

The Impact of Peers on College Preparation:  
A Review of the Literature

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## Executive Summary

This paper examines how peer relationships influence students' academic success. Beginning with a brief definition of peer groups, it turns to a more extensive discussion of a typology of peer groups and the ways in which peer groups function to influence academic success in general and college-going behavior specifically.

To help all students better achieve their academic potential, college preparation programs should capitalize on the power of peer networks by:

- Establishing cohorts of students, as research indicates that students perform the best through sustained interaction with a group of peers.
- Making program identity visible—by giving students T-shirts, backpacks, folders, etc., emblazoned with the program name and logo so they can be identified as members of a discrete peer group.
- Scheduling regular meetings over a sustained period of time so students will not only know how to prepare for college admission, but also begin to acquire an identity as college-bound.
- Focusing on academic preparation over socializing.
- Equipping students with the necessary tools for college preparation, application, and acceptance.

Most teenagers naturally seek out connections with their peers. Some of these connections are based on common interests while others are based on a desire to belong. College preparation programs can fulfill both of these roles for students; by gathering college-bound students together, they create a peer group in which students can support one another and motivate each other to succeed. College preparation programs should create environments that unite students based on a common academic identity and allow them to support one another to achieve the ultimate goal: admission to the colleges of their choice.

## Introduction

Human beings spend their lives tangled in a complex web of relationships. Young children look to their primary caretakers—often their parents—for support and validation. As children become adolescents, their reference group begins to change. Parents’ opinions often become less valued as teenagers increasingly look to their peers to provide a sense of acceptance and validation. Peer pressure becomes more salient in all aspects of teenagers’ lives, from social situations to performance in the classroom. Some students form relationships with peers that promote academic engagement. However, others join peer groups that encourage total disengagement from the school and academic practices. Clearly, members of these two types of groups will have different experiences in school leading to different academic futures. In this paper, we examine how peer relationships influence students’ academic success. We begin by offering a brief definition of peer groups before turning to a more extensive discussion of a typology of different types of peer groups. We then discuss the ways peer groups function to influence academic success in general and outline the ways in which peer groups specifically can impact college-going behavior. We conclude by providing a set of strategies that schools and college preparation programs might use to harness the power of peer groups to facilitate academic success for all.

## Definition of Peers

People are embedded in a variety of social networks. An individual is often simultaneously a member of a family, a neighborhood, a church, and an office team. However, not all social networks necessarily constitute a peer group. A peer group consists of those who are of roughly equal status. For teenagers, a peer group is composed of individuals who are approximately the same age. Like their adult counterparts, teenagers can be immersed in a

variety of peer networks, looking to friends, classmates, and teammates for support in different social situations (McNeal, 1995). Alexander Astin (1993) defines peers as a “collection of individuals with whom the individual identifies and affiliates and from whom the individual seeks acceptance or approval” (p. 400). Two elements are particularly salient in Astin’s definition: connection and acceptance.

First, peers are a group of people with whom an individual spends time and feels a sense of connection. Margaret Gibson, Patricia Gandara, and Jill Peterson Koyama (2004) underscore this aspect of Astin’s definition by arguing that peers and peer groups are “situated through shared participation in particular types of behaviors and activities” (p. 4). Not all students necessarily feel a sense of connection with other students in their school. Only when students are united by a shared identity or by participation in common activities do they form a peer group.

Second, a peer group is one from whom an individual seeks acceptance or approval. According to Abraham Maslow’s (2005) hierarchy of needs, seeking acceptance from others is among the most important needs for survival and happiness. Maslow hypothesized that individuals seek to fulfill increasingly complex sets of needs. Once an individual has fulfilled the basic physiological needs (such as shelter and food) and obtained personal safety, the next task is to secure love or acceptance. For teenagers, this often takes the form of seeking acceptance from peers. As William Tierney and Julia Colyar (2005) argue, identifying with and seeking acceptance from a peer group often go hand in hand. “Affiliation and acceptance are exclusively interrelated—each generates the other” (p. 51). Simply because students are members of their school’s student body does not necessarily mean that they identify with the

school or that they belong to any peer group. Being a member of a peer group necessitates that a student feel a sense of identification with his or her peers.

