

Introduction

Because of wide variation in socioeconomic status, home environments, and schooling opportunities, challenges to educational equity persist across the United States. Disparities in college readiness and graduation rates have remained largely unchanged over the past few decades (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker 2016) in spite of a vast number of national, state, and local efforts. Additionally, many existing interventions in universities and K-12 school districts are fragmented, implemented during a narrow timeframe, or address only a narrow slice of the complex challenges facing education stakeholders. Another complicating factor is the reality that “policy makers tend to focus on increased student achievement rather than the social policies and relational aspects of schooling that may strongly influence this achievement” (McHugh, Horner, Wallace, & Colditz, 2012, p. 32). Instead of recognizing that social and emotional health is closely linked to student success, state and federal policies sometimes ignore that connection in a narrow focus on academic achievement as demonstrated through standardized testing, which means that social and emotional concerns sometimes exacerbate academic challenges (Crosnoe, 2011).

Both because and in spite of these challenges, California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) is deeply and publicly dedicated to student success. We know that education is a passport to social and emotional prosperity for our students and our region. The university is proud of its diverse student body—approximately 54% of students are first in their family to graduate college while approximately 60% of students self-identify as persons of color—and dedicates resources to ensuring their success at CSUSM and beyond.

To that end, CSUSM created the Alliance to Accelerate Excellence in Education. The Alliance is a unique, regionally focused initiative aimed at improving the college attendance and graduation rates of students, particularly underserved youth in North San Diego and Southwest Riverside Counties. It focuses not only on increasing access for the region’s students but also on ensuring success through college and into their post-college careers as described in the vision and mission statements:

Vision: The Alliance to Accelerate Excellence in Education strives to create a comprehensive, comprehensible pathway to college access and success for all learners in the CSUSM footprint.

Mission: Recognizing that there is a difference between access and success, The Alliance works collaboratively with regional partners to ensure that all K-12 students have access to a college education *and* are successful in persevering toward a degree.

The primary purpose of this Research Agenda is to identify questions that might guide conversations and initiate inquiry projects of interest to a variety of stakeholder groups.

It is organized according to the three primary initiatives that ground Alliance programming and provides a working definition, brief literature review, and potential research questions

within each section. With the intention of providing a comprehensive, cohesive approach to understanding the impact of the Alliance on various stakeholders in the region, this research agenda is intended to provide a framework for research activities in which stakeholders engage.

Family Empowerment Network (FEN)

FEN's purpose is to ensure that families understand how to support and nurture their children in finding academic, social, and emotional success. While there are many approaches when conceptualizing this work, the Alliance believes that there are three critical ways in which this might happen. They are: 1) Connecting families with critical resources in the community and at the university; 2) Fostering a families-supporting-families network within our partner districts; and 3) Maintaining clear and consistent communication with families and students.

Preview of the Literature

Engaging parents and guardians on subjects regarding their child's education and future and teaching them how to create nurturing home environments leads to more confident and engaged parents regardless of their socioeconomic status. Similarly, the interpersonal relationships that develop between families and schools often influence levels of parental engagement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Research shows connections between student achievement and family engagement (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2010), and these findings are not surprising in light of the knowledge that human behavior is governed by both personal and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). It behooves educators to think critically about ways to deepen these connections and provide families with meaningful ways to engage with schools in general and their children in particular. When parents believe they can have a positive impact on their children's educational attainment, they are more likely to become involved in a positive way. These feelings of self-efficacy encourage positive engagement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), which can reduce informational, procedural, and behavioral barriers that hinder a youth's likelihood to even think about college as a viable post-secondary choice (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Some barriers to family participation in K-12 contexts are language, differences in cultural viewpoints on roles of teachers and parents, and being unfamiliar with the ways in which schools function (Suizzo, Moran Jackson, Pahlke, Marroquin, Blondeau, & Martinez 2012). In response to these challenges, Tierney (2002) recommended that schools consider the importance of developing strategies "that call on local languages and definitions of *self and identity* to enable parent/family interaction to occur with teachers, counselors, and administrators." Involving parents and guardians throughout the educational pipeline increases their familiarity with the educational system and makes it easier for them to assist their children in school (Villalba, Gonzalez, Hines, & Borders, 2014; Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz 2010).

