



THE IMPORTANCE OF POSTSECONDARY CAMPUS VISITS: IMAGINING POSSIBLE FUTURE SELVES

GEAR UP for LIFE | K20 Center

Introduction

While primary and secondary education help graduates maintain social and economic stability, current workforce needs and job trends illustrate a clear need for the social and economic mobility created by tertiary education.¹ Therefore, to close achievement and income gaps, creating equal access to higher education for all students must be a priority. Yet students from underrepresented and underserved populations face both tangible and intangible barriers that impede access to postsecondary education (PSE). One strategy to break down those barriers is to introduce secondary students to college and career tech campuses early. Visiting PSE institutions in seventh and eighth grade and throughout early high school helps students conceptualize their future, imagining themselves in those spaces.

Possible Future Selves

Decades of research indicate that helping students set goals, strive for those goals, and imagine their possible future selves meeting those goals improves mood, fosters their ability to manifest results, and contributes to enhanced self-regulation.² Although imagining our future selves often begins with focusing on a desired end result, educators can help students create a roadmap to guide them toward that desired destination. It is not enough to give middle school and early high school students information about PSE opportunities.³ It is imperative to encourage them to consider why and how those opportunities impact their future and what steps they should take to reach those envisioned goals and possibilities. The following section addresses how campus visits can prime students to imagine their future selves and navigate around both tangible and intangible barriers to PSE.

PSE Campus Visits

Research is ongoing as it pertains to creating a college-going culture and developing postsecondary readiness. The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, more commonly known as GEAR UP, is one federal program designed to address this issue among populations with greater socioeconomic needs.⁴ Several studies show that the strategies implemented in GEAR UP programs increase the number of students who enroll in college-focused coursework, who enroll in college, and who persist in college. A recent study emphasizes the major impact of campus visits on those outcomes. According to Kim et al. (2021), “Students who participated in college visits were approximately 9 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within a year and within 2 years of high school graduation, and they were almost 13 percentage points more likely to persist in college compared with college enrollees who did not participate in such visits.” Research demonstrates a correlation between early college visits during middle school and increased interest in attending college; further, it indicates that multiple campus visits throughout a student’s secondary education compound the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment.⁵ The following sections describe the benefits of campus visits in more detail.

Campus Visits as Strategic Interventions

Overcoming Tangible Barriers to PSE Access

Several tangible barriers limit postsecondary opportunities for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including a lack of academic preparation, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of information on costs, benefits, and the application process. However, purposeful campus visits can address these barriers. Students who learn about the benefits of PSE early can make more informed decisions about high school coursework to pursue their goals—whether

¹Ma et al., 2016, Improving College Access and Completion, 2015

²Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2004

³Swanson et al., 2021

⁴US Department of Education, 2024

⁵Smith et al., 2022

this means enrolling in career tech programs, AP classes, or concurrent courses at a community college or university. Campus visits that focus on pathways to careers can inspire action in late middle school and early high school students, and this prepares them for success after high school. Additionally, early exposure to financial aid and scholarship options helps students navigate the decision-making process armed with the information and encouragement they need to seek out the resources in place to help them access PSE. For students later in high school, well-designed educational campus visits can help connect them with admissions officers and representatives equipped to assist with the application process.

Overcoming Intangible Barriers to PSE Access

Social capital—especially social connectedness—is an intangible barrier to PSE for students from populations with higher economic needs. Since students construct their own self-image and potential for achievement based on their environment and experiences, then it follows that students with limited social connectedness to postsecondary opportunities are limited in the ways they might envision their possible future selves.⁶ They lack ties to general college knowledge. Campus visits bridge the gap created by this social capital deficit by giving students opportunities to personally connect and interact on campuses. Late middle school and early high school students are more likely to aspire to attend a PSE if they can picture themselves—and envision greater potential for their own achievement—in that space.

Conclusion

Research shows that intervening early in late middle school and early high school can change postsecondary outcomes.⁷ Scalable educational campus visits can introduce students to career pathways, financial aid resources, and PSE application processes while connecting them to experiences and creating social belonging that helps them imagine their future selves within those spaces. Campus visits amplify the possibilities for students from underrepresented and underserved populations by helping them understand and envision their place in the future, inspiring them to take action and pursue their college and career goals.

⁶Swanson, et al., 2021

⁷Kim et al., 2021; Swanson, et al., 2021

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