Though others (Astin, 1993; Gibson, Peterson, Koyama, 2004) offer many definitions of peers, *we define a peer group as any set of same-age peers linked by a common interest or identity with whom individuals engage in sustained interaction. Sustained interaction suggests that individuals interact with the same set of peers on a regular basis over a significant amount of time. To ensure this sustained interaction, individuals must be invested in their peer groups and feel a sense of accountability to other members.* Peer groups can refer to a student's set of close friends, a student's classmates, or a student's teammates. Students can be part of or influenced by multiple peer groups at the same time. As such, students might simultaneously feel pushed to achieve through a group of peers in a class, but receive clues from their close friends that academic achievement is not valued. Students' success is also shaped by their position within peer groups and various social networks. For example, some students belong to peer groups that have access to fewer resources—both financial resources and knowledge resources—for the college-going process. We turn to a consideration of the ways in which peer group structure can influence academic achievement.

#### Social Capital: Capitalizing on Peer Networks

Why do some students attend top tier universities while others fail to graduate from high school? The answer depends upon multiple factors. Although academic achievement and the quality of a school certainly play a key role in student success, proponents of social capital also argue that an individual's acquaintances (or social connections) help determine the pathways available to them. There are two different schools of thought among those who work on social capital: some subscribe to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) while others subscribe to the

definition of social capital set forth by James Coleman (1990). Each definition has a slightly different emphasis, often leading researchers who employ the theory to focus on different elements depending on whose theory they invoke. However, when considered together, elements of each theory help explain the potential impact that peer groups can have on the college-going patterns of their classmates and friends.

Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1990) agree that social capital can be understood as a network of relationships designed to help members accomplish certain goals. Whereas Coleman focuses on the positive nature of social capital, viewing its accompanying norms and sanctions as a positive form of social control, Bourdieu argues that social capital operates continually to reproduce hierarchies that privilege one group while discriminating against another. According to Bourdieu, social networks are designed to keep non-members out of an exclusive “club.” Although networks of relationships can be beneficial for those invited to participate in them, they work against those who find themselves excluded from them. While Bourdieu focuses on those who are excluded from networks, Coleman’s theory of social capital focuses on the benefits that accrue to members. Coleman argues that social capital lies not in individuals, but in links between individuals, or “the potential for information that inheres in social relations” (Coleman, 1990, p. 310). In other words, being involved in various social networks helps members acquire information that can help them accomplish specific goals.

Paul Adler and Seok-Woo Kwon (2002) further clarify the difference between the two perspectives on social capital. They term Bourdieu’s definition of social capital a bridging view, in which individuals use their relationships with people in other social networks to achieve goals. In contrast, Adler and Kwon describe Coleman’s social capital as coming from a bonding view, in which individuals focus on achieving group members’ goals. Both perspectives can help

explain the impact of peers on college going. Theorists who employ the bridging perspective often emphasize the importance of establishing a variety of networks to acquire resources, such as the multiple sources students can use to acquire information on the college application process. Those who employ the bonding perspective emphasize the importance of fostering an academic identity among students in a school. By transmitting the expectation that all students will go to college, schools can create a culture on their campus in which students work together to achieve a common goal (admission to college). We now discuss the ways each of these perspectives functions with respect to peer groups.

#### *Peer Networks Facilitate Access to Academic Resources*

The most popular students in high school are often those who know people in multiple cliques; from a bridging perspective, these students have a variety of social networks upon which to draw. According to Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2001), “individuals [are] deeply embedded in social webs that, in turn, are interwoven within other webs, with these webs further interwoven within ever larger webs or networks” (p. 16). However, research indicates that the nature of individuals’ social networks (and their access to networks) is often shaped by their social class. For example, individuals from middle-class homes have access to cosmopolitan networks, or networks that grant access to a wide variety of resources that can help facilitate academic, career, and social growth. “Middle- to upper-class networks tend to provide adolescents with social capital: relationships that provide access to resources, privileges, and power and exposure to larger, higher status, more heterogeneous groups of people” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005, p. 413). Middle-class high school students can often rely on their parents’ social networks to help facilitate connections and to aid them in the college-going process. In contrast, working-class peers draw upon more limited networks that are more homogenous, have access to fewer

resources, and are restricted to a smaller geographic area. Students from working-class families are often the first in their families to go to college and cannot expect to profit from the larger social networks available to their middle-class peers.

