DIY College Access: Collaborations Between a Regional Campus and the Local Community

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This paper offers an account of the development of the Rural Scholars Program, a college access program based on research-based best practices, yet developed within an intentionally local, place-based framework. By adapting local assets and resources as well as creating multiple channels for community input from all stakeholders, including participating students and their families, the Kent State University Salem and East Liverpool campuses have created a program design uniquely suited to address the needs of Columbiana County. A survey of research on best practices and an assessment of Columbiana County's needs as an Appalachian county are detailed as a foundation for program design and implementation. Initial data aligned with program outcomes for assessment are included as well as suggestions for future research directions.

Kent State University's Salem and East Liverpool campuses are situated amongst the wooded hills and rolling farmlands of Columbiana County, Ohio. Abandoned coke ovens and pottery kilns mark the county's industrial past; gas wells and a reviving manufacturing industry rise amidst pasture-raised cattle and recovering waterways, suggesting compromises and hopes for the county's economic future.

Students enroll on these regional campuses seeking increased access to economic participation in a county where 16% of residents live below the poverty line and only 13% of residents aged 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 26.7% of the general Ohio population (American Community Survey, 2012). Eighty-one percent of students enrolling at the Kent State University Columbiana campuses are required to take remedial math courses (Kent State University Research Planning and Institutional Effectiveness [RPIE], 2011), placing them at risk for never completing their degrees. Nationally, a survey of state-level data conducted by Complete College America (2012, p.6) has shown that 32% of college freshman entering a four-year institution enroll in at least one remedial course. Only 35% of those required to enroll in remediation go on

to earn a bachelor's degree within six years (2012, p.8). These national numbers, too, are consistent with degree completion rates on the Columbiana campuses; the 2008 cohort achieved a six-year completion rate of 35.3% (Salem) and 32.6% (East Liverpool), the best in the Kent regional system (Kent State University RPIE, 2014).

With degree completion and rising student debt increasingly driving the national conversation about higher education, leadership on these campuses decided in 2009 that coordinated action was needed in order to address the land-grant mission central to Kent State University's role providing open access to a major University education in northeast Ohio. Faculty and staff on both campuses were concerned that students were not arriving prepared to succeed and that, once on campus, they were struggling to complete degrees even as they accrued debt. The Kent State University Columbiana County Rural Scholars Program was created to answer these concerns with a uniquely local solution to the problem of college access and completion.

Faculty, staff, and community educators on the Salem and East Liverpool campuses identified a variety of reasons for the problems with preparedness and persistence on our campuses. Fifty-one percent of students on the Columbiana campuses are first-generation college students (Kent State University RPIE, 2012a,2012b), and although 81% qualify for Pell grants, a large number of students also work and have extensive family commitments. The top reason students give nationally for leaving college is an inability to balance work and studies (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2011). Just as students on our campuses struggle financially, they also struggle to balance competing family, work, and college responsibilities.

Higher education outcomes in Ohio are consistent with these findings as well; first-generation, low-income college students received just 25% of bachelor's degrees awarded in the state (Ohio Board of Regents, 2011). A 2008 report on college access and completion in Appalachian Ohio concluded that access to information about financial aid and the affordability of college had actually decreased in Appalachian Ohio over the previous sixteen years, and that one in four high school seniors planning to attend college had not completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Lewis, Ruhil, Yandell, & Johnson, 2008, p.iv.) Although the report notes 51% of Appalachian Ohio students attending college are first generation college students, the findings also suggested that participation during high school in a college access program increased the percentage of first

generation students aspiring to attend college immediately after graduation by as much as 8% (Lewis et al., 2008, p.7). Most significantly, just 20% of the 2001 first-generation Appalachian cohort tracked in the report completed a bachelor's degree as compared to 52% of non-Appalachian students aspiring to a four-year degree (Lewis et al., 2008, p.21). A 2011 Ohio Board of Regents report concluded that one of Ohio's priority areas in education needs to be the support of degree attainment for students in the state's rural, Appalachian counties where the supply of skilled workers has not kept pace with the changing economy. Beyond the needs of these rural counties, the state, too, needs these workers; on average in the years between 2007-2011 Ohio lost nearly 27% of students receiving bachelor's degrees from in-state public institutions (Ohio Board of Regents, 2013). Although this represents improvement over previous decades, consistent gains in retention of Ohio graduates and recruitment from out-of-state universities will be necessary to meet the projected needs of Ohio's evolving economy.

