

I'M GOING TO COLLEGE AT 13:

The Impact of Middle-School College Tours

Richard A. Gadsby
Teacher's Network Leadership Institute
June 2006

RATIONALE

The current discourse concerning the obstacles in college opportunities for America's youth mainly focuses on issues such as increasing costs, the pressure (and value) of high-stakes standardized tests and the Affirmative Action. For many of our children, the drone of this chatter is being drowned out by more pressing concerns regarding college, such as questions about the grades and coursework necessary for admission and doubts about whether it is a realistic option for many of them. While American college attendance rates have been steadily rising over the last thirty years, the pace of the improvement has been frustratingly slow. As traditional barriers to college admission, such as cost and discriminatory admission policies, have been reduced, underlying, more serious problems have become apparent. These include a shockingly low high school graduation rate and an absence of college-level academic skills among many of those who do graduate. This is especially true in urban environments and among students of color. It has become apparent over the years that preparation, college exposure and social networks are even stronger determinants of a child's likelihood of attending college than financial resources or school admission policies.

The question addressed here today is what is the impact of exposure to a college environment on middle school students? Specifically, does it increase their knowledge about the college experience, their academic focus and performance and ultimately, their likelihood of attending college?

This research focuses on the impact of college tours on African-American and Hispanic boys--the groups currently experiencing the least success in high school performance, college attendance and graduation rates. It involves a collection of data concerning the impact of a middle school college tour on students' academics, college interest and actual college attendance. The tools utilized in this research include surveys and interviews with students and teachers, an analysis of student report cards, and anecdotal data from conversations with alumni of the college tour.

My analysis of this data focuses on the short-term impact of a college tour in improving student academic performance and interest in college and the long-term impact on alumni matriculating to a four-year college or university. This analysis leads to several policy recommendations at the school and district level regarding the viability and management of college tour programs in middle schools.

BACKGROUND

I teach an Eighth grade Social Studies curriculum to approximately one hundred students. The Ronald Edmonds Learning Center ("RELC") is a Grade 6-8 middle school located in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, NY, a largely middle class integrated community, and also services the Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights neighborhoods. Our school serves children of color almost exclusively, a large percentage of who are 2nd - 3rd generation immigrants from the Caribbean. The demographics of the school are approximately 87% percent African/Caribbean-American, 10% Latino and 3% Asian, White or other. Approximately 75% of our students qualify for free lunch under the federal 'Title I' program.

Six years ago, the concern of several teachers and administrators about the academic progress and focus of our male students and the dire statistics

regarding high school graduation and college attendance rates among African-American and Hispanic males led to the creation of the “Young Men’s College Tour” (hereinafter, the “Tour”). The purpose of the Tour was twofold. Primarily, it illustrated the benefits of the college experience and should serve to inspire our students to prepare themselves to be viable college candidates at the conclusion of their high school careers. Secondly, the Tour was designed to have the short-term effect of improving the academics and behavior of our male students through a focused and intense intervention by faculty chaperons.

In our conversations with high school educators and school alumni over the years, it had become apparent to my colleagues at RELC that many high school students did not begin serious consideration or preparation for college until their junior or senior year of high school. At that point, many students either had not taken the necessary coursework or had not performed well enough in that coursework to be viewed as attractive candidates by many four-year colleges and universities. Many of our students will qualify as first-generation college students when they matriculate to college, thus there is often a scarcity of college-educated family members or friends in their lives. Without the benefit of someone imparting general knowledge about the college experience and the admission process, many of our children rely solely on their schools as information sources. One benefit of the Tour was to inform students of the qualifications necessary for admission to college at an early age and provide them the opportunity to compete with other students who come from a college-track background.

Specifically, the Tour is a five-day bus ride during the April Spring Break vacation to several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (“HBCUs”) primarily on the East Coast. There are approximately male 34 students (6th-8th grades) and four male faculty chaperons. Some of the schools visited include Howard University, Morehouse College and Hampton University. On campus, the students receive official tours, talk with college students and in some cases,

sit in on classes with students. Where possible, the students also meet with RELC alumni who are currently enrolled as college students.