Although they may be excluded from many cosmopolitan adult social networks, working-class peers are capable of entering into beneficial social networks with their school peers. Stanton-Salazar (2004) argues that peer networks have the potential to serve as either mediating or moderating influences. Peer networks can act as a moderating influence by inhibiting the pro-academic resources being generated through involvement in multiple networks. In other words, peer groups can discourage members' academic success. However, peer networks can serve as a mediating influence in two ways. First, they can facilitate access to institutional agents to help students become embedded in multiple social networks. Students form connections with teachers who, in turn, pass on important information about the college-going process. In addition, although working-class students may not specifically have the social capital to understand the college application process, they can benefit from forming relationships with their middle-class peers, who presumably have inherited such knowledge from their parents (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). However, studies indicate that working-class students do not always profit from partnerships with middle-class students (Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch found that students of lower socioeconomic status have a difficult time incorporating higher SES friends. By not forming close friendships with students from different social classes, working-class students are therefore less likely to profit from social capital networks unless such networks are intentionally created by the school.

*Peer Networks Promote an Ideology of Academic Achievement*



Peer networks can also serve as a mediating influence by promoting an ideology of academic achievement among students. This role embodies the second perspective of social capital (bonding) in which individual members focus on achieving a common goal. By intentionally creating groups of students, schools and college preparation programs can foster an academic identity that encourages all students to attend college. Some schools and programs have started to do this by relying on the notion of fictive kin. Coming out of anthropology, fictive kinship refers to close relationships between those not related by blood but linked by a common economic or social goal (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). In the case of high school students, a network of fictive kin can be composed of those who have plans to apply to college. Fictive kin networks are especially useful for those who come from families who have little knowledge about the college-going process. Students can enter into communities in which they not only have access to information and resources, but they are also granted an identity that presumes that college is in their future. In addition to serving as a source of support and identity, fictive kin networks also act as a source of social control. “Because fictive kin networks bind people to one another emotionally and socially, they serve as a mechanism to...enhance community solidarity” (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000, p. 201). Fictive kin networks create expectations for members. If properly structured, schools can use the concept of fictive kin to create peer networks in which engaging in academics and going to college are the norm. Many peer groups create a common identity for members, though some facilitate more academic success than others. We now turn to a discussion of the various peer groups found on a high school campus.

### Typology of Peers

An observer spending time on a high school campus will witness peer groups in action. However, the types of peer groups an observer might see in a classroom will be different than those observed in the cafeteria during lunch. While teachers and administrators play a role in shaping the composition of peer groups in the classroom and extracurricular activities, other peer groups—most notably friendship groups—are organized and maintained by students themselves. In other words, teachers and administrators can influence with whom students associate in the classroom and in school-sponsored activities; outside the classroom, however, students are entirely responsible for finding and maintaining their own friendship groups. Although students may rely on different peer groups for different sets of needs, not all peer groups are equally effective in helping students get into college. Rather, as we will discuss, those peer groups that are organized around a common academic identity have a greater effect on academic achievement.

Peer groups typologies can be delineated on two different sets of axes. Peer groups can be located either within the school or outside of the school and can be either formal or informal. Formal peer groups are those that have been organized by the school or by adults while informal peer groups are those that have been created and maintained by peers themselves. Examples of peer groups that fall on each of these axes are listed in Table 1. Since formal peer groups within the school are the focus of this paper, Table 2 focuses on the peer groups in this quadrant. In Table 2, peer groups are delineated by goal (college preparation or interest development) and by the area in which they occur (in class or out of class). We define in-class activities as those in which the *majority of instruction and participation occurs within the classroom*. Out-of-class programs may have an in-class instructional component, but require additional outside student involvement. As with any typology, the following is an ideal type; the typology is neither

exhaustive nor do student groups fit neatly into just one category. Students may claim membership in a variety of different social networks. The two tables included here provide just a sampling of possible groups. Following the tables, which provide examples of groups that fall within each quadrant, we offer a brief description of different kinds of peer groups found on and off school grounds.

