

What Happens Next?
Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School's Class of 2006
In Their First Year After High School.

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QUESTION

How can we better prepare our students for college and support them during college?

RATIONALE

Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School (MHVP) is a small public high school located on the South Bronx High School Campus. MHVP opened in the fall of 2002 as a partnership among the school, East Side House Settlement, and New Visions. The three main goals of MHVP are to prepare students for success in college, to form close personal relationships with the students, and to help students become active participants in their communities. Last year, we graduated our first class of seniors. Of the 61 graduates, 58 (95%) were admitted to college. While this represents a tremendous success, what truly matters is how many of our former students finish college. Many studies show that students have a high dropout rate during their first two years of college (Swail, 2003). As a senior teacher and advisor, I assisted students in the college preparation process and wanted to know if we were successful. With this in mind, I set out to discover what we could do to better prepare future students for the transition from high school to college, and what kind of support our students need to successfully complete their first year of college.

CONTEXT

The student body at MHVP is typical of a public school in the South Bronx. Out of a total school population of approximately 325 students, 65% of our students are Latino, 33% are African-American, and 2% percent are Asian. The majority of the students come from the surrounding neighborhood but students also come from neighborhoods throughout the Bronx, Harlem, and Washington Heights. Ninety-five percent of our students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Eighty-two percent of our students test at level one or level two on the 8th grade English Language Arts test when they enter our school, the equivalent to a 3rd through 6th grade reading level. In addition, 35% of the students who responded to my survey acquired a language before they learned English and 26% were the first in their immediate family to graduate from high school.

ACADEMIC STATISTICS

Last year, MHVP graduated its first class of seniors. In this class, 58 out of 65 students graduated in June with another three students graduating in August. Of the 61 graduates, 58 were admitted to post-secondary institutions. These schools range from two-year colleges like Bronx Community College and Kingsborough Community College, to fouryear public schools like Hunter College and SUNY Binghamton, and include some fouryear private colleges like Marist College and Farleigh Dickinson University as well as proprietary schools like Monroe College and Berkeley College.

In the class of 2006, the average grade point average (GPA) was 76.2. The top 20 students had GPAs from 93-79, while the middle 20 students had GPAs from 78-74, and the bottom 21 students had GPAs from 73-63 (See Table 1). The average SAT score (Critical

Reading/Math Combined) was 695. The top 14 students had SAT scores from 1000-800, while the middle 20 students had SAT scores from 790-670, and the bottom 21 students had SAT scores from 660-400 (See Table 2). The average student score on the five Regents exams that are graduation requirements was 62.7. The top 20 students had averages between 81.8-71, while the middle 20 students had average scores between 70.8-63, and the bottom 21 students had average scores between 62.8-34.2 (See Table 3).

	GPA
Top 20 GPA's	93 – 79
Middle 20 GPA's	78 – 74
Bottom 21 GPA's	73 – 63
Class Average	76.2

Table 1

	SAT (Reading and Math)
Top 14 Scores	1000 – 800
Middle 20 Scores	790 – 670
Bottom 21 Scores	660 – 400
Class Average	695

Table 2

	Average of 5 Regents
Top 20 Averages	81.8 – 71
Middle 20 Averages	70.8 – 63
Bottom 21 Averages	62.8 – 34.2
Class Average	69.5

Table 3

However, these numbers do not paint a full picture of Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. To truly understand the school, you need to look beyond the numbers and see the personalized learning environment, the traditions, and the focus on college preparation that make MHVP a unique school. At Mott Haven, teachers, staff, and administrators are dedicated to understanding the students as individuals. Through advisories, after school programs, extracurricular activities, and a genuine desire to understand the students, teachers and staff

develop deep and meaningful relationships with the students. In addition, MHVP is a school that is trying to change the history of low graduation rates that has long been associated with urban public education. MHVP builds community by having many traditions and events that set it apart. Students and staff look forward to eating and socializing at our annual cultural feast, competing in the student versus staff basketball game, and dressing up for our annual spirit week. These events, and others, create school spirit and build a sense of community at MHVP. Finally, the college focus of MHVP is unique. At Mott Haven, 9th graders go on college trips, advisors and college counselors stay late to work on college applications, staff stress college from the day students enter the school, the senior class has a college advisor, and our community partner awards over \$50,000 in scholarships to our students.

