

“We’re All in It Together”: the Role of Youth Leadership in College Access

Lori Chajet

A youth-generated solution creates a college-going culture on three New York City campuses.

For six years I taught in a small public high school in New York City that held college as a goal for *all* of its students. Having taught the school’s first four graduating classes, I worked hard to prepare my students academically for college and to repeatedly send them the message that they could – and should – go to college. At the same time, I often found myself wondering how well we had prepared them to make informed post-secondary choices and if we had effectively supported them throughout the overwhelming application and financial aid process.

Brimming with questions, I moved into a PhD program where I focused my research on the post-secondary experiences of small-school graduates. Having come from a community and family where knowledge about college saturated the lives of young people, I didn’t fully realize, until I was well into my research, just how much more needed to be understood, and done, by schools who serve low-income students whose mission it is to see them go to, and succeed in, college.

As I observed the students in my study, my urgency to understand grew: What could have prevented Manny from getting so frustrated and overwhelmed by the countless questions on college applications that he opted out of the process (Chajet & Stoneman-Bell 2008)? How could Wesley and his mother have been counseled to better understand the financial aid package they accepted so they were not confronted with an unexpected bill the summer before Wesley intended to start college? How could Maria have been helped to manage the reality that she would be one of only four Latina students in her freshmen class? How could Carmen have been challenged to question her intention of being an accountant when her weakest, and least favorite, subject area was math? What could have helped Malik to better understand, and resist, the lure of for-profit colleges in the face of unexpected testing requirements and remedial coursework at his college of choice (Chajet 2003)?

For the past seven years, I have been involved in a variety of initiatives that aim to better address the high-school-to-college transition for first-generation college-bound students. Among the most powerful are the

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Student Success Centers (SSCs) in New York City, which place youth leadership at the core of college access. In 2005 a group of young people affiliated with the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC)¹ knew that they, and many of their peers, aspired to attend college but did not have the support they needed to navigate the process. They argued that a youth-driven initiative could make a significant impact on students' access to college and a school's overall college-going culture.

In an effort to figure out how to translate this idea into practice, UYC organizers visited a sister youth organizing group, the Philadelphia Student Union,² to learn about their SSCs and met with several City University of New York experts to better understand the issues of college counseling. These meetings reinforced the idea that a full-

¹ To learn more about the Urban Youth Collaborative, please see the article by Jorel Moore in this issue of *VUE* and the UYC website: <www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org>.

² To learn more about the Philadelphia Student Union, please see the article by Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith in this issue of *VUE* and the PSU website: <<http://home.phillystudentunion.org>>.

service center with a youth-leadership component would be critical to their own initiative. The idea was not just to provide integrated services, but also to make sure that young people were actively involved in identifying and addressing students' needs. With these convictions, UYC organized and founded four SSCs (see sidebars on pages 33 and page 38) with funding from both private and public sources (including the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, New York Community Trust, the New York City Department of Education, and the New York State Education Department).

SSCs are collaborations between community-based organizations and public schools, staffed by two to three adults (funded by the CBOs, with counseling, training, and administrative roles) and five to twelve high school students who guide other students through the college search, application, and financial aid process. The SSCs are located on multi-school campuses; there are currently three in New York City. The students, called youth leaders, are mostly juniors and seniors and are representative of the high schools they attend: first-generation college-bound students with a range of academic success. While some youth leaders are top students, the model intentionally seeks a range of academic success. It is often the B and C students who serve as inspiration to more-struggling students. For \$8 per hour, for approximately ten hours per week, youth leaders staff the SSC during their free periods, lunches, and after school, working one-on-one with their peer juniors and seniors, facilitating early awareness workshops with ninth- and tenth-graders, organizing college trips, and planning campus-wide events to raise awareness about college.

Where Are the Student Success Centers?

The first SSC opened in 2007 on Bushwick Campus, with Make the Road New York, serving four small schools; the second opened in 2008 on Franklin K. Lane Campus, with Future of Tomorrow/Cypress Hills Local Development

Corporation, serving four small schools and one large school that was phasing out; and the third opened in 2010 at Elmhurst Campus, with Make the Road New York, serving four small schools. An SSC also opened at Leadership Institute in the Bronx in 2009, with Northwest Bronx Community

and Clergy Coalition; elements have remained in place, but not the full model.