In addition to the exposure to the college admission process and lifestyle, one of the most important aspects of the Tour is its academic meetings. In order to help students improve their academic performance, the Tour provides each student with an individual analysis of their grades, teacher feedback, and study habit analysis. The fact that the chaperons know all of the teachers well allows for a very penetrating and meaningful analysis of the students. The sessions involve collecting each student's report card, teacher progress reports and standardized test history. This information is reviewed by the Tour chaperons (all educators) and based on questions posed to the student and the group, each student receives a breakdown of his strengths and weaknesses in academics, testing and behavior. Although the sessions can become intense, each student leaves his session with an action plan with the changes necessary for the student to improve his academics and/or behavior. In some cases, the proposed changes are discussed with the parent upon the conclusion of the Tour.

One recent powerful example of the impact of the intervention is a student from the most last Tour who *voluntarily* turned his X-Box video game system over to the principal for the remainder of the school year once we discovered that it was the major cause of his academic difficulties. That student's grades improved in the subsequent marking period (see Data Analysis section).

The Tour program originally began to address the special needs of the young men in the school; however, in order to address the needs of our female students, a Young Women's Tour was instituted in 2003.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite a significant number of reforms to the public school system nationally, and in New York City in particular, the have been only modest gains

in student achievement over the past ten years. One statistic that remains troublingly low is the high school graduation rate. In 2003, the overall national public high school graduation rate was 70% (Greene, & Winters, 2006). In New York State, the graduation rate was approximately 58% for the same year (Greene & Winters, 2006). In addition to these low graduation rates, our children are also suffering from low attendance and completion rates in college. For the academic year 2004, only 51% of Class of 2004 New York State high school graduates were planning on entering a four-year college in the Fall (The University of the State of New York, The State of Learning: "Statewide Profile of the Educational System", 2005). To be fair, among the graduates, there were an additional 30% who planned to pursue other educational options, including two-year colleges. However, based on the increased value that educators and society place on degrees from four-year colleges, i.e. graduate schools, this research will focus on four-year colleges.

Using the previous data, if one were to make the assumption that the graduation rates and college attendance rates remained relatively stable for the classes of 2003 and 2004, one can calculate that, among the New York State students that were *originally scheduled* to graduate in those two years (based on their high school entrance year), approximately 30% actually entered a four-year college. While that figure is surprisingly low, the reality for New York City students looks even bleaker because the high school graduation rate for New York City students in 2003 is lower than the State rate, at 43% (Greene & Winters, 2006). Thus, the college attendance rate for New York City students in 2003-2004 would forecast at approximately 22% of the students *originally scheduled* to graduate in those years.

One reason for these poor college attendance rates is that research has found that many students are graduating high school academically unprepared for college admission. In a study that measured college readiness rates among high school graduates, researchers found that the overall college readiness rate

for New York State was a low 29% (compared to 32% nationally), while the rate for African-American students was 16% and 10% for Hispanic students. (Greene, & Forster, 2003). The researchers defined college readiness using a three-part measurement: (1) the student has completed high school and received a diploma; (2) the student must have completed the minimum coursework that a four-year college would require for admission (generally, four years of English, three years of math, and two years each of natural science, social science and foreign language); and (3) the student must have a reading score qualifying as the “basic” level of achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Test, a nationally administered, standardized examination. (Greene & Forster). This research lends some explanation to the previously stated fact that a relatively small number of high school graduates in New York City and State are actually attending four-year colleges: many of them simply do not qualify academically for college.