COLLEGE PREPARATION PROCESS

To achieve the goal of college preparation, MHVP emphasizes college readiness throughout the curriculum. Thanks to college trips, SAT prep classes, and the College Preparation and Leadership Program (CPLP), the vast majority of the students think of college as the obvious step after high school. During the students' senior year, college preparation is done through the advisory program, CPLP, and in English class. In addition, MHVP has a guidance counselor who helps with all aspects of the college application process. One of the major components of our college preparation program is advisory. Last year, advisory took place once a week for an hour. During this time, seniors met in groups of about twelve to fifteen students with their advisor. The advisors were subject area teachers, the guidance counselor, and the social worker. During advisory, students went through the college application process step by step. Advisors helped

students begin the college application process by searching for schools that they would be interested in.

Next, students developed a list of reach, target, and safety schools. Finally, advisors helped students fill out and submit college applications. Once the applications were in, advisors assisted students and their families with the financial aid application process. CPLP plays an equally important role in the college application process. CPLP took students on college tours and to college fairs, organized a college fair in our building, and provided support throughout the college application process. In addition, CPLP provided money for the application fees when fee waivers could not be obtained and gave out \$50,000 in scholarships. As part of the CPLP, 20-25 students per class attended educational counseling class once a week for an hour. In educational counseling, students worked on SAT preparation and received help completing the college application and financial aid process. In addition, students could participate in optional events planned by CPLP such as college trips and additional SAT tutoring.

The final pieces of the college preparation program were English class and the guidance department. During the fall semester English class, the seniors wrote and revised their personal statements. Our school also has one fulltime guidance counselor who is responsible for all 325 students in 9th-12th grades. The guidance counselor provided help to the students throughout the college preparation process. In addition to acting as an advisor, she helped students with college searches, facilitated the financial aid process, provided recommendations and fee waivers, and worked with students on finding scholarships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Horace Mann popularized the idea that public education could function as the great equalizer and help prevent and end poverty (Mann, 1848). Needless to say, this dream has not been realized. There is still a large achievement gap between students of different races and income levels. Whether measured by graduation rates, test scores, or the number of students below grade level, the “factory model” of education has failed large numbers of low-income students of color (Kozol, 1991). Urban schools have been plagued by insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, under-qualified teachers, and high levels of teacher turnover (Kozol, 1991). In addition, schools in urban areas are affected by conditions that are beyond their control, for example, access to health care, a living wage, and affordable housing, all of which have a disproportionate effect on low-income communities. These issues must be addressed if urban schools are to close the achievement gap (Noguera, 2003).

The achievement gap exists not only in high schools, but also in post-secondary education as well. Conditions that contribute to unequal education at the high school level continue to affect students long after they graduate. Recently, the racial gap in college enrollment rates appears to have declined. As of 1999, 86% of Asians enrolled in college, 76% of Whites, 71% of African-Americans, and 71% of Latinos (Adelman, 1999 in Chajet, 2006). However, when the enrollment rates are compared by income level, the numbers are not as encouraging. While 85% of high school graduates from the highest income quartile have enrolled in college, only 58% from the lowest income quartile have (Mortenson, 2001 in Gladieux, 2004 in Chajet, 2006).

Furthermore, the achievement gap widens when college persistence and completion rates are examined. African-American and Latino students leave college at alarming rates. One in six

African-American and Latino low-income college students leave during their first year and a total of one in three leave by the end of their second year (Swail, 2003 in Chajet, 2006).