Make the Road New York and Future of Tomorrow are members of the Urban Youth Collaborative (see footnote 1).

Youth leaders undergo intense training in order to effectively fulfill their roles. In the summers they attend seven weeks of training, including a series of cross-site workshops facilitated by the Goddard Riverside OPTIONS Institute, an organization that trains college counselors throughout New York City. Youth leaders learn the details of the college search, application, and financial aid process and develop counseling and leadership skills. Youth leaders also meet weekly throughout the academic year for ongoing professional development and several other times for cross-site trainings.

Preliminary data, conducted as part of an internal program evaluation, suggest that the SSCs are increasing the numbers of students engaging in and completing the college process: in 2009-2010, more than 70 percent of seniors at two of the sites applied to six or more colleges (there are no data yet on the third site). It also illustrates how being a youth leader has a significant impact on the youth leaders themselves, as the experience provides them with information about the college process and the skills of advocacy and leadership critical to success throughout

college: 67 percent of youth leaders felt more comfortable speaking in front of others; 88 percent felt more comfortable representing their school; 71 percent felt more likely to participate in school activities; and 80 percent felt more comfortable talking with adults.

In the overly competitive world of college applications, where many high school students perceive themselves to be pitted *against* one another for select spots at colleges and middle- and upper-class families invest tremendous resources to ensure their children have an edge in the process (Bloom 2007; McDonough 1997; Perna & Titus 2005), the collaborative role SSC youth leaders take to help one another is rare. Furthermore, it is precisely because of the many hurdles first-generation college-bound students, in particular, face throughout the college process, that youth-led collaboration is critical to meeting students' many and varied needs.

The Context: Challenges to Realizing Aspirations

The SSCs are a response to the ever-growing gap between students' aspirations for college and their achievement. While 95 percent of high school students

want to go to college (Adelman 2002; Kinzie et al. 2004; Rosenbaum 2001), far fewer actually enroll and even fewer persist to graduation.³ This is due to a variety of intersecting realities for first-generation college-bound students: the limited knowledge and understanding students have about the college and financial aid process (Carnevale & Rose 2004; McDonough 1997, 2005; Roderick et al. 2008); the lack of structured opportunities to receive needed guidance (Knight 2003; McDonough 2004, 2005; Roderick et al. 2008); limited engagement in the college process (Roderick et al. 2008); the growing complexity of the application process (Kinzie et al. 2004); and the multiple socio-emotional hurdles encountered throughout the process (Bloom 2007).

Children from middle- and upper-class families often have their parents or private counselors playing a critical role. Parents of first-generation college-bound students encourage their children to apply to college, but they often lack the knowledge, resources, and time needed to support them through the specifics of the process (Bloom 2007; Kirst and Venezia 2004; McDonough 1997). Some school-based counselors would provide such support if they had the time, but between their large case loads⁴ and a variety of non-college related responsibilities, counselors rarely

have the capacity to do this for every student. Intensifying the situation, as Bloom (2007) points out, completing the steps required throughout the process is not just a lot of work; it is often alienating and painful for students who feel the application and financial aid forms, and thus college, are not designed for them. Questions about mortgages, investments, employment, parents' marital status, family's past college experience, can leave them perplexed, and moreover, questioning whether college is for them.

The Possibility: Students as Change Agents

Despite the many challenges, the research makes clear:

The good news... is there are ways that... teachers, counselors, and administrators can improve college access for students: ensuring that students who aspire to attain a four-year degree get the help they need to understand how to make decisions about potential colleges, making sure that students effectively participate in the college application process and apply for financial aid in time to maximize their financial support, and urging students to apply to colleges that match their qualifications. (Roderick et al. 2008)

SSCs take this research one step further by making students into change agents in the process – not just because many schools are unable to enact this vision, but also because youth are best positioned to engage other young people.