In 2009, a graduate student with the Kent State University School of Educational Foundations was asked by the Salem and East Liverpool campuses to research college access programs in rural communities nationwide; the purpose of this research was to identify successful models that might be adapted for the particular needs of students in Columbiana County. Her recommendations were presented to the dean of the campuses, and in 2011 the KSU Columbiana campuses succeeded in partnering with Ohio Campus Compact to host an AmeriCorps VISTA. The VISTA was tasked with laying groundwork for a program the campuses had determined could be a powerful approach to addressing the problems of college access and persistence for Columbiana County residents. Through partnerships with local educators and business leaders, the VISTA and campus communities were able to begin piloting the Rural Scholars Program in the summer of 2012 with a cohort of twelve seventh graders from four participating school districts. Within a year the program had expanded to include a total of six school districts. As the 2014-2015 school year began, three cohorts of young Rural Scholars were participating in the program: 53 students from six school districts. The program is guided by two faculty members and a support staff of college student mentors. An advisory board of campus faculty, community leaders, and public educators oversees the program's direction, assessment, and fundraising efforts.

Meeting the Need

Five of the six school districts participating in the Rural Scholars Program are classified as "high poverty" by the Ohio Department of Education district typology (2013). The student poverty rate in the most affluent district is 41%, and in the least affluent, 64%.

The national research as well as guidance from our local educators and university faculty indicated that interventions, in order to be most effective, must address the problem of rigorous academic preparation before college, provide accurate information about the college admissions and financial aid processes, and create a means for sharing the cultural capital and social network that amplifies the gap between low income, first-generation college students and their middle-class peers (Bernhardt, 2013; Harvill, Maynard, Nguyen, Robertson-Kraft, & Tognatta, 2012; Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2011; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terzian & Moore, 2009; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Academic preparation is the single most effective means of increasing the odds that students will graduate from high school ready for college, matriculate, and eventually receive degrees (Harvill et al., 2012; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Adelman, 1999), so guiding and supporting low-income, first generation college-aspirants into academically rigorous classes needed to be a priority for the program. Additionally, research indicated that programs with the most profound impact tended to begin in middle school to ensure that students were enrolled in college-preparatory math and English courses in order to prevent the necessity of remediation at the college level (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; IHEP 2008).

Program Design

The Rural Scholars Program was designed to address student needs for academic preparation, college and career guidance, and social support. The initial guidance committee of both college faculty and public school educators believed the most effective way to build the program would be to borrow best practices from existing programs, adapting them to local needs, rather than beginning with a pre-existing design from one of the many grant-funded college access programs such as AVID, the Breakthrough Collaborative, or First Scholars. A 2001 survey of college access programs offered a foundational taxonomy of interventions, highlighting the importance of sustained, individual relationships between students and program personnel , long-term investment in students, an emphasis on the

incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds into the programming, and the necessity of scholarship support (Gandara, p.36). The final design for the Rural Scholars Program was based on best practices from a number of successful college access programs including the University of Kentucky's Robinson Scholars Program and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's PEOPLE program, as well as federally funded Upward Bound and GEAR-UP programs. The KSU-Columbiana County Rural Scholars Program's activities are organized around three areas: mentoring by college students, academic and career-based enrichment workshops offered during school and, in summer, as intensive, week-long summer camps, and financial literacy/college knowledge programming offered to all sixth graders in participating school districts. Students completing the high school programming successfully will be eligible for full-tuition scholarships to Kent State University and, in their turn, become mentors to the young middle-school scholars entering the program. As undergraduate mentors, they will be treated as a learning community and receive additional support throughout their college career, completing the wrap-around nature of the program. Table 1 illustrates the anticipated outputs of these programming interventions.

Students are identified by their schools at the end of sixth grade and invited to apply. Once admitted, students and families attend a program orientation introducing the types of support offered and acquainting them with the college student mentors who will be partnered with the new Rural Scholars for their first year in the program. Rural Scholars receive individual mentoring throughout their years in the program and participate each year in two one-day workshops as well as one weeklong workshop.

An additional area of programming includes support for students' families. In the early years of the program, this support has primarily taken the form of outreach to families through an annual celebration, personal conversations on the phone, focus groups, and inclusion of families in program events such as the annual FlashDash 5K fundraiser. In the 2014-2015 school year, families will also be invited to a Financial Planning workshop for parents of the class of 2018 in response to their expressed desire for information about funding college and managing budgets. Personalized contact with students' families has encouraged relationships of trust, open communication, and responsiveness between all parties, laying a foundation for future partnership as scholars encounter the many transitions that mark the pathway to post-secondary education and career.