Additionally, 77% of high-income students graduate college within six years compared to only 54% percent of low-income students. Finally, 67% of White students graduate in six years while only 47% of Latino students and 46% of African-American students do so (Berkner, HE, & Cataldi, 2002 in Carey, 2004 in Chajet 2006).

In New York City, the small schools movement grew in response to the failure of large comprehensive high schools. Small schools were created to offer low-income students of color the same educational opportunities that students in high-income schools and districts were receiving (Anyon, 1980). Small schools set out to try to close the high school achievement gap as well as gaps in college enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Many small schools, including Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School, adopted the college-for-all model. This model involves giving all students access to college counseling resources and detracking classes so that all students have access to a high level, college preparatory curriculum. In addition to these policy changes, the college-for-all model requires a change in the attitudes and expectations of all staff and students. The school must create a culture in which all students believe that they can succeed in college. With this research in mind, I set out to discover if MHVP has succeeded in establishing a college-for-all model.

DATA COLLECTION

Beyond the academic statistics and other contextual data already presented, my data falls into two broad categories—from students who are in college and from students not in college. The data was collected through student surveys/phone interviews and in-depth interviews with 15

students. Initially, all of the students from the Class of 2006 were contacted to inform them about the research and to update their contact information. After making these phone calls, a survey was sent to each of the 61 graduates. As the surveys began to trickle in, I realized that one mailing would not produce the response I was looking for. At this point, I began to call students and complete the surveys with them over the phone.

Through the mail and the phone calls, surveys were completed for 43 of the 61 graduates. I was able to speak with a relative or close friend of the remaining 18 graduates to determine whether they were in school but I did not get detailed information on these students. Students were asked to provide basic demographic information like their race, first language, and country of birth. This was followed by questions about their high school preparation, their transition to college, and their first semester in college. In addition, there were questions about their family's educational background. Finally, the survey included a section for students who were not in college that asked them for reasons why they were not enrolled.

After compiling the surveys and identifying themes and trends, I began a series of informal conversations with former students. These conversations took place in school when students returned to visit. In all, I talked with 15 students. These conversations provided valuable background information and personal stories that complement the surveys. I contacted the students again in March to get updated information on their enrollment status for the second semester. During this round of data collection, I was able to speak with 50 students over the phone and with close friends or relatives of the other 11 students. Though more brief than the initial round of interviews, these conversations helped me identify changes that occurred during the students' first semester in college.

DATA

In September of 2006, 46 out of 61 graduates (76%) enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (See Table 4). This is six points higher than the average for African-American and Latino students and 19 points higher than the average for the low-income students. Enrollment data also indicate that many of our students enrolled in CUNY schools (47%). In addition, a significant number of students attended proprietary or for-profit colleges (21%).

MHVP Class of 2006 – September 2007							
Total – 61 Graduates							
Did Not Enroll In College	Proprietary College	2 Year CUNY	2 Year Non-CUNY	4 Year CUNY	4 Year SUNY	4 Year Private	Tech/Voc. School
15	10	8	1	14	1	10	2

Table 4

Those Who Did Not Enroll in College

Out of the 15 students who did not enroll in college, I received a survey from or spoke with eight. All of the graduates not in college whom I contacted stated that they planned to enroll within the next year. Furthermore, as of the end of the fall 2006 semester, only three students out of the 46 attending school had dropped out of school before completing the semester. However, all three students planned on re-enrolling within the next year. Of these 11 students (eight not enrolled, three who dropped out), eight mentioned financial aid as a reason they were not in college, three said that they were not ready for college and wanted a break, and one student graduated high school in August and did not have time to enroll. Three out of the seven foreign-born graduates did not start college in September.

Students who did not finish their first semester mentioned two additional themes in our conversations: 1) they wished they had spent more time exploring the colleges that accepted them; 2) They felt they should have visited college campuses and looked more closely at financial aid packages before making their decision.

