Again, this is insider information that should be publicized.

Lesson Learned: CUNY needs to increase staff resources and the capacity to provide quality advisement for incoming freshmen.

Improving Academic Skills

There was consensus among Local Network staff that math skills were the largest deficit for the students entering college and remained the largest problem at the end of the first semester. At the end of the first semester, College Access students had failed remedial math more than any other course. Much of this was due to gaps in their pre-college preparation. In discussions with other community-based organizations at the PPP meeting, there was a consensus that there is a wide skill gap between passing the mathematics portion of the GED and passing a college math course. Teachers must be taught how to fill this gap. PPP members, such as Good Shepherd Services and CUNY Prep, shared resources and frameworks designed to improve math education, but

acknowledged that recruiting and/or training teachers who can teach college math skills remains a critical task (an ongoing study by the Department of Education and Princeton University is examining this structural challenge). At the PPP meetings, John Garvey of CUNY called for a concerted effort to improve teaching of remedial math.

Lesson Learned: Best practices in the teaching of remedial math skills must be identified and modeled for all teachers regardless of the setting: in colleges, GED programs, CBOs, YABCs, or high schools. In addition, PPP members agreed that the recruitment and development of qualified math teachers must be made a citywide priority.

One successful strategy increasingly employed to boost achievement in high school and college has been the small learning community (a structure in which all students in a small cohort take the same introductory classes). However, using this strategy in the College Access program has been a challenge. The very different work schedules of the students and wide variation in academic preparedness have made it difficult for the Local Network staff to coordinate students' schedules. This is an important structural challenge to address in designing academic achievement programs for working youth.

Nonetheless, Local Network staff worked to create places and times to help students cope with their common problems and tap into the support of their peers. Villanueva and Gray arranged a series of Friday afternoon workshops for students focusing on key issues for college survival. Topics included stress management, time management, career exploration, and resume writing. During one session, the head of the counseling department did a presentation for students designed to familiarize them with how to access different kinds of help. Unfortunately, out of the cohort of 12 students, only five or six students were able to attend consistently. The counselors found that the combined demands of work, family, and school made it difficult for students to take advantage of the new opportunities offered them and to stay in touch with each other.

Yet, in spite of scheduling difficulties, group activities did happen. To create a sense of peer support and community, Gray arranged to take the students out to dinner and a movie one Friday night in late September of the first semester. This was followed by a student and family celebration in mid-October in which faculty, administrators, and Local Network mentors attended and gave gifts of encouragement to students. Students were particularly touched by this experience. They reported being impressed that adults who did not even know them were willing to attend an event for them. To students, this was a palpable demonstration of caring and commitment on the part of the people involved in the program.

Local Network staff continued to organize social activities for students throughout the year. Carlos Besora describes his efforts organizing his fellow CAS students to go out for a bowling night: "It took a long time to set up because we all have different schedules, but I finally got 15 students together to go out bowling. We were bowling for three hours. Some of us had a lot in common.

Some of us were the same majors and didn't know it. We got to trade information about professors." This informal networking can breakdown the sense of isolation that leads so many students to a sense of discouragement.

Tutoring Services

Throughout the first year, Local Network members (both at City Tech and CHLDC) worked diligently to improve students' academic performance. Tutoring was offered to students every day at multiple sites throughout the college. At the beginning of the school year students were given an orientation as to how best to use the Learning Center and were repeatedly encouraged to use it throughout the semester. Cypress Hills also hired an on-site tutor for students whose schedules made it difficult to go to tutoring on campus.

In spite of all these efforts, very few students attended, even after mid-semester grades showed many students were struggling academically. Students' inability to access help provoked long conversations at the Local Network meetings. Gray admits, "We had a really hard time getting them to access tutoring and we didn't know why." When confronted with their failure to go to tutoring, students gave different reasons. One reason given was that the peer tutors had an attitude of superiority that prevented the students from learning. Another reason was that tutors sometimes used different methods than those taught by the professors, which was confusing. A third reason was that the tutoring centers were busy when students went and they did not have time to wait.

