

Experiential Learning Activities to Promote Higher Education for At Risk K-12 Students

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education are posed with many complex issues including financial affordability, infrastructure, recruitment and retention. It is important to implement engaging practices and outreach opportunities that promote a college-going culture during early and adolescent years for students deemed at risk. This paper describes how two collegiate, academic preservice teacher student organizations created an experiential learning activity for at risk K-12 students all while promoting experiential learning for themselves. The focus of this article is twofold: first, to show how an experiential learning activity can assist preservice teachers in working with at-risk students and second, to demonstrate the importance of early college exposure for at-risk students.

Keywords: At risk students, experiential learning, college-going culture, preservice teachers

An important role of education in the United States is to prepare K-12 students for opportunities after high school graduation. One very important activity is to appropriately equip students for college and career readiness opportunities. While not all students are college bound after graduation, there is still a priority to prepare individuals for work-related skills in order to live a productive life and be responsible citizens (Brock, 2010). In fact, OECD (2009) notes:

“A well-educated and well-trained population is essential for the social and economic well-being of countries. Education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to participate effectively in society and in the economy. It also contributes to the expansion of scientific and cultural knowledge. (p. 28)

Education is the primary source of upward mobility for the population of this country. With the growing demand for college-educated workers, a college education is one of the surest ways into the middle class. Citizens with a higher education degree are afforded many opportunities including usually higher paying jobs and more job security (Collins, 2011). In fact, many middle class families in America grew up with the notion that college was a pathway to getting job and maintaining a job. While the socially acceptable push for middle class citizens is to attend and graduate from college, it is often not the mind set of citizens who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Each year hundreds of thousands of low-income students face barriers to college access and success (Collins, 2011). Low-income students often lack the guidance and support they need to prepare for college, enroll in college and seek financial scholarships and grants to help pay for college. As a result, large gaps remain in educational achievement between students from low-income families and their high-income peers.

In the past twenty years, efforts to improve educational attainment have focused on programs and marketing toward underrepresented and lower socioeconomic populations. The U.S. federal government has been instrumental in offering more financial aid opportunities to propel students to higher education. While financial incentives have promoted an increase in the college growing culture of the U.S., it has not yet significantly improved the college growing culture for at-risk groups (Brock, 2010).

Research by Kolb & Kolb (2005) suggest that institutions of higher education can implement activities and programs that promote a college-going mentality for at risk students. The purpose of this article is share how several programs and activities worked to promote a college going culture for at risk individuals. Specially, this article details experiential learning activities from two student organizations within the academic component of preservice teacher education.

Review of Literature

Throughout the United States, the landscape of student dynamics is radically changing. In the past twenty years there has been considerable growth in public schools in the number of children who can be defined as “at risk.” The United States Department of Education (2010) defines at-risk, or high-needs students as students who are

. . . at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools . . . who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners” (Definitions).

There are multiple studies that demonstrate that students who are labeled as “at risk” often do not attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Hallinan, 2008; Cabrera, 2006; Cammarota, 2006). Smith (2013) states that through mentoring and early exposure, at risk students have a better opportunity of being successful in higher education. Research by Corbett & Huebner (2007) for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, demonstrates that it is important that it is essential that students see college as an attainable goal.

Due to the continued growth of students who are classified as being at risk, there are educators who have concerns about how to best meet the needs of these students (McKinney, Frazier, & Abrams, 2006). Additionally, research by Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto (2005) demonstrates that with the continued exponential growth in the number of ELLs in United States schools, it is necessary to prepare and train teachers to work with all students deemed at risk. It is imperative that preservice teachers have an understanding of how to be effective in meeting the needs of all learners.

One way to assist preservice teachers in learning how to work with multiple types of students is to allow them to experience and interact with a variety of students through experiential learning opportunities. Twentieth century scholars including John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire and others advocated that growth and development was inclusive of experiential learning activities. Kolb (1984) also built on the work of these scholars and suggests that “learning is a process where knowledge is created through transformative experiences”. Indeed, experiential learning is key for growth (p. 38).

