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Laying the Groundwork: The Constant Gardening of Community–University– School Partnerships for Postsecondary Access and Success

Donald Earl Collins,[1] Alexandra T. Weinbaum,[1] Gilberto Ramón,[1] and Debra Vaughan[1]

Abstract

Collaborative efforts between school districts and higher education institutions to address access, retention, and achievement issues for underrepresented students have grown in recent years. Yet many of these university or school district–led efforts possess limited understanding of the community context for systemic change, and engage community stakeholders in limited ways. This article illuminates a national initiative's efforts to develop local partnerships led by community organizations to influence systemic change in K-12 and higher education institutions around postsecondary access and success.

Resumen

Esfuerzos colaborativos entre distritos escolares e instituciones de educación superior enfocados en asuntos de acceso, retención y aprovechamiento de estudiantes de baja representación han crecido en años recientes. Sin embargo, muchos de estos esfuerzos dirigidos por universidades o distritos escolares poseen un entendimiento limitado del contexto cultural de cambio sistémico, y tienen limitado compromiso de los líderes comunitarios. Este artículo ilumina los esfuerzos de una iniciativa nacional para desarrollar asociaciones locales dirigidas por organizaciones comunitarias para influenciar cambio sistémico en Preescolar-Preparatoria e instituciones de educación superior sobre acceso y éxito universitario.

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An assumption among educators in the K-12 and postsecondary communities is that a university or college—or occasionally, a school district—should take the lead in developing and implementing reform efforts that address diversity, equity, preparation, achievement, and graduation from high school or college. Given the persistence of the achievement gap between Whites, Blacks, and Latinos at all educational levels—not to mention the grossly uneven playing field that low-income students face regardless of race, geography, or citizenship status—this assumption needs to be questioned.

In this article, we propose to examine a foundation-funded initiative, Partnerships for College Access and Success (PCAS), in which community-based organizations in eight cities led partnerships focused on the improvement of access and attainment of underrepresented students[1] in postsecondary education. The initiative in each location was led by a well-respected community-based organization with a history of initiating and facilitating effective educational programs and strong leadership. Each partnership consisted of the aforementioned lead organization, a 2- and 4-year institution, and a school district, with many of them involving additional community organizations and representatives from the business and civic communities.

Over the past 4 years, the PCAS mission has included recognition of the need for engaging community organizations as lead agencies that would help shape and operationalize work around postsecondary access and retention and a process to build trust and address conflict. The PCAS initiative was based on a theory of change that recognized the need for a community organization to act as an intermediary and as a facilitator among postsecondary institutions, school districts, and other community entities. The initiative was designed to bolster each grantee's capacity to use its partnership to achieve systemic changes in access and success for underrepresented students. To this end, it was driven by a theory of change (or theory of action) with intermediate- and long-term activities, benchmarks, and goals that included the collection and analysis of data meant to inform the partnership's decision-making regarding postsecondary preparation, access, retention, and attainment.

In this article, we argue that the PCAS work is important for understanding the significance of community engagement in the work of advocating and bringing about systemic changes in both secondary and postsecondary institutions to improve opportunities for access and success in college for traditionally underrepresented students. We also posit that leadership from community-based organizations—even with histories of successful intervention in education reform is not sufficient. The initiative also required an intermediary organization, in this case the Academy for Educational Development (AED), to play a critical role in the selection of the grantees, provision of technical assistance, accountability for the initiatives, and facilitation of learning across communities.

In this article, we focus on two community-based organizations (one in San Antonio, Texas, the other in Chattanooga, Tennessee) and on the factors that led to their effectiveness in successfully addressing historic and continuing barriers to college access and success in their communities. Although only one community's

population is predominantly Latino—the other is majority African American and low-income Whites—many of the same kinds of issues around successful collaboration to address postsecondary access and success barriers arose as key organizations engaged in the PCAS initiative.

Literature Review

Most of the literature on developing collaborative efforts between school districts and higher education institutions to address access, retention, and achievement gap issues for underrepresented students calls attention to universities and school districts (and state education policies and practices indirectly) with universities as the central partners in working with school district or community organizations (Carey, 2004, Gomez, Bissell, Danziger, & Casselman, 1990; Grant & Murray, 1999; Henschel & McLaughlin, 1992; Ravitch, 2000; Timpane & White, 1998). The range of the work of these partnerships varies from small pilot programs that can be university department specific (e.g., literacy outreach, teacher preparation and professional development, after-school programs) to the beginnings of initiatives for systemic change in the ways a given postsecondary institution works with school districts or communities (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Butterfield, 2005; Bailey, Hughes & Moore, 2003; Jacoby, 2003; Soska & Johnson Butterfield, 2005; Workforce Strategy Center, 2003). Most of these partnerships fall in the category of pilot programs, with researchers concerning themselves with the kinds of resources a department, school of education or university could bring to bear on issues faced by a relatively small group of students or teachers at a school, a group of schools, or a school district (Cantor, 1993; Clarke, Hero, Sidney, Fraga, & Erlichson, 2006; Grant & Murray, 1999; Maurrasse, 2001; Ravitch, 2000; Timpane & White, 1998).

In the past decade, the literature in this area has shifted to look at the building of partnerships in which universities are critical players but not the central entities in planning and administering the work or in facilitating such partnerships. Foundations, often working in collaboration with one another or with the nonprofit sector, have fueled the development of different and more egalitarian partnerships in the past decade that include representation from diverse sectors of the community. Among others, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (New Options for Youth), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Model High Schools, including Early College High Schools), Carnegie Corporation of New York (Teachers for a New Era), and the Ford Foundation (Collaboration for Education Reform Initiative) have funded a variety of long-term projects in which universities have been critical—but not the lead institution (Bodilly, Chun, Ikemoto, & Stockly, 2004; Sanders, 2005; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2005; Workforce Strategy Center, 2003). Nonprofit organizations with a history of facilitating partnerships and not tied to either a university or a school district have usually been the lead entities for these projects whose raison d'être was systemic change in how 2- and 4-year institutions, school districts, and community organizations engage their leadership, faculty, and students in addressing achievement gaps, low graduation rates for low-income and students of color, and poor postsecondary outcomes.

