Professional Development for Staff

Any new initiative or curriculum needs to be accompanied by adult learning—professional development, in educational parlance—in order to be effectively implemented.

Staff members’ ability to effectively support first-generation college students through the process depends on their own pathway to and through college, the degree to which they share the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students they serve, and how much time has passed since they went to college (and thus how much the landscape has changed since then).

As noted at the end of the Findings: Curriculum Section, sufficient support for staff implementing college access work is critical to its success at a high school. What can we learn from the experience of our seven schools about implementation of professional development for staff?

It makes sense in a general way that any new initiative or curriculum needs to be accompanied by adult learning—professional development, in educational parlance—in order to be effectively implemented. However, doing so effectively in high schools is often very challenging because the majority of staff time is scheduled with young people, and the needs of those students spill over the edges of every working hour. It is the rare school initiative that is given sufficient professional development time before it is launched, and even rarer when an initiative is given ongoing time over the course of several years of implementation.
We recognize, then, that every school will be challenged to devote sufficient professional development time to building their college access capacity across the whole staff. At the same time, we have seen quite a few high schools assume that, because all staff members have attended college and the school has a “college prep” mission, they can skip or skimp on professional development when it comes to the particular topic of college access work. We have also seen that it is only with sufficient time and energy devoted to adult learning across the staff that this work can flourish at the highest level.

Why is it important to devote significant time to a topic that everyone on staff already has experience with, by nature of having the degree required to become a teacher?

The answer: because their ability to effectively support first-generation college students through the process depends on their own pathway to and through college, the degree to which they share the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students they serve, and how much time has passed since they went to college (and thus how much the landscape has changed since then).

> Did they go to an Ivy League for four years or start at a community college?
> Live at home or go away?
> Go to college thirty years ago or three?

Whatever their background, their experience is likely to be what they talk to students about as “college,” either formally or in the informal conversations that inevitably occur during the many hours teachers and students spend together over the course of a school year. Thus, during these formative years, students are likely to hear a range of conflicting messages from the adults with whom they spend the most time. Only by devoting sufficient time and resources to developing staff knowledge to a baseline of correct and current information about the landscape of higher education in their own local area—and about access issues for the population of students that they serve—can a school present a coherent and accurate message to students (in both formal and informal spaces) that best supports their needs.

One way to better understand this is to think about initiatives for literacy across the curriculum. At one point, teaching “literacy” skills was viewed as only the province of English teachers. However, most high schools now recognize that learning depends on reading across a wide range of subject areas, and as subject matter becomes increasingly complex across the high school years, science and math and social studies teachers also need to teach literacy skills in their classrooms. Furthermore, the more that a school coordinates these strategies across subject matter—so that students hear the same vocabulary, are given similar scaffolding, and have to meet the same expectations—the more successful they are likely to be.

How, then, to prepare such a wide range of people to successfully support a school initiative in an area with which they have some familiarity, but have not been professionally prepared to do instruction?
Whole Staff Professional Development

First, the staff as a whole needs to be brought on board as to why the school is focusing on this area. How does it fit into the larger vision and mission of the school? In our experience, in relation to college access, while most staff would agree that a college education is an important route to social mobility, there are differences in their views about the preparedness of their students for this work, the routes to higher education that might make the most sense, and the role that the school should play in specifically supporting students’ planning.

As noted above, unless schools confront and discuss these varying beliefs and move toward a set of shared understandings and cultural competencies within their staff community, teachers will continue to present very different information to students about post-secondary education based on their own experiences and implicit biases. We know that the informal mentoring teachers do with their students can play an important role for those students; it is therefore critical that information be correct and up to date. As an Assistant Principal at Centro High School noted:

“I think we do need to get better at common language as it relates to college talk and what I mean by that is teachers not necessarily making their own personal experience what they think a kid should do. I’ve heard more of that this year, kids saying, ’Well, I’m not gonna do this because the teacher said he didn’t do that.’ For example, ’I’m not gonna take a loan cause Mr. Whatever said not to.’ I’m like, ’Well, Mr. Whatever’s father paid for his college.’ It’s remembering who our kids are and that they need to have all the information to be able to make that informed choice.”

