

Fostering Student Desire for Postsecondary Education

MICHAEL J. SALMONOWICZ

As outsourcing and competition for jobs increase and the U.S. economy grows more tenuous, many politicians and policymakers cite education—specifically college education—as the means by which the United States can maintain its dominance in the global marketplace. President Bush wants to make certain students are “provided greater access to college, and are more successful in completing a postsecondary education,”¹ and some governors have called for an increase in the annual number of college graduates in their states.²

Efforts to help more students attend college so far have involved achievement and financing. On the achievement front, state and federal education policies promise to better prepare students for college so they are qualified to attend and ready to succeed. On the financial front, President Bush has pledged increased funding for Pell Grants,³ and some schools—the University of Virginia, Harvard University, and the University of Illinois, among others—have “access” plans that allow talented students from low-income backgrounds to obtain an excellent college education.⁴ Addressing both fronts, the United States Office of Postsecondary Education counts as a major aim its administration of “programs that increase access to postsecondary education for disadvantaged students.”⁵

Although academic preparation and financial aid are important issues, a crucial piece has been left out of the worthy goal of increasing

1. The White House, “Educating America: The President’s Initiatives for High School, Higher Education, and Job Training,” 2004, whitehouse.gov/infocus/education/educating_america_policy_book.pdf.

2. Office of the Governor, “Granholm Says New Merit Scholarship Will Make College a Reality for More Students,” 2005, michigan.gov/gov/0,1607,7-168--118129--,00.html; and editorial, “Another unfunded goal?” *The Cavalier Daily*, 2003, cavalierdaily.com/lead.asp?pid=1062.

3. The White House, “State of the Union,” 2005, whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2005/index.html.

4. University of Virginia, “Access UVa,” virginia.edu/accessuva; Harvard University, “Harvard Financial Aid Initiative,” admissions.college.harvard.edu/hfai; and University of Illinois, “Introducing the Illinois Promise,” oc.uiuc.edu/promise/index.html.

5. U.S. Department of Education, “Office of Postsecondary Education Home Page,” ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/index.html?src=mr.

the number of students who earn college degrees. Thus far the rhetoric has focused on *can*. What it has not included is *want*. High school students must want to go to college. They need to see college as useful, the logical and necessary next step in the educational process. If they do not, increased student achievement and financial aid will fail to benefit a large portion of our nation's youth. Ideally, all students would learn the value of college at home and come to school motivated to work toward that goal. However, with only twenty-eight percent of U.S. citizens over the age of twenty-five holding bachelor's degrees,⁶ many students do not have parents or relatives who have earned a degree or fully understand the benefits and process of doing so. This leads to the question: What can be done to instill in students the desire to attend college?

One possible answer is to formally teach high school students about college. While an English teacher in a low-income Chicago neighborhood, I developed a three-day unit about college and presented it to my freshmen each year at the start of the second quarter. Without access to data regarding the percentage of my students who have gone on to higher education (I left my school after two years), it is impossible to quantify the effectiveness of the unit. However, I am in touch with a number of former students who are now freshmen in college, and it appears the time I put into planning and presenting was indeed well spent.

From Inspiration to Instruction

A few days before classes began in August 2001, I attended my school's freshman orientation assembly. There I heard administrators, counselors, and teachers implore students to "earn your credits," "pass your classes," "stay out of the discipline office," and "get to class on time." What I did not hear was encouragement to do excellent work, achieve high grades, or set the goal of attending college. The first quarter brought more of the same. A counselor visited my class and talked about earning credits; teachers' lunchroom discussions focused on student deficits; and administrators asked teachers to

6. U.S. Census Bureau, "College Degree Nearly Doubles Annual Earnings," 2005, census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/004214.html.

report student failure rates after every five-week assessment. The freshman class had been discounted by nearly everyone in the building only weeks into their first year of high school! I was frustrated and angry and felt a responsibility to provide my students with something more than the low expectations that met them at school each day. That something more would be an introduction to college, through which I could bestow upon students high expectations and reveal the myriad benefits of meeting those expectations. To design the unit I recalled my preparation for college, researched current college admissions requirements and trends, and gathered ideas and documents from my college scrapbooks and course materials. After organizing the content into specific themes and activities, I was ready to spend three days immersing my students in the world of postsecondary education.

