Partnering With Parents to Promote Postsecondary Enrollment
Part I: Foundations and Basic Strategies

This is the first of two briefs on partnering with parents to foster positive attitudes toward postsecondary enrollment by their children. The second brief reports specific strategies that schools can use to build positive attitudes and help reduce the effects of negative parental attitudes on postsecondary aspirations and enrollment.

Walk a Mile in Their Shoes

The authors of this brief both have doctorates in education, work at major universities, and have helped their students and their own children negotiate the admission, matriculation and financial pathways to college graduation. However, in preparing this brief we tried to put ourselves in the position of parents who had never been to college and who have little knowledge about how to pay the seemingly astronomical costs of a college education. We explored five different colleges: two public, one private, and two community colleges (one a recent conversion to a 4 year school). The process was daunting, frustrating and often discouraging – and we had little at stake: our kids have already graduated. This research brief examines the tremendous influence that parents have on the postsecondary college enrollment potential for their children, the attitudes they bring to the process of "college going," the challenges and frustrations they face, and some strategies that schools can use to help foster positive attitudes toward postsecondary education and help reduce their frustrations and failures. We encourage school leaders to read these sometimes dry research findings with empathy for the real families in their communities who struggle with helping their children attain college admission and, ultimately, graduation. In other words, look around your school and do your best to put real faces and names on the data.

The Power of Parents. When it comes to deciding whether to seek admission to a postsecondary education program, parents are among the most significant influences on their children. Some studies claim they are the most important influence; most others place them in the top three. More important, though, parents can either exert a positive influence or actively discourage their children from attending college, and some of the messages they send to their kids are so subtle that they may not know they are doing it at all. These messages, which often reflect deeply held beliefs, attitudes and commitments, typically exist in four major domains:

Attitude Toward Education and Schooling. Parents begin to express their personal attitudes toward education almost from the moment of their child's birth – or, according to at least some literacy experts who encourage parents to read aloud to their unborn child, even before! As children grow, the messages (and the attitudes they represent) become more clearly focused on learning and schooling. Parents may read to their children or make sure they have access to books, engage them in informal learning and problem-solving activities in games or household , and convey messages about the importance of school by insisting on regular attendance, overseeing homework obligations, and staying in touch with teachers about their child's progress and needs.

Similarly, an apparently neglectful attitude toward education – or even outright hostility ("That school never treated me fairly, either!") – can leave an indelible mark on children that ultimately affects their school success and postsecondary opportunities.

Attitude Toward Postsecondary Education. Children of college educated parents and successful first generation college attendees typically report that, as far as their parents were concerned, going to college was a given – completely non-negotiable. They never said, "**if** you go to college," it was always, "**when** you go to college." Even among parents who didn't know much about application, finances, admission, or the college experience, the message was always very clear – "we will find a way." Among poorer parents, this message was bolstered by evidence of other kinds of non-financial support as well: active use of the strategies listed above to convey the importance of education in general and participation in college-related activities in school and the community.

College Isn't For People Like Us. Two negative attitude messages can also prevail in this domain: (1) college isn't for people like us, and (2) who needs it? The first of these reflects the common perception among resource-poor parents that college is really a luxury that doesn't invite participation by "people like us." Unfortunately, they are likely to gather their evidence from media (currently broadcasting the message "college: who needs it?") or from peers for whom college may be seen as something that rich, white folks do. Add to this that many poorer parents have no college graduates among their circle of friends, and they may never hear the countervailing message that college is, indeed, for people like us.

The second part of this attitude is embedded in personal experience, local lore, and even media reports. One of the reasons this particular belief is so difficult to examine is that it's at least partially true. A person who is relatively successful in a working-class job may believe, quite accurately, that "I didn't go to college, and I did OK." Locally, the most visibly successful business owner in town may never have had a day of postsecondary education. Unfortunately, outside observers seldom see the army of lawyers, bankers, accountants, insurance experts, technicians and other postsecondary educated people it takes to keep a small business running effectively, so they see only a partial view of the contributions made by college-educated workers.

Finally, parents hear about truly successful people who have never completed college – Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Mark Zuckerberg, and other technology moguls to name a few. Ironically, the part of the story that is never told is that all of them are surrounded by highly educated people who manage their businesses and generate their prosperity.