Table 1

*A Typology of Peer Groups*

	In School	Out of School
Formal	Please see table below	Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts Religious youth groups Community sports 4-H Boys' and Girls' Clubs
Informal	Friendship groups	Gangs Role playing gamers Skateboarders Video gamers Informal garage band Study groups

Table 2

*Formal, In-School Activities*

Goal	In class	Out of class
College Preparation	AP Honors AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)	MESA (Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement) Puente I Have A Dream Foundation EAOP (Early Academic Outreach Program) The Posse Foundation TRIO GEAR UP
Developing Interests	Drama Band Yearbook Student newspaper	Athletics Hobby clubs (Chess, Language, etc) Student government Academic Decathlon

### *Formal, In-School Peer Groups*

We begin our discussion of peer groups by focusing on the groups created through formal in-school activities as detailed in the second table. Although there are a variety of these peer groups, their foci vary dramatically. Some peer groups are specifically concerned with helping students prepare for college. However, the majority of peer groups focus on different types of goals, such as helping students to become better athletes or training budding journalists. As such, we have further divided these groups into the four quadrants. Classroom peer groups with a focus on college preparation might include students enrolled in honors courses, AP courses, or AVID courses. Every classroom does not automatically constitute a peer group. Simply spending fifty minutes a day with other students learning about history, math, or science does not necessarily lead to any common bonds between students. In-class peer groups are formed only when students share a common academic identity and a concern for one another's well-being.

Sharing a common academic identity does not need to be conflated with being grouped with students of the same ability level. Although Thomas Hebert and Sally Reis (1999) found that high-achieving students enrolled in honors courses with their peers accrued a variety of benefits, there is no indication that their academic ability was the sole cause of these benefits. Rather, students profited from a structured program with frequent peer interaction and support from caring adults. Hugh Mehan, Irene Villanueva, Lea Hubbard, and Angela Lintz (1996) found similar benefits for students enrolled in AVID, a college preparation program that helps prepare academically average students for college eligibility. Much like the high-achieving students in the previous study, AVID students benefited by sharing a common academic identity with their peers.

Although many students acquire an academic identity through classroom-created peer groups, still others gain that identity through out-of-class in-school peer groups in college preparation programs. Students in programs such as Puente and MESA participate in programs in which they work with peers, often of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, to prepare for college while focusing on an area of interest to them. For example, Patricia Gandara (2002) details the success of Puente programs in preparing Latino students of all ability levels for college. Puente creates an environment in which peers serve as a source of support for each other. Thus, the key to creating a community of college-going peers may have less to do with the similarity of student ability than with the structures in place that encourage students to develop bonds with their peers.

While some peer groups may focus on college preparation, many students become involved in a variety of other activities that focus on promoting student growth in other areas, both inside and outside the classroom. In 2001, 39% of all high school seniors participated in athletics; 25% of seniors participated in the performing arts; 15% participated in academic clubs; and 10% participated in student government (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). While students have the opportunity to become involved in a variety of activities, athletics is by far the most popular choice. However, participating in athletics does not necessarily lead students to college. Although student athletes may adopt a particular identity in the school, it is not one that always promotes academic achievement. Schools that want to help students successfully navigate high school and go to college should focus their efforts on creating peer groups in classrooms based on a college-going academic identity.

*Formal, Out-of-School Peer Groups*

Although many students participate in school-affiliated extracurricular activities, still others are involved with structured groups outside of school, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. In the United States, more than three million boys and nearly three million girls participate in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, respectively (Boy Scouts of America, 2005; Girl Scouts of the USA, 2005). Each group is guided by a mission of preparing members to develop good character and assume leadership responsibilities. Many junior high and high school students are also actively involved with religious groups. According to the 1992 National Education Longitudinal Study, 45% of all high school seniors participate in religious youth groups more than once a month; of these, over 20% participate in youth group activities at least once a week (NCES, 2004). Although none of these groups are academic in nature, each bestows upon participants a specific identity—be it Eagle Scout or Mormon—that they share with other group members.

#### *Informal, In-School Peer Groups*

Although schools can facilitate the formation of structured and supportive peer groups, many adolescents will naturally seek to form such peer groups on their own. Some peer groups, like gangs, form outside the school and rarely provide any benefit to their members with regard to increasing the likelihood they will go to college. Other groups, such as friendship groups, may develop through interaction on school grounds. Students can be embedded in many different types of friendship groups. In a study of adolescent friendships at three schools, Kathryn Urberg and colleagues (1995) found that students can be classified in one of three ways: as belonging to specific cliques, belonging to loose groups (or groups of peers that are loosely connected), or not connected to peer groups at the school. Groups can either be single or mixed gender. The size of friendship groups can range from just two individuals to groups of greater

than ten. In a study of Latino students in Southern California, Ricardo Stanton-Salazar and Stephanie Urso Spina (2005) found that most students cited between five and six other students as sources of support and members of a peer network. However, not all of the individuals cited necessarily belonged to the same friendship group. Such a finding underscores the fact that students are often embedded in multiple friendship groups, drawing support from and taking social cues from a variety of networks. As we will discuss later, the composition of friendship groups can have an impact on students' educational aspirations. Those who form friendships with others who value educational achievement will typically also seek to excel.

