TURNING MIRRORS INTO WINDOWS - WINDOWS RESEARCH BRIEF

# Understanding & Embracing Different Cultures

If history has taught us anything, it is that what we *think* we know may not be a widely accepted truth. Instead of embracing our personal truth as objective truth, we need to work toward an intentional understanding of different cultures, backgrounds, skills, and interests to redefine how we approach preparation for post-secondary education with our students.

There are some common misconceptions about education and careers that *hinder* students' full potential. We are obliged to understand these misconceptions, to address them in an open and honest way with our students, and to reshape our own beliefs in order to forge a path to a more enlightened and holistic program. It is those “... schools [which are] possessed by a robust sense of efficacy for serving all students, regardless of background, [that] are those most likely to successfully mitigate achievement gaps” (Goddard, et al., 2017).

Researchers have identified that a student’s affinity (perceived ability and interest) for an aspect of their high school academics (e.g. math or English) “influence academic choices such as college major and occupation” (Umarji et al., 2018). Bright (2020) discusses the implications of reality on career awareness. Lack of exposure to career options often results in young people never considering potential paths. Role models, however, are shown to positively impact their career aspirations and beliefs.

Rural communities, which often lack employment opportunities for those with college degrees, may inadvertently limit student awareness of professional job opportunities; instead college is represented as a vehicle best suited to take students away from their home communities. However, this perception can be turned around by communities coming together to offer support and by building connections to not only outside opportunities but also to local ones that can help students be successful. By being involved with school leaders, community leaders can ensure that students have the opportunity to see how their academic work can connect with careers that are available locally. Students may also seek opportunities to learn skills outside of the community that they can bring back to assist in developing the community and job opportunities.

Fletcher, Hernandez-Gantes, and Smith explored Victory Academy, a case study of a Latinx community coming together with a shared goal of ensuring the social mobility of students. They examined how perspectives and targeted strategies support students through post-secondary education and how positive experiences have empowered students and families to expand cultural norms and barriers. These beliefs and identities motivated the school administrators and counselors to be effective and transformational leaders at Victory Academy (Crow & Scribner, 2014). Fletcher, et. al., write that “[t]herefore, students translated their resiliency in life to become the highest academic performers within the school district” (2019). This ultimately enabled students and families to envision pathways for success they had not previously considered.

# Bridging the Gap

Research in the field of career explorations shows declining interest in STEM subject areas when female students reach adolescence (Hyllegard et al., 2017). This is due to a lack of environments which promotes collaborative learning, hands-on experiences, creativity, practical applications, and stereotype threats (Cooper & Heaverlo, 2013). Given that girls do develop an interest in STEM careers in proportion to their enjoyment of STEM classes and activities, it is important to identify specific skills that will help to encourage their passion in STEM subject areas (Sadler, et al., 2012).

Due to the rigor of the school curriculum, many teachers may not have the capacity to go deeper into various interests that students may have towards a field. Clubs are another avenue to consider. With teacher time and institutional funding at a premium, it is worth considering how to better invest in extracurricular activities such as clubs (Kronholz, 2012). Though there is value in clubs serving simply as something fun for students to do within the school framework, clubs can also provide students with the tools necessary to succeed beyond the K-12 environment. Research suggests that when structured with educational objectives in mind, clubs can be powerful tools for improving student preparedness for college and the workforce (Ahmad et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2019; Levine, 2016).

Regardless of whether or not students head off to college, participation in school clubs equips students with skills that will help them thrive in professional and academic contexts. For example, one study indicates that students who participated in school-sponsored activities for two years were 97% more likely to attend college than their peers who did not participate and 179% more likely to complete college (Kronholz, 2012).

Researchers also note that club participation plays a vital role in equipping students with the skills needed to forge valuable relationships with teachers, peers, and community members of different backgrounds through a process known as “bridging social capital” (Levine, 2016). Morris (2016) states that although it can be difficult for lower-income students to bridge social capital, it will be easier for them to do so if the same extracurricular opportunities are available. Solberg et al. (2020) note that the extracurricular opportunities provide opportunities to acquire transferable skills, known as “sustainable livelihood” skills, that will enable them to excel in a variety of career fields (p. 192).

Club participation of all kinds provides an avenue for long-lasting benefits beyond the immediate impact seen in high school. These benefits can be further enhanced when a curriculum explicitly aims to improve life skills for college and workforce success. Through a carefully designed curriculum that overlays the traditional club structure, students stand to significantly benefit as they work toward their future.

High school should be a safe, supportive environment that provides students with opportunities to build career development skills through providing resources from within and outside the school as well as allowing students to develop soft skills to learn from, understand, respect, and value one another’s differences. Studies have shown that adolescents experience different barriers in career development, dependent on location, that may lead to higher rates of unemployment (Turner & Conkel, 2010). Faculty, staff, and external partners in and outside the community can help advocate and create bridges of opportunities, windows, to help remove barriers and to enhance student achievement in areas that many may not have considered. While there is ample evidence and research to support the addition of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom setting, there is further evidence that by making resources and support accessible to students at school, educators can lessen the future wage and job opportunity gaps for the generation of students they teach (Turner & Conkel, 2010).

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# Resources

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