

Creating a College-Going Community in High Schools

The recent publication of *Forming a College-Going Community in U.S. Public High Schools*, written by Barbara Schneider, Ph.D. of Michigan State University and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, outlines steps a school can take to transform itself into a college-going community. While her focus is on schools with low post-secondary participation rates, a number of her findings have broad relevance.

Dr. Schneider emphasizes school climate, the social network of peers and adults who share the school's common goals. To change that climate – and the school's goals and expectations – requires a whole school initiative. By stressing the importance of college attendance on future career opportunities, schools can raise student interest in considering careers and identifying potential colleges.

Dr. Schneider found that students often have unrealistic expectations about careers, the education required, and where they stand in relation to their current courses. Creating long-range career and education goals can enable students to make thoughtful decisions about the courses they need to take. She also recommends that planning for college include realistic conversations about financing. Counselors can play a pivotal role for both students and parents in career and course planning, college selection, and college funding.

Additional suggested activities include whole school interventions to prepare for college entrance exams, such as taking practice exams. She also suggests creating opportunities for mock interviews with college alumni volunteers. Because alumni volunteers actually interview candidates, they can share their experiences to prepare high school students for their own interviews. Another suggestion is encouraging or arranging college visits and having in-school college fairs to increase the visibility of colleges in students' lives.

A final recommendation is to evaluate each intervention to ensure it creates the desired result. One outcome worthy of measure is the participation rate in postsecondary education, but other relevant measures include follow-up surveys with high school graduates to examine persistence in college and an evaluation of the level preparation the high school provided to the student. The full text of *Forming a College-Going Community* can be downloaded from www.gatesfoundation.org/UnitedStates/Education/ResearchAndEvaluation/Research/HsImprovement.htm.

Customize college-preparatory activities by grade level.

Employ a multi-tiered mentoring system that assists students in crystallizing their education and career plans.

Allocate resources to counselors, teachers, and principals regarding student performance, engagement, and college preparation.

Build relational trust within the school community.