Sticker Shock and Attitude Toward College Costs and Debt. This attitude has three parts.

1. Limited value compared to other items. This sounds like, "Good grief… you could buy a house (or car, or business vehicle, or hunting camp) for what you'd pay for college."

2. Lack of affordability. "We can't possibly afford for you to go to college," either because of actual costs or the loss of the child's income to support the family (or "opportunity" costs).

3. Suspicion about the value of college learning. "We're not going to rack up that kind of debt so you can study art or golf."
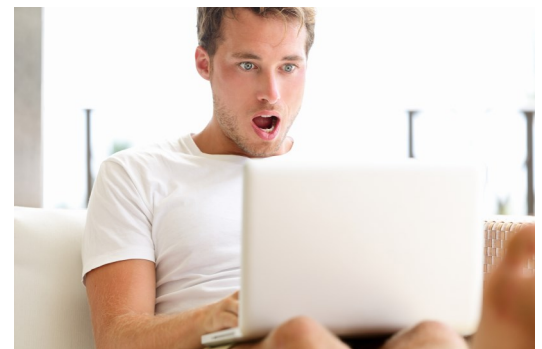
Sometimes, it appears as if some colleges take a perverse pride in publishing costs in one lump sum. In their drive for full disclosure, they may, in fact, scare the wits out of parents without postsecondary educations. Unfortunately, our examination of many college websites showed that while they posted the total costs prominently, the "but" was buried much further in sometimes pretty technical language. Sure, tuition and fees amount to $12,000 a year – and quickly get to $20,000+ when you factor in a full room and board package, books, supplies and other incidentals. But you have to look a lot further to find out that 70% of students receive some form of non-loan financial aid, and that the grand total is often reduced by quite a substantial amount. In fact, most schools will even waive the application fee for financial hardship. Colleges also are not particularly good at disclosing alternative arrangements, such as the actual cost of room and board, especially if the student can live at home and continue to work or contribute to the family. Finally, a number of colleges include loans in their "financial aid" packages – and some parents who have little experience with higher education finance see that as a bait and switch scheme of sorts.

Once again, the media contributes to this problem – and underscores the futility of incurring debt to obtain a postsecondary education. A recent article on Salary.com lists eight college majors (and related careers) that provide the worst return on investment:

- sociology (social work, corrections officer)
- art (graphic designer, illustrator),
- education (elementary and secondary teachers)
- religious studies (chaplain, pastor)
- hospitality (hotel manager, catering manager)
- nutrition (dietician, food service manager)
- psychology (human resources associate, career counselor)

Sadly, a number of these occupations are the examples of college-educated individuals many students and their parents, especially in poor and rural communities, see on a regular basis: teachers, law-enforcement officers, clinic workers, pastors, social workers or counselors. Few of us in any setting run into materials scientists, software designers, or investment bankers (some of the best careers for return on investment) on a regular basis.

Fear of Losing their Child. While some parents may fear for the actual physical safety of a child who attends college away from home, most of the fears that parents express are somewhat more subtle and, frankly, harder to assuage. This is a complicated matter, and sometimes parents share these deeper fears by expressing anxiety about physical safety. This is especially true among parents in both rural and urban settings (especially those in poverty), cultural and linguistic minorities, and undocumented residents.

Upon deeper investigation, it appears that the real fear is often that the child will get educated, move away, and forget about their family/community/culture. These fears are particularly significant among rural populations, and "encapsulated" communities that share deep linguistic, cultural and economic interests. Two notable examples are Native American children and those who live in migrant agricultural communities, where people, because of their transient lives, turn largely to one another for support and assistance. Having a child move away removes a very real family resource.

Changing Parental Attitudes to Support Postsecondary Education

This brief does not examine all of the arguments about whether schools should try to change parental attitudes at all, but, rather, starts with the assumption that postsecondary education is a public good and the people reading this brief are inclined to promote it.

Some Important Features of Attitudes

An attitude is a predisposition to approach or avoid an attitude object (idea, person, object, activity) – a tendency to act either positively or negatively toward the attitude object.

Attitudes are learned, so they can be unlearned and changed.

Most people don't hold very strong attitudes about most things, so a little effort can encourage them in one direction or another.

Where do attitudes come from? Usually, we form attitudes in three ways:

We copy the attitudes of someone who is important to us.