Research Questions

How do parents/guardians conceptualize their role as it relates to their children's educational success?

What do parents/guardians identify as barriers to their participation in the K-12 school system?

What K-12 practices and programs do parents/guardians identify as encouraging their participation in their children's educational journey?

What is the longitudinal impact of FACE: Family Alliance Community Exchange on the ways in which families interact with each other?

What is the longitudinal impact of FACE: Family Alliance Community Exchange on K-12 students' academic, social, and emotional achievement?

Student Support

The Student Support Initiative is broadly defined to include both CSUSM students and K-12 youth. Its goal is nurturing an environment of academic success to ensure that all students achieve a college degree and graduate prepared to engage with society as productive, global citizens. Recognizing that academic success is inextricably connected to social and emotional health, Alliance programming focuses on supporting the whole learner, whether in the K-12 system or at CSUSM. Goals include increasing Alliance students' participation in campus and community activities, developing skills associated with successful professionals, providing multiple opportunities for students to connect with each other, and ensuring that CSUSM students achieve academic success.

Preview of the Literature

Many factors exist in the context of schooling that sometimes foster and other times hinder students' motivation to engage, work, and achieve. K-12 teachers face external pressures in the form of content standards, high-stakes standardized testing, and community opinions on the "best" way to educate youth as they work to support students who often need much more than academic instruction. Higher education faculty must balance competing teaching, research, and service demands on their time and, while they are discipline area experts, often do not receive specific training in how to teach that content to others. Understanding what empirical research, anecdotal experience, and the students themselves say about the educational contexts in which they function allows educators to confront those myriad pressures (Daniels, 2011).

All humans have a basic psychological need to feel some sort of control over events in their lives. When they do, they feel more willing to engage and more intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Bandura (1997) posited that "by selecting and creating environmental supports for what they want to become, they contribute to the direction their lives take." Since students do not have the freedom to entirely create their own environments, they often feel disconnected from their school experiences. Additionally, Willingham (2009) explained that humans remember content based upon the ways in which they think about so educators have

a greater impact on student learning when they are intentional about *how* they engage students in the classroom.

Research Questions

For students who graduate within four-six years, what are trends and patterns in their trajectory?

For students who do not graduate by the end of their sixth year at CSUSM, what are trends and patterns in their trajectory?

Why do students leave CSUSM before obtaining a degree?

What teaching practices have a positive impact on CSUSM students' progress toward graduation?

How do (elementary, middle school, high school) students think about post-secondary plans?

What factors influence their thinking and decision-making?

Professional Development Network

Because educators' skills, knowledge, and dispositions have a substantial impact on their students' learning experiences, the Alliance seeks to leverage high-impact practices and provide cohesive, meaningful professional development for teachers, counselors, administrators, and professors. Education systems (K-12 districts, community colleges, CSUSM) in North San Diego and Southwest Riverside counties for the most part enjoy a highly collaborative environment in which connections between and among stakeholder groups are robust. At any given time, there are numerous initiatives, programs, and research projects across the region, and the Alliance's PDN strives to support ways in which expectations can be aligned and activities can be coordinated.

Preview of the Literature

Past research shows a tendency to ask teachers to wait passively for a resolution to classroom challenges rather than proactively engaging with the obstacles that create those challenges and then participating in their remedy (Glazer & Hannafin, 20016). This passivity and the dearth of authentic reflection opportunities often means that traditional professional development practices have limited usefulness in terms of actively improving practice (Watts & Lawson, 2009). Being "practically critical" when thinking and talking about one's practice (Hagevik, Aydeniz, & Rowell, 2012) encourages educator to take greater control over their teaching and/or leadership decisions and actions.

Research Questions



How do K-12 teachers and/or administrators and college professors conceptualize potential collaboration opportunities?



What are college professors' perceptions of K-12 teachers? What factors shape those perceptions?



How can productive views of low-income, high-ability learners be cultivated?



What level of efficacy do K-12 teachers have in terms of supporting their students' social and emotional health?



What do K-12 and higher education personnel view as the most pressing challenges in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional well-being?

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