According to McMahan & Fredrickson (2013), it is imperative for preservice teachers to interact with students outside the confines of the university setting. They believe that working with preservice teachers in an experiential fashion allows the preservice teachers to make “the connections between the pedagogical theory taught in the university classroom and the real world application and practice of pedagogy” (p. 229). Although many teachers have students who would be identified as at risk, in many cases, they have had very few opportunities to become skilled at using the best practices for working with students who may present potential challenges in school. Since learning about working with at risk students does not solely occur in educational methods courses, such experiential learning activities and opportunities are exceptionally important. It is through the connections preservice teachers make through experiential learning that helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In the development of cultural competencies, experiential learning has been demonstrated to be very effective (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000). It is important for students to understand and see these connections from theory to practice through real world opportunities in the way that Dewey (1938) termed the “theory of experience” (p. 10).

Experiential Learning in Reverse

A southern university implemented the concept of experiential learning across its campus through the university wide mission of “Learning by Doing”. Through this initiative, collegiate students and faculty were challenged with participating in different types of experiential activities. Three teacher education faculty members, who sponsored the two teacher education student groups, Bilingual Education Student Organization (BESO) and the Association for Texas Professional Educators (ATPE), then challenged their student groups to take this task a step further.

Through a number of experiential learning activities, the faculty created additional learning activities for others. It was as a result of these student organizational activities that experiential learning opportunities were created by college students to promote higher education for K-12 at risk students. As a result of planning and discussions, both student organizations decided to create specific targeted activities for at risk K-12 students. There were three distinct “targeted” audiences for these experiential learning activities: elementary students, middle school students and high school students. As a part of their teacher education student organization activities, these students hosted multiple groups of school-aged children on their university campus as a way to expose them to higher education.

Experiential Activities and Faculty Perceptions

We report here on four experiential activities that were carried out in collaboration with the student organizations, the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE), and the Bilingual Education Student Organization (BESO). ATPE serves all preservice teachers and is sponsored by the larger state organization, while BESO is for preservice bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL) track students.

Over the past three years, we (as sponsors of these student organizations) have worked closely with local K-12 schools to promote university connections and a college-going climate among the K-12 students. In some instances, the organizations have invited local schools to our campus to experience college life, while in others, we effectively ‘brought’ the university campus to their school. In each of these situations, however, we understood that both the K-12 students and the university student organization participants gained insights as to their potential and their future trajectories. The four K-12/university experiences spanned elementary, middle, and high school. All K-12 students came from schools with large numbers of at risk children, representing both English Language Learners (ELLs) and high poverty. We describe the four experiential activities and reflect on the experiences gleaned by both the school-aged students and the university future teachers.

Elementary Students

Two different age groups of elementary students were brought to the university campus. Both age groups come from schools that are labeled as Title I and have high instances of students who are deemed at risk.

Kindergarten dual language and monolingual classes. Over a period of two years, our university organizations hosted almost 120 kindergarten students to our institution for a lunchtime experience in which they learned about college and what it is like to become a teacher. In small groups, the kindergarteners were each assigned a university, preservice teacher education student who interacted with them in their native language (two out of five classes were designated as dual language classes and over half of the students in each of these classes were Spanish dominant students) and spoke with the five and six year olds about attending a university, becoming a college student, and taking coursework to become a teacher. Within this experience, the children asked questions, played games, and listened to the (often first time in college) university students share their own experience. To enhance the lunchtime visit, we also invited university students from other academic departments to showcase their own cultural heritage to the elementary students. On one occurrence, university students from the department of dance performed dances from areas in Mexico where some of the kindergarten students came from. The children left with pencils, paper, and other promotional items emblematic of our university, as a souvenir of their day. This experience was exciting and motivating for all involved. Parent chaperones, kindergarten teachers, and the children themselves were enthusiastic about the time they shared at our institution. One kindergartener indicated that she had decided she wanted to be a bilingual teacher like the one facilitating her table, while a great many other kindergarteners pledged their allegiance to our university, over all others.

Second Grade- College week. On another spring day, we had the opportunity to host four second grade classes from a nearby suburban school district during their ‘college week’. We planned a full day for the young students and exposed them to many aspects of college life. To begin, our student organizations met the visiting buses and introduced the entire group of over 100 second graders with a general overview of the university and the plan for the day. At that point, second graders broke into groups and experienced a range of activities including tours of the dormitories, the campus grounds, the fitness center, and the student union. A group of advanced level preservice teachers worked with each of the second grade groups, engaging them in a lesson related to science, social studies, math, or English Language Arts that the future teachers had prepared. Following lunch and additional one on one time with the university students, the second grade students were visited by the Chemistry club who put on an engaging science show that involved blowing up materials and other compelling science experiments.