An assumption among funders was that collaboration among these sectors would result in better services for underrepresented students and provide more resources to school districts and nonprofit organizations that work with them. In the 2004 RAND Corporation report to Ford Foundation on *Challenges and Potential of a Collaborative Approach to Education Reform*, the authors challenged this assumption, indicating instead that much greater public engagement and a linking of pre-K-12 and higher education systems might be needed to bring about the kinds of systemic changes that were envisioned:

> After years of attempting to improve education outcomes for all students and not seeing the fully desired results, the Ford Foundation . . . staff became convinced that specific sites could make quality teaching in all classrooms a reality by employing a combination of tactics, such as effectively linking the different levels of *pre-K–12 to higher-education systems* [italics added]; promoting informed public dialog, debate, and consensus-building around school reform options; promoting professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators; promoting district and state policy changes; and enhancing the role of parents and caregivers. (Bodilly et al., 2004, p. xv)

To address its concerns, the Ford Foundation created the Collaborating for Education Reform Initiative (CERI) in 1997, with the thinking that "basing the impetus for reform largely outside of the public school central office would . . . encourage the development of collaboratives of community-based organizations in urban settings," enabling school districts and postsecondary institutions to better "address systemic barriers to high quality teaching and learning" (Bodilly et al., 2004, p. xvi).

Although the literature in general shows these assumptions to be sound, the reality is that these efforts also tended to be top-down even with the inclusion of community-based organizations. This was a result of leadership inertia in school districts and in higher education institutions and lack of alignment between school district and postsecondary policies (Bodilly et al., 2004; Kirst, Venezia, & Antonio, 2004; Oliva, 2004; Sanders, 2005). At the heart of this work was an assumption that partnerships could successfully address complex social problems, better than individual institutions. But as sociologist Francie Ostrower put it, "Partnerships can be a powerful tool . . . But partnerships are *tools*; they are not ends in themselves. Partnerships are not appropriate for every task, and they will not work if used incorrectly" (Ostrower, 2005, p. 40).

We propose that one of the reasons that the kinds of partnerships described above have not been successful is that university–school and/or community partnerships miss the major challenge in addressing the educational needs of underrepresented students. The critical issue is that students who are most at risk of dropping out of high school or, if they are able to gain entrance into a postsecondary institution, will most likely not complete their first year of study. With so much state and philanthropic focus on accountability at the K-12 level and on improving high school standards, the actual collaboration around improving the postsecondary access and success for these underrepresented students has

been limited at best. These collaboration models either are incapable of fulfilling this role or were not designed to fulfill them (Bodilly et al., 2004; Oliva, 2004; Ostrower, 2005; Sanders, 2005; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2005).

There are other issues beyond the insufficient attention to underrepresented students around their postsecondary preparation and success. In the top-down approach to partnership development, states, universities, and foundations have not traditionally tapped into and benefited from the ideas and resources of nonprofits (especially community-based organizations). Among those ideas and resources are the role of effective community organizations in transforming theory into practice and the role of intermediary nonprofit organizations in building a context for trust and maintaining collaborations that benefit all parties involved. Many state or foundation-funded collaborations possess a limited understanding of the community context for systemic change around postsecondary access and retention, not to mention limited engagement of community stakeholders in helping to design program and policies that would benefit underrepresented students. These partnerships are often not rooted in a local community or its context, or within an organization that has community-wide credibility and proven success—critical elements in the success of a community–university–school partnership (Baum, 2003; Bodilly et al., 2004; Brabeck, Walsh, & Latta, 2003; Decker, Decker, & Brown, 2006; Hill & Harvey, 2000; Ostrower, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Timpane & White, 1998; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998).

Needless to say, it is equally important to understand the local population in which an organization is engaged in order to successfully collaborate with other stakeholders, especially the organizations that represent these communities most directly (Clarke et al., 2006; Podair, 2002, Wilson 1999). In the case of underrepresented students such as Latinos and African Americans, this is about more than the differences in barriers such as language, culture, generational, immigration, and socioeconomic status (Clarke, et al., 2006; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Vaca, 2004). Partnering with community stakeholders also involves meeting them where they are in their perceptions of barriers facing Latino and Black students and constantly tapping into student and stakeholder aspirations for where these students should be educationally (Clarke et al., 2006; Collins, 2007; Vaca, 2004).

The PCAS Approach and Process

Similar to the Ford Foundation's CERI project, the AED team of six staff members began the PCAS initiative in February 2004 with the premise that effective cooperation of influential stakeholders in partnerships and the involvement of organizations with strong roots in their communities—as well as members of the communities they represent—is needed to call public attention to the barriers to postsecondary attainment for underrepresented students. Such partnerships are needed to advocate for and support the coordination of programs and policies to improve the access and success in postsecondary education of underrepresented populations. To the extent that the PCAS partnerships could be effective in this work, they could provide models for building similar partnerships throughout the country.

Out of this meeting came the following criteria for understanding the PCAS initiative and for conducting our outreach to the eventual grantees for it:

- The concept of a partnership must be rooted within a community context and led by organizations that have a history of good community work and relations.
- This community partnership must be led by a nonprofit organization that had a history of working well with other groups.
- The lead organizations would have experience either from previous partnership work or as an organization in college access, some aspect of K-12 reform, workforce development or adult education, or youth development and engagement.
- The organizations selected for this initiative would work for systemic change around K-12 and postsecondary success for underrepresented students, including the collection and use of data to drive their partnerships' decision making in their work.