To address the concerns regarding the peer tutors, Villanueva was able to direct students to times and places where students could get tutored directly by faculty. But many students still failed to go. One clear issue was a lack of free time. Some students are parents, while other students work after school and on weekends. At meetings of the Local Network and the PPP, members concurred that a central policy issue is the need to develop more job opportunities (work-study positions and internships especially) that allow students to work and study at the same time. Patricia Smith of Good Shepherd Services noted that community-based organizations have recognized this need and are working to address the problem. As she explains, "Everyone in the organization plays the role of job developer because employment is the biggest need that young people have, specifically, jobs that fit a college schedule and are 'college friendly.'"

Lesson Learned: To increase access to college for working youth, creating more college-friendly jobs is a crucial policy priority. Juggling work and school becomes unmanageable for many students. Since most students nationwide now work and go to school at the same time, this is a national priority.

Resistance to Help

Local Network staff members also believe there are psychological factors involved in students' resistance to tutoring. Megan Gray speculates that student aversion may have had something to do with feelings of insecurity. "I think maybe for some there is an underlying feeling of sabotage,

because you're afraid to fail again because you've failed in the past," she says. "If you don't put your best foot forward, you'll always have that as an out for why you failed class. 'If I worked hard enough I would have passed that class,' but instead of really putting their best foot forward and failing that class, you have this kind of, "well, it was because of so and so." You always have this reason for why things didn't work out for you." Provost August also speculated on the tutoring issue: "Some students didn't like being tutored by another student, but why not? It should be easier. It should be less intimidating. I think perhaps it is acknowledging a weakness, a sense that 'I should be able to do this on my own.' I don't know where that 'should' comes from."

Students who have been disconnected from the educational system for a period of time are often reported to lead more independent and self-sufficient lives. While they are rightfully proud of this, these characteristics can also lead to reluctance to ask for help. Student Rebecca Rodriguez explains. "For me, moral support is something I only get at home from my mom and sister. In my community I don't get it at all. I don't like asking for help. I would rather have people come to me rather than ask for help, because if I do, I see myself as being weak. I want to make sure the help is there when I ask for it. It's good to have it at home, but it's better to have it outside." Counselors at the Local Network and PPP meetings concurred that students were often reluctant to be open and honest about limitations and weaknesses. They needed to learn how to ask for help, make realistic compromises, and practice strategies of self-advocacy.

To counteract this resistance to asking for help, both Villanueva and Gray worked to build a less formal, personal relationship with the students. For example, students reported that if they did not find Villanueva during the first week of school, she found them, introducing herself and openly engaging them in conversation to find out about their lives and their interests. This created a rapid sense of trust with students and established her as the "go to" person. Students also mentioned the fact that Villanueva and Gray's relative youth (neither was more than ten years older than students in the cohort) provided more immediate and accessible role models.

Students reported finding Villanueva and Gray less intimidating than other "authority figures" on campus. As one College Access student, Carlos Besora, explains, "Most counselors will nod and go "alright, alright, alright" and just refer you to someone else. They have five minutes for you and they don't actually take the time to help you. Vanessa and the Cypress Hills counselors get to know you personally. They treat you like a friend, and so you listen to them more." Although it took place in the second year of the program, Carlos relates a story that shows how these more personal relationships can yield concrete academic results for students. When Carlos received a failing grade in a class, he went to his CHLDC counselor, John, to seek advice. John encouraged him to talk directly to his professor to explain what challenged him about the paper and to ask for a chance to revise it. After initial hesitation, Carlos spoke with the professor who agreed to let him revise it. After rewriting the paper, Carlos' "F" turned into a "C."

This story illustrates how important it is to "teach students how to advocate for themselves in an often impersonal bureaucracy," says Provost August. In the example above, John did not just tell Carlos to talk to the faculty member, but HOW to talk to the faculty member. John transmitted to Carlos a key element of cultural knowledge that disconnected youth sorely lack. But it is important to note that John's ability to ask Carlos to take a personal risk was dependent upon the trusted relationship he had built with Carlos.

Diana Martinez also credits these personal relationships with sustaining her. "It's the personal touch. The little things make a difference—like the fact that the administrators and professors know my name and my face and say "hi" to me in the hallway. That can really help when I'm having a bad day." Gray describes this process of building trust with students: "It takes a lot of case management. Students lead complex lives. It involves a whole process of unfolding their problems, providing opportunities to build up and instill self-pride and a sense of themselves. You have to help them develop strategies to learn to deal with day-to-day issues, to get to a point where they shift and take responsibility for their own success, and can validate themselves as adults. To develop a rapport with students over time is a slow process. You need to look beyond the obvious issues."