#### *Informal, Out-of-School Peer Groups*

Many teenagers look to their friends for social and emotional support. Though some rely on friends within school, others are involved in a variety of peer groups outside of school. Examples of such peer groups include skateboarders, youth who play together in a band, and students in a study group. Such groups provide a place for students to come together and focus on an issue of interest without, necessarily, leading to any negative academic sanctions. One exception is students who seek support and affiliation by joining a gang. As James Vigil (2004) describes, gangs generally require their members to adopt an oppositional identity, or one that is outwardly resistant to school practices. In a comparison of African American male gang members and non-gang members, Carl Taylor and colleagues (2003) found that gang members were less likely to complete their homework assignments than their peers. Many gang members cited socializing with friends as the primary reason for coming to school while non-gang members reported that they attended school to get a better job or to go to college. Although gang members may have an interest in or aptitude for school subjects, their gang affiliation calls upon them to feign disinterest around their classmates. Due to this intense peer pressure, gang

members often do not graduate from high school and experience little academic success.

Though some might imagine that members of gangs have little in common with those involved in academic peer groups, each type of peer group fulfills the same four functions, albeit in different ways.

### How Peer Groups Function

The impact of peer groups depends on the way in which they fulfill the following four functions: 1) the amount of time members spend together, 2) the purpose or focus of the peer group, 3) the way in which they provide an identity for group members, and 4) the strength of the network. We discuss each function in greater detail.

#### *Time Members Spend Together*

The time students spend engaged in an activity benefits them at individual and group levels. At an individual level, students accrue benefits through spending extra time on a particular activity. A student who practices, for example, with the school band five days a week is likely to be a better flute player than a student who does not practice often. Similarly, a ninth grader who begins learning about the steps necessary to prepare for college admission will be more prepared to apply to college than a student who first hears about admissions requirements as a twelfth grader. However, individual gains can also turn into group gains. Groups form because members spend time together. Peers become friends because of repeated contact. Athletes become members of a team by attending practice several times a week. Beckett Broh (2002) found that a student who participates in intramural athletics does not accrue the same gains as a varsity athlete. We hypothesize that some of this difference in outcomes can be attributed to the time spent on task. Varsity athletes practice together several hours every day of the week. In contrast, those who play intramural athletics rarely practice, often only coming



together to play games. Those involved in interscholastic athletics benefit from repeated interaction with the same set of teammates while those involved in intramural sports may be a part of many different teams and not form the same type of deep relationships.

The importance of sustained interaction holds true for other types of peer groups as well. Research indicates that college preparation programs that provide sustained support for peers will ultimately be more beneficial to students than programs that schedule events on an intermittent or irregular basis (Hayward, Brandes, Kirst, & Mazzeo, 1997; Oesterreich, 2000). The focus should not only be on regular interaction, but on sustained interaction over a significant period of time. For example, students in Puente programs spend two years enrolled in an English course with an explicit focus on Mexican-American literature and the Latino experience. By coming together as a group each day, students acquire the identity of being “Puente students.” If Puente did not bring students together on a regular basis, students would be less likely to affiliate with the program and may not only lose interest in the group, but also not experience the benefits associated with participation.

#### *Purpose or Focus of the Peer Group*

Many peer groups have different purposes. For example, friendship groups generally serve to provide a sense of belonging along with social and emotional support to members (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Depending on the composition of students in the group, some friendship groups may also promote academic achievement among members. However, such a purpose is generally implicit and not the primary goal of the group. As a result of being marginalized in their schools, some peer groups promote the development of an oppositional identity, which encourages group members to resist schooling practices (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gandara, O’Hara, & Gutierrez, 2004; Ogbu, 1991; Vigil, 2004). Early research

hypothesized that students of color develop an oppositional identity in an effort to avoid “acting White,” or adopting behaviors associated with White Americans, such as academic achievement. More recent research (Carter, 2005) suggests that students of color do not develop oppositional identities out of resistance to schooling practices, but rather out of forced adoption of White identities and practices.