Immediate feedback from the second grade teachers indicated that the experience was useful and positive for the students. The children were highly engaged and in some cases, mesmerized (in the case of the science show). We learned later from the teachers that their experience with our university students was so great that our institution had gone to the top of their list within the college week rankings.

Secondary Students

The secondary students participated in a mentoring program where the university preservice teachers served as mentors to at risk adolescent students. This program was implemented in a suburban school district in two schools that might be more adequately classified as “urban.” The schools were both Title I schools. In both schools, the preservice teachers would go to the middle school or high school and meet one-on-one with their mentee. They had a list of questions to start the discussion on their first visit with their mentee but after that, the preservice teachers simply worked to find ways to connect with their student as well as learn more about working with middle/high school students. The preservice teachers would visit with their mentee on their home campuses once a week throughout the semester and at the end of the semester, our organizations would bring the students to the university campus for a visit and tour.

Middle School. The middle school that participated in this experiential learning activity with our university preservice teachers, serves a population that has students from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The school has over 50% of the students classified as “economically disadvantaged” and almost 20% qualify as “limited English proficient” (LEP), with a majority of those students being served by the bilingual program. The school itself is an older building that looks like a typical school from the 1950’s.

When first introduced to this activity, many of the preservice teachers were a little concerned and nervous about working one-on-one with students. Both student organizations worked within this program as well as an introductory pedagogy class. At the end of the semester, the students came to the campus for a half day event. The student organizations hosted the students and provided multiple opportunities for them to interact with collegiate life. The university students arranged tours of the campus facilities such as the dorms, student union, workout facilities, and the theatre. The middle school students also attended a class that was taught by one of our university faculty members. It gave the students a glimpse into not only collegiate life, but also into the world of their university student mentor. Reports from the student organization participants suggested that the middle school children indicated they took away positive feelings towards higher education and our institution overall.

At the end of day in which the alternative school students came to visit our university, we received a phone call from the principal of the high school. Her first comment was that she needed to have a discussion with us about a parent meeting that she had had that afternoon. We knew that this conversation could go poorly and we were a little nervous about the remainder of the conversation. When the daughter of the parents (who had contacted the principal) had come home, their daughter was exceptionally excited. She said that she believed that she could go to college, and had decided she wanted to go. She knew it would be hard work but she knew that there would be support for her and that she could be successful. The parents were crying as they told this to the principal because their daughter had never thought that college was an option for her. The principal wanted to call us at once so that we could let our students know that even before they were teachers in a classroom, they had changed the life of a student.

Conclusion

Overall, we feel as if the collaborative experiences fostered by way of K-12 and university cooperation were beneficial in that they served as additional rich experience for the preservice teachers as well as for the K-12 students we hosted or visited. These experiential learning activities promoted opportunities to see and experience a college-going culture and environment for at risk youth. Moreover, these experiential learning activities for preservice teachers inspired aspirations of higher educational attainment for the K-12 students with whom we interacted. This connects to research by Marks (2000) that postulates students who are engaged in school activities are more likely to experience learning and pursue higher education. Given that all three Teacher Education faculty members had previously been public school teachers who worked extensively with at risk students, their passion for helping students was an integral piece of what put this experiential learning activity in play. Their purpose in doing this activity was twofold. By bringing school-aged children to campus they wanted to give their preservice teachers the opportunity to interact with at risk students of multiple ages, thus allowing them the experience of working with many different types and ages of children.

This opportunity to work with multiple age groups may not have been extended to these preservice teachers otherwise, as they traditionally only go into the schools of students who are of the grade levels for which the preservice teachers are seeking certification. That is, preservice teachers usually do not have the opportunities to interact with students in educational levels other than their target certifications. The second purpose for the teacher educators taking on experiential activities was to expose the school-aged children to higher education and to help them understand and experience that attending college is not only a possibility but it is achievable. Overall, we as teacher educators understood that through the work carried out by our preservice student teacher organizations, lives were impacted in some ways. By working with at risk K-12 students, our university students had the chance to impact and influence the youths' perceptions of university life. We also hope that the experiences we helped to shape had some long lasting effect on the K-12 students. While such impact is difficult to measure, we intend to continue to incorporate experiential activities into our work with our preservice teachers and students in our communities.

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