

First Generation Students' Acquisition of College Knowledge: Examining the Effectiveness of Outreach Programs in South Texas

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Abstract

Many college outreach programs such as GEAR-UP and Upward Bound have been employed to prepare minority, low-income, and first-generation students for college. The effectiveness of these two outreach programs in South Texas was evaluated based on a 35-item College Knowledge Test (CKT) developed by the researcher through focus group interviews. Data were collected from students enrolled in a GEAR-UP program, students enrolled in an Upward Bound program, and a comparison group of students with no experience with either program. A one-way analysis of variance indicated group differences were statistically significant. Post hoc analysis showed that both the Upward Bound and GEAR-UP groups outperformed the comparison group based on CKT scores. The focus group interviews revealed students were satisfied with the Upward Bound and GEAR-UP programs. Students in Upward Bound regarded the program to be most effective in providing academic preparation. Students in GEAR-UP regarded the program to be most effective in providing exposure to college and careers along with dissemination of college information.

Introduction

Federal and state initiatives have focused on preparing students for postsecondary education with the intent to close educational gaps that currently exist between (a) Anglo and minority students, (b) high- and middle-income students and low-income students and (c) non-first-generation and first-generation college bound students. Outreach programs may help fill the gaps and may offer an equal playing ground when considering access to postsecondary education.

The need for effective outreach programs is supported by studies affirming the gaps between minority and nonminority college students. Figures compiled by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in the summer and fall of 2005 indicated first-time undergraduate enrollment as 52% Anglo, 25% Hispanic, 14% African American and the remaining 9% Asian, American Indian, or international student. *Closing the Gaps* (n.d.) reported that (circa 2000) only 5% of the Texas population here enrolled in higher education compared to the national average of 5.4%. The difference of .4% may seem minuscule, but it actually represented 76,000 students. Of the ten most populous states in the union, Texas ranked 5th in respect to enrollment in higher education. Texas students participating in outreach programs, i.e., Upward Bound and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) are exposed to postsecondary options between 7th and 9th grades.

Selected Literature Review

Students decide to attend college at different times of life. According to Noeth and Wimberly (2002), first-generation students often aspire to attend college late in high school. The students do not receive timely college-planning information, may not take rigorous courses, and may struggle with cultural conflicts between the college-oriented world and the world of friends, family, and community. Choy (2001), in a study for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), found most high school students come to a decision about postsecondary education between 8th and 10th grades. Choy further reported that educational aspirations in both 8th and 12th grades varied significantly with parents' level of education among 1992 high school graduates. First-generation students reported lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students did as early as the 8th grade.

Bourdieu (1992) posited that the dominant class is born into a position of society where the rules of the game are lived and learned. Children of the privileged learn the rules and know how to navigate them effectively. The social groups to which the children belong influence their approach to school and educational aspirations. Children not born into privilege must learn through multiple means and cannot rely on family alone.