Other factors that play heavily into these graduation and college attendance statistics are the goals and aspirations of the students. Those students that enter high school with a plan of graduating and attending college are much more likely to accomplish that goal than students without such a plan. Researchers found in a study of first-generation college students that, regardless of background, “those who have a strong sense of motivation within themselves, or who have parents with a strong sense of the importance of college, will have the aspiration to attend college and will act upon it.” (Killmeyer, Pace, & Quaily, 2003). For students in urban environments, often students of color, there is often a lack of exposure to college graduates in their everyday experiences that becomes a barrier to the students developing such a plan. This absence of exposure often manifests itself as a lack of familial support and less college knowledge that contributes to the vulnerability of first-generation students. (Hertel, 2002).

Thus, for many urban students, one potential solution to the problem of limited knowledge about college is to create the exposure to the college experience that is essential for students to see college as a desirable and realistic destination for themselves. In recent years, there has been growth in the area of pre-college outreach programs that are designed to provide exposure to the college experience to children at earlier ages than the traditional high school college guidance programs. The researcher Laura Perna has found that there are several essential elements to successful college outreach programs that target low-income students, students of color and potential first-generation college students: the goal of college attendance, college tours or fairs, promoting rigorous academic coursework, parental involvement, and reaching students by the eighth grade. (Perna, L.W., Differences in the Decision to Attend College Among African-Americans, Hispanics and Whites, The Journal of Higher Education, 2000). The job of middle school educators is to encourage students to consider college and to ensure that they are academically qualified. (Perna, L.W., College Preparation in the Middle Grades: It's More Than SATs, Middle Matters, Fall 2001). Increasingly, school administrators have begun experiment with introducing students to college programming at earlier ages in order to combat some of the harmful statistics previously described, with increasing levels of success.

RESEARCH TOOLS

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Tour experience, three main research tools were utilized: a grade analysis for each student who attended the 2004-05 Tour and returned to RELC for a full academic year following the tour, Progress Reports from the teachers of a sample of students who attended to 2005-06 Tour, and surveys of Tour alumni who are either college-age or high school seniors.

Grade Analysis

In order to evaluate the short-term impact of the Tour, a grade analysis was conducted for a sample of the students who attended the Tour in the 2004-05 academic year as 6th or 7th grade students, and are currently still enrolled at RELC. The analysis had two components: first, a comparison of the students' grade averages for the three marking periods that preceded the Tour with the one marking period that began after the Tour; second, a comparison of the students grades for the 2004-05 academic year with the grades for the 2005-06 academic year.

Progress Reports

In order to gauge the effect of the academic intervention session and the overall experience, I had teachers complete Progress Reports for every student that attended the 2005-06 Tour. The reports measured the students' progress in their 4 core subject areas (Math, Social Studies, Science, English) in seven categories: homework, test/quiz performance, projects, attitude, effort, conduct and overall performance. The teachers evaluated the students using several measures: N/A (meaning the student was already performing at a high level in the category prior to the Tour), *major* improvement shown, *some* improvement shown, no improvement shown, or the student has regressed since the Tour.

Surveys

In order to assess the long-term impact of the Tour, I conducted surveys of selected Tour alumni. The criteria for the alumni survey was that they be eligible (based on their age) for college or their junior or senior high school year. The recordkeeping for the initial two years of the Tour (the 1999-00 and 2000-01 academic years) was incomplete, but based on estimates there should be

approximately 20 college-eligible alumni and 20-25 high school juniors or seniors.

The challenge in this effort was twofold. First, tracking down the students four to five years after their middle school graduation based solely on their school records was very difficult. Second, once located, simply securing the completed surveys from teenagers proved very difficult. As of the current date, I have received completed surveys from two college-age alumni and three high school students.¹

The survey addresses three major topics: how the Tour affected their opinions about college, the status of their college plans, and the schools they ultimately applied to or attended.

DATA

Grade Analysis

The initial data showed that 7 of the 10 students from the 2004-05 Tour improved their overall averages in the marking period immediately following the Tour (See Chart 1). The average increase was approximately 2-3 points for each student. Of the 3 students whose grades declined after the Tour, 2 of them still maintained averages above 75%.

