

AFFIRMING EQUITY: CREATING ACCESS TO COLLEGE CAREERS AMONG  
FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR IN  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

Students of color and first-generation students across the country encounter substantial barriers to higher education with regard to access and preparation. This project focused on increasing awareness of college professions and interest in pursuing a college degree among elementary school students in a western state with high percentages of first generation students and students of color. A literature review on this topic yielded several important findings. First, it was found that many schools do not have career awareness programs because of limited resources such as time, budget and equipment. These studies suggest that making students aware of college careers provides them with activities for achieving self-esteem and helps to answer questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" In addition, raising awareness of college careers enhances students' familiarity with many professions. Second, lack of career education has caused a majority of students to be interested in occupations such as singer, actor and dancer that are perpetuated by the media. With these findings in mind, the objective of this project is to introduce careers that require a college degree to third grade students from an elementary school in a western state. The purpose of the project is to foster awareness of college professions and interest in pursuing a college degree among the third grade students. A pre-survey and post-survey were given at the beginning and end of the project to see if there was an increased interest in college and a college education among the third graders.

**Introduction/Background:**

Research reveals substantial barriers to educational access for first generation students and students of color across the nation. Students of color and first-generation students lack adequate access to and preparation for institutions of higher education. For example, studies find that many schools with significant populations of underserved students do not have college career and college awareness programs because of limited resources such as time, budget, and equipment. These studies suggest that making students aware of college careers provides students with activities for achieving self-esteem and helps to answer questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?”. In addition, raising awareness of college careers enhances students’ familiarity with many professions. Having these findings in mind, the objective of this project is to introduce careers that require a college degree to third grade students attending Mountain View Elementary School. This school has statistically high percentages of students who access free-lunch programs as well as significant percentages of students of color enrolled in the school. The purpose of the project is to foster awareness of college professions and interest in pursuing a college degree among the third grade students. A pre-survey and post survey were given at the beginning and end of the project to see if there was an increased interest in college and a college education among the third graders.

**Review of Literature:**

Solutions to educational access and equity issues can’t be achieved by individual schools alone; they are a national problem that must be addressed by the entire society which requires resources and a team approach. The combined efforts of students, parents, teachers, administrators, community based organizations, and businesses as well as

federal, state, and local governments are needed to combat this growing problem (Woods, 2001). The National Dropout Prevention Center suggests the following have had positive effects on the drop out rate such as: early childhood education, out of school experiences, community collaboration, reading and writing programs, individualized instruction, mentoring/tutoring, career education/work force readiness, learning styles/multiple intelligence strategies (U.S. Department of Education). Further, understanding the sources of group differences will enable educators and policy makers to direct efforts more effectively toward improving the educational attainment of students of color (Bohon, Kierpatrick Johnson, and Gorman, 2006).

It is clear from the research, as outlined above, that investment in targeted educational programs will help to alleviate some of the inequities in the school system, especially with regard to fostering access for the most underserved students. In addition, it is clear that some strategies have shown progress in expanding access for underserved students including the following: providing programming at the earliest grade levels in elementary school and providing a vision of higher education through raising awareness about college and college careers.

One example of a successful program which focuses on the K-12 school years was established at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The Pre-College Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence (PEOPLE), started in 1999. The program works with students of color to build up the academic skills needed for college. The program was originally designed for high-school students, but has expanded to middle-school students, and, in fall 2005, to students in elementary school. College students tutor the elementary students, helping them with homework, playing games with them, and

working in small groups. Some tutors are former PEOPLE participants themselves. Though the academics are important, the program directors believe the mentoring that takes place is also important and crucial to the success of the program.

To date, the current literature tends to focus almost exclusively on high school and middle school retention (Rumberger, 1995). Further, there is a limited amount of research that has focused on students of color, because early studies of educational attainment were based on the experiences of white male youth (Kao and Tienda, 1998). Thus, there is a need to implement programs that provide information about college and college careers/higher education in the elementary school years among students of color and first generation students (Magnuson & Starr, 2000).

**Procedure:**

This project entailed a series of three Career-Day presentations to given at MVE for one third grade class. First, Shontol and Deisy met with Mrs. Moore at her convenience to discuss the project in detail and decided on dates for presentations. Shontol and Deisy also gave the teacher Parent Permission forms and Assent forms for the students. Parent Permission forms were sent home with each student in the class. The forms described the project, provided assurances of confidentiality as well as the voluntary nature of the project, and included Shontol and Deisy's names and numbers as well as Dr. Martinez's contact information, and requested permission for the child to participate in the project. The Parent Permission forms were clear that the child need not participate in the project to participate in all activities during the Career-Day presentations. Assent forms were also given to each student which described the project

in understandable terms and requested permission from the child to agree to participate in the project.

Shontol and Deisy visited the class for the first of three Career-Day presentations. The first presentations at MVE began with the pre-survey for participating students. On the day of the third and final Career-Day presentation at MVE a post-survey was given to participating students. The three careers were: Doctor, Archeologist, and Psychologist. The pre- and post- surveys were meant to assess students' familiarity with college, college careers, and their interest in college.

Each of the three "Career Days" involved a PowerPoint on the career and hands-on activities during intermissions to help the students better understand that particular career. The presentations focused on presenting information about careers which require a college/university education.

### **Results:**

The Career Day presentations were demonstrated to be effective with third grade Students at Mountain View Elementary. The Career Day presentations increased the students' awareness of college and also motivated them to believe in their own ability to go to college some day. We believe, however, that activities involving parents and family members, multiple field trips in a year's time, and frequent and long term involvement of college-aged peer role models would increase the success of this project. Students were able to learn about careers that required a college degree and higher education. On the post survey all students indicated that they wanted to go to college. Students also provided feedback about other careers they would like to learn about in the future.

**Reflection:**

Last semester I started my Integrative Service Project at Mountain View Elementary (MVE). This project has definitely been a growing experience. It's provided me the opportunity to work with people in the community such as Mr. John Erlacher, Mrs. Carole Moore and Katie Olson. The purpose of my ISP is to talk to elementary school children about higher education. I met with the staff at MVE as well as people on my committee. I was able to coordinate meeting times with agency stakeholders as well as meetings with committee members. The most challenging task was trying to find a time when everyone could meet. Each of us has very busy schedules. My hope for this project was to spend more time in the school with the students so I could get to know them better. Due to time constraints and their busy schedule that was not possible fall semester. However I was able to do one presentation on doctors at MVE with Deisy. We prepared a power point presentation, bought supplies and distributed them at the presentation. We were able to meet the students and have a fun day with them and Mrs. Moore.

This semester we prepared the second presentation on Archaeologists and Psychologists. I've also been able to get to know Mrs. Moore and have been able to work in the classroom with the students on a weekly basis since January. This has provided an opportunity to get to know the kids better. Some of the literature on this topic suggest that children from low-socioeconomic situations are less likely to succeed statistically. This is frustrating because I came from a low SES environment. What students need are resources and someone to believe in them. I know I've been fortunate to have such

people in my life. I think Margaret Mead said it best, "Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For indeed, that's all who ever have." While there have been challenges and obstacles such as district policy, class curricula and schedules to work with, I feel like this project has been successful and an experience I won't forget.

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