

A Longitudinal Study of Big Picture School Graduates

Prospectus

Context

In this era of heightened NCLB-style accountability, high schools collect more student performance data than ever before. In addition to NCLB testing requirements, teachers and administrators are concerned with measures of student retention, college readiness, and graduation. Most of their data collection, however, stops at graduation. Out of sight, out of mind, you might say.

What becomes of Big Picture Learning (BPL) graduates in their transition from high school to college and from college to adult life? Is there a connection between the Big Picture experience and postsecondary success? Do the hallmarks of a Big Picture education—self-knowledge, motivation, passionate learning, and resourcefulness—endure into adulthood? In short, is Big Picture really making a difference in the lives of its students, especially when it comes to underserved urban students, the vast majority of our student body—many of whom are the first in their families to attend college?

The Big Picture school design is unconventional, and we define success as a wider array of quantitative and qualitative information beyond typical NCLB, state, or district requirements. For this reason, Big Picture is using a longitudinal study in order to document student outcomes, understand the conditions for successful transitions to college and careers, inform school improvement, and support the continued personal and professional development of alumni.

The Work We Propose To Do

Big Picture has designed a longitudinal study that tracks the lives of students from high school until age 30 in order to document their outcomes, understand the conditions for successful transitions to college and careers, inform school improvement, and support the continued personal and professional development of alumni. Big Picture has developed and begun using a relational Alumni Manager database that connects key data about students during their high school years to post-high school information entered by both school staff and alumni themselves. The Alumni Manager integrates information about students over time, enables high school staff to capture alumni contacts, and keeps track of the whereabouts of graduates.

Big Picture wishes to refine the data system and support its implementation in all 60 BPL schools as well as in the more than 250 schools in the Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI) network. The system can easily accommodate different school designs. Big Picture will provide training and support to the schools in collecting data, preparing reports, and using them to guide program improvement and to communicate their outcomes and impact to educators, policy makers, and the communities they serve.

The longitudinal assessment is a companion to Big Picture's Postsecondary Transition Program, which not only helps students get ready for college, but also provides a support network for them

as they enter and proceed through the difficult college freshman and sophomore years. The Transition Program also supports students who wish to enter the workforce directly after high school by helping them identify learning opportunities they can pursue while working.

The study supports the Big Picture Company's mission of reducing social inequality through a fundamental redesign of education that provides opportunities for social mobility and self-realization for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. To this end, the study aims to influence secondary and postsecondary policy and practice by demonstrating how the Big Picture's innovative design of personalized, relevant schools impacts student outcomes on a broad spectrum of adult personal, vocational, and relationship measures.

The next challenges for the longitudinal study include finding effective ways to reach older alumni, analyzing the links between pre-college experience and college outcomes, and attending equally to the lives of alumni who have not pursued higher education. The longitudinal system infrastructure is nearly complete. Resources are required to provide training and technical assistance to school staff in collecting data. Additionally, more work is needed on refining the data collection instruments and in procuring valid and reliable information about students after they have graduated from our schools.

Goals and Objectives

The goals of this initiative are to enable ongoing contact between BPL and AHSI schools and their alumni, as well as provide school-specific and network-wide information about the adult lives of graduates of BPL schools.

To accomplish these goals, BPL will:

1. Refine the longitudinal system data infrastructure and analysis system.
2. Develop a training and support system in order to help all schools in the BPL and AHSI networks participate in the longitudinal system by inputting data and maintaining contacts with their graduates.

Major Tasks

To accomplish these objectives, BPL will:

Refine the data collection and analysis system. We will streamline the data collection forms, update and enhance the Alumni Manager, and prepare several report generators that can be used by all of the schools participating in the study. Major attention will be given to systems for tracking and keeping in touch with graduates over several years. We intend to procure national tracking services to support this task.

Refine and expand training and support system. We will expand and refine the technical assistance we provide to school staff in using the Alumni Manager and in maintaining tracking and data collection systems for the graduates. We will provide a limited amount of direct technical assistance in helping schools establish these systems. We will develop an online and hotline capability for responding to technical assistance requests.

Expand national dissemination of the results of this study. It is important that schools that provide non-traditional approaches to curriculum and program structures as well as to teaching and learning document their success on a diverse set of respected indicators of success. To that end, we will prepare reports for national dissemination and assist our schools in preparing reports for local dissemination within their communities.

Resources Required

BPL has already committed its own resources to this work in developing the Alumni Manager and in initiating data collection across the network. We have done some preliminary analyses of the data and have produced reports.

BPL needs additional resources in order to refine the data collection system, train and support our schools in collecting these data, and preparing reports that serve both school level and national level audiences. We estimate that this project will require about \$.49 million over two years for the project. We believe that we can institutionalize this project at the end of that project period, relying on a small amount of funds for purchasing student tracking information and for producing local and national reports.

Benefits

As the number and diversity of alternative schools and programs expands, it will be important to provide a wide range of performance information gathered over many years following high school in order to convince educators and policymakers that such investments are worth making. The longitudinal system we are developing will be important to document student outcomes, understand the conditions for successful transitions to college and careers, inform school improvement, and support the continued personal and professional development of alumni.