Central to the development of each PCAS grantee was the technical assistance that AED, as the lead intermediary, provided individually to each site and collectively through convening directors' meetings and annual learning communities that included representatives from each grantee's partnership. Central to AED's approach was a philosophy of technical assistance based on "collaborative inquiry" into the collective work of the initiative (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000) and into each grantee's work. This approach was taken by each technical assistance liaison in his or her support of individual grantees, and then introduced into the learning community that was convened annually and composed of representatives of all the institutions represented in the partnerships.

According to the authors of *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice*, it is "a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question or importance to them" (Bray et al., 2000). The reasons that AED adopted this approach for the PCAS initiative was that the work involved many unknowns in building local partnerships among institutions and organizations that traditionally had not collaborated in addressing postsecondary access and success. There were no books or research specifically on the topic, and the sites' efforts needed to be guided by a forum in which they could find out about related research, hear what others were doing, and have a safe structure for making sense out of their evolving experiences. This needed to be done on two levels—within their respective partnerships where their theory of change was to be the guide for the planning and assessment of their work and within a community of practice that AED convened through a variety of venues.

AED believed that it was important to constitute the members of the initiative as a learning team that could bring rigorous processes of inquiry to their own work and to the collective work of the initiative. The team was often assisted by outside experts, but key to the technical assistance approach was that to use outside expertise well, each site had to reflect deeply and critically on its own practices. In this we were also

guided by the research on learning organizations (Senge, 1990), by the work of Schon (1983) on the need for experts to reflect on their practice in order to understand the assumptions that underpin them ("mental models" in Senge's words), and the literature on school improvement and use of protocols, specific structures, and tools to facilitate inquiry among teachers and mutual accountability for students' outcomes (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003; Weinbaum et al., 2004). Critical to this work is the growing understanding that educators need outside expertise to improve schools, but that they cannot use this well without rigorous reflection on their own practice.

In the PCAS learning community meetings, there were opportunities for each site to bring a "dilemma" that was discussed with a protocol that guided discussion and led to feedback to the site bringing the question. AED also posed initiative-wide questions and sought the collaborative inquiry of all directors into solutions for initiative-level decisions regarding what areas of support and research would be most valuable for everyone. It took the AED TA team a year to establish an environment in which sufficient trust was established for such initiative-wide inquiry to take place, but in the end it proved to be among the most powerful levers for change in the initiative. Sites were able to bring questions that were deeply troubling to a group of other directors and get and receive peer feedback that helped them see "outside the box"; members of similar institutions, for example, universities, were able to meet and reflect on pressing questions that affected their participation in the partnership; and a variety of tools were developed that were shared and used across the initiative, such as a rubric to assess partnership effectiveness and processes for collecting and sharing "difficult data" on student access and success.

For the PCAS initiative, the AED team worked with an evaluation team from OMG Center for Collaborative Learning (the external evaluators for the initiative) to develop both an initiative-wide theory of change (TOC) model that helped guide AED's technical assistance with the grantees and grantee-level TOC models that guided the work of each lead organization and its partnership. In order to develop the TOC model, each lead organization convened its partners to discuss and develop consensus around the site's TOC—a process involving a day of discussion, with follow-up revisions of the documents developed to represent the TOC. In addition, the AED team met with OMG's evaluators to discuss the TOC models (both the initiative-wide TOC and the grantee-specific ones). As a result of these meetings, the AED team, the OMG evaluators, and the PCAS grantees developed a series of outcomes and indicators—some common to all and some specific to each grantee. The following categories were used to assess progress of each grantee's work and across the initiative as a whole: (a) lead organization capacity for the work; (b) partnership development; (c) postsecondary access activities and outcomes for students; and (d) postsecondary success activities and outcomes for students (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2005a, 2005b).

In this article, we explore the following four lessons learned from the PCAS initiative through the above analysis of the literature on education reform, university–school and community partnerships, and postsecondary access and success, as well as through interviews with the key actors in San Antonio and Chattanooga, document review, including third-party evaluations of their work by the OMG Center for

Collaborative Learning, and data on student outcomes provided by the lead organizations in San Antonio and Chattanooga.

- *Antecedents:* The need for an already developed community partnership with sufficient capacity to facilitate the partnership's work and bring the right partners and stakeholders to the table.
- *Community readiness:* A community context that makes addressing challenges within the preschool-to-postsecondary education continuum—including post-secondary success—possible.
- *Data collection capacity:* The need to collect, share and use the data that the partnership has gathered to improve programming and create a trusting environment in which to improve access and success.
- *A theory of action:* The need for a theory of action and a set of measurable benchmarks that the partnership and evaluator can use to assess the effectiveness of the approach and to make midcourse corrections in approach as needed.

What cannot be underestimated here is the need for a high level of leadership at the lead organization, including experience in working with community stakeholders and a reputation in the community for implementing effective projects that benefit low-income students and students of color. In addition, both school district and postsecondary leadership must perceive the lead organization as capable of leading an important education initiative.

Leadership experience is especially critical in addressing the politics—including turf issues—between the various stakeholders in the partnership. These internal dynamics can both shape and hinder a partnership's successful functioning. For example, both San Antonio and Chattanooga have business partners as part of their community partnership, and these partners have provided leadership on the issue of high school reform and college access from the perspective of local workforce development. At the same time, when both partnerships sought to expand their focus to postsecondary success, these business leaders initially did not see the need to work with colleges and universities on these issues. This is why it is incredibly important to lay the groundwork and constantly nurture cooperation toward common goals in fulfilling work such as the PCAS initiative.

All these processes significantly affected the overall success of the initiative and supported some of the risk-taking steps, which are described in the case studies of San Antonio and Chattanooga.

San Antonio Education Partnership's (SAEP's) Story

SAEP's launch began with the tenure of former San Antonio mayor, Henry Cisneros, who convened a diverse group of community stakeholders in 1988 (his last year in office) to address achievement and graduation issues faced by the city's predominantly Latino student population. The group included business leaders (represented by

the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce), two community organizations with great credibility in the San Antonio community (Communities Organized for Public Services and Metro Alliance), school superintendents, a college president, and representatives from the City of San Antonio.