We are talked into an attitude.

We "try out" an attitude and are either rewarded or punished for it.

These coincide with three general approaches to attitude formation and change – (1) social, (2) cognitive and (3) behavioral. Most often, it is a combination of all three of these approaches that produces an attitude.

Social Approaches. Two key social approaches are modeling and structured peer groups.

Modeling involves presenting a respected individual who expresses the desired attitude to skeptics. Depending on the community, models might include students who were successful in college but who did not break ties with their families even if they moved away, clergy, and parents of students who benefitted from postsecondary enrollment.

The most important thing is that the model is known and trusted by the parents, "like them" in as many ways as possible, and absolutely sincere and honest in sharing their experiences (including their fears, frustrations and challenges) with the parents.

A second powerful strategy is to create new *peer groups* for parents made up of people whose children have gone to college and been successful. The examples from Texas and Ohio below show how both modeling and structured peer groups work.

Example: In Austin (TX) ISD, volunteers host college information nights, including food and child care, in homes, churches and recreation centers in local, mostly Hispanic, communities – not at school. Unlike most "college nights," these aren't about picking majors and filling out FAFSA forms; they address very directly the fears that parents have about sending their child into the postsecondary environment. In Ohio, parents in the community whose children have gone to college reach out individually to parents who are not sure if it's the best course for their own child. The critical qualification of these parents is that they are as much like the target group as possible – culturally, linguistically, and geographically – and that they are honest about their own anxieties and how they resolved them.

Cognitive Approaches. The most effective cognitive approaches are persuasive communication and creating cognitive dissonance.

The Practical Leader

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

Persuasive communication involves presenting evidence that postsecondary education is beneficial and important. The most important feature of this information must be that it is accurate, related to the lives of parents in the community, and easily understood. Telling parents who live from paycheck to paycheck and who can't imagine retiring about the 401K benefits available to most college graduates isn't very effective. Telling them about "layoff proofing" their children probably is. Answer the question: why is a college education important to kids in this community or region? Most states provide information about unemployment rates by education level, so that's a place to begin.

Cognitive dissonance is a powerful tool that relies on the fact most of us hold contradictory beliefs *until* someone points them out to us. Then we have to resolve them somehow. Often parents say that they "want the best" for their child, but harbor a somewhat more personal desire to keep their child close to home – despite its effect on his or her future. Cognitive dissonance occurs when people are asked to confront the notion that their own desire to keep their child close to home may, in fact, create a very bleak future.

Example: In a northern Michigan mill town, a downturn in the paper industry produced hundreds of layoffs among otherwise well-paid hourly workers. Working together, two ministers and a priest developed a sermon they agreed to give on the same Sunday, followed by a joint letter to the local newspaper and placement in their church bulletins. The topic: Are you really concerned about your child's future? (Cognitive Dissonance) In it, they pointed out who *did not* get laid off or who recovered quickly from the layoffs: engineers, technical workers, skilled tradespeople, and others with some kind of postsecondary education. (Persuasive Communication) Then they hosted college information meetings in their respective churches about how to prepare a child for college and support her postsecondary ambitions.

Behavioral Approaches. Essentially, this means reward the desired attitude(s) and, because punishment seldom works to change attitudes, ignore negative attitudes. When parents begin to express positive attitudes toward postsecondary education for their children, find good ways to reward their growth. In this case, it's critical to have the advice of people from the parents' community. Sometimes what schools may see as rewards (e.g., showcasing, public celebrations) may clash with cultural norms about privacy in family matters.

Example: In south Texas, once parents have expressed an interest in helping their child at least explore postsecondary education, a district works with local social workers, clergy, and community volunteers to help parents with college-related activities, such as line-by-line help with FAFSA forms or other necessary steps. These services are provided by volunteers in churches, community centers or private homes, and, to the extent possible, in the parents' language.

Be A Myth Buster

Stereotypes abound regarding poor people and education. One of the most popular is that poor people don't value education very highly; they don't engage in the kind of "parent involvement" we believe supports achievement. According to Straus (October 28, 2013), "this stands to reason, as research consistently confirms a correlation between family involvement and school achievement. However, too often, our notions of family involvement are limited in scope,

focused only on in-school involvement—the kind of involvement that requires parents and guardians to visit their children's schools or classrooms. While it is true that low-income parents and guardians are less likely to participate in this brand of "involvement", they engage in home-based involvement strategies, such as encouraging children to read and limiting television watching, more frequently than their wealthier counterparts." She then cites study after study confirming this myth-busting conclusion.