The most successful students are those who learn to tap into multiple social and academic networks while still maintaining an intact racial or cultural identity (Carter, 2005; Gibson, 1997; Mehan, et al., 1996). Well-structured academic programs can help students achieve while simultaneously providing a sense of belonging. The explicit purpose of such programs is to prepare students for college while the implicit purpose is to provide a sense of belonging and to teach students that an academic future is within their reach. As described earlier, Latino students participating in Puente spend two years in a course studying Latino literature. The program’s focus specifically capitalizes on students’ cultural heritage while preparing them for college admission. While college preparation programs should focus on academic achievement, they should not ignore students’ identities, but capitalize on them whenever possible.

#### *Identity Definition for Members*

Belonging to a peer group gives a specific identity to group members. Some peer groups are defined by particular identity characteristics—all members are girls or all members are African American. Others are defined by the activity in which students participate—all are football players or all play in the band. Returning to the cafeteria at lunchtime, an observer might see students clustered based on extracurricular activities, academic identity, or racial or ethnic identity. Students in college-prep courses might sit at one table while student-athletes and their groupies occupy tables across the room. Still other tables might contain students in band or

those in drama. As Penelope Eckert (1989) discusses, members of these groups distinguish themselves from other groups through a variety of ways, including specific dress and use of language. For example, student-athletes often wear their jerseys to school on game days, marking themselves as members of a team. Students not affiliated with any particular activity mark themselves through their clothing: “Goth” students are so defined by their preference for black clothing; “hicks” often wear cowboy boots and hats; and “preppy” students are easily identified by their Abercrombie & Fitch clothes. In her study of two social groups at one high school campus—Jocks and Burnouts—Eckert found that the way members used language differed dramatically. While Eckert discusses differences in preferred greetings and the grammatical structure of sentences, other language differences also mark different peer groups, particularly for those for whom English is not a first language. Some peer groups prefer speaking in their native languages, which, while providing a common sense of connection among members, sometimes alienates them from other members of the student body.

However, language differences are not the only reason students affiliate with those of similar racial or ethnic background. Students often seek out peers who look like them, knowing that students from the same racial or ethnic background face many of the same barriers in their lives. Gandara (2004) argues that peer groups are often primarily defined by ethnicity and only later by other attributes. In other words, the Goth, hick, and preppy peer groups discussed above are almost entirely composed of White students. Students of color tend to congregate in other groups. For example, in her study of White and Mexican American girls in a central California high school, Julie Bettie (2003) found that students formed separate friendship groups, primarily based on racial background but also due to the way they were tracked academically. For example, the majority of students in the college-prep track at this school were White. The

Mexican American students in these courses tended to associate with other Mexican Americans of differing abilities. In this environment, racial and ethnic identity was a more salient and unifying identity characteristic than academic experience. Racial segregation often translates into class segregation. Bettie further describes the fact that White students did not associate across class lines while Mexican American students were more likely to associate across class, confirming Gandara's claim that racial identity may supersede other identity variables.

### *Strength of the Peer Network*

Members of successful peer groups feel a sense of connection to one another. Part of this stems from the fact that they spend a large amount of time with each other. Part of it is also due to the fact that all are focused on achieving the same goals, whether that is enjoying time with friends or obtaining admission to college. However, groups are more likely to achieve their goals when they have a stronger, or more closely knit, network of peers. The earlier discussion of social capital makes this point readily apparent. Students who are members of a tight network of peers have access to more resources than those who are only loosely affiliated with other students. Students who are tightly connected will feel a sense of obligation to succeed and to help other members of the group succeed as well. Hebert and Reis (1999) discuss one network of students who credited their peers for keeping them from failing in school. "For these students, achievement could be thought of as walking up a crowded staircase. If some students started to underachieve and tried to turn and walk down the staircase, their peers pushed them back up" (p. 442). Students help each other to stay connected to the group and stay focused on achieving group goals.

### College Preparation and Peer Groups

We have discussed the ways in which most students become affiliated with one or multiple peer groups and the features that are common to all peer groups. We now turn to a consideration of the role that peer groups play in college preparation programs. Just as peers play a critical role in providing academic and emotional support within the school, they also play an important role in helping students succeed in college preparation programs. In an extensive review, Patricia Gandara and Deborah Bial (2001) found that effective college preparation programs all focus on both creating a supportive peer culture and establishing an academic identity for participants. We discuss, then, the ways in which programs can create an academic identity and the benefits that students derive as a result of participation in college-oriented programs.