It is important, then, to engage the whole staff in conversations about the place of college access in the school’s overall work; and then to continue to message that place coherently and consistently over time. An Assistant Principal at Neighborhood High School argued:

“It’s really about prioritizing. There are a lot of priorities in the building, and it’s really about having someone who’s willing to prioritize this work. Having my voice say that for PD day, even though we have 50 million other initiatives that the city is rolling out—we have district priorities, we have Chancellor’s priorities, we have school goals, we have an instructional focus, we have 50 million things—the fact is [this is] so important that we are going to spend dedicated time for this work. And every time that there’s a PD, we’re going to spend even more time on this work. So it’s not a one and out, it’s the dedicated, sustained messaging that this work is important. And then people keep hearing it, hearing it, hearing it; they see the success and then they start to buy into it. But it’s a daily grind to get the message out and to stick with the message, even if you have any type of set back. Or if things don’t seem to be going as well as you want them to go; it’s the persistence. It’s a lot of persistence. Cause there’s a lot of competing interests at the school level.”
Another staff member at Neighborhood High School made the point that, in the face of these challenges, celebrating success is a crucial element of helping staff get on board. They described how, at a staff meeting in June, seniors and their post-secondary destinations schools were announced:

“They came up in front of the faculty and we did shouts outs of the schools they were going to and it was amazing—the staff just, you know, everyone loves a success story. So the students really sold it, and the staff really loved it.”

This does not mean that everyone on staff will come around to loving this aspect of their work; at all seven schools, staff reflected on the varying levels of engagement with college access work, even schools where it was a huge part of the advisory work. A teacher at Career High School spent much of an interview talking in detail about his senior advisory, but at the end, admitted sheepishly, “I love my advisory but I just wanna teach math, man.”

While a teacher at World High School noted:

“I feel really comfortable helping kids prepare, others do not ... it’s not about information, it might be a humanities/STEM thing, not everyone can be comfortable with college stuff, with advising, and I think it’s fair. It’s a skill. I listen to the conversations [in advisory] and different staff have different comfort levels with talking about things.”

Some of this can be due to the ways in which talking about students’ post-secondary hopes and plans bring staff into contact with issues in students’ lives that their math, science, or language teaching may not. With first-generation students from low-income families, this frequently entails complicated circumstances that staff know about in the abstract, but might not have experience talking about—issues more often confined to the realm of “counseling,” and ones that feel much bigger than what the school can tackle. An Assistant Principal at Career High School remarked:

“Some faculty members sort of just inherently gravitate or feel more inclined to be able to manage sort of the more social-emotional pieces of the role and of this process where others sort of just want the facts and the steps and support in that way .... And there are some teachers who are more comfortable sharing about themselves and their personal lives with their students than others are.”

And the Assistant Principal at Neighborhood High School concluded at the end of his interview:

“I don’t know what schools are really addressing social-emotional needs on a large scale. And most of the adults are not trained in dealing; if they had one class in graduate school, or they had to take an abuse training, they don’t have the training.

And what happens is, adults in schools like this, because of the situation the students are always in, they become almost traumatized, and then they need support. I think about what all the teachers, all the guidance counselors, what they’re trying to do, not just education-wise. Supporting students through some of the most horrific situations you can imagine, and how they process it, and what tools they have to process .... You carry around a lot of the trauma that students are going through. Because when you care, this is what happens. It’s not just listening, you end up internalizing it also.”

Some staff members are better equipped and more temperamentally suited to take on this kind of work than others.
Targeted Professional Development Based on Staff Role

These inherent differences can be addressed and mediated to some degree through:

> Decision-making about when and where curriculum is taught based on particular staff strengths, abilities, and interest in relation to the college access work.

> School-wide clarity around the 9–12 college access scope and sequence (see Findings: Curriculum Section).

> Targeted learning on the topics that staff members are responsible for teaching.

> Ongoing professional development time for teachers to discuss implementation of the curriculum with others who are teaching at the same grade level.

> Integration of peer leaders into curriculum planning and delivery.