Table 1

Intervention	Result
Mentoring • Social support • Tutoring assistance if needed • Explicit instruction on organization and study skills • Advocacy for student within the school • Encouraging self-exploration and awareness	• Increased self-efficacy • Improved social skills • Responsible choices • Improved organization and study skills • Academic improvement • Increased enrollment in college-preparatory classes
Workshops • Exposure to diverse career fields • Experience with hands-on application of Common Core concepts in community and campus environments • Mentoring by professionals • Community service opportunities	• Increased familiarity with professional and campus environments • Increased interest in school subjects • Increased knowledge of diverse career pathways • Understanding of adult decision-making • Experience problem-solving and persisting at open-ended tasks • Higher aspirations • Appreciation for local community • Sense of personal responsibility to local community and environment
Financial Literacy/College Knowledge • Junior Achievement Economics for Success Programming delivered by college students and faculty in all sixth grade classrooms for participating districts	• Increased understanding of college and career pathways • Ability to apply basic budgeting skills and finance concepts • Increased understanding of economic decision making

The program design was created to foster specific outcomes for Rural Scholars. Through a collaborative process involving educators, undergraduate mentors, and our advisory board of community leaders, the Rural Scholars Program identified five primary outcomes for Rural Scholars as they graduate high school.

- Successful Students
- Engaged Learners
- Workforce Ready
- Socially Savvy
- Committed to Community

Guided by Ohio College Access Network training in purposeful assessment, our assessment committee also articulated metrics for each of these outcomes. Table 2 defines the outcomes and offers highlights from initial data collected in the 2013-2014 school year for seventh and eighth graders participating in the program.

Table 2

Outcome	2013-2014 Data Highlights
Successful Students	
Good grades Motivated to explore opportunities Goal-oriented Desire to pay-it-forward	• 3.33 was the average GPA, 8th grade in 2013-2014. • All but three eighth grade scholars met or exceeded the program minimum GPA of 2.5. • 2.99 was the average GPA for 7th grade in 2013-2014. • Average year-to-year change in GPA for 2013-2014: + 0.22 • 72% of ninth grader scholars are enrolled in Accelerated Algebra or Geometry for 2014-2015. • 61% of eighth grade scholars are enrolled in Algebra 1 for 2014-2015.
Engaged Learners	
Passion to learn Curious and inquisitive Reach beyond the classroom for learning Involved/hands-on	• 66% of scholars report positive interest in learning more about chemistry and biology after attending Rural Scholars workshops. • Ninth grade scholars demonstrated their ability to persist by producing catapults, battery-powered gliders, bricolage machines, and inventions, all of their own design, spending an average of three hours every afternoon at these open-ended and challenging math/design tasks during their summer 2014 Makers and Mechanisms workshop.
Workforce Ready	

Specific industry knowledge and skill set *Application of knowledge outside classroom* *Know own strengths* *Value relationships*	• 275 sixth graders participating in Junior Achievement Economics for Success programming demonstrated a gain of 11% in their knowledge about insurance, credit, and financial planning. • 50% of scholars reported a positive change in their attitudes toward manufacturing careers after a workshop at a local manufacturing shop. 75% reported an interest in learning more about careers in manufacturing after the workshop. • Eighth grade scholars learned about interviewing and business etiquette this year as part of the Career Explorations curriculum. They learned to shake hands, dress appropriately, use good phone etiquette, and write thank-you notes.
Socially Savvy	
Emotionally intelligent *Understand context* *Connected and active* *Adaptable*	• Counselors, teachers, and mentors report improved behavior for all scholars identified as at-risk. • Majority of scholars participate in sports, after-school activities, faith-based groups, or the arts with their peers. • Scholars report that the program has changed their understanding of themselves in positive ways, helping them find a supportive peer group and connect to supportive adults at school and in their communities.
Committed to Community	
Aware of local, state, and national issues *Concerned for others* *Advocate for what they believe in* *Value volunteerism* *Active citizen locally* *Understand culture and history of the area*	• Scholars committed more than 162 hours of community service through Rural Scholars events at soup kitchens and in wildlife areas during 2013-2014. • On their own time this summer, eighth and ninth grade scholars committed more than 467 hours of service in their communities. • Scholars and mentors are participating in the Educational Service Center's Youth Leadership initiatives. • Scholars report that community service is one of their highest priority activities, and in response to their expressed interest in doing more, the Rural Scholars program has adopted the Youth in Service to America Service Project Toolkit as part of the ninth-grade academic year curriculum.