In addition, students who did not enroll in college felt they should not have taken a break. Some students felt like they were falling behind their peers and others mentioned that being out of school was boring. Overall, they recommended students go directly to college without taking a break.

Those Who Did Enroll in College

Thirty-five out of the 46 students who did enroll in September 2006 participated in the study. Of these students, 14 (40%) were the first in their immediate family to attend college. When asked about the transition to college, 11 (55%) mentioned that the easiest thing about being in college was writing essays. This idea was supported when 15 (42%) mentioned essay writing as the most valuable thing they learned in high school. In addition, seven (20%) mentioned having difficulty with the freedom and/or responsibility they encountered in college and five students (14%) said making friends was difficult. Few students found cost to be an issue. One exception was mentioned by two students who attend CUNY schools and said paying for Metrocards was difficult. This suggests that these students were prepared for the cost of tuition but were not aware of some of the hidden costs of college such as transportation and books. Regarding what was difficult in college, 12 (34%) mentioned the workload, 8 (22%) said the freedom and/or responsibility, and five (14%) said math. To get a better sense of what subjects might be difficult for them, I asked students if they were taking remedial classes, and if yes, which ones. Fifteen

(42%) were not taking remedial classes, eight were taking only remedial math, two students were taking only remedial English, and seven were taking remedial math and English.

In March, I gathered enrollment information on all 61 students from the class of 2006. At this time, 43 were enrolled in college while 18 were not enrolled. Six out of the 15 who did not enroll in college for the first semester began school in January; nine who started school in September were no longer in school (see Table 5).

MHVP Class of 2006 – January 2007				
Total – 61 Graduates				
Total Students Enrolled In College	Students Who Started College in January	Students Who Have Not Enroll In College	Students Who Started College in September But Did Not Return For 2 nd Semester	Total Students Not Enrolled In College
43	6	9	9	18

Table 5

ANALYSIS

According to Anyon, small schools were created to achieve the goal of providing students in urban areas with a high quality education that would include college preparation (Anyon, 1980).

MHVP succeeded in making college a goal for all students and is well on its way to providing access to college for all students. But more has to be done after the acceptance letters are received to help ensure perseverance and success in college.

The data from this study suggest that persevering through two and/or four years of college will be difficult for MHVP graduates. While the rate of college entrance from MHVP is higher than the national averages for both low-income students and African-

American and Latino students (Adelman, 1999 and Mortenson, 2001 in Chajet, 2006), more work must be done to ensure that students have the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to succeed in college.

My data suggest that securing financial aid was one of the major reasons that students did not enroll in college or did not complete the first semester. This is keeping with the research of Berkner and Cataldi (2002 as cited in Chajet 2006) that shows that college enrollment rates for low-income students are much lower than they are for high-income students. We need to make students more aware of both the obvious and hidden costs of college and help them to compare the costs of public and private colleges. Students need guidance about ways to pay for college. As my data shows, this is particularly important for students who were born outside of the U.S. The fact that 58% of the students who responded to the survey reported taking remedial classes is particularly troubling in light of data from the National Council of Education Statistics (2004 in Conley, 2007), which shows that only 17% of students taking remedial reading earn a bachelor's degree. MHVP must do a better job of preparing students for college level work by beginning in the 9th grade to make them more aware of the type and amount of work that will be expected of them in college.

My data suggest that our students may have become accustomed to teachers giving them a high level of support and that this aspect of the MHVP culture may have led to students struggling to adapt to a culture that values individual responsibility. Many students mentioned that it was hard for them to hand in assignments on time without teachers constantly reminding them of the due dates and encouraging them to do the work. While extra support and attention is one of the strengths of small schools, students must also be taught individual responsibility and the ability to advocate for themselves.

Thus, we need to become more adept at nurturing their independence. Finally, these students also stressed the need to spend more time picking the right school. Students said they wished they visited schools before making their decisions. Several students also mentioned they picked their school based on what major was available and they wished they had based their decision on other factors.