Lesson Learned: The case management approach that CBO counselors bring to youth work is vital in the effort to reconnect out-of-school youth to educational institutions. Due to the time and caseload constraints of many college counselors, it is an approach that is difficult to replicate, but not impossible to learn from and adapt. It is an important benefit that community-based staff bring to work with colleges.

Creating a Ladder of Mentoring & Support

To further support students during their first year, the Local Network members began to develop a comprehensive mentoring program. Vanessa Villanueva spearheaded the design of the program. The program was conceived as a three-level mentoring system in which each student would ideally have three different mentors throughout the course of their college careers. In the first year, a more senior student would serve as a peer mentor to orient the student to all aspects of college life. Once students picked their majors, they would be assigned a faculty mentor who would help them pick their courses and plan their educational and career trajectory. Finally, as students headed into the labor market, they would be assigned an alumni mentor who could offer advice on making the transition from college to career. Each of these mentors would supplement official advisement and be trained to refer students to the appropriate people or resources if they could not answer their questions. The recruiting of faculty and alumni mentors for this ambitious program has been a slow process, but it has begun.

By the end of the first year, most students had a mentor in place. In addition, as early as the second semester, students in the first CAS cohort volunteered to serve as informal mentors to students in the second cohort. As students have continued into their second and third years, some report the advice from mentors and counselors has been crucial in helping them figure out their major.

Provost August reflects on one student in particular who has advocated for admission into a competitive program. She observes "he has really responded to mentoring and it has helped him to advocate for himself. The process is not mechanistic."

The Benefits of Integrated Academic & Social Services

Over the course of the first year, Gray and Villanueva essentially developed a two-counselor model of joint problem solving. They were in constant contact with each other about all the students' progress, discussing the students at least a few times a week. As Villanueva explains, "If I didn't get them at one end, she would get them on the other." Both Villanueva and Gray were essential in keeping students afloat. As Villanueva explains, "A lot of students first had to come to my office to vent about their problems. A lot of them really don't have much support from other people, so at least here they can feel supported." As academic difficulties and personal crises took their toll on students' motivation, Vanessa explained: "We constantly called them and checked in and kept that connection alive. When there's an emergency, we just kept on calling and calling, telling them they had to come in to the office." Gray also set up a system so students who lived in the Cypress Hills neighborhood would come to her to get their weekly *MetroCards*. "That became a kind of informal counseling system which really forced a lot of them to check in with me on a regular basis so I could flag anyone who might be headed for trouble," she explains. Nonetheless, they both admit it is slow and difficult work. "Some of them call me when things are already unraveling. I try to get them to understand that they have to call before that. Vanessa does too. We're working on it—it's a long process. We can easily advocate for them, but part of it is to teach them how to support themselves, but I think that will take a while for them to really be able to do that on their own." As Vivian Vázquez succinctly described: "I view Megan and Vanessa as sort of the two godmothers to these students."

Because Gray and Villanueva encountered students in different contexts, they were able to gather different information about them. In the case of tutoring, students' complaints surfaced at Cypress Hills rather than on campus. Gray relayed the complaints to Villanueva, who then brought the issues to the Local Network and PPP meetings. Villanueva created a solution at City Tech by providing access for students to faculty tutoring. Addressing student problems from both a school and out-of-school context provides the kind of early, pro-active support that helped prevent dilemmas turning into insurmountable obstacles.

Another case of joint problem surfacing and problem-solving came with a student who was not eligible for financial aid due to his immigration status. Because Villanueva and Gray had developed a personal relationship with the student, he was able to disclose the situation, explain that he had raised some of the money toward tuition, and needed help finding the rest. Villanueva and Gray were able to present this unique situation at the Local Network and PPP meetings, which collectively worked to help him find the rest of the funds.

In yet another case, Villanueva and Gray worked to help a student through a temporary personal crisis. "One student had been kicked out of his house," Villanueva explains. "He told us he had a cousin at City Tech. So we talked to the cousin to see if he could stay there for a little while until he was able to get more help. We spoke to him and talked about shelters—he stayed at friends for a while... we helped him figure out his housing." This story illustrates the depth of their involvement with students and distinguishes their strategy from the typical advisement most freshmen receive. For students who have had no practice in asking for help, Gray and Villanueva first had to show students how to ask for and get help.