Implementation

From the beginning the program faced significant challenges with implementation. While the campuses were willing to commit funds initially, rural college access programs are confronted with uniquely rural logistical concerns. Transportation for small groups of students from disparate parts

of a county covering 535 square miles was one such difficulty. Identifying college students who could travel to far-flung rural areas on a regular basis and finding professionals in diverse career fields willing to collaborate in educating local middle school students were additional challenges for two campuses located in small towns with a combined student body of just 1,852 full-time enrolled students in the fall of 2012 when the program began. We also wanted to ensure that scholars selected for the program were chosen by people who knew them best, rather than selected through a relatively anonymous university application process.

Additional concerns included whether the program could accommodate the transience that characterizes much of the low-income student population. Most significantly for the program's future, the challenge of building a sustainable funding model independent of the ebb and flow of state budgets has required the campus to actively solicit partnerships with the business community and local foundations with the assistance of the program's advisory board.

An examination of assets in our county included the Community Action Agency's public transportation program, CARTS. With its small buses and familiarity with navigating the occasionally tricky network of backroads in the county, CARTS presented a simple and affordable solution to the challenge of transportation. In support of academic preparation, the county already had a robust partnership between area school districts and the Kent campuses around providing dual enrollment college credit courses to high school students, so these courses were also integrated into the planning of the high school portion of the program. The local campuses' strong health science programs provide access to a network of highly motivated, high-achieving students from local communities, which has enabled the program to recruit college student mentors with the maturity and discipline to manage complicated schedules and leadership roles with demanding responsibilities. Our mentors' close connections within the community have proved invaluable as students' families shift between towns or family dynamics change, so that we become aware of potential problems often before schools notify us and can offer support for young scholars during difficult transitions. Building our profile within the community in order to establish a funding base has been accomplished by soliciting community input on the design and purpose of the program from the beginning. Superintendents, area manufacturers, small business owners, judges, guidance counselors, students, and their families have all given guidance to

the program through focus groups, community listening conversations, and membership on our advisory board.

Conclusions

Initial data on student success in the classroom for the oldest cohort now entering ninth grade is promising overall. The average change in GPA for students in the program is + 0.22, and for our oldest cohort, the year-to-year change in the 2013-2014 school year was + 0.33. Currently 84% of the class of 2018 meets or exceeds the program's minimum GPA of 2.5. All of our ninth grade scholars are currently enrolled in Algebra 1, Algebra 2, or equivalent courses, putting them on track to avoid remediation at the college level. Evidence of engagement in their education can be seen in a number of areas. Rising ninth graders participating in the 2014 Makers and Mechanisms workshop over the summer spent hours every afternoon on open-ended, problem-oriented projects and their production of variously designed catapults, bricolage projects, inventions, and solar-powered gliders are tangible evidence of their ability to persist in engaging tasks. Scholars' avidity in suggesting ideas for programs, asking questions in workshops, and taking responsibility for their program participation have also provided strong indications of their engagement. The oldest cohort of scholars has even guided aspects of the assessment design process and will continue to participate actively in assessing their own progress. Career exploration projects guided by the undergraduate mentors have helped scholars become more workforce ready as they learn about career pathways in our region and interview locals working in fields as diverse as video game design and explosives technology. Scholars participate in after school activities and sports, volunteer in animal shelters and food pantries, but they also mow lawns for elderly neighbors and take odd jobs to assist their families. Of particular importance are the many, many examples of social support offered and cultural capital gained when scholars interact with their mentors and with the many professionals who share their time conducting workshops. These critical interventions have made a dramatic impact in the lives of many scholars already and will no doubt continue to do so as relationships strengthen over time and experiences accumulate.

As the program moves forward and the oldest cohort approaches college, many questions remain to be answered. With the assistance of our assessment committee, the program is collecting comparative data from a variety of educational sources and community agencies in order to

determine where the program is having a measurable impact when Rural Scholars are compared with their peers. We intend to examine academic performance, postsecondary enrollment, and college completion of course, but questions about the value and durability of peer group support created through the program and the influence of locally based career explorations on scholar education and career choices will prove to be important lines of inquiry as well, particularly as these areas have tended to be insufficiently evaluated and documented in the peer-reviewed literature. Perhaps some of the most interesting aspects of the program to examine as we move forward will be the emphasis on a pedagogy of agency, requiring the participation of scholars and their families in guiding the program's development, and the model of community collaboration that has fostered a uniquely place-based emphasis embedded into the program design.

Personal Biography

      Wendy Pfrenger earned an M.A. in English from the University of Connecticut. She recently joined the faculty of the Kent State University campus as a non-tenure track faculty member in English. In addition to teaching English courses and coordinating the Rural Scholars Program, she supervises tutoring services on the campus.

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