CONCLUSION

The data from the first graduating class of MHVP provides a glimpse into the lives of the students after they have left high school and shows that Mott Haven has had tremendous success in some areas and highlights other areas in need of attention and improvement. Mott Haven has succeeded in making college a reality for students and it has successfully prepared many students for the college application and enrollment process. In addition, many of the students who enrolled in college had the skills and dedication to complete their first semester. However, it appears that students will continue to face hurdles as they proceed through their college careers. This research has helped to answer some questions but it has also raised questions that should be answered through further study. In particular, it will be important to look at what factors help students succeed in college by following the Class of 2006's progress through college. Similar studies of each graduating class should be done to determine whether we are making progress improving our college preparation. Finally, this study shows that a large percentage of our students are attending for-profit, proprietary colleges. More research is needed to determine if our students are successful in these schools and if these schools provide our students with a solid education and prepare them for life after college.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Students are affected by policy decisions that are made in the local, state, and national government. In order to transform urban education, a full-scale attempt to end persistent and systematic poverty must be made through dealing with issues such as affordable housing, access to and affordability of health care, un- and under-employment, immigration reform, criminal justice reform, etc. However, policy recommendations in all of these areas are beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, there are specific recommendations for education policy that can help.

At the National Level

1 Expand public education to include a free public college education to ensure access to the middle class for all students. For many years, the government has provided a free high school education and for most of this time, a high school education was sufficient preparation for a middle class salary. However, high school graduation no longer provides easy access to the middle class.

2 Change financial aid formulas for needy students. One of the biggest obstacles our students face when enrolling in college is obtaining sufficient financial aid. The cost of a college education continues to rise while state and federal grants remain stagnant or have decreased (Gladieux, 2004 in Chajet, 2006). Furthermore, a greater percentage of financial aid is being tied to merit rather than need. Both of these trends place a college education out of reach for many students from Mott Haven. Particularly worrisome is the high percentage of students born outside of the U.S. who cannot afford college. These students, in many cases, did not choose to come to the U.S. but have worked hard to succeed in a new country. Cutting these students off from obtaining a college education will serve no positive goals and will only create a permanent

underclass of undocumented students who are not able to fulfill their desire for a postsecondary education. There are many steps to be taken to make college more affordable for all low-income students.

At the State Level

1 Change funding formulas to provide equity of resources for low income schools. There is a tremendous gap in college enrollment and perseverance between students who come from families with low incomes and students who come from families with high incomes. Another tremendous gap exists between the funding for schools in low-income neighborhoods and high-income neighborhoods. Lower funding hinders schools in low-income neighborhoods. This fundamental inequality must be addressed so all students have the opportunity to receive a college preparatory high school education. The state government can begin to address this gap by providing all of the funding mandated by the decision in the lawsuit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity.

2 Adjust financial aid opportunities.

- * The State of New York should seek to decrease, or maintain, the cost of tuition at SUNY and CUNY schools.
- * More money should be provided in the form of need-based grants, or money that is currently used for merit-based grants should be redirected to needs-based grants.
- * Federal Pell grants and New York State TAP grants should be increased.
- * Funding for Education Opportunity Programs (SEEK, HEOP, and EOP) that focus on helping low-income students succeed in college should be increased.
- * Financial aid must be made available to all students, regardless of immigration status.

At the College and University Level

Colleges and universities need to take more responsibility for supporting the students that they admit and enroll. High schools are consistently criticized for high dropout rates while post-secondary institutions receive little blame for having low retention rates. Rather than blaming students for not successfully completing college we must begin to hold colleges more accountable for the students they admit and enroll. Overall, colleges and universities should devote more time, energy, and resources to graduating their students. The following recommendations would increase the graduation rate of college students.