The Value of Wrap-Around Services

Because of their case management skills, social service connections, and youth development perspective, CBOs have a unique ability to address the whole student. At a PPP meeting, Patricia Smith of Good Shepherd Services described what she believes CBOs bring to an education partnership. "In short, 'wrap around services.' We advise students on all aspects of their lives, not just academics, including employment, budgeting, health care, child care, housing, and family issues." Gray describes what she does for students in similar terms: "It involves a continuous linking of all services."

Vanessa Villanueva sums up the problem: "It was difficult for many of these students to get into the academic mindset because of the severity of the problems many of them faced. Honestly, some of these students had to get their basic needs met first. We had students with sick family members, some had been evicted, many had transportation issues, and some had immigrant status issues. These issues were complex and preoccupied them, so it was not always easy for them to assimilate back into education."

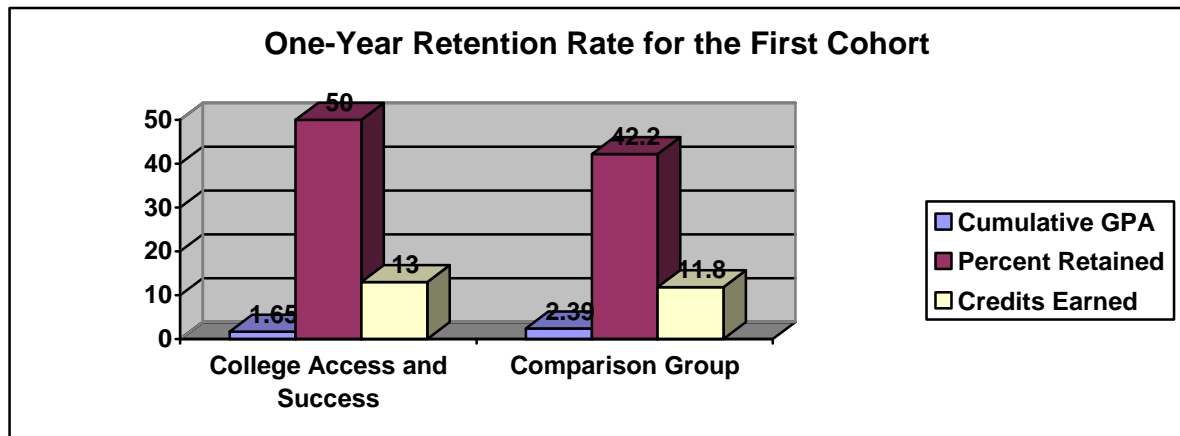
Lesson Learned: In order to build the academic skills of youth, one must address their non-academic needs at the same time. The Department of Education is developing models—Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) and Transfer High Schools—to provide integrated social and academic services to overage and under-credited youth. All concerned stakeholders can advocate for more resources to create a more interconnected web of services for these youth.

ASSESSING ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

At the end of the first year, City Tech's Office of Assessment and Institutional Research provided Local Network staff with basic progress indicators of the first cohort and an initial comparison group of students who had a similar profile to the Cypress Hills cohort on key attributes.⁴ While the overall grades of the first cohort were discouraging to staff, the 50 percent retention rate of

⁴ Both the Cypress Hills cohort and the comparison group were first-time freshmen enrolled in associate degree programs, had a very similar racial/ethnic profile, percentage of males and females, age range (17-21) and choice of major.

CAS students remained above that of a comparable sample of first-year City Tech students (who had a retention rate of 42 percent). In addition, CAS students earned more credits on average than the City Tech comparison group (See Table Below).



This mixed outcome—disappointing academic progress but some preliminary success in retention—provoked different interpretations by members of the Local Network. While the college-based members were discouraged that students had such a steep hill to climb academically, CBO-based members pointed to the high retention rate as a sign of student resilience. One member described her perspective: “The retention is good. Academically the students are...well it depends on who you ask. Right now I feel it’s more about the engagement piece and some people in the network are very disappointed by their grades. And it is a disappointment to me, but it’s not, in the greater sense of things, as important. It depends on whom you ask about that. Obviously CUNY is going to have a different stance...” While these discussions did not hamper cooperation in any significant way, it is worth noting that different organizational missions can lead to different interpretations of outcomes. Intermediary groups, such as YDI in this case, must have the skill to acknowledge these differences while keeping all members focused on their common goals.