When PCAS was initiated in San Antonio, SAEP targeted students at 15 high schools in 7 independent school districts (it is currently in 24 high schools in 8 school districts). The student population was 94% of color (roughly 88% Latino), 84% of all students were low income, and 70% were students who would be the first in their families to graduate high school and attend college.

From the beginning, the major issue SAEP sought to address was low student achievement and high school graduation rates in the area's 19 independent school districts. SAEP was concerned about the impact these low rates had on hiring practices of the area's employers—who increasingly needed a highly skilled workforce—and the community's economic future when so few of its students were graduating from high school in 4 or 5 years, much less going on to college. It is important to note that in the case of San Antonio, unique issues such as undocumented and documented immigrant students and language barriers were peripheral to SAEP's work. It has worked across generational barriers in reaching out directly to Latino high schools' students to provide services that would enable them to have access to postsecondary education (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

In that process, SAEP asked students to sign contracts requiring them to maintain a minimum of a B average and a 95% attendance rate while in high school to qualify for its $1,000-a-year scholarship for college. Cisneros' relationships with various sectors of the San Antonio community, combined with his popularity, enabled SAEP to raise sufficient funds for its scholarship program in its first years of existence.

With the loss of Cisneros to the Clinton Administration as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in 1993 and with a declining commitment to the workforce development aspect of the program from SAEP's leadership, the corporate stakeholders began to exhibit serious distrust in the organizational mission. As Ramón explained, the corporate stakeholders believed that SAEP no longer cared about the placement of students in local jobs; nor did they see the connections between the scholarships and the numbers on college access and what that meant for their workforce needs in the long term. Ramón's first task when he became the new executive director of SAEP in 1996 was to regain the trust of SAEP's corporate stakeholders by providing them with data on the numbers of students who had fulfilled their contracts for the 4-year scholarships and had gone on to apply for and gain acceptance to a postsecondary institution. SAEP staff found that in the 3 years preceding Ramon's leadership, it had reached more than 30,000 students with college counseling and access services through college access advisors in eight high schools, as well as awarded scholarships to 450 students a year (Gilberto Ramón, personal communication, June 6, 2007).

In its need to convince its corporate stakeholders of its success in its work with area high school students, SAEP inadvertently and indirectly established collaborations with area 2- and 4-year institutions to gather data on the number of scholarships awarded, the

number of San Antonio–area students with B averages and 95% attendance rates, and the number of students accepted to college based on student transcripts and contracts as well as acceptance lists from local colleges. These data proved convincing to corporate stakeholders and by 1998, the number of corporate stakeholders committed to providing scholarship funds to SAEP had increased beyond the original 15 to 30.

This series of events in SAEP's history points to the importance of leadership and the constant gardening of a partnership in maintaining a successful one. Even with anecdotal evidence of its track record for giving high school seniors scholarships for college and with Cisneros' enthusiastic support, SAEP faced a critical crossroads with its corporate partners within 3 years of his departure. SAEP's involvement with high schools from the various independent school districts and its engagement of local postsecondary institutions in gathering data of its success in working with high school students helped salvage an importance segment of its partnership. Moreover, it allowed SAEP to begin to build a reputation for successful collaboration beyond its work under Cisneros (Gilberto Ramón, personal communication, June 6, 2007).

Community Readiness

The questions that SAEP's corporate partners raised around process, effectiveness, and outcomes were a blessing. For this challenge spurred SAEP to gather more data from the schools and school districts on student achievement and program effectiveness. The City of San Antonio assisted by increasing its contributions to SAEP: a grant of $195,000 from the city's Job Training Partnership Act federal grant in 1994 increased to $450,000 from the city's general fund by 1999. In addition, because the city wanted more follow-up with the area's students after their high school graduation, it provided funds for SAEP to hire a retention and follow-up staff person in 1999. With this support, within 3 years of his hire, Ramón and SAEP had made its data collection and database more sophisticated and its evidence of effectiveness more compelling.

Yet even with more advanced technology, a dedicated staff person to track student outcomes after high school, and a huge city and corporate commitment, new issues had emerged by 2003. "We could collect almost everything we wanted from the schools, but we didn't have the capacity to do everything we [wanted] with it," Ramón stated. Furthermore, the major challenges that the data revealed were the high rates of student remediation at the local 2-year institutions and low rates of student retention and graduation. In reviewing its data on its recent high school graduates who were eligible for the scholarship fund, SAEP discovered that only about 20% of the students who attended a 2-year institution received an AA degree of certificate or transferred to a 4-year college or university within 6 years of enrollment. Despite this reality, SAEP's Board did not see postsecondary retention and graduation as something that should be added to the organizational mission (Gilberto Ramón, personal communication, June 6, 2007).

These perceptions are typical of many stakeholders working on reform efforts for underrepresented students, Latino or otherwise. What made SAEP's situation unique was the combination of cultural and generational influences on perceptions around

college access and college success. Given the existing efforts to increase *high school* graduation rates among Latino students in San Antonio, combined with the reality that many of the SAEP scholarship students were often the first in their families to graduate from high school, it seemed that anything more was too much for SAEP to take on. There was a perception among some stakeholders that the relatively high achievement among SAEP's scholarship holders should have left these students fully prepared for college. In any case, some SAEP stakeholders did not see college remediation and retention issues as part of their responsibility—it ended once students enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

With the invitation from the PCAS initiative for SAEP to apply for a planning grant in April 2004 came the opportunity for Ramón to accelerate his negotiations with his partners on addressing college success issues—and in effect to change SAEP's focus from college acceptance to college retention, transfer, and graduation. The initial planning grant and the PCAS initiative's requirement that organizations and their partnership work to link postsecondary access and success as a central focus of implementation gave Ramón leverage in moving his Board to support expanding SAEP's mission. After a commitment to work on all aspects of college success was solidified in SAEP's new strategic plan and Eyra Perez was hired to manage the PCAS work, the next step was to obtain data from the local colleges on student rates of remediation, retention, and graduation. In doing so, SAEP faced two major challenges: issues around the confidentially of student data and "avoiding the blame game"—as discussed below.