A close look at the SSCs reveals that while their existence provides needed additional support to under-resourced schools, the role of youth leadership introduces an element to

3 In 2007, 56 percent of African-American, 64 percent of Latino, 70 percent of White, and 58 percent of low-income students enrolled in college directly following high school graduation. In 2007, 12 percent of Latinos (age 25–29), 20 percent of African Americans (age 25–29), and 36 percent of Whites (age 25–29) had a bachelor's degree; 10 percent of low-income 24-year-olds had a bachelor's degree (Engle & Lynch 2009).

4 McDonough (2005) found that in large cities, the average counselor to student ratio is 1:740.

the guidance process that is effective in engaging first-generation college-bound students. While there was, and continues to be, resistance to and skepticism of youth taking on this role, those adults who see SSCs in action usually evolve in their understanding of youth power. While youth cannot replace the role of counselors, they can complement their work in critical ways. The SSCs provide an opportunity to take seriously the many ways youth leadership confronts salient issues inherent to the college process for first-generation college-bound students.

Engaging Students

One thing the youth leaders understand firsthand is that hesitancy with, or resistance to, the college process is rooted not in apathy or lack of ambition, but rather in students' limited understanding of the process and, moreover, their underlying fears. One student explained:

I thought that if you wanted to go to college, you could just go to the institution, sign up, give your name, and enroll there. I learned that there is a huge process for it, and it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of courage.

When the youth leaders were asked what they thought prevented students at their schools from applying to college, their answers coincided with the research cited in the section "The Context: Challenges to Realizing Aspirations" in this article. They most frequently highlighted students' belief that they could not afford college, the fear that they would not be accepted, and their inability to name specific colleges to go to. They also noted how emotionally overwhelming the process is. One student reflected,



I think it is the fear. There is a lot of paperwork to get done – I have not seen so many forms that need to be filled out in my life, so you get scared.

With these obstacles at the forefront of their minds, and no concrete information about the real costs of college or the entrance requirements, students too frequently avoid the process (Bloom 2007; McDonough 1997; Roderick et al. 2008). Thus, as one youth leader remarked:

[Students] know they might want to go to college, but they are not doing anything about it. ... This is the moment. Someone has to tell them with a voice that is going to hit them.

This is just what the youth leaders set out to do. Armed with information and an understanding of what is possible for students, they spread the

word in a variety of ways. One youth leader explained:

After we did a series of workshops in all of the [senior] classes in our school... a lot of them started applying to college. They started coming down to the SSC. ... Other people who heard the information we gave them... they weren't that encouraged ... because of their grades or because their parents wouldn't give them the information they needed. ... We know what is going on, we know the students, we know who to look out for and how to look... so we go in those little corners where they are hiding and get them out – where [counselors] can't see them.

The presence of other students in the SSC and the promise of help from the youth leaders is often what it takes to bring in more reticent students. One youth leader explained, “They say, ‘Are you going to be there?’ And I say, ‘Yes,’ and then they come.” She concludes, “Bottom line: we bring the students; we get them to come.”

In addition to direct outreach, youth leaders also plan events that are distinct from those adults would plan.



For example, the youth at one campus decided to have a late-fall prom; in order to attend, students had to have completed a certain number of applications. Others planned a campus-wide basketball game where teams represented the City University of New York and State University of New York colleges; at half-time the youth leaders did a college-based trivia game.

The youth leaders see their hard work paying off. Once the students come to the SSC, as one explained, “You are kind of hooked so you are going to be down there, like, every single day.” Several students commented that at the SSC, they see other students working on the same process as they are, struggling with the same questions, and hitting the same obstacles; but they also see people who can help them and evidence of their peers going to college. One student said, “If you look at the wall, you see different students... who got accepted to colleges. ... It does help.” While many high schools have a similar wall, it is seldom located in a place with sufficient hands-on help and a communal work environment. As one student commented, “We’re all in it together.”

The large student-designed space devoted exclusively to post-secondary planning also lures students to the SSC. Most days, music fills the room, punctuated by talk of college and questions about applications. The bulletin boards are covered with important information: grade-point average conversion charts, financial aid guidelines for New York State Opportunity programs, application deadlines. Spray-painted across the walls are: “COLLEGE” and “STUDENT SUCCESS.” One student commented:

I feel like they create a homey environment, and students feel comfortable because it looks like a student would create that space, and it is not crammed. . . . It is spaced out – sofas so if you need to sit and think about something, you have that.