Progress in Subsequent Cohorts

The Local Network recruited a second cohort of students that enrolled at City Tech in February 2006. Compared to the first cohort, the process of transition was much smoother. All students received their books on time. More students in the second cohort participated in pre-college test preparation and orientation. By the end of the semester, the second cohort was reported to be a much more cohesive group of students in general and in some cases was able to rely on members of the first cohort to serve as mentors.

The College Access program continued to expand in its second year (the fall of 2006) – from the original cohort of ten students to more than 30. Cypress Hills continued to recruit 90% of their out

of school youth from their local neighborhood, using their pipeline of after-school programs (such as Community Education Pathways to Success [CEPS], and their GED program) and word of mouth.

To serve the needs of this growing cohort, both Cypress Hills and City Tech had to expand their staff. Cypress Hills added two counselors to replace Megan Gray - Tasha Henry and Jonathan Beauford. City Tech replaced Vanessa Villanueva with Lourdes Furtado and Roxana Melendez who runs the mentoring program at City Tech. Significantly, the Cypress Hills counselors were given space and time to spend two days each week at City Tech, to further connect with students. Each Cypress Hills counselor paired up with a City Tech counselor and divided the students amongst themselves. This allowed the counselors to compare notes on both the academic and non-academic needs of their students. They report that "face-to-face problem solving is quicker." Taking a cue from Vanessa and Megan, in addition to office hours, counselors have sought out students in their more natural context (in lounges, and cafeterias) to do quick check-ins.

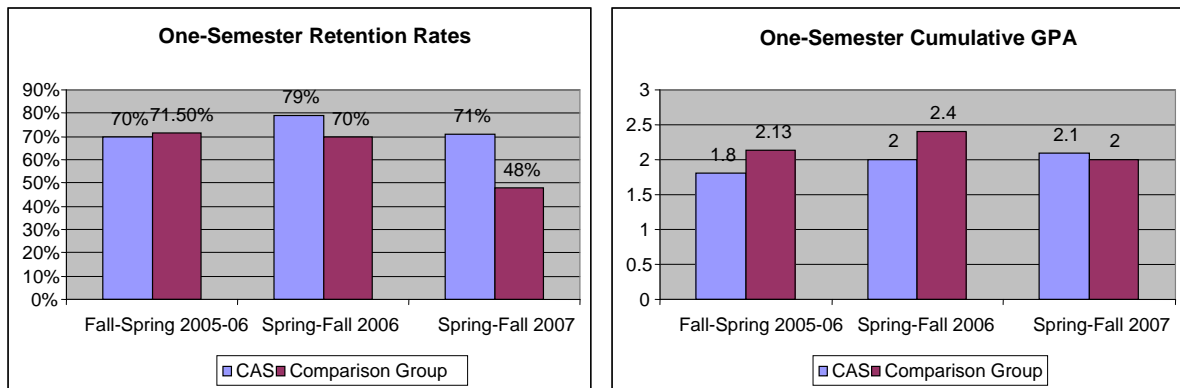
Program staff believe they learned much from the first year and that the enrollment and support process for students is now solid. As Emily Van Ingen explains: "The relationship with the bookstore is better, *MetroCard* distribution has been systematized, students go to the learning center more regularly, and we're much better at flagging financial aid problems earlier to avoid crises." Students continue to be required to check in weekly with counselors—where they also pick up their *MetroCards*. Counselors use the weekly check-ins with students as opportunities to reward positive actions and remind students of their academic responsibilities.

However, challenges remain. Both students and staff reiterate that financial aid is the biggest obstacle to students completing college. As Van Ingen explains: "The number one barrier to students is the financial barrier. But the nature of financial issues vary from case to case—it's money and child care, or money and housing, or money and lack of work." Indeed, some first-year CAS students had to stop out in their second year because of child care issues or because the pressure of working and going to school simply proved too much for them. However, in the fall of 2007, some of these same students who had stopped out in their second year returned to City Tech through the program and are reportedly doing well academically.

Lesson Learned: As data collection continues, it will be important to evaluate whether programs like CAS increase the rate of return of student "drop-outs" or "stop-outs" to college.

Staff turnover in the Local Network has also been a challenge for the project. Provost August speculates: "Students formed attachments with the original counselors and that may affect the continuing students. We may have lost some momentum with the personnel changes." This underscores a major challenge for community-based organizations in general—to secure the funding necessary to ensure long-term staff stability.