If we design an intervention based on beliefs that aren't true, we are likely to make things worse. Or, perhaps even worse than that, we may elect to do nothing if we think that parents are so dysfunctional that we can't do anything to change outcomes for their kids. The point is that before doing anything, we need to take a good, hard look at our own attitudes and beliefs that shape our policies, practices and interaction with parents.

The next step is to engage school staff in this kind of introspection and dialog. What do we believe about our students and their families, and what kind of messages do we send to them every day? A good place to begin our own reflection and a conversation with staff is with Straus' insightful article, "Five Stereotypes About Poor Families and Education." In fact, if you read only one article in the resources section of this brief, that should be it.

What Works

The resources that follow contain evidence, examples, and numerous programs that help build positive parent attitudes toward postsecondary enrollment for their children. They boil down to several key ideas.

Start early. Early intervention is most likely to affect college aspirations among children and their parents. Starting in middle school (or even earlier) helps parents begin to imagine their child as a college graduate and get accustomed to the idea. It also facilitates the selection of essential courses and helps to foster the other "habits of mind" essential for college success. (Conley, 2007). One 4th grade teacher assigns each incoming student a college, and throughout the year kids keep track of the school's academic performance, sports teams, and special events. They become an "expert" on that school and its admission requirements. The teacher provides them with a (donated) college logo hat and t-shirt which they all wear for special "college day" events in the class.

Address fears directly. If parents are concerned about "losing" their child, address that issue first. Don't dance around it with a lot of technical information about the application process, financial aid, or how to choose the right college – unless those things help address the baseline fear of loss.

Be mindful of special needs. Use trusted community resources to communicate with parents whenever possible. Consider not only linguistic, economic and cultural issues that might interfere with your ability to communicate effectively with parents, but think about other potential landmines as well. Are some of your parents and students undocumented? If so, the last place they are likely to show up is the school – a quasi-government agency that may, indeed, create major problems for them. Are there large numbers of foster kids or homeless families in the school's attendance zone? If so, who will advocate for these students in the college-going process?

Be financially realistic. After working through a "college cost estimator" on one university's website, using data he suspected his own parents could supply (adjusted for inflation), one of the authors succeeded in reducing the cost by about 75%. The bottom line was still more than a third of his parents' income for a year, well out of their reach. But he did go
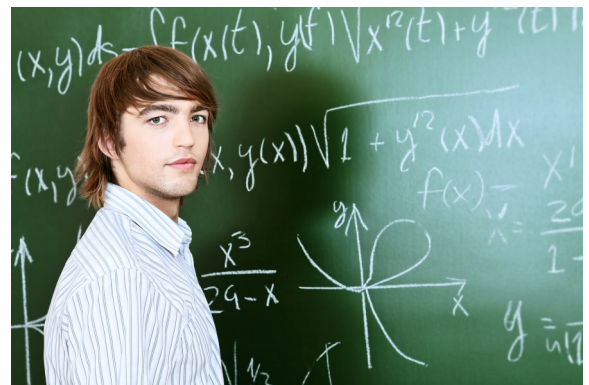
and even earned a Ph.D., so there must have been a way. To help build parent confidence, provide real examples of real people like them who have been able to enroll and succeed in college – people who beat the financial odds and made it happen for their kids.

Think local first. Parents want to know about how college attendance fits into their lives and their community. Maybe the kid from a tiny town in southern New Mexico will go to Harvard, but it's more likely he will live at home, take dual enrollment classes in high school, attend a local community college, and maybe transfer to a 4 year program. That sounds a lot more doable to parents than packing their kid off to Cambridge, so figure out how to support each of those steps, and help parents support those steps, toward earning a college degree.

Stay Tuned

This is the first of two briefs on partnering with parents to foster positive attitudes toward postsecondary enrollment by their children. The second brief focuses on very specific strategies that schools can use to build positive attitudes and help mitigate the effects of negative parental attitudes on postsecondary aspirations and enrollment.

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