The effect of this is powerful, explained one student:

I think the majority of the people – everyone I have known who went down to the SSC – they changed their whole mindset. They enjoy people down there. . . . It helps you see college as not so hard.

And so the word spreads: “They get us, and then we go to our friends and we bring our friends,” said another student. “And our friends will get their friends and bring them downstairs.”

Giving Personalized Attention and a Message Students Can Hear

Youth leaders are not college counselors, but like counselors, they provide other students with information about college, motivate them to complete the process, and assist them over the hurdles. They do this, however, as youth. It is this combination that often makes students open to working with the youth leaders. Unlike school-based counselors, youth leaders are entirely focused on the college process, and they speak the same language as their peers. One student explained:

The guidance counselor has other duties that she has to do. She can't strictly focus on college issues. . . . I feel like [the SSC] is devoted to only college – you get one-on-one attention.

Several referenced having a difficult time meeting with their counselors. A youth leader explained the difference:

With the guidance counselor. . . . you might have to set up a meeting. . . . she [might] tell you, come back next week. . . . It makes it hard for the seniors to keep up with everything. . . . There is always someone [at the SSC], so they always have help every time they come down.

Many of the students noted that it was not that their counselors did not want to help; it was simply that they did not have the time and space to follow through with them as thoroughly as needed. In the SSC, students feel that the attention and guidance they get is

“We know what is going on, we know the students, we know who to look out for and how to look.”

— A Youth Leader

more personalized and goes beyond just telling them what they need to do by helping them to actually do it.

The messages the youth leaders send are also distinct from those of counselors. One youth leader explained that several students he spoke to had dismissed the idea of applying to college because of their high school standing. While a guidance counselor might focus on the credits owed, he is able to send a different message:

Someone might say, “I am missing, like, five credits,” and you might say “I am missing, like, three.” You are not the only one. You can get past that and still go to college. Just because you might graduate a month later doesn't mean you can't go to college.

PERSPECTIVES:

Youth Leaders in Action: Looking Back on the Fight for Student Success Centers

Santy Zambrano was a student at the Bushwick School of Social Justice and a youth leader with Make The Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative during the campaign for Student Success Centers.

My name is Santy Zambrano, and I was a youth leader with Make The Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative when we were fighting for – and winning! – Student Success Centers. I wanted to say a little bit about why I was part of that campaign and how I see the SSC helping my old school.

In 2005, UYC had an event that brought together 800 New York City high school students. Through surveying students, UYC learned that almost all of the students said they wanted to attend college. Students also said they could not see guidance counselors when they needed to. They did not know who to turn to if they had questions about college and had trouble even getting the information about what they needed to graduate.

It wasn't as if as soon as we presented the idea to the Department of Education they said, "Yes!" We had to have lots of meetings, sometimes hold rallies, have our allies support the

idea, and really develop the concept of SSCs into full proposals.

I was there the day that the SSC in Bushwick opened, and the SSC at Lane. I have graduated now, but it is so fulfilling and inspiring to see all the students that the SSC is helping. Students at my old school are talking about college a lot now, and students are helping each other. I wish the SSC had been there when I was in high school, but I also feel great knowing that my work paid off and is making a difference in my community today.

Another youth leader explained the impact of language:

You have your guidance counselor who will explain things a certain way, but then you have us who will explain things a certain way. ... We make it easier in the terminology we understand. ... We break it down for them. We are that bridge to college.

A counselor at one of the SSC schools concurred:

Lots of times when I am explaining [things], I am not understanding why it is not connecting, but a student explains it in different terminology and the kid instantly gets it.

Youth leaders also have more consistent access to the students, in ways the adult-based staff and counselors do not. As a result, they can give continual support and reminders throughout

the school day. The reminders extend beyond class time as well. Many of the youth leaders spoke about contacting their peers on Facebook, calling them at home or on their cell phone, and tracking them down on the lunch line. One youth leader explained just how persistent she has to be:

There is a whole list of people who haven't done anything, and they say, "tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow." And tomorrow never comes. I just got one kid who came from my class, and he started from scratch – CUNY all the way to FAFSA and then TAP all in one day. I got him to do that. ... He messaged me on Facebook, and he was like, "What do I have to bring?!" and I wrote a whole list for him, and he brought it in today. I was so happy and now he is just done!