In the 2005-06 academic year, however, the trend reversed for most of the 10 students who returned to RELC. Six of the 10 students experienced declines in the academic averages from the 2004-05 academic year. The average decline in average was approximately eight points; however, that number appears to be somewhat skewed by the performance of one particular student who experienced a severe drop in his average. Without this student, the average

¹ Additional surveys results will be added to this research in the future.

decrease per student is reduced to six points. On a positive note, although most of the students experienced a decline in grades, 7 of the 10 students still maintained an overall average above 75%. Interestingly, there was one student in the group who attended the Tour for both years; his average continued to rise through both periods examined.

The data illustrates that the Tour may demonstrate some immediate positive impact on the students' academics as shown by the averages of several students. Conversations with several of those students revealed that they felt more focused on academics upon their return from the Tour. However, the student's grades regressed in the subsequent academic year; it appears the impact of the Tour appeared to fade over time.

Progress Reports

The Progress Reports were created to allow the students' teachers to provide immediate feedback on their progress upon their return from the 2005-06 Tour (Example, see Chart 2). The data focused on approximately 15 students who shared the same teachers during the year. For the three teachers in the four core academic classes who completed the survey, all of them reported gains in the academic categories: homework, tests and projects. In the Effort category, 13 of the 15 students showed improved performances.

There was some inconsistency in the responses among teachers, especially in the categories regarding behavior. I attributed this to the varying levels of experience among the teachers surveyed, which can often result in more instances of aberrant behavior for the less-experienced teacher. The two more experienced teachers reported few behavioral issues overall and noted some improvements, while the less experienced teacher reported serious behavioral issues and little improvement among the same students.

Surveys

Although the sample size of Tour alumni surveyed is not large enough to provide any discernable trends, the students surveyed did provide some common impressions about the impact of the Tour (See Chart 3). The Tour provided all of these students with their first exposure to a college campus. One theme that ran through their responses was that one major benefit of the Tour was the students becoming aware that the college experience was much different from their initial expectations. They commented that issues such as independence, individual responsibility, the admission process and the enjoyable experience were all factors of which they were unaware. Only one student had subsequently attended another college tour, and only one reported that their high school actually offered one.

All five students surveyed are on the college track, with two of them currently attending college at schools they visited on the Tour. Both of the high school students have been accepted to college and plan to attend in the Fall. While neither of them will attend a school that we visited on the Tour, both of them did apply to at least one college that we visited.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data suggests that the Tour is a successful program in improving student's academics and behavior and providing lasting impressions about the college experience. These results support both the feedback that RELC has received from Tour Alumni and the research that has been conducted on early college preparation programs. Today's students need to understand the direct connection between their classroom studies and the impact they have on these students' futures. Without that connection many of our students are passing through their high school experiences but not appreciating the difficulty and competitiveness of the college admission process. Some of our alumni have

demonstrated that even in challenging environments, students with focus can succeed academically in high school, graduate on time and be admitted to reputable four-year colleges. They attribute much of this focus to the lessons they learned on the Tour about the importance of grades, extracurricular activities and minimizing distractions. This research has shown there are two main areas in which the Tour had a significant impact.

First, many students benefited in the short-term from the Tour experience. The middle school years are often the most challenging for students to navigate as they learn to balance the competing interests of academics, family, friends and adolescence. Many students who received excellent grades in elementary school fall into mediocrity or poor performances academically as they struggle with these issues. These students received substantial benefits from the Tour because it eliminated many of their day to day distractions, focused on their academics, and exposed them to an aspect of education that many of them could not envision: college life.

Students have returned excited about the opportunities that college provides, understanding what it takes to be admitted to college and ready to work towards making themselves viable candidates in the future. Their grades showed improvement and teachers noted improved effort. The next challenge is building on that improvement. The decrease in academic averages for some students in the subsequent year shows that the Tour lessons must be reinforced as the students return to face new distractions. Group meetings among Tour members could serve as a refresher on the action plans that the students received during the Tour and assist in setting goals for the new academic year.