Day One

The first day began with students filling out a survey about future goals and how they might reach them (see Figure 1, p.112). While this prompted students to think about life after high school, their responses also enabled me to tailor my approach to the unit to the pre-knowledge and needs of each class. We then discussed practical things I knew most of my students could connect with—money and jobs. Students helped me design a budget on the chalkboard that separated essentials from extras, the idea being for them to understand (1) how budgeting works and (2) that having money to pay the rent, buy groceries, have some fun, and save for the future would require a good job. Having a good job would, in turn, require a college degree. During this conversation I discovered that because my students had so little money, they also had little concept of how budgeting was handled outside their community. For example, whereas many middle-class families budget twenty to thirty-five percent of their income for rent or mortgage payments, most of my students expected that fifty percent or more of the money they earned as adults would be used for this purpose. It was not my intention to teach them that the middle-class budgeting system I knew was the correct or only method; however, I thought it beneficial to show them how some people in other communities managed their finances.

Figure 1. Future Goals Survey

THE FUTURE

**1. What do you plan to do after high school?
(circle one option)**

- a) attend a 4-year college or university
- b) attend a 2-year junior college
- c) attend a technical school for careers such as plumbing, electric, construction, or computer science
- d) find a job right away in retail (clothing stores, Target, etc.), manual labor (construction, etc.) or some other area

2. How confident do you feel that you can achieve what you answered for question #1? Choose a number on the scale below.

- 1 2 3 4
not confident at all a little confident pretty confident extremely confident

3. Write two things you can do over the next 3.5 years to help you achieve your goal from question #1.

1)

2)

4. Why did you choose your answer for #1? (choose all that apply)

- a) for money or the chance to make money
- b) because someone you look up to or admire is doing that
- c) it is something you enjoy doing

Students next received a copy of my résumé. I pointed out that a person's educational background is the first thing listed on a résumé and recounted my interview for an internship during college, when my future boss greeted me with a compliment about the university I attended and my grade point average. I immediately proceeded to a talking point I would reiterate throughout the year: having options. Though I had become a teacher, I explained, my college courses and work experiences had also prepared me to enter fields unrelated to education or to attend graduate school. I was a teacher by choice. When I asked how many students knew someone with a job they didn't like but couldn't quit, most hands in each class shot into the air. I stressed that going to college would allow them to take a job because they wanted it, not because they had no other choice. I ended this portion of class by revealing the financial impact of college—that a person with a bachelor's degree will earn in his or her lifetime twice as much as a high school graduate.⁷

Halfway through our first day of the unit, we finally addressed the big question: What is college? To my surprise, none of my ninth graders could tell me anything about a typical week in college. I needed to connect college to high school (their best reference point), so I asked them to help me fill out a chart on the board that compared the two (see Table 1, p.120). After they provided the answer for a category in the high school column, I provided an answer and explanation for the corresponding category in the college column. Minutes later our chart showed that although the amount and difficulty of their coursework, as well as their responsibilities, would increase, they would also have more freedom. I wanted my students to understand that college was not simply an extension of high school, but an experience that would present new and different challenges and be a lot of fun! Their facial expressions and excited whispers to nearby classmates told me I had succeeded. A copy of my college transcript further revealed to my students what awaited them in four years. In addition to proving the accuracy of the college column with regard to number of classes taken and hours of class per week, it evoked numerous

7. Associated Press, "Census: More degrees equal bigger bucks," *CNN.com*, July 19, 2002, archives.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/07/18/degree.dollars.ap.

questions. “How did you decide what to take?” “Are you required to take certain classes?” “What if you don’t like the classes you pick?” As I provided answers, my freshmen seemed increasingly eager to have this experience themselves. During the first half of class, I portrayed college as a necessity; as we moved into day two students also saw it as a desired destination.