#### *Establishing an Academic Identity*

Why do students flock to college preparation programs? While many students join to receive support and guidance in the preparation and application process, some also are motivated to join to be surrounded by students who have similar interests and goals for the future. Just as some students identify as jocks, other students identify as college-bound. In their study of Latino peer groups in college preparation programs, Kristan Venegas and William Tierney (2005) found that participants joined a program with the expectation that they would be interacting with other involved students. In fact, many sought out the college preparation program to specifically affiliate with those who were more interested in school and had plans for college, unlike many other students in the school. For students who come from schools where rates of college attendance tend to be low, the presence of a college preparation program can provide a needed haven and a sense of identity for academically oriented students.

However, students do not necessarily need to identify as college-bound before joining a college preparation program. Several studies indicate that programs have successfully changed the structure of students' peer groups, helping students to move from affiliating with non-academically motivated students to those with higher academic aspirations. For example, Mehan, et al. (1996) found that AVID students formed new academically oriented peer groups after sustained participation in the college preparation program. In a comparison of Puente students with non-Puente students, Gandara (2002) found that Puente students were more likely to want to be known as academically oriented students. She asked students to identify whether they would most like to be known as a good student, a cool student, a nice person, or a popular student, and 43% of Puente participants indicated that they would most like to be known as good students. In contrast, only 33% of non-Puente Latino and 27% of non-Puente White students indicated a similar preference. Since Puente identifies students of all ability levels, one can reasonably conclude that participation in the program pushed students to embrace an academic identity.

Through participation in college preparation programs, students acquire a special identity within the school as being college bound. Often, this identity is marked through physical symbols, both implemented by the program itself and adopted by the students. For example, students in one AVID program attended a designated (and conspicuously labeled) classroom (Mehan, et al., 1996). Other school-affiliated programs are publicized through banners and other advertising throughout the school. However, students also play a key role in promoting the program. Venegas and Tierney (2005) detail the ways in which program participants actively promoted their college-bound identity. "Students often wore college prep program names on T-shirts, headbands, wristbands, and backpacks. They used college prep programs' pens and

folders and used ink to trace the program logo and name onto shoes, jeans, arms, and legs” (p. 15). While students carried around official program materials, their participation in the program was so important to their identities that they found ways to display their involvement in any way that they could.

How do programs successfully create a college-going culture? Karen McClafferty, Patricia McDonough, and Anne-Marie Nunez (2002) and Gandara and Bial (2001) identify specific elements that schools and effective college preparation programs have used to establish a college-going culture. Gandara and Bial (2001) highlight the use of mentors, the provision of high-quality instruction and special programs, the availability of financial assistance, and incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds into the program as key features of college preparation programs. Others (Mehan, et al., 1996; Oakes, 2001) have underlined the importance of not forcing students to compromise their racial and cultural identity in order to achieve in school. As reviewed earlier, Puente capitalizes on students’ racial and cultural backgrounds through the program design. AVID encourages students to develop critically reflective skills without erasing their cultural identity. These successful programs do not force peers to relinquish their identities in order to excel.

However, successful programs recognize that students need to be given the knowledge to navigate the college preparation process. Many working-class students are the first in their families to apply to college and, unlike their middle-class peers, cannot rely on their parents’ social capital and knowledge of what it takes to get into college. McClafferty, McDonough, and Nunez (2002) identify nine principles that schools should follow to create an environment in which going to college is the norm. Several of these principles emphasize the importance of communicating with both students and their parents not only the expectation that they will attend

college, but also the necessary steps that they must take to become college-ready. College preparation programs should focus on equipping participants with the knowledge and the social connections necessary to excel in high school and be admitted to college.