Second, the feedback on the Tour has shown that it is having a long-term impact on the students. The most satisfying aspect of this research was finding Tour alumni enrolled in colleges that they visited on the Tour and seeing our high school alumni on the college track. Some of the feedback has been anecdotal from Tour chaperons who have encountered alumni in various

settings in recent years. This feedback, when added to the surveys results, confirms that many students took the lessons from the Tour to heart regarding their academics in high school and college plans. Students recalled details about specific schools when they began their college application process and utilized that information in their decision-making process. For many of the alumni, the RELC Tour was the only one they ever participated in, in many cases because their high school did not offer a college tour or any substantial college preparation services.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the data presented leads to the conclusion that the College Tour program has shown signs of positively impacting students. Both in their short-term academic and behavioral progress as well as their long-term college planning, the data illustrates numerous ways in which the Tour influenced and benefited the students. Thus, the major implications of this research are to spread this experience in order to impact more children and to develop methods to improve the efficacy of the Tour.

Replication of the Tour

School districts must increase their support and funding of college tour programs. Research has shown that exposure to higher education at an early age is critical for modern students, particularly African-American and Hispanic males. While impactful for the entire group, it is even measurably more important for those young people who lack exposure to college-educated individuals in their normal environments. A college tour experience is one that can show immediate results in improving academics and behavior, as well as an introduction to the college experience. Currently, there are a significant number of high schools that do not offer college tours as a part of their college

preparation programs, and precious few middle schools. Often, the burden of providing these services is borne by community groups, churches and similar organizations. While these organizations' efforts are essential and laudable, their role should be supplementary to that of school districts. Charitable donations should be utilized to expand the opportunity to more students and enhance the experience, not as a primary funding source.

The planning and operation costs for the Tour described in this research are approximately \$20,000 per year, including a fee of approximately \$275 in fees/donations for each student. Over the years, district and regional support for the Tour has diminished and we have been forced to rely more heavily on charitable donations from outside sources. This trend has to be reversed. Schools need strategic and financial support from their regional administrators in order to make these programs more widespread. Specifically, school principals/administrators need to request that the regions allocate monies in their budgets to support these activities. While fundraising by individual schools is necessary based on today's economic realities, school regions should be able to fund a minimum of 50%-60% of the operating expenses.

Improving Efficacy

A second priority illustrated by the research is that college tour programs must be supplemented by additional college track programming to ensure that students maintain their focus on college as their primary goal. The initial rise and subsequent fall of student grades in the periods examined after the Tour indicate the lessons of academic achievement rigor and achievement must be reinforced. As most educators and parents can attest, teenagers have very short memories and need periodic reinforcement of their priorities.

At the middle school level, administrators must provide periodic monitoring of the academic and behavioral progress of its Tour alumni. The use of teacher progress reports is a good step in that direction. Additionally, new

programming that reinforces the goals of high aspirations and the benefits of academic success must be used to assist the students in maintaining their focus. Examples of such programming might include: (1) discussion groups that focus on important books and articles, and social issues affecting teenagers; (2) tutoring by and for Tour alumni; and (3) career days that introduce students to professionals in various industries. At the high school level, these programs can be expanded to match the maturity level and college readiness of the student body. Many forms of programs will be useful; the goal is to clarify to students the careers and lifestyles that their academics can provide for them in the future and to provide the tools for them to succeed academically.