Subsequent student cohorts were added in the spring and fall of 2007.



The preliminary data on CAS cohorts paints a picture of slow but steady progress. As we can see, the retention rate of the CAS cohort remains above the retention rate of the comparison group. Moreover, the overall GPA of the CAS cohort has slowly risen over time, so that they are now, on average, slightly outperforming the comparison group.⁵

The Role of the PPP & YDI in Creating Partnerships

The first year of the College Access and Success program can be read as an emerging dialogue between colleges and community-based organizations. These are two distinct organizational fields, one established and one very new, that now serve the same students. How these different organizational institutions cooperate (or conflict) with each other in their efforts to meet the needs of students may be useful to future partnerships.

Diffusing Insider Knowledge Across Organizations & Occupations

The CAS structure of partnership allows for shared learning to take place on many levels. In its first year, it allowed learning to take place within role-alike occupations across different organizations. Counselors in CBOs learned about the financial aid process from college counselors. College counselors in turn learned about social service resources from CBO counselors. Tutors at colleges learned about tutoring services available at CBOs and vice versa. Administrators learned about funding opportunities and effective policies from other administrators.

This ongoing process created a systematic network of information sharing that helped to better meet the needs of out-of-school youth. Provost August hopes the partnership is a first step in developing further linkages between colleges and community-based organizations, "I would like to see established at City Tech an office of liaison for CBOs. Someone whose job it would be to interface with CBOs to connect students and expand services. City Tech could also use it as a pathway where we could also become a presence in the community."

⁵ Note: Data on credits earned not available for all cohorts.

Learning Within Organizations

Improved information sharing within organizations also occurred as the Cypress Hills and City Tech staffs recognized the need to devise innovative solutions to the complex challenges faced by out-of-school youth. For example, in the context of the Local Network, City Tech was confronted with how to assist the student who was not eligible for financial aid due to immigration status. To figure out how to help this student, the provost, the dean of Instruction, the head of the Learning Centers, the head of College Now, and the director of Counseling Services convened a meeting to see if they could assist him. During that meeting, it surfaced that City Tech actually had an internal foundation that could make funds available to individual students. This process also helped City Tech administrators realize they were unaware of resources that existed within their own organization. Thus, in the words of one administrator, the Local Network meeting became “a forum for different departments within colleges to come together to coordinate resources and missions.”

Cypress Hills also learned about the overlapping needs of its youth. The pressing need for flexible work schedules pushed staff to think about how best to integrate the dual educational and work needs of students. As a result, Cypress Hills has since reconfigured its office space so that the job development and academic services departments share the same office, making information and referrals immediately accessible.

LEARNING ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS

To design and disseminate best practices in the area of developmental education and college preparation, the PPP was a crucial forum for youth development agencies to share the lessons they’ve learned in working with out-of-school youth. It became an informal forum among CBOs to disseminate information about grants and funding streams and consider collaborative projects. Each month, new guest speakers were invited to the PPP meeting to discuss their programs and what lessons and synergies they might provide for CAS. Among the groups that presented were the POSSE Foundation, Good Shepherd Services’ College Program in the Bronx, NYC Young Adult Boroughs Center (YABC), New Visions College Bound program, and CUNY PREP. Based on experience, these organizations made recommendations to improve college preparation and access by increasing financial aid, coordinating remedial services, increasing advisement capacity, increasing job development and work study opportunities, and enhancing wrap-around and referral services. Together, they are working to put these recommendations into effect.

DEVELOPING A COMMON ADVOCACY AGENDA

The experience of the first year highlights how many of the challenges students face go beyond the formal education system. Issues like affordable housing, work schedules, financial aid policy, day care services, and transportation costs all impede students' ability to access and succeed in college. The monthly meetings of the Promising Practices Partnership became a place to begin to address the larger structural issues. Members discussed common data indicators that colleges and

CBOs should be collecting to measure their success. As Vivian Vázquez explains, "Our work cannot be successful alone and requires the cooperation and collaborative efforts of others to achieve certain goals. This collaborative work is also driving the development of our own hybrid organizational culture." As members of the PPP have reflected on the experiences of the Local Network, a common advocacy agenda has crystallized.