Data and the Issue of Confidentiality

At first, student confidentiality issues kept college doors closed to SAEP. According to Ramón, "Part of the challenge [with colleges and universities] has been that only one college president has been on the Board since the start" of SAEP. Ramón and his staff took a look at their student and parent data release forms at the high school level and realized that these would not be sufficient for the local colleges. They also looked at forms from other organizations, including ones developed by Chattanooga's Public Education Foundation (PEF), which we will discuss later. Eventually SAEP's partners formed a committee consisting of a college president, a school superintendent, and representatives from the two community groups to iron out the legal issues as SAEP designed a new student data sharing release form for the postsecondary level. It took nearly 15 months to vet and review the new release form so that SAEP could use it to collect data at all area colleges and universities (Appendix A). In overcoming one of SAEP's biggest challenges to expanding its work into postsecondary success, the data sharing form vetting process enabled it to solidify its ties with some of the 2- and 4-year institutions in the area, including the Alamo Community College District (and San Antonio College) and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

What SAEP and the rest of its partnership have learned about its students has given them more insight into the next steps around improving performance and graduation numbers at the postsecondary levels. For example, during the 2004-2005 and

2005-2006 school years, 90.2% of the 3,543 high school seniors who (a) met the SAEP's scholarship eligibility requirement and (b) applied to college were accepted. SAEP's partnership also learned that of the 2,327 high school seniors in 2004-2005 who met SAEP's scholarship eligibility requirement, 71% had enrolled in a 2- or 4-year institution by fall 2005 (compared with 66% in the United States overall and 61% of Latinos nationally in 2004). Although these numbers were encouraging, they also illustrated the need to address remediation, curriculum alignment, and retention issues on the postsecondary success side, given the low graduation rated mentioned earlier (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2007a, pp. 19-22; 2007b, pp. 16-17).

Data and Avoiding the Blame Game

Perhaps the biggest challenge that SAEP faced with their postsecondary and K-12 partners was the ability to maintain open and honest communication with them about the implications and uses of the data SAEP collected. Both Ramón and Perez often talk with school district superintendents, college presidents, and other stakeholders in small groups or one-on-one before the larger partnership meetings to ensure that all parties understood the data being discussed. Both Ramón and Perez saw these discussions as vital to maintaining trust—a key component of their roles as constant gardeners. "When I haven't done that . . . that's when we get into the blame game," Ramón explained, citing one example of college remediation data being analyzed at the last minute before a partnership committee meeting (Gilberto Ramón, personal communication, June 6, 2007). As a result a disagreement arose at the meeting over who was to blame for high remediation numbers at one particular college. Although Ramón resolved the disagreement and the meeting on remediation moved forward, he was reminded of a valuable lesson, one that he had learned from the crisis with SAEP's corporate stakeholders a decade earlier:

> Partners can be a great resource once they understand the numbers and what they mean for our work, but you need to be strategic . . . about getting buy-in, especially about *how* the data can be used (Gilberto Ramón, personal communication, June 6, 2007).

SAEP's Theory of Change Model

The main long-term (5-year) goals of SAEP's systemic change work as related to its theory of change involved (a) the strengthening of transfer agreements between 2- and 4-year institutions, making it easier for students to transfer credits from one institution to another in the process of obtaining a 4-year degree (usually known as 2 + 2 students) and (b) the promotion of cross-institutional engagement, awareness, and agreement (especially between high schools and 2-year institutions) on the level of readiness, competency, and preparation required of students for college. Both, of course, require a large degree of curriculum alignment if SAEP expected to reach these goals (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2005b, pp. 1-2).

In the meantime, SAEP has met its intermediate (2-year) goals, putting them on the path toward meeting the long-term ones. Among the intermediate goals they met were

- to increase the annual City of San Antonio appropriation to the SAEP to $1.5 million (thereby leaving the partnership in a stronger position to expand its mission to include postsecondary retention and attainment as critical program components and postsecondary institutions as significant stakeholders) and
- to enhance tracking of student progress and to assess student success outcomes and program needs/performance as indicated by consistent and regular collection of data from local postsecondary institutions (thus solidifying the partnership's inclusion of postsecondary institutions and assisting the decision-making process on key barriers to postsecondary success for low-income and Latino students).

In the end, SAEP successfully linked its high school and college activities with the overall goals for its work, and in the process, managed to expand its mission, and learn more about connecting college access and preparation to college success and retention.

Chattanooga Public Education Foundation's Story: How It Compares With SAEP

Chattanooga/Hamilton County Public Education Foundation's (PEF's) partnership story began with the merging of the 63% Black city system with the nearly all-White county school district in 1997—becoming Hamilton County Department of Education. The merger provided the spotlight necessary for K-12 reform in a county that was 60% White, 36% African American, 2% Latino, and split between urban and suburban Chattanooga and semirural Hamilton County. The geographic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of these students created the context in which school and other civic leaders saw reform as a must. Although the population's ethnic demographics are obviously different, the students in Hamilton County faced many of the same socioeconomic and academic barriers to college access and success that Latino students in the independent school districts of San Antonio experienced.