If improving high school graduation and college attendance rates is truly a high priority for school districts, administrators must think beyond school and teacher efficacy as the sole solutions to the problem. While those are vital issues, some of the improvement in our schools' performances must come from the students themselves as motivated and goal-oriented young people. Much of this motivation is more directly related to what students experience outside of the school walls and see as realistic goals for themselves. Exposure to the college experience is vital for those students who may lack it otherwise and for those visual learners who value first-hand experience. Experience for many educators has shown that one cannot drag an unwilling student to academic success and career achievement; at some point the student must start walking on their own towards those goals. A college tour experience is one method that has motivated students to start walking. Individual schools and districts must support and replicate these programs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Greene, Jay P. and Winters, Marcus A. (April 2006). *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, Civic Report No. 48, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
2. The University of the State of New York (July 2005). *The State of Learning: "Statewide Profile of the Educational System"*.
3. Greene, Jay P. and Forster, Greg (September 2003). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*, Education Working Paper No. 3, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
4. Killmeyer, W., Pace, S. and Quailey, J. (2003). *Barriers and Opportunities Faced By First-Generation College Students*, Duquesne University.
5. Hertel, J.B. (2002). *College Student Generational Status: Similarities, Differences and Factors in College Adjustment*, The Psychological Record.
6. Perna, L.W. (2000). *Differences in the Decision to Attend College Among African-Americans, Hispanics and Whites*, The Journal of Higher Education.
7. Perna, L.W. (Fall 2001). *College Preparation in the Middle Grades: It's More Than SATs*, Middle Matters.

**Grade Analysis – Pre-Tour vs. Post-Tour
Academic Averages**

Student-Grade	Pre-Tour Average	Post-Tour Average	Subsequent Year (2005-06) Average
student 1 – 6 th	84	89 (+)	66
student 2 – 6 th	83	84 (+)	79
student 3 – 6^{th*}	87	91 (+)	92 (+)
student 4 – 7 th	77	68	66
student 5 – 7 th	78	76	78 (=)
student 6 – 7 th	85	87 (+)	83
student 7 – 7 th	87	89 (+)	89 (+)
student 8 – 7 th	86	80	81
student 9 – 7 th	87	87 (=)	89 (+)
student 10 – 7 th	74	77 (+)	67
Totals	82.8	82.8	79

- -- attended Tour both years

College Tour Student Progress Report

Teacher: Ms. H

The purpose of this report is to assess the progress our students have made in their academics and behavior since attending the college tour over the Spring Break in April. Please take several minutes to consider how each student has performed in the following areas since the Tour and fill in the categories below.

The categories should be graded in the following manner:

- N/A – the student was performing at an **above-average** level prior to the trip
- MI – major improvement shown in this area
- I – improvement shown, but could be better
- N – no improvement shown
- R – student has regressed in this area

Student	Performance Categories						Overall
	Homework	Test/Quiz	Projects	Effort	Attitude	Conduct	
1	NA	MI	MI	MI	I	NA	
2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
3	N	I	N	I	NA	NA	
4	NA	R	MI	NA	NA	NA	
5	I	I	I	I	MI	MI	
6	I	I	I	I	MI	MI	
7	NA	I	NA	MA	NA	NA	
8	MI	MI	MI	NA	NA	NA	
9	I	MI	MA	NA	R	MI	
10	MI	MI	MI	NA	NA	NA	
11	I	I	I	I	I	I	
12	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
13	M	MI	I	NA	MI	MI	
14	M	I	MI	I	NA	NA	
15	N	N	N	N	R	R	

College Tour Survey

This survey is directed towards former RELC students in their high school junior/senior years or currently attending college. The purpose is to collect information on what you remember about the RELC College Tour, and how it influenced your attitude about attending college and the process you used/are using to select a college. Your participation and thoughtful responses are very important to us securing funding and improving the tour. Questions vary for current high school and college students.

1. Why did you go on the College Tour (parents, you chose, teacher sponsor, friends)?

2. When you think about college, what do you remember from the College Tour?

3. Did the College Tour affect your opinion of what the college experience was like? How?

4. Did you (do you plan to) attend college?

5. If so, on a scale of 1-10, how influential was the tour in you deciding to attend college?

6. Did the College Tour make you more likely to attend college? Why?

7. What colleges did (do you intend to) you apply to and attend (college students)?

8. Does your high school offer a college tour?

9. Did (do you plan to) you attend another college tour (school/church, etc.)?

10. Are there any ways that we can improve students' experiences on the tour?