Table 1. Differences Between High School and College

	High School	College
Hours of class per week	30	12–16
First class starts at	8:00 a.m.	You make your own schedule
Number of classes per week	7	3–5
Rules in class	No eating, drinking, gum, or hats	Generally allowed to eat, drink, chew gum, and wear a hat
Hours of homework per week	7–14	30–40
Number of organizations/clubs students can join	10–15	Hundreds
Number of parties per weekend	6–8	Dozens
Responsibilities/ Staying on track	Most classes are picked for you; security guards and teachers make sure you are in class; teachers meet with and call your parents	You choose your classes; you make appointments with your advisor; you choose to come to class on time; grades are not sent to your parents

I explained to students that these numbers were based on my experience at a large, public university and may be somewhat different at small or private universities.

Day Two

Part of the *can* that current higher education efforts fail to address is students' understanding of the "pipeline" leading to postsecondary education. Day two therefore was designed to be a basic map of how to get to college. I told my fourteen- and fifteen-year-old freshmen that in three years they would apply to college, and their acceptance would be based primarily on three things: grade point average, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement. As our discussion about grades began, my frustration and anger at the school's "powers that be" returned. Though students had already received their first-quarter report cards, no one had explained to them what grade point average meant or how it was calculated. Not understanding its importance, they had simply focused on whether or not they passed or earned their credits. They were quite interested in having that mysterious number broken down, so we worked through a mock report card on the board. Suddenly, letter grades were also numbers with important values. Students also had lots of questions about standardized tests—what tests they would take, when they would take them, and what scores they needed to achieve. I answered that they would take the ACT as juniors, but tried to temper their already evident test anxiety by telling them that coursework should be their current focus.⁸

Our conversation then turned to extracurricular involvement. I explained that colleges want students to show high commitment and leadership in a few activities, rather than having low involvement in many. (Many colleges no longer covet "well-rounded" students, but instead want focused students who en masse will form a "well-rounded" student body. As would be expected, students whose parents or high schools were most informed about the college admission process first recognized and adapted to this change.) I wanted students to understand that involvement should start during freshman or sophomore year so they could "pay their dues" before securing leadership positions as upperclassmen. To someone coming from a family where parents have "climbed the corporate ladder," this may seem obvious. However,

8. Toward the end of the year I explained how the ACT was scored and encouraged students to buy a prep book and start working out of it. Students at my school scored an average of 14 on the ACT, compared to the national average of 21.

many students do not know the importance of positioning themselves in this way. To model this, I distributed copies of the high school résumé I created prior to applying to colleges. It included my involvement in sports, clubs, and service activities and was broken down by year, illustrating where I allocated my time and how my involvement increased during the years. I felt this was especially necessary given that neither the school nor community culture emphasized student involvement in extracurricular activities. Few opportunities were offered by the school (e.g., there was no student newspaper or drama club, and the National Honor Society did not hold meetings, sponsor programs, or provide community service), and in the community, many students began working at age fifteen (sometimes due to family finances, sometimes because having a job was simply what was valued). Though I advocated strongly for students to make extracurricular activities a priority, I questioned whether or not I was infringing upon community norms and values by doing so. Whereas my father did not allow me to work during high school, many of my students' families *needed* them to work. In the end, I sensed that my students appreciated what I had presented. Whether they or their families acted on the information was beyond my control.

Day Three

Each year, day three commenced with a guest speaker, a senior from our school who was an honor student and had received a scholarship to play college basketball. (Though I am critical of most aspects of the school, I must acknowledge its women's basketball program as a bright spot. The coach pushed her players to earn the grades and test scores necessary to attend four-year universities, and they responded. Graduating team members attended universities across the nation that were reputable in both academics and athletics.) They told my wide-eyed freshmen why they were excited to go to college and what they did to get there. The second year I taught this unit, our speaker revealed that her summer mornings began at 6:00 a.m. with running on the beach, that after games and practices during the season she spent hours doing homework, and that she was currently taking Advance Placement calculus. Some students appeared intimidated at

the effort she was putting forth; at the same time, though, they were seeing someone from their school who worked hard and was successful. Kendrick, a student in my second-period class, wrote in a post-unit reflection: "...after [the guest speaker] came in I knew I could make it."