Of greater significance than the merger was the school board's decision in 1999 to gradually move toward creating a single-track, college-prep system. It was a move that brought the issue of postsecondary access and success into sharper focus. A single-track system meant a more rigorous, postsecondary preparation curriculum for all of Hamilton County's students (Debra Vaughan and Stacy Lightfoot, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

Community Readiness

This decision to create a K-12-wide postsecondary preparatory track was a controversial one, especially given that some civic and community stakeholders believed that such a curriculum would entail reducing academic rigor for high-ability students and

increase academic failure among low-income students. Despite this opposition, most school and civic leaders concluded that a new approach to public education was necessary. The efforts of PEF's President Dan Challener as a facilitator in this process were critical to obtaining the school board's approval of a single-track system. According to Challener, the "university and the business leaders turned the tide" (Dan Challener, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

A 5-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York under its Schools for a New Society initiative in 2001 not only enhanced PEF's capacity to fulfill its mission and expand its partnership with the school district and with the College Access Center (CAC), but also laid the groundwork for developing partnerships with Chattanooga State Technical Community College and the University of Tennessee–Chattanooga (UTC). Schools for a New Society focused on high-school reform, including the use of data as a catalyst for specific programmatic reform efforts. As a result of becoming the lead organization for a multimillion dollar grant, PEF was now a central player in the community's high-school reform efforts and in developing better connections between the school district and the postsecondary community. This grant raised PEF's profile in the same way that Henry Cisneros' founding of and involvement in SAEP raised its profile a decade earlier.

Collaborating on Data Collection

Both PEF and CAC needed more and improved data. As a key part of its work with PCAS, PEF needed data on school district graduates—their postsecondary enrollment, remediation, retention, transfer, and graduation patterns—to work with PCAS partners in addressing any challenges evident in those patterns. CAC needed access to data to assess the key variables in the successful transition of Hamilton County students to college, including the need for college advising in the district's high schools. Both organizations, though, could rely on Debra Vaughan, hired as PEF's director of evaluation and research in 2002 to increase the organization's data capacity and use it to improve PEF's education reform efforts with Hamilton County Department of Education.

Indeed, PCAS became more than a partnership between PEF and CAC. Even before the PCAS work started in earnest, PEF and CAC began to deepen their collaborations with Chattanooga State and UTC. Although PEF's and CAC's initial attempts at collaboration with the postsecondary institutions around data were unsuccessful in 2004, with PEF's assistance, CAC and the school district eventually gained access to enrollment, retention, and remediation data from Chattanooga State and UTC. PEF worked with the two postsecondary institutions to create data-sharing agreements so that data would be available to the other partners. These agreements spread the responsibility for sharing data (and to a lesser extent, analysis—that would become Vaughan's primary role) to PEF, CAC, Hamilton County Department of Education, Chattanooga State, and UTC as part of their process for improving the preparation of students for college and increasing student retention rates in college (Debra Vaughan, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

In addition, PEF and CAC worked together to collect student graduation and college acceptance data through student and parent release forms. In collaboration with the school district, PEF and CAC also enrolled Hamilton County's 17 high schools in the National Student Clearinghouse to track students as they enrolled in institutions outside the region or state or transferred elsewhere from Chattanooga State or UTC. The National Student Clearinghouse provides general data on students who remain in college and graduate, given that an enrolled school or school district provides an identifier for the students in which they are seeking to track (usually a social security number or date of birth).

PEF and CAC broke down the initial barriers they faced from the colleges to collecting data by taking the approach that the data collection process was as much about showing what the two postsecondary institutions were doing well as it was about uncovering high remediation and low graduation rates. The first data collection activity that CAC and PEF engaged in with their postsecondary institution partners was to develop a college-going map tracing where all graduating seniors of Hamilton County schools' attended college in 2004 and 2005 (Appendix B). In fact, 43% of Hamilton County Department of Education's graduating high school seniors who gained acceptance to a postsecondary institution enrolled at and attended either Chattanooga State or UTC (Debra Vaughan, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

It was a good first step and a positive way to engage partners who otherwise might have not been as cooperative around preparation, remediation, retention, and attainment issues if those issues had been raised by PEF and CAC initially. It also identified a rationale for Chattanooga State and UTC's involvement—they served nearly half of all Hamilton County students who graduated high school and attended college. This compares well with what Gilberto Ramón faced in his first year as SAEP's executive director, in that he also needed to convince his board and other stakeholders of the worthiness of the partnership's work and break down perceptions around college access and success for Latino students.

Sharing Data and Developing a Common Language

This positive first step also illuminated some achievement and graduation gaps at the high school and postsecondary levels. According to CAC founder and former project director Susan Street, "Although 70% of Hamilton County's high school graduates enter college, there are gaps by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and geography, and many students do not complete college." Statistics such as this likely explained the initial opposition of the local postsecondary institutions to partaking in PEF's and CAC's PCAS work (Stacy Lightfoot, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

Data on high-school achievement, graduation, and college enrollment was also shared with high-school principals at monthly principal meetings facilitated by PEF. Principals received disaggregated and district-level data for their high school, as well as data identifying the rankings of their high school among the 17 in the district without identifying any schools except their own (Appendix C). This provided both confidentiality and a common point for discussion of best practices rather than an opportunity for playing the "blame game."

This is in contrast with SAEP's one-on-one approach, often meeting with individual stakeholders to discuss confidential issues ahead of partnership-level meetings in order to avoid potential "blame game" hotspots in their meetings. Both methodologies proved effective, as they both adhered to the principles of constant gardening, or education, or their stakeholders around major issues in their work. Debra Vaughan put it well when she said, "My job is to tell the story, to paint a picture of the work through data," and to provide "a common language that could be used as a tool in [our] efforts" to address sensitive issues with care (Debra Vaughan, personal communication, June 13, 2007).

It certainly helped that much of the data presented by PEF and CAC to its stakeholders showed progress even before the first discussions of preparation, remediation, and curriculum alignment had begun under PCAS. As data from Hamilton County Department of Education, the two postsecondary institutions, and the National Student Clearinghouse indicated, PEF and the school district's earlier work and the Schools for a New Society initiative had already had an impact on college access. For example, during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years, 66% of the 613 high-school seniors that the Chattanooga partnership tracked for its PCAS work (from its pilot project work with three high schools) applied and gained acceptance to college. This percentage was the same as the college acceptance rate in the United States overall and higher than the rate for African American graduating seniors in 2004 in the United States as a whole (62%). Of the 66% (404 students) who applied to either a 2- or 4-year institution in those years, 100% were accepted (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2007a, pp. 19-22; 2007b, pp. 3-4).