Many students noted that they were also more comfortable talking with their peers about issues related to the college process than they were talking with adult staff. One student explained:

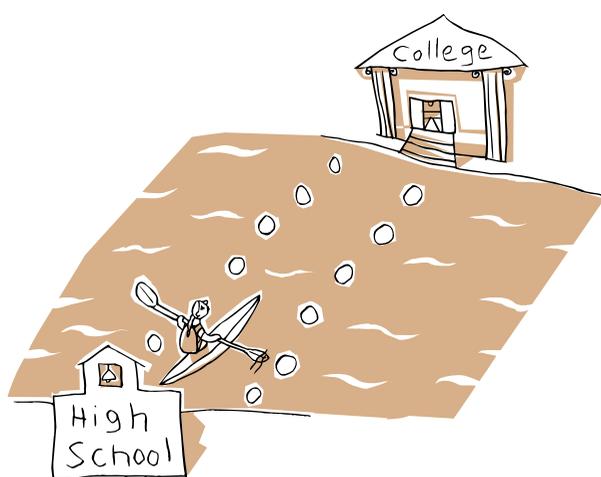
It is kind of easier to talk to your peers – if you are asking, like, a weird question. . . .if you constantly need help, you don't want to bother an adult.

When students look around their schools, they sometimes doubt that teachers and counselors understand the specifics of their lives; they often come from different backgrounds and, several students noted, from different neighborhoods. One student said that the youth leaders “relate to you more,” another that they “understand you more,” and another that “they have the same situation.” The fact that the youth leaders are a similar age to the students using the SSC, and that they know so much about the college process, is an inspiration in itself. As a result, students openly share questions, concerns, fears, and information with the youth leaders.

The End Result: Empowered Students

Having students guide others through the complexities of the college process is not an idea that many people come to intuitively. There is often skepticism about the role youth can and should play in the grounded work of schools; in the complex arena of college access, there is often resistance to investing resources in such a model. And yet, many who are ambivalent at first change their thinking once they see the effects of well-trained youth leaders. As Allison Palmer, director of the College Access Center for New Settlement Apartments, said,

When I initially heard about the SSC model, I was skeptical of the concept of high school students providing “college counseling services” to their peers. After working with the youth leaders, I now realize that with the proper support, training, and resources, these students are quite effective in guiding their peers through the college admissions process. Because of the peer-to-peer relationship, oftentimes peer counselors are able to reach students who traditional adult counselors have historically had difficulties reaching.



Youth leaders serve a need in under-resourced schools that do not have enough adults to coach students through the process the way that middle- and upper-class families often do for their own children. It might be argued that SSCs would not be needed if there were equitable funding for urban public schools. However, they contribute something further: youth-to-youth power and support. McDonough (1997) describes the importance of middle- and upper-class youth being surrounded by peers invested in the college process; the SSCs replicate a similar effect for first-generation students. The effect youth leaders have on

other first-generation college-bound students demonstrates that the youth role, in and of itself, is a critical strategy for engaging students in and providing needed support through the college process. Asked what they would change about the SSCs or what advice they had, students' most noted response was: "They should have this in every school."

The work of the SSCs illustrates that the power of youth leadership in college access cannot be ignored; it was the UYC students who developed, successfully advocated for, and provide the bulk of the staffing for SSCs in their schools. Not all college access programs and schools will have the time and resources to train youth as comprehensively as the SSCs do, nor will they have the capacity to have them work as extensively throughout the college process as the youth leaders do. However, there is a spectrum of potential involvement for youth leadership, whether it's training students to support their peers with specific parts of the college process, having them do outreach to younger students, or giving them opportunities to work with the school-based guidance counselor.

Schools and college access programs shouldn't overlook young people as a resource as they seek ways to support the post-secondary aspirations of their students. Youth organizing has proven to be highly effective in creating a way for students to help other students access college – and all of the accompanying opportunities. Support for youth organizations like UYC and its member organizations not only honors youth power – it also takes seriously the aspirations of more than 95 percent of high school students by transforming the college-going cultures of their high schools.

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