

Transitions to Postsecondary Learning and Work

Prospectus

Context

Inequitable postsecondary access across social groups is a growing concern in the United States. Scholarly and policy efforts have focused on college access in the form of postsecondary preparation and admission to a college or university. Increasingly, college access is being more broadly defined in terms of access to the college degree, that is, to retention through to graduation.

The loose hand-off between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions has varied consequences for students from different social class origins. Middle class high school seniors who plan to go directly to college follow a standardized path of college applications, notification of acceptances and financial aid, and confirmation of college choice in the form of a financial deposit. It is a very different experience for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. The college choice process—deciding whether to attend at all and then which college to attend—is a much more complicated process.

Big Picture graduates are highly unusual among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, however, in having experienced a positive, personalized, real-world-based high school experience that supported them in aspiring to higher education and helped them succeed in gaining admission to a four-year college. Every Big Picture student takes college entrance examinations, applies to colleges, and completes financial aid applications. With slight variations across schools, 95-100% of Big Picture students are accepted into college; about 89% actually enroll. Along with a school culture of college attendance, adult mentorship, and student self-determination, Big Picture high schools achieve their notable college acceptance rate partly through a staff structure of college transition counselors employed specifically to work with individual students and families to facilitate the college and financial aid application process. College transition counselors are also responsible for ongoing support of alumni.

The Work We Propose To Do

A prominent component of the Big Picture Learning design is to prepare each student graduate for success in postsecondary learning and work. Given the substantial financial barriers that confront many of the students BPL Schools serve, our postsecondary transition services emphasize a coordinated postsecondary learning and work program in which our graduates pursue postsecondary learning even as they work part time in high wage work related to their career interests.

Key components of the transition program include:

1. **College Preparatory Curricula.** We provide an integrated college preparatory curriculum that is consistent with our philosophy and design, college entrance requirements, and student learning standards. The curriculum serves as a framework for implementation of a comprehensive college preparatory course for all students. The curriculum also addresses

noncognitive variables, such as those identified by Sedlacek, which have been shown to contribute to college success.

2. **Early College.** We provide structured opportunities for students to participate in college courses that are particularly addressed to their learning needs and career interests. We will ensure that, where appropriate, through successful participation in these courses students will earn college credits and count towards satisfying high school graduation requirements.
3. **Alumni Engagement.** Supporting alumni is the hallmark of our work, and an element that allows us to learn from our graduates about experiences that inform our practices as we learn about other opportunities for our students. We have developed strategies, such as hosting events, newsletters, informative workshops (e.g., on internships and employment opportunities) and annual gatherings as a way to engage and connect to alumni. In addition to these programs that increase the opportunity to stay connected to students, we will investigate 21st century technology tools, such as Facebook and My Space, as a resource for maintaining close connections and a support network for alumni.
4. **Parent Training and Support.** We employ a support system for parents so that they are better able to work with us in supporting their children.
5. **Student Tracking Database.** We use the Alumni Manager, a database developed by Big Picture Learning network, in order to maintain contact with our alumni, provide them with support, and to maintain longitudinal data on our students' success in postsecondary endeavors.
6. **Supporting Students' Postsecondary Planning.** At the entry point, our college transition counselors (CTCs) work in tandem with teachers and parents in assisting students in an exploration of their interests and then connecting these to possible career paths for students. Students will be apprised of the college application process and admission requirements and receive continuous aid and support throughout their high school experience and beyond.

Goals and Objectives

The four primary goals of this project include:

1. Provide low-income first-generation students in small, innovative urban public schools with the resources and skills they need to navigate to and through college.
2. Build partnerships among these high schools and select colleges and universities committed to improving retention and completion for socially and culturally diverse students.
3. Leverage resources to enable shared practices among practitioners.
4. Serve as an effective design for high school to college support programs.

We will create a college-going culture by implementing programs and services that are innovative, respond to current needs and circumstances, and introduce best strategies for supporting student achievement.

To accomplish these goals, we will:

1. Sustain and expand the National College Transition Network in order to increase the number of low-income and first-generation youth going to, and succeeding through, college. This expansion includes the work we are doing with the Alternative High School Initiative, a national network of eleven school developers of about 300 alternative high schools, facilitated by Big Picture.

2. Expand financial aid opportunities for students pursuing college (such as our upcoming grant submission to the College Access Foundation).
3. Continue to explore opportunities to work with agencies, such as the National College Access Network and the National Scholarship Providers Association, which contribute to our postsecondary transition program.
4. Continue and expand the Big Picture College Emergency Fund to better assist students experiencing a crisis in meeting their financial obligations.
5. Develop and strengthen partnerships with colleges and universities that support the BP design, particularly those schools with pre-collegiate bridge and TRIO programs.
6. Develop a network-wide alumni leadership program.
7. Continue to develop partnerships with community-based organizations that provide supplemental programs and support services to students and parents.
8. Continue to seek out innovative tools and resources that respond to the growing trends and challenges students and parents are facing.
9. Strengthen partnerships with school districts to supplement resources and services for students and families.
10. Continue to track our students through high school and postsecondary pathways to ensure their success.
11. Refine our work around teacher preparation and postsecondary planning by developing an institute dedicated to providing training and support to all 9th and 10th grade advisors.
12. Continue to develop Web-based services and products to assist students, advisors, and other school staff with building a college culture.
13. Publish the results of our research and disseminate our learning throughout the country.

Major Tasks

To accomplish these objectives, BPL will:

Partnerships. We would like to develop more formalized partnerships with current and future institutions of higher education by developing MOUs (Memorandum of Understanding). We need to increase and strengthen the links to community-based programs that augment some of our services. Moreover, we would like to focus more on developing alternative pathways and innovative community-based enrichment programs that provide summer support.

Funding Sources. Identifying and procuring diverse scholarship funds for students, specifically undocumented and foster care youth, is challenging. While we have identified some funding, more work still needs to be done (and earlier). As our population of undocumented students increases (currently we have over 20%), we know that we need to be better prepared to address policy issues and services available to students and their families, as well as to work with institutions that have developed specific programs and resources for this growing population.

Support Staff. The most important organizational challenge includes maintaining contact with alumni after high school. Our alumni engagement model is becoming more systematic and schools are being more responsive by directing more personnel to work with alumni. As students enter

college, programs, and the workforce, we need to work harder at providing consistent contact with and support to students. Some of our more successful Big Picture schools have developed strategies for connecting with students by special events such as alumni reunions, luncheons, and other gatherings to bring students together, share experiences, and obtain information. As we grow, the need for more personnel is evident. This year alone, Big Picture has over 600 graduates, all of whom will need support beyond our current capacity. We need to work smarter and better on projects and initiatives that are aligned with our resources. We have learned from our longitudinal study that the more consistent we are with our connections to alumni, the greater the chances for positive outcomes (e.g., college degree attainment and apprenticeship completion).

Resources Required

BPL has already committed its own resources to this work in developing a detailed program and implementing it in our schools. BPL needs additional resources in order to expand the program within and across our schools. We estimate that this project will require approximately \$.425 million over three years. We need resources for personnel to provide training and support to school staff in implementing the program.

Benefits

By strengthening and expanding our postsecondary transition programs, we will contribute to addressing the current inequities in postsecondary access across social groups. Our program will ensure that our students are prepared to succeed in postsecondary learning, to gain admission to an appropriate postsecondary institution, and to persist through to graduation.