In addition, from 2004 to 2006, the percentage of all HCDE graduates *enrolled* in college was 69.5%, 68.7%, and 70% respectively (1,313; 1,324; and 1,499, respectively for those 3 years). Although the percentage has been relatively constant, the numbers of students enrolled in college has increased by 14.2% since 2004 because the total number of HCDE graduates has increased (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2007a, pp. 19-22; 2007b, pp. 3-4).

Chattanooga PEF's Theory of Change Model

The long-term objectives of PEF's partnership for its PCAS work were to develop pilots in three high schools, one urban, one suburban, and one rural, and in the process, increase college enrollment and completion by students (mostly low-income Black and White students) from these three schools. At the same time, PEF, CAC, and the rest of the partnership wanted to achieve curriculum alignment by developing relationships across the high schools, Chattanooga State and UTC, to improve student outcomes, particularly in mathematics. The intermediate activities and goals that would be the building blocks for reaching the aforementioned long-term goals included

- the creation of college access teams made up of counselors, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders,

- the implementation of a comprehensive college-preparation testing program (Explorer for eighth graders, PLAN for all 10th graders, ACT for juniors and seniors), and
- advocacy for more AP courses and dual enrollment with UTC/Chattanooga State in Hamilton County high schools (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2005a).

In addition, PEF and its partnership have committed themselves to and been successful in improving communications regarding support services in the community available to college students and to building stronger relationships between the local colleges, the school district, and various community programs in order to better coordinate services and increase student enrollment in existing retention programs. Though SAEP and PEF/CAC's approaches to the issue of using their partnerships to link college access and success together differed in specifics, both used data, their role as respected leaders in the community on this issue, and the principles of laying the ground for collaboration to push their reform work forward.

Conclusions

The authors recognize the reality of external factors that influence any initiative around education reform, postsecondary access and success, and P-20 alignment such as state education policies, the emergence of state and regional P-16 councils, and the pressures resulting from federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Yet we also understand that just as all politics are local, education policies and any efforts at reforming them are all ultimately local in nature. This article illuminates what it takes for a local partnership led by a community-based organization with visibility and credibility in their community to influence systemic change in both K-12 and higher education institutions to improve access and attainment for underrepresented students.

Partnerships managed and facilitated by lead organizations such as SAEP and PEF allowed stakeholders at the school district and postsecondary levels to collaborate in their efforts at systemic change as opposed to engaging in the "blame game." With the lead organizations acting as an experienced convener of the partnership and a facilitator of relationship building in the service of clearly defined goals of the partnership, they were able to defuse potential conflicts or resolve them. It gave all stakeholders the opportunity to address college access and success in their communities from a variety of perspectives, yielding new ways to implement the best practices in the field. The one disadvantage is that these complex relationships—not to mention the changes in leadership at these institutions—means that the lead organization must act in the role of a constant gardener to maintain the communication and political balance within the partnership, difficult even under the best of circumstances with skilled leadership.

What is important to remember about the PCAS approach to community–university–school partnerships is that this process was not a linear one. It was one that evolved at different rates and happened in different aspects of each grantee's work. For grantees such

as the ones in San Antonio and Chattanooga, because of their previous work within school districts, with foundations or community organizations, city government or community colleges, the levers for systemic change already existed. They had already laid significant groundwork on issues of K-12 education reform and postsecondary access years before becoming part of the PCAS initiative. They were already constant gardeners, and the PCAS gave them additional seeds with which to continue their reform work. Those grantees used PCAS to expand their work to include access and preparation, math remediation and retention, and 2- to 4-year college transfers. Any efforts at systemic change must account for policy changes that present opportunities for collaboration and take advantage of leadership ready, willing and able to make education reform and postsecondary access and success via a partnership a reality.

Although PEF's partnership was further along in building momentum around expanding its work to include postsecondary success and reform than SAEP, it still needed to build trust among its postsecondary partners to obtain data and to use it to address remediation and retention issues. Moreover, PEF needed to work strategically—more so than SAEP, in fact—in order to include postsecondary leadership and faculty as significant players in the implementation process. To be sure, SAEP also had to be strategic, using the data sharing form development process to bring more postsecondary partners to the table as part of its postsecondary success mission. Both lead organizations worked to provide a safe space for partners to voice their concerns, their complaints, and their misunderstandings of the work or the intentions of other partners. They also use this space to make decisions critical to the implementation of policies and programs related to postsecondary access and success. By tending to the partnership as if it were a garden in need of constant care, the lead organizations were to maximize the partnerships' advantages while mitigating their disadvantages.

Researchers and practitioners should be able to draw a number of implications from the work of SAEP, PEF, and the PCAS initiative more generally, many of which we do not have the space to explore here. For instance, one could examine the implications of replicating the lessons learned from this initiative at a regional or state level or analyze further the dynamics of partnering with private higher education institutions as opposed to public ones. However, one that is immediately apparent is the need for a history of success and momentum in a given community to work on issues of postsecondary access and success and K-12 education reform. The fact is that any lead organization that wants to engage in such work has to have credible, effective, and visible leadership, an existing infrastructure with the capacity to work in collaboration with a variety of entities, and an understanding of the complexities of working in a partnership addressing education issues. Although community organizations can grow into this role, this takes time and means having a long-term vision and strategy—a long-term theory of change—that leadership is dedicated to work toward. Otherwise a community organization could find itself attempting to manage two or more heavyweight stakeholders without the staff, leadership, or capacity for doing so. Ultimately, this work is for leaders willing to take a long-term approach to P-20 education reform, leaders willing to tend this garden until it yields students ready for and successful in postsecondary education.

