



Use of technology, relationship-building and the formation of alliances themes of 2008 Conference

Creating new opportunities, developing and sustaining relationships, and making sacrifices during tough economic times that help Michigan youth attend college were among the themes addressed at the inaugural Michigan Pre-College and Youth Outreach Conference, held November 21, 2008, at Michigan State University.

Creating opportunities for all youth

Archimedes once said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." Pre-college specialists can give youth a place to stand by increasing the number of opportunities that enable growth and provide the skills and knowledge needed to move the world over the course of lifetime.

These opportunities, say some specialists, must be open to all youth -- not just privileged students and those able to afford college. This means promoting programs to students who might see college as inaccessible.

Moving beyond typically high-achieving students that specialists seek for their programs can result in reaching students who need the support that a pre-college program could give to encourage interest in higher education.

Investing in opportunities that bring students to campus is one tactic. For some, a pre-college program may be their first and only chance to visit a campus. Staying in a dormitory and meeting a diverse group of peers, current college students and faculty can demonstrate the value of this environment. It can also seed relationships that carry into enrollment as students reconnect with those whom they met while visiting as a high schooler.

Outreach data is needed

Conference attendees noted that one challenge facing outreach efforts is a lack of data on pre-college programs. This is important for individual programs as it can support budget requests and program existence. Out-

reach specialists from Grand Valley State University have focused on teacher and youth development in K-12 schools. As their programs use campus-based facilities, data on pre-college programs at GVSU helps ensure that pre-college efforts are given priority when it comes to space usage.

The availability of data is also critical in showing the results of efforts and guiding programs. By evaluating data after program activities, decisions can be made as to whether a program should continue or if changes need to be made. Such data may also prove to those who may have invested in specific efforts that their program may be less than successful and should be reduced in scope or eliminated.

Evaluative data can also serve pre-college programs by enhancing best practices in outreach and engagement. Outcomes include helping specialists clarify their roles and create pathways that increase college enrollment.

Going high-tech to meet youth

One universal area of best practice that can bridge gaps between youth and programs is the use of technology and the Web 2.0 environment to give greater access to information.

Research shared by EduGuide, a non-profit organization that supports pre-college programs and K-12 education, shows increases in the use of technology by youth and families at all socioeconomic levels.

Pre-college specialists are urged to embrace technology and consider Facebook and other networking platforms, along with text-messaging and wireless communication to.

Enlisting these forms of communication can encourage a young person's consideration of higher education opportunities. Such efforts also tell youth how to apply for college.

Some in pre-college programs identi-

The steps integral in designing programs was a best practice shared at the conference: 1) literature review, 2) establish a design team, 3) form focus groups and conduct testing, 4) draft a program, 5) pilot test, 6) launch the program, and 7) in support of the need for more data on programs, conduct outcome evaluations.

fied the challenges shared by youth and by their families in attempting to understand how to apply for college and financial aid and learn about the demands of being a college student.

Hospitality and customer service are also vital in both the online world and in the "real-world". These are basics that can be overlooked, say specialists, and give youth and families comfort in learning about higher education opportunities. It also fosters transparency that allows youth and families to seek information.

Sustained relationships crucial

Knowledge development and the building of skills and character may be goals of many programs. These can help youth succeed in today's increasingly interdependent world. However, getting them into college to enhance these skills requires something more: relationship-building.

Dr. Joanne Keith of MSU's Department of Family and Child Ecology shares that as many as 22 adult figures may move through a family within one year. In this era of connected communities and technological dependency, we see a greater number of relationships. They exist, however, for a shorter duration leading to instability in a young person's life.

Pre-college specialists should make relationship-building a priority and learn how to sustain those relationships. This means making individual youth

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their project. While the scientific knowledge in a specific discipline is important, the development of youth who are subject to that knowledge should be the goal.

Building and maintaining relationships can be daunting. Pre-college specialists cannot necessarily do this on their own. Those in outreach should ask what other organizations and individuals are in their communities with whom they can partner to serve as a basis for relationships that reach youth.