So, for example, staff teaching 10th grade might need to gain familiarity with career exploration websites, while 11th grade staff might need to know more about local community college options and how to help students make good college lists. If 12th grade staff are familiar with financial aid (e.g., FAFSA) and financial aid packages, this will allow them to be helpful to their students, but this kind of training is probably less important for staff working with younger grades. And integrating peer leaders—with their current knowledge and experience of college—into 11th and 12th grade seminars can support staff who have less time to keep up to date with the explicit and ever-changing details of the process.
Professional development provides support and direction for those who might find college access work more challenging, as well as ongoing accountability to their peers for consistent implementation. Career High School provided multiple opportunities for targeted learning as each grade began their access work, as the math teacher noted, “Pretty much the entire staff has gone on multiple retreats to be involved with learning about this college process and coming up with a curriculum for it, for advisory to get those things happening.”

This level of professional development tended to have happened less at the schools that struggled with consistent implementation. At the High School for Leadership, one of the most involved teachers commented:

“I don’t think faculty involvement is very systemic. I think there’s a lack of preparation or knowledge, we are novices. When I speak to the nuts and bolts of the application process, I don’t have the most recent or best information, because my process was so long ago and I grew up in Iowa and I don’t know the New York system. The network of systems wasn’t comparable. I spent a lot of my adult life in California, so I learned some about that system. There are various degrees of personal knowledge based on personal pathways, some on the staff are very familiar, some really not. So we really refer to the college office. It would be nice to have a bit better base of knowledge to speak from.”

The college counselor at the same school concurred:

“I’m not sure we’ve had enough professional development for faculty in the area of college access. We haven’t really had any this year, the PD calendar is filled with instruction and curriculum. Although they are involved in the events, they wear their college gear during acceptance week, there’s not been much professional development. I guess that’s also why I don’t have a sense of how the faculty feel, because we don’t have an opportunity to speak as a group.”

This lack of targeted and sustained professional development then leads to ongoing challenges with the consistency of implementation, and with adjusting the curriculum to be coherent in an ongoing way. A second-year teacher at Centro High School talked about his experience of the curriculum there, and the impact of a lack of clear scope and sequence:

“It’s not super clear what was covered in the 9th grade and how that connects to the 10th grade, and how that connects to the 11th grade. A lot of times, it’s like alright, we’re gonna do this lesson and then you know, we’re gonna do other stuff for a couple weeks and then a CARA lesson will come back. If there was a clearer sequence and some stuff that could follow the students along, then, maybe there’d be more connection but sometimes it seems like the lessons exist in a vacuum.

[It would be helpful to have] a logical sequence of what a 9th grader should know, what a 10th grader should know, what an 11th grader should know, what a 12th grader should know, and here’s everything they’ve done over the four years, to build up to the 12th grade. So, there’s more of a sense that it’s building somewhere as opposed to like, once a week we gotta sweep the floor, like once a week we gotta do a CARA lesson.”
Rising at Their Own Speed

There’s no question that doing professional development well in an ongoing and thorough way is a tall order. Even though Neighborhood High School devoted multiple whole staff professional development sessions to college access over the course of their first several years, one of the counselors reflected that many staff still needed more training. He estimated that 85%–90% of the staff had come around to seeing post-secondary access as part of their job, but noted:

“There needs to be a little bit more training. They agree with all of this, but they may not know, because [the] college admissions process is always changing, [the] college landscape; or they may not know how to have those conversations with students. So, I think a little bit more training around that. Cause they’re always like, this is great, but how do I do this? Or, how do I talk to my students about this? What should I know about the SATs, or this or that? It’s just, they don’t know how.”

This professional development work, then, is a long-term project, where progress will often be slow and frequently uneven. As with curriculum implementation, it requires the ongoing attention of school leadership in order to be successful, and requires holding on to a long-term vision in the face of the numerous competing demands and distractions in a high school environment. The Neighborhood High School Assistant Principal talked about the long-term way he saw the work growing:

“Everyone in the building is at such different places with this. Those closest to me in this office here, are fully committed. One of the things is, we went from one or two people in the building fully committed, to probably, between the guidance counselors, the seminar teachers, the Bridge Coaches, and the college counselors to a total of about twenty people fully committed. So that capacity alone causes a spillover to other adults.

So, I think what happens is that at each level, where the person is committed, we’ve constantly built at every level, every level is rising at their own speed.”

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