1 All students should receive more frequent mentoring through advisors and older peers.

2 Financial aid counselors should be readily available to all students.

3 Orientation programs should be expanded so all students receive a thorough introduction to college life regardless of whether they are resident or commuter students.

4 Education Opportunity Programs (EOP) have been successful in helping students graduate. The strategies that these programs employ, including intensive summer preparation, frequent mentoring, small group advisement, and team building, should be expanded to include more students (Swail et. al., 2003, in Chajet, 2006).

5 Colleges and universities should make retention and graduation rates readily available to the public. Furthermore, this information should be disaggregated based on race and income level. This material should also be highlighted in college search materials so that students and counselors can avoid schools with low retention and graduation rates.

At Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School

While the national and state government and post-secondary institutions play a role in increasing the college persistence rate of MHVP graduates, the school itself has the greatest ability to affect its students and is the institution most capable of quick and fundamental changes. MHVP has quickly built a successful college preparation program. However, as this study shows, it is our responsibility to do more to better prepare our students for success in college. Our responsibility as a high school does not end when the students graduate. We need to make sure that we are not only preparing students to graduate high school but also ensure that they are prepared for higher education.

1 MHVP should do more to prepare students for college level work. Each content area should look at what is expected of a college student in that area. Once these expectations are clarified, a 9th –12th grade curriculum can be developed and implemented that focuses on scaffolding in the skills and knowledge students will need in college (Chajet, 2006). It is important that this work begin in the 9th grade and continue through the 12th grade so students are prepared for the scope of work they will be doing in college and have access to a rigorous high school curriculum.

2 Prepare students to advocate for themselves and live independently. Students mentioned that they struggled with the freedom and responsibility that they encountered at college. One of the strengths of MHVP is the constant attention and support that we provide for our students. While we should not remove the support that we give to the students, we need to begin to shift the support as students progress through high school so that they are prepared for the independence and responsibility they will find in college (Chajet, 2006).

3 Spend more time teaching the students about the true cost of a college education and comparing the cost of various programs including SUNY, CUNY, and HEOP programs. Students need to be aware of the price of tuition and room and board but they should also be prepared for other hidden costs like transportation and books. While we do not want to give the impression that college is overly expensive, we cannot sugarcoat its cost.

4 Help students identify and apply for scholarships and grants.

5 Help students develop personal financial skills so they are fully prepared to navigate the financial world. Students need banking and money management skills before they go to college.

6 More time needs to be spent on post-acceptance counseling so that students pick the right school. MHVP should help students visit the schools they have been admitted to. Many of our students apply to the same schools and MHVP could organize trips to some campuses after students have been admitted. Furthermore, many of our students attend schools in New York City so it would not be expensive or difficult to visit these schools. Also, money should be made available to students who are admitted to schools that are further away so they can visit the campuses before deciding where they will go to school. Finally, parents should be invited on campus visits and college trips so they can help students make the decision about where to go to college.

7 Identify schools where our students succeed as well as those where they are less inclined to succeed. In the future, we can establish relationships with schools where students are successful

and encourage students to apply to them. So far, Marist College seems to be a school where our students have been successful. Furthermore, schools where our students are not successful need be identified. Identifying “pipeline” schools where our students succeed and schools where our students are not successful will help us advise future graduating students (Cookson & Persell, 1985, in Chajet, 2006). This process will take many years but can begin with the class of 2006.

8 Do more to support students so that they can stay in college. Other schools have created a position that focuses solely on alumni support. This position involves staying in contact with students through visits to their college campuses, phone conversations, and email. Through this contact, the alumni support person is able to support students during challenging periods so that they are able to remain in school. This type of support has helped to increase college enrollment rates at other schools and should be duplicated at Mott Haven.

EPILOGUE

Based on the data of this study, MHVP hired a college counselor/alumni support person whose sole responsibility is to stay engaged with the school’s graduates, study their progress, and provide support to them and feedback to the MHVP faculty.

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