Appendix A

> **IMPORTANT:** This form is needed to better assist you when you are in college. Please complete and sign below. If you have any questions, please call Eyra Pérez at 229-9900 ext. 235.

Student Authorization & Educational Release Form

High School:		Class of:	
Social Security #:		Date of Birth:	
First Name:	Middle Initial:	Last Name:	
Home Address:		City:	Zip Code:
Home Phone #:	Cell #:	Email Address:	
2nd Address Where You Can Be Contacted:	City:	Zip Code:	Phone #:
College/University You Plan To Attend Upon Graduation from High School OR You Are Currently Attending:		College Major (if undecided, please leave blank):	
Do you plan to transfer to another University? Yes No	If yes, please provide name of university and approximate date of transfer:		

I authorize the San Antonio Education Partnership to have access to my academic and enrollment information at any college/university I attend in an effort to assist in successful completion of my undergraduate education. Specifically, the San Antonio Education Partnership may have access to: semester and cumulative grades, courses enrolled/completed, major, degree plans, degree(s) earned, and graduation/transfer date(s). I also authorize the San Antonio Education Partnership to share my educational record with institutions of higher education to facilitate college enrollment and completion.

This authorization is valid for a maximum of five years after high school graduation or until graduation from college. I, or my parent if I am under the age of 18, may request from the San Antonio Education Partnership a copy of <u>my</u> educational records disclosed.

I give my permission to the San Antonio Education Partnership to amend this form in the event I transfer from the college initially noted when originally signed. I also authorize the San Antonio Education Partnership to have access to degree earned information. I understand that the information collected will be used to compile program reports and will be shared with school districts and local colleges/universities to document program effectiveness.

Student Signature:	Date:

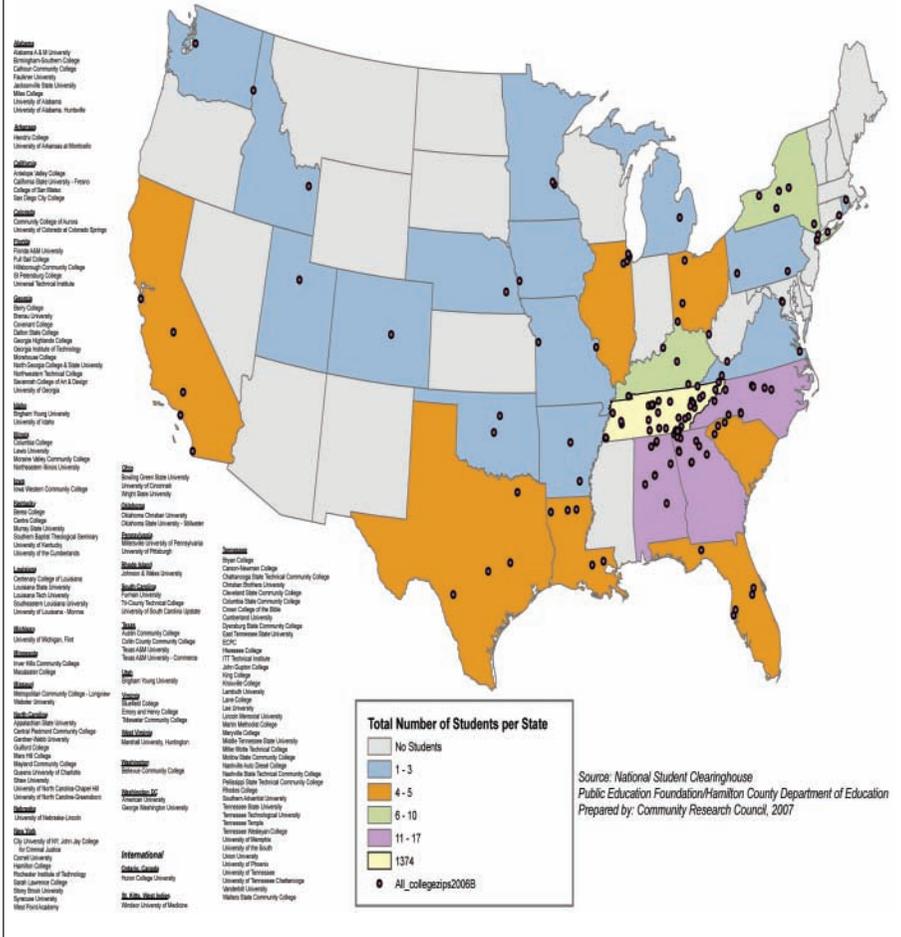*Parent/Guardian Signature Required If Student Is Under The Age of 18 At The Time Form Is Completed:*

Parent Signature:	Date:

Please return this top copy to:
San Antonio Education Partnership, 206 San Pedro Ave., Suite 200, San Antonio, Texas, 78205   04/2007

Appendix B

Colleges and Universities Attended by Hamilton County Public School Graduates - Class of 2006

Total Number of Students per State

- No Students
- 1 - 3
- 4 - 5
- 6 - 10
- 11 - 17
- 1374
- ● All_collegezips2006B

Source: National Student Clearinghouse
Public Education Foundation/Hamilton County Department of Education
Prepared by: Community Research Council, 2007

Appendix C

Percentage of 2006 graduates enrolled in 2 or 4 year colleges	
School	Percentage
	96%
	85%
	82%
	81%
	78%
	76%
Your School	76%
	76%
	75%
	74%
	73%
District	**73%**
	60%
	54%
	52%
	48%
	no data

Percentage of 2005 graduates enrolled in 4 year colleges	
School	Percentage
	72%
	57%
Your School	52%
	50%
	50%
	48%
	48%
District	44%
	44%
	40%
	35%
	33%
	29%
	29%
	25%
	16%
	no data

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. In this article, we use the term *underrepresented students* to refer to low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, and students with disabilities in higher education.

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