Community-based partnerships

Teachers at the K-12 level are vital partners. While they can help transfer academic knowledge, they can also promote college enrollment. Programs such as those at MSU's School of Engineering, actively involve K-12 teachers.

The Engineering program is committed to building K-12 teachers' knowledge and increasing the ways in which they teach their curriculum. A second piece of this partnership is learning how teachers can be conduits to youth. Examples include MSU's role in local science fairs, sponsorship of competitions such as the Lego First League, and by hosting hands-on events that bring students and teachers to campus to interact with university students, faculty and private sector partners.

Volunteer mentors can also play roles in outreach. Mentors can come from within academia, a community, or can be other trusted adults who put youth first and seek to create a balance between knowledge transfer and relationship-building between youth, a program and program facilitators.

The Work Study Program at MSU uses this approach, creating ways for youth to shadow working professionals. An outcome is helping young people enhance their professional skills. A specific product is the students' creation of e-portfolios to describe their capabilities. These partnerships also enhance a program's rigor. Groups and professional organizations in a community may have expertise that can enhance an activity.

For instance, pre-college engineering specialists at Grand Valley State University have enlisted a local model airplane club that brings in 40 volunteers to help youth build and fly planes. Club members also show off their own aircraft as part of the experience.

They are many ways to keep teachers, volunteers and groups involved in programs, say outreach specialists. The first is to create an understanding of the roles of the program staff. This can clarify the role that volunteers play. The second is to plan a program far enough in advance to recognize the contexts and experiences needed to fulfill its aims and direct volunteers. The third way is to give volunteers and groups praise in private and public venues. This includes recognizing them in final ceremonies and within the local media.

Outreach beyond knowledge transfer

Many pre-college programs may focus on knowledge and skills development. One area that can be overlooked is social and civic skills development. MSU's Extension Services use a civic engagement curriculum to fill this void.

The program teaches good citizenship and finds that creating interest in areas such as volunteerism at an early age can promote the adoption of the values that become part of one's lifestyle. The program emphasizes an understanding of policy-making and the role of government. This helps youth appreciate the positive role that government can play and teach them how to join in local, state and national decision-making.

Recent legislation has increased the need for this curriculum in schools. Due to certain measures, civic engagement is no longer as prevalent in schools as in the past. As a result, supporting teachers with these resources is crucial.

Meeting goals in a tough economy

"Making sacrifices" is also an important task for pre-college programs. In the current economic climate, many programs must do more with less and adjust to lower funding levels. Still, means exist for securing resources to enhance pre-college programs.

One option is to seek support via partnerships with associations and private sector partners. Some of these groups may have their own priorities, timeframes, processes and deadlines. Therefore, sufficiently researching these potential funding sources can avoid the lengthy time periods that can often be associated with receiving grant funds.

One should also work with on-campus development officers. Coordinating efforts from the start can determine which organizations to contact, how much to request, and who else on campus may have contacted that group.

Being aware of potential funding partners can also point to outside programs that can help a pre-college program meet its goals. Michigan Technological University specialists point to state and nationally-based math programs that have resources and ways to reach youth and teachers. There are also national contests that can build the understanding of disciplines such as mathematics, while weaving in civil rights, social issues and knowledge from other disciplines in fun and entertaining ways.

Involve decision-makers

A final best practice that specialists urge is contact with college administrators and with local, state and federal legislators. Decisions that affect pre-college programs can start in the upper levels of university administration and the halls of government. The direct participation of legislators and academic officials in activities may be more powerful than form letters or other means of contact that are used to inform to decision-makers.

One example noted by Wayne State University specialists was the state-supported creation of a night school in Detroit for 25 youth. It was the result of participation by elected officials. Without this program, say WSU specialists, these children would have dropped out of school and failed to complete their degree. Giving policy makers the chance to see programs and learn of models that work can bring benefits that stretch beyond what we might initially expect.

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