### *Becoming a Member of a Group*

Though students may join college preparation programs to affiliate with other motivated students, they do not automatically feel a sense of connection with other members. While a shared identity provides a helpful starting point, only through repeated and sustained interaction will students begin to feel a sense of obligation with one another. Programs like Puente and AVID accomplish this through regularly scheduled class meetings. The I Have a Dream Foundation accomplishes this through regular involvement over the course of a student's entire K-16 career. Such sustained involvement has the potential of creating change. Sustained programmatic interventions lead to changes in participants' behavior. Many students in college preparation programs indicate that they socialize with other participants. Gandara (2002) found that Puente students were more likely to socialize with school friends than out-of-school friends, compared with non-Puente students. She also found that 77% of Puente students said that they socialized with other Puente students. Socializing with school peers is important since non-school peers may be those less committed to academics. However, socializing with other program participants allows students to support each other and reinforce the norms of the program. College preparation programs provide an opportunity for students to interact with their peers. Venegas and Tierney (2005) found that some participants rarely interacted with students in their school outside of official program activities. Some programs provide students with a much needed opportunity for peer interaction and support. College preparation programs can provide a sense of identity and a strong peer network for participants.



## Implications for Practice

To help all students better achieve their potential, college preparation programs should capitalize on the power of peer networks. We offer five suggestions for practice.

### *Establish Cohorts of Students*

Research indicates that students perform the best due to sustained interaction with a group of peers. This sustained interaction occurs throughout the school day as well as through frequent participation in program activities. College preparation programs that draw participants from multiple schools will not be as effective as programs that draw participants from just a few schools. By clustering students at two to three schools, programs will create opportunities for students to interact throughout the day and begin to develop their own peer group identity.

### *Make Program Identity Visible*

Students often mark their group membership through visible symbols, such as choice of dress. College preparation program participants need to be identified as members of a discrete peer group. This can be accomplished by giving students T-shirts, backpacks, folders, notebooks, or pens emblazoned with the program name and logo. Most students are proud to be participating in a college preparation program and want to display their membership to the rest of the school. Such overt symbols also serve as a source of advertising for future generations.

### *Schedule Regular Meetings over a Sustained Period of Time*

The most successful programs are those that regularly work with students over a long period of time. Part of this is due to the fact that students need to know in junior high school which courses to take to prepare for college admission. But, it also stems from the fact that students need to begin to acquire an identity as college-bound. To help students identify with the college preparation program, they should be brought together on a regular basis. Meetings can occur

before school, during school, after school, or on weekends. Although the time of day is not critical, the frequency with which students interact is.

#### *Focus on Academic Preparation over Socializing*

While the first three suggestions are structural, the remaining two suggestions focus on the content of successful college preparation programs. It is not enough to create cohorts of academically interested students. College preparation programs must also intentionally focus on academics, not simply on bringing students together to socialize. Such components might include additional tutoring after school or additional academic units that capitalize on students' backgrounds or interests. For example, students from the South might be interested in the struggle for civil rights that gripped the United States in the 1960s. The key lies in finding the type of academic intervention that works best for particular groups of students or programs.

#### *Focus on College Preparation*

For college preparation programs, focusing on academic intervention is not enough. Rather, such programs must equip students with the necessary tools to prepare for and apply to college. In addition to providing additional academic instruction, college preparation programs also need to inform students of the requirements for college admission. Such a step should occur no later than the ninth grade so that students can prepare an appropriate high school course plan to meet all admission prerequisites. Programs might familiarize students with local universities, by bringing students to tour campuses and through establishing mentoring relationships with local university students, preferably alumni of the preparation programs. The more students are prepared, the more likely they will be to apply and be accepted to colleges and universities.

The above interventions are intended to help students prepare for college as a group. As such, programs should capitalize on the importance that students give to the opinions of their

peers as well as the ways in which peer-to-peer interactions can positively affect students' academic outcomes. Most teenagers naturally seek out connections with their peers. Some of these connections are based on common interests while others are based on a desire to belong. College preparation programs can fulfill both of these roles for students; by gathering college-bound students together, they create a peer group in which students can support one another and motivate each other to succeed.

Students' other obligations do not cease to exist once they enter college preparation programs. Many students remain close with their preexisting friends and continue their involvement with other student organizations at school. College preparation programs should neither force nor expect participants to relinquish ties to other social networks. As we noted at the outset, students can hold membership in multiple groups at the same time. A teenager is simultaneously an athlete, a musician, an actor, and a college-bound student. College preparation programs should create environments that unite students based on a common academic identity and allow them to support one another to achieve the ultimate goal: admission to the colleges of their choice.

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Over the last decade we have received funding from the Ford Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, Atlantic Philanthropies, the James Irvine Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Haynes Foundation.

This research is supported by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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