In order to capitalize on the lessons from the initiative, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) engaged in discussions with leadership from the City University of New York, the New York City Department of Education, and a leading advocacy group. Findings were shared through a series of meetings and two papers: *The Dream of College* and *College Access and Success* (www.ydinstitute.org). YDI is continuing to advance these discussions, and the current report will provide another means of more sharply defining the resources needed in order to assure that these young people enter and complete college.

YDI AS BROKER & FACILITATOR OF THE PARTNERSHIP

As we have seen, serving the needs of out-of-school youth requires bringing the expertise of various organizations and occupations together. This does not happen naturally. Organizations—whether colleges, social service agencies, community based organizations, or high schools—all exist within larger institutional fields. To ask them to go beyond their traditional institutional mission is to ask them to leave their comfort zones and risk potential mistakes and even failure. Moreover, to ask organizations with precarious funding streams to share their expertise and resources may result in struggles over funds, territory, or publicity with each other.

Some of the success of the partnership can be credited to good "organizational fit." Emily Van Ingen of Cypress Hills explains why she thinks the partnership has been sustained: "It has to fit with your mission. Our mission is to revitalize the community and that has to start with our young people. So obviously this program fits with that mission and we're committed to looking for money to make it work." Provost August explains the gamble colleges face in working with community-based organizations and why, in this case, she thinks it paid off "I only want to work with really good CBOs—we need talent and commitment—and well-run programs."

YDI helped bridge these organizational fields by engaging in a process of collective planning and implementation. By structuring the College Access program as a collective grant making and program development process, the members of the partnership were motivated to share resources rather than compete for them. Vivian Vázquez's background as a school starter and as assistant executive director of a community-based organization made her a credible facilitator between the different groups represented by the partnership. Her ability to help different organizations understand each other's perspectives during moments of conflict was vital to sustaining the initiative. Vázquez recounts, "In one situation, staff at one organization bypassed the normal procedures to appeal a decision that was made about a student. We made calls to smooth things

out. In another situation, after a struggle in one of our meetings, we tried to provide a larger context in which to reconcile different perspectives about students' progress. After the first semester, it was apparent that students were struggling. City Tech staff were very disappointed, while Cypress Hills staff felt much more positive that the students persisted and were planning to come back the following semester. YDI emphasized the importance of having both perspectives, focusing on a youth development approach of promoting high expectations while helping students achieve realistic goals."

Lesson Learned: In facilitating partnerships, it is helpful to have a trusted broker who can provide a neutral space for various interests to meet and compromise.

CONCLUSION

Right now, the path to and through college for disconnected youth is more of a treacherous uphill climb than a smooth road. These youth face a myriad of intertwined challenges that make access to and success in college difficult. Students face financial challenges: they need help to plan how to fund college, navigate the complex financial aid system, and stick to a disciplined budget. Students face employment challenges: they need help learning how to negotiate the competing demands of jobs, schools, and often childcare. Academically, they must catch up on years of academic content in a short amount of time. Psychologically, they often must overcome personal doubts and change engrained habits. Finally, they must learn to navigate a variety of organizational cultures and master the rules and expected behaviors of each.

Clearly, it will take the coordinated efforts of many organizations to address these interconnected challenges. The work of the Local Network and the Promising Practices Partnership in their first year represents an effort to begin that process of coordination. While the challenges remain daunting, the first year witnessed examples of effective organizational collaboration. The staff of City Tech and Cypress Hills engaged in a collaborative learning process about how they could best meet the needs of youth who are over-age and/or under-credited or have dropped out. Together, they worked together to:

- * Coordinate pre-college academic preparation programs;
- * Provide supplemental guidance on financial aid and advisement;
- * Develop a book credit program that allowed students to buy books;
- * Leverage community resources to supplement student transportation and book costs;
- * Expand and refine the college tutoring process;
- * Develop social activities for students with different schedules;
- * Begin a peer and alumni mentoring system; and,
- * Begin a citywide dialogue with other stakeholders on how to address the larger issues of housing, employment, child care, and health care that thwart students' progress.

There is reason to believe these efforts are making a difference in students' lives. Diana Martinez explains what the College Access and Success program has given her: "It has helped me to grow as a person. It has affected how I speak, how I approach people. I have really become an adult. People say I have a graceful presence." Carlos Besora remarks on the growth he's seen in his colleague Diana: "She's a mother. She started her own club. She's so into the school; she's so into College Steps. She's got a full life."