We next discussed financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Financial aid is another part of the "pipeline" to postsecondary education. It requires filling out an FAFSA, college-specific financial aid forms, and scholarship applications; having parents' tax information available; and knowing who to call and what questions to ask when confusion arises. In families whose parents are financially illiterate or have little education, the burden falls on the student to know and understand what must be done to access the financial aid available to them. This ended up being a crucial portion of the unit because many students believed college was too expensive for them. Once they understood that scholarships and loans were available, they seemed more assured that college was a viable post-high-school option.

Our unit ended with a review of the goals students established on day one (see Figure 1) and a chance for them to reevaluate those goals in light of the past three days. When comparing individual students' pre- and post-unit answers, I continually found differences on three of the four questions. Though some students had initially noted their desire to attend a four-year college in response to question one, more than half were planning on attending a two-year junior college or technical school or had no plans to pursue postsecondary education. After the unit, most of these students planned on attending a four-year college, while others were now willing to try a two-year junior college. I also found a difference in confidence levels reported in question two. Pre-unit levels varied considerably for students planning on attending a four-year college; on the post-unit survey, however, nearly every student who planned to attend a four-year college was "pretty" or "extremely" confident. A student in my fifth-period class, Lakenya, particularly impressed me with her post-unit responses to questions one and two. Lakenya initially planned on finding a job in a clothing store after high school and was "extremely confident" about her chances to do so. After the unit she planned to attend a two-year junior college but was only "pretty confident" about her

chances. Something in those three days had encouraged her to stretch herself, to reach for the higher goal even though it meant taking a risk and moving out of her comfort zone. A final observation involves question four. At the start of the week, most students based their future plans on money and/or enjoyment. As we concluded our unit, many of these students' answers also included admiration for someone who had chosen that path. This change indicated to me that students had been strongly influenced by the experiences of the guest speaker.

Reflections

With the exception of some minor changes, I would teach this unit the same way today as I did four years ago. After the unit my students better understood (1) what college is, (2) its practical importance, and (3) how to get there. They *wanted* to go to college, and they possessed the vocabulary and knowledge to intelligently discuss and plan for this desired outcome of their K–12 experience. The desire that ideally would come from the home had been built in the classroom. That this was established in their first semester of high school was significant, since students are accepted to college primarily based on what they accomplish during their first three years. Students must develop good study habits, enroll in college-prep courses, and study for and take the ACT or SAT during this time, which means the motivation to attend college should be present well before junior or senior year.

Though today I am pleased with how I chose to introduce my students to college, at the time it was awkward to continually refer to myself and my experiences. I was wary of revealing too much personal information, as well as appearing self-righteous before students who did not have the resources and support systems that helped me during my schooling. In the end, however, I saw it as necessary to make the material as relevant as possible. For example, because the handouts I provided (my résumé, college transcript, and high school résumé) related to my life and experiences, students could ask specific questions that I could answer. Using my own experiences also gave me credibility, since students quickly realized I had just graduated from college and had been in high school only a few years earlier.

After presenting this unit for the first time, I worried that its message would eventually fade. My solution to this potential problem was to build a Website that included information on financial aid, links to the Websites of all U.S. colleges and universities, and a checklist explaining how to prepare for college during each year of high school.⁹ During the second semester I brought my students to the computer lab and taught them how to use the resources on the site. When I left the school (and the state), the site was still there to remind students of my high expectations for them and guide them along the road to college.

A Call to Action

Reforms affecting student achievement and financial aid have indeed given many enthusiastic and talented students access to postsecondary education; however, it is important to realize that not all students want to attend college. We must put the horse back in front of the cart and provide students with an understanding of college that motivates them to apply, attend, and graduate. A classroom-based program like the one described here is one way of accomplishing this at the high school level. Organizing the content of such a program could be done by school leaders or ninth grade faculty teams, and all subject areas could be involved in its presentation (e.g., for three days, teachers present the unit to their freshman classes during second period). In schools where a cooperative effort is unlikely, I encourage individual teachers to be creative and find the time to share this vital information with students. At a time when a college degree (or lack thereof) increasingly determines a person's economic and social standing,¹⁰ we must do everything possible to ensure that *want* is as widespread as *can* for our high school students.

9. The URL is: umich.edu/~msalmono/college.html. I keep the site updated and frequently e-mail my former students with reminders to visit it.

10 David Brooks, "The Education Gap," *